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Contents

Ministerial Statement

Children in the Justice System: A Scoping Study and an Update on the Sentencing Framework .. 1

Private Members' Business

Defibrillators: Interactive Map-based Register 7

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development 21

Social Development..... 28

Private Members' Business

Tourism VAT 36

Adjournment

Age-appropriate Respite Provision: South Tyrone 51

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)
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)
McAlear, 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 (Speaker)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
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)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 May 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Children in the Justice System: A Scoping Study and an Update on the Sentencing Framework

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister of Justice wishes to make a statement.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on children and the justice system.

When we removed under-18-year-olds from adult custody at Hydebank Wood, in line with the recommendation in the youth justice review, I gave a firm commitment that that would be underpinned by a change in legislation. First and foremost, I want to emphasise that that commitment remains. I also want to stress at this point that no child has been held in Hydebank Wood since November 2012, and nothing I have to say today will change that.

There is still a need to introduce legislative provision to underpin that commitment, but I intend to do that in a way that improves and simplifies the current system rather than merely adding to its complexity. For that reason, last November, I informed the House that I had made the decision to pause the work and instead to take it forward as part of a wider examination of how we deal with children already in or on the fringes of the criminal justice system. At the heart of this decision is my belief that there is a way to create better outcomes for children, victims and the community.

It is clear that many people agree with me. During the public consultation that we undertook around custodial arrangements for children, the conversations that took place, and the formal responses that we received, majored far more on the need for systemic changes and enhanced community provision than on custody. That is significant; hence my decision

to look at custodial sentencing in a far wider context.

Since the decision to pause was taken last November, my officials have been in discussion with key statutory stakeholders across the youth justice system to take soundings as to the nature, scope and structure of this exercise. I now wish to outline to the Assembly the arrangements that I am putting in place for taking it forward.

I am commissioning a scoping study to consider whether the legislative, strategic and structural architecture surrounding the youth justice system is adequate to address the many and complex needs of the children who come into contact with it. This work will be undertaken with the aim of simplifying the system and ensuring that we can deliver more focused interventions that help to improve outcomes for children and young people across the whole of the justice system, not only those who experience custody. In doing so, we can also create better outcomes for the wider circle of those affected by offending behaviour, including families, victims and communities.

As Members will know, over the past few years, my Department, criminal justice organisations and cross-governmental groups have been taking steps to deliver on the various recommendations in the youth justice review. The progress made, and the changes seen as a result, afford us this opportunity to widen our horizons and create an innovative and progressive youth justice system. For example, the review emphasised the need for the Northern Ireland Executive to focus more clearly on early intervention and to secure funding for investment in this vital area.

There is no doubt that, through the Delivering Social Change framework and its signature programmes, the issue of early intervention is now firmly on the agenda and is being addressed at Executive level. As part of Delivering Social Change, my Department is working with other Executive Departments on the funding, development and delivery of a

range of innovative projects through the early intervention transformation programme (EITP). This cross-governmental programme is intended to deliver services and support to children and young people through early years interventions for the very young age groups and early stage interventions for children of any age who need additional support to prevent them from taking a path, perhaps unwittingly, that may adversely affect the rest of their lives.

Developments such as those are precisely what allow our review to encompass issues around prevention, diversion and pre-court options; specifically, the way the system organises itself to respond to the needs of those children and young people who are on the verge of offending behaviour.

My Department is leading on an innovative early intervention project, which has been allocated £450,000 from the EITP over the next three years. That will pilot a project enabling the Youth Justice Agency to deliver meaningful interventions and wrap-around support for children to prevent future offending behaviour. I can point to further examples, such as the roll-out of police discretion and the development of youth engagement clinics, both of which fulfill youth justice review recommendations, which have provided additional options for dealing with children in the system.

These changes have shown that Northern Ireland has the vision and the ability to progress and adapt and that our criminal justice organisations can work in partnership to develop and deliver interventions that are timely, proportionate and effective and which meet the individual needs and circumstances of children. Such principles will be central to the forthcoming exercise, and I intend to build on the success and effectiveness of such interventions. The focus will be on examining the system to ensure that it is easier for everyone, but in particular for the children and victims involved in it, to understand, so that they are clear about exactly what is expected of them and why. In doing so, we will be looking at how we can ensure that the principles espoused in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are applied across the system.

We are already amending the statutory aims of the youth justice system to ensure that a child's best interests are fully considered throughout the process. The forthcoming work will allow us to take our compliance with international obligations a stage further. It will examine ways in which children who come to the attention of the criminal justice system can be dealt with at the earliest opportunity and the lowest possible

level, without having to resort to formal proceedings unless appropriate. It will also reduce any unnecessary use of custody by maximising the community and restorative justice options that are available. My Department will also look at options to address any overuse of the juvenile justice centre at Woodlands for non-sentenced children.

In short, we have the opportunity to create a system that is fully compliant with children's rights and uses custody as a last resort. Where custody is necessary, my Department will use the learning and experience of the focused consultation to feed into that aspect of the work and in designing any new sentencing framework.

I hope that this statement has given Members a good grounding in why we are undertaking this scoping study, what will be covered and what we hope to achieve. In terms of how it will be structured, I have asked the chief executive of the Youth Justice Agency to take the lead. He will chair a steering group comprising senior figures across the criminal justice system, including the Courts and Tribunals Service, the Probation Board and the Police Service. Invitations will be extended to other key stakeholders, such as the Public Prosecution Service and the judiciary. I am very pleased that the Commissioner for Children and Young People has agreed to play a key role in scrutinising the process.

Given the vital role that other Departments play in the lives of our children and young people, I will also be writing to a number of my ministerial colleagues to invite representation from them at official level. The steering group will provide overall direction and oversight and will coordinate the commissioning of subgroups to research, benchmark and provide evidenced proposals to the main group.

I know that we are fortunate in Northern Ireland in having a very strong children's sector with a wealth of experience, and that will be invaluable in informing the work over the coming months. Each subgroup will liaise with stakeholders across all sectors as they draw together their proposals to ensure that the steering group is fully informed when formulating its conclusions. Children and young people will, of course, play a key role in this process. Who better to tell us what works than those who have experienced it first-hand? Once the scoping study is complete, the steering group will provide me with its analysis and recommendations, which I will present to the Assembly by the end of this mandate.

Members may already be thinking about the cost of such an exercise and the financing of any future changes to be made to the system. There is no doubt that we face difficult times financially, but this should not be a reason for delaying or preventing change and progress. Indeed, as the Lord Chief Justice expressed during a recent discussion with the Justice Committee, rather than using austerity as an excuse to do nothing, it should be used as a catalyst to take a critical look at how we do our business and what we want to achieve. I echo those thoughts completely and I firmly believe that there are savings to be made by reducing duplication and streamlining the system, savings that can be reinvested to support children and their families and to prevent young people in future generations from entering the youth justice system.

I appreciate the opportunity to set out my Department's plans for this scoping study. Some people may question the need for yet another youth justice review. Really, it is a continuation of the work begun by the review team. It set out a path for the future of youth justice in Northern Ireland, and we are still on that path. We have implemented its recommendations and have seen changes in the system; changes that have created further opportunities for us to work better together, to think smarter and to intervene earlier. Now is the time to take a radical look at how we can take this review to the next level, and that is what the scoping study is intended to do.

I have covered a lot of ground in this statement, so I will summarise briefly what I intend to do. I will commission those involved in the youth justice system to come together to develop proposals that will look at the system from end to end to reduce the number of children entering the formal justice system through appropriate use of prevention, diversion and pre-court engagement, and to ensure that, for those who do enter the system, the sentencing framework is straightforward, flexible and effective, with only the most serious and persistent offending resulting in custody. It will, I hope, provide the platform to set an innovative and exciting agenda for action on youth justice matters, to make a real difference to the lives of children and young people and to create a better system for them, their victims, their communities and for society as a whole.

Mr Ross (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I welcome the statement. Indeed, it uses much of the language that I too have been using around focusing on outcomes, early interventions, developing a smarter justice system, innovative approaches and using the

squeeze on public finances as a springboard for doing things differently. Indeed, that has been the focus of the Justice Committee in recent times as well.

I hope that the Speaker will give me the flexibility offered to the Chairman to ask a couple of questions. First, when does the Minister expect to see actual changes on the ground? Will he give a commitment that, where innovative ideas and practices have been identified and have been evidenced to work, he will implement those in conjunction with the Committee for Justice immediately rather than waiting for a final report from the steering group?

Secondly, on a point that I raised with him during Justice questions yesterday, I very much welcome the investment in early interventions that he outlined in his statement, as I believe that it is the right approach to take. However, much of the early intervention work will have to fall to other Departments, such as Education and Health. How can the commitment of those Departments to this work be maintained, given the budget pressures that they face, and how can some of these issues be mainstreamed rather than funded through individual specified projects?

Finally, I support much of the work on discretion and diversion; I think that it works much better. How can we ensure that victims are part of that process to ensure that they feel that they are seeing justice being served rather than what is sometimes, I think unfairly, described as going soft on justice?

Mr Ford: I congratulate my Committee Chair for what I think was about four questions when he described it as two. I thank him for his welcome for the statement, and I restate my commitment to continue to work as best we can with the Committee. I believe that we have worked well between the Department and the Committee over five years.

10.45 am

Actual changes, if they require legislative change, are unlikely before the next mandate, but I had given a commitment to report by the end of this mandate. Certainly, I am keen that what can be done without the requirement for legislation will be implemented as soon as possible. Indeed, we have already seen that in our work on statutory time limits, for example, by looking at what can be done administratively in advance of formal legislation. I entirely share the view that Mr Ross expressed that we need

to ensure that work is done to get the best possible innovations in place as soon as possible by whatever means that can be done.

In terms of early interventions with other Departments, I highlighted yesterday in my response to him that, even in the context of early years interventions, the DOJ believes it has a role to play, although other Departments clearly have a larger role in those early years, rather than in early stage intervention processes. I think that he makes a very valid point about mainstreaming, which is where we need to look at the wider use of central Executive funds, rather than depending purely on existing departmental resources being deployed. Two of the key ministerial level partners in the work that will be done on this process will be my colleagues the Ministers of Education and Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I will write to them later today inviting their officials' involvement at every stage of this work. I believe that we will see that.

In answer to his final question about meeting the needs of victims, the good work that is being done to implement the charter and our European obligations and that we hope to see coming to fruition if the Justice Bill proceeds through its final stages before the summer recess will clearly have ramifications in youth justice, as well as in adult justice. It is, of course, also the case that a lot of the Youth Justice Agency's work on restorative practice involves engagement between young offenders and their victims. That is the kind of good work that can produce very positive results by making young people aware of the effects of their actions on other people and by giving victims the sense that their voice is being listened to. I have no doubt that that will continue to feature in the work of the Youth Justice Agency.

Mr Speaker: Thank you and well done, Minister. It is up to you to decide whether you will pick up all the questions.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement and, indeed, welcome it. I know that the departmental officials will be in front of the Committee shortly to brief us, and we will tease out some of the wider aspects of this. I look forward to that. The Minister, in one of the paragraphs, posed the question of whether people will consider this a review of a review. I am just wondering how best he can offset that. Perhaps it would be

best for him and the Department to ensure that we know what is going to be done, when it is going to be done and how it is going to be done. I wonder whether the Minister agrees with that.

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, in response to your first point, I am, of course, always happy to ingratiate myself as fully as possible with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee. I will do my best to keep on their right side. I welcome that the Deputy Chair also welcomed the statement.

In terms of whether this is a review of a review, we are now looking at a continuation of the youth justice review's work, which set some high-level work but left a number of recommendations to be worked through in detail, in particular when the issue arose of stopping the use of Hydebank Wood for the under-18s. It opened up wider issues, which we need to look at. For example, youth custody under the PACE and alternative accommodation are all key issues that mean that we need to take a wider look. I think that this is a matter of the Department at official level putting into practice some of that work in consultation with other Departments and the other justice agencies and by involvement through the subgroups in the relevant NGO partners, with which we have already had some informal discussions. We have the opportunity to show that this is following through on the youth justice review by putting the detail on the way the Department and its agencies will operate in future. I have no doubt that the Committee will continue to play a part in keeping the Department on its toes in that respect, and I also have no doubt that the Committee's meeting this week will be very productive on that.

Mr A Maginness: I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. I think that it is very important that we pursue vigorously ways and means of preventing young people, and children in particular, from being put into custody. In particular, I welcome the involvement of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. That is very important.

How long does the Minister envisage the steering group will take to come to conclusions that have, in many ways, been prefigured in the youth justice review?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Maginness's positive words for the statement. Just to repeat the point: the commissioner felt that she had an appropriate role to play slightly at arm's length

from the review, but I have no doubt that she will provide a very valuable challenge function, and I am very grateful to her for offering to carry that through.

The expectation is that I will be back before the end of the mandate to give a statement on the detail of the conclusions. Mr Maginness is, perhaps, being marginally unfair by saying that everything was prefigured in the youth justice review. There are a lot of details that need to be worked out, which now falls to the Department to do rather than asking the external review. That is what I want to see: that we carry forward the good work of the review; look at the wider issues that have emerged, such as PACE remands; and ensure that we use the opportunity to reduce the number of young people in custody ever further.

There is no doubt that we have a specific issue of young people on remand; sometimes a greater number of remands at weekends because it appears that Woodlands provides a suitable facility that makes it easy for people to refer there. We need to ensure that we use the facilities that we have, whether custodial or in the community, to the best possible effect. That is what I want to see the review doing, and to put in place, as soon as possible, whatever can be done, whether that be administratively in the next few months or legislatively in the next mandate.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I fully appreciate the importance of seeking to reduce the number of young people entering the formal justice system. I know very well the good work of the PSNI in my constituency. They work with young people on the verge of offending behaviour, as the Minister has referenced.

Can the Minister assure us that the notions of punishment and deterrence will retain a key role in the system?

Mr Ford: There is clearly a need to ensure that deterrence is a key factor in the way the system works. We need to be very careful when we talk about punishment in the context of those who are particularly young. The reality is, even with the current low age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland, that the very small number of young people who become involved in that at the lower ages are treated largely through care means, rather than through criminal sanctions means. We need to ensure that we deal effectively in a way that reduces future offending. There is no doubt that custody remains an option, and that other aspects of reparative justice are not easy to deal with.

They will be seen as significant sanctions by those who have to carry them through.

There is no doubt that punishment is part of it, but we need to ensure that we do not elevate punishment to the point where it is seen as the sole purpose of the justice system, if it is ineffective in reducing future offending. What I am keen to do is see that we build on the youth justice review and find the most effective way of dealing with young people on the verge of offending, and those who have offended, to ensure that we cut the cycle of reoffending at the earliest possible point.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's statement and the important work that is being planned. Can he confirm his absolute determination to continue the process whereby under-18s are detained at Woodlands, not Hydebank? I know that stakeholders will want to hear that loud and clear. Can he also confirm that stakeholders will be involved in the process of the scoping review?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for her welcome. I think that makes five out of five, which is not always the case with justice statements.

On the specific issue, I am happy to confirm that the only place where under-18s can be held in custody is now Woodlands, not Hydebank. That is the practical reality. Some of our NGO stakeholders said that they accept that because they accept the current arrangements in the Department, but they want to ensure that it is underpinned in legislation for fear that a future Minister might reverse that policy. I will ensure that legislation progresses — but it will not be reached before the next mandate — to ensure that that is put in place, and, in the meantime, administratively, that will be the position.

In terms of engagement with stakeholders, the stakeholders across the justice system will be fully part of the steering group. The various subgroups will engage with relevant NGO stakeholders as well. We have a good relationship. I already mentioned to Mr Maginness the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. We will certainly continue to work with stakeholders, but it is now a matter of the Department putting into practice the fine detail and fine tuning of what has already been done by the youth justice review. We will continue to engage with others, though the responsibility will effectively lie with my officials, to ensure that proposals are put that can be carried through, either administratively in the Department or in future legislation in the Assembly.

Mr Douglas: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement this morning. The Minister will be aware that the Justice Committee has been hosting a number of justice seminars aimed at promoting innovation and collaboration within the criminal justice system. The Minister states that recommendations in the youth justice review:

"afford us this opportunity to widen our horizons and create an innovative and progressive youth justice system."

He also referred to savings that can be made by reducing duplication and by streamlining. Does that mean that the Minister accepts that the current system has duplication and is not efficient? Will the Minister now acknowledge that the issues surrounding duplication could have been tackled much earlier?

Mr Ford: Ach well there always has to be a sting in the tail, Mr Speaker. It is certainly the case that as we look at, frankly, I suspect, every part of our system of government but certainly across the justice system, there are elements of inefficiency and duplication. To suggest that that could all have been achieved much earlier is, I suspect, not practical reality. We needed the youth justice review to set the overarching framework for the changes that we are making. We need to ensure that the different agencies of the justice system, which retain their independence, also recognise their interdependence to ensure that we cut out the duplication. I am certainly heartened by the conversations that I have with leading members of the relevant aspects of the justice system to ensure that that will be the case in the future. We are only five years old. We have not been able to do everything that the Department of Justice would have wished to do in five years, but give us another five.

Mr Agnew: As much as I enjoy challenging a cosy consensus, I have to welcome the Minister's statement and, indeed, his direction of travel. I recently attended a very good NIACRO event at which Karyn McCluskey from the Violence Reduction Unit of Scotland spoke. She made a point along the lines of this: a child in school is a child out of prison. What work is the Minister doing, or will he do, with his counterpart the Minister of Education to look at the Glasgow model, where they have effectively stopped school exclusions?

Mr Ford: First of all, I thank Mr Agnew for now making it six out of six. It is always good to know that we can actually manage a consensus about some of these difficult issues in the

justice system from different sides of the House. The specific issue around education in Woodlands is something that I have been in contact with the Department of Education on. My officials in the Youth Justice Agency have been in contact as well, and I will be having further discussions in the near future with the Minister of Education as to that.

As for the Glasgow model and the issue of school exclusion, I suspect that that is rather more the responsibility of DE than of DOJ, but I am very happy that we continue to discuss its application to young people who are involved in or on the fringes of the justice system to ensure that we make the best possible arrangements to help young people to stay out of criminal activity.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. Following on from that, I was somewhat surprised that there was little mention of education in the statement. I think that Mr Ross asked a question and you responded. Many of our young people who are in the youth justice system believe that they have been failed by our education system, particularly in literacy and numeracy. In the scoping exercise, what will the input be from the likes of the Education Authority, schools and the Department, with specific reference to getting our young people to reconnect to education?

11.00 am

Mr Ford: I certainly appreciate Mr Rogers's point. As I said in an earlier answer, ministerial engagement will be at a key level with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education, because I entirely recognise that, frankly, many of those who end up in custody in particular, never mind those who end up in contact with the youth justice system in the community, would be seen by some to have been failed by the education system. Very few who are currently in Woodlands had previously been attending school. That is a key issue, where non-engagement with school is part of a pattern of behaviour that frequently also leads to offending. I have no doubt that the role of the education representative on the steering group will be crucial as we start to look at some of those points.

Private Members' Business

Defibrillators: Interactive Map-based Register

Mr Speaker: 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. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McMullan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to conduct a feasibility study into the potential for an interactive map-based register of defibrillators across the range of service providers within her Department, including arm's-length bodies; and further calls on the Minister to bring the findings from the feasibility study to the Executive and to ensure compatibility with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service systems.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for selecting the motion. The Sinn Féin motion before the Assembly is of the utmost importance. With the Assembly's support, we will take the first steps to setting up a register of all defibrillators, mobile or standing, in the North of Ireland, where they are located and who is responsible for their use and maintenance.

I first became interested in the importance of defibrillators when I, as chairman of my local disability group, got involved in helping to set up a first responders scheme in the mid-glens. First responders groups are set up with guidance from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS). The criteria that are used for an area to qualify for a first responders scheme are the number of emergency calls from that area, where existing ambulance stations are located and the availability of volunteers. The most important criterion of all is whether the area proposed lies outside the eight-minute response time that is set down by the Ambulance Service. That is why most of the areas selected are rural, such as my area in the mid-glens. In fact, the area that I represent, East Antrim, has two.

At present, the Ambulance Service has selected eight community first responders schemes. They are in Islandmagee, Slaughtneil, Cookstown, Loughguile, Enniskillen, Foyle, mid-glens and our only inhabited island, Rathlin. All these areas use automatic external defibrillators (AEDs), which are located in kiosks or boxes. In the glens, for example, we have three units: two are located outside local businesses, and the third is in the local nursing home. All volunteers have keys to the boxes to use when needed. All volunteers are trained to the standard laid down by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Their aim is to provide emergency life support until an appropriately equipped paramedic vehicle from the Ambulance Service arrives. It is now recognised that early intervention by first responders can and does increase the survival rates for out-of-hospital heart attacks by as much as twofold to threefold.

At a recent meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, a group called Defibs4Kids made a presentation. Their campaign was launched in June 2013 by the then Health Minister, Edwin Poots, and the Education Minister, John O'Dowd. Defibs4Kids was founded by schoolteacher and present chairman, Mr Art Kernan, and Martina McConville. Their vision is to increase the survival chances of those who suffer out-of-hospital heart attacks through early intervention and early recognition. They also want to have mandatory CPR training for children and teachers as part of the school curriculum, improve the availability of AEDs in schools, sporting organisations and all public places and create an online database of all mobile and static defibrillator locations. Their campaign has been supported by sports stars such as Mary Peters, the GAA's Joe Kernan, soccer's Jim Magilton and rugby's David Humphreys. Prior to the campaign launch, it was estimated that approximately 30 schools had defibrillators. Since the launch, the figures show that 196 schools have defibrillators. I want to put it on the record that this organisation deserves great credit for the work it has put in and for the success it has achieved and continues to achieve.

The main reason for the register — this is what shocked me when I researched the issue of defibrillation — was the lack of knowledge of where all the defibrillators are located. We know that there are hundreds out there, but there is an argument that there could be thousands. We do not know the exact figure. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service knows only a fraction of the locations, and that is the main problem. At present, there is no onus on

anybody who buys a defibrillator to register its sale, its ownership and, most importantly, where it will be kept. I will come back to that.

As part of my research, I recently spoke to the chief medical officer in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, Dr David McManus, who assured me of his full support for a register. He told me that time was the most important factor when dealing with cardiac arrest, and he went on to say that it was vital that the Ambulance Service had a register of all defibrillators and their locations, not only to support the service but to get treatment to patients as quickly as possible to give them every chance of survival. It is also worth stating that he said that registration and responsibility for the register should lie with the Ambulance Service.

Sports clubs have been to the fore in promoting the use of defibrillators. It is recognised that the sudden death of GAA star Cormac McAnallen and his family setting up the Cormac Trust has popularised the use of defibrillators. The Owenbeg GAA facility outside Dungiven has three units on its premises, and their importance was seen recently when Derry star Kevin McCloy collapsed during a local league match. Kevin's heart stopped for a few minutes, and one of the defibrillators was used to restart it. I am glad to say that he is making good progress towards a full recovery. We have also seen young rugby players, referees and soccer players collapsing during games. All those who survived owe their life to the defibrillator. Unfortunately, some of those who were treated did not survive.

We in the Assembly must show the way forward. The motion calls on all Departments and their arm's-length bodies to carry out an audit of their provisions, in case there are no defibrillators within their estate, and provide training for staff in the use of the equipment.

At some stage, the majority of the public will use recreational facilities provided by their local authorities. Those facilities include swimming pools, football pitches and gyms etc. We must ensure that the new councils that have been set up have equipment and staff trained in the use of the equipment. Indeed Members, I would further say — I am sure you will agree with me — that any organisation that encourages the public to use its facilities, such as airports, ferry terminals, train stations, supermarkets etc, should have defibrillators on its premises and staff trained in their use.

The motion is about setting up a register of defibrillators, but that will be only part of the solution. For the register to be successful, all

purchases of defibrillators must be registered with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. That will save time. I go back to what I said earlier: at present, there is no onus on people to register a defibrillator. That should happen now, because fire extinguishers, which are a vital part of keeping the public safe, are mandatory in all public buildings. Defibrillators should be mentioned in the same breath as fire extinguishers in public buildings and other buildings that encourage the public into them. Having defibrillators will save time, and, with heart attacks, time is the difference between life and death.

I go back to how I originally became interested in defibrillators. Disabled children and adults have all been born with heart problems. Children with Down's syndrome, for example, all have heart defects in common. Other children have respiratory problems.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McMullan: We must protect those children when they go to youth clubs or other public places. I ask Members to support the motion. Let us start the journey of setting up a register. England, Scotland and Wales do not have one, so let us be the first to do so.

Mrs McKeivitt: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Leisure" and insert

"in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to conduct a feasibility study into the potential for an interactive map-based register of defibrillators across all Departments, including arm's-length bodies; and further calls on the Executive to devise a strategy that will see an increase in provision of defibrillators in public buildings and to ensure compatibility with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service systems."

The issue around the provision of and public access to defibrillators has been discussed in depth by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. I had hoped that the Committee would table a motion on the topic in the near future. However, I am happy to have the light shone on the issue through all means, so I very much welcome the motion tabled by my Committee colleagues.

The amendment would modify the motion in two key areas. By supporting it, we would ensure that the feasibility study was widened to include all Departments and arm's-length bodies and, furthermore, that the Executive would devise a

strategy that would see an increase in the provision of defibrillators in public buildings.

There are thought to be over 1,000 automated external defibrillator machines available outside of hospitals in Northern Ireland. However, there is no comprehensive record of who has an AED machine, where the machines are located, who has access to them, who is trained to use them or whether they are regularly maintained. Through the community resuscitation strategy, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is charged with encouraging owners to register their defibrillators with it. This is a good opportunity for local sports clubs and businesses to register so that the Health Department becomes aware of the location of defibrillators. It will aid the development of a new first responder scheme.

The Assembly also has a responsibility to carry out a study that will note the location and maintenance details of defibrillators in Departments and arm's-length bodies and to back the register by the NIAS. The SDLP supports a feasibility study that would detail the potential for an interactive map-based register of defibrillators, but, rather than have the study focus solely on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and its arm's-length bodies, we would take the opportunity to broaden its scope. Indeed, it would be remiss of the Assembly not to take up the opportunity to assess the feasibility of establishing a map-based register that would look at the availability of defibrillators across all Departments. Yes, that might mean that the study took a little longer or cost more, but would it not make more financial sense to authorise one whole study that covered all Departments rather than look at each Department individually?

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure takes the lead on sport. There has been an increasing number of incidents in which young people suffer cardiac arrest while participating in a sport. It would make sense that the Department take the lead on the development of an interactive map-based register, particularly at a time when the provision of defibrillators is on the rise.

11.15 am

I am delighted that a number of sporting organisations, such as the GAA, the IFA, the IRFU and many others, have drastically increased the number of defibrillators available at training sessions and matches, along with trained personnel to use the equipment. This is a positive step in the campaign to increase

survival rates, and I hope that the levels continue to rise.

I am working with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to install a portable automated external defibrillator at council-owned sporting grounds in the South Down constituency, particularly the Derryleckagh playing fields, where there has already been one sudden cardiac death. Oisín McGuinness, a young 16-year-old lad from Newry, was a neighbour of mine, and his family campaigned tirelessly after his death to help to support the community. They raised funds to help young children to have heart tests to see whether there was an underlying problem, as well as to increase the use of defibrillators. They donated a defibrillator to Páirc Esler, and, only a number of weeks later, it was used to save the life of a referee, Mr Tumelty. The family and community are very proud of that, and the story can be retold in communities across our districts.

While it is of the utmost importance for sports clubs and organisations to have a ready-for-use defibrillator on-site, a person can suffer a cardiac arrest in any place and at any time. Cardiac arrests are not limited to football fields or hockey pitches. The charity Defibs 4 Kids is working to increase the provision of defibrillators in schools, and I personally would like to see defibrillators in our libraries, police stations, fire stations, museums, GP offices and many other public places. Furthermore, I hope that the locations will be detailed on a map-based register that is accessible to the general public.

Francis Bacon once said that "Knowledge is power." If the general public are knowledgeable about the location of defibrillators, they could have the power to save lives in the event of an emergency. When a person suffers a cardiac arrest, time is of the essence. For every minute before defibrillation, the chance of survival drops by 10%. In most areas, the chance of an ambulance arriving in less than eight minutes is very low. Even if it arrives within eight minutes, it may be too late. That is why we should extend the study to include all Departments and all arm's-length bodies.

The Department will, of course, change in the next year. While that should not necessarily delay the feasibility study being carried out, in order to future-proof any interactive map-based register and maximise the use of public funds, it would make sense for the development of such a register, if found feasible, to take place after the new Departments are arranged.

The amendment further calls on the Executive to devise a strategy to increase the provision of defibrillators in public buildings. This is an important addition to the motion and, if supported, will demonstrate the Executive's commitment to widening the provision of and access to defibrillators.

The community resuscitation strategy undertaken by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety aimed to increase the survival rate of those who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest to the highest level that can be achieved across Northern Ireland. The strategy is ongoing, and objective 6 details some ways to improve access to automated external defibrillators already in place across Northern Ireland. The onus of creating the register and detailing the whereabouts, maintenance and service of existing defibrillators in Northern Ireland, as well as developing first responder schemes, is placed on the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, a service that is already overworked and under-resourced. I am unsure whether any funding has been provided directly for the implementation of this strategy to date, but I have submitted written questions to the Minister responsible to find out this information.

I wish to clarify for all Members here present that the community resuscitation strategy is not a strategy to increase the provision of defibrillators in all public spaces: it does not detail the increase of provision as an objective; rather, it focuses on the formulation of the register by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Therefore, by supporting the amendment, you would not be facilitating a duplication of work.

According to the figures from the community resuscitation strategy in Northern Ireland, each year, over 1,400 people suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. The early use of CPR and defibrillators really can make the difference between life and death. The current survival rate for out-of-hospital cardiac arrest in Northern Ireland is 7.5%. Research proves that using a defibrillator along with CPR can increase the survival rate to over 70% while allowing time for paramedics to arrive on the scene. Under government regulations, non-domestic properties must have annually maintained fire extinguishers on site and a fire exit policy. Fire kills two people in the UK every year. Compare that to the 270 people who die daily from sudden cardiac arrest. Fire extinguishers are now commonplace. Why not defibrillators?

We should follow the example set in other jurisdictions. Senator Feargal Quinn set a fine example by bringing a private Member's Bill to the Senate to amend the Public Health (Availability of Defibrillators) Bill 2013. There is so much that the Assembly can do to improve survival rates even further. For instance, my colleagues and I hope to bring a motion to the Floor in the near future to make CPR compulsory on the curriculum for all post-primary schoolchildren. We hope to achieve this vision of many to create a nation of lifesavers, but that is a matter for another day.

Today, I am asking for support for the amendment before us. Increasing the provision of defibs will bring added financial cost to our financially burdened House. I am very aware that we are in a dismal financial situation and that it may not be the best time to call on the Executive to spend money on providing defibs, but we can call on the Executive to show a commitment to growing the provision of defibrillators and to devise a strategy to this effect that can be implemented when we are in a better financial situation. This is the time to build momentum so that, maybe not today or tomorrow or even next year but one day, many public offices and perhaps private firms too will have a working defibrillator on site. This may be an aspirational dream, particularly at a time of deep financial hardship, and I would not wish to put —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mrs McKeivitt: — our business community and organisations under further financial pressures. However, I do hope that it can work so that, one day, the survival rate of cardiac arrest is closer to 100%.

Mr McCausland (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and do so as Chairman of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. This is an issue that the Committee has been considering over a period of months. The Member who spoke previously made reference to that, as indeed did the proposer. I am sure that Members will have noted that some of the correspondence to the Committee and from the Committee on this issue is contained in the information pack that the Library has so helpfully put together. It is true to say that all the different political parties right across the Committee have taken a keen interest in this. There has been a unanimity of purpose and interest and strong support for the provision of defibrillators as widely as possible.

The Committee's interest in defibrillators stemmed from a briefing that members received some months ago from a group called Defibs4kids. This group has campaigned tirelessly for defibrillators to be placed in every school. As Members will be aware, the Education Minister put this out to tender, and schools can now access defibrillators at a much reduced cost. Members of the Committee also heard from Defibs4kids about its campaign to have defibrillators in public spaces as well as sports clubs and grounds. The Committee agreed that there was compelling evidence that defibrillators can be the difference between life and death in cardiac arrest situations. Members heard that every minute wasted reduces the chances of recovery by 10%.

The Committee agreed to gather evidence on the bodies that hold defibrillators and how many people are trained in their use. Members wrote to all the Executive Departments and their arm's-length bodies, the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union, the Ulster branch of the GAA and the IFA. The Churches and the main uniformed organisations for young people were also approached. The aim was to ascertain whether they had defibrillators and, if they had, how many staff were trained to use them.

The Committee also attempted to pin down whether there was a Minister responsible for the regulation of defibrillators and whether there were any plans to put them on a mandatory footing similar to fire extinguishers. The Committee discovered from the correspondence and inquiries that there are lots of defibrillators out there and lots of people trained in their use. However, it became apparent to the Committee that there was no coordinated approach towards defibrillators across Government, with no one Department taking the lead. There are lots of initiatives. Indeed, the Committee will receive a briefing this Thursday from Health officials about that Department's community resuscitation strategy. The Committee is interested to hear how defibrillators and other forms of resuscitation might be embedded in communities.

I am pleased that the members of the Committee who brought forward the motion were inspired by what the Committee has heard about defibrillators and have therefore called for the mapping exercise. It is clear that the production of an effective guide to defibrillator locations would make a difference in saving lives. I am not in a position to express Committee support for the motion as the Committee has not actually discussed that particular point and has not yet come to a

Committee view. However, I know that, like me, other members of the Committee will be listening with interest to hear the Minister's response and to see whether the idea can and should be taken forward by DCAL. Obviously, if that is the case, the Committee will undertake its statutory scrutiny role of any mapping scheme for defibrillators.

Speaking personally, it seems that, if we are focusing purely on one Department, we are missing the wider picture. There are so many other locations where defibrillators would be appropriate and beneficial. It seems that the idea of broadening that out more widely is the more appropriate approach.

Mr Speaker: Mr McCausland, we did not have notice that you were going to speak on behalf of the Committee, so I apologise that there was no lectern.

Mr Cree: This is a very timely motion that seeks to address a major issue facing society. The original motion is worthy of support, but it is too modest in its scope; it focuses only on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. We should surely be seeking to broaden this initiative out across all Departments and their arm's-length bodies and to place the onus on the Executive as a whole. That is why, today, I will be supporting the SDLP amendment.

Only yesterday, the British Heart Foundation (BHF) organised a CPR demonstration in Parliament Buildings. It was most informative; it enabled MLAs to get a quick overview of CPR and to meet a local school already doing CPR training and to meet survivors. MLAs had the opportunity to take part in the British Heart Foundation's Call Push Rescue challenge, which is aimed at helping Northern Ireland to become the first country in the UK to create a generation of lifesavers. Unfortunately, due to urgent Committee business yesterday, I was unable to attend the event, but I am in full support of the initiative.

I have studied the data, and the statistics are quite shocking. We know that there are over 1,400 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests per year. The British Heart Foundation has printed statistics that state that if you suffer a cardiac arrest out of hospital in Northern Ireland, you have less than a one-in-10 chance of surviving. I think that Karen made that point. The British Heart Foundation is leading the fight to change that by creating a nation of lifesavers. Currently, the BHF in Northern Ireland provides free CPR skills training to approximately 65% of secondary schools locally, but we must help it to get the support of the remainder to register

for the Call Push Rescue training kit, which, I understand, is provided free. It is in all our interests to ensure that our young people can gain the practical skills needed to help to save a life.

The motion and amendment refer to the CAL Minister in the first instance. That is understandable given the number of incidents, often involving very fit and healthy young people, that have taken place on sporting fields. In December 2013, 45 schools from across Northern Ireland were presented with defibrillators at a special ceremony held at Stormont as part of the legacy of the 2013 World Police and Fire Games. That is all the more reason to have even more defibrillators outside the hospital environment and for a register of their availability to be kept.

It has been established that the presence of first responders can increase survival rates by twofold or threefold. There are many reasons why qualified personnel need to be available in specific areas to carry out vital first aid and use the defibrillators. The motion seeks to conduct a feasibility study into the potential for an interactive map-based register of defibrillators across all Departments and arm's-length bodies. In light of the British Heart Foundation's groundwork, research and training with schools throughout the Province, I suggest that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure meets it again, initially as part of its feasibility study. As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I would be particularly interested in establishing a link with the BHF and others related to the issue.

11.30 am

The motion calls on the Executive to devise a strategy that will increase the provision of defibrillators in public buildings and ensure compatibility with the Ambulance Service systems. It makes good sense to do so. I am very pleased to see defibrillators strategically positioned throughout Parliament Buildings, with a number of staff trained to operate them.

Several Departments have a clear role to play, not least the Health Department, Culture, Arts and Leisure, which has responsibility for sports, and Education. Northern Ireland is not a geographically large place. We have a population of 1.8 million people. It should be possible, given sufficient political will, to do so. We must provide the best first-aid and medical services possible to address these problems.

I am pleased to have been able to speak on the subject today, and I am heartened by the vital

work that is already being undertaken by the British Heart Foundation. I look forward to more research and outreach as a result of the debate. I reiterate, at this point, the Ulster Unionist Party's support for the amendment.

Ms Lo: First, I thank the Members who brought the motion and the amendment for raising awareness of this very important issue, not only in the House but in the media.

I think it is important to stress again that, every year, in Northern Ireland, over 1,400 people suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Sadly, less than 10% of them will survive. We know that early resuscitation and a defibrillator shock are vital to a person's chances of surviving a cardiac arrest. However, CPR should be started as soon as possible while waiting for an ambulance or the delivery of a defibrillator machine from nearby.

It is heartening to see increasing awareness of the importance of defibrillators, with sporting associations and other community groups leading by example. I welcome the motion urging Departments to follow suit.

Like other Members who have spoken, I pay tribute to the Defibs4kids organisation, which was started by a parent and a teacher from St Colman's Primary School two years ago. Defibs4kids has been doing fantastic work in raising awareness, promoting CPR and working towards ensuring that CPR training becomes a mandatory part of the curriculum for all children and trainee teachers. It has been improving the availability of automated external defibrillators in schools, sporting organisations and public places across Northern Ireland as well as helping to create and maintain an online database of mobile and static defibrillators' locations, which, I am sure, provided some inspiration for the motion.

Currently, there is no national database in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. That is something that certainly needs to be addressed. Defibs4kids estimates that, throughout Northern Ireland, around 30 schools had defibrillators prior to the launch of its campaign. The latest figures show that 196 now have defibrillators, with 41 schools using the newly created education board tender during the first term of this academic year. Its vision is tried and tested and, apparently, working. It makes sense that we roll it out.

There is already an interactive map showing defibrillators in schools around the country, which is a worthwhile initiative. It allows you, at a glance, to see where the nearest defibrillator

is. With so many people reliant on their smartphones nowadays, that is a very good idea. However, a quick sample of 10 marked locations on the map showed that only half had sufficient information on the address, geographical coordinates, location of defibrillator and opening hours, all of which should be given when you click on the specific location. For it to be effective, it is vital that that information is kept up to date. It seems that a number of them do not provide such information. The time spent travelling to a location, only to find that a defibrillator is not installed or that the premises is closed, could have devastating consequences. Ministers must bear this in mind when installing equipment. Training needs to be rolled out in conjunction with this. I would not have the confidence to use the equipment and would probably opt to wait for an ambulance, should I find myself in such a situation.

I support the motion and amendment because we should be doing all we can to save the lives of those who suffer a cardiac arrest.

Mr Dunne: I, too, support the motion. Anything that can help reduce the risk of dying from cardiac arrest across Northern Ireland is to be welcomed and encouraged. A lot of good work has been done over recent years by sports clubs, schools, charities, businesses, community groups and many other organisations in helping to tackle this problem. Many of them have taken the initiative by providing practical support through defibrillators being installed in many places across Northern Ireland.

Every year, more than 60,000 people in the UK suffer out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Each week, in the UK as a whole, 12 young people die of sudden cardiac arrest. Each year, 1,400 people in Northern Ireland suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Sadly, and quite shockingly, fewer than 10% survive to be discharged from hospital — an alarming statistic indeed. Early resuscitation and a defibrillation shock are vital to a person's chance of survival. We are aware, sadly, of tragic cases of local young people suffering an arrest while playing their sport and many not surviving. This confirms that a real issue exists and much more work must be done.

I commend the many local organisations that have helped fight this battle, including charities such as the British Heart Foundation, and Defibs4kids in schools, for the good work they have done, particularly with sports clubs. They have done a tremendous job in helping to prioritise work in this area. Education is a vital

part of the process. There is room for joined-up working in this sphere; one practical example of which is a recent joint initiative by the British Heart Foundation and Asda. Asda has a defibrillator for public use in every one of its UK stores. That is a positive, practical example of the private sector getting involved in the health and well-being of the public.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for giving way. On the point you have just made about what the economy can do: the only manufacturer of automated external defibrillators in the UK and Ireland is the Belfast-based company, HeartSine. Does the Member agree that any strategy by our Executive to increase the availability of defibrillators would not just save lives but would potentially create jobs in a Northern Ireland-based firm?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dunne: I am obviously supportive. Speaking as a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, which is to get a briefing on jobs created, I am very supportive of the point made by the Member.

As with many areas in the health and well-being sector, early intervention and education are key. The community strategy launched by former Health Minister Edwin Poots last year was a welcome development. It helped raise awareness, create targets and focus everyone to aspire to meet those targets. It was interesting to note that during a recent Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure visit, Sport NI headquarters had no defibrillators in place. However, it is to be welcomed that it has since ordered two life-saving machines that are now in operation.

It is important that people across our communities are suitably trained and equipped with the skills to operate these machines. Maintenance of defibrillators is vital. They need to be checked weekly and serviced regularly to ensure that they are serviceable when needed.

An interactive map-based register of defibrillators should help tackle what is a growing problem, and any further work between the Minister and her Department must follow a joined-up process that will support the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to help pump new life into the project and to ensure awareness and good communication between all involved.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-sásta tacaíocht a

thabhairt don rún seo, agus don leasú chomh maith. I very much welcome the motion and commend my colleagues for taking the initiative to table it. I also welcome the amendment, which certainly adds value and increases the amount and type of action that needs to be taken and will be taken to save lives.

I strongly support the mapping of defibrillator provision in DCAL, its relevant agencies and, indeed, all the other Departments, as is referred to specifically in the amendment. I am pleased that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is in attendance, and I note from the Research and Information Service (RaISe) document that has been provided to all MLAs that, in correspondence from the Minister to the Committee in February of this year, she stated that she would welcome and support a strategic response across all Departments on this important matter and committed DCAL to taking action.

I am familiar with the work of the Cormac Trust. Following the tragic death of Cormac McAnallen in 2004, there was a lot of focus — understandably so — on the need to provide automated external defibrillators to communities and to train people in their use. Other Members referred to other sporting individuals who died or nearly died in various scenarios. I am pleased to note that, in my county of Tyrone, the Cormac Trust initiative has been rolled out to every club and every community. Just yesterday evening, I visited my own club rooms in Carrickmore to see that there is a dedicated, accessible building clearly marked with "defibrillator" on it. I had a discussion with parents who were waiting to collect their young ones from training about their knowledge of that defibrillator and spoke to some people who had been trained in its use. In the Carrickmore community in mid-Tyrone, a first responders organisation has been established as well. It is made up of volunteers who live or work in the area, and they have been trained to attend certain 999 calls in support of the Ambulance Service.

Some other issues have been thrown up with rural locations, such as the value of having house numbers on display and making sure that name signs for roads are clear in rural communities. In my constituency, I am aware that, in the recent past, the absence of proper signage at Retreat View and Granagh Lane led to emergency services going past those locations and having to come back. Can you imagine if that were to happen in the case of someone needing a defibrillator? The GAA, the IFA, the rugby authorities and other sporting bodies are all playing their part in

a very impressive way. Earlier this month, when Tyrone won the All-Ireland Under-21 Championship title at Parnell Park in Dublin —

Mr Speaker: When was that?

Mr McElduff: I am not sure whether you noticed that or not, Mr Speaker.

At that match, a tragic situation developed close to half time where two people in the stand required the use of a defibrillator. Unfortunately, one gentleman died, but one life was fortunately saved. This is a matter of life and death, and it would be good to have this type of register across all public buildings and to have the involvement of all Departments.

I commend the Department, the Minister and the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which has taken a very strong interest in this subject.

11.45 am

Mr Hilditch: I support the motion as amended. Members have certainly been doing their research, as we heard on a number of occasions about the 1,400 cardiac arrests each year and the poor 10% survival rate for those who, unfortunately, have taken ill outside the hospital. Therefore, it is important that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure proceeds with a feasibility study. Those are quite shocking figures, which, I guess, the public are not totally aware of. I hope that the first step is to raise awareness in our communities about the victims and the importance of saving lives through resuscitation training and about how defibrillators have the potential to make a huge difference.

Back in 2013, when Mr Poots was Minister, he announced the development of the regional Northern Ireland community resuscitation strategy. We thank the Minister and his Department for that work, which was completed in July 2014. I understand that, since then, subgroups have been formed, with membership from the trusts, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke and the British Heart Foundation, to name but a few. The group met in February and is progressing work streams and structures. We look forward to the new Minister's update from its next meeting, which, I believe, is due to take place in early June.

Let us hope that the new strategy implementation group, along with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, can

help to connect the gap that exists between what resources are needed and what is already out there and, at the same time, ensure compatibility with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

There is no doubt that available defibrillators are located in organisations and public bodies that are under DCAL's remit, but local communities maybe just do not know of their whereabouts. A DCAL feasibility study for a defibrillator register will aim to rectify that by informing the public of the exact locations where the equipment can be found in an area, whether it be in the local theatre, sports grounds or wherever.

Nevertheless, before an effective register can go ahead, some major difficulties need to be addressed during a feasibility study. Recently, I heard from Janice Bisp from Bisp Training, who runs a very successful first aid and training consultancy throughout Northern Ireland. She highlighted some of the hurdles to me. She informed me that this simply cannot be a paper exercise. She has experienced many situations where she has gone out to complete first aid training, and brand new defibrillators were sitting in back stores still in their boxes covered in the original polystyrene, but there was no intention of them being used. I have no doubt that the majority of us here today, as Anna Lo said, would be nervous about using a defibrillator because of our apprehension about not being able to help the victim or because we are aware of even being sued for not being able to help or for using the defibrillator wrongly. That is despite the fact that most automated external defibrillators are now easy enough to use.

The new register cannot simply be a tick-box exercise that organisations complete. People must be educated on using the equipment with competence, confidence and assurance, while communicating with the right people at the time of an urgent incident. To date, the strategy implementation group's work has recognised that and has supported the current community CPR training initiatives, particularly in schools. We appreciate that funding has been secured throughout 2015-16. Let us hope that future funding can be awarded for this and for the training of community resuscitation development officers.

With regard to the insurance side of things, we need to consider what safeguards will be put in place to indemnify those prepared to act beyond their planned or insured remit to extend their duty of care. Most countries include the good faith use of the automated external

defibrillator (AED) by any person under the Good Samaritan laws. Good faith protection under Good Samaritan laws means that a volunteer responder not acting as part of one's occupation cannot be held civilly liable for the harm to or death of a victim by providing improper or inadequate care, given that the harm or death was not intentional and the responder was acting within the limits of their training and in good faith. AEDs create little liability if used correctly.

The last point that I will raise relates to the administration side of the register. Updating the database of contact details will need tight controls. Who will have overall responsibility for it? Will the position be potentially tendered out? How will it be allocated? The name of the first point of contact, their details, telephone number, the times they work and their availability will all need to be logged and properly looked after.

I support the motion and the amendment and look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé thar a bheith buíoch díot as an deis chainte a thabhairt domh ar an rún tábhachtach seo atá ag iarraidh ar an Aire Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíocht staidéar féidearthachta a chur ar bun ar fhorbairt learscála idirgníomhaí de dífhibrileoirí agus na háiteach éagúla ina bhfuil siad lonnaithe. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on the motion. Tacaím leis an rún agus leis an leasú. I support the motion and the amendment.

At the outset, I want to remember a neighbour of mine, Mary Mooney, who died at the age of 18 as a result of sudden adult death syndrome. Mary's death was a huge tragedy for her mother Kathleen, her brothers, her friends and her neighbours. I pay tribute to Mrs Mooney for her courage in turning tragedy into something positive through her efforts at fundraising to provide defibrillators in sports clubs and primary schools in the Newry area. I was honoured to help in whatever way I could with Mrs Mooney's efforts, and I was inspired by her courage in the face of great sadness and her selfless desire to save the lives of other people.

I support the amendment and the motion, which seeks to provide Northern Ireland with a fully interactive map-based register of defibrillators while further securing the greater provision of such life-saving defibrillators for a broader range of public buildings. Today, we are calling on the Executive to recognise the need to explore the issue in greater detail and for them

to recognise the lives affected and the lives that can be saved with the greater provision of defibrillators in Northern Ireland. Today, I hope that the Assembly will recognise the need for a comprehensive interactive map-based register across all Departments; a register that will detail who has external defibrillators, where they are located and who is trained to use them. Such a register is essential for providing the public with better information on where they can access automated external defibrillators and to ensuring that they are regularly maintained.

It was through the efforts of families like the Mooney family, the McAnallen family, other families and the many cardiac groups that we have seen the clear benefits that the installation of portable defibrillators has brought to the people of Northern Ireland. Many lives, including those of John Dobbins, Kevin McCloy and many others have been saved through the intervention of on-site defibrillators. To my mind, every life saved only lends greater strength to the need for a robust study into the potential of having defibrillators across all Departments and public buildings.

I am very pleased that there is agreement across the House today on the motion and the amendment which, I believe, as Mr McElduff said, increases the value of the motion. I sincerely hope that the Minister, in her response, will add to that by clearly outlining where she sees the future to be in relation to this important issue, which obviously impacts on all those who play sport and on the population in general.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's positive response to the motion and the amendment.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl daoibhse as an rún. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú.

I thank both the Members who brought the motion and those who brought the amendment, both of which I fully support. I have listened very carefully to the views expressed. It is delightful to see not only cross-party support but a genuine collaborative approach to tackling an issue which many Members have spoken very well on.

I would also like to congratulate the many Members who have paid tribute to the work that is already under way, particularly, though not exclusively, that which has been pioneered by

families who, regrettably, were urged on by the loss of a loved one or, probably, the near loss of a loved one. Incidents in sports, or among those attending sporting events, where people suffer heart attack or cardiac arrest, are, thankfully, not that frequent, but when they occur great distress is caused to everybody involved. When tragedies happen, they raise public awareness and generate debate about the need for different defibrillators and proper provision of CPR training.

Most of the Members who spoke today raised high-profile examples. Many people, including sports clubs and the governing bodies — primarily the Ulster Council of the GAA, Ulster Rugby and the Irish Football Association — and the work that they have done, in conjunction with many health charities, have to be commended. As Minister for sport, I want to see more people engaged in sport and leisure activities: that is a given. However, I also want to do all I can to ensure that there is safety for people when they participate in activities which, at times, involve strenuous exercise.

We have also to bear in mind that training in the use of defibrillators, and keeping them maintained — I think that that was raised by David Hilditch and other Members — is very important. We have also to be very mindful of the issue that has been raised of their geographical spread across the North. That applies to urban areas but, perhaps, as some Members have said, it is more critical in rural ones.

We have a simple and affordable device, invented by one of our very own citizens, Professor Frank Pantridge, which can quickly help people if a heart attack happens. Immediate action, through the defib and CPR, can improve the chances of survival following a heart attack. Every Member who has spoken thus far has mentioned the rates — in the region of 1,400 people — that this has affected. The need for the defibs, and the knowledge of how to use them, is an issue not just for my Department but for everybody involved in sports and arts groups. The need exists right across our communities, and access is critical as people go about their daily lives, should it be in shopping centres, cinemas, the workplace, places of worship, school buildings and, indeed, as has been mentioned, government buildings and those of arm's-length bodies. Given that diversity, and the range of places where the defibrillator can prove useful and lifesaving, it is right and proper that there is a strategy for their provision and a database which shows where each device is located and information regarding who can use it. That is critical.

With regard to the use of defibrillators and the ability to perform CPR, we must not forget about the importance of providing proper training. Again, this has already been mentioned. It is critical. Anna is not on her own; I have had CPR training, including training in the use of defibs. Many people are frankly afraid to use them but, as David Hilditch has pointed out, some of the more modern ones actually take you through each step. It is important that we break down any myths and that people feel confident and have access to this training and these devices. We are making progress. More and more devices are being provided and installed in clubs and venues, but we have still some way to go to catch up with other countries. For example, in Japan, a change in the law to allow the use of defibrillators by the general public led to a countrywide installation in public places.

Many of those defibs are held in vending machines to address problems relating to access for the general public when an emergency occurs. We need to learn lessons from other places that not only have done it well but are exemplars. Last year, my health colleagues' community resuscitation strategy, which was mentioned by many Members, considered public access to defibrillation. The Ambulance Service has been tasked with carrying out 10 actions regarding objective 6 of that strategy, one of which is to assess the feasibility and potential value of establishing and maintaining a register of defibrillators. I have been asked in this instance to take a lead, and I am happy to do that. It is important that I work with colleagues across the Executive. The first place I would go to is Health and, after that, Education to see what we can do. We all agree that technology is a wonderful thing. It opens up all sorts of opportunities, not on the same theme but just in health promotion.

12.00 noon

I was recently at the launch of the IFA's child safeguarding app, which my Department funded. It provides coaches and parents with instant access to information and contacts to help them handle any type of incident. This is on the same principle: we need to know where the devices are, their details, how they can be accessed and how training can be made available. This is about safeguarding people as best as possible. DCAL's role with other Departments and organisations should be to survey and gather data, as defined by the Ambulance Service, and provide it in a format that is compatible with the

system being developed with the Ambulance Service. That is crucial. DCAL has already made a start by providing defibrillators in some of its buildings and associated training, as well as providing funding for organisations to purchase defibs.

As Members know, my Department is responsible for a number of arm's-length bodies. Buildings used by three of those bodies are equipped with defibrillators, namely the Waterways Ireland headquarters, Armagh Observatory and the Sports Institute. Sport NI and Foras na Gaeilge have undergone a procurement exercise for the supply of defibrillators at locations including the House of Sport, Tollymore National Outdoor Centre and Foras na Gaeilge venues in Belfast. Libraries recently completed a procurement exercise to supply, deliver, commission and provide training in the deployment of 40-plus defibrillators in libraries. They envisage that those will be placed in the busiest locations and that two staff will be trained in their use in each location. Museums has four defibrillators across its sites for events that attract large audiences. It also engages with first-aiders from the Red Cross and St John Ambulance to ensure that defibrillators are available. Although Sport NI does not yet hold a list of clubs with defibrillators, it has agreed to support Defibs4Kids and the Northern Ireland Sports Forum and to undertake a mapping exercise of the provision of defibrillators across the sector.

As mentioned, the legacy from the 2013 World Police and Fire Games, in partnership with HeartSine, gifted 45 defibrillators for distribution across local schools. The IFA purchased 75 defibrillators as part of a health programme funded by DCAL through promoting equality and tackling poverty, and they were distributed to senior, intermediate and junior clubs across the North, along with the delivery of associated training. I know that, in the past 10 years, the GAA has invested significantly in buying defibs. They have been distributed to clubs, and arrangements have been made to train members in their use. Approximately 80% of clubs are now equipped. While progress has been made, there is clearly a need to continue to increase the number of defibs and the places in which we can get access to them.

Sport NI and DCAL have been represented on the group that is chaired by David McManus, the medical director of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Dr McManus has expressed his desire to avoid duplication in the mapping of defibrillators. It is important that we do not have duplication and that the matter is

sorted out as best we can, so we are taking a collective approach.

I am very supportive of these measures to protect life, as well as the activities of groups such as Defibs4Kids, which appeared before the CAL Committee in February. My Department has supported and encouraged Defibs4Kids because education and building confidence at a young age in the use of CPR and defibrillators are crucial.

Another bit of good news, which some Members mentioned, is the role of the private sector. My officials recently met the Henderson Group to hear the details of a community-based initiative that will see the siting of 420 defibrillators at Spar and Vivo shop outlets, which, as Members will know, are largely based in rural areas. It is that type of initiative that demonstrates a desire at community level to make this emergency assistance available and accessible. I applaud the innovation behind the scheme, and I will continue to monitor that development and the opportunities that may emerge to make widespread defibrillator provision a reality. I am willing to play my part in extending access to provision across the North, not only for the benefit of sports participants who may suffer a cardiac arrest but for the whole community. I want to underline my commitment to seeing more people engage in a full range of sporting and leisure activities, and I will do all in my power to ensure their safety whilst participating. However, this is a wider issue for us all across the North, and the challenge exists on a number of levels, as we have heard today from all the Members who spoke.

I will also ensure that my Department gives the Ambulance Service full cooperation and assistance in meeting the requirements of the community resuscitation strategy. I encourage all Departments to deliver on their respective roles in extending the availability of and access to defibrillators and to provide the details of such provision to the Ambulance Service. We will take the lead on this and play our full role.

Finally, I thank Members not only for raising awareness of this important health issue today but for the opportunity to provide assurance that my Department will do all it can to play its role in supporting the development of a map-based register of defibrillators and making it a reality. I thank you all for the motion and the amendment.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate. As Members have already articulated — I see no need to reiterate

the figures — cardiac arrests are extremely dangerous, but they are treatable with early intervention and defibrillation, which is why our amendment recommends wider provision, a point that was agreed by Mr Cree, Mr McCausland and the Minister. Most importantly, chances of survival dramatically increase if defibrillation is delivered quickly. Equally, they decrease with every second that passes where treatment is delayed. We all know the cases where defibrillation was not delivered quickly enough to prevent sudden death. Mr McElduff referred to the tragic death of Cormac McAnallen and the deaths of others since 2004, and they were also referred to by my colleague Mr Bradley. Also mentioned were the great efforts made by many, including those people's families, to have preventative steps adopted and defibrillators installed. However, the argument is that, without a marked register of defibrillator location and an accepted knowledge of those who are trained to use them, the reality is that such incidents could still happen.

Many of these life-saving devices are located in health centres, hospitals or fire stations. We even have one here in Parliament Buildings. Those are places where you might expect to find them or where you would first go to look for them, but there are also many in urban and community settings. We have seen many businesses and agencies over the last number of years installing defibrillators, a point emphasised by Mr Dunne. However, we have no idea of the number of machines or where they are located, so it is important that we ensure they are mapped so that, should an individual suffer a cardiac arrest, the location of a machine is known and we can provide vital and timely treatment, which significantly increases survival rates. That is an obvious point to make, and it was made by the proposer of the motion.

I will draw on some international comparisons that were not made by Members. Canada, the USA, Hong Kong and even Japan have made many advances recently in implementing strategies to provide greater public access to defibrillators. We have some way to go to match New Zealand, which, with a population similar to that of Scotland, has just under 4,300 publicly available defibrillators. Most importantly, they have an online interactive map that clearly displays exactly where they are, and they are where they need to be. They have been innovative in embracing new technology and even have a mobile app for download that locates the closest defibrillator through GPS. I am aware that there is an online system here that details the location of defibrillators, and I

commend the great effort that those behind the scheme are making, but the initiative is in its infancy, with only school defibs being mapped. I refer to the contributions from Ms Lo and the Minister, who both praised the good work of schools in that regard.

In comparison, I was online this morning, and the website AED Locations showed me exactly where defibrillators are located in any part of New Zealand. I cannot tell you where they are located in Belfast or anywhere else in Northern Ireland. There is a fundamental disconnect here, and we lag behind.

We could pat ourselves on the back about the fact that we have installed more defibrillators in the past five years than we have had before, but we still cannot say categorically that we have done everything to protect our young sportsmen, sportswomen and children — in fact, anyone who suffers a cardiac attack in a public place. Mr Hilditch made the point that there has to be real action and that it cannot be just a paper tick-box exercise. He also touched on cost, and, obviously, there will be a cost included in an interactive mapping register. However, surely this an exercise primarily, at least in the first instance, in information gathering rather than of capital spend. The SDLP would like to see an exercise by the Executive to establish cost and initiate a process that will create an interactive register of defibrillators here. As I mentioned earlier, we need look no further than Gareth Jenkin, who set up the New Zealand website. He had no money, but he had the ambition and the determination to help save lives. He set up his website with the help of a technology company, and we need that type of ambition here.

The fact that defibrillators can save and have saved lives is the reason that motions such as this are to be welcomed and supported, and I commend all colleagues who have joined in supporting it. However, we cannot continue to take a haphazard approach, with Departments working in silos, implementing and supporting their own departmental initiatives. That goes to the heart of our amendment. We need that interdepartmental collaboration in seeking to map out where these important machines are all across Northern Ireland, and, alongside that process, we need to raise awareness. Crucially, we need to set out the action that is required to increase the availability and accessibility of these life-saving machines. I hope that the motion and the amendment, if agreed, will go some way to helping pursue that objective.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé lán-sásta an díospóireacht seo a thabhairt chun deiridh inniu agus ba mhaith liom a rá fosta go bhfuil muid sásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I am happy to wind on the debate and to say that we support the amendment as well. We see it as a natural extension of the spirit of the motion, and we have no difficulty with that.

As all Members who have spoken said, this is a very important debate, and it highlights the reality of the role that defibrillators can play in saving lives. Many people talked about the statistics, so I do not need go back over them, but it is fair to say that fewer than 10% of people will survive coming out of hospital if they do not have access to CPR and a defibrillator. It is vital that we take all of that on board. It is also important that we should save life where we can, and we have an imperative to do that. We need to take responsibility for that.

I want to highlight the work of the Defibs4Kids campaign, which is an excellent initiative that was started by Martina McConville in St Colman's Primary School in Lambeg. There are other initiatives that I want to commend. The Minister of Education and the Minister of Health launched the interactive website in 2014, and that was about having defibrillators available in schools and making that knowledge known. At the time, there were 30 schools involved, and I believe that there are now 196. I visited one of my local schools recently, St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, where staff talked to me about their plans to have a defibrillator. I also want to mention that the sporting fraternity has been pivotal to the campaign, and that is because many people in that world have lost their life. That is tragic, and cases such as those of Cormac McAnallen highlight the need to have the equipment available.

12.15 pm

I also want to mention the community resuscitation strategy, which is very important in taking forward this work. That strategy highlighted the need for early recognition by the public of what a cardiac arrest looks like, for early access to CPR and defibrillators and for training in their use. I would go further and say that there is a need for as many as possible to access training in the use of defibrillators, just as people generally feel that it is important to access CPR training.

I will point out a couple of wee examples. Apparently, Crossgar is a very safe place to have a heart attack, if you are going to have one, because there is a defibrillator in a local

phone box. That shows you the importance of local initiatives and ingenuity in making our communities safer places.

I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service and its excellent work. It is important that we support that. The first responder scheme is an excellent part of the support that the Ambulance Service needs, and we should all support it. It is also worth highlighting the case of Lynda Donaldson, who took a heart attack on the street. Michelle, who was driving by, gave her CPR, and another passer-by, Phil, who had a defibrillator in his car, also stopped. Together they saved her life. That flags up the importance of having the knowledge, the equipment and the training in how it is used. Many Members made similar points, and I am happy to say that everybody has been supportive of the motion and has made very positive contributions to the debate.

Oliver McMullan talked about the first responders scheme in the glens, where he comes from, and the importance of the Ambulance Service knowing where defibrillators are located. That highlights the need for mapping. It is as vital as having fire extinguishers available. Karen McKeivitt talked about this being a good opportunity for businesses and the work that she does in her constituency with local people and local councils. She mentioned the Páirc Esler case, where the life of a local referee was saved by the use of a defibrillator — sorry, I cannot say that very well. Nelson McCausland, speaking as Chair of the Committee, mentioned a recent presentation that Defibs4kids gave to the Committee and pointed out that schools can access defibrillators at a reduced cost. He also said that no Department had yet taken the lead but he looked forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Leslie Cree highlighted an initiative to create a generation of lifesavers. Anna Lo highlighted the number of people suffering cardiac arrest, the Defibs4kids campaign and the high number of schools that have installed defibrillators as a result. Gordon Dunne commended the many local organisations and charities that have taken initiatives in this regard and highlighted the need to ensure that defibrillators not only were available but were regularly maintained. Barry McElduff talked about the Cormac Trust, which was started by the family of Cormac McAnallen after his tragic death in 2004. He also highlighted the fact that the GAA, the IFA and rugby all play their part in promoting the use and availability of defibrillators. David Hilditch commended the community resuscitation strategy and the good

developmental work that has arisen from that. He also highlighted the need for training in the use of defibrillators. Dominic Bradley talked about the tragic death of another local person, Mary Mooney. He found it inspiring that the family has been involved in very positive work. It is often the case that, out of these tragic circumstances, there are inspirational examples of leadership in our communities and issues such as this being highlighted.

The Minister fully supported the motion and the amendment. She was delighted that there was cross-party support. She paid tribute to the work being pioneered by families and highlighted her responsibility to ensure safety for people in the sporting world. She felt that access was critical in all public places. She highlighted the importance of the community resuscitation strategy and of learning lessons from places like Japan that lead the way. She gave an account of the current situation with defibrillators in her Department and arm's-length bodies, and she stressed the importance of not duplicating any of that work when we create a map-based register.

Fearghal McKinney wound on the amendment and talked about New Zealand, where 4,300 defibrillators are publicly available as well as full mapping information and a mobile app. In the North, you cannot get information on their location, which highlights the need for an interactive website so that everybody can access the information at the touch of a button and we can become like Japan and New Zealand in having the most up-to-date and important information to save lives.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to conduct a feasibility study into the potential for an interactive map-based register of defibrillators across all Departments, including arm's-length bodies; and further calls on the Executive to devise a strategy that will see an increase in provision of defibrillators in public buildings and to ensure compatibility with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service systems.

Mr Speaker: 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. Thank you, Members; that was a very good debate.

The sitting was suspended at 12.22 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I have to tell Members that questions 3, 6, 8, 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Road and Drainage Maintenance Criteria

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the criteria issued to Transport NI staff regarding maintenance of the road and drainage networks. (AQO 8206/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, at the outset, may I express my sympathy and, I am sure, that of the whole House, to the Nicholson and Attwood families on their recent sad bereavements.

To answer question 1, as Members will be aware, my Department is facing a £60 million resource budget pressure in 2015-16, more than half of which will fall to Transport NI. That budget pressure has created an immediate impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services and, as such, I have had no option other than to agree to a skeleton service, at some financial risk to my Department, until June monitoring.

There is no funding available to employ external contractors. However, my Department's internal work force will endeavour to keep the road network in as safe a condition as possible. Roads will be inspected as normal and repairs will be prioritised as far as resources permit. Defects will be prioritised for repair depending on their severity, but it is likely that non-urgent defects will not be repaired on low-traffic rural roads. Grass will be cut once in all areas between April and October, with sight lines at bends and junctions being cut more frequently as required. The emptying of gullies will be

targeted to known problem locations in an attempt to reduce the impact of flooding and maintain road safety. There will be limited weed control and maintenance of white lines, and only one quarter of the required resource available to repair street lighting outages.

I will make a strong bid for resource funding in June monitoring to return routine maintenance services to normal levels, and I hope that the Member and the House will support my Department's bid.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. He said that the roads would be inspected as normal. Will he elaborate on that, please?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that roads are inspected on a regular basis and defects are identified. I am simply highlighting the fact that it will not be possible to address all the defects as quickly as we would do normally or as we would like. That is not a situation that I want to be in, but it is a consequence of the financial challenges that my Department is facing.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer so far and for his explanation of the situation. Can he state what bid he is making in the monitoring round? How hopeful is he about getting something, particularly to improve roads maintenance in the two counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh, which greatly rely on upgrading and roads maintenance?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. We will indeed make a very strong bid. Obviously, it is important that I share that bid with the Regional Development Committee, of which you are a member, as are other Members. Essentially, it is to deal with the challenges of the resource budget and to address the need that there is and the clear gaps that there are in the maintenance that we seek to do in emptying gullies, maintaining street lighting and grass cutting — all the important services that people expect my Department to carry out on a day and daily basis. I hope that members of the Committee and Members of the House will give support to trying to get more resources to my Department to meet those challenges.

Mr Clarke: I also thank the Minister for his answers. However, Minister, given that there seems to be a reluctance in your Department to fix some of the worst potholes, are you already seeing a rise in the public liability claims for those?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for that question from the Member, who is, of course, the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development. There has been no upsurge in claims at this point. I do have a concern that, as the situation continues in which defects on roads are not repaired either as quickly or with proper speed, that could give rise to claims. It lends itself to a false economy if we end up having to pay compensation, which, obviously, comes out of the departmental budget, when we would be better to get money to carry out the proper maintenance activities that are required and which people demand. The Member makes a very good point. I very much hope that he and the Committee will continue to support bids in the current situation.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister, in his original answer, mentioned the reduction in grass cutting to those areas where it is strictly necessary. Will he take the opportunity to do something positive for bees and other things that enhance our environment by trying to reduce the amount of grass cutting that is actually done and moving it further back in the season because, as he will know, the bee population is under severe pressure and needs to have as many flowering plants as possible in verges?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for that slightly unusual angle. Clearly, he gets a buzz out of these things.

On a very serious point, I am concerned about any reduction in grass cutting at verges and particularly where sight lines are involved. There are attendant dangers. Irrespective of the bee population and other environmental issues, I think that the public expect grass cutting to take place. They want to see potentially dangerous verges cut back to avert potential accidents. Public safety has to override all things, even the environmental concerns that the Member has raised.

Knockmore Link Road

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the Knockmore link road. (AQO 8207/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am meeting members of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council tomorrow to discuss the development of the Knockmore/M1 Sprucefield link road.

The Knockmore link has been identified in the Belfast metropolitan area plan 2015 as a non-

strategic road scheme that is to be developer-led and funded either in full or in very substantial part. In the current economic climate, it is unlikely that public-sector funding will be available to deliver this road scheme. Available funding is rightly directed at improvements to the strategic road network. It is up to developers to fund delivery of the road, particularly as it is closely linked to unlocking development potential in the area.

Any contribution towards the scheme from my Department's Transport NI would be subject to detailed economic appraisal, the availability of funding and inclusion within the major works programme. Transport NI has no plans to provide or fund any part of this road.

Mr Lunn: I am glad to hear about the meeting tomorrow. I suppose that I should try to improve communication between myself and my council group. That is good news.

The Minister said that it is a non-strategic project. That surprises me, but I suppose that, in strictly legal terms, that is what it is. Would he not agree that a lot of strategic values are involved here with Blaris Road, the Maze, Sprucefield and connectivity to the M1, the A1 and the airport? It may not be strategic in strict terms, but it is a very important piece of work.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It may well indeed be a matter for him to pursue that with council colleagues and update his diary requirements.

His point is not unreasonable, and I have some sympathy with it, but, in strict terms, the project does not feature as part of the strategic road network, and it is seen as developer-led. I am happy to encourage the project with developers as necessary and in conjunction with members of the council. I see the benefits of extending or improving the network in the region, but, in strict terms, the project does not meet the criteria for the strategic network.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Members, the questions are getting longer and longer and longer.

Mr Givan: One of the expansion programmes for the strategic network is an improvement of the M1 at the Sprucefield junction. Would there be any merit in the Minister asking his officials to review its strategic importance vis-à-vis what we regard as the very strategic route of the Knockmore-Sprucefield link, with a view to identifying the latter as requiring public funding? It is a chicken-and-egg scenario with

developers: without unlocking this site, we will not get the development.

Mr Kennedy: I think that the Member also makes a fair point, and it may be that we can explore that at the meeting with the council tomorrow. In strict terms, the Department is clear that this project should be developer-led. However, there are other strategic road issues in the area that, with collaboration and cooperation, could be explored to the benefit of the whole area. I am certainly open to that discussion to see whether opportunities can be brought forward.

Weed Spraying: North Down

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to carry out weed spraying on pavements in residential areas in North Down. (AQO 8209/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Due to the budgetary pressures in 2015-16, my Department is able to provide only a skeleton routine maintenance service at present, and even that is being carried out at some financial risk to my Department. As a consequence, weed control is one of the areas affected. This will impact not only in North Down but right across Northern Ireland

My Department will not be able to control weeds chemically, either by the use of external contractors or its internal workforce. Where resources and other higher priority work permit, my Department's internal workforce will manually scuffle localised areas to control weed growth. The Department will, however, continue to treat noxious weeds.

As I said in reply to an earlier question, this is not the service that my Department wishes to provide. However, it is a direct consequence of the challenging budgetary situation. As I indicated, I will bid in the June monitoring round for the resources required to provide normal routine maintenance activities. I trust that the Member will support that bid.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer, but will he advise us what his message is to ratepayers? They look after their properties, pay their rates, cut their grass and control their weeds, yet, when they go out onto the public roads, they are at risk because weeds are not controlled and grass is cut only once a year. As the Minister, surely you are concerned about the real issues of road safety, especially sight lines on places like the Bangor road.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I know that he will understand the difference between ratepayers and taxpayers, but I am interested —

Mr Dunne: They are all paying.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. Nobody should shout from a sedentary position.

Mr Kennedy: — in ratepayers and taxpayers and the service that we are expected to provide and need to provide.

I do not dispute the need for the service to be maintained at a proper level. In fact, I am fighting very hard to try to ensure that that happens. My Department faces a very challenging economic situation — £60 million in real terms — and that has to be managed. I cannot spend money that I do not have. I am stretching the finances until we see the outcome of the June monitoring round.

The Member will also know that the Executive are losing £2 million a week. Shamefully and disgracefully, that is because of Sinn Féin's refusal to move forward on welfare reform. That money, if spent in my Department, would make a very useful contribution to dealing with the issues that I have and that the Member mentioned today.

2.15 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He has answered most of my question; I was going to ask him whether he has restricted weed spraying and grass cutting in North Down and, indeed, in other constituencies.

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Member to my original answer, in which I made it clear that there has been an impact not just in North Down but all over Northern Ireland. I do not want to be in this situation. Again, I make the point to the Member that, if the issue of welfare reform could be resolved, the very dark cloud that hangs over the Assembly, the Executive and these political institutions could be lifted, and perhaps we could then have sensible and reasonable discussions about how we can afford the things that we need to do, particularly from my budget and the other Executive budgets that are so badly impacted as a result of Sinn Féin's current stance.

Reservoirs: Sale/Disposal

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the sale or disposal of redundant reservoirs owned by Northern Ireland Water. (AQO 8210/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In accordance with the terms of Northern Ireland Water's operating licence, it has an obligation to dispose of assets that are no longer of use. Twenty-five reservoirs have been identified for potential disposal during the current financial year, and these are detailed in the annual land disposal return for 2015-16, which was submitted to the Utility Regulator on 1 April 2015.

Northern Ireland Water appreciates the potential for local community use through continued public ownership and agreed, in the first instance, to offer these reservoirs to the public sector to determine any expressions of interest, prior to advertising them for sale on the open market. Expressions of interest were invited from the public sector during 2014, in accordance with the Department of Finance and Personnel's 'Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland' guidance document. Expressions of interest were received from local councils for three reservoirs: Altmore and Cappagh in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area; and Portavoe in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. The councils are considering the feasibility of procuring those assets. NI Water hopes that ownership of the assets can be transferred to the councils within the current financial year.

Following an active marketing exercise during 2014, Northern Ireland Water agreed the sale of Knockbracken reservoir in Belfast and Craighulliar reservoir in Portrush to private purchasers, and contracts are progressing with solicitors. Neither of these assets attracted any public-sector interest. The remaining impounding reservoir sites will be assessed for development and recreational potential and advertised on the public market accordingly.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his full response. He will be aware that many of these reservoirs have fishing licences, some of them for five-year periods. Is that any encumbrance to the sale of the redundant reservoirs?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and for his interest in the matter. He will know that, effective from 18 December 2014, the responsibility for fishing rights at the 28 reservoirs at which angling is permitted has been transferred to DCAL to manage under the terms of a service level

agreement with NI Water, which will be incorporated into the conditions of any sale. That will allow for existing recreational activities to continue. I am content that DCAL will handle that appropriately, in accordance with the agreement with NI Water.

Mr Clarke: Has the Minister done any work on the likely cost of bringing all the reservoirs up to standard to suit the so-called Reservoirs Bill?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. My Department's interest in reservoirs is increasingly limited because NI Water no longer uses them or draws water from them to serve the local population. To that extent, they are redundant as a water supply. On that basis, it is more sensible to look at opportunities to offload or sell them.

We initially checked out what interest there was among local government in particular, as the reservoirs have recreational benefits. However, as they no longer serve the local population with water, NI Water's interest in them is increasingly limited. That is why it is more sensible that they move to a new owner, and that is what we are seeking to do.

Magilligan to Greencastle Ferry

7. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Regional Development what engagement he has had with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport on retaining and supporting the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry. (AQO 8212/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member should be clear that my Department has no legislative responsibilities for the service, nor does it have any operational or financial obligations associated with what is essentially a private sector enterprise. Given those circumstances, I have had no engagement with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport on retaining and supporting the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister confirm the joint commitments made to the service from previous and current Ministers?

Mr Kennedy: I am not sure where the Member gets any previous commitment from. It was not from me or any of my predecessors, because my Department has never funded the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, even when it was under the stewardship of his party colleague Conor Murphy.

Capital funding for the ferry's establishment was provided through a number of streams, including the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation; the Republic of Ireland's then Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources; the then Limavady Borough Council; and Donegal County Council. As to the running of the service, the Limavady and Donegal councils subsidised the service up until 2013. Since then, the service has not received any funding, and its operation is financed solely through fare revenue.

Transport NI: Staff Bonuses

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on why bonus payments to Transport NI manual grade staff have been withheld in recent months. (AQO 8216/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Transport NI operates a productivity incentive scheme for its industrial staff. The scheme does not allow for the withholding of productivity-related earnings, but it does allow for such earnings to be reduced or recovered where workmanship has been found to be below the required technical standard or where higher productivity than the scheme allows has been claimed. Productivity-related earnings have been retrospectively reduced and recovered on occasions over recent months but no more frequently than normal.

However, the current pressure on Transport NI's resource budget is so severe that I have had to scale back to a skeleton service, which has reduced work volumes in certain activities. Consequently, that has impacted on the productivity earnings of some industrial staff. Transport NI management is endeavouring to utilise the capacity freed up within the industrial workforce through the reduction in activities with high levels of cost for materials, such as pothole repairs, or for waste disposal, such as the emptying of gullies, on alternative work in those areas that requires less cost. That is to ensure that industrial staff are fully occupied and to provide the opportunity for productivity-related earnings.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith again, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he indicate whether any savings have been made in the light of the non-payment of those bonuses?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question, but, again, the Department's work, which is so necessary, is

not being achieved because of the financial constraints. That is having an impact on the ground on the emptying of gullies, grass cutting, road defects and street lighting and, consequently, is having an impact on the staff who work there — not just on their wages but on their morale.

The Member will be interested to know that I was in the Armagh section office last week on a routine visit and that I took the opportunity to speak with staff who are attempting to work through the very challenging positions on the front line. They have to deal with the many queries and frustrations of the general public when they ring in to report defects and to ask for work to be carried out only to be told that there is insufficient money. It is not a virtual circle at all; it is a vicious circle, and I want to get out of it as quickly as possible.

Mr Clarke: Following on from that, Minister, given that the previous questioner's party is holding up welfare reform, which, as you said earlier, is costing us £2 million per week, will you give us an estimate of how much is being lost to staff because they are unable to receive their bonuses because of the stalemate that has been caused by Sinn Féin, which is resulting in £2 million of waste a week?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he makes. I am not able to specify in close detail just how much it is costing staff, but it is costing the reputation not only of my Department but of the Assembly and the Executive when gullies are not emptied, grass is not cut, road defects are not addressed and street lights continue to be out. There is reputational damage, but financial damage is also done to the workforce, many of whom are not earning high salaries. I do not think that people who have to fend for their families are impressed by the political stunts of Sinn Féin, which claims to represent working people and yet, by its actions, ensures that working people are not earning sufficient to allow them a proper income.

Speed Limits: Carrickfergus

12. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the review of road speed limits for Carrickfergus. (AQO 8217/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My officials, in conjunction with the PSNI, recently completed the review of speed limits in the Carrickfergus area to consider the existing speed limits on the B90 from the Monkstown Road to the B149 Beltoy

Road as well as the A2 between Carrickfergus and Whitehead. The review indicated that, given the gradual increase in residential development and traffic volumes around Greenisland, a revision of the current speed limits along the B90 at Greenisland would better reflect the function of the road and improve driver respect and, in turn, compliance with the speed limits.

I am pleased to confirm that the consultation process to provide a 40 mph limit to the west of Greenisland to include the Monkstown Road junction and extend the existing 40 mph limit to the east of the village to include the development around the Trooperslane Road junction is to begin shortly. In addition, it is proposed to increase the existing 30 mph limit at Woodburn Road and extend the existing 40 mph limit for approximately 575 metres from the new line. I can also confirm that the consultation process to provide a 40 mph limit on the A2 at Knocknagulliaigh is under way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I call Mr Hilditch for a very brief supplementary.

Mr Hilditch: There is no need to ask one, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Minister's answers; I do not need a supplementary.

Mr Kennedy: I am very glad to please at least one Member during questions today. Those Members who, for various reasons, were not able to attend missed a treat. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I am so grateful for your cooperation.

That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Traffic Flow System: Armagh City

T1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the main elements of the new traffic flow system around The Mall area of Armagh city. (AQT 2521/11-15)

2.30 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will know that consideration has been given to the proposal, which was to create a gyratory one-way system around the centre of Armagh. The Member knows that I have received considerable correspondence on this; indeed, I have had conversations with representatives from The Mall residents'

association. Having taken those issues into account and following discussions with my officials, I have recommended a complete review of the proposed scheme. I will be particularly interested in the outcome of that review.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us a timescale for the proposed review of the system?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will know that the review will not be meaningfully possible until the works that are taking place at the Friary Road and Newry Road are completed and evaluated. I hope very much that that section of scheme will be completed in early June. At that point, we will be able to assess traffic flows in and around the centre of Armagh and their impact and then look at any gyratory proposal that was originally made. Of course, we need to be aware and conscious of the public interest in the issue from public representatives, the council and, not least, The Mall residents' association. It will be important to ensure that everyone is aware of any proposal on the project that ultimately emerges.

Bus Station: Kilkeel

T2. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve the bus station in Kilkeel. (AQT 2522/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will know that there have been considerable discussions over the years on improving the facilities at Kilkeel, not least on finding a suitable location for any new bus centre and the attendant issues around planning for such a proposal. However, the current financial position that my Department finds itself in makes it difficult to see how we can carry forward a particular scheme at this point in time. I am open, of course, to continuing discussions, because I am aware of the importance that such a new bus centre could have for the people of Kilkeel.

Mr Wells: I am sure the Member will accept that the present facility is certainly not adequate for a town the size of Kilkeel, particularly with its tourist infrastructure. Can he at least promise the Assembly that, whilst finance may be limited, his Department will continue to explore options so that, when funds become available, he will be ready to move quickly?

Mr Kennedy: As I said, the difficulty is not just a location for a bus station but the resulting revenue costs when a new bus station is built.

However, I am open to suggestions from the Member and other local representatives in trying to find a solution at the earliest possible point, setting aside some of the financial considerations, which are there. If he has any input to that, I will happily receive those representations.

Enterprise: Continuation of Service

T3. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister for Regional Development how he will ensure, during the time of the Enterprise overhaul, that the service will continue to meet the needs of the travelling public, particularly the working public who board the train at Newry to travel to work in Dublin. (AQT 2523/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and, indeed, for his interest. The refurbishment and upgrading of the Enterprise service is an important facility. We want to see that carried out as speedily and quickly as we can. There will be real benefits when that service is upgraded. The Member will know that there will be some inconvenience to travellers while that work continues. Translink is attempting to manage that as best it can and will continue to do so. I very much hope that the initial problems will have been ironed out by early August, but we are mindful that the improvements will be welcomed by the many thousands who use the Enterprise service daily and weekly.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he also clarify whether there will be no first-class carriage or catering facilities? In particular, will the first train that leaves Belfast around 6.50 am and stops in Newry have only three carriages? If any of those things are the case over that two or three months, many people could move off the train and not come back.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member and understand his points entirely. Unfortunately, there will be a level of inconvenience and a reduction in the services traditionally associated with the Enterprise, which is always a popular form of travel. We want to maintain that as best we can. We cannot make omelettes without breaking some eggs, and we are anxious to move the refurbishment scheme on as quickly as possible. I can tell you that my officials and Translink are working hard to ensure that that is the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Mr Alex Easton is not in his place.

Waste Water Treatment: Infractions

T5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given his responsibility for waste water treatment, what infractions or pending infractions Northern Ireland is facing. (AQT 2525/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will know that there is an ongoing issue as to how we have to maintain waste water and other treatment works under our responsibility. This remains an important feature, as is the quality of drinking water, to the population, which is why I have attempted in the current financial year and with a very challenging budget to protect the allocations to NI Water as far as I can. We have not been able to do that fully. There is something in the region of £5 million potentially, but we will work with the company to ensure that adequate service is maintained and that that service is in line with European regulation.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I appreciate the information you have given us, but you will appreciate that meeting European waste water quality standards delivers blue flag beach status, which is important for tourism in Northern Ireland. With the recent loss of blue flags around the United Kingdom, how confident are you that we will maintain blue flags for Northern Ireland's beaches?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The issue of blue flag status and all those awards is more properly directed, he will know, to the Minister of the Environment, Minister Durkan. However, I am led to believe that the impending awards will be potentially good and welcome news for Northern Ireland beaches. It is encouraging that, in spite of the economic challenges, we are able to maintain water quality and an environment in which people can enjoy some leisure at the many beaches across Northern Ireland.

Translink: Taxi Fares

T6. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assurance that, if the recent news article that stated that Translink spent £170,000 on taxi fares is true, he will do everything in his power to ensure that every efficiency saving that can be found is found, with the money given to front-line services. (AQT 2526/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am advised by Translink that the

use of taxis is closely regulated and they are used only when it is the most economically viable solution. There are often practical operational reasons for their use. However, not least because of the public comment and the overall financial position, I am concerned and will pursue the matter with Translink in the coming period.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that, in my constituency, Transport NI is telling us all about the financial pressures that it is under, is there any other way that the Department can carry out a full investigation of how more money can be found through efficiencies to ensure that it can be delivered to the front-line services that I referred to in my previous question?

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much indeed for the supplementary question. The Member will know, as, indeed, members of the Regional Development Committee will know, that the current chief executive, David Strahan, has successfully made efficiency savings in the overall Translink budget. Obviously, that will not end there. It is important that, on an ongoing basis, we look at the overall costs of all companies such as Translink and NI Water and, indeed, my Department. If that can reduce impact on front-line services, so much the better, but it is not easy because, in organisations like Translink and NI Water, the pips are already beginning to squeak.

Road and Sewerage Works: Armagh

T7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development to state completion dates for the ongoing roadworks at the bottom of the Newry Road and the Friary Road and for the sewerage works on Barrack Hill at The Mall. (AQT 2527/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising the issue. The work at Friary Road and Newry Road on that scheme is at a very busy and complex urban junction in Armagh city. It is progressing, but, due to issues regarding services and ground conditions, it is behind schedule. However, work is due to be completed, as I indicated to Mr Bradley, early in June. Of course, whilst the ongoing works have caused some disruption, I hope that, when it is complete, the scheme will improve conditions for traffic and pedestrians at that key junction in the city.

Rather than postpone the work at Barrack Hill and the work of NI Water and then start the whole regime, if you like, of inconvenience, it

was considered better to proceed with that, get the work done and move off site. We will then hopefully have a better traffic situation in the centre of Armagh.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I appreciate the answer from the Minister, but he will be aware that businesses at that end of the town have been affected by the work. Minister, have you discussed with those businesses any way of reimbursing them, or have you been talking to the Finance Minister about some rate relief that will assist them, given the loss of earnings that they have had over recent months because of those works?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that, as a Member for Newry and Armagh, I have had meetings and discussions with concerned business operators in that area. I understand their concerns and am very sympathetic to them. A rate reduction would be a matter for DFP and would require the appeal procedure to be used. It is my experience that, sometimes, it is a mistake to appeal rate valuations because, as well as coming down, they can go up. I have had that unhappy experience. Nonetheless, I understand the concern. That is why I am particularly keen that the work, which is almost at completion, should be completed, and, hopefully, contractors can move off site, and normal traffic and normal business hours can be resumed.

2.45 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Please note that questions 6, 9 and 14 have been withdrawn.

Personal Independence Payments: Pilot Scheme

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposed personal independence payment pilot scheme. (AQO 8219/11-15)

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): Following the Stormont Castle agreement on welfare reform in December 2014, an amendment was tabled to the Northern Ireland welfare Bill that made provision for a pilot scheme to be carried out in advance of personal independence payments going live in Northern Ireland. It was passed by

the Assembly at Consideration Stage of the Bill's passage, and, since then, my officials have been working to put in place the arrangements to implement that commitment. That has included mapping the process by which potential participants in the pilot could be identified; discussions with DWP about the early deployment of the personal independence payment IT system; and engagement with Capita business services, which will provide the personal independence payment assessment service, and other key stakeholders to ensure a successful and meaningful personal independence payment pilot.

Given that the key purpose of the pilot was to help to inform plans for personal independence payment roll-out in Northern Ireland, the actual commencement of the pilot was always linked to establishing a definitive date on which personal independence payments would be introduced. As the welfare Bill did not complete its legislative passage through the Assembly on 9 March, the work needed to prepare for implementing the changes, including the personal independence payment pilot, has had to be stopped.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response. We all know of the problems that we face in view of the political intransigence we face over welfare reform. If the legislation gets passed, how quickly do you think we will be able to move to have this — my mind has gone blank — pilot scheme in place?

Mr Storey: The Member is absolutely right about the intransigence and the lack of decision on the issue. I will probably have more to say about that as we make our way through Question Time. On the anticipated timescale, I trust that, when we have the completion of the welfare Bill as far as the processes in the House are concerned, we can start immediately to engage in the work set out in the substantive answer that we have given. I trust that, over a period of months, we will see progress on the pilot. I will ensure that, subject to what happens in the House next Tuesday, the Member is kept informed.

Mr Clarke: This has veered into welfare reform more directly, and we are all familiar now with the fact that you will bring the legislation to the House next week. Will you inform the House of the consequences, including those for the rest of your Department, if there is no resolution to welfare reform by next week?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary. As we know, the welfare Bill did not complete its legislative passage through

the Assembly as scheduled on 9 March. The further delay in the Bill receiving Royal Assent meant that the work needed to prepare for implementation of the changes had to be brought to a conclusion. For me and for many, the continuing delay has been frustrating, not only for those involved in delivering social security or even for those who advise claimants on their rights but, more importantly, for the thousands of people across Northern Ireland who are becoming totally confused about what changes will be brought in by the Bill and how those changes will impact on them.

Let us be under no illusion, and let us not try to paint a narrative in the House today that there is a bit of smoke and mirrors and that something is happening that is being choreographed and that something else is happening in the shadows of other buildings beyond the confines of the Chamber. Let me spell it out very clearly and plainly: at the Business Committee today, I tabled my intention to bring back the Welfare Reform Bill for Final Stage next Tuesday, and, if it falls, that will have serious repercussions for Northern Ireland, for the people of Northern Ireland and, I believe, for the long-term sustainability and the future of the institutions that we are engaged in. Let us not be under any illusion: we are at a very serious juncture, we have run out of road, and we will very soon run out of money. That should focus the mind and the attention of every Member in the House so that we find a solution to the problem, which has been around for far too long.

Community and Voluntary Sector: Funding Pressures

2. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the funding pressures faced by the community and voluntary sector. (AQO 8220/11-15)

Mr Storey: As Minister for Social Development with lead responsibility for relationships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), I am fully aware of the funding pressures faced by the sector. The voluntary and community sector is seen as a key social partner of government as we build a participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive community in Northern Ireland. As you are aware, the strain on public finances in 2015-16 has been considerable, and that has impacted on the financial relationship between government and the sector. When finalising the budget for my Department, I instructed my officials to ensure that resource allocation decisions being made across the Department were prioritised,

transparent, accountable and evidence-based. As Minister, I fully recognise the role of the voluntary and community sector in delivering so many necessary public services on behalf of government and the impact that reduced resourcing can have on those vital services. I also fully recognise the significant contribution made by the VCS to economic and social activity in Northern Ireland. Like all Departments, my Department is a signatory to the concordat between the voluntary and community sector and the Northern Ireland Government, and successful implementation of that agreement requires real and recognisable commitment across the public sector.

The Member will be aware that, no later than yesterday, we had a debate in the House on the issue. In the House, we often use phrases and terminology, but that sometimes fails to relate into practice beyond the confines of the Chamber. Following on from yesterday's debate, the collective challenge to Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly is to ensure not only by word but by deed that we demonstrate the value that, we believe, the voluntary and community sector delivers in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I gently remind the Minister about the two-minute rule.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. At present, the combined cross-cutting effect is not being considered. Following yesterday's debate, which the Minister mentioned, will he now ensure that the issue is brought back to the Executive so that all Ministers are made fully aware of the impact across the Departments? Furthermore, does he agree that transitional funding should be made available to the sector so that it no longer falls foul of government decisions?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. On the basis of her last point about a transitional fund, I met NICVA representatives a few days ago, and the issue of a transitional fund was raised at that meeting. I have subsequently written to OFMDFM setting out the issue, and I continue to engage with OFMDFM. Obviously, the follow-on from yesterday's debate will be part and parcel of the review that has been undertaken by the two OFMDFM junior Ministers. As outlined, I have responsibilities as Minister for the community and voluntary sector. I have given an assurance that I and my officials will continue to engage in that process. That is the reality for us. As I said yesterday, I have seen this in my

constituency, and many Members, if not all, can relate it to their constituency. We all know of organisations that, if they do not find a financial resolution to their problems, will either have to provide a greatly reduced service or disappear altogether. Then, the challenge for government agencies will be to meet the cost of picking up that service. We need to bear that in mind, and it ought to be to the forefront of the decisions that we make. However, we should always be mindful of the difficult and challenging financial circumstances that we find ourselves in, which are a challenge for every Minister and for the Assembly.

Mr Maskey: The Minister partly addressed this in his first response, but can he outline, perhaps in a little more detail, how he has sought to alleviate difficulties, particularly with neighbourhood renewal area-based projects?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member. That was an issue that I found challenging, given how the process operates. With the hand that I was given in the budgetary process, it would have been easy for me to have simply top-sliced. In fact, the situation in DSD became even bleaker, as, following further discussions, the budget was further reduced. That created a particular difficulty for us. However, a process was engaged in. In fact, I encouraged organisations that felt that they could not fully accept the way in which the budgetary process had been handled to come in and have discussions with us so that they were clear about the rationale that we use. I trust that that rationale was transparent, fair and equitable and that things were at least done in a way for which there was justification, if there ever can be justification for being in a position in which you had a certain amount of money last year but that is now reduced. However, that is the reality of where we are, and that process is a template. It is not perfect; it probably has flaws; but I think that we clearly made a genuine attempt to address the issue.

The other point that we need to bear in mind is that I was also very cautious and cognisant of the fact that, come next year, the funds will transfer to local councils. It will then be the responsibility of those councils to determine how those moneys are spent and their priorities.

Mr Girvan: The Department has responsibility for the voluntary and community sector. What assistance is being given to organisations that are being impacted on by the efficiency savings that they have to target over the next number of years?

Mr Storey: The Member's question follows on from the answer that I gave to the previous question. We sought to use a process to mitigate those difficulties as far as we could. We did that by prioritising, as far as possible, funding to support the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector for key services such as general advice services, neighbourhood renewal, the Supporting People programme, volunteering and the women's centres' childcare fund. As I said, we will liaise closely with the junior Ministers as they undertake dealing with the impact of the review. I also intend to continue to discuss the issues with NICVA, because it plays an important role as a conduit. As I said yesterday, we have the joint forum, which I have attended and for which I have set out our programme and priorities. Recently, the forum had a meeting at which there was one issue on the agenda, and that issue clearly focused the minds of the many organisations that are part and parcel of the forum.

I bring Members back to the issue of the concordat. I know that that is only on paper, but it ought still to be in practice. It is a commitment by government about the way in which it will respect and work with the community and voluntary sector and endeavour to understand the problems that it faces.

3.00 pm

Cars: Abandoned in Carrickfergus

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Social Development what work is ongoing with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other relevant agencies to alleviate the problem of abandoned cars at Taylors Avenue, Carrickfergus. (AQO 8221/11-15)

Mr Storey: The Housing Executive has advised me that the abandoned cars in Taylors Avenue are on private property and not on Housing Executive land. This matter was raised at the Carrickfergus antisocial behaviour forum meeting in March and it was agreed that the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council — formerly Carrickfergus Borough Council — were the most appropriate agencies to take action.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate the Minister's answer. On a general issue, what steps is the Department taking to address antisocial behaviour in areas of social housing?

Mr Storey: This issue is a challenge for us all. What we face in Carrick is no different from what is faced in many other parts of Northern Ireland.

You could look at what the Department does to address antisocial behaviour in two parts. First, it provides the policy and legislation to help the Housing Executive and other social landlords to deal with antisocial behaviour. Proposals are being developed for new legislation to facilitate the sharing of information about antisocial behaviour. Many people are concerned that what we have in place is not robust enough to deal with issues in an effective and timely way. Many of these things go on for a long time.

The Housing Executive has also developed a system to tackle antisocial behaviour based on a written strategy, which is being updated. That sets out the Housing Executive's objectives and priorities. There are a number of elements in what we and the Housing Executive can do; ultimately, however, this is an issue that society has to address. I trust that in areas where there is a considerable focus on this issue that people realise that they are bringing to their own community a reputation that is ill deserved and certainly not warranted by the great majority of people, who want to live in settled communities at peace with their neighbours.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest in this subject, as I provided court evidence that resulted in an ASBO being awarded against an individual linked to 90 cars being abandoned in the Taylors Avenue area. Does that antisocial behaviour order still apply and what action has the Northern Ireland Housing Executive taken to invoke the tenancy agreements of occupants of Taylors Avenue who may be continuing to contribute to the abandonment of vehicles in the area?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his contribution and for declaring his interest in this issue. He makes a valid point, particularly about the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive's non-statutory interventions, as we said, include warning letters, acceptable behaviour contracts, mediation and community support. In addition, the Housing Executive is a founding partner and participant, along with the PSNI and councils, in antisocial behaviour forums that meet to discuss antisocial behaviour in nearly every council area. They have 57 neighbourhood officers who contribute to making their estates cleaner and safer places. The Housing Executive contributes funding to local schemes to address crime, and the fear of crime, in an area.

As for the specifics about Carrickfergus, when the Member raised this question, it focused my attention on that area. When we looked into the detail, we found that it has been going on for a considerable time. Following today's Question Time, I intend to get an update from the Housing Executive as to what further steps it will take to ensure that we have an effective outcome. When I have that information, I will share it with those Members who raised concerns.

Affordable Warmth Scheme

4. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the number of schemes delivered under the affordable warmth scheme. (AQO 8222/11-15)

Mr Storey: Already, 328 households have benefited from the provision of energy efficiency measures delivered through the affordable warmth scheme. My Department has a public service agreement target to assist at least 9,000 households with energy efficiency measures. In the past, we have consistently exceeded the targets, and I am confident that that will be the case again in 2015-16.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he share my concern at the delay from the date of referral to the implementation of the measures as assessed? What plans does he have to monitor and improve outcomes for constituents?

Mr Storey: Obviously, we have a particular issue here in that we moved from one scheme to another, and any transition is always difficult. We continue to liaise with the councils to ensure that they are working in a way that is effective and efficient in relation to the timescale, as well as to referrals and the quality of what is going on in the scheme. That is something that I am particularly interested in, given that colleagues in the House have been writing to me over a period of time to raise particular concerns.

We have had correspondence on individual cases where there have been some delays, and I am obviously concerned that that number could grow. I do not think that it has started to grow, but when you have a situation where there is a process and referrals, you could have some delays. I will endeavour, as will all those involved in the affordable warmth scheme, to make sure that those are kept to a minimum and that this remains an effective and efficient way of dealing with a very important issue in our homes that has to be addressed.

Mr Douglas: In the Minister's estimation, are the new super-councils ready to deliver the affordable warmth scheme?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question, which in a sense follows on from what I was saying to the Member who asked the previous question. While the affordable warmth scheme is at an early stage, I think that it has already been effective in delivering across all council areas. My officials have been working with council staff for over two years to pilot and develop the affordable warmth scheme. A number of issues were highlighted in the pilots, and those can now, I trust, be easily addressed in the roll-out of the scheme.

Each council has signed a service level agreement with the Department, demonstrating their commitment to deliver the new scheme, and all councils have appointed a coordinator and support staff for the scheme. Officials from the Department will meet regularly with the lead council officers to monitor progress, receive feedback and provide additional support where necessary. It is my intention to take some time, if we have time — some of us may have more time after next week than we imagined; however, we will deal with that as it is — to visit some of the schemes to see in a practical way what is being delivered, what it really means to our constituents and to the people, and how the scheme is being effective in what it was originally intended to do. That is what I want to ensure happens as a result of the scheme.

Mr B McCrea: Does the affordable warmth scheme have any mechanism for self-referral?

Mr Storey: There is a mechanism for self-referral, which I will outline to the Member. The affordable warmth scheme offers a range of insulation and heating measures to improve energy efficiency in low-income households. Such measures include loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and new heating systems. The person can refer themselves by making contact with the council. If the council believes that someone should be referred to the scheme, it can also refer an individual.

Social Housing: West Belfast

5. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development, given the length of the waiting lists, how many new social houses are planned this year in West Belfast. (AQO 8223/11-15)

Ms McCorley: Ceist uimhir a cúig.

Mr Storey: Thank you —

Mr Humphrey: There was no translation.

Mr Storey: I will assume that that was question 5.

You will be aware that it is the Housing Executive's role to assess housing need and formulate and manage the delivery of the social housing development programme. I recently approved the three-year gross social housing development programme, covering the period 2015-18. For the West Belfast parliamentary constituency, the programme comprises a total of just under 1,200 units, 1,191 to be precise. At this early stage in the programme, it is hard to be precise about delivery times and final numbers. As you will appreciate, schemes can slip or be lost from a particular given programme for a variety of reasons, such as difficulties achieving planning permission, and others can be added as new opportunities arise.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister give us some detail on any available land in west Belfast that has been zoned for housing but has yet to be applied for?

Mr Storey: Obviously, one of the areas that has had a considerable degree of interest is the Visteon site. Fold Housing Association plans to take forward the development of the Visteon site during this financial year, subject to planning approval. This is an important scheme that would meet a significant amount of housing need, and I urge all in the Chamber to be supportive. My Department is fully supportive of mixed-use tenure developing with this particular type of development.

In areas where housing need is identified, housing associations are encouraged to look out for potential sites for development. Land supply is a key constraint to building more in west Belfast. Housing associations are doing all that they can to identify and buy land in the area. They are supported in this by my Department and the Housing Executive through the programme of advanced land purchases. However, securing land in areas of high demand such as west Belfast remains very challenging, and opportunities that do arise, such as Visteon, need community support. There is also a case for building higher densities in west Belfast and other areas of high

demand, and, if there is support for this, it is an issue that my officials will continue to explore.

Mr Dunne: Can the Minister clarify how housing need is assessed? Is it all about waiting lists for the specific area, whether it be west Belfast or, indeed, north Down?

Mr Storey: I am always impressed by how Members can be inventive when it comes to moving from west Belfast to north Down. On the specific question of how housing need is identified and addressed, the Housing Executive is responsible for assessing the level of social housing need, determining the need for schemes in specific geographic areas and formulating the social housing programme. The Housing Executive carries out an annual housing needs assessment of all council areas to examine the supply and demand for new social housing. This assessment is then used to determine the Housing Executive's unmet housing needs prospectus, which identifies locations where there is general unmet housing need beyond the schemes included in the social housing development programme and where it has not been possible to secure new-build sites. Housing need is identified by the number deemed to be in housing stress. This is where applicants have 30 points or more on the Housing Executive's housing selection scheme. Housing need in Northern Ireland is addressed through the social housing development programme in a fair and equitable way.

Also in answer to the Member, I want to say that much has been achieved in addressing housing need, but there is no doubt that the serious financial challenges that we face moving forward will make this an increasingly difficult task. However, the delivery of social housing will remain a priority.

I was delighted just last week to announce that we have exceeded our target of for social and affordable homes. It was set at 8,000 homes, and it is over 10,000. There are always many naysayers who will say that it should have been 12,000 or 15,000. However, for the people who are in those homes today —

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Minister's two minutes is up.

Mr Storey: For them, it is an improvement and an advancement, and I want to build, if you will excuse the pun, on that success.

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

Housing Executive: Points System

T1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the effectiveness of the Housing Executive's points system and whether he has any plans to review or amend the system. (AQT 2531/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. Obviously, this is an issue that has done the rounds. There has been a contentious issue for a long time about how we allocate houses. The Member will know, as will other Members and as I do as a constituency MLA, that there are those who believe that the allocation system is unfair and there are those who believe that it is fair. We have many different approaches, and it all depends on the experience that the individual has when they go to the Housing Executive or to other agencies for an allocation. It is under review, and no doubt we will face challenges on how we get an objective and fair system. Whatever system you put in place for points allocation, there are those who will try to find inventive and sometimes not very wholesome ways of getting round that to ensure that they have more points than the reality of their needs justifies.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister again for his comprehensive answer. Does he agree that a system that awards and, in certain circumstances, removes points would be a fairer way of ensuring that Housing Executive properties were allocated to those in the greatest need and, indeed, the most deserving? Furthermore, does he agree that those with a connection to an area should be given extra points to improve community cohesion?

Mr Storey: It is always difficult when you start to remove something from people. Obviously, you would need to have a very good basis. Let us remember that the process commences when someone goes into the Housing Executive for a points assessment to be carried out. You would need substantial reasons not for removing points but for not allocating points. I have seen in my short time in this job — maybe it will be even shorter, depending on what happens over the next number of days — how good housing and settled tenants contribute to the community. You make an invaluable contribution, which is something that we all strive to do as Members. We all have areas in our constituencies where there have been difficulties and challenges. I think of one

estate in my constituency where, a number of years ago, people did not want to live. Because a proactive approach was taken and there was intervention, today that development has a waiting list. The tone and the way in which people live has been greatly enhanced, and we are all beneficiaries as a result of that.

North West Development Office: Closure

T2. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Social Development what will become of the 44 staff employed in the North West Development Office, given the coming transfer of urban regeneration and the office's closure. (AQT 2532/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for raising the issue. Obviously, this is a concern to him as a constituency MLA. He is right that the Regeneration Bill currently progressing through the Assembly provides the legislative basis for the Department for Social Development to transfer the urban regeneration and community development powers to local government from 1 April 2016. As the Department is transferring powers rather than functions, there will be no compulsory transfer of DSD staff to councils. Staff exercising urban regeneration and community development powers that are to be transferred to local government will become surplus when the powers are transferred. The staff in the Department's urban regeneration and community development group include the 44 people in the North West Development Office. Staff will be redeployed in line with the Northern Ireland Civil Service redeployment policy. The voluntary exit scheme and subsequent redeployment opportunities will be the means by which the surplus in the North West Development Office will be managed.

I will just say in conclusion in relation to that issue that I pay tribute to the staff in that office and, indeed, to all my staff in the development offices, particularly for what they have achieved in the city. I know from working with many of the organisations and from the feedback that we have received that it is appreciated and valued and that their contribution to the city has been worthwhile and has been recognised.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer and join him in paying tribute to those staff. I also appeal to him to work with his Executive colleagues, if possible, to ensure that staff who want to be redeployed can be redeployed within the city or the surrounding areas. We have a very real unemployment

crisis in our city, and losing jobs is not something that we need to acquiesce in.

Mr Storey: I am very conscious of that, and I alluded to the framework within which we have to work, in the sense that we have the Northern Ireland Civil Service redeployment policy. I am very conscious that we want to ensure, as far as possible, that staff are located in areas that are suitable. The issue of travelling to work is obviously a concern for staff who are currently employed in the Londonderry area. I will endeavour, as we have done in relation to other issues in the city, to be very conscious of the employment challenges in the west and in that particular location. It is something that I will continue to give an importance to, and, if there are any developments on that issue, I will be happy to keep the Member informed.

Tower Block Strategy: Update

T3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the tower block strategy and to state whether there has been any delay. (AQT 2533/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue that continues to be a particular concern for me. I have had some discussions with the chair and chief executive of the Housing Executive on the matter. Members will be aware that one scheme is currently being progressed — they will see it as they make their way along the Westlink — but we have a considerable number of tower blocks in locations throughout Northern Ireland, and there are decisions that we will have to make about where we go with housing in general and about the long-term issues. There are exciting plans and proposals that, I trust, we will be able to develop in the weeks and months ahead around housing in Northern Ireland. One issue that will require specific work is tower blocks. Indeed, I have a meeting with the Housing Executive either next week or the following week, and that is one of the issues on the agenda.

Mr F McCann: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I had heard that there were delays in the strategy coming through. That raises some serious concerns for people who live in tower blocks and live with poor heating, leaking windows, leaking roofs and the many other serious problems that people face in high-rise living. Can he assure me not only that it will be investigated but that there will be a proper strategy to deal with those problems in future?

Mr Storey: Yes, I would like to see progress being made, as I would on a number of issues. I am well aware. In fact, just last week a petition was handed in to both the Housing Executive and the Department around concerns and particular issues that had been raised in Rathcoole. I have asked the Housing Executive, as the lead body to deal with that issue, to give us an update. That will all feed in to where we go with that particular issue, because I am very conscious that there are people who want to use it as a divisive issue and who say, "Well, you are doing work in that particular location, but you're not doing work in this location". I want to ensure that, within the limited and finite resources that we have, we will address the problem in a way that is fair to as many as possible.

There will be a challenge for us in the coming weeks. There is one coming for us all on Tuesday, but there is another one, and that is around where we take housing in Northern Ireland. The Member will be aware that a stock condition survey has been carried out by Savills. I now have receipt of that report and will soon share it with him and his colleagues on the Social Development Committee. That will clearly indicate to us the magnitude of the problem that we have in addressing the needs with the current Housing Executive stock. Clearly, the challenge for us will be how we fund all of that. How do we secure the funding to ensure that we continue to give the best possible quality homes to the people that we represent? I have repeatedly said in the House that it is not about houses; —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's two minutes are up.

Mr Storey: — it is about homes.

Irish Open: Pressures on Newcastle

T5. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps his Department has taken to facilitate and to deal with the huge pressures that will be placed on the Newcastle and south Down communities as a result of Newcastle's very welcome hosting of the Irish Open golf tournament within the next few days. (AQT 2535/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank Mr Wells for his question and his continued interest in his constituency. We are also glad to see our colleague with us. We continue to have him in our thoughts and prayers. We ask him to pass those on to his wife at this time and also, as he mentioned the

issue of golf, to pass on our congratulations to Rory McIlroy, who, yet again, at the weekend, did us all proud. He is someone that Northern Ireland is immensely proud of, and one can only wonder at his skill in playing golf.

My Department has provided funding of some £250,000 towards a £287,000 revitalisation project in Newcastle. The Newcastle revitalisation scheme sought to build upon the award-winning public realm scheme by introducing new public art, additional attractions, a covered outdoor event space, bespoke Christmas lighting, and a new marketing and promotional campaign to promote the area. In addition, particularly in relation to what has been done in regard to the Irish Open golf championship that is going to be held there in May, we recently approved funding of £21,500 to help Newcastle prepare.

An important factor in hosting that event is ensuring that we do our best to create a welcoming and attractive town centre for the many visitors and tourists expected to arrive in support of those prestigious golf events. I visited Newcastle some time ago and was really impressed with the work that had been carried out. Indeed, I plan to be in Newcastle very soon, I trust; in fact, possibly tomorrow morning.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): We have time for a quick supplementary question.

Mr Wells: I was almost going to ask the Minister if he had any free tickets for the event, but maybe he has not.

I welcome that development and hope that, when he does visit south Down and Newcastle tomorrow, he will get a chance to apprise himself of the enormous opportunities that the event will create for Newcastle and Northern Ireland generally. Hopefully, as a result of his investment, he will be able to show that we can regularly host such major competitions and bring a great deal of credit and good news to Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

Mr Storey: First, I have no tickets for the golf. Secondly, yes, I will be in Newcastle tomorrow morning, and I look forward to seeing what is, yet again, a very important part of our tourism infrastructure and a place that many people in Northern Ireland enjoy going to, not only during the summer but throughout the year, because it is an idyllic part of our natural heritage.

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

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

Private Members' Business

Tourism VAT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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 wish to speak shall have five minutes.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the decision by the Government of Ireland to retain a reduced rate of VAT on tourism and hospitality; further notes that this is a practice in many EU countries; recognises the potential of this measure to significantly boost the Northern Ireland tourism industry; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to undertake a report into those benefits for presentation to the UK Treasury.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas chomh maith as ucht an seans a thabhairt domh an rún seo a chur os comhair an Tionóil. I welcome the opportunity to introduce to the House a motion that calls upon the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to conduct a report on the potential benefits of reducing tourism and hospitality VAT. The SDLP has called for this reduction in the Assembly and at Westminster on numerous occasions, voicing its support for the campaign that has been led by Pubs of Ulster since 2012. It is time for the tourism sector to be allowed to unleash its full potential.

I would like to put on record a number of factual issues that have been drawn to my attention. For several years, Pubs of Ulster has spearheaded the campaign calling for a reduction in the VAT rate for businesses in the tourism sector. Tourism in Northern Ireland is worth over £720 million to the local economy and is responsible for 43,000 jobs. Thirteen EU member states, including the Republic, have reduced their VAT rate in a bid to boost their tourism sector and create jobs. Northern Ireland is at a worse disadvantage because it

shares a land border with the rest of the island, where the rate is 9%. A reduced rate in the Republic has helped to create, depending on which figures you look at, up to 30,000 jobs since the reduction in the VAT rate in July 2011.

A reduction of the rate to 5% in the North would create 3,300 jobs and contribute to achieving the target for tourism set out in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. Using HM Treasury's economic model, a VAT cut would have massive benefits, driving the economy by bringing £4 billion in new revenue into the UK. Northern Ireland loses many tourists to more competitive rates south of the border. We must do something to encourage more people to cross the border. That does not apply just to tourism; it applies to social occasions and weddings. When young people, and, indeed, not so young people, are thinking about their big day, they look at the competitive rates just a few miles down the road. Add to that the current currency fluctuations, and that can mean quite a bit in savings for many.

Having hosted events such as the Irish Open, the British Open, the Giro d'Italia and the World Police and Fire Games, our tourism and hospitality industries have shown that they can compete extremely well on the global stage with the best of them. They add to Northern Ireland's vibrancy by attracting visitors and creating employment in local communities. One in 10 of the workforce in Northern Ireland works in the tourism and hospitality sector. The industries manage that despite there being a highly competitive VAT rate south of the border and a rate of 20% here, which is the third highest in Europe. The challenge for the sector here is even greater than for the sectors across the water because of the stiff competition that it faces.

The South's Finance Minister, Michael Noonan, announced that he has no plans to end what was originally to have been a temporary reduction in the VAT rate. The Republic recognised the importance of tourism to its economy, and it has experienced a very significant rise in visitors, who are coming there to spend time and money following a reduction in tourism VAT.

A report on the impact of VAT rate reductions for the tourism sector in the Republic indicated that the aims of stimulating and driving employment have been achieved whilst avoiding a burden on the Irish Exchequer. The rate disparity gives businesses in the South a major competitive advantage over local tourist enterprises and means that we are always struggling to compete on a level footing. It

impacts visitors from the UK, Europe and the Republic, and tourism figures for 2014 show that 64,000 fewer overnight trips were taken by Northern Ireland residents, with fewer people enjoying staycations, as they are referred to.

Our tourism and hospitality industries play a massive role in our local economy, but they are being threatened by the failure to support them with a reduction in the VAT rate. The lesson from the South is that visitors respond to reduced rates of VAT, which increases demand and stimulates the industry. In turn, the industry can expand and grow and create further employment opportunities. Such employment involves various skills and ranges from entry-level, part-time work to highly skilled and well-paid roles that require greater levels of experience, be they in marketing, management or other aspects that are required by the tourism industry.

The nature of tourism across the North also means that the border and rural areas could benefit massively where other forms of employment are not always readily available as a result of the recession or other factors. Tourism is one of the bedrocks of our local economy, and more needs to be done to stimulate growth in the sector. The lower VAT rate in the Republic must be replicated here if we are to give our tourism industry and hospitality sectors a fighting chance.

It is not a case of simply standing still and failing to reap the benefits. The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation estimates that a failure to lower the rate of VAT could cost our economy nearly £130 million over the next few years. Before the election, the Prime Minister pledged that his Government would not increase VAT rates. On the contrary, it is time for him to lower the VAT on tourism and hospitality to give a much-needed boost to tourism and hospitality in the North. Whilst a reduced level of corporation tax is aimed at attracting FDI, we already have an excellent tourism and hospitality base here that could grow and develop.

At this time, it is over to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to come together and undertake a report into the benefits that such a reduction in VAT could reap for the North and to bring that to the Treasury's attention. They must lobby the Treasury on that as a matter of urgency if we are to grow our economy and move beyond austerity and into the prosperity that many of us seek to achieve. On that point, I will conclude.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion. In doing so, I want to say that it is very much a decision that has to be made by Westminster and one that 11 Downing Street should possibly be driving forward. It will and should benefit the tourism industry in Northern Ireland.

I appreciate the figures that have been mentioned: the £720 million that tourism generates for Northern Ireland's economy and the 43,000 jobs that spin out from that. Those are all relevant facts. We are unique in that we have a land border with the Republic of Ireland, which has a hospitality VAT rate of 9% and, because of that advantage, has been able to grow its tourism industry over the last couple of years.

I do not quite go along with the figure of 30,000 jobs. The information that I received was that 6,000 jobs had been created as a consequence of the lower rate of VAT. If you use the same formula for Northern Ireland, it would equate to around 3,300 jobs being created in the tourism industry, should the Chancellor decide that the VAT rate in the United Kingdom for the hospitality industry should be reduced to a certain level. I will not venture an opinion on what the figure should be, but, suffice it to say, if we want to go lower, we should go lower than the Republic of Ireland. That is one way in which I would wish to go.

The sector has shown its capability to grow, to create employment and to react to change very quickly. A number of major events in Northern Ireland, as the proposer of the motion said, have gone off very well. They have been well supported and facilitated by the hospitality industry, and it is vital that we support what is a very good industry. We have a lot to offer as a nation. We have some wonderful scenery, so we should be using all the tools in the box to capitalise on that.

Prior to the election, a DUP delegation met the Chancellor on the same matter. During that meeting on 20 February 2015, the delegation presented a petition along with a short poem, which read:

*"Labour is red, Tories are blue,
Here is something important that you need to do.
Our VAT rate is crippling our ability to grow,
It is putting off tourists, to other countries they go.
Please cut the VAT rate and help us create
A competitive market for beds and for our plate."*

There were other verses to the poem, but they refer more to what was happening in the forthcoming election:

*"As you know, dear Chancellor,
You are close to our hearts.
But elections are looming
And you must do your part."*

It is important that we bring to the attention of the new Government in Westminster the benefit that we see in having something such as this. I support the motion.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Ba mhaith liom tacú le mo chomrádaí Patsy, agus ní annamh, Patsy, a bhíonn seans againn tacú le rud a mholann tithe tábhairne. Patsy and I sometimes find ourselves supporting the proposals of pubs, but, in this case, we have a special excuse, because it is on behalf of Pubs of Ulster, or Hospitality Ulster.

The proposal to reduce VAT on tourism and the tourism sector speaks for itself. It is clear from our colleagues south of the border that, when they cut the VAT rate, there was an immediate, rapid and dramatic increase in expenditure. Of course, then, there is a net benefit to the economy. I suppose that it is the objective of us all to be able to tweak or change a tax and reduce it but bring more money into the coffers. That is something that we would all welcome.

The leadership on the proposal has come from our tourism sector. It is appropriate today to put on record, especially for the city of Belfast — I represent South Belfast — our gratitude to those businesses, particularly the indigenous businesses, that have driven forward the tourism miracle that has happened in Belfast. Today, tourism is four or five times what it was 20 years ago, and that has been driven by Bill Wolsey at the Merchant Hotel, the Hastings family at the Europa Hotel and the Macklin family at the Malone Lodge Hotel. Again and again, we see that tourism businesses are run by local people, many of whom came through very tough times in the city and are now seizing the opportunity to serve the tourists who want to come to this part of the world and enjoy the hospitality offering.

The difficulty that we have when we approach all the questions about taxation is that this is only one tool in the toolbox. If we want to grow our economy, we need all the fiscal tools and powers. My colleague Mr McGlone said that he would like to see a rate of 5%, and I know that other Members from his party have talked about different rates. Whatever the reduction, the

difficulty for us is that we do not know the full detail of what is brought in with the taxation. We know that it hurts the tourism industry, but if we ask the Treasury, "How much did you raise by the 20% VAT on the tourism industry?", the facts, figures and the details are not there.

3.45 pm

What Mr Girvan referred to as trust and transparency are not there when we want to know how much is raised from VAT in this part of the world, not to mention what is raised from hospitality. However, if any of the business owners whom we mentioned previously owe £1 or £100 in VAT, the Treasury can tell them that immediately and seek it. The answer to our wish and desire to grow the economy has to lie in having more tools in the toolbox than just the reduction in VAT and the power to impose VAT on tourism at whatever rate we choose.

The second big issue for us is that, when we look at how we will partner the tourism sector to grow tourism, we hear again and again people saying that, if they have to compete with rivals across the border, in particular, with that much more favourable tourism rate, those in the border counties especially will lose out. In this part of the world, we charge people taxation on their flights to get here, and then, when they get here, we hit them with a 20% tax rate. That punitive tax is putting a barrier in the way of those who want to create new businesses. One of the goals of all of us, as we try to grow the tourism sector, is to create more businesses. Tourism is, on occasion, associated with low wages, but we want to make sure that as many local businesses as possible set up their own enterprises so that they create jobs and we see more indigenous businesses. If you want to take the plunge into a B&B or you want to have a tour guide or a bus company to benefit from the tourism surge, the difficulty is that you immediately have a 20% taxation rate to deal with.

As we support the proposal brought before us by the SDLP today, our —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: — overall goal must be to grow tourism and get to the levels of our Celtic cousins in Scotland and Wales, who are at least double the levels in terms of GDP and contribution to the economy that we are at. The initiative by Pubs of Ulster is —

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: — welcome, and, hopefully, we can support its endeavours in —

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: — the time ahead.

Mrs Overend: I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate. I support the motion.

This is a non-devolved matter, so we need not only Executive lobbying but our local MPs to act in unison. I believe that there is consensus on the matter in Northern Ireland and a growing consensus across the United Kingdom, driven by the Cut Tourism VAT campaign. It is clear that Northern Ireland is in an uncompetitive position, as we have just 15% of the island of Ireland's tourism spend from overseas visitors. The 11% differential is just too significant to ignore.

Tourism is the only export industry subject to VAT. At 20%, we have the third highest VAT rate in Europe, and we are one of only four countries in the 28-member EU that does not have a reduced rate for accommodation. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to reduce tourism VAT to 9% across the UK. We could look to the Isle of Man to see how that could work. The Isle of Man has also operated a concessionary VAT rate on hotel accommodation, which has been judged to be a direct stimulus to that sector. Given that Northern Ireland's tourism competes with the Republic of Ireland, which enjoys a 9% VAT rate for that type of purchase, the 11% differential is clearly off-putting for potential visitors to Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, which represents 85% of the hotel sector in Northern Ireland, reports in its tourism 2020 analysis that the UK has the third highest VAT rate in Europe and is one of only four EU states that does not have a concessionary VAT rate for hotel accommodation. The potential benefits for Northern Ireland are measured in significant boosts to GDP, job creation and additional tax take. We should seek a concessionary 9% VAT rate to be applied to the hospitality sector to negate the marketing disadvantage with the Republic of Ireland.

The Assembly debated the issue on 10 September 2012, but it had been on and off the political agenda for a very long time before that. Indeed, over 11 years ago, on 24 February 2004, East Antrim Ulster Unionist MP, Roy

Beggs, led an Adjournment debate on it in the House of Commons. He urged the Government there to introduce a reduced rate on tourist accommodation to 8%, down from the then rate of 17.5%, to bring it in line with other European Union states. He wanted a pilot scheme to be introduced in Northern Ireland to test the effectiveness of a cut. He said:

"If Northern Ireland and, indeed, the rest of the UK are to improve their attractiveness to visitors and fully develop an internationally recognised and globally competitive tourism industry, the lowering of VAT on tourist accommodation is a vital first step. Reducing VAT on tourism, particularly on tourist accommodation such as hotels, farmhouse bed and breakfasts, guest houses and similar establishments would undoubtedly do wonders for the economy of the UK as a whole."

At that time, the Labour Treasury Secretary, John Healey, claimed that the cost to the Treasury was too much. The arguments that the Labour Minister used in 2004 were regurgitated in 2012, almost verbatim, by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the Conservative David Gauke MP. Mr Gauke is to remain as Financial Secretary to the Treasury, so clearly there is a job of work ahead for our newly elected MPs to persuade. It does not seem that our Northern Ireland MPs have made much progress on the matter over the past decade at all. So, in that regard, it is excellent news —

Mr Girvan: Simply because you weren't there.

Mrs Overend: — that the two new Ulster Unionist MPs are due to assume their places on the green Benches to raise the standard of representation at the mother of all Parliaments.

Some Members: Aww. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mrs Overend: You are going to have to let the Ulster Unionists continue to promote the two new MPs in the House of Commons for a while yet.

I refer directly to what Danny Kinahan said at the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation's tourism summit in March past. He said:

"If we want tourism in Northern Ireland to meet its potential, we need to develop a fully dynamic strategy, with commitment to clear

deadlines, dealing with those issues which are continually neglected."

He went on to say that we must lobby hard at Westminster to reduce tourism VAT and that he was committed to doing that. I am delighted that, as the newly elected MP for South Antrim, he is now able to pursue this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs Overend: Thank you. I support the motion.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the transformative effects of a reduced rate of VAT and what it could do for our tourism industry. I should say that I am standing in today for Judith Cochrane who has suffered a family bereavement.

Our tourism industry is one that we should be proud of, but it is also one that needs to be nurtured and promoted in any way possible. I believe that it is now time that the Executive begin to make serious representation to the UK Treasury to demonstrate the positive impact that a reduction in the VAT rate for the sector would have here. As an aside, I am sure the Minister must have thought she was getting away from tourism debates following her promotion, but here we are again.

Many from the sector have been calling for this change, not least, as others mentioned, Pubs of Ulster, which in recent years has been at the forefront of a campaign to deliver a reduced rate for the tourism sector. That is because of the obvious success it has seen from the effect of a similar measure in the Republic. As it stands, Northern Ireland is clearly at a disadvantage, because our rates remain high in comparison with those in the Republic, where the rate has been reduced in recent years and is to be held at a reduced rate, I believe, for the foreseeable future. That has not happened in isolation. It has been part of a trend across the EU, where no fewer than 13 member states have reduced their VAT rates in a bid to stimulate their tourism industries.

Obviously, this is not a devolved matter. My impression is that the difficulty that we might have with the Treasury on this is that, the closer you get to London, the less need there is for this reduction. It seems to me that London and the south-east of England will flourish as tourism destinations whatever the VAT rate is, but the further away you get — we are about as far away as you can get — the argument for the

need for this concession is obviously well made.

Others said that this is not a decision that can be taken for Northern Ireland alone. If there was to be a reduction in VAT on hospitality matters in the UK, my understanding is that it would have to be at the expense of something else. You are allowed only so many reductions. The UK is using all its reductions and concessions. So, on what would we increase the VAT rate? However, that should not deflect us from making a real case for the need here. We have seen the benefits that a reduced VAT rate has reaped in the Republic of Ireland, and we need to emulate that in Northern Ireland if we can. Indeed, the Irish Government decision to retain their current rate of VAT has been made on the back of an estimate, which somebody else mentioned, that it has been responsible for 6,000 jobs. If that can be translated into anything of the order that Pubs of Ulster indicate, which I think is 3,300 jobs here, bring it on. We have to press for this. It would also significantly help us to achieve the tourism targets set out in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy.

Evidence from across the Republic and beyond suggests that, while there is a natural initial reduction in the overall tax take, in the long term, benefits flow to the economy, with trade up, new businesses opening, jobs created and other tax revenues rising. Independent research using the Treasury's own model has shown that a VAT cut could have massive benefits by driving the economy across the UK, perhaps by up to £4 billion.

It is essential for us to have a vibrant and healthy hospitality sector. It is one of our most important industries. The more visitors we can attract, the better, and we have had such success. I compliment the Finance Minister for achieving some of that success during her previous ministerial existence in the last few years, including the Giro d'Italia and all the rest of it. It is there to build on; the potential is there. We can see from what we have achieved what potential there is.

I agree with the terms in the motion that we should prepare a fully detailed report and take this up with the Treasury as quickly as possible. We may do the whole UK a favour by driving the issue from Northern Ireland, so I happily support the motion.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Members for bringing the debate and all those who contributed.

Those who live in the East Londonderry constituency, which takes in a swathe of coastline, are lucky to have a large chunk of Northern Ireland's tourist attractions along the north coast and in the Causeway Coast Borough Council area, which straddles County Antrim and County Londonderry.

Tourism makes an extremely large contribution to the economy there, as it does in all of Northern Ireland. Tourism is worth millions to the Northern Ireland economy every year and is a major investor in employment, supporting 43,000 jobs, which represents 5.2% of the total workforce. Tourism jobs and skills are spread across Northern Ireland, which attracts over four million visitors each year, and that figure is growing. Tourism is one of Northern Ireland's key service sectors and presents a great opportunity to expand and strengthen its contribution to the economy. With the massive potential to capitalise further in this market, we are at the beginning of an exciting and prosperous journey with tourism in Northern Ireland, and we need to have the opportunity to fulfil and explore that.

The motion gives us an opportunity to look at the potential under the tourism umbrella and consider what our European neighbours are doing. With various European countries adopting different rates of VAT on their tourism services in varying aspects of the industry, a number of different combinations could be possible if considered in the right way. I have every sympathy with local tourism businesses that struggle to compete with the reduced VAT rate in the South of Ireland. However, we must not get caught up in the argument that what is right for them is right for us. A number of research reports have been commissioned by various tourism-related bodies, and the evidence appears to support the case for reduced VAT on tourism.

I commend the efforts of the previous Finance Minister in writing to Her Majesty's Treasury in relation to exactly this cause. The response, however, was negative for Northern Ireland, somewhat stifling the purpose of this debate. We need to work collectively with the rest of the United Kingdom to address the imbalance and put forward a joint case to Her Majesty's Treasury to consider, as realistic measure, a reduction in tourism-related VAT in the UK as a whole. It is easily realised that a reduction in tax is not going to be welcomed in the early stages of a new Government that have the existing deficit at the forefront of their attention. That is why it is vital that we work together.

4.00 pm

As I said at the outset, we have just begun the journey of tourism in Northern Ireland, and we have a unique product with a world heritage site on our doorstep, not to mention the numerous areas of outstanding natural beauty. Those are only the natural assets that we have at our disposal; I have yet to touch on the complete tourism package, which includes historical sites, historical buildings and cultural events, including some of the most renowned sporting events in the world. I fully support the work that the various bodies have done to promote tourism in Northern Ireland and will continue to support them going forward. I encourage a collaborative approach that may have more influence on Her Majesty's Government and bring the results that we and others in the UK would like to see in what is a very demanding and competitive marketplace.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I congratulate the sponsors on bringing it forward. It sounds as if the House is fairly united on this issue. Of course, it has come before the House before. There was a debate three years ago on the same issue, and, in some ways, we have not moved on much since that. Yes, we have made progress on tourism in general, and the success has been widely mooted already, but in terms of economic policy, in some respects we have not moved on at all since that time. Based on that fact alone, there are issues that we need to look at.

The high level of VAT that is levied on local tourism here is a grave concern. Other Members have mentioned the lower rates across the rest of the EU and the rest of this island. That, coupled with other bizarre economic policies that we have as a result of the policies set at Westminster — air passenger duty being the most obvious one — leads to a situation where our tourism industry, fantastic and all as it is — and it has done much, despite some of the restrictions that have been placed upon it — cannot punch at or above our weight at the moment.

I do not know if any Members have seen today's 'Irish News', but Uel Hoey from Belfast International Airport cites the fact that there has been a 52% growth in Northern passengers at Dublin airport. He gives plaudits to the Finance Committee on our work and also says that he hopes that Ministers will see the light after a recent report by both the present Finance Minister and the present Health Minister, who was acting as Finance Minister at that time. I raise that point because I certainly sense that there is frustration among the airports and

those who work in the tourism industry that there are restrictions in place. They are helplessly watching many of their potential customers coming onto the island through Dublin and going elsewhere on the island but not coming north. That is a problem that we all need to get to grips with.

There are benefits. The Member for South Antrim said that we should go lower than the South on some of the taxation rates. I think that we need to see an equal rate in APD and tourism VAT. We need to see an equal playing field, first and foremost. Of course, there are many issues with having a different rate than Britain, but there are examples in Europe, such as Austria, where a different rate applies in different regions of that country. We need to explore greatly. We not only need to raise with the British Government the fact that this rate does not suit us, but we need to find local solutions where possible, regardless of the many barriers that are put in place in that regard.

The Scottish Parliament will be receiving some power in terms of the receipts from VAT — I think that it is some 10% — and they can use that and be responsible for the actions arising from it. We need to look at whether there are other solutions to this issue. If we are restricted in the VAT rate, are there other solutions that the Executive can look at by using money more creatively? That is if we get more money in the first place, which is an entirely different issue. Given that we are returning to this issue three years on from a previous debate, it does, as Máirtín Ó Muilleoir said, highlight the fact that we do not have a full suite of fiscal powers. It most certainly highlights the fact that we do not have enough at present. We need to see APD devolved. If the British Government decide to abolish it altogether at some point in the future, so be it. We will receive financial compensation at that time.

There is clearly a message coming from the tourism industry, from airports, and from B&Bs in places like East Derry and North Antrim, that we are not punching above our weight, and there needs to be some radical changes in economic and fiscal policies here to ensure that we punch above our weight and are getting our fair share of the tourism pie on an all-island basis.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the opportunity to support the call to examine the benefits that a reduced rate of VAT would have on our tourism and hospitality industry. I am particularly pleased that we have the opportunity to debate it the week leading up to the Irish Open in my

constituency of South Down. I will also take this opportunity to congratulate Minister Foster on her new role. It is great that she is able to come here to today's debate with her old hat on as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and with that experience, and also as the Finance Minister. I have no doubt that she will know what we are all talking about, hopefully.

I have no doubt that, based on reports, evidence and experience of other European countries, including Ireland, our report will highlight the economic benefits and job creation opportunities. My colleague South Down MP Margaret Ritchie secured a debate in the House of Commons in January on the reduction of VAT in the tourism industry. A co-signatory to the debate was Strangford MP Jim Shannon. Margaret got great support from across the House, with a number of MPs from England, Scotland, Wales and, indeed, this region, supporting her motion.

The tourism and hospitality industries are delivering greatly for Northern Ireland, despite VAT that is double that of their counterparts in the South and across many European countries. Twenty-two countries have half of our rate — 10% or less — and 16 countries, including Ireland, have a rate of 9% or less. According to Invest NI, the total revenue generated by the Northern Ireland tourism industry is £723 million. Tourism contributes 5.2% to the Northern Ireland gross domestic product, and over 43,000 jobs are sustained by tourism activity.

People are employed in tourism across Northern Ireland in every constituency and at every skill level. The aim is to double tourism's contribution to the economy by 2020. That target for growth means generating £1 billion in total revenue, attracting an additional 10,000 new jobs and drawing 4.5 million visitors into Northern Ireland. The task is made almost impossible when those involved in the industry are faced with a VAT disparity between them and their counterparts in the South.

The Finance Minister in the South, Minister Noonan, announced recently that he was retaining the 9% VAT rate due to the number of new jobs created, the growth in the industry and the increase in visitors to Ireland. The VAT reduction has contributed significantly to strong overall growth in tourism and hospitality over the past few years. Unfortunately, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury was not convinced by the arguments and said:

"a cut in VAT would be expensive and would create a revenue shortfall."

I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work together to convince Mr Gauke and the Treasury that they are mistaken and that this could create the thousands of jobs that Northern Ireland needs. Just like the Irish example, the repayment can be enormous.

Mr Cree: As already stated, this is a non-devolved matter, so the Executive and Northern Ireland's newly elected MPs must make common cause and lobby the Westminster Government on the issue. The good news is that there is broad consensus on the matter in Northern Ireland and growing consensus across the UK, driven by the Cut Tourism VAT campaign. The Ulster Unionist Party has been pressing for it for at least 15 years. It also formed part of our general election manifesto. The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, representing, as it does, 85% of the hotel sector in Northern Ireland, reports in its Tourism 2020 analysis that the UK has the third highest VAT rate in Europe and is only one of four EU states that does not have a concessionary VAT rate for hotel accommodation.

The potential benefits for Northern Ireland are measured in significant boosts to GDP, job creation and additional tax take. In our manifesto, we committed to seeking a concessionary 9% VAT rate being applied to the hospitality sector to negate the marketing disadvantage with the Republic of Ireland.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves what value added tax is all about. It is a tax on consumer expenditure, which is the third largest source of Government revenues. It was introduced in 1973, at a standard rate of 10%, in consequence of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community. By 1991, the standard rate had become 17.5% but was raised as a deficit-reducing measure to 20% in January 2011 by the then chancellor and, I understand, the current chancellor, George Osborne. The VAT rate in the UK has remained at that level since then.

I agree with the assertion that VAT on tourist services is a regressive tax. It is effectively a tax on domestic products, whilst leaving foreign goods and services untaxed. It leaves Northern Ireland, which shares a land border with the Republic, at a competitive disadvantage. If we look to the South, it is interesting to see that throughout all the cutbacks, tax rises and austerity ushered in after the collapse of the Celtic tiger in the Irish Republic, two policies

have not changed: the low rate of corporation tax and the low rate of VAT on tourism and hospitality. In fact, in 2011, Dublin cut tourism VAT to 9%, whilst the standard rate of VAT remains at 24%. Since then, an estimated 15,000 extra people have found employment in the tourism sector in the Republic. We should also note, given our hopes for golf tourism here, that the Republic's 9% rate applies to facilities for taking part in sporting activities, which includes green fees — a charge for golf — and subscriptions charged by non-member-owned golf clubs.

It is clear that Northern Ireland is in an uncompetitive position, as we have just 15% of the island's tourism spend from overseas visitors. The 11% differential is just too significant to ignore. Tourism is the only export industry that is subject to VAT. We have the third highest VAT rate in Europe at 20%, and we are one of four countries in the 28-member EU that does not have a reduced rate for accommodation.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants to reduce tourism VAT to 9% across the UK. We could look to the Isle of Man to see how that could work. The Isle of Man also operated a concessionary VAT rate on hotel accommodation that has been judged to be a direct stimulus to that sector. Given that Northern Ireland's tourism competes with tourism in the Republic of Ireland, which enjoys, as I said, the 9% VAT rate for that type purchase, the 11% differential is clearly off-putting for potential visitors to Northern Ireland.

As stated earlier, the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation is in no doubt about the benefits that would flow from a concessionary VAT rate for hotel accommodation. I am aware that, in the Chamber, we are all accused of preaching to the converted. The real task is to unite and convince the Treasury, which will inevitably resist any potential reduction in revenue and will require convincing, that a cut in VAT will produce sufficient economic growth to outweigh the revenue shortfall. That is the task to which we must now commit ourselves. I support the motion.

Mr I McCrea: I recognise that most Members have said that this is not a devolved matter and is, therefore, something that we have very little, if any, control over. However, it is worth noting and accepting the work that has been done by Ministers to date. I commend the previous Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton, who raised the matter with the Treasury, as has the current Minister in her role as the former Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I do know

the work that has been done to try to do what can be done in that respect. However, it is important to recognise that a reduction in VAT for the tourism and hospitality sector would be welcomed, not just by those in that sector but by consumers. Let us face it, if consumers were not using the sector, it would not exist. When I speak to hotel owners in my constituency, they tell me of issues in that respect that are impacting on their business, but the need for that to find its way down to the consumer is also very important.

4.15 pm

The motion asks us to undertake a report on the benefits of a reduction in VAT for presentation to the Treasury, and I have no difficulty with that whatsoever. Whilst we can do that, it would be remiss of me not to mention that there is a lot that can be done with the powers that we have already. Welfare reform may not be linked specifically to VAT on tourism and the hospitality sector, but we cannot get to grips with what we already have. There is no point in doing this report and asking for a reduction in VAT when we cannot prove ourselves capable of coming to decisions on welfare reform that affect most people's everyday life. Personally, I think that we are wasting our time asking the Government to consider a reduction in VAT. That said, I believe that the sector requires it, and work continues to try to achieve it.

The Executive set out targets to better our tourism product, and I commend the Minister because, in the next couple of weeks, we have the Dubai Duty Free Irish Open coming to Royal County Down. That is another great news story for the tourism sector in Northern Ireland, and there is more to come.

Certainly, with our tourism product, we are punching well above our weight, and the hospitality sector will obviously benefit from that, but there is no doubt that a VAT reduction would be of benefit, and this party will certainly play its part in trying to ensure that that happens. However, we have to realise that there is an elephant in the room: welfare reform must be sorted before we take on any additional power.

Mr B McCrea: I was going to intervene because I think that my namesake, Mr McCrea, has made some really important points.

There are two things that the Assembly does really well. The first is that we are really good at calling for cuts in taxation. We want a

reduction in everything. The second thing that we are really good at is spending more. So, the conundrum that we face is trying to stretch that piece of elastic.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I certainly will.

Mr Flanagan: Does the Member agree that we are also very good at calling for other people to do things?

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

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. What is interesting about Mr Flanagan's contribution is that this is, effectively, a cut-and-paste debate. When you read through the documentation that we have, everything said today has already been said ad nauseam. The Member for Mid Ulster went back to when we raised this question in 2004, but I note that it was raised in a Westminster Hall debate by members of the DUP, and we have heard from others who have said the same thing

The key question that I have to ask is this: what part of "not devolved" do we not understand? This is a non-devolved matter. We can have many debates, wringing our hands and saying that somebody should do something, as Mr Flanagan said, but we are talking to ourselves. This is a key issue. The reason why I was going to support Ian McCrea is that he made the point that, if you want to talk real politics, it is really difficult for us to go to the Exchequer and say, "Please can we have some form of derogation or separation on VAT?", when we cannot sort out welfare reform. We are incapable of government. We are not able to go along and say, "Give us a chance".

I had the benefit of hearing Mr Lunn speak. The great thing about Hansard is that you can go back and read what he said the last time we debated this issue in September 2012. He has an engaging turn of phrase. On that occasion, he said that the Alliance Party would support the motion, although we might wonder why when we heard him speak. He raised some good points and said that he was voting for the motion, but he explained why he might have a problem. He said that just because things happened to work in the Republic of Ireland did not mean to say that we should adopt them willy-nilly up here.

When preparing for this debate, I wondered why the British Government would be so stupid

as not to agree to the collective wisdom of this place, given that it is so self-evident that this is what they should be doing. During the previous debate, the then Minister pointed out a number of issues. One was that, although the Republic of Ireland had changed its VAT rate, its visitor numbers went up the same as in the United Kingdom. In that debate, Mr Lunn quoted a letter from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury to Naomi Long that stated:

"There is no evidence of a causal link between the VAT rate and tourism". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 77, p44, col 2].

The issue is whether we will decide what we will do. We spent a considerable time yesterday, and even during Question Time today, saying that we were really worried about the state of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), the third sector and the voluntary sector, and asking where we were going to find the money. At the same time, we are asking for a tax rebate.

One thing that the Minister at Westminster came up with that bears thinking about is that we pay zero VAT on food, newspapers and transport. We give back VAT on museums. We have the highest VAT registration, so many people in the tourism industry do not pay VAT at all. In other words, it is all part of a complicated system.

When you ask me what drives tourism, I have to say that many people will know that, when you go to the South, it is very expensive. It is more expensive than here. I do not know whether that is an exchange rate argument, an issue with labour rates or whatever. I would like to have the money to invest. The interesting thing is that the Sinn Féin argument is almost identical to Mr Sammy Wilson's argument in the previous debate. He said that this is a non-devolved matter, so it is extremely difficult to do things, but let us see whether we can be creative. He then produced quite a list of things that we do, and the Minister who was responsible is here. Three years ago, he mentioned the £300 million in tourism infrastructure and the 450,000 visitors to Titanic Belfast in its first three months. He mentioned the 192,000 visitors to the Giant's Causeway visitor centre. That is the real issue.

This is Groundhog Day. This is not showing us at our finest. This is not us tackling issues properly. This is cut-and-paste politics, and it is not good enough. We need to get our act together. We need to find a way to drive employment and tourism and all those good

things, but simply regurgitating the same old same old —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr B McCrea: — will not cut it. You need to get your act together and find a way to drive this place forward.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Basil for his cut-and-paste speech. I welcome the Minister into her new role. This is the first opportunity I have had to engage with her since she took over the post, and I genuinely wish her well. We will miss her from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Since peacetime arrived here, we have had a huge transformation in our tourism sector, particularly since the establishment of this institution and Tourism Ireland, which carries out an outstanding role in promoting this island overseas. We have seen a seismic shift in the interest levels in visiting this place for tourism and business reasons, and we need to maximise and exploit that and keep the trend going. I hope that the Minister's successor in DETI will continue in that vein, and I am sure that he will.

Since 2010, our wider economy has been under attack as a result of the policies put forward by the Tory Government in England, with devastating cuts to our public services and an increase to 20% in the rate of VAT. That is a regressive form of taxation, and one that also applies to the tourism sector. That was a regrettable policy: it should not have been explored, and it has had a deeply negative impact on society, particularly on our tourism sector here, which is in competition with other parts of the island.

It is clear to see that, in this part of Ireland, our tourism sector is going well. It is certainly growing. Overnight trips to the North increased by 2% last year, and spend increased by 3%. Our challenge, as a legislative body and as representatives of the people, is to ensure that those increases are converted into job opportunities and do not remain headline figures.

In the North, particularly along the border in places such as Fermanagh, we are losing out on considerable investment and spend as a result of the differential rates of VAT, as well as through the difference in currency strength. The result is that, when a group is looking to

hold a dinner dance or a function, when a couple are looking to get married or when parents are looking to have a christening, crossing the border into Cavan, Donegal or Monaghan is a very real prospect. Just last Friday, I was in the Cavan Crystal Hotel at the wedding of a young woman from Tempo and a young man from County Down. It is a growing trend for people, because of the reduced cost as a result of the difference in VAT rates, to cross the border to hold their wedding. That is having a deeply negative impact on our local economy. People are opting not to hold events in their local area and are instead having them in other counties in Ireland, often because of the cost differential.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will surely, Ian.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Member consider that part of the reason for that may not be the reduced costs from the VAT rate and may be to do with the exchange rate?

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

Mr Flanagan: I agree that part of the reason is the exchange rate, but another part of it may well be that the licensing laws here are fairly restrictive at times. Therefore, there is a range of issues that we need to sort out to support our tourism sector, and it is important that we listen to the views that are put forward by representative bodies such as Pubs of Ulster and the Hotels Federation, which do very good work in representing their members. They have a very good opportunity here to engage with local representatives. They get a fair hearing from Ministers and MLAs.

The level of detail and the number of times that the issue has been debated shows the strength of the campaign. The fact that, time and time again, we debate the issue and unanimously agree that the rate of VAT on tourism and hospitality products is too high and a barrier to the growth of our local economy demonstrates the importance of the tourism and hospitality sector to us as MLAs and to our economy.

The motion merely calls for a report to be carried out by the two relevant Departments. That is fairly straightforward, and you could not have much argument with it. There is an argument to be put forward that it makes economic sense for a reduction in the VAT rate to take place. Reports have been done on that in the past, and it is clear to see that it will pay

for itself through increased spend from consumers, as well as through increased disposable income for people who are in work and who will have increased work because of the reduction in VAT and the knock-on increased tax take that will arise. Therefore, we need to see a move to support our tourism and hospitality sector. That is what we are all calling for here.

There is a range of options being proposed and looked at, but you can clearly see that the Government in England have been increasing the rate of VAT to close the deficit. Some other European member states have put their tourism sector at the centre of their economic policy. We need to make sure that, particularly here, we adopt a similar position. Even in some other member states, they do not use a tourism tax or the VAT on tourism and hospitality to close the deficit or merely to raise revenue for the Government. It is directed into enhancing the tourism product and the things that are offered to potential visitors.

4.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Flanagan: There is an awful lot more to be done to support our hospitality and tourism sector, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): First, I thank Members for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House. I certainly do not think that there is much disagreement about making the argument for a reduction in VAT at a UK level. Here are words that I never thought I would say: I entirely agree with what Basil McCrea had to say today. It is not often that I take lectures from you, Basil, but I hope that the whole House was listening to you today and that the Members who are not here were listening and will read it in Hansard.

There is an air of unreality about today's debate; it is rather surreal. It would be wrong if I did not say that. We in Northern Ireland have been granted more powers in some areas than either Scotland or Wales; however, we are not using them either responsibly or with logic. I am, of course, speaking about welfare powers. Yet, we are talking today about going to the Treasury and asking for more fiscal powers. There is a real issue of credibility with that. I ask Members on the opposite side of the House to reflect on that because, when you complain about the lack of economic levers in Northern

Ireland, we have to make the strongest possible case to Treasury to get more powers devolved to Northern Ireland. We have to answer very difficult questions: how will we pay for a lower rate of VAT? How will we pay for a lower rate of air passenger duty?

We cannot go to the money tree at the back of Stormont for the money because, let me tell you, I have been looking for that money tree over this past week, and it is not there. If it were, I would not be in the difficult position in which I find myself in relation to the budgetary process. Members need to reflect on that. I do not criticise Members for tabling the motion; it is absolutely right to debate it. However, we must reflect on what is actually happening in Northern Ireland in relation to the Assembly.

As you would expect me to, I want to put on record that tourism makes a hugely important contribution to the economy. It is worth almost three quarters of a billion pounds per annum, and, as we have heard from many Members, it provides a vital source of employment. As we have heard, about 43,000 jobs have been created directly in that sector, with many, many more created indirectly. That represents over 5% of the total workforce, or one in every 18 jobs. Those jobs are spread right across Northern Ireland, and the tourism and hospitality industry is an easily accessible market that generates jobs in every constituency and, importantly, at every skill level.

As it is one of Northern Ireland's key service sectors, I recognise that developing the tourism and hospitality industry offers a great opportunity for us to strengthen our economy, and that has been recognised in the Programme for Government and in the economic strategy. We must recognise that the industry is, for very obvious reasons that the House is well aware of, at an earlier stage of development compared with our nearest neighbours. I have believed for a long time that it is an industry with huge growth potential, and I hope that I have advocated for the tourism industry over this past seven years. I believe that very sincerely, and, therefore, it is vital that we take every possible step to ensure that its potential is fully exploited.

That brings me to the substance of today's motion. We have heard about the Irish experience and how Members believe that that has made a great difference to the industry down there. Tourism is one of a limited number of areas in which the EU permits member states to apply a reduced rate of VAT, and we have heard that 13 member states across

Europe have taken advantage of that, including Germany, France and Italy. There is the rub. Member states have taken that decision, and, therefore, we need to continue to push our member state, the United Kingdom, to see the benefit of that.

Many Members made the point that our local businesses in particular have pointed to the lower VAT in the Republic of Ireland presenting a significant challenge for our restaurants, pubs, hotels and visitor attractions that are dotted along the border. I very much recognise that it is negatively impacting on our tourism offer's economic competitiveness. For that reason, I support the local industry in its calls, whether it is Pubs of Ulster or other tourism organisations, like the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation.

Those organisations have been very good at putting forward their arguments for the reduction of VAT. Indeed, a number of reports and reviews have been put forward on this issue, most recently by the Hotels Federation here, which said that we could benefit by up to £60 million a year and increase jobs within the hotel sector by 10% and in the wider industry by a further 6%. At national level, a number of other very good reports have come forward. One that Professor Adam Blake took forward concluded that tourism VAT reduction is perhaps the most efficient means of delivering economic growth at low cost to the Exchequer. That is a very clear indicator from a very eminent gentleman. He estimates that a reduction on key tourism services, such as visitor accommodation and attractions, could deliver the Treasury up to £2.6 billion over 10 years. Other sources of research and survey evidence are available as well. So, a host of evidence is available to us that we can take forward to Her Majesty's Treasury.

We have had a number of debates, and my predecessor wrote to David Gauke in the Treasury and got a very detailed letter back indicating why the Treasury does not believe this is the best way forward. That does not mean that we do not continue to push; we will continue to push on all those issues. I agree with Mrs Overend, who was, I think, the first person to comment that it is something we need to do in conjunction with our Members of Parliament. I hope she does not mind me saying that we will work with all Members of Parliament, not just the Ulster Unionist ones. Those who attend Westminster have a full role to play in this matter. Our 14 MPs who attend Westminster have a very significant role to play in this issue.

I do not believe that there is merit in having further research on this area. I think that the case has been made, and we have all the evidence that we need on the issue not only at a national level but here in Northern Ireland at a regional level. That does not mean to say that we do not continue to press Her Majesty's Treasury. Indeed, as a result of this debate, I will be writing to David Gauke about the matter again or, if he is not still in post, to his successor.

Apart from that, we must continue to work with the sector through Tourism Northern Ireland and others to continue to invest in and promote our tourism offering. Price is important, but it is only one part of the tourism industry, and we need to recognise that.

In closing, I assure Members that the Executive and I, as Finance Minister, are committed to working with the tourism sector and, indeed, others to invest in and develop our potential. My predecessors raised the case for a reduced rate of VAT on tourism-related services with the previous United Kingdom Government, who made it very clear that this was a step they were not prepared to take. There is no indication that the new Conservative Government will change their position on the matter, certainly not as they seek to deal with the deficit that they have to deal with. Whilst that is disappointing, we will continue to push ahead with our tourism policy in the context of the economic strategy.

We will continue to ask the question, but I do not believe that there is merit in taking forward a fresh report. There is a whole range of reports available to us. That is not the issue. The issue is the Treasury's view on this matter. Whilst I cannot support the motion, because I do not believe that there is a need for more reports, I agree absolutely with the need to continue to push. I say that in the context of economic realities and of a debate that we will have in the House next Tuesday: a hugely important debate on welfare reform, which will have far-reaching consequences for the Assembly.

Mr Rogers: First, I thank the Minister for being here and all the Members for their contributions, which I will come to in a few minutes.

I welcome the opportunity to highlight the very real benefits that reducing tourism VAT would bring to Northern Ireland. With the Irish Open coming to south Down in just a few days, there is an ideal opportunity to consider how we can grow our growing reputation as an ideal location for world-class events.

Minister Noonan's recent announcement that the South has no immediate plans to raise the VAT rate further demonstrates the positive impact that it is having on their economy. They have experienced a rise in visitor numbers and a growth in industry. What began as a temporary measure has been retained in successive Budgets because of its fantastic impact. Northern Ireland must take heed of that, and of the fact that we face a greater challenge than England, Scotland and Wales. Tourists who want to come for an Irish experience are more likely to go to the part of Ireland with a thriving and vibrant tourist industry. Our local tourism and hospitality sector is facing increasingly challenging conditions with rates of such disparity. The UK remains one of only two countries in the EU not to offer some sort of tax relief for the tourism industry.

Northern Ireland's tourism and hospitality sector plays a key role in creating and maintaining employment in the North and in attracting visitors, yet its true potential remains untapped. In south Down, we have some of the most breathtaking landscape, which visitors to the Irish Open will see next week. They will see some of our best golfers compete against other world-class players. We will experience a fantastic boost in the short term, but the long-term gain will simply not materialise if the right policies are not in place. One of the key policies we need is a reduction in VAT. We also need the right infrastructure in place. The Narrow Water bridge project must be renewed to capitalise on the publicity that the Irish Open will bring to south Down and, indeed, to all of Northern Ireland. The loss of EU funding was regrettable, but we must keep Narrow Water bridge on the agenda.

We all know, as Members said, that VAT is a Treasury responsibility, but that does not mean that we leave it to Westminster. Five years ago, we were told the same about the devolution of corporation tax, but discussions between Westminster and the Executive created a road map. The same road map can make a reduction in tourism VAT a reality. Creating that flexibility with VAT would help to boost our tourism economy and open the door to greater flexibility. I mentioned in the Chamber recently the reduction of the VAT rate for home improvements. Such flexibilities could kick-start our economy and would increase HMRC's revenue.

Today, around the House, we speak with a united voice. My colleague Margaret Ritchie has brought the matter to the Floor of

Westminster. The Minister talked about our 14 MPs. It would be great if our 18 MPs would stand on the Floor of Westminster with the same message that we have today and push it for us.

I come now to the various contributions. Mr McGlone said it was time for the tourist industry to unleash its full potential. He talked about how 13 member states have reduced the VAT rate and how a 5% VAT rate would bring 3,300 jobs and up to £4 billion into our economy. An important point he made is that visitors respond to a reduced rate of VAT, increasing demand and stimulating industry, which can in turn expand and grow to create more employment.

I did not know that Mr Girvan is a poet. He talked about it being a Westminster issue. Yes it is. We are unique here and, as he said, we have to use all the tools in the box to make sure that this happens. Mr Ó Muilleoir talked about gratitude to the tourist industry right across the North and how difficult it has it, which is a very important point. He said that there is only one tool in the box and talked about a punitive tax and air passenger duty, and he is right. He made the very important point that we want to grow indigenous business because that is the future for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend talked about our MPs in Westminster working together. Look at how the VAT rate was reduced in the Isle of Man and what a difference it has made there. She said that there is a job of work to do for all of our MPs, and I agree.

4.45 pm

Mr Lunn talked about the tourist industry that we are proud of, but it needs nurtured and developed. He said that we are so far away from London, and that is the reason why we need our MPs to really work out there. If we want to achieve our Programme for Government targets we really need to make sure that our tourism industry is vibrant.

Mr McQuillan gave us a north coast perspective, and it is no different to the south Down perspective. We must work together on this. He talked about working collectively. At this time, my thoughts and prayers are with the two people who were seriously injured at the weekend. I am glad to hear that they are making a recovery.

Mr McKay said that we have not moved on very much in three years. He talked about air passenger duty as an impediment as well. So many people fly to Dublin and then turn right

instead of left, and we never see them again. He talked about it being an even playing field.

Ms McKeivitt talked about the economic potential and how 23 countries out there have less than 10% VAT. That is something that we have to aim for. I think somebody made a point about the loss in revenue to the Exchequer. A reduction in VAT would actually encourage more people to spend their money and come in, so, at the end of the day, HMRC would still get its money.

Mr Cree talked about the Cut Tourism VAT campaign. He talked about the Hotels Federation and how the UK has the third highest VAT rate. He talked about the Ulster Unionist manifesto and reminded us what VAT is really all about. One in four members of the EU has not reduced VAT. He also talked about the Isle of Man.

Mr McCrea commended both the previous and present Finance Ministers and talked about how it is affecting hoteliers in his constituency. I disagree with him; we are not wasting our time talking about this. It is important to have a good, united message going out from the Assembly today. Basil talked about how we are good at asking for a cut in taxation and wishing to spend more. He talked about cutting and pasting etc. He talked about the same old same old, but he did ask very pertinent questions. What drives our tourism? He gave us a lot to think about. It reminded me a wee bit of that old song of Johnny Nash many years ago, 'There Are More Questions Than Answers'.

Then we got a Fermanagh perspective from Phil. It just brings home in the border counties, whether you are in the South Down constituency or in Fermanagh, the real effect that the increased VAT rate has in the North as opposed to going South. If somebody is going to make their mind up about having a wedding or going out for a meal, the different VAT rate could make the difference. He talked about driving forward our economy and how important that is to us all.

I want to commend the Minister for being here and for the work that she has done in her previous role and, no doubt, in her present role. She said that there was a bit of unreality about the debate today, but, having passed that by, there is a reality that a 20% VAT rate does reduce people's spending power and so on. It turns tourists off. Again, she asked us important questions. We must reflect on what is happening in Northern Ireland. She talked about the tourist industry having a great growth

potential. She talked about support for the Pubs of Ulster and the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, and she said that she will keep pushing the case forward. I have no doubt that she will. She said that we do not need more research, and that is good. The case is made; let us press ahead. From her previous role as Minister of Trade and Investment, she has a good insight into the ways that VAT reduction could develop our economy.

Minister Foster has indicated on previous occasions that the Treasury has little appetite for this reduction. The motion calls on the Minister to work with the new Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to undertake a report into the benefits of a reduced rate of VAT for tourism hospitality to send to the Treasury. Now, more than ever, facing years of austerity handed down from London, I urge Ministers to make Northern Ireland prosperity their priority.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the decision by the Government of Ireland to retain a reduced rate of VAT on tourism and hospitality; further notes that this is a practice in many EU countries; recognises the potential of this measure to significantly boost the Northern Ireland tourism industry; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to undertake a report into those benefits for presentation to the UK Treasury.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments as we change those at the Table.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Age-appropriate Respite Provision: South Tyrone

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the Adjournment. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes and all other speakers will have approximately eight minutes.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. As we approach Carers Week, which takes place from 8 June to 14 June and, very appropriately, with regard to the debate, has for its theme this year Building Carer Friendly Communities, I thank you for the opportunity to address the House on the lack of age-appropriate respite provision for young adults with learning disabilities in south Tyrone.

I have been working on this issue on behalf of local families for some considerable time. Their concerns mostly centre on the need for enhanced provision for bed-based respite and short-break options. In response to a question that I submitted to the Assembly's Research and Information Service regarding respite provision for adults with learning disabilities in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers the south Tyrone area, it was stated that, at present, demand for respite and, in particular, bed-based respite is outstripping capacity and that the trust is looking at appropriate interim measures to purchase interim beds.

The research paper also states that the trust is aware that many young people are coming through transition with very complex health and behavioural difficulties and is responding to try and meet this growing need on an individual basis. It concludes that one clear message from carers is that adults with very challenging behaviour should not mix with adults with complex health needs, because of the significant risk of harm and that, as a result, the trust is being faced with the challenge of providing bespoke individualised respite short-break options.

At present, all respite short-break provision in the Southern Trust for adults with a learning disability is provided following the completion of a carer's assessment with the carer for whom

the respite is provided. Respite provision can range from a cash grant, direct payments, an increased domiciliary care package, bed-based respite or a combination of these options. The trust currently has 24 beds which it uses for bed-based respite. Eight of these beds are located in Woodlawn House, Dungannon, which is a nursing facility that caters for the wider trust area. While there is no waiting list for Woodlawn House, perhaps that may be due to the fact that the bar has been set so high with regard to the criteria that needs to be met to secure respite provision.

The trust presently gathers information about unmet need via the children's disability social work teams. While there are no children on waiting lists for respite services, nor is there a waiting list for respite for carers of adults with a learning difficulty, the trust is reported as experiencing difficulty providing the levels of bed-based breaks which carers would wish for.

Like many trusts, the Southern Trust is endeavouring to identify some form of scoring mechanism following the completion of a carer's assessment to enable it to quantify the amount of respite a carer should receive. It has set up a working group that consists of carers to examine all possible scoring options, and that is to be welcomed. We have been informed that the trust has recently completed a series of information sessions with carers to ascertain the level, type and location of respite provision that would best meet their needs as well as those of the individuals that they care for.

The clear message that is being communicated to me by carers who are in need of respite from across south Tyrone is the same message that I mentioned earlier when I referred to the answer that I received from the Assembly's Research and Information Service. That is that adults with very challenging behaviour should not mix with adults with complex health needs because of the significant risk of harm and that there needs to be more locally available bed-based respite and short breaks. That explains the demand from my community for more investment in age-appropriate bed-based respite provision. I spoke to one mother, whose child is 18 years old and was going into respite in a nursing home with people who are much older and whose ages range from 60 to 70-plus. That really is inconceivable.

We are only too aware that as children and young adults with severe learning needs become older, their personal, physical, emotional and social care needs become more, not less, demanding. That means that carers and families worry more about the demands

that are placed on them and what the future holds for the young person as they progress to the key transitional age of 19.

In the foreword to the Post 19 Lobby Group's research report, 'The Impact of Transition on Family Life', Dr Janet Jamieson stated:

"On the one hand, I am overwhelmed with respect and awe for the efforts and sacrifices made by carers, parents and families to attend to the needs of their children with severe learning difficulties. On the other, I am aghast and angered that their efforts lack sufficient and appropriate state support and resources and that a bleak future awaits both these families and children with severe learning difficulties as provision and services ebb and finish on the basis of the young person's attainment of the ... age of 19 years rather than a holistic consideration of their learning and developmental needs."

Dr Jamieson quite rightly concluded:

"Ultimately, the needs of children and young people with severe learning disabilities demand creative, compassionate and caring responses."

The Post 19 Lobby Group is made up of parents, carers and representatives from 21 severe learning-disabled schools from across the six counties, including Sperrinview Special School in Dungannon in my constituency. The group's report examined a number of key areas to provide a snapshot of family life in the North of Ireland and sought to provide examples of best practice in Europe and Britain to suggest changes to our system and structures of post-transition care, in particular for those young people with profound or complex disabilities. The key areas included family demographics, caring responsibilities, transition arrangements and the impact of caring on the family.

The picture of family life that emerged from the research was very grim indeed. Some 62% of parents are caring for their young people with severe learning difficulties for upwards of 70 hours per week, and care needs that are associated with severe learning disabilities clearly outweigh the approximate average 50 hours per week that has been suggested by Care NI. Overall, 77% of parent carers state that their caring responsibilities have had an impact on their health, with one quarter of that number stating that depression, stress and anxiety are now an integral part of life.

Social isolation is also a common theme for families with a severely learning-disabled member. This is compounded when a family includes two or more children with severe learning disabilities. I dealt with a local family who have two such children at home and find it extremely difficult to coordinate their respite.

5.00 pm

As part of the survey that shaped the report, people were asked about the impact of caring on health and whether there had been occasions when caring arrangements had broken down because of the carer's ill health. One mother said that the amount of time and mental strain put into caring leaves her exhausted and that she finds that it takes longer to do simple tasks because she is too tired to think straight. She had hurt her back when struggling to keep her son safe when he was displaying challenging behaviour.

As legislators, now is the time for us to come together on a cross-party basis, as a united Assembly and one voice, to demand that the British Tory Party, which has assumed the role of a single-party Government in Britain, makes available an appropriate block grant that enables us to tailor economic and social policy, not only to protect essential front-line services such as age-appropriate respite care for young adults with learning difficulties but to enhance the range of post-19 provision for such young adults. We must rigorously investigate and advance, if deemed appropriate, the range of measures that the Post 19 Lobby Group said would help to deal with the challenges posed in securing a happy, fulfilled and stimulating adulthood for these young people.

I will conclude by paying tribute to all carers and calling for full recognition of their right to appropriate support. Age-appropriate respite care for our young adults with severe learning needs, which also provides them with stimulating and engaging activities, tops the list of social demands from my constituents in south Tyrone. In the spirit of the forthcoming Carers Week, let us play our part by helping to build carer-friendly communities.

Mrs Overend: The issue raised by Ms McGahan is important to so many families across Northern Ireland. There is not one of us in this place whose constituency office has not been contacted by families who desperately need care for their ill, vulnerable and often elderly relatives. In this case, however, the issue in hand is the younger people who are often ill or have special needs and need age-

appropriate care. As we debate the issue, it is worth remembering that it has a human face that is familiar to us all. Indeed, much of the respite care provided in our care homes and communities has been under threat over recent times.

There are vulnerable people of all ages who require respite care, and it is easy to presume that this sort of care is required only by elderly people. Many families have children of all ages who require high levels of specific respite care. It is vital that families are given the support and assistance that they need to ensure that they can live as normal a life as possible, often under incredibly difficult circumstances. It is essential, in order to promote the inherent dignity of each individual patient, that they are given treatment and care that is age-appropriate. This specific treatment helps to maintain and promote health benefits, physical and mental, for those people, which will, in turn, help to enhance their quality of life and that of the families who care for them daily.

For many families, the facilities provided locally are the best environment for respite care. The knowledge and awareness of issues surrounding individual circumstances, along with their experience and access to excellent facilities, mean that they are often best placed to provide this level of care for patients of all ages. They are also best placed to provide a range of services, being able to use this expertise to ensure that any respite is provided in an age-specific way.

Each patient is an individual, and care providers know that there is no single way to treat all patients. Care is required to be available locally to ensure that these people are treated as individuals and given the care that they need and deserve.

Ms McGahan mentioned the difficulties experienced in south Tyrone. I apologise on behalf of Tom Elliott, who is unable to be here this afternoon. I am sure that he is well aware of the circumstances in that area. It is interesting to hear the details: there is no waiting list, but they are experiencing difficulties with getting places for young people in the area. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on those issues.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome this opportunity to discuss the provision of age-appropriate respite or short-breaks care in south Tyrone, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust generally and across Northern Ireland. I congratulate Ms McGahan on

securing the debate, and I also congratulate her and Mrs Overend on their contributions this afternoon.

Respite or short-breaks care provision is based on assessed need and can be provided in a variety of ways, such as in a residential or nursing home; through the use of day-care facilities or a sitting service; or through direct payments, whereby service users make their own arrangements. The Southern Trust is actively involved in the development of short-breaks provision as part of Transforming Your Care and is committed to working in partnership with carers to agree the best way forward.

Demand for bed-based respite in mental health services is relatively low, and there is no evidence to suggest that the trust requires more than three respite beds. Carers who have completed a carer's assessment that has identified the need for a short break from caring can receive an allocation up to £250 to help to fund a break from their caring role. With learning disability services, the trust has recently completed a series of information sessions with carers of individuals with a learning disability to determine the needs of carers, particularly on bed-based short-break options. It will now carry out an options appraisal in partnership with carers to agree how the future bed-based needs of carers and their loved ones will best be met. As part of that review, the needs of young people who will be transitioning from children to adult services are being factored into the type and number of beds likely to be required in the future for an emerging number of young people with complex conditions.

In the case of physical disability services for 18- to 65-year-olds, there are no age-specific dedicated nursing or residential facilities. After the carer assessment is completed, short breaks are offered in a variety of ways. Those include bed-based short breaks in nursing or residential facilities registered to meet the needs of young physically disabled people; out-of-area specialist facilities; day sitting; night sitting; and flexible respite, when carers can be awarded a direct payment to allow them to arrange a short break to best meet their particular needs. It is often the case that people are offered a combination of those supports. In the older people's programme of care, I am informed by the trust that there is adequate access to age-appropriate short-break respite opportunities in the south Tyrone area and that it is not facing any difficulties with the provision of short breaks for older people.

The trust offers short-breaks support to children with disabilities up to 18 years of age, regardless of the locality a child comes from. The level and nature of support offered by the trust is dependent on the individual needs of a child and his or her carers. An assessment of need incorporating a carer's assessment is carried out, and, if intervention or support is required, a package is developed to meet the individual needs of the child and family. That will take account of a child or young person's age, the type of support needed and the availability and accessibility of local community services to include that child or young person successfully in their services. By definition, such support should be age-appropriate and reflect an individual's specific needs and, when possible, his or her particular preferences. Short breaks or respite service options for children also include overnight care, day short breaks and other flexible support, such as direct payments and self-directed support, which parents can use to buy the particular service or assistance they need.

Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that families in rural localities, such as the south Tyrone area, are likely to have fewer choices in community options. That is one reason why we are encouraging the promotion of direct payments and self-directed support for children and families assessed as requiring services. That can be particularly useful for families in rural areas. Such payments give parents more flexibility about how they use the payment for their child. Domiciliary care services are also used for families when community options are limited, and the worker can provide support to a child in or out of home.

The Southern Trust has informed me that it appointed a short-breaks manager within children's disability services in April of this year to progress a review and a development plan for services. The matter of children living in rural communities will be a particular area of focus in that post.

The Health and Social Care Board has been leading a regional adult short-breaks development group. That involves all the trusts and my Department, and it incorporates carer representation and community and voluntary representation. The aim of the group is to improve access to adult short-breaks provision, increase the range of services available to carers and increase the number of carers regionally who are supported by the Health and Social Care system and its partners. Needless to say, those are challenging aims, particularly in the current financial environment, but I look

forward to receiving its conclusions and recommendations.

In conclusion, I can assure Members that I am committed to ensuring that the best possible support is provided to carers and that I recognise the importance of providing age-appropriate, accessible and flexible short-breaks services for carers and their loved ones.

Adjourned at 5.11 pm.

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