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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 April 2015

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with other similar motions, this is a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Gary Middleton be appointed as a member of the Committee for Social Development. — [Mr Weir.]

Ministerial Statement

Enabling Success: Supporting the Transition from Economic Inactivity to Employment

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a joint statement on a new strategy to address economic inactivity in Northern Ireland.

The Executive's Programme for Government includes a commitment for my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to develop and implement a strategy to reduce economic inactivity through skills, training, incentives and job creation. This joint statement has been agreed with my partner in that regard, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

To reflect the need to develop a holistic approach to tackling economic inactivity, the strategy has also been developed in close partnership with other Departments, including, in particular, the Department for Social Development, Invest Northern Ireland and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those Departments for their valuable role in the development of the strategy

and for their continued cooperation as we move forward through the implementation process.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the many stakeholders for their invaluable insights and contributions throughout the development of the strategy. The strategic proposals were rigorously tested during the consultation period by a wide range of stakeholders, and I am delighted that a number of new innovative ideas and approaches were identified through the consultation and have been incorporated into the strategy.

Economic inactivity is a labour market classification referring to individuals who are neither in work nor actively seeking work. High rates of economic inactivity have been a feature of the Northern Ireland economy for decades. The current rate of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland is 26.8%, which equates to approximately 312,000 adults between the ages of 16 and 64 who are not engaged with the labour market. This is the highest rate across all the regions of the United Kingdom and compares to a UK average of 22.1%. This level of economic inactivity has been a persistent feature of our economy over the past 30 years, within the ranges of 26% to 32%, irrespective of the changes in the economic cycle. I am sure that Members will agree that the figures outline the stark scale of the problem.

High levels of economic inactivity represent a major structural problem in our economy, which, if unaddressed, would limit our ability to develop and transform our economic prospects. For that reason, our two Departments have been leading, on behalf of the Executive, on the development of a new strategy aimed at tackling economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. It will be the only dedicated government strategy in the UK at a national level aimed at tackling economic inactivity.

The strategy has been informed by an extensive research, development and consultation process, including a baseline study of the profile of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland; an independent literature review carried

out by Edinburgh Napier University; a strategic framework document; a 12-week public consultation exercise; engagement with the local business sector; independent focus groups with people from a range of economically inactive groups; regular engagement with the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and regular engagement with the Executive subcommittee on the economy, including its endorsement of a wide range of strategic proposals that have been included in the strategy. The outcomes from the comprehensive development process informed a final strategy that was agreed by the Executive on 16 April.

It may be helpful if I take some time to outline the key elements of the strategy and how we plan to implement them. The strategy makes a clear distinction between the different categories of economic inactivity: from benign forms of inactivity, such as students or early retirees, through to other forms of inactivity, such as severe health conditions or disabilities that cannot be addressed through any government intervention. The focus of the strategy is, therefore, on the forms of economic inactivity that are caused when an individual's particular personal circumstances, often combined with various structural issues, geographical nuances and economic conditions, restrict their access to the labour market.

The strategy will focus on three key economically inactive groups: people with work-limiting health conditions or disabilities who are included within the wider long-term sick and disabled category and who, with the right level of support and reasonable accommodations from an employer, should be able to work; and lone parents and carers who are included within the wider family commitments category, who are currently in receipt of out-of-work benefits and would be better off in work but are unable to make the transition due to a lack of appropriate support or opportunities.

Recent social security statistics show that the total for the three target groups is approximately 64,000, which equates to approximately 40% of all social security claimants in the economically inactive groups and approximately 20% of the total working-age economic inactivity figure in Northern Ireland. In saying that, we fully recognise that not every person who falls into these categories will be in a position to engage with the labour market or will wish to do so. I think that it is, therefore, important to highlight

the person-centred ethos of the strategy and to confirm that the strategy will be based on voluntary participation. The strategy will be about supporting people to make transitions when they opt to do so. This is not about compulsion.

The strategy seeks, by 2030, to contribute towards a stable and competitive employment rate in Northern Ireland, which exceeds the UK average, through a reduction in the proportion of the working-age population classified as economically inactive. An interim strategic goal of achieving an employment rate of more than 70% by 2020 has also been included in order to assess the effectiveness of the strategy at a mid-point in the implementation process.

To put this in context, the current employment rate in Northern Ireland is 68.6% compared with a UK average of 73.4%. Achieving that goal will, therefore, be hugely challenging, but we are firmly of the opinion that we must aspire to put Northern Ireland's economic competitiveness on a level footing with that of the rest of the UK. It is worth stressing that our focus is on the overall employment rate, as opposed to a stand-alone reduction in the economic inactivity rate. We are not interested in reducing economic inactivity simply through shifting people into the unemployment category or by moving them from unemployment into inactivity.

Whilst our future actions will take into account the changing landscape arising from welfare reform, they are not part of the current proposed changes to the welfare reform system nor are they motivated by them. Rather, our response is directed at addressing what has become a long-term structural problem within our economy.

Successfully achieving the strategic goal will require the fulfilment of three strategic objectives. The first is to reduce by 2030, through transitions into employment, the levels of economic inactivity due to work-limiting health conditions or disabilities by a 25% reduction in the number of people claiming employment and support allowance within the work-related activity group against the 2015 baseline position. The second objective is to reduce by 2030, through transitions into employment, the levels of economic inactivity due to family commitments through a 25% reduction in the number of lone parents and carers claiming income support against the 2015 baseline position. The third objective is to establish by March 2017 a robust baseline for the numbers of people moving from work into economic inactivity due to health-related issues

and to reduce by 2030 the baseline figure by 20% through a reduction in the number of new claims to relevant health-related social security benefits.

It is recognised that any potential future changes to the social security system in Northern Ireland may have implications for these strategic objectives through the scope, nature and claimant count of any new or revised social security benefits. It is, therefore, proposed to review and refresh the strategy on a regular basis to ensure that any necessary changes are appropriately reflected.

The strategic approach is based on a model of holistic intervention that is centred around six key themes. Theme one is about improving engagement and support by seeking to encourage and facilitate labour market transitions and improving employment outcomes for people in the target groups through an innovative outcomes-focused competitive pilot testing model. Theme two is about increasing employment opportunities and seeking to stimulate job creation through the development of a new model of incentives and supporting people in the target groups to make the transition towards and into the labour market. Theme three will address wider barriers by seeking to challenge and change societal attitudes towards disadvantaged groups in the labour market and by helping to improve employment outcomes for older workers and people with mental health issues. Theme four is about breaking the cycle of inactivity, and it seeks to reduce future inflows to economic inactivity through preventative interventions aimed at improving health and work outcomes. It also seeks to promote positive life choices amongst young people who are at risk of disengaging with education, employment or training and of potentially becoming economically inactive in the future. Theme five relates to partnership, and strategic management seeks to create effective management structures to deliver, coordinate and monitor the strategy's implementation. Theme six is about improving information, and it seeks to develop a robust information base and effective data management systems to improve the effective delivery and monitoring of the strategy's implementation and management.

Each of the six themes will be implemented through a series of 11 projects delivered across a number of Departments. I will now briefly outline the projects.

Project A is the co-design development of an outcomes framework to inform and guide the

pilot testing process. DEL will take that project forward.

In project B, an innovative regime of competitive pilot project testing using a pre-commercial procurement-based model will be developed to allow a number of small-scale initiatives to be tested for their potential to improve outcomes for the target groups. Successful approaches will be developed further and potentially upscaled. DEL and DETI will take that project forward.

Through project C, a geographically focused control group project will be developed, delivered and evaluated to provide benchmarking data for the competitive pilot testing phase. DSD will take that project forward.

Under project D, a new model of support and incentives will be developed to encourage employers to hire and upskill people from the target groups and to promote sustainable employment. DEL will take that project forward.

12.15 pm

Under project E, new and improved measures will be put in place to promote the financial advantages of employment, raise awareness of transitional benefits protections and better communicate the linking rules to reclaim benefits to encourage labour market transitions among the target groups. This project will be taken forward by DSD.

Through project F, new measures will be put in place to address wider labour barriers faced by older workers. These will include an age-positive public awareness campaign to highlight the benefits of employing older workers and promote age-positive recruitment practices. This project will be taken forward by DEL.

Through project G, new measures will be put in place to tackle mental health stigma in the workplace. These will include a mental health promotion strategy aimed at encouraging positive mental health through work and in the workplace, as well as initiatives to support employers to foster mental health friendly workplaces. This project will be taken forward by DHSSPS.

Through project H, an expert panel will be appointed to undertake a Northern Ireland scoping study of the health and work recommendations from Dame Carol Black's report 'Working for a healthier tomorrow' and identify and explore the feasibility of options to better integrate health and work services in

Northern Ireland. Again, this project will be taken forward by DHSSPS.

Under project I, a series of regional younger people's advocates will be appointed to engage with young people who are at risk of disengaging with education, employment or training and potentially becoming economically inactive. The advocates will help to inspire and support positive life choices among the young people. This project will be taken forward by DEL.

Project J will establish a strategic forum based on a partnership comprising employers, the voluntary and community sector, central and local government, the health-care sector, relevant statutory and non-departmental public bodies and expert advisers to provide strategic oversight, leadership and guidance. This project will be taken forward by DETI.

Under project K, a series of research projects will be undertaken to identify new sources of data to inform the implementation process and accurately monitor the progress of the target groups towards and into employment, in line with the strategic objectives. This project will be taken forward by DEL and DSD.

The strategy has been developed in the context of constrained public expenditure. For that reason, a number of projects will initially be piloted to ensure that effective solutions are identified prior to the upscaling of investment. A number of other projects will initially focus on feasibility and scoping exercises to provide modelling to inform the viability, cost and benefits of implementation. Additional resources will have to be identified across Departments to ensure the successful implementation of the strategy going forward.

The development of a strategy to underpin these efforts is an unprecedented action by the Executive, and I cannot overemphasise that there is no quick-fix solution. Efforts to address the multitude of complex factors and barriers that fuel the high rate of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland must be not only innovative but incrementally progressive to ensure that sustainable results are achieved.

We have a duty to do everything we can to help and support people to meet their full potential for the benefit of the individual through the positive factors associated with sustained employment and for the benefit of Northern Ireland in the economic and social advantages of having a more buoyant and competitive labour market.

Sustainable results cannot be delivered by government alone. We must coordinate the efforts of all key sectors and stakeholders to maximise the outcomes for those most in need of our support. In doing so, I am hopeful that the strategy will provide a long-term framework for greater economic participation in Northern Ireland. The challenge now is one of delivery. Through collaboration and partnerships, we are confident that sustainable change can be achieved.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister for his statement, which outlines three target groups, three strategic objectives, six themes and 11 projects, with an interim strategic goal of an employment rate of 70% by 2020. That is an additional 18,000 jobs over the next five years. Is that the limit of the ambition of this strategy?

The strategy recognises overall job creation as critical but we cannot move people into jobs that are not there. What resources have already been assigned by the Executive to this strategy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of my Committee for his comments. Again, I stress that this is a strategy that will be reported in greater detail to both of the Committees scrutinising the two lead Departments.

I stress to the Member and the House the unprecedented nature of the undertaking that we are making. This has been a problem in Northern Ireland for the best part of 30 years. It has defied the ups and downs of the economic cycle, so we know that it is a structural problem within our economy, but it is also one that we have to address if we are to make the most of the people whom we are there to serve and the wider economy.

We also have to recognise that this is the first time there has been anything like this in any jurisdiction in these islands. This is innovative policymaking in its rawest sense. This is a great advertisement for the benefits of devolution: this would not be happening if we did not have a devolved Executive and Assembly that have the interests of the economy at heart and have the means to take forward innovative strategies.

In saying all that, we recognise that this is not going to be easy. This is an inescapable pressure that we have a fundamental duty to address. It is going to take a lot of work from a lot of the people, in government and beyond government, to achieve the targets that we are

setting. We believe that the targets, contrary to what the Chair said, are incredibly ambitious. We are seeking to get above 70% by 2020 and to get above the UK average, which is 73%, by 2030. Even achieving a 1% move will be incredibly difficult. To put it in context, achieving the target by 2020 will involve the creation of about 58,000 jobs, and potentially 115,000 new jobs will be needed to get to the 2030 target.

Of course, this strategy should not be viewed in isolation of other efforts that the Executive have taken forward to address the economy. There are many other good things that we are doing. The Member will be well aware of the record results that Invest Northern Ireland had last year. We are aware of the efforts that are being made to attract a lower level of corporation tax to Northern Ireland and the jobs potential that will flow from that. So, with all the levers being geared towards improving the economy, it is also important that, within that context, we have specific measures to address the barriers faced by those who are economically inactive. It is in that context that this strategy is most relevant.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. How do you intend to encourage voluntary participation within the target groups? With regard to 2030 being the chosen target date set for measuring the success of the strategic objectives, should there not be a secondary, interim goal to measure the effectiveness of the objectives, for instance around 2025?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments. He will be aware that we have set an interim target in relation to 2020 of having 70%. It is the clear intention that this strategy will be refreshed on several occasions as we move towards 2030, and I have no doubt that a further interim target of 2025 will be considered as part of that process. It will involve a lot of work and mobilisation of people to achieve those targets.

It is also worth stressing that the European Commission has a target of achieving 75% economic participation by 2020, so we are part of a wider movement across the European Union to improve participation. In that context, we can take some degree of comfort in that, while we see some very high performing economies, particularly in northern Europe, there are many other economies in southern and eastern Europe where the economic participation level is lower than that in Northern Ireland. This is a phenomenon that is a problem elsewhere, and we can derive lessons from that, but there are, no doubt, some very

particular circumstances in Northern Ireland that we need to be very mindful of. Again, the strategy is here to address those.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement. Does the Minister agree that the key to overcoming barriers for lone parents and others is the provision of affordable and accessible childcare? Will the Minister outline what steps he is taking to address that? Can he also advise whether the general policy has been rural proofed?

Dr Farry: Let me say two things on that. First of all, the childcare strategy is the responsibility of OFMDFM. Nonetheless, there will be read across with what we are doing. With the competitive piloting process, we will be looking for projects coming forward, and, as we seek to address issues about those with family commitments being excluded from the labour market, childcare will be a key focus. I have no doubt that projects will come forward, and the whole nature of the competitive piloting is to try as many things as possible to ensure that that is the case.

The Member also referred to the urban/rural split, and I can reassure her about that. We are not suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach across Northern Ireland or, indeed, one that derives from an urban perspective. It is a bottom-up focus. We know that that is the way that this will be most effective, so we will seek a range of projects coming forward, and I have no doubt that a good balance of those projects will come from rural communities as much as from urban areas. As the Member well knows, there are major differences in the barriers that people will face.

I apologise to Mr Buchanan because he referred to voluntary participation and how we encourage that. We accept that a large number of people who are economically inactive will not be able to engage in the labour market. That is accepted and acknowledged. However, the strategy is based on the presumption that there are people who want to engage in the world of work but that there are barriers that prevent them from doing so. As the Member outlined, childcare is a key example. We are trying to enable people to take that step into the world of work, which is not only more productive for them and their self-esteem but better for the economy. We have to address the reasons why they are not able to make that leap.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement.

In setting the strategic targets for the objectives, will he advise what work has been undertaken by both Departments to ensure that these are realistic and achievable? I will pick up on Ms McGahan's point about trying to bring carers back into work, and many already appreciate that those carers have substantial and significant duties. What work has been done in consultation with the likes of Carers NI and representative bodies to establish what support mechanisms could be put in place to facilitate the transition to the acquisition of additional skills?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions and acknowledge his role as the Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and his particular responsibilities in this regard. The targets are not only ambitious but realistic. They are within reach and are based on benchmarking against what is happening elsewhere in these islands. We know that, if we are able to address barriers that are perhaps particular to Northern Ireland, we should be in a situation in which we can be on a par with or, indeed, exceeding what is happening in other jurisdictions.

This process has been devised through significant engagement with stakeholders, including a public consultation, and carers have had an opportunity to be part of that process. That is not the end of the engagement with stakeholders, and, if anything, we will now be changing gears. As we take the projects forward, we want to engage with those who have the most direct say in how we design the process by which we can overcome the barriers. For an organisation such as Carers NI, there may be opportunities with the competitive piloting process on devising projects. There may be opportunities to influence the strategic forum that will be put in place to monitor the delivery and to speak up and identify particular challenges that are being faced.

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

This is not about compulsion. We are not trying to force people who have caring responsibilities into the world of work. We are trying to address a situation in which those with caring responsibilities who may feel trapped are empowered to engage in work. That may be part-time or full-time work, but such people can have a different balance if they choose so or if they feel that they are being impeded by artificial barriers elsewhere in our policies and practices that are holding them back.

Ms Lo: I certainly welcome the Minister's statement. As he said, economic inactivity is not only a long-term problem for Northern Ireland but a very complex societal matter.

The Minister said that a kind of bottom-up approach would be taken. Apart from being involved in the strategic forum, what will the community and voluntary sector's involvement or role be in the implementation of the strategy?

12.30 pm

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her comments. Specifically on the community and voluntary sector, I can say that, particularly at this time, there is the impression that government and the community and voluntary sector are pushing and pulling in different directions, particularly on funding. Right across the Executive, that is not the message that we want to get out. The community and voluntary sector is a critical partner in the delivery of a range of services and in providing advice to government. I see a strong role for the community and voluntary sector, particularly in the delivery of the strategy.

The Member mentioned the strategic forum, which is one immediate opportunity. A lot of the different types of interventions will have to be devised in a community setting, and that is why the process of competitive piloting is so critical. In due course, we expect to see calls for bids coming in from different actors in Northern Ireland, and there will be opportunities for the community and voluntary sector to make bids as part of that process in order to take forward, on a pilot basis, different types of interventions to see what works and what does not. Government will then seek to upscale the types of interventions that have been proven to be most successful.

Mr Campbell: The Minister said that there was no quick-fix solution and that, over the past 30 years, economic inactivity had remained very high. What will he do about ongoing monitoring, especially of those very hard-to-reach communities where economic inactivity has been even higher than the average higher-than-normal rates throughout Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: The Member is right to stress two points, the first of which is the importance of ongoing scrutiny and management. A number of the projects are very much geared towards those objectives, including ongoing data collection to assess how we are doing. He is also right to make the point that there are significant variations in levels of economic

inactivity across Northern Ireland, and that is immediately stark, even at district council or parliamentary constituency level. If you drill beneath that, the figures may well be even starker. There are pockets in Northern Ireland where, if you combine economic inactivity levels with levels of unemployment, approximately one in two adults is not part of the labour market. That is a really shocking reality that we have to address.

The achievement of the objectives that we are setting in the strategy cannot be realised simply by going through the easier-to-reach groups and ticking boxes. If we are to make a lasting difference to people and communities, we have to ensure that the range of projects and interventions runs across the board and that we have particular sensitivity to ensuring that we reach the hardest-to-reach groups, who, at the same time, want to engage in the world of work.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Any strategy to deal with the chronic unemployment that many of our communities face must be welcomed.

Theme 3 speaks about "Addressing wider barriers" and seeks to challenge and change societal attitudes to disadvantaged groups, especially older workers and people with mental health issues. That is something that people have been trying to get their head around for many years. Can the Minister say how he intends to do that and tell us what resources will be brought to this most crucial of problems?

Dr Farry: The Member is right to highlight the issue. Far too easily, we tend to write people off, whether they are older workers, people who have been made redundant in their late 40s or early 50s — we say, "Well, that's them" — or those with mental health issues. Many people, particularly those with a mental health condition or other disability, are not restricted from engaging in the world of work, particularly if the relevant support and interventions are put in place to allow that to happen. That is why the project is so important to seeking to address those barriers. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for example, has specific responsibilities, particularly for mental health and disability issues, but all of us can be champions in changing the attitudes both of the companies receiving the workers and of the workers themselves, so that they have the self-esteem and self-confidence that they are worthwhile and able to make a competitive contribution in the labour market.

The Member also makes reference to resources, which — I have to be straight with the Member — are an ongoing challenge. The Member, like others, is fully aware of the very tight public expenditure context in which we find ourselves. There has been a successful bid to the change fund, which is a central Executive pot of money managed by DSD, that will allow us to take forward the control project. I will see what resource I can find in my existing budget to allow my DEL responsibilities to be taken forward during the year, and other Ministers may approach it in a similar light. Equally, we may need to look to monitoring round bids for specific programmes to allow us to begin implementation of the strategy. I suggest that the bigger pressure point will come in the next financial year, 2016-17. We will have to ensure as we strike the budget for that year that we mainstream the funds necessary. Ultimately, investment in this regard will create a return for individuals, society and the economy as a whole. It is a worthwhile investment.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I note that the strategy is not just focused on shifting people from unemployment to economic inactivity; it is stand-alone. It is good that we are not just trying to shift people about to suit certain numbers. The Department has responsibility for project D: under any new model, what support can the Minister give to employers and small businesses to encourage them to hire and upskill the groups mentioned in the statement? What can his Department do in the future that it is not doing now?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments. First of all, he is right that this is not about shifting people from one form of labour market classification to another but looking at the employment rate. To crystallise this, a lot of people criticise the Conservative Government in the 1980s, when they had huge difficulties with unemployment, for simply shifting people off the unemployment rolls into economic inactivity, as opposed to getting them back to work. In that way, the figures were perceived to have been somewhat rigged. It is clear that, as an Executive, we want to be straight with people. This is about the employment rate; that is the way we measure the success of the strategy. Simply moving people from unemployment to economic inactivity or from one category of exclusion from the labour market to another is not addressing the problem.

In project D, which falls to my Department, there is a mix of interventions to encourage companies to take on people who are economically inactive. One potential means is

to expand the use of social clauses into new territory. In the main, however, it will be a combination of investing in skills and financial incentives, and I suggest that one will not be successful without the other. Employers will not hire someone simply on the basis of a wage incentive; they have to know that the person has the skills and capacity to do the job. But employers are maybe prone not to take a risk with someone who is economically inactive, and that is where a wage subsidy becomes relevant. Obviously, wage subsidies carry a significant cost to the public purse. We have used them, most recently to tackle youth unemployment as part of the youth employment scheme, and they have been successful in getting young people between 18 and 24 into the world of work. An extension of that type of model to those who are economically inactive can be considered as part of the delivery of project D.

Mr Ramsey: I warmly welcome the statement to the House today. I thank Minister Foster and you for responding by bringing forward the strategy. I saw, from the meeting that I attended along with key stakeholders representing Derry and Strabane, the importance of a programme of this nature.

Given the much higher levels of economic inactivity and higher levels of apathy and low morale in the north-west, will the Minister outline to the House when he expects to see the programme up and running and operating there?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments. Again, this is an Executive strategy that is a product of many hands. It has been taken forward by Minister Foster and me in partnership, and it is a classic example of how the Executive can work in a collaborative manner to produce outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland. Delivery now falls to a range of Departments, as well.

The project that the Member referred to is essentially our control project. That will be taken forward by the Department for Social Development, and it has been the subject of a successful bid to the Executive's part of the budget via the change fund. It is for Minister Storey to take forward that project in detail. I know that he is very conscious of that and, in doing that, will want to be very mindful of the areas in Northern Ireland where economic inactivity is most acute. The Member mentioned the north-west, and a delegation from the Derry area had a meeting with a

number of Ministers to make that point and to work up a detailed proposal.

There will need to be further co-design work with the relevant people to take that project forward, but it is my understanding that that initial control project should run from the autumn to March 2016. We will then see a mainstream competitive piloting process being taken forward during the 2016-17 financial year.

Mr Allister: After the Executive have been in charge for eight years, the Minister now tells us that we are going to have a holistic approach to tackling the blight of economic inactivity. Minister, you know that it is not holistic. There is nothing in the strategy to incentivise the work-shy into work, because of the block on welfare reform. Therefore, it is a limp proposal. Do you agree that one hand has been tied behind your back by the block on welfare reform, whereas we have heard reports from GB of tens of thousands of people being moved from benefits into work through welfare reform?

Dr Farry: I want to say a number of things to Mr Allister. He may wish to say that we have had devolution for eight years and that we are only now getting this. However, we have it, and this is the first time that any region in the UK has sought to undertake such an undertaking. I am not aware of any comments from Mr Allister over the intervening eight years demanding that the Executive should produce such a strategy. Indeed, Executive Ministers determined that it was a priority, and it was inserted into the Programme for Government to recognise its importance.

The second thing that I would say is that I do not think that it is helpful or accurate to use the term "work-shy" to refer to those who are economically inactive. I and my colleagues are working on the basis that there are people in our society who want to work but who are being held back by various barriers or stigmas that prevent them from doing so. This strategy is quite clearly based around empowering people to go back into work. It is not about compulsion.

This is not linked to welfare reform. If welfare reform had not been devised by the outgoing coalition Government, we would still have regarded economic inactivity as a major structural problem within Northern Ireland's economy, and the Executive would have sought to address it. Welfare reform is obviously part of the landscape out there that the strategy will need to take into account when it is being delivered, but it stands on its own merits and is not based on compulsion. It is about

empowering people to make choices for them that create better opportunities and self-esteem and produce better outcomes for our economy in terms of increased economic participation.

Ms Sugden: I thank both Ministers for their very ambitious statement. However, moving forward, I would like to see some more specific SMART objectives, particularly in relation to the projects, so that the statement is more about substance than fancy words.

I suppose that Mr McCann alluded to it earlier, but it would be irresponsible of both Departments to announce such an endeavour unless some money is available. Will the Minister give me some examples of what funding is already under his power?

12.45 pm

Dr Farry: First, as we develop the different projects — as we have outlined, there are 10 different projects that will be taken forward by different lead Departments — they will have their own delivery targets. There will be senior responsible officers in the relevant Departments who will be responsible for the delivery of each of those projects. Again, they will be scrutinised through the various existing government scrutiny techniques to ensure that delivery is taking place.

We are not running away from the difficulties that exist in relation to resources. Nonetheless, it is important that we put the strategy in place. There are elements that we can begin to implement readily without a massive injection of resources. In due course, we will need to look for resources to be made available. I have identified the monitoring rounds and, perhaps, on a more sustainable basis, the budget for the year after this one for mainstream delivery of the project. To be very clear: this is an Executive Programme for Government commitment; it is not a tick-box exercise of publishing a strategy to sit on a shelf. We are setting ourselves some very ambitious targets. Having done that, we have to ensure that we provide the resources that will enable us to meet those targets; otherwise we will leave ourselves exposed to criticism.

Today, however, let us acknowledge that we have taken the step of publishing the strategy. I stress again that this is the first time that this has occurred anywhere in these islands; this is a new departure and we are in unknown territory. There will be ups and downs in the upcoming years; this will not be easy, but we know that it is inescapable. We cannot have an

economy with an economic inactivity level of around 27%; it is simply not sustainable. We simply have to address the problem.

Committee Business

Public Services Ombudsman Bill: First Stage

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to introduce the Public Services Ombudsman Bill [NIA 47/11-16], which is a Bill to establish and make provision about the office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman; to abolish the offices of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; to provide that the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman is, by virtue of holding that office, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [NIA 46/11-16].

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill passed its Second Stage on 10 March 2015. As part of the Committee Stage, the Committee for Education has sought written responses. The Committee expects to begin oral evidence sessions involving key stakeholder organisations shortly. The Bill is reasonably short, but the provisions are complex and quite involved. In order to allow sufficient time to consider the evidence and anticipated amendments, the Committee is seeking an extension to the Bill's Committee Stage. I assure the House that the Committee will endeavour to conclude its work well in advance of the proposed extended deadline. On behalf of the Committee, I ask the House to support the extension of the Committee Stage

of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill until 13 November 2015.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [NIA 46/11-16].

Department of Education Retention and Disposal Schedule for Employee Records: Prayer of Annulment

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I wish to inform the House that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education has written to the Speaker's Office to advise that the Committee has agreed not to move the motion. I call Miss McIlveen to confirm that the motion is not moved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly requires the preservation of medical records of those exposed to a substance hazardous to health listed for disposal in the Department of Education retention and disposal schedule for employee records laid in the Assembly on 25 February 2015. — [Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education).]

Motion not moved.

Private Members' Business

Fuel Laundering

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Bell: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the continuing high levels of fuel laundering, the organised criminal activity surrounding it and the evident lack of criminal prosecutions; notes the environmental damage caused to the countryside; recognises the financial losses suffered by Her Majesty's Treasury and legitimate fuel operators and the consequential serious implications for the local economy; and calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure action is taken at every operational level to secure greater numbers of prosecutions for this serious crime.

The nefarious criminal activity of those who engage in fuel laundering has consequences for each and every person in Northern Ireland, yet, up to now, there has been a lamentable failure to adequately tackle the problem. The scale of the situation is probably best summarised by the estimate of just how much illegal fuel there is in Northern Ireland. By a conservative estimate, it stands at 12% to 13% of the total. Thirteen litres out of every 100 litres of fuel in Northern Ireland is believed to be illegal. I compare that to the other parts of the United Kingdom, where the figure stands at 2% falling into that category.

Those are shocking figures, by any stretch of the imagination, but especially so when one takes a moment to consider how much tax and duty has been avoided. One reasonable estimate of the figures suggests that £80 million is lost annually. Many others that I have spoken to in the field — and I have spoken to academics, businesses and the people who are selling fuel legitimately — tell me that the true figure is much higher than that.

On 31 January 2013, the BBC reported that no one had been subject to a custodial sentence for engaging in fuel laundering in Northern Ireland. That revelation was made following the discovery of a fuel laundering plant in County Armagh that was capable of producing 25 million litres of laundered fuel, helping those responsible to avoid £18 million in tax and duty in one single 12-month period.

So allowing for a starting salary of teachers and nurses of somewhere in the region of just over £21,000 a year, this one fuel laundering operation alone could pay for 857 new nurses in our local health service. With £18 million, we could employ somewhere in the region of an additional 817 new teachers. I am seeing what somewhere in the region of a quarter of that could do to improve literacy and numeracy in our primary sector and the GCSE sector. Can you imagine what we could do with 817 new teachers? These are the proceeds of just one

plant over the period of one year. The people responsible for this theft are inflicting real and lasting damage upon all our public services by their actions.

Their selfishness is not confined to merely taking money out of the economy and public services. The criminals responsible for these crimes have no compunctions or scruples about poisoning the environment and the people who live near their illegal operations. Fuel laundering is a dirty business. The toxic waste and other dangerous by-products of the process of fuel laundering are immense. The disposal of such dangerous substances is extremely hazardous for the people who come into contact with them. Fuel launderers put their own health at risk. That, for criminals, is a matter for themselves, but we should all be concerned that public services, our firemen and firewomen, our policemen and policewomen and our DOE staff are being put in harm's way by the fuel laundering gangs' illegal actions. Given the dangerous nature of the substances associated with fuel laundering, it defies belief that any person would choose to casually dump these products into a water supply or to leave them abandoned in places that the public use, such as forest walks and nature trails. Yet that is precisely what is happening on a day and daily basis.

On 22 February this year, the 'Sunday Independent' carried a story about the criminal activities of the republican movement in the south Armagh, Louth and Monaghan areas. The paper showed that four 1,000-litre containers of poison, the by-product of fuel laundering, were dumped in a drain that feeds directly into Lough Ross, which supplies the drinking water for the entirety of Dundalk and parts of south Armagh. Let me quote what the newspaper article said:

"However, sources in south Armagh — speaking on strict conditions of anonymity — said that they believe both the Irish and British governments are turning a 'blind eye' to the lethal trade in fuel laundering."

One source said:

"There's been stuff dumped there for years. It's the same all round here. People have complained but nothing happens."

They said that the council come and look at it and do nothing. They continued:

"It's running straight into the lough and that's the drinking water for Dundalk and Crossmaglen. The pumping station for the water to Cross[maglen] is just around the

shore of the lough from that place. They're poisoning their own people."

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that a sample that the 'Sunday Independent' took and that City Analysts of Dublin tested showed that the water was 400 times over the EU toxicity limits for waste water, never mind drinking water?

Mr Bell: I take that point, which realises starkly the level of toxicity and poisoning of people.

I hope that all of us across the House make absolutely clear that anyone with information about this criminal activity should come forward and share it with the police on either side of the border. We welcome the National Crime Agency's involvement in tackling these criminal gangs. We want everyone to make clear that people should be free to give this information without fear of retaliation to themselves, their businesses or their property. A full and unambiguous statement is all that will suffice. There has been some action from the Department of Justice on the issue, and I welcome that.

1.00 pm

However, I think that most people who have looked at the situation agree that, so far, the fight is not being won by the legitimate forces of law and order. Rather, as we sit here today, the gangsters have the upper hand. Measures designed to go after the distributors of illegal fuels are fine insofar as they go, but people want to see the problem tackled at source. Measures such as the introduction of a new fuel marker that is harder to wash out, which was announced by the Government in February last year, are welcome. However, as I have communicated directly to the British Government, I have been contacted by businesses that indicate that they have a superior marker. The best marker should be used. I have also been contacted by leading academics, sat with them and discussed it. It is not good enough to have a marker that can be washed out by anybody with basic GCSE chemistry skills. That is not good enough.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for highlighting the specific issue of the marker. Is he also concerned that the marker that the Government seem to favour is not available for roadside testing, which is one of the clear ways in which we can discover how this type of fuel is moved around Northern Ireland?

Mr Bell: I take that on board and I serve notice on the British Government, the Department of Justice and all in the Police Service of Northern Ireland who have responsibility for this that we must use the best product. If there is a superior product that will make it more difficult for the gangsters, the case for using it should be unassailable. No longer can a blind eye be turned. It is time for resolve to tackle this problem once and for all.

The longer this activity is allowed to continue, the more devastating the cumulative impact will be on our public services, which are robbed of much-needed investment, and an environment that is being poisoned by those responsible. It also speaks directly to the heart of public confidence in the apparatus of justice in this country.

We know what the situation is and we want to put these criminals out of business permanently. Many people ask us, "What are you doing about it?" It is true that we should be doing more and need to do more. However, I also ask them back, "What are you doing about it?" If you are buying illegal laundered fuel, you are depriving your children and the health service and you are poisoning your environment. It is not a cost-free option. I hope that all parties support the motion and send a clear message to the criminal gangs that their time is up.

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

Mr Attwood: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert after "economy;"

"further notes that legislation extending the role of the National Crime Agency in Northern Ireland has completed its passage at Westminster and that the National Crime Agency must now demonstrate that it will deploy its full powers and resources against any and all persons or organisations involved in fuel laundering and other organised crime;"

I welcome the motion and the fact that the legislation giving further powers to the NCA in Northern Ireland has passed all its Westminster stages. As a consequence of that, and because of this debate and the profile of all these issues, you would like to think that all the relevant authorities, North and South, will now apply their minds with greater effort to dealing with the issue of organised crime, including fuel laundering.

Through the negotiations on the NCA, the SDLP achieved Patten thresholds of accountability. In all those negotiations and since, we have said to all the relevant agencies, including the NCA, that they now have to demonstrate, decisively and unambiguously, that no individual or organisation is off-limits, protected or receives a light touch when it comes to organised crime on the island of Ireland. Having achieved Patten thresholds of accountability when it came to the NCA, we challenged it and the other authorities, because you begin to wonder what is actually going on.

The date of 5 November 2014 tells the tale. That was when the biggest diesel laundering operation ever found in these islands was discovered in south Armagh. It had been in existence for a year. HMRC removed 50 tons of waste. It was capable of producing 20 million litres of illicit fuel a year. The public purse had to clean it up. One person was arrested from that fuel laundering operation in south Armagh that had been going on for a year. On the same day, in County Monaghan, another plant, with the capacity to launder dyes out of about 20 million litres of oil every year, was closed down. In the spring of 2013, on the edge of the River Faughan, a mile or two from the River Foyle outside Derry, the single biggest illegal waste dump ever found in these islands was discovered, in respect of which three people are before the courts. It is estimated in court papers that £40 million or more of money and illegal assets were secured by those who have been alleged responsible for that offence.

The issue that arises from all that is this: when it came to the biggest illegal waste dump ever, which was found two miles outside Derry, the police did not know anything about it; the Serious Organised Crime Agency did not know anything about it; and the Organised Crime Task Force, which is chaired by the Minister, did not know anything about it. Nobody, it seems, knew anything at all about the single biggest illegal waste dump ever found in the history of these islands. We, on these Benches, do not believe that nobody in any of the relevant agencies — intelligence, policing, security, crime and the DOE — could not have known something about what was happening on the edge of the city of Derry.

I hope that all Members will support the amendment. It will demonstrate that they are unambiguously opposed to what happened outside Derry and what is happening in south Armagh. Some people, since the decision on the NCA, are still fence-sitting, to put it at its mildest, when it comes to the issue of

organised crime and the tackling of it on the island of Ireland. We have proposed our amendment to say to all the relevant authorities that, now that we have Patten thresholds of accountability when it comes to the NCA in its operations in Northern Ireland, the NCA has to demonstrate, be it about a waste dump up in Derry or a fuel plant in south Armagh, on the far side of the border or the many others that exist and have existed across Northern Ireland, that it will unambiguously face down any individual or organisation and ensure that nobody is off limits or enjoys a light touch.

In making that argument, we also have to box clever and think laterally when it comes to the issue of organised crime on the island of Ireland. Individuals, parties and organisations must face it down. Information must be shared in an increasing way with the population, so that they are aware of what has happened and, critically, give information and intelligence to the authorities in order to face down those responsible. We need to learn from the assets regime in the South, where they have integrated the work of assets in a way that sees their assets agency having seconded into it members of the guards, the revenue commissioners and the Department of Social Protection. It is a completely independent statutory organisation. A joined-up approach in the NCA and the other organisations is essential. I ask the Minister to confirm whether, even now, there is a dedicated waste subgroup of the Organised Crime Task Force in order to recognise the profile and threat of environmental crime on the island of Ireland. The last time that he spoke about this in the Assembly, that had not been established. We have to ensure that individuals who are pursued by the crime agencies, North and South, are not allowed to enter into private deals with the state, that are approved by the courts, in respect of some of their assets.

There has to be a public profile around all of this. The evidence is that 95% of the cases that go through the assets agency in the North are dealt with in a secret, private arrangement with no public awareness or publicity. All of that has to be consistent with civil liberty and due process protections. We need to recognise that, in addition to fuel laundering, illegal alcohol and the illegal importation of cigarettes need dedicated action.

At the same time, we appeal to the courts and to the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan, who has a particular interest in and commitment to dealing with waste crime, to introduce sentencing guidelines that see those who are culpable and responsible for crime, organised

crime and waste crime on the island of Ireland face the stiffest penalties rather than our ending up with what happened when I was Minister of the Environment. A case was brought before the courts, and a proceeds of crime order was made of nearly £120,000, which was significant at the time. Those responsible handed that money over through their lawyers that afternoon, basically sending the message to the DOE and to government that this was a minor business cost for which a cheque could be written over a lunch break and handed to the state. We need to ensure that sentencing guidelines are laid down that say to those who are responsible that they will face the full weight and rigour of the law, with maximum not minimum penalties being imposed.

I will conclude by making this appeal again. What happened in Derry was an indictment of all the relevant agencies. There is no way that that environmental crime should not have been known to the authorities of the state. Be it within government or outside government, be it the police or criminal assets agencies, it should have been known about. In our view, there must have been intelligence that made it known to somebody somewhere, yet it was allowed to happen. Questions linger about how it was allowed to happen. The NCA and the other agencies must now demonstrate that nobody involved in that sort of activity — no one person, no organisation — whatever their background, their past or the character of their organisation is off limits.

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

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. From the outset, I condemn the illegal activity of diesel laundering. It is a scourge and a blight on local communities and the environment in which the toxic sludge is dumped. I agree with much of what was said by the first Member who spoke. Our representatives have been standing up to the organised crime that is termed fuel laundering. The people operating the fuel plants are criminals. They have no respect for the environment, as they discard their poisonous waste throughout the countryside. The victims of their actions are their own communities and relatives —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lynch: Yes.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that his colleagues had been standing up against this: have they been giving information and

intelligence to the police and telling them where and when this activity is happening to help them to track down those responsible, many of whom will be former associates in the Provisional IRA, so that this is brought to an end for the benefit of the entire community?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Lynch: They have not got anywhere, and I will address your issue later in my speech.

The cost of the recovery and disposal of toxic sludge is high. My colleague Megan Fearon recently called for increased funding for the NIEA so that it can continue to clear diesel waste. The Environment Agency has claimed that it has run out of money to clear the waste. Money needs to be found if we are to safeguard the environment.

The republican movement was mentioned in some earlier comments, but the reality is that some of the most senior republicans and Sinn Féin elected representatives, including Conor Murphy and Mickey Brady, have been standing up to organised crime regardless of its form. Every effort should be made to ensure that support is given to policing authorities on both sides of the border to stamp out fuel laundering, given the damage that it does to communities. As someone who comes from a border community, I can say for certain that there is no support for this activity. It is imperative that there is a close working relationship between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána in investigating fuel laundering. The fact that there have been no, or very few, prosecutions is disappointing. If that continues, confidence in policing will be more difficult to achieve in those areas.

1.15 pm

Immediate investment in policing and customs is one solution to the problem. That would be financially beneficial to the economies of the North and the South. Another way is to introduce a new dye. In 2013, the South of Ireland introduced a system whereby green diesel is tracked from supplier to customer. In just over 12 months, the sale of green diesel fell by approximately 10% and the sale of road diesel increased, which brought in €150 million more to public funds. That system needs to be replicated here to increase public funds and reduce laundering and dumping. Fuel laundering is not a victimless crime. It damages the environment, impacts on revenue and wrecks people's cars. I cannot state more

strongly and loudly that what is happening is criminality. Those involved are not republicans. We all must be resolute in our condemnation of this activity. All efforts should be employed to eradicate fuel laundering.

Mr Beggs: Fuel laundering criminality has been raised as an issue a number of times in the Assembly. That is testament not only to the importance to the community that the matter be addressed but to the lack of meaningful action that has been taken to address it by the authorities on both sides of the border. The illegal activity has denied finance to the Treasury, and, as others said, that has resulted in less money being available for our hospitals and schools. Instead, fuel laundering allows criminal gangs and terrorist groups to prosper, causes damage to the environment, threatens public health through endangering the water supply and fosters a climate of criminality and fear. In addition, it undermines legitimate businessmen.

The report submitted to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) in February 2015 confirmed that fuel fraud cost the Exchequer an estimated £80 million in lost taxes in 2013 alone. However, there are other hidden costs: the cost of trying to clean the environment and of addressing the criminality associated with fuel laundering.

Mr Lynch mentioned the importance of giving more support to the NIEA. Yes, that is needed, but it is even more important that we close this down at source by giving the police and the National Crime Agency the information that will allow them to do their job. There is little point in continually having to spend millions of pounds of public money on cleaning up waste when the environment will still be damaged. We want to cut off the supply, end the damage to the environment and save millions of pounds in public funds.

We do not want criminal gangs siphoning off the money, some of which is directed towards republican terrorism. Literally millions of pounds are being made by republican gangsters, who continue to provide funds to allow IRA elements to terrorise parts of our community.

As others said, this is also frequently associated with illegal tobacco activity and the smuggling of other goods. Once someone is involved in criminality, they are happy to make money from doing anything. Therefore, those criminal gangs will be funded through a range of activities. Once they get the funds, much of which has been raised by fuel laundering, that

allows them to branch out into many other aspects of criminality and undermine our economy.

It is quite frightening that, over the past two years, 2,500 tons of associated waste — toxic waste — have been dumped in the Northern Ireland countryside. The huge sums raised, the amount of toxic waste and the damage done to the environment are unbelievable. As others have said —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I will.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much. I have it from good, reliable sources that the toxic waste that is produced is being pumped directly into the water system for Dundalk and Crossmaglen. In fact, it is poisoning people. These people are poisoning their neighbours, friends and family with this stuff because they want to cream off extortionate amounts for themselves. That is seriously not on, and I am glad that the motion is before us today. The waste is being deliberately leaked into the water system: it is a disgrace, and they should hang their heads in shame.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Beggs: I agree with what the Member said; indeed, some of those compounds are carcinogenic. People could end up getting cancer because of dangerous compounds being dumped in the environment. I accept that the whole of Dundalk has been put at risk as a result of this.

We now have conclusive proof that shocking damage has been done to the environment and to the health of local residents as a by-product of criminal activity. Just two months ago, the 'Sunday Independent' laid the blame squarely at the door of the Provisional IRA. I ask all Members to condemn such activity and supply information to the law that will allow this practice to come to an end. It is not enough for people to say that they will support the police: people must take practical action. Words and deeds are required to help bring this to an end to protect the environment and the community.

It is completely unacceptable that criminal gangs should be able to operate with relative impunity. Whatever the cause of the lack of activity to date, it is not acceptable that it should continue. No one in Northern Ireland has been jailed for fuel laundering since 2002, despite

millions of pounds being made each year, considerable damage to our environment and, now, public health being put at risk. What is going on with law enforcement? Ordinary law-abiding folk are asking what the authorities on both sides of the border are waiting for before they will take concerted action to close down this lucrative illegal industry for good and put those responsible behind bars. How can 30,000-gallon tankers move freely about the border areas largely undetected? It is important that the issue is addressed. I ask also that the courts treat the matter with the seriousness that it deserves —

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

Mr Beggs: — and that sentences reflect the dangers being inflicted on our community.

Mr Dickson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue that we are dealing with today. I support the motion and the amendment.

As others have said, fuel laundering has been a worrying, damaging and pervasive problem in Northern Ireland. Although it is primarily an excepted matter, HMRC and local authorities have been working to tackle the problem for many years. Many people see fuel laundering as a victimless crime, as has been said, but nothing could be further from the truth. Many are terrorised by criminal gangs in their own community. They are not only being terrorised, but, as Mr McGlone said, they are being poisoned by their neighbours, by people whom they may go to church with or shop with — people whom they know in their own community.

Environmental damage is inflicted by criminals who dump toxic sludge with wanton disregard in our countryside, waste that, as others have said, ends up in our rivers, lakes and water supplies, killing wildlife and foliage and contaminating land and water. Meanwhile, the bill is left to us, the ordinary tax-paying public. Between June 2012 and December 2014, the Environment Agency cleared some 340 incidences of fly-tipping of fuel-laundered waste involving nearly 3,000 tonnes of material at a cost of nearly £1 million. That money, as others have said, could be spent on schools, hospitals and other public services.

I believe that we are beginning to turn the tide of fuel laundering. Thirty-eight plants were dismantled last year, compared with 13 in 2003-04. The price of fuel has tumbled, as we know,

making this crime perhaps less profitable, but, as others have said, the proceeds of these crimes are being turned to other crimes. Furthermore, this month, HMRC introduced new red diesel dye in coordination with authorities in the Republic of Ireland. HMRC expects that action to stamp down on fuel laundering massively — we will see — putting it out of the reach of the majority of criminals. I hope that that will be the case. I also expect the National Crime Agency's full resources and time, much of which we were deprived of for over a year, to now help with tackling this form of organised crime. That is why I will gladly support the amendment proposed by the SDLP today.

As I mentioned, tax evasion is mostly an excepted matter and a UK-wide matter. Nonetheless, the problem cannot be dealt with on only one side of the border. It requires a holistic approach across the entire island, and, therefore, I am encouraged by the unprecedented levels of cooperation between the PSNI and the gardaí. Nevertheless, we need greater political commitment here to truly tackle this on the ground and in local communities with the assistance of the Policing Board and the policing and community safety partnerships.

Others have referred to who some of the criminal gangs may be. I read with interest the comments of the Irish EU Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan, in March, in which he asserted:

"It is clear the criminal gangs involved in fuel rackets have breakaway paramilitaries among their members. Some of these are close to the political process and some of their windfall gains may be making their way into the political process."

I find that deeply troubling, and, if that is the case for any of the participants, they should immediately cease such activities and work with the police to end this debased and highly illegal industry. After being questioned on whether his comments related to Sinn Féin, the EU Agriculture Commissioner said:

"I think they should tell us what they know."

I agree: they should tell us what they know.

Tackling fuel laundering requires a coordinated, cross-border and efficient approach. I know that the Minister will tell us about how he and his colleague across the border, together with HMRC, the NCA, the PSNI and the Garda Síochána, have been working to achieve that,

but it requires all of us in the House to give our utmost political backing to dealing with this blight so that we can remove it from society, protect our environment, protect people's health and vehicles and ensure that the resources of which our state is being deprived are put where they need to be — in our hospitals and schools.

Lord Morrow: Needless to say, I, too, support the motion. We have debated the issue on a number of occasions in the House, and it is a tragedy that we still have to debate it. We have to reflect and say that not much has happened since we last debated the issue.

I was interested to hear what Mr Lynch had to say about how his party is very concerned about this. They are concerned about the impact that this has on the environment. They are concerned, but they have to go a bit further than simply being concerned. Concern will not change this. As others have said, they have a responsibility to come forward and disclose what information they have to the appropriate authorities. While they do not do that, the finger will be continually pointed at them. You could and should and need to do more to tackle the issue.

I welcome the fact that Mr Attwood mentioned the NCA. I know that the SDLP was slow in coming to this position, but better slow than never. Sinn Féin has still to come to a position where it will give unqualified support to the NCA in tackling criminality. It is time that they came up to speed.

Some startling figures have been made available to us. There is some stuff that we are already aware of, and it makes startling reading. It is worth repeating. For instance, NIEA officials have dealt with some 345 incidents of laundered waste being dumped since June 2012. Ninety per cent of those incidents happen to be in the Newry and Armagh area. That tells you something. We are all very aware that that area is dubbed "the no-go area". Is it still that way? Do the security forces still operate in that area? Do other agencies operate in it or is it a case of, "No, we do not go there."?

It is significant and very concerning that there have been no prosecutions in relation to this sort of activity. We have to ask ourselves the question: why is that the case? Why is it that there are no prosecutions? Let no one tell me that the information is just not there. It seems to be, or at least the perception is abroad, that where fuel laundering plants are got, they are dismantled and that seems to be the end of the story, but that is not instilling the necessary

confidence in the law-abiding community. We need to see those doing it being brought before the courts. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about what joined-up thinking and action is going on between the Department of Justice and the Department of the Environment.

1.30 pm

This activity is ruining our environment and destroying many of our watercourses, rivers, fish life and everything else that is associated with that. It is time that action was taken. How many more debates do we need to have in the Chamber before we see some positive direct action taken against the perpetrators? Since we know where the areas of concern are and since we know that 90% of the area affected is in Newry and Armagh, why are resources not being concentrated in those areas to bring the activity to an end? I hope, when the Minister responds to the debate today, he will bring some assurances that the Department of Justice — I know that it is not an entirely devolved matter, but that makes it all the more important — will start a task force and have some joined-up thinking to ensure that this activity is brought to an end swiftly.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the comments of Seán Lynch; he outlined very well the Sinn Féin position. Fuel laundering is a criminal offence, and those who involve themselves in it, be it distribution or profiting from the business, should be arrested and face trial for that criminality. Any member of the public with any information should come forward and give it to the PSNI. I do not think that it can be put any more clearly than that. Indeed, I appeal to people who sometimes find themselves in the trap of thinking that it is legitimate or OK to use laundered fuel to desist because if people did not use it, the demand would not be created. That echoes the comments of our party colleagues in the Oireachtas — Gerry Adams, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Kathryn Reilly — who spoke recently in similar debates about closer cooperation to ensure that this type of activity is stamped out.

Other people this afternoon spoke about the other side of the criminal activity, and that is the damage to the environment. We have seen that in toxic dumps. Indeed, Mr Attwood spoke about the dump in Derry. I was the first person to call for a public inquiry into that dump because there are many unanswered questions. People have suspicions, and he may be right that there may be people in

authority who have turned a blind eye or have been silenced in some way. As a public representative, I, certainly, have nothing to fear from a public inquiry. I say, bring it on.

I listened to Jonathan Bell, and I find common cause with most of what he said, but the lawyers in the room would agree that, if you were presenting any case, you would not want to start with saying that these are unnamed, anonymous sources from the 'Sunday Independent'. I think that they would advise you never to present a case in that way. It is easy for people to make allegations, and it is easy to hide behind reliable sources, unnamed sources or people who do not want to go public. There are people who are vested with protecting the environment and our waterways. Uisce Éireann — Irish Water — is tasked with looking after the waterways in the Twenty-six Counties. It carried out an investigation into, let me say it, the allegations put forward by the 'Sunday Independent', and it said that it tested the water on a daily basis and found no evidence. So, I am a bit surprised that someone like Stewart Dickson, who is a wee bit more measured when it comes to these types of things, also allowed himself to fall into the 'Sunday Independent' trap.

In these situations, if people have genuine concerns about water — and Mr Beggs fell into the trap of relying on the 'Sunday Independent' — Danny Kennedy is the Minister for Regional Development, and one of the aspects of his portfolio is the Water Service. He should have asked the Water Service to —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I will not give way. You had plenty of time.

He should have asked the Water Service to conduct an investigation into whether the water in Crossmaglen and all those other places he named was poisoned. I see nowhere in the public record — and I may be wrong — where the Water Service carried out an investigation and came and told us all, "Lo and behold, our waterways are poisoned". I did not see any of that.

On 11 February, the Organised Crime Task Force was in front of the Committee —

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member is referring the issue to the Minister for Regional Development when, in fact, the Minister of Agriculture is actually responsible for rivers and waterways, and that

water that is flowing into the reservoir that is being contested is his own Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. That is not a point of order. You could have addressed that as an intervention.

Mr McCartney: I have often heard of the expression to split hairs, but that is splitting hairs. The Minister is responsible for the Water Service.

The Organised Crime Task Force was in front of the Committee and there was much discussion around the lack of convictions; and there are many, many issues that we have to explore in relation to that. It was interesting to hear that only two people in their presentations this afternoon put forward the fact that this is an excepted matter. This has been long running, with the much-vaunted NCA involved for a long number of years, so the record for turning this —

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

Mr McCartney: Thank you.

Mr Craig: Like others in the Chamber, I feel a sense of déjà vu that we are talking about fuel laundering yet again. It reminds me that it is an issue that has been around for a long time. In fact, the fuel laundering that is going on around the border areas very much reminds me of what used to happen in the 17th and 18th centuries in the south of England around the smuggling of brandy and other illicit liquor. It is endemic in the culture of those areas. We have to be honest with ourselves: it has been rooted in the Troubles, where the IRA and other illegal organisations used it as something to fund and fuel — pardon the pun — their organisations throughout the Troubles, and that has continued. The real crime today is that we find that it is fuelling organised crime, and there are definitely organised criminals who are taking advantage of the situation in those border areas. It is very lucrative for them. We have seen the figures. Millions of pounds are being lost in revenue every single year.

The level of detail they go into in those fuel laundering plants is absolutely frightening. Not only are they set up as mini factories producing the illegal fuel, but escape routes are planned, there are tunnels and there are even lookouts in the surrounding area to give forewarning of anybody coming to raid the facilities.

We are looking at something that is done on an industrial scale. If it is done on that scale, that leads to a lot of questions. There are certainly a lot of questions in my mind. How come the Government cannot get a grip of this issue? Is there a lack of focus on it?

In fairness to the Minister of Justice, it is not only his Department that has responsibility for this; HMRC has a huge responsibility for it. We heard how it has upped the ante on this in the past couple of years and has successfully closed down more plants. However, there needs to be greater focus on what is going on. This is organised crime at its worst. Where is the money going? Who is lining their pockets out of this? What are they doing with it? They are building up criminal empires.

That leads on to another issue. Others in the House sat on their hands on the NCA. I welcome that they have now got on board, because we need to get to grips with the criminals who are profiteering from this fuel laundering, the illegal dumping and all the other illegal matters occurring around our border in Northern Ireland. Those people need to be closed down, and the way that that will be done effectively is by grabbing their assets. Once you clean up and remove the profits that those criminals are making, you will have killed off the organisation behind them. That is what we need to have in operation today, and, thankfully, it is now in operation. I welcome that.

The other thought that occurred to me is that we are continually seeing these plants being set up. I think that there are two factors in that. There is a fear factor around the border, because organised criminal gangs are carrying this out. I also believe that those who own properties around the border are afraid to pass information on to the police. That cycle of fear needs to be broken. Others with more influence in those border areas need to make it very clear to people on the ground that they should pass information about where this is going on to local police through whatever means necessary and on to HMRC. If they do not, that cycle will continue.

There is also the thought and fear in my mind that some of those who rent these properties are profiteering. That is for the police and HMRC to investigate. I find the low level of arrests on this issue very disappointing.

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

Mr Craig: I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine a chuir an rún seo os ár gcomhair. Thanks very much to those who brought the motion. It is a very topical and important issue that affects many people's lives in the literal sense of the word — the very literal sense of the word.

I support the SDLP amendment, which aims to ensure that the National Crime Agency deploys its full powers and resources against any and all persons and organisations involved in fuel laundering. We are talking about a massive criminal empire with tentacles that, in some instances, have been there for 30 or 40 years. It is important that resources are deployed to tackle the difficulties that fuel laundering is creating for many people — the poison, the dumping and the cost to the public purse. Indeed, it is also important to tackle the assets that have been accrued over many years by those criminals, sometimes fronting as patriots.

The SDLP has been at the forefront of NCA negotiations. We secured accountability on the National Crime Agency. In early February, we voted for the NCA to have full powers in Northern Ireland. That vote was possible after lengthy negotiations by our party. We have ensured that the NCA will work here in the North. The Home Secretary has made a lot of commitments on the NCA. The SDLP notes those commitments and intends to ensure that they are honoured. If the public are to accept and trust the NCA, it needs to prove that no one person or organisation is off limits or protected when it comes to criminal assets. They must be pursued and prosecuted. We are calling for a demonstration that that is the case.

1.45 pm

Turning to the motion, I am very concerned about the high levels of organised crime across this island. In 2013-14, 38 fuel laundering plants were closed. Although that was an increase on the previous year, we should be very wary, as the oil and fuel laundering plants have become larger and more sophisticated. The process of fuel laundering has definitely become more industrialised. There is a very unusual feature about raids made on these premises. Have you noticed the number of times that there does not seem to be anybody there? Nobody seems to be about. Computers, oddly or quirkily enough, have either been scrubbed or have disappeared just before the raid is made.

On illegal waste dumping, the increased cost of the legitimate disposal of wastage caused a black market development. Those who are involved in this show no concern for the environmental damage done: absolutely none. Their actions include pumping directly into the Fane and Lough Ross water systems for Dundalk and Crossmaglen; dumping in disused quarries and bogs, all of which leak into the shallow drumlin water table; and disposal along roads via tubes hooked up to containers in the backs of vans. More worryingly for Irish agriculture, in some cases — thank God most of our farmers and members of the farming community are highly responsible — it is being mixed with slurry and spread over fields. Apparently, there was a situation last month in the Knockbridge area, south-west of Dundalk, where it stank for over a week. The fumes were smelt as far away as Dundalk after that happened. That is the sort of activity that is ongoing to fuel the build-up of assets of those criminals and fuel their property empires at extreme cost to our environment and, worse again, to our animals and, more importantly, human beings.

Organised crime is not confined by geographical boundaries. Cross-border crime presents serious threats to the economic prosperity of our country and risks to the population. The SDLP believes that more needs to be done to tackle cross-border crime and criminal organisations. We need to disrupt and dismantle these organised crime groups, which are engaged in or are seeking to engage in fuel laundering and the smuggling of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and counterfeit goods as they add to their existing asset bases and empires.

Only last month, there was a debate on cross-border crime in the House of Commons.

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

Mr McGlone: During the debate, my colleague Mark Durkan said:

"There is a sense that a blind eye is being turned, and that there is some sort of set-aside deal going on".

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

Mr Allister: It is no coincidence that south Armagh is synonymous with the scourge of fuel laundering: no coincidence whatsoever. There are two attendant fantasies that go with it. One is that the authorities are doing all they can and

the other is that republicans are not involved. South Armagh used to be called "bandit country", and it seems to me that it could now be properly called "blind-eye country" because it is inconceivable that, with the industrial scale of fuel smuggling and laundering that has been going on in south Armagh, it is beyond the authorities to bring to justice those who have been perpetrating this criminality for years.

My goodness: if a farmer, in his single farm payment claim, gets something wrong about a field boundary, the satellites will catch him out, but you can run riot with fuel laundering in south Armagh, and no one sees, no one hears and no one is brought to justice. As Mr McGlone pointed out, how many times have we heard of seizures and of nobody being there?

I suspect very much that, sadly, this is part of the pernicious arrangement of the peace process: one will not look too hard, one will not look too deeply and one will let those who need to be undisturbed be undisturbed.

Then, today, we have the crossed-finger condemnation of Sinn Féin about the matter. They tell us that republicans are not involved. That brings back echoes of 2006, when one Slab Murphy was arrested. In March 2006, a fleet of tankers was seized from his premises. Mr Gerry Adams, furious, came onto the media to say that Mr Murphy was not a criminal and that he was a good republican. Yet, in October 2008, the same Slab Murphy and his brothers paid over in settlement over £1 million for the very criminality that was involved. As far as Sinn Féin was concerned, it was a set-up. He was not involved. He was an innocent, good republican. Whereas anyone with a titter of wit knows that he is a godfather, not just of this but of so much more that republicanism has done in south Armagh. The weasel words that we have again from Sinn Féin do not wash.

Mr Attwood was absolutely right: we need stern, severe sentencing guidelines. Before we get sentencing guidelines, we need to get people in the dock, and the real problem here is the blind-eye approach. What the Minister needs to do, as Minister of Justice, is to have a relentless pursuit with those prosecuting authorities to find out why we have this apparent blind-eye approach, why it is that no one is ever arrested and why it is that no one is ever charged. If the Minister does anything, that is where he should start. It is a scandal, and the more it goes on, the more one is confirmed in the view that I suggested that it is all part of the pernicious arrangement that attends to the peace process. Sadly, I fear that that is exactly what it is.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): As Question Time must begin at 2.00 pm, I propose to suspend the debate and call the Minister after Question Time. The sitting is, by leave, suspended until 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.53 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that questions 2 and 11 have been withdrawn. Mr Chris Hazzard is not in his place, so I call Lord Morrow.

Civil Service: Voluntary Exit Scheme

3. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Northern Ireland Civil Service voluntary exit scheme. (AQO 7948/11-15)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on how many expressions of interest in the Northern Ireland Civil Service voluntary exit scheme have been received. (AQO 7952/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 7 together, as both relate to the Northern Ireland Civil Service voluntary exit scheme.

I will deal first with Lord Morrow's request for an update. The scheme closed for applications at 5.00 pm on Friday 27 March 2015. My officials are now working closely with Departments to manage the selection process, in line with the published criteria. All staff who applied will receive notification of the outcome. Staff who receive a notification with a specific exit date, and who have received a quote from Civil Service pensions staff, should use the information to decide whether they wish to accept the offer. All staff selected to leave will be given three months' notice. We anticipate that those selected to leave under the scheme will do so in tranches between 30 September 2015 and 31 March 2016, subject to the requisite resources being made available. An important part of the process will be maintaining business continuity, so a range of measures is being put in place, including redeployment arrangements to move staff into essential posts left vacant by staff who leave via the scheme.

I can confirm that, as at 27 March 2015 — the closing date — 7,285 applications to be considered for selection had been received. I

emphasise that we will not know the number of staff exiting via the scheme until selection has taken place and those selected confirm whether they wish to accept the offer.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive and detailed reply. It is quite startling that over 7,000 have already applied to the scheme. Will he outline what impact not progressing welfare reform will have on the overall scheme and does he feel that that will have a detrimental impact on those who want to avail themselves of it?

Mr Hamilton: I agree with the noble lord about the 7,285 applications. Of course, 7,285 people will not be exiting the Civil Service. We will not require anywhere near that number. I can recall, however, being quizzed repeatedly — some might say badgered — by a presenter in a television studio the day before the scheme launched about what would happen if we did not get to the 2,400 that we estimated were necessary. We have far surpassed that figure, as my answer revealed.

The Member is right to highlight his concerns: they are shared by me, right across the Executive and, indeed, by the Senior Civil Service. The Member and the House will recall that, as part of the Stormont House Agreement, there was a public-sector transformation fund giving us access to some £700 million in borrowing — £200 million in each of the first three years and £100 million in the final year — to help fund the voluntary exit scheme for not just the Civil Service, which is what we are talking about here, but the entire public sector. If we do not have access to that money, which is a possibility if we do not proceed with welfare reform and other aspects of the Stormont House Agreement, it will mean more than not having access to the £200 million that is badly needed to fund the exit scheme. It will mean that the savings that would be yielded through our pay bill, which are around £25 million for the Civil Service alone in the current financial year and probably another £25 million for the broader public sector, could be in jeopardy. It is, therefore, imperative that we move forward with welfare reform and, indeed, all aspects of the Stormont House Agreement in and of themselves, but particularly because of the timeliness of the scheme, not least because, in the case of the Minister of Education, teachers who are leaving need to get their notice very soon. If they get that notice, they can exit the public service well in advance of the start of the new school year.

Mr Beggs: As the Minister said, borrowing to enable the voluntary redundancy scheme to go ahead was based on welfare reform and the mitigation that was put together with that in the agreement around Christmas time. If welfare reform does not proceed, will the Minister advise what will happen to those 7,200-odd individuals who have thought carefully about their future and applied for life-changing early retirement and to the finances of the Northern Ireland Budget?

Mr Hamilton: The Member has asked a very good question. Of course, there will many among the 7,285 who, on the basis of the figure that they get and their personal circumstances, will decide that they do not want to proceed. We expect an attrition rate and expect that around one third of those people will say that they do not want to proceed to the next stage. Therefore, not all of those 7,285 people will be affected or disappointed. Without the other issues that are swirling around, there were always going to be those who would not be able to exit because of affordability issues or the pressures that leaving would put on the broader public service.

The Member is right to highlight that everybody who has gone to at least this stage will have given careful consideration to it. They will have looked at it in and of their own circumstances. They have had access to an online calculator that shows their entitlement. So, having put their application forward, most people know, more or less, what they are entitled to and have made an informed decision to put their names forward.

The Member is right to highlight the concerns that I have highlighted to Lord Morrow. Access to that £200 million was absolutely critical in the Stormont House Agreement, as we do not have the ability to access finance from departmental budgets. Ordinarily, that is how schemes of that nature would be funded. We are unable to do that because of the innumerable pressures on our departmental budgets, so making a call on those budgets to fund it is not an option. That is why we agreed with the Government to access the £200 million through our borrowing powers. If that is not available, it will be, like many things, a matter for an incoming Westminster Government to consider what they will do in the circumstances.

As I have pointed out in the House and elsewhere before, not having that £200 million, not having the £100 million of pay bill savings that would accrue this year and not having the sizeable pay bill savings that would accrue in

subsequent years would put extreme pressure on our Budget.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline the protections that are in place to maintain front-line services in the context of the voluntary exit scheme?

Mr Hamilton: It is incredibly important that, whilst there is some dispute in some corners of the House about how we are financing the exit scheme, I do not think that there is any dispute from any quarter that it is something that we should be doing. In fact, some of us might argue that we should have done it a little bit earlier. We are where we are, and I hope that we can proceed from our current position if progress is made elsewhere.

In reducing the size of our public sector at a time when our private sector is growing, it is critical that there is continuity of service in our public service delivery. The best intervention that we can make as a Civil Service to ensure that there is continuity of service and minimised disruption to service delivery is the timely and planned use of redeployment. Within the scope of the scheme, Departments can use some limited flexibility to ensure that the timing of the release of staff does not have an impact on business continuity and service delivery. However, it will require us to have well-thought-out and well-planned redeployment of staff in some places so that, wherever services are being delivered in Northern Ireland and whatever services they are, they still produce the outcomes that our citizens require.

Mr Dallat: The voluntary exit scheme might be exciting for those who wish to leave the Civil Service, but for the 20,000 young people who might traditionally have expected to get on the first rung of the jobs ladder over the next few years, it is not so funny. Has the Treasury expressed any interest in decentralising any of the tens of thousands of jobs in Britain, which might be sent here?

Mr Hamilton: I do not think that anybody finds any aspect of the voluntary exit scheme a laughing matter. I take it as a very serious and necessary thing to be doing. It is an onerous matter, and we must deal with it accordingly and in an appropriate manner.

The Member will know that, unfortunately, the DVLA issue did not work out that well for his constituency, but there are other areas of

employment where people who are based in Northern Ireland are providing public services to people who live in other parts of the United Kingdom. One particular area is the Social Security Agency, which has people based in Belfast and in Londonderry and the north-west — drawing, I am sure, people from the Member's constituency — who are doing work for that agency in assessing and delivering benefits for people in the south-east of England. It is incredibly important that that continues, but one threat to that would be if Northern Ireland were to diverge further away from the rest of the United Kingdom in welfare. I know that it has been mentioned in discussions between DSD and DWP in the past that failure to implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland and, therefore, having a different system here is one of the factors that would be considered by DWP in keeping some 1,600 jobs in both locations here in Northern Ireland. That is about keeping those jobs that we already have, never mind attracting more from England or other parts of the United Kingdom to Northern Ireland. That is something that we are very good at and very capable of.

Mr Allister: As a complement to the exit scheme, if it goes ahead, has the Minister a Civil Service recruitment freeze in place and, if so, for how long? In deciding whether to grant an application to the exit scheme, what account will be taken of the impact that that would have on the balance of the community background in the Civil Service?

Mr Hamilton: There were two supplementary questions there. There is a recruitment freeze in place; in fact, it was one of the first strategic personnel interventions that we enacted, long before the launch of the voluntary exit scheme. It is important that we introduce a range of measures to ensure the achievement of the Stormont Castle Agreement target of a reduction of 20,000 in our public sector. It has been misreported — I think, deliberately — by some people that 20,000 jobs will go, but it is hoped that 20,000 posts will go over a period of four years. Some of those posts will go because of a recruitment freeze; in fact, freezing recruitment in the Civil Service has already reduced the number of posts by around 1,000, because those vacancies are not going to be filled in future.

On the issue of community background, an equality screening assessment of the scheme was done beforehand, and it was actually screened out. It was screened out because, with a few exceptions for some very senior grades at permanent secretary level, the scheme was open to everybody in the Civil

Service to apply for, given its nature as a voluntary exit scheme. We have to be clear and methodical in how we choose people exiting on the basis of clear, set criteria that have, quite frankly, nothing to do with somebody's religion. I appreciate that there are issues at both ends of the scale — in the Senior Civil Service and at the lower end — in different ways with underrepresentation of certain genders and religious backgrounds, but using a voluntary exit scheme is not the way to deal with that particular problem. There are other measures that we have to introduce to ensure that nobody is dissuaded from applying for posts in the Civil Service in future because of their religious background, gender or anything else.

Subcontractors: Payments

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures can be taken to ensure payments to subcontractors are made in accordance with his Department's guidelines. (AQO 7949/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: It is important that the benefits of prompt payment are shared throughout the supply chain, and this is reflected in the guidelines that my Department has set. As the problem has been felt most acutely in the construction industry, centres of procurement expertise are required to monitor the implementation of fair payment requirements in government construction contracts. The information is reported quarterly to CPD and discussed at each meeting of the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

The monitoring regime involves dip sampling to ensure that prompt payment is happening in practice. In 2014, a sample of 15% of payments was validated, with only one irregularity found. That has since been resolved by the relevant centre of procurement expertise. For supplies and services contracts, CPD has implemented standard terms and conditions requiring subcontractors to be paid within 30 days. When issues of non-compliance are highlighted to CPD in projects that it manages, they are pursued with the contractor so as to facilitate early resolution.

Mr Poots: Can the Minister give us an assurance that, where companies are highlighted that are not adhering to the principles that he has outlined, thorough investigation will take place to identify the veracity of the complaints and, if they are found

to be right, actions taken thereon? Many small companies fear raising the issue because they believe that they will lose out on contracts. It is incumbent on us to defend the subcontractors and ensure that they are paid promptly.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The measures that I and, more so, my predecessor have introduced in that regard have come as a result of concerns expressed to us by small businesses — contractors in supply chains, particularly in the construction sector. Measures have been introduced over the last number of years to deal with the issue, which has been highlighted, I suppose, in the very high-profile collapse of some local construction firms. In January 2013, we introduced the ability to have project bank accounts for projects of over £1 million with a significant amount of subcontracting going on. Ten pilots have been chosen for that, and feedback so far has been positive. Indeed, we may well look to extend it away from construction and into supply contracts too.

Perhaps more relevant to the Member's question is that a procurement guidance notice was issued in January 2012. It has now been backed up by regulations introduced this year that monitor the performance of main contractors in a range of ways, including on their payment to subcontractors, and a certificate of unsatisfactory performance can, in appropriate circumstances, be issued. Indeed, main contractors who are found to be failing to pass on the prompt payment that government is doing — government is very good at paying; some 91% of our invoices in DFP are paid within 10 days — can be struck off public contracts for 12 months. Now, there has been no single case of that so far, but, as I revealed in the first answer to the question, one of the samples taken last year showed that there were some issues. That was dealt with between my Department and that main contractor.

My Department relies on companies coming forward. I accept the point that the Member makes about the fear that some people have, but, if subcontractors are even prepared to go through Members or other elected representatives to bring that to my attention, I assure the Member and the House that those issues will be dealt with with the appropriate seriousness.

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

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister advise the House whether there are any protections or measures in place to ensure that

local businesses can avail themselves of all subcontracting opportunities?

Mr Hamilton: There are no particular measures or statutory provisions in place to ensure that. What is found in most cases is that those main contractors, even if they are not locally based, bring on a large number of locally based subcontractors, particularly in construction, to do their work and assist them in the provision of whatever capital project it may be. Again, like our prompt payment, we have a good record of letting contracts of all types, whether construction or supplies contracts, to suppliers in Northern Ireland. We have a record that sometimes does not get through. Sometimes you would think, even listening to debates in the House, that local suppliers are not getting to deliver government contracts, but that is not the case. I think that the latest figures show that over 70% of contracts go to local firms. Indeed, about two thirds go to local SMEs, so we have a good record in Northern Ireland not just on prompt payment to contractors but on getting local suppliers. We do that without having to manipulate. As the Member will be aware, procurement is highly governed by the European Union and you have to be very careful about what you do at local level so that you do not breach European law. Within the laws that are there, we have a very good record in this part of the world of ensuring that local suppliers get work.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. In relation to small construction companies accessing government contracts, especially small to medium-sized road contracts, I am hearing that there is a catch-22 situation in that, in some cases, if you are not already on the list, you cannot be considered for the list. Is the Minister aware of this situation, and, if so, is there anything that can be done about it?

Mr Hamilton: I was just checking the precise figure that I gave to Mr Maskey in my previous response. In 2013-14, 75% of government contracts were awarded to Northern Ireland firms. That £2.6 billion, more or less, is being spent every year in Northern Ireland on centrally-let government public contracts, of which 75% are going to Northern Ireland firms. I am sure that we would all like to see that being higher, but it is a record that compares favourably with other jurisdictions in the British Isles.

I have not been made aware of the particular issue that the Member raises. I suppose that, in some ways, I would not expect to be; road contracts are obviously taken forward as the responsibility of the Minister for Regional Development. Roads Service — Transport NI, as it is now called — has a centre of procurement expertise of its own. I would expect that perhaps Minister Kennedy would have a better appreciation of that problem. I encourage the Member to draw any concerns he has from his locality to the attention of the Minister for Regional Development or, if not, I am happy to pass them on to Minister Kennedy.

Rates: Non-domestic Revaluation

5. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the non-domestic rates revaluation. (AQO 7950/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Executive agreed back in 2012 to undertake a revaluation in response to calls from the business sector. My assessment is that it was the right thing to do and has helped to rebalance the rating system. We could not have continued to ask commercial ratepayers to pay business rates that are shared out on the basis of 2001 rental levels given the fundamental changes that have taken place in the way in which people live, work, shop and go about their business.

This exercise in redistribution, however, means that there are winners and losers. I cannot go into all the effects of the revaluation now, but take, for example, the retail sector: the outcome is that there are far more winners than losers. Many high streets and town centres have benefited, but there are others, such as modern convenience stores and large edge-of-town or out-of-town food stores that now pay a lot more than they did before. This reflects their success in the real world and mirrors the relative decline of many of our traditional shopping areas.

At the end of the day, it is not LPS or DFP that decides who should pay more or who should pay less; the property market has already done that. The problem for some stems from the gap between this revaluation and the last one. It could be argued that those now paying more should have been paying it well before now.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the revaluation does not raise more money from the system for the Assembly. The regional rate has actually gone down a little to reflect a modest overall increase in values and thereby fulfil the Executive's commitment to ensure that this revaluation is revenue-neutral in real terms.

Mr Rogers: You talk about winners and losers, but I have not found very many winners in this situation in towns like Kilkeel, Newcastle and Castlewellan in South Down. What can the Department do to keep shutters going up when the rates for businesses, like pound shops, have gone from £6,200 to £16,200? How can you convince businesses like that and many others? What can the Department do to keep them open?

Mr Hamilton: It is not my job to keep businesses open in that sense. It is not my job to step in and do that. What we have done through the rating system over the last number of years is to be incredibly generous through the support that we have given in the small business rate relief scheme, for example, which has ensured that over half of business properties in Northern Ireland get at least 20% off their rates. We continue to keep in place industrial derating, which offers over £60 million worth of support to many of our bigger businesses in Northern Ireland.

A revaluation will always produce winners and losers. The important point for the Member and the House to note is that the Assembly does not raise any more money through the regional rate as a result of the revaluation; it merely redistributes money from one section of ratepayers to another to reflect where the market has gone and the changes in circumstances that have affected that. In those circumstances, there will always be some winners and some losers. There will be some winners in the Member's constituency, and there will be some losers in his constituency, just as there are in every constituency across Northern Ireland.

It is significant, though, to note that the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association called for the revaluation to go ahead. When the revaluation results were published, its chief executive, Glyn Roberts, said:

"We welcome the outcome of the rates revaluation and are particularly pleased that [it] has addressed the unfair imbalance of large out of town multiple retailers paying less rates per square foot than many of our members in town centres. This is a win-win for our independent retailers and town centres".

I accept that that is not the case for every town centre and retailer, but it has tried to redistribute more fairly where the rates burden should lie,

reflecting the changes over the preceding 13 years.

Mr Middleton: What plans does the Minister have for reviewing business rates in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: In his recent Budget statement, the Chancellor announced that he was going to review business rates in England, and some have called on me to review them. In fact, a Member who was in the Chamber not that long ago called on me in his local press to review the business rating system in Northern Ireland. Two years ago during a Question Time in the House, in response to a Member's question, I announced that it was my intention to review business rates in Northern Ireland and to do so after the revaluation had bedded in. That process will start in the next number of weeks. In fact, we will have an innovation lab that will look at this issue and discuss it with retailers and other businesses.

I go into that review with an open view about what the outcome should be. A lot of people express concern about the rating system. There are some who do not like that it is based on property values and others who put forward suggestions on how it might be replaced. I am open to looking at all those possibilities. I am also open to looking at the reliefs and allowances that we have in place. They have been there to try to support business and to keep it in place and operating through the downturn. Let us not forget that the small business rate relief scheme was an intervention to help businesses through a very difficult recession. Many of our retail businesses still struggle not because of the recession, per se — in some cases it is because of its effect — but because of other lifestyle changes, changes in our town centres and the effect of large out-of-town retailers. I want to look at all those and other issues to make sure that, moving forward, we have a suitable system to locally tax our businesses.

Ms Sugden: I will see whether I can talk fast to counteract the Minister's ad-libbing. The revaluation is a bit of a shambles, and I have requested a meeting with the Minister to discuss it. I concur with Mr Rogers: there are certainly very few winners in my constituency. I do not expect the Minister to have specific figures to hand, but does he have any idea for how many business properties the net annual value has risen and made them ineligible for the various thresholds of the rate relief schemes?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have those specific figures in front of me, but I am happy to furnish the Member with them, if she will forgive me for ad-libbing, I suppose. In her constituency, East Londonderry, you can take Coleraine as an example; it is the principal or premier borough — I do not know how they would describe it. As a result of the revaluation the average increase in rates was 7%. Let us take high streets in the constituency. If you look at Church Street in Coleraine, you will find that its valuation fell by 40%. This is the average in the area, and I appreciate that there will be differences. In The Diamond, rates went down by 45%. In Kingsgate Street in Coleraine, they went down by 30%. The rates of the Main Street in Garvagh went down as well.

I could go into some secondary streets as well. Bridge Street in Coleraine went down by 20%. New Row in Coleraine went down by 10%. Contrast that with some of the retail parks, which are up by 20% from their previous valuation. I suggest that, if that is the average in those areas, there are plenty of winners in Coleraine and right across the East Londonderry constituency. I accept that not everybody is a winner, but, in a revaluation, not everybody is going to be a winner. However, a significant number of business properties in the Coleraine area, east Londonderry more broadly and, indeed, right across Northern Ireland are reflecting where the market is and are paying lower rates bills today than they were in the past.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Rates Revaluation: Winners and Losers

T1. **Mr Ó Muilleoir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in a move back to the contentious issue of rates, but perhaps from a different angle, and given that the Minister said that it is not his job to keep business open, whether he agrees that, for the losers — and there are losers in the rates revaluation — our message should be that we will do more to support them in the time ahead, that we do not want to see them disinvest, that we want to give them every support that we can and that, although we realise that not everyone can be a winner, it is our job as an Assembly and an Executive not only to keep business open but to ensure that business prospers. (AQT 2361/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: It is certainly our job to support businesses. They create the jobs and make the investments, and they need to be encouraged and supported in doing that. As I mentioned in response to previous questions, the Executive have a very good track record of supporting businesses through our rates system. It is our main fiscal lever that we have to pull, and we have done that through the small business rate relief scheme. Indeed, we have continued that into this current financial year, so several thousand businesses across Northern Ireland will receive that reduction in their rates bill. That will cost the Executive some £20 million. We have done that in spite of the fact that it was introduced in 2010 to tackle the recession. The legislation that governs it specifically talks about the downturn. That downturn has, statistically, passed. There are still effects for retail businesses, just as there are for construction sectors and others as a result of the downturn, but other factors are hitting our retail sector as well. I am very keen that we continue, as we are this year through the small business rate relief scheme, to offer support to that important sector.

Our captains of industry and small businesspeople do the work and create the jobs. It is our job in the Assembly to support and encourage those businesses and do what we can through rates and other interventions to allow them to grow.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister has the facts, figures and stats. In the time ahead, is there a way in which we could look at the cohort of those who had a 100% or more increase — I am talking about non-domestic properties — and find ways of going to the businesses that took the biggest hit and seeing what extra help we can give them to ensure that they remain committed to growing their businesses here?

Mr Hamilton: That was considered well in advance even of the publication of the new values. I was well aware that, given the fact that there would be losers in the revaluation, there would be a plea from many quarters for some special assistance, such as some sort of transitional relief, to be put in place for, so to speak, the biggest losers. I pondered that carefully over a period and I came to the very clear conclusion that many of the biggest losers are very large businesses. Some of them are big global businesses that have seen their valuations go up by 40%, 50%, 60% and even

more. Those are businesses that one would expect to be paying more, compared with the 2001 valuations of those properties, so I was not sure about the ethics of offering some support through the public purse, which is, in effect, taking it from other ratepayers and giving it to those big businesses.

I was obviously concerned about smaller businesses that would lose out as a result of the revaluation. That is why, rather than constructing a sophisticated transitional scheme on top of all the other very complex things that we have been doing with rates this year, the Executive agreed to extend the small business rate relief scheme — the Assembly has endorsed this — which will offer that additional £20 million-worth of support to thousands of businesses across Northern Ireland. Now, some of those will be businesses that have done OK out of revaluation, but many will be businesses that have done badly out of the revaluation. I hope that that, rather than some other transitional relief scheme, will be able to afford those businesses some support and allow them to continue to stay in business in the short term and grow in the longer term.

Civil Service: Redundancy Criteria

T2. Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm what criteria are being used to identify redundancies in the Civil Service. (AQT 2362/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am going to go back to a previous question from Lord Morrow, who asked about the scheme. If the Member will bear with me, I will give him the specific criteria. I have just found them; by the way, I was ad-libbing up to that point.

There are two criteria. The criteria that have been applied in order by grade, analogous grade and discipline, where necessary, to determine who should exit under the scheme are principally based, over a one-year period, around best value for money using the least cost up front, which is the payment that would be required to give somebody a voluntary exit payment, and the maximum payback, which is how much it yields in pay bill savings. Now, that will, in some cases, have people who are exactly the same. In situations where there is a tie on those criteria, random selection will be used.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful for the Minister's explanation. Could he tell me what weight age is being given for these redundancies?

Mr Hamilton: There is no weight given to age. Age does not carry any more or less of an impact. The system that is governing this is legislation that passed through this House some years ago: a Superannuation Bill, now Act. If I say anything wrong, I will correct it in correspondence with the Member.

Mr McNarry: There is no ad-libbing now. This is a straight answer now.

Mr Hamilton: This is the law now. My understanding is that those who are over 60 do not get the same amount of payment. They are capped at a six-month salary as opposed to the 20-month salary for those who are under 60. Obviously, in some cases, it may be financially less attractive. However, given the stage that they are at in their careers, there may be other reasons and other factors as to why people who are a little older might still find it attractive to take up the voluntary exit scheme.

Private Sector: Wage Levels

T3. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he agrees that, with the economy slowly moving towards recovery, now is the time to urge the private sector to raise wage levels to reward workers who, in essence, have kept businesses moving forward in very difficult times. (AQT 2363/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I do. I say that quite clearly knowing that, whilst the economy is growing and the latest figures in Northern Ireland suggest a year-on-year increase of 1.2% between quarter 3 of 2013 and quarter 3 of 2014, that the claimant count has fallen for 27 consecutive months and that unemployment is down at 6%, which we should welcome, there are still many businesses in Northern Ireland that are struggling. What I also know — and I am sure that many Members will know it from contact with businesses in their areas — is that, during the recession, although some businesses shed staff and, in extreme circumstances, some had to close unfortunately, others kept themselves going through cutting wages. We talk about pay freezes and pay restraints in the public sector. We sometimes forget that, in the private sector, pay cuts were the order of the day in many cases. As companies get back to strength, the economy grows and companies benefit from a growing economy here in Northern Ireland and those in our neighbouring countries and around the world, that should then be reflected in increasing wages and pay packets for our workers.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister and welcome that clarification. If the Minister is saying that he can see clearly that higher wage levels would feed into boosting the economy, could he outline how he, the House or the Executive could promote that line of action?

Mr Hamilton: I go back to the earlier question. It is not my job to tell businesses how to do their job. They are in a far better position than I am or, indeed, anybody in the House is to know how their business operates, the market that they are operating in and the circumstances that affect their business. Whilst it is maybe easy for me, standing in my position, to look at the totality of the economy and say that things are good, that this sector is up, that sector is up and, indeed, even the construction sector, which had been doing very badly, is showing signs of growth and recovery, neither I nor any part of government can dictate to firms and businesses that their staff's wages should go up. As the economy grows, however, it is incumbent on our businesses, as their business improves, that they pass on those benefits to their staff who, in many cases, absorbed significant pay cuts during the recession, stuck with those firms and stayed loyal to them so that they could retain the skills and experience that they brought. If those businesses are doing well, and the markets in which they are operating are improving, any sensible business should increase its staff's wages. That, obviously, helps the economy in a broad sense, and it also reduces the benefits bill, as those in-work benefits, which are sometimes forgotten about in a debate on welfare reform, would naturally reduce as people get paid more.

Northern Ireland Water: Pay Remit

T4. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has received the pay remit for Northern Ireland Water, given that he will recall the strike by Northern Ireland Water staff in January and the impact on services of that action. (AQT 2364/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I recall the strike and its impact. I am sure that there are Members who represent constituencies in the west of the Province and constituents who remember it far better than the Member does or I do. The answer to her question is yes. I received the pay remit from Northern Ireland Water on my desk at the end of March. I have had it for a couple of weeks, and I have been carefully considering it over that time.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. When does he expect to be in a position to take a decision?

Mr Hamilton: As you would expect, the pay remit deals with pay issues for Northern Ireland Water staff. It also deals quite substantially with productivity issues and benefits that Northern Ireland Water management hopes to be able to produce as a result of modernisation and transformation moving forward. It is easy to look at the pay side and to understand it superficially, but I have been carefully considering the productivity side over the past number of days. I hope to be in a position to approve the pay remit within the next 24 or 48 hours.

Peace Funding: Applications

T5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the opening of applications for Peace funding. (AQT 2365/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The House will be aware that the INTERREG V programme has already been approved by the European Commission. Agreement was reached in the Executive and between us and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the Irish Republic on the Peace IV programme. That has been transmitted to the Commission for its approval. The Commission has come back with some queries, which we are dealing with systematically. I hope that we will have approval for the scheme in the next number of weeks, which will allow it to go out to open calls later this year.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. How confident is he that there will be a quick turnaround for applications in the next round of Peace funding and that there will be no further delays?

Mr Hamilton: It is a constant cry from people who have been involved in various Peace funding schemes that the process can be very long and frustrating. Indeed, many have had their fingers burnt in the past and may not want to be involved in Peace IV, given their experiences of Peace III. However, I am committed, as are my counterparts in the Irish Republic, to trying to cut down the time that it takes to assess various schemes to allow the funding that is approved to go to the schemes as and when required. I say that, but with the absolute caveat that it is important that the

financial fiscal processes through which we put public money in Northern Ireland continue to be used but in a more efficient and quicker manner.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Cancer Treatment

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on how many patients urgently referred with suspected cancer are beginning their treatment within 62 days. (AQO 7961/11-15)

Mr Wells (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am disappointed that the number of patients who are referred as urgent by their GP with a suspected cancer and receive their first treatment within 62 days remains below the ministerial target of 95%. Recent performances are 70.1% in October 2014; 74.1% in November; and 74.7% in that December. The majority of patients waiting beyond 62 days are in the urology specialty. Urology services across Northern Ireland remain challenging, and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is leading a service improvement initiative across all trusts to improve the position.

Mrs Dobson: I note what the Minister has said, but the minor improvements in no way excuse the totally unacceptable situation that persists, not least considering that the vast majority of people who are not treated on time are later diagnosed with cancer. Does he think that that is an acceptable situation for the patients, as the disease spreads freely through their body, or their families, who are forced to sit by and watch helplessly?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that questions should be asked and not read out.

Mr Wells: The short answer to the honourable Member for Upper Bann is "No, I do not think that it is acceptable. There is massive room for improvement, and, indeed, the board has set challenging targets for the trusts to meet in the coming year.

I emphasise that there are two targets: the 62-day target and the 31-day standard, which is the time between diagnosis and first treatment.

In fact, the trusts are doing exceptionally well on that target. For instance, the most recent figures that I have are 91% in the Belfast Trust; 100% in the Northern Trust; 97.6% in the South Eastern Trust; and 100% in the Southern Trust. Those figures are for up until February 2015. The latest figure that I have for the Western Trust is for up until December 2014, and, again, it is 100%. Clearly, once a diagnosis is made, the clinicians are very quick to organise and deliver treatment. The problem lies after the earlier reference from a GP for diagnosis, where there seems to be a delay.

Some of the issues are outside my control. There is a shortage of urologists throughout the United Kingdom, and, at the moment, we have vacancies in the Northern Trust and the Belfast Trust that are proving difficult to fill. In the absence of those clinicians, it is difficult to deliver a service, but I accept that there is room for improvement on the 62-day target, which we are determined to deliver.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for the update. The recent statistics from Macmillan show that survival rates in the North for people with lung, breast, colon and stomach cancer lag behind some other European countries by as much as 10 years. What is the strategy or plan to tackle that stark statistic? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: It is worth saying that, in Northern Ireland, we are achieving remarkable outcomes on some cancers. For childhood leukaemia, prostate cancer and breast cancer, survivorship is way beyond 80%, which shows that we have made remarkable advancements in the treatment of those cancers. Taken as a whole, Northern Ireland can hold its head up when it comes to overall survival rates, but I accept that, for conditions such as lung cancer, pancreatic cancer and ovarian cancer, we are still way behind where we want to be. Our rates are similar to those in the rest of the United Kingdom. I accept that in countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, where there are far more resources available for cancer treatment — with commensurately higher taxes, I have to say — the outcomes are better, and we need to learn from those countries' experiences. However, we are certainly moving in the right direction as far as cancer treatment is concerned.

The one issue that I do not have control over is staffing. If the staff are simply not there and the qualified urologists and oncologists are simply not available for recruitment, it makes it difficult for the trusts to meet their targets. Workforce planning, I am afraid, will become a more and

more dominant issue in health. I think that we have 11 workforce reviews on at the moment, and at almost every level in the health service at the moment, we face workforce pressures. The tide has turned inexorably in that area, and we will have problems ahead. This is not about money. I must make it absolutely clear: we have the money to employ the specialists; we simply cannot get them at the moment.

Mr McKinney: Can the Minister give a commitment, similar to the approach taken in Scotland, that he can relax the exceptionality criteria in the IFR process while the consultation period continues and is adjudicated on to allow access to life-extending drugs?

Mr Wells: That is a fairly valid comment. If he carefully reads the statement that I made on the IFR report, the Member will see that, implicit in that is a very significant increase in the funding for cancer drugs; I think that it is a trebling of the amount. That presupposes that the new two-committee system that we are setting up will have a much more flexible approach to IFR requests for individual cancer drugs. Therefore, we are determined to deliver on that, even in terribly difficult financial situations, but remember that that will not greatly improve survival rates. The vast majority of the drugs enhance and extend life; very few of them save life. The comments that Mrs Dobson has made will not be addressed by a more flexible IFR strategy, but it will help those who have a terminal diagnosis to live out their life on an extended basis and more comfortably. That is a very valuable role that those drugs perform. Still, the overall figures show that Northern Ireland, particularly through the Belfast cancer centre, has achieved so much in a very short period, and that is to be welcomed. We should not beat ourselves up on this issue; we are doing well.

Mrs Cameron: The Minister has already mentioned that urology is a major part of the problem here: can he outline what actions are being taken to make improvements in that field?

Mr Wells: The main pressure points are in the Northern and South Eastern Trusts. I expect both to take urgent action to reduce the time that patients wait on a urological pathway. That will involve moving urology services temporarily to the Western Trust until issues in the Northern Trust have been resolved. As a result of that action, the number of patients waiting longer than 62 days on the urology pathway in the Northern Trust has been reduced from 140 in August 2014 to seven in the provisional

reporting that the board issued at the end of February 2015.

Last week, I was in Londonderry with the Irish Health Minister, Minister Varadkar, and we inspected progress on the new radiotherapy unit that is being built at a cost of £69 million and has been partially funded by the HSE in the Irish Republic. Once that is up and running in the autumn of 2016, it will provide new capacity for radiotherapy, not only for Northern and Western Trust patients but also those from Donegal. It will also relieve the pressure on the Belfast cancer centre. Therefore, we should see a general improvement in treatment throughout Northern Ireland. I was delighted to hear, when I was up there last Wednesday, that it is on time. That will interest the Chair of the Committee. The building will be state of the art. Indeed, it will be the most modern radiotherapy centre on the island of Ireland and, we think, in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the people of the north-west will get a marvellous new facility that will help in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer for over 450,000 people.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that question 11 has been withdrawn.

Health Promotion

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had about raising awareness of health promotion messages on skin cancer and other conditions with organisations such as the loyal orders and marching bands. (AQO 7962/11-15)

Mr Wells: I have invited representatives of the Grand Lodge of Ireland and the Confederation of Ulster Bands to meet the Public Health Agency and me to discuss how public health messages can be disseminated to their members. I also met Cancer Focus Northern Ireland to discuss its initiatives to improve community health, including its work with the Orange Order.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he outline what particular conditions he envisages progress being made with?

Mr Wells: The meeting with the Orange Order and the PHA will provide an opportunity to discuss how we can raise awareness around a number of health issues. Of course, the vast majority of those who participate in Orange Order parades and band parades are, basically, male, and often young male. We are looking at

issues such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, physical activity, alcohol problems and, of course, the promotion of smoking cessation.

We know that men are four times less likely to visit their GP than women and, often, men find that, by the time they do report with a condition, it is too late; it has progressed. Therefore, we feel that it is important to get out into the community and speak to young men in particular to emphasise the importance of giving up smoking, drinking sensibly and, more importantly now, reducing skin cancer, which is now the most prevalent form of cancer in Northern Ireland. Therefore, people who tend to be out in the sun a lot need to be very careful to take protective measures, whether they are marching or simply out enjoying the countryside.

I was very enthusiastic about the Cancer Focus NI initiative, which is to go out into the community, not just to Orange and band events but also, for instance, to reach those in the farming community. Male farmers tend to be very loath to report a problem to their GP. For instance, it visited the field during the sham fight in Scarva on 13 July, and it was in Markethill on the Twelfth, and it was interesting to notice that it picked up conditions amongst those members of the Orange, the bands and their families that would have been missed had the Man Van, as it is called, not been out in the field. I also understand that it is exploring that initiative with the GAA. This is an excellent opportunity of taking health provision to the community and identifying conditions that, up to that point, would have been missed totally.

Mr Cree: I am interested in the Minister's comments. Minister, can you explain why there is effectively a postcode lottery for people across Northern Ireland who are diagnosed with things like skin cancer? It depends on where they live.

Mr Wells: I would be very interested in the evidence of that, because, in Northern Ireland, we have taken the very sensible step of centralising acute cancer services into the Belfast City Hospital cancer centre, and that has led to a concentration of resources and skilled clinicians, consultants etc in the one building. We have had experience of that for about 10 years, and all the evidence indicates that that has been the right way forward. Therefore, someone in a trust who has been diagnosed with a serious cancer should be referred to that service, without any difficulty with a postcode. There is no real evidence to indicate that people are being turned away

because they happen to live beyond Glengormley or Carryduff or whatever.

The problem in the South Eastern Trust is the lack of urological consultants, but, once the diagnosis has been made, the South Eastern Trust is meeting its target — I think that I quoted 97% earlier — of patients who are then treated within the 31-day period. I would be very interested in any evidence that he could give me of that happening. From my point of view, the evidence is that we are moving forward to a healthier society, with fewer of us dying from cancer, as a result of that work.

I said this before, and I keep mentioning it, because I have noticed that good news does not travel very fast out of this Building. Last year, for the first time ever in Northern Ireland, more people with cancer were alive after 10 years than had passed on. That is very, very important — almost a Rubicon that we have crossed. For the first time ever, more people are alive than have died. Therefore, cancer is rapidly becoming a long-term condition, rather than an acute condition that leads, ultimately, to fatalities. We need to keep that going, and we are doing well.

The Member for Upper Bann has highlighted an issue that has caused me concern, and I am worried about what has been said. We need to tighten up on the 62-day target, and we owe that to the people of Northern Ireland. I know what a worrying period those 62 days are for many people, and we have to try to bring it down to a more manageable level.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister about the two-minute rule.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister now acknowledges the high importance of the work of the Public Health Agency. Will he reconsider the huge reduction in its budget of 15%, which will leave it unable to provide the service that it has heretofore?

3.00 pm

Mr Wells: We have moved a long way from the Twelfth field at Markethill, assuming that it is still relevant to the question. The 15% efficiency saving in the PHA is in administration; I need to emphasise that. We targeted administration as the way to make savings in the health service without affecting front-line care. We examined carefully the savings proposed by the PHA, and we believe that they are achievable in a way that does not cause difficulties to the essential work that we all

recognise that the PHA is carrying out. It will be a stretching target; I accept that. Still, many of the programmes that the PHA has been rolling out across the Province will remain intact despite the huge difficulties we are in as far as funding is concerned.

Oakridge Day Centre

3. Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurances he can give that the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has sufficient capital in its 2015-16 Budget allocation to provide a modern facility to replace Oakridge Day Centre, Dungannon. (AQO 7963/11-15)

Mr Wells: My Department is in the final stages of reviewing the business case for the replacement of the Oakridge social education centre in Dungannon. Due to current financial constraints, a number of projects under consideration, like this one, cannot be progressed as no funding is available. The timeline for completion will, therefore, be dependent on appropriate business case approvals and, ultimately, budget availability.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, I am sure that you would acknowledge that there is a need for a new facility in the Dungannon area for those with learning disabilities. I encourage you to visit Oakridge to see it for yourself. Will the Minister commit to providing new and enhanced modern facilities for those with disabilities in the Dungannon area?

Mr Wells: I have promised the Member and Lord Morrow that I will visit Loane House in Dungannon, so I could easily combine a visit to Oakridge with that. I am sure that, now that she has reminded me, my diary secretary will be beavering away to ensure that that happens.

That project would have a capital cost of £3.5 million. For next year, I have an entire capital budget of about £203 million. By the time you take in all that I have committed to, and what my predecessor Mr Poots, and, indeed, Mr McGimpsey, committed themselves to, that leaves us with next to no money for any new initiative.

It is important to emphasise what we will be spending money on in 2015-16. I mentioned the new radiotherapy block at Altnagelvin; we are doing a new north wing in the same hospital. A new Ulster Hospital general ward and acute services block is costing us £210 million. The Omagh local hospital will benefit

some of the lady's constituents, and there are new health and social care centres in Ballymena and Banbridge. There is the new children's hospital on the RVH site, and paediatric services at Daisy Hill and Craigavon hospitals.

We are trying to squeeze as much as we can out of that budget, but, in the absence of something happening post-general election or some great success in the monitoring round, it is difficult to see how I can commit myself to that sort of funding. The Member will, of course, say that it is only £3.5 million out of a £203 million budget. However, I am sure that, in the Chamber, Members have at least a dozen or 15 similar projects, and if I conceded on this one, no doubt they would be in to see me to demand similar treatment. I had a group in the other day from Crossmaglen demanding similar provision in that area. Both made the point, as you have, that the present facilities are very poor. I accept that, but the present budget does not give me much in the way of funding.

That is in the Southern Trust, to which a large range of schemes have already been committed. For instance, we are putting £16 million into the health-care hub in Banbridge, £11 million into Craigavon for rewiring —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Wells: — and a new scanner in Craigavon.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Paula Bradley, can I remind the Member that this is a very specific question to a constituency?

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are waiving your right. I move on, then, to Mr George Robinson.

Suicide: Cross-departmental Support

4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of cross-departmental support to address suicide. (AQO 7964/11-15)

Mr Wells: The ministerial coordination group on suicide prevention has helped to ensure improved cross-departmental engagement in addressing suicide. Cross-departmental work has taken place through sporting organisations,

rural networks and in justice settings, libraries and schools. The group last met last week on 16 April, a meeting that I chaired, to consider the first draft of the front-line intervention section of the suicide prevention strategy that is in development.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline some examples of actions being implemented by other Departments?

Mr Wells: I found the meeting last week — last Thursday — to be very useful, and not because I chaired it. There was buy-in from all of the Executive, which was shown by the fact that Minister Durkan, Minister Storey and Minister McCann were all present. If other Departments were not represented by Ministers, a very high-powered group of officials came along to represent them. We worked well together.

The main work of the group is to refresh and update the Protect Life strategy, which was rolled out over the last two years. The good news is that the number of suicides in Northern Ireland has dropped from about 303 in 2013 to a provisional estimate of just over 280 for 2014. That is despite a situation in other parts of western Europe where the numbers have inexorably grown. So, we believe that the strategy is working. Therefore, the various activities that have been carried out by the Departments have been successful. However, we cannot be complacent, because 280 — I think it is 286 — suicides have a hugely devastating impact on a society the size of that in Northern Ireland. It is reckoned that every suicide in the Province affects 60 people directly, because of the close-knit society that we have.

Therefore, I am pleased that at least we seem to be getting some progress on this very difficult issue. The Lifeline initiative has had 655,000 callers in the last year up to February 2015, and interventions were required for 13% of those callers. It is handling 2,244 calls per week. We are putting a total of £7 million into the budget for suicide, and almost half of that goes into Lifeline. At least there is some encouragement that these policies are beginning to work.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers. An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire cén plé a bhí aige lena mhacasamhail sa Deisceart maidir le cur chuige le déileáil le féinmharú agus le clár feasachta faoin fhéinmharú a chur chun tosaigh? What

discussions, if any, has the Minister had with his counterpart in the South in relation to tackling suicide and the promotion of suicide-awareness programmes?

Mr Wells: I had a very useful meeting with the Health Minister of the Irish Republic last Wednesday in Londonderry, in Altnagelvin Hospital. We found ourselves singing from the same hymn sheet on this issue. Both jurisdictions are bringing forward strategies to deal with suicide. We are at different stages in the process, and we agreed at that meeting that there was little merit in having a joint all-island strategy but that there was huge merit in officials from both jurisdictions getting together on a regular basis to share best practice on this very important issue.

We identified that, on both sides of the border, the particularly difficult area is males between 15 and 50, particularly unemployed males from socially and economically disadvantaged areas, and the important role that alcohol unfortunately played in suicides. Therefore, both jurisdictions agreed that that was the core area that we needed to analyse in particular. We are going to work together to see what is best practice in the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Mr McGimpsey: Bearing in mind the important role that the Internet and Internet chat rooms have had in promoting suicide, how effective have the Byron report and the Byron task force been in bringing providers into some sort of social responsibility to help us press down on what is one of the scourges of our society?

Mr Wells: The Member has asked a very useful question. If he was on my Back Benches, you would say it was a plant. It is something that is incredibly important, because unfortunately the growth area, as far as danger to our young children is concerned, is in the Internet and electronic media. There have been some extremely worrying developments. As a recent BBC 'Spotlight' programme showed, several hundred young girls had their Facebook images used for pornographic images. Also, there was a report recently that showed that a high proportion of eight-year-old boys have been exposed to sadistic pornography, which is absolutely appalling.

Issues that were totally unheard of when many in the Chamber were young are now rampant. That is why I welcome strongly that the entire Executive — this is unusual — have agreed to jointly fund a strategy on the issue. The money — I think that it is £80,000 — has been made available, and we are going to develop a

strategy for Northern Ireland. Without pre-empting that, I would like to hope that the situation will arise that means that this hard-core material, bullying and all the associated risks to our young people will be automatically blocked unless an adult registers to opt in to it. I simply cannot understand why the big multinational Internet service providers allow our young people to have unlimited free access to material that is totally unsuitable and desperately damaging to their emotional and physical welfare. I would like to think that the lead that some Internet providers like Sky have already adopted will be brought in for all the companies. If someone wants to access this material, that is up to them, but they need to register for it, and it needs to have a blocking mechanism so that no one under 18 can see it.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's answers so far. Obviously, the subject under discussion is very serious, and we welcome the reduction in suicides. Will the Minister agree with me that early intervention for those people who find themselves in this situation is absolutely critical? Will he also agree that best practice, where it exists, should be more widely known? For example, in the Holywell Hospital in Antrim there is best practice, and at the Robinson Hospital in Ballymoney there is best practice. However, perhaps not enough people have access to those wonderful facilities, where people go out literally into the homes of those who are at risk and help them and, indeed, save their lives.

Mr Wells: I recently attended a meeting in Gransha with the Western Trust. It is quite clear that the Western Trust is taking the lead on this issue. It worries me slightly that, as you go around Northern Ireland, you see little pockets of excellence being carried out by various trusts but not much evidence of it being shared with the rest of Northern Ireland. One of the things that the Western Trust told me is that 72% of those who commit suicide in Northern Ireland are totally unknown to the health and social care system. That shows you how difficult it can be to identify those who have mental health issues that can lead to suicide. What is even more worrying is that over 40% of those who subsequently committed suicide had presented to A&E and were not picked up as suicidal during that visit. The Western Trust was concentrating on that.

Another issue that I will highlight relates to the fact that the majority of those who commit suicide in the Londonderry area do so in the river. I congratulate the Western Trust for taking action on that. For instance, it is putting up cameras at the appropriate spots to identify

those who perhaps are considering suicide. The trust is making signs on the bridges — it really is the bridges that are concerning — more informative by giving warning to those who are considering taking such drastic action. Foyle Search and Rescue has told me that the vast majority of people who it rescues have not slipped but have jumped into the river and, therefore, are contemplating suicide.

Therefore, the Member is right to say that there are examples of good practice. He mentioned the Robinson Hospital, and I think that we need to disseminate this good practice throughout Northern Ireland because we are still losing far, far too many people to this awful situation.

Sleep Clinics

5. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what procedures are in place for sleep clinic patients forced to wait for an appointment beyond the 18-week time period. (AQO 7965/11-15)

Mr Wells: It is disappointing that some sleep clinic patients are waiting longer for appointments. That is a particular problem in the regional services that the Belfast Trust provides. Again, that is due to staffing issues. The Health and Social Care Board is working with the Belfast Trust to expedite the transition of sleep clinic services to other trusts to help waiting times. The Belfast Trust is also making every effort to cover the workload until the staffing issues are resolved; for example, by obtaining additional limited capacity in Edinburgh.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he detail the numbers waiting and the action plan that he has for this serious matter?

Mr Wells: I do not have the exact details on the numbers that are waiting. We would have to obtain those from the five trusts, but I am more than happy to write to her with specific details and to provide a bit more update on what we are doing to improve this service, particularly with the link to Edinburgh and trying to take the load off the Belfast Trust. I think that we are running out of time here. Once again, we are in a situation where there is only a finite number of experts on this issue at consultant level. We are finding it hard to recruit. I am afraid that this issue will come back time and again: the labour market in health is tightening rapidly. From nursing to

middle-grade doctors to consultants, we are finding it very hard to recruit the necessary staff. At the end of February 2015, there was a total of 555 patients waiting for diagnostic sleep study, and 128 of those had been waiting for nine weeks. A total of 127 patients have been waiting for over nine weeks in Belfast, and one in the South Eastern Trust area. I will expand on those figures and send the Member full details.

3.15 pm

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

Post-mortem Services

T1. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many families have been impacted adversely by the lack of weekend and bank holiday post-mortem services. (AQT 2371/11-15)

Mr Wells: Rev William McCrea, MP for South Antrim, has raised the issue with particular reference to Antrim Area Hospital and the distress that this can cause families. Without prior notice, I cannot give the Member the figures. Mr McCrea's approach prompted me to make a mental note to investigate the issue because it seems to be a problem throughout Northern Ireland, apart from in the major Belfast hospitals. We will investigate the issue and see what can be done to help families in this very distressing situation.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that this does not affect just my constituency; it happens across the whole of the North. It is reassuring to hear the Minister state that he will take a look at this. If a review is needed, I ask that it is done as quickly as possible because of the stress that it causes to the families concerned.

Mr Wells: Yes, I will look at this. Rev McCrea gave me information on a very distressing incident that he was involved in with a family from Magherafelt. No one could give a definitive answer to the family. Unfortunately, the deceased passed away at the weekend, and there seemed to be a hiatus before anything could be done to assist them. I suspect that that issue, which was raised in the local media in mid-Ulster, is the one the Member is referring

to. You have to balance that with whether you keep staff working over the weekend when there may be very few cases to deal with. But, having heard from Rev McCrea of the huge hurt that that particular issue caused, I think it is something we should investigate, and I will do that. It will not be a formal review but a departmental look at where we are going on this. Remember that we do not have direct control of all these issues, but we will certainly look at it.

Abortion: Guidelines

T2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety where the guidelines on the termination of pregnancy currently sit, given that, five weeks ago, he said that he was working on them and that he hoped to bring them before the Executive within a few weeks. (AQT 2372/11-15)

Mr Wells: This is an incredibly difficult and complex issue, as the Member will understand. It is inevitable that whatever I decide will be judicially reviewed. If the guidelines are perceived by some as being too weak, those who campaign in the pro-life movement will judicially review them; if they are seen as being too strong and seem to others to be too pro-life, inevitably those in the charitable and NGO sector in what is called the pro-choice lobby will judicially review them. It is, therefore, very difficult. We have been trying to deal with the issue for, I think, nine years. Each time, obstacles arise because it is such a difficult moral issue and one that many, many people in Northern Ireland and their public representatives feel exceptionally strongly about.

As far as the timeline is concerned, we are coming close to a situation where we will be able to refer the guidelines to the Executive for discussion, but I can assure him that that will not be the last of it. We know from experience in the House how frequently our constituents and lobby groups go to the courts. I will, therefore, be very surprised if the issue is permanently resolved within the year.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Does the Minister accept that delay on the issue puts pressure on all the people concerned, not least the health professionals?

Mr Wells: Getting this wrong will not help the health professionals. If I issue a document that is immediately referred to the High Court and that leads to long and turgid judicial review, we

still have a lack of clarity as far as the clinicians are concerned. We all have vast experience in the Chamber of legislation being referred for judicial review and sitting for years before agreement is reached on the way forward.

I will be honest with you: I think that this is the most difficult issue that I have on my table at the moment in terms of reaching a consensus that, I feel, will be deliverable in the community. It is one that I have spent a huge amount of time on and one that I would prefer to see resolved, but I have to say that I cannot see that happening in my time as Minister of Health and probably not in my successor's.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Alzheimer's Disease/Dementia: Support

T4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he intends to support the Alzheimer's Society's Right to Know campaign, given that there are around 7,000 people with dementia in Northern Ireland who do not have a diagnosis, a quarter of people who are diagnosed receive no information and support and around 90% feel that the support that they receive is inadequate. (AQT 2374/11-15)

Mr Wells: I am very supportive of the Alzheimer's Society's Right to Know campaign, and I work closely with the charity in that field. We have to understand that, whilst the percentage of people with Alzheimer's is falling, the overall numbers are rising dramatically, because we are an ageing society. That puts tremendous pressure on clinicians. A greater awareness of Alzheimer's is combined with larger numbers. It is, therefore, still a real challenge. Northern Ireland has been commended as the best region in the United Kingdom for making an early diagnosis of dementia, so we are getting it right to some extent.

I have to set aside £35 million every year in the health service budget simply to take account of the fact that we are an ageing society. That gives you an indication of the pressure I am under. We are making progress. I hear regularly reports in the media of some breakthrough cure or diagnosis for Alzheimer's, and I really hope for success, because, at the moment, there is no quick fix for this awful condition, which is progressive and causes huge difficulties for sufferers and their families. Nothing would make me happier than to

introduce some form of medicine that would curtail the progression of the condition or better. We are doing our best in difficult conditions, and we can stand up proudly with the rest of the United Kingdom in what we have achieved. Is that enough at the moment? No. It is becoming a more difficult issue as the years progress.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response and for his support for the Right to Know campaign. In his assessment, how far are we from achieving the key targets of the campaign, which are a diagnosis for everyone with dementia, a wait of no longer than 12 weeks between first appointment with the GP and diagnosis and a dementia support worker or equivalent for everyone at the point of diagnosis?

Mr Wells: Those are the aspirations of the Right to Know campaign; it is not based on any clinical recommendations from those directly involved. One of the reasons for that is that it is extremely challenging to have a guaranteed wait of only 12 weeks. To have a guaranteed nurse practitioner looking after the patient is terribly demanding in the present economic situation. I have to say that, when I reveal the budget for 2015-16, there will be a lot of pain for a lot of parts of Northern Ireland and a lot of concern expressed about reducing services yet maintaining our high standards of clinical care. I do not think that we are yet in the position to deliver the Right to Know campaign's demands, which could be said to be legitimate, but we will continue to ensure that people in Northern Ireland with suspected Alzheimer's are diagnosed as quickly as possible and given the best care pathway in what is a very challenging economic environment.

Health Service: Senior Staff Salaries

T5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the salary increases received by Northern Ireland's senior health service staff in the past two years, albeit that it is very interesting to hear him mention the budget that he is going to reveal. (AQT 2375/11-15).

Mr Wells: Our senior health staff have actually had pay reductions because of the increase in their pension contributions. I know that it is quite easy to criticise our chief executives and directors, but the problem — the Member will have to face up to this — is that we have recently lost three very capable senior executives of health trusts to England, where they offer packages that are way in excess of

anything that we are allowed to offer under the guidelines issued by DFP. I am particularly annoyed about losing one individual who, everybody in the House accepted, was absolutely outstanding. If we are to retain the best talent in Northern Ireland, we have to look at pay and conditions. I know that it will be unpopular if I suggest that they should be paid the going salary for the crucial work that they do. However, I flag that up as an issue that will arise in the future that I am particularly worried about.

Senior health staff all have contracts under which they are permitted to receive statutory pay increases. I can assure you that those have been very modest, and, taking into account increases in their pension contributions, all of them, as far as I am aware, have taken a pay cut. There are two exceptions to that, because two trust chief executives are also qualified consultants. They are on a different pay scale to the non-consultants, which is why it may seem that their pay is quite high. However, you should remember that, if they were doing consultancy work with some private add-ons, they would be receiving a very high standard of pay.

I believe that we now have in place a very strong team of chief executives and directors at all levels in the health trusts. We have seen some quite remarkable turnarounds and improvements in performance throughout the service in Northern Ireland. One of my roles is to try to keep that team together for as long as possible. That will be difficult, given what I see happening in England, where that talent is recognised in both status and pay.

Mr McNarry: I am not criticising anyone, least of all the Minister. In fact, I join him in the encouragement that he has given to the talent and the people we have.

There were revelations in England that some health executives earned more than £1 million last year and that directors were getting packages of up to £5,000 a day. In light of what the Minister has said and to allow us to compete, what increases does he have in mind over the next two years for the category of staff that he has just told the House about?

Mr Wells: We are looking at that, but I assure you that we will never reach the situation where anyone in Northern Ireland is paid anything like that amount of money. Some of our top staff are in charge of budgets of £600 million or £700 million — indeed, it is over £1 billion in the Belfast Trust — and in their delivery, the better and efficient management of their trusts and a

more efficient delivery of health-care provision, good chief executives or directors can save more than their salary. Liam Donaldson's report stated clearly that we needed to recognise that talent. It is not just me who recognises it. Chairmen of trusts throughout England are eyeing up Northern Ireland for potential transfer deals, if I can put it that way. That tells me that we have some very capable and special staff in Northern Ireland.

I want to flag up one other issue. Many English trusts are moving to joint health and social care provision, whereas, up to now, they have been split. Where is the only place in the United Kingdom that they can get good, experienced staff with skills in health and social care? It is in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have to watch out that more staff are not lured to southern England. We need to look at that, but any change would, of course, need to fit in with broader Northern Ireland public sector pay and have the approval of DFP. It is a difficult issue, but I do not think that our top staff are recognised sufficiently.

GP Services: Kilkeel

T6. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what he will do, first, to enhance out-of-hours services in Kilkeel through extra funds for GP services so that Kilkeel becomes a model for rural health care right across the North, particularly given the Minister's comments about there being a lot of pain, which was highlighted by a constituent who had a lot of pain at the weekend and who was told to ring back on Monday, which led to relatives phoning the emergency number to get an ambulance, and, secondly, to create a bit of flexibility around GP appointments, given that many working people leave Kilkeel at 6.30 am and have no access to appointments. (AQT 2376/11-15)

3.30 pm

Mr Wells: The Member for South Down's point is well made. Indeed, that is the reason why, 10 days ago, I announced an extra £15 million in funding for GP services, including £3.1 million in additional moneys for out-of-hours provision. The BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners have been lobbying the Department and me on that. Indeed, on Thursday night, I was at a meeting with the BMA at which the issue arose again.

I have seen the rotas for Kilkeel — it is a particularly difficult area, where there are large gaps throughout this month and beyond — and

I can see the problems that we are having. Many MLAs throughout the country, particularly those in rural areas, have mentioned the problem to me. We are hoping that the extra £3.1 million will enable us to employ locums to provide cover in difficult areas. In Kilkeel, as the Member knows, the options are very limited. You go to Newry, Downpatrick, Craigavon or wherever. It is a long distance to the other cover, and it is therefore important that we plug the gaps in Kilkeel. As he knows, this has been going on since last May. In July, there were long shifts around the Twelfth fortnight for which there was no cover, because staff were not available to do it. That is why I am hoping that the £3.1 million will have some impact on overall performance in Northern Ireland. I do not want patients to be going to A&E at Daisy Hill Hospital or Downe Hospital, because, on many occasions, that is not what is required. We are simply storing up trouble for down the road, as it were. We need to improve out-of-hours provision throughout rural parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time. I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Fuel Laundering

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the continuing high levels of fuel laundering, the organised criminal activity surrounding it and the evident lack of criminal prosecutions; notes the environmental damage caused to the countryside; recognises the financial losses suffered by Her Majesty's Treasury and legitimate fuel operators and the consequential serious implications for the local economy; and calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure action is taken at every operational level to secure greater numbers of prosecutions for this serious crime. — [Mr Bell.]

Which amendment was:

Insert after "economy;"

"further notes that legislation extending the role of the National Crime Agency in Northern Ireland has completed its passage at Westminster and that the National Crime

Agency must now demonstrate that it will deploy its full powers and resources against any and all persons or organisations involved in fuel laundering and other organised crime;". — [Mr Attwood.]

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I start by congratulating the junior Minister Mr Bell, who has now resumed his customary Front-Bench seat, on securing the Back-Bench debate on this important topic. I welcome the motion and the amendment before the House.

The debate is very timely, as it coincides with the recent introduction of a new rebated fuel marker — the Dow marker — on 1 April. That was the culmination of a detailed joint project involving Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Irish Revenue Commissioners. I welcome that step at the outset. It is a very significant development, and one that the Organised Crime Task Force hopes will have a major impact.

The comments that I have seen locally have been positive about the introduction of the fuel marker. As others said, fuel laundering is a total scourge on our society. For those who are buying laundered diesel, it may seem like a victimless crime — a cheap fill-up, with nobody losing out except the Government — but that is certainly not the case. First, the loss of revenue to government is very significant and important. As a number of Members highlighted, fuel laundering in Northern Ireland costs the Exchequer in the region of £80 million every year, although it should be pointed out that, since excise duty is a non-devolved issue, not all of the £80 million would be available for services in Northern Ireland were it to be achieved.

There are other important aspects. There are the losses to honest businesses: those who are either selling legitimate fuel or in an industry such as haulage who are seeking to compete with the criminals — that is what they are — who are undercutting them through the use of illicit fuel. There is the damage to the environment. As we have heard repeatedly today, fuel laundering produces toxic waste, which is dumped with no regard for the potential impact on the environment and on the health of people round about.

There have been a number of recent media reports about fuel laundering. There is the direct financial impact locally. The cost of cleaning up the waste, whether by HMRC, DOE or local councils, is money that could be used for more productive purposes. Additionally, it has been established that this sort of fuel can

damage vehicles. A short-term saving can lead to major costs for vehicle repairs in the longer term. There is also the very real concern that that crime is supporting organised crime groups and that some of them are using the profits to fund other serious and organised crimes, such as drugs.

I think every Member who has spoken today recognises those problems, so I now want to set out some of the steps that are being taken across the justice system to address the crime, but, before I do so, I should exercise a little caution and remind people that excise evasion is a reserved matter, and that responsibility for tackling fuel laundering lies firmly with HMRC, which answers to the Treasury for its results. A number of Members, such as Lord Morrow and Mr Craig, suggested that it was principally an issue for the Department of Justice. No; the issue of excise evasion is excepted and is operational. It is not really for the DOJ at all.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for giving way. I did not say that; I said the very opposite — that I accepted that it was not a totally devolved matter.

Mr Ford: I thought that is what I said. The point is that it is not devolved at all.

As chair of the local Organised Crime Task Force and as Justice Minister, I do have a close interest in the subject, and work is done within the OCTF to deal with the issue. In response to Mr Attwood, there is no specific subgroup of the OCTF dealing with waste, although the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has attended meetings of the OCTF, but waste is principally a matter for the NIEA. There has been a co-hosted seminar between the DOJ and NIEA, so there has been that kind of joint working.

The subgroup on fuel operates on a cross-border basis, and, as I report regularly when I report on meetings of the IGA with the Irish Justice Minister, the issue is discussed regularly. I think it has probably been at every meeting that I have held since I became Minister. Laundering also features regularly at meetings of the full OCTF, and that subgroup continues to do detailed work, bringing together the relevant agencies, including the gardaí and the Irish Revenue Commissioners, to ensure the best possible cross-border action.

My experience is that HMRC does have a clear focus on the issue. The motion mentions prosecution, quite properly, but we should note that disruption and detection are also important parts of the process. In the past three years,

HMRC has found and dismantled over 90 laundering plants, but prosecuting those responsible is, we accept, a difficult task. The nature of fuel laundering, because most of it is automated, means that sites do not need to be attended, making it difficult to identify those responsible and achieve successful prosecutions. I visited one particular plant as HMRC was breaking it up in south Armagh, very close to the County Louth border, and it was clear that, in that place, somebody could drive in a tanker and connect up a hose to the filtration mechanism to an underground tank, could drive back the next day and, in half an hour, pump the proceeds into a different tanker. These are not factories or industrial-scale processes with large numbers of operatives available. That is why it is frequently very difficult to catch people and, even if people are caught, they are not Mr Big; they are the guy driving the lorry for €100 or £100.

However, steps have been taken to improve detection. HMRC now uses a scenes of crime officer to capture evidence, and evidential pictures can be built up in different sites over time. In addition, and contrary to the impression that has been given here today, most notably in the last contribution, from Jim Allister, there have been prosecutions here — 53 prosecutions in Northern Ireland since 2011, and a number of cases are pending. There is clearly an issue of sentences, which I will return to later.

The new fuel marker introduced should have a significant impact as well. No one is claiming that it is impossible to remove, but HMRC believes that it is difficult to the point that it should make laundering uneconomic. That view is based on engagement with scientists at the Laboratory of the Government Chemist — a full scientific assessment, not the comments of those who might have interests in other particular systems.

There is also an issue that has been raised today about naming and shaming stations found to be selling illicit diesel and the current legal position that they cannot be named in such a way. I have written to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury on it because I believe that it is important that we should allow naming and shaming. I hope to have a meeting with the new Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury after the election.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. On that very point, does he believe that the Exchequer is taking that view simply because it prevails across the United Kingdom? I am sure that the Minister has made the point

to the Exchequer that the circumstance of the land border with another EU country means that Northern Ireland has to be treated as a separate case on this issue?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Humphrey for that point. I think that there is probably a case that Treasury does not view it seriously enough because it is of much less significance in other parts of the UK. The issue is not the question of fuel being brought across a land border, which is at least benefiting the Irish Exchequer, but the laundering process that occurs close to the border on both sides, whereby neither jurisdiction gets any financial benefit.

We also need to recognise the problem that people are buying fuel because they think that they are getting a bargain and do not realise the full implications. It is an old adage that if the price of something looks too good to be true, it probably is. In the case of fuel, if it looks too good to be true, it certainly is. I appeal to businesses and individuals who knowingly, half knowingly or with some suspicion buy fuel to think about whom and what they are supporting. I also warn people that if they know that they are buying illicit diesel, they are committing an offence themselves and can be dealt with by the courts.

HMRC has equipment to check storage depots, lorries and cars, and it uses it. Furthermore, HMRC is undertaking a tender exercise to strengthen that testing capability. The new contract for forensic testing, which will be tendered shortly, will have a requirement to have at least one accessible forensic site to allow same-day turnaround on the laboratory condition tests that underpin the roadside programmes. The benefit of roadside testing was mentioned by Mr Ross, I think. That was part of the last tender process, but in the weighting of different factors, it did not emerge as the crucial issue. Clearly, the faster that there can be a turnaround of testing, the better.

We need to ensure that all the relevant agencies work together to fight this problem. HMRC is backed by the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and others in tackling this crime. They need the support of the public. We, as MLAs, can help in that by giving a clear, public signal of what needs to be done. Those who have suspicions about a laundering plant or filling station can report it anonymously to Crimestoppers if they fear for their safety. The same goes for those who know of a business that is using illicit fuel anywhere.

With regard to sentencing, my Department introduced legislation that means that any

excise evasion sentence that appears to the DPP to be unduly lenient can now be referred to the Court of Appeal. That was a response, in part, to the view that sentences here were too low. HMRC and the OCTF strategy group are monitoring the outcome of cases. In addition, the judiciary has produced guidance cases on tax evasion, so far specifically on tobacco. Furthermore, duty evasion and smuggling is on the Lord Chief Justice's programme of action on sentencing. Where there is a suitable case for further guidance on excise duty relating to fuel, guidance will be issued. Decisions are, of course, for the judiciary in individual cases, but the unduly lenient sentencing provision is now available. HMRC is also reviewing the penalties for those fuel stations that sell illicit fuel.

Finally, I should also mention that to take stock following the introduction of the new marker, and in light of concerns that have been expressed by different bodies and MLAs, OCTF is planning a focused workshop on fuel laundering before the summer. The Fiscalis European conference will be held in June. It will be the second time that it is held in Northern Ireland because of the work that is being done by HMRC and the Irish Office of the Revenue Commissioners, and the recognition across Europe of the work that is being done here.

The amendment makes clear that the National Crime Agency will now be fully operational in Northern Ireland. It will come into place on 20 May. I believe that the NCA will give all the support it can to the police and other agencies in the fight against fuel laundering, as well as other organised crime. I understand that work is now well under way to ensure that the NCA is ready to work to the fullest effect from day one. We should remember, in particular, that a key part of the NCA's role will relate to asset seizure — something currently not possible, even where the NCA is able to operate in the reserved field.

Fuel laundering is a difficult problem that needs a joined-up effort from all to tackle it. The introduction of the new marker will help. OCTF will continue to focus on other strategies. I believe that we are now in a significantly better place than we were just two or three years ago. I support the motion that is before the House and, although I might quibble with the precise wording of it, I entirely endorse its sentiment and that of the amendment. I commend them both to the House.

3.45 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank all those who participated in the debate and who added to the debate on the amendment brought forward by my colleagues in the SDLP. Let me say that this is a very pernicious activity on the part of criminals, and I accept what Mr Bell said, that, as an Assembly, we should collectively send a clear message to those criminal groups that their time is up. I believe that this debate is appropriate and timely, because it sends a strong message. As the Minister said, the introduction of the new marker in relation to fuel will — I share the Minister's confidence — make it extremely difficult for people to launder fuel as they have done hitherto. Therefore, it is the right moment to send the right message to the right people.

This is a criminal conspiracy that has been going on for years, and it needs to end now. The effect of it has been to corrupt, first of all, those involved in fuel laundering, but also those involved in business because, at times, they have been pressurised, forced and almost blackmailed into using such fuel, receiving it and cooperating to some extent. It has therefore corrupted legitimate business, and that is wrong, cancerous and something that, I believe, we should all try to end.

I hope that the introduction of the marker and the National Crime Agency, with its full force and resources, will give the public, and those engaged in business, confidence to resist the pressures that there may be out there in the community. It is very important for all of us to identify this as criminality at its worst, and I take on board the remarks made by Mr McCartney and Mr Lynch, on behalf of Sinn Féin, that they regard this activity as criminality. Historically, however, the provisional republican movement was involved in it: there is little doubt about that; it is not even speculation. It is important that, if Sinn Féin recognises this criminality now as a contemporary crime, it should also recognise that, in the past, fuel laundering was a historic crime.

It has had some very bad impacts on the environment; that has been well outlined by various Members throughout the debate. It has affected the natural environment, natural watercourses and so forth. However, let me say this: with the NCA, we now have an opportunity; it has the powers that are required to deal fully with this crime. We in the SDLP have suspected, in the past at least, that a light-touch approach was taken to this form of criminal. I hope that we are wrong; but there certainly was a very strong suspicion that effort was not put in to deal with this type of criminality. If that was in fact the situation, let it

be in the past. We now move to a new situation where the NCA can show its mettle and really tackle this insidious crime, which has so long dogged legitimate enterprise, business and trading throughout Northern Ireland.

I will conclude simply by saying that I hope that all colleagues in the House support our amendment, which strengthens the motion.

Mr Ross: I thank Mr Bell, for setting the scene for the motion, and the Members who contributed to the debate today. As many Members mentioned, it follows on from a debate on organised crime that my colleagues tabled in the House of Commons at the beginning of March. Of course, fuel laundering was a significant part of that debate. Perhaps, this time next month, Mr Bell will be joining them on the green Benches at Westminster and can continue some of the work he has started on these blue Benches today.

This is a serious issue. There needs to be coordination between the House of Commons and Stormont. This is one of those issues that requires joined-up collaboration among a number of agencies, whether it be the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the NCA, the Department of Justice here, the Ministry of Justice at Westminster and, of course, HMRC. It is a crime that costs the UK £400 million per annum. Here in Northern Ireland, as many Members outlined, it is £80 million annually, according to the figures that we have. As Mr Bell outlined at the beginning of the debate, it accounts for 13% of the fuel trade here in Northern Ireland, compared to only 2% in Great Britain. As nearly all Members mentioned in their contributions, there is an impact on the environment, the water supply because of illegal dumping, and legitimate trade, and there is a huge loss of revenue that should be going to Treasury. Mr Bell put that in context when he said that the amount of revenue lost is the equivalent of 857 nurses. It puts it in some context when we learn of that.

One of the concerning themes throughout the debate was the fact that a number of Members questioned why little or no action has been taken against those responsible for fuel laundering in Northern Ireland. Many Members pondered whether a blind eye is being turned to that sort of criminality. Mr Maginness asked whether there was a light touch towards that sort of crime. That is something that we have to be very concerned about. There is a saying here in Northern Ireland that even the dogs in the street know what is going on. Having followed Mr Bell's Twitter feed and his electioneering, I do not think that there is a

breed of dog that he has not talked to in his research for the debate today. On a serious note, it adds to the level of cynicism amongst members of the public if they feel that this sort of crime is going on, they know who is involved in it, but they do not see those individuals being brought before the courts and, ultimately, being put behind bars. Indeed, as one Member mentioned, when we hear reports of the fact that, before the law authorities arrive at one of the plants, laptops have been destroyed and papers have been removed, it suggests that somebody was tipped off. That adds to the cynicism that there is, perhaps, in the public; I have certainly picked up on it during the debate here today.

Mr Bell talked about it being a crime with consequences. That is a hugely important comment; it is not a victimless crime. The profits being made from fuel laundering quite often fund illegal terrorist activity; they fund organisations that are intent on destroying and murdering people in our community. He also raised the concern about the lack of prosecutions and convictions. That theme ran through the contributions of all Members this afternoon.

Mr Attwood, in proposing the amendment, which we, on this side of the House, are comfortable with supporting, spoke of the importance of the NCA now operating in Northern Ireland. That is a positive contribution that the SDLP has made. It is unfortunate that it took so long, but we are there now; that is the important thing. He said that it is important that no individual or organisation be off limits. He suggested that this piece of work is a test for the NCA and that the public will be looking for action. That is right. He talked about the plants that are active in south Armagh, the 50 tons of waste being dumped and their capability of producing significant amounts of illegal fuel annually and yet only one arrest has been made. If anything comes out of the debate today, it is our frustration that we do not see convictions of those involved in that illegal activity. He also talked about the need to seize the assets of criminality; something that the Minister mentioned in his contribution as well. He also talked about some of the other counterfeit materials, whether that be tobacco or alcohol. I will resist talking about the impact that plain packaging will have on making it easier for counterfeit tobacco products in Northern Ireland.

In Mr Lynch's contribution, he condemned those involved in illegal fuel laundering and called them criminals, but, interestingly, he did not say that he would support the NCA in trying to put those criminals behind bars. That is where

Sinn Féin is becoming increasingly isolated in the community; it will not support the NCA in tackling not just fuel laundering but a range of crimes that are affecting people across Northern Ireland. Mr Beggs talked about —

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will.

Mr Attwood: Returning to Mr Maginness's point, if Mr Lynch now maintains that any republican involved in fuel laundering is a criminal, would it not be very important to hear from him and his colleagues today that any republican ever involved in fuel laundering was and is a criminal?

Mr Ross: One would imagine that that logic would follow. Indeed, when Sinn Féin talks about those involved in terrorism today being wrong, it follows that those involved in terrorism in the past were also wrong. I am quite sure that that point will not be lost on the public.

Mr Beggs made the point about the dangers of fuel laundering to public health. He talked about the toxins that are released into the countryside and the water supply. He appealed for those with information to bring it forward. Indeed, to follow on from the point, given that Sinn Féin has said that those involved in this sort of activity are criminals, it follows that it should also be encouraging people to bring information forward to the police. Mr Beggs asked what is going on with law enforcement, which is a theme that, as I said, many Members raised.

Mr Dickson, who along with me tabled the motion on the NCA that was successfully passed at the beginning of February, said that he hopes that the tide has turned, pointing out the number of fuel plants that have been dismantled and the fact that the cost of fuel is coming down. As much as I would like to agree with Mr Dickson — I hope that he is right — I will point out that a number of individuals are concerned at the type of activity that is going on and that, although we are discovering fuel plants and shutting them down, we are not necessarily seeing convictions. I think that the public would want to see fuel plants being shut down and people being brought in front of the courts and put behind bars. The cost of fuel has come down of late, although I suspect that that will not last for too long with the manipulation of the market in the Middle East. The people who are involved in this sort of activity are making huge profits. That will

continue, and I do not think that that situation would deter them.

Mr Dickson and the Minister talked about the fuel markers, but Mr Bell pointed out at the beginning that there are serious concerns about whether the type of marker that the Government favour is the best available. As the Minister acknowledged, I mentioned the lack of roadside capability. I think that that is important if we are to tackle this properly. I know that, in a House of Commons debate, many Members pointed to some of the technology that the Brazilian Government were able to use to help to counter the illegal fuel trade there. Mr Dickson, in concluding, called on Sinn Féin to "tell us what you know." I think that many Members would agree with that.

Lord Morrow said that it is a tragedy that we are discussing this issue here once again. It shows that little improvement has been made. He asked whether south Armagh is a no-go area for law enforcement agencies and whether HMRC is too scared to go there. If HMRC is to do its job properly, it is important that it is given support from other law enforcement agencies. I think that we all want to see HMRC go to areas of south Armagh where perhaps it is not particularly welcome and tackle this issue head on. That is hugely important.

Mr McCartney said that he supported his colleague Mr Lynch's comments, and he warned the House against media reports with unnamed sources. He did not, of course, question that this type of activity is going on, nor did he say that he would support the NCA in tackling it. That is important to note as well.

My colleague Jonathan Craig, a member of the Policing Board, of course, talked about the role that fuel laundering profits played during the Troubles. He said that those profits were used to bankroll the Provisional IRA. That point was also made by Mr Alban Maginness who, in his conclusion, talked about the lucrative nature of the business and the complex escape tunnels, lookout posts and material at the fuel laundering plants. Those again show the sophistication in some of the plants that are making this illegal fuel.

Mr Patsy McGlone talked about the poison of the toxins that are released, and he made the important point that, where this activity is going on, people are poisoning their own communities. It is the people who live beside them and who the launderers are friendly with and, in many cases, related to who are suffering from these toxins being put into their waterworks. I think that that it is an important

point. He also, in common with other Members, asked why nobody is ever at the fuel plants when they are discovered.

Mr Allister spoke about a number of issues. The Minister highlighted the difficulty in catching people in the act, as these plants operate independently, are automated and can be unattended. However, Mr Allister pointed out that many ordinary farmers are caught out in some of their activities by satellite imagery. He asked why similar technology cannot be used to see plants where large-scale lorries and tankers are coming and going at different points of the day. I am quite sure that there is technology that could see where that kind of activity is going on and that would help law enforcement agencies to bring those people to book. He said that it was inconceivable that this level of fuel laundering was going on with nobody knowing about it. He finished by calling for tough guidelines in the event of a conviction. I am sure that all law-abiding people would concur with that.

4.00 pm

The Minister spoke about a number of issues. I think that it is important that we look at whether fuel stations that are selling illegal fuel should be named and shamed. I do not buy the argument that they are changing their supplier every other week. Therefore, I think that they have a responsibility to ensure that the product that they are selling is legal and has its duty paid. We will watch progress on that with interest. It is important that we do not take our eye off the ball on this issue. There is concern across the community, and I look forward to more convictions in the future. I certainly give my support to the law enforcement agencies in tackling the issue.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the continuing high levels of fuel laundering, the organised criminal activity surrounding it and the evident lack of criminal prosecutions; notes the environmental damage caused to the countryside; recognises the financial losses suffered by Her Majesty's Treasury and legitimate fuel operators and the consequential serious implications for the local economy; further notes that legislation extending the role of the National Crime Agency in Northern

Ireland has completed its passage at Westminster and that the National Crime Agency must now demonstrate that it will deploy its full powers and resources against any and all persons or organisations involved in fuel laundering and other organised crime; and calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure action is taken at every operational level to secure greater numbers of prosecutions for this serious crime.

Westminster Elections

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the potential for a hung Parliament following the Westminster elections; further notes that the votes of Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland could be critical in relation to the formation of the next Westminster Government; and calls on all Members of Parliament returned from Northern Ireland to play their full part in achieving the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland, in particular in relation to the block grant and welfare provisions.

I am glad to move the motion this afternoon. It is quite clear that this is one of the most interesting Westminster elections that we have seen in quite a while. For the first time in a long time, people here can have a say in what type of British Government are formed, what type of policies they will follow and what impact that will have on us here. We are all very good here at blaming the British when we run out of money, and we are very good at, rightly, recognising that the Tory cuts have been detrimental to our people and that the welfare cuts have had a very real and dangerous impact on the people of the North. If we recognise that, we have to recognise that that is where the decisions are being made in relation to those key areas of budget and welfare. The logical outworking of that is that we go there, as a starting point, and that we go there to maximise our influence to best serve the people of the North. That is what the SDLP intends to do. We want to join others in a kind of Celtic coalition to help lock David Cameron out of Downing Street. I think that would be a good result.

We have heard people in the Chamber, people on protest rallies and people from trade unions talk about the impact that the Tory Government have had in the North, whether on the welfare system or on our block grant. When we are offered the opportunity of an election in Westminster, whatever some of us might think about the fact that we, unfortunately, still have to go to there to represent our people, I think it is incumbent on all of us to take up that opportunity to put the case and get the best possible deal for people here.

The Tory Party has said that its very first act would be to reduce the benefit cap. If that is going to be its first act, I worry very much about what its second, third, fourth and fifth acts will be. I think that the potential Tory Government or Tory/UKIP Government, with, maybe, the DUP as well, are determined to reduce even further the welfare provisions for the most vulnerable; they are determined to reduce even further the pay and conditions for our public sector; and they are determined to reduce the size of government. We all know what kind of an impact that will have here and on people in constituencies like my own that suffer unemployment issues and suffer as a result of bad government and bad politics. We are determined to make our voice heard; I encourage other people to do the same.

I ask the DUP to make it clear that, if it is within its gift, it will not allow a Tory Government to do what they have been doing, multiplying the impact on the people here. Equally, I ask Sinn Féin to review its policy of abstentionism, because, if it is able to sit in here and Dáil Éireann, how does that not apply to Westminster? I understand that people can be abstentionist if they want, but I do not think that there is a consistent message in sitting in here while there is still no united Ireland. I do not understand. If there is a place that people need to be represented in, people need to go and do that representing. We need to join with the other progressive forces across these islands in trying to prevent another Tory Government and trying to support a Labour Government that will do the right thing because we make sure that they do the right thing. What we need to look for from the negotiations that, I think, will be inevitable after the Westminster election is a proper, better and fairer deal for the North.

What should the Barnett consequentials of the HS2 project look like if we get them? Based on DFP's figures, it should be £1.3 billion for the North of Ireland. Imagine the infrastructure development that we could put in place with £1.3 billion. People talk about welfare all the time. We need to tackle welfare dependency,

and the best way to do that is to put people into work. The way that you put people into work is by investing in infrastructure and skills. We want a deal that ensures expanded university provision and expanded infrastructure investment right across the North, so that places like Derry can begin to properly contribute to the economy of the North, therefore reducing the welfare bill and leading to all the positive things that flow from that. We would also like to see a city deal for Derry — my colleagues from other cities will allow me this indulgence — that will allow us to ring-fence funding and borrowing powers for people in Derry and to implement all those things that we would like to see happen.

I have another major worry about this election. One of the potential Governments that are talked about is one made up of the Conservative Party, UKIP and potentially the DUP. What would that end up with? It would end up with there being a referendum on Britain's involvement in the European Union. Does anybody in the House think that a British exit from the European Union would be good for Britain or here? When we are sitting with a land border with another jurisdiction that is part of the European Union, I cannot understand how that would be a positive thing for the North of Ireland. In fact, look at the direct funding that came from the EU between 2007 and 2013. It was £1.3 billion in single farm payments; £330 million through the Northern Ireland rural development fund; £18 million through the European Fisheries Fund; £180 million through Peace III; over £300 million through the European regional development fund; £165 million through the European social fund element; and £77 million through INTERREG IV. That is without even talking about the benefits from doing trade with other member states. After this election, we are potentially looking at a Conservative/UKIP/DUP alliance that would allow for an exit from the European Union. People in Northern Ireland should be very scared of that, and, in our view, the only way to stop it is to ensure that we have a Labour Government in Downing Street, one that have their feet held to the fire by progressive forces from the Celtic areas around here.

I am an Irish nationalist and I would love not to have to go to Westminster. I would far rather go to our own national Parliament in Dublin, but the fact remains that power rests with Westminster, and, as democrats, we will go to Westminster to try to get the best possible deal for our people. We will go to Westminster to try to lock David Cameron out of Downing Street and ensure a progressive alliance in the next

British Government. I hope that others will hear the call and join us in that fight.

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, which is very timely as we come up to 7 May, and the election draws ever closer. I listened with interest to what the proposer of the motion said, and I think that the issue of Europe needs to be looked at very quickly. Amongst those who wish for the status quo with Europe to remain, there is hysteria about the very prospect of a referendum, but, importantly, there has not even been any agreement at this stage on what the referendum question would be. Given that, at this point in the election, we do not know what will happen on 7 May in any great form, we have to be careful not to allow ourselves to get drawn into an almost hysterical position on what our future relationship with Europe would look like. That broader discussion will definitely need to happen, but I am not convinced that this is the time to do it.

That said, I welcome the Member's premise. It is very telling, and it will not go unnoticed by the electorate, that there are people, even in the Assembly, who are very vocal in their opposition to the so-called Tory cuts, but, when they have the opportunity to make their voices heard in the national Parliament, they refuse to do so and miss that opportunity. The electorate's patience is growing thin. I believe that, in this election, the electorate will be looking not only at those who are shouting the loudest but at those who are backing up their words with actions.

This is a unique opportunity, and the precedent has been set. The Member for Foyle makes a very good point in that Northern Ireland is within the United Kingdom — long may that be the case, as far as I am concerned — but, while that is the case, what excuse do the parties that do not take their seats have, because the precedent has been set in other places?

If we look at the Israeli Parliament, for example, there is a very strong Israeli Arab representation, and it would be easy for those people to throw their hands in the air and say that they do not agree with the state and what it is doing, so they will absent themselves. However, what they say is that they can make a difference in the Parliament and can have the voices of their people heard. They back up their words with actions in the way that they do so. I struggle to see what the abstentionist parties really feel that they are achieving by taking that stance. There are more important issues for us to look at. What can be achieved by strong Northern

Ireland representation in the Mother of Parliaments in Westminster? From our point of view on this side of the House, we are putting the economy at the very centre of what we want to achieve, and we want to use our influence to ensure that Northern Ireland continues to prosper and to be looked on as a serious contender when it comes to foreign companies investing and creating wealth. The ability to set our own rate of corporation tax would be a hugely beneficial tool in making that grow even more. However, there is a huge question mark over whether, in the short to medium term, that will turn out to be the case while there is a continued failure on the part of some parties in the Assembly to face the realities that are being forced on us in relation to welfare reform.

I recognise that the Member for Foyle made specific mention of our party, and I am glad that even the nationalist parties are recognising that it looks like the DUP will be a strong contender for kingmaker when it comes to the next term. The Member will not be surprised to learn that I share his confidence. It is so important. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Indeed, it is a once-in-a-century opportunity for the parties of this island to have a real influence on the affairs of the national Parliament. That can be done only by returning a large, united group of people to Westminster. I believe with all my heart that the party on this side of the House is the only party that will be able to do that.

4.15 pm

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag caint in éadan an ruin seo inniu. I say at the outset that I oppose today's motion. I oppose it because, first, it is based on a false premise. It presupposes that there is a worth in taking seats at Westminster, that there is an impact and value to doing so and that it somehow reaps benefits for the people in the North. I have seen no benefits come to the North as a result of people taking their seats at Westminster, but it is up to them to do that. I represent West Belfast in the Assembly, and I can only say that I do not hear that from anybody there. Nobody has raised it with me — not once. Gerry Adams went before the people of West Belfast for many, many years, and he got a resounding endorsement on an abstentionist ticket. Nobody wanted Gerry Adams to take his seat, and that is the case throughout the North. Nobody who votes for Sinn Féin wants Sinn Féin to take seats in Westminster, because they do not see it as having value. Paul Maskey is going in front of the electorate in a few weeks' time, and I am sure that he will receive the same ringing

endorsement as Gerry Adams had before him. I am convinced of that.

The leader of the party that tabled the motion, Alasdair McDonnell, is not here today, and I am a bit disappointed, because I would like to have heard from him. I read in a paper that he is in the bottom 10 out of 645 MPs at Westminster in attendance for votes. That tells me that he does not have much confidence in the system either. If he has confidence in it, why is he not there using his vote to make the impact that, he feels, it would have? I would like to hear from Alasdair about why he is not here today to extol the virtues of taking his seat in Westminster. I thought that that might have been useful. However, we will go on and see whether he appears.

As for influence, Sinn Féin has participated in all the major negotiations and all the big political decisions that affect people in the North, and we have done that successfully without taking seats in Westminster. It has not been a requirement; actually, it has not even been relevant. We have had the Good Friday Agreement, the Hillsborough agreement, the St Andrews Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement. All five of the main parties here, plus the two Governments, signed up to the Stormont House Agreement without a mention of Westminster. It was just not part of the equation. Therefore, it does not matter that, out of that, people then reneged on their agreements; the fact is that agreement was made. It is a major agreement, and it is one that we need to get back to.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she tell the House why her party is so frightened to take its seats in the House of Commons? Is it the case that you cannot get by and around the swearing of the oath?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McCorley: I tell the Member that we are not frightened; we just do not see it as relevant. We are Irish republicans, so we want to have influence on the island of Ireland. That is where the sphere of influence lies, not in a British Parliament, and I will unashamedly stand by that, as will my colleagues in Sinn Féin. As for the oath of allegiance, I have no desire to take any oath of allegiance to a British Crown. That is my position and my party's position. It is up to other people to decide whether taking an oath of allegiance to a British Crown assists the people of Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms McCorley: I will.

Mr Beggs: Has the Member any interest in the taxes that are raised from her constituents? Is she aware that there are different oaths that can be sworn?

Ms McCorley: Sorry, I did not quite get the first bit of what you said.

Mr Beggs: Is she interested or concerned about the taxes that can be raised by Westminster, which can significantly affect her constituents, or, indeed, about the levels of benefits that are set at Westminster that, ultimately, we largely have to follow? By her absence, is she not accepting that she is leaving that to others? Furthermore, is she aware that a variety of oaths are available at Westminster if she happens to have a particular difficulty with the oath that most of us are content with?

Ms McCorley: In terms of taxes, what I and my party would like to see is more powers devolved to the North so that we could make our own decisions here. Whatever about what happens in Westminster, we will call for more powers to be devolved to the North, where we can make decisions for ourselves and not be beholden to decisions made by a Tory Government.

The part of the motion that I agree with is where it calls on all the people elected to come together to make the case for the best outcomes for people in the North. That is what Sinn Féin does; it is what we do every day. Everything we do is for making best outcomes for people in the North, and we do that without taking seats in Westminster.

Mrs Dobson: I am a confirmed and unashamed unionist. It is my firm opinion that, whether we face a hung Parliament or a massive majority for Conservative or Labour, every Member elected from Northern Ireland should, as the motion states, seek at all times:

"to play their ... part in achieving the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland".

When the last Labour Government left power, Liam Byrne left a note for his successor as Chief Secretary to the Treasury stating:

"Dear Chief Secretary. I'm afraid there is no money. Kind regards — and good luck! Liam."

The world economic situation meant that austerity was inevitable, regardless of who was in Downing Street. A Labour Government in 2010 would still have had to implement austerity policies. The collapse of the eurozone devastated the economies of the Republic of Ireland, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. The reality we face is that, in a bid to balance the books, there have been cuts in public spending in every English region plus Scotland and Wales, as well as Northern Ireland. We receive a subvention of £10 billion per year in Northern Ireland. The price of the Union is that we share in the national wealth when times are good and carry our share of the burden when times are not so good.

With regard to welfare provisions, there is no bottomless pit of money. We really must seek to put in place the welfare state we can afford. Since its inception in the post-war consensus of 1945, it has expanded massively and expensively. It should be a safety net and not a lifestyle choice. We should reform all aspects of public services to ensure that we deliver value for money and operate as effectively as possible.

It should go without saying that every Northern Ireland MP elected to Westminster should at all times seek to represent and do the best for his or her constituents. It is in the Mother of Parliaments that key decisions are taken on taxation, welfare and defence. That is what makes Sinn Féin's policy of abstention futile. How can you complain about the impact of a policy when you could not be bothered to turn up when it was being debated? Instead of sitting on the green Benches of Westminster, Sinn Féin MPs adopt an approach of sitting on their hands. Would it not have made more sense to take their seats in the House of Commons and engage in debates on issues such as the Budget, taxation and welfare reform? There was a time when republicans pledged "No return to Stormont", yet here we all are. Perhaps one day they may take their seats at Westminster and represent the people who choose to elect them. The work done at Westminster is vital to daily life in all corners of our nation.

It is the duty of all the 18 individuals elected from Northern Ireland to go to Westminster to participate fully in debates and Committees. No matter what the result of the election on May 7 is, whether there is a clear victory for one party or a hung Parliament, the Ulster Unionist Party will not seek to exploit our fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom. A stable Union is the most important result a good unionist should hope for in the election. Ulster Unionist

MPs will be responsible citizens of the United Kingdom and will defend, promote and advance the Union at this time of immense uncertainty. While our MPs will seek to do the best they can for the people of Northern Ireland, we will also work in the best interests —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I have almost finished my speech.

We will also work in the best interests of our country as a whole. In the event of neither Labour nor the Conservatives securing a majority of seats in the House of Commons, the Ulster Unionist Party will not go to Downing Street holding out a begging bowl. Ulster Unionist Party values are not an auction item available to the highest bidder.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Assembly's election broadcast on behalf of the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party, the DUP and Sinn Féin, whether they are taking their seats or not.

We have had five years of Tory-led Government in Northern Ireland. It is difficult to describe them as good years, whether it has been cuts, foreign policy or a wide range of other issues that that Government have embarked on for all citizens in the United Kingdom. I welcome the opportunity for a change of Government in Whitehall, but the wording of the motion somewhat perturbs me. It calls for Members to be returned to seek:

"the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland".

Surely that is what the 18 Members of the last mandate in Westminster must and should have been doing. Certainly, I know one Member who has been doing that: Naomi Long, the Member for East Belfast. She has been delivering for the citizens of Northern Ireland and for the people of East Belfast. She voted in over half of the divisions in the previous Parliament, and she has been a strong voice for progressive politics in many areas. She influences, and, if Sinn Féin wants to know about welfare cuts and why it feels that its abstentionism has benefited the citizens of Northern Ireland, you only have to look to the record of an MP like Naomi Long, who has influenced legislation at Westminster to the point of change.

Of course, let us look, by stark contrast, at the party that tabled the motion. Its leader has only voted in 27 % of the Divisions. In fact, Dr McDonnell cost the taxpayer over £3,000 for

every vote that he makes in Westminster. I will leave it up to the Members of this House to decide whether that is money well spent or not. How on earth can we be expected to take lessons on influencing government from the SDLP, when it only shows up for 27% of the votes? Perhaps Dr McDonnell can confirm to the electorate — of course, he is not here today — whether he will continue the shameful double-jobbing, providing a poor service to his constituents and ignoring the consensus that it is a disgraceful situation to maintain.

That brings us to the elephant in the room: the party that stands for election but does not take its seats. The party that complains, grandstands and allows us to be vulnerable to Tory cuts but cannot bring itself to do the right things and represent its constituents where it matters. All that stands in stark contrast to the Member for East Belfast, Naomi Long. She does not have two or three jobs, she has one job: representing the citizens of East Belfast with energy, enthusiasm and dedication. She will do that again in this election.

It is time that Members of Parliament, whatever party they come from in Northern Ireland, stop taking out the begging bowl and, instead, want to be returned as confident Members of Parliament to try to move this country forward. I hate to pour cold water on the coalition ambitions of the parties here, but what sane party of national government in the United Kingdom would go near either the DUP or the SDLP? The DUP is a party that talks about British emblems and symbols but wishes to exempt Northern Ireland from the social progress made in the rest of the United Kingdom and is keen to ignore British values of liberal democracy and tolerance. It is a party that does not have a single female candidate.

The SDLP is similar. It has a leader whose views on a range of issues would likely see that Member excluded from its sister party. It cannot even keep to its word here in Stormont on such key agreements as the Stormont House Agreement, so how on earth would any national Government trust it in Westminster? Of course, ultimately, Sinn Féin is just a bystander in the real politics of Westminster, never mind its baggage.

4.30 pm

Once again, this should be about taking Northern Ireland forward, stepping out and stepping up on behalf of all the citizens of Northern Ireland. Sadly, the citizens of East Belfast cannot have the choice of Mrs Dobson's

party because it is not standing there. This is not about cash; this is about building a Northern Ireland that all our citizens can be proud of, a Northern Ireland that will stop being the illiberal backwater it is so often perceived as, so that we can play a meaningful and proud role representing all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Mr G Robinson: First, I congratulate all my party colleagues who are outgoing Members of Westminster as they have represented Northern Ireland consistently and with dignity in the Mother of Parliaments during the last few years and more. I believe that, whether or not there is a hung Parliament, DUP Members will continue to argue Northern Ireland's case and seek the "best possible outcomes" for Northern Ireland. At least my party MPs are in their Westminster seats to argue Northern Ireland's case, week in and week out.

I am confident that MPs who are returned for the DUP will continue a tradition of not hitching their political wagon to any single political party unless the needs of Northern Ireland are being fully addressed, particularly from an economic and austerity point of view. The concerns about the block grant and welfare provision have to be part of any discussions in the event of a hung Parliament, regardless of others' wish lists. I am confident that all returned DUP MPs will have Northern Ireland's best interests at heart and will be arguing the case for the additional funding required to continue the improvement in our local economy.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: I am finished.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was not expecting to be called so quickly.

Coming into the Chamber for the debate this evening, I prepared myself to listen to all the great achievements that have been grasped from the hands of power at Westminster by the various parties. I am not surprised, however, that I have not heard anything. The BBC leaders' debate last week featuring the parties from Britain is a stark illustration of the complete failure of local parties to make any impact whatsoever at Westminster. There was no voice and no concern for local issues, and I thought that it was a very pertinent example of how local issues simply do not hit the political radar when it comes to the Westminster political elite. To pretend anything else is a complete fallacy, and I think that parties are simply horse-

trading for votes ahead of an election when they talk about being kingmakers.

The DUP likes to believe that it will be the kingmaker in a new Government; it talks itself up, but it is complete nonsense. I think that there is an awakening in Britain as well, in that people are starting to realise and to ask who exactly they will be getting into bed with when it comes to the DUP. It is a party that would undoubtedly look to set back the clock on civil rights across these islands; it is a party that, in recent weeks, has been involved in race rows; and some of its leadership figures believe that the earth is not older than 6,000 years. I think that that is starting to resonate in Britain and that people are starting to ask who the DUP is. This is the party, of course, that, amongst its leadership, has climate change deniers as well. I think that some of the questions will start to shine a light.

From the SDLP, there is such hypocrisy. Last week, when its leader was questioned on his very, very poor attendance record, he said that his constituents do not want to see him sitting in Westminster. That is exactly what Sinn Féin is saying. You are wasting your time talking to yourself on the green Benches at Westminster. Anything that people have gathered has been gathered from direct negotiations, be it the devolution of policing and justice powers or the devolution of corporation tax that is eventually coming. It has been direct negotiations with the British Government, and that is exactly what it is.

My colleague has outlined some of the issues around the principles of this. It goes without saying that a British Parliament never has, does not, and never will have any right to adjudicate over Irish affairs. We stand firmly behind that. It is one of the reasons why, as a party, we received the most votes at the Westminster election last year. It is not as if, as one of the Members claimed recently, we are somehow conning the electorate. We go to the electorate as proud Irish republicans. Since Countess Markievicz was elected the first female to the Westminster Parliament and did not take her seat, we do not take our seats at Westminster.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: I will not be giving way, no. We will not be taking our seats at Westminster: it is as simple as that.

I am not surprised at the SDLP. I know that when the late Eddie McGrady died, Seamus Mallon was on the radio talking about how they used to miss votes at Westminster because

they were off seeing matinees in the West End in London. Then they have the cheek to say that we are somehow not representing our party or constituents if we are not over in Westminster. Well, you are not even in Westminster. You are at West End matinees and everywhere else. It is about being truthful to the electorate and to the people we represent.

It is important that we look to repatriate as many powers as possible away from the London-centric elite and back home to Ireland, because it is here in Ireland that we are going to build the society that the previous Member was talking about, in the interests of our people.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat a Cheann Comhairle as an deis labhairt sa díospóireacht seo inniu. I will begin by responding to some of the points made by other Members. Ms McCorley and Mr Dickson have criticised Alasdair McDonnell's attendance record at Westminster. Alasdair McDonnell has been at Westminster for 100% of the votes on Northern Ireland, which is where he is elected to represent. He is not elected to represent north-east England or south-west England: he is representing South Belfast. Any vote pertinent to that region has been attended and actively participated in by Dr McDonnell.

Sinn Féin makes much of its view that it does not recognise the British Parliament, yet we have seen its members, down through the years, running back and forth to Downing Street. That is a de facto recognition of the British Government.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. Would the Member agree with me that Sinn Féin appears to have some degree of amnesia when it comes to the issue of what goes on in this place? The Education Bill, which was recently brought forward by the previous Member's Minister, starts with the words:

"BE IT ENACTED ... by the Northern Ireland Assembly and assented to by Her Majesty".

Surely this is a clear indication that to make a viewpoint that the British have no say in the affairs of Northern Ireland is utterly insane.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. Hypocrisy has never troubled Sinn Féin in the past, and I do not see why it should begin to trouble it now. Ms McCorley makes

much of the fact that negotiations are carried on between the parties here, but what does she say after that?

"it does not matter that ... people then reneged on their agreements".

What a statement to make. I am sure the Irish language community, who have no Irish language Act because people reneged on their agreements, will not welcome that statement.

The descent by Mr Hazzard into insulting the memory of Eddie McGrady is hardly worth comment. It speaks for itself.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: I will.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that it is no wonder that the electorate is confused over Sinn Féin's stance of not taking its seats at Westminster, when it has taken its seats here and in the Dáil, even though, over the years, it said it would not do so. Is it not the case that the only time that Sinn Féin negotiates with the British is for an on-the-run letter or a royal prerogative of mercy?

Mr D Bradley: The Member makes very good points. There is little doubt that we will be facing a hung Parliament and that MPs returned from this region will play a decisive role in the formation of a new Government.

David Cameron wants votes from the DUP to add to a coalition with UKIP. Sinn Féin, of course, will not be there and will make things easier for the Tories — that is, if it will not be there. There seems to be some confusion about that. Michelle Gildernew says, "Never say never". Mickey Brady says, "The policy is always open to review", just as it was in the case of Leinster House or just as it was in the case of this House. These are the people who used to sing:

"take it down from the mast, Irish traitors".

They used to sing that to the Irish Labour Party, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Now they are busting their backs to get into Leinster House. We can see who makes the U-turns. It is certainly clear to me.

The SDLP is the only —

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: You did not give way to Mrs Kelly, so I do not see why I should give way to you.

The SDLP is the only party in this region that has said that it will be there with the Scottish Nationalist Party, with the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, and with the Greens to work with the Labour Party to ensure that it does the right thing by our people here. We will hold the Labour Party true to its values and ensure that we begin phase 2 of the peace process — the prosperity process. We clearly outlined that in our manifesto.

We will stand against the serious threat UKIP poses to our relationship with Europe. To judge UKIP, all we have to do is look at some of its representatives here in Northern Ireland. I need say no more. Even more than England, Scotland and Wales, we here have a deep and unique link with Europe, mainly because of our trade relationship with the Republic. Not many people will be aware of this, but the Republic is the biggest source of inward investment for Northern Ireland. Any change in the link with Europe would be devastating for us here, and people on all sides of the House should remember that.

The SDLP has stood firm on welfare reform and will continue to do so in the next Parliament. Our MPs voted against Tory Budgets of fiscal responsibility, which would enforce £30 billion of cuts on the next Government —

Mr Speaker: Thank you. The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way for a moment?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: We voted against the welfare cap, the bedroom tax, and we will do so again. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Lord Morrow: We as a party will obviously support the motion. I congratulate the SDLP on coming to the reality of the situation. It has been denied up until today's debate. It is simply this: yes, potentially, the DUP will have a big influence on the forming of the next Government and, indeed, will perhaps even decide who will be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I say to the SDLP, "Well done. You were a wee bit slow in coming to it, but, nevertheless, you are there now". It was interesting to listen to Mr Hazzard. He was bouncing about, hitting everybody and

sundry as he thought. This thought came into my head: when you throw a stone into a pack of dogs, you always know the one you have hit. It is the one that growls the loudest. That is just how Mr Hazzard came across. He obviously now sees the new dawn breaking, but his colleague Michelle Gildernew seems to be a step ahead of him, because she is already paving the way for Sinn Féin to do another about-turn and U-turn. She has said, "We will never say never to taking our seats in Westminster". Now, of course, that is not what Mr Hazzard is saying; he can never see the day when Michelle Gildernew and co will go in and take their seats. Michelle Gildernew can see the day coming, and maybe Mr Brady agrees with her; I do not know. We will perhaps hear from him on that subject later.

It is patently obvious that, when things become clear after this election and when all is said and done, it will be the DUP that will have the greatest influence of any party from Northern Ireland. That has been accepted, I think, by everybody who has spoken. They might not have used those words, but that is quite clear. Why do we say that? We say it because we know that Sinn Féin, at the present time and perhaps for the next Parliament anyway, has said that it will not take its seats. So it goes out and gets people to elect it not to take its seats.

4.45 pm

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Right, OK. Come on.

Mr Dickson: On the point of Sinn Féin not taking its seats, I am sure that Lord Morrow will agree with me that the hundreds of thousands of pounds that have been taken by way of expenses for those seats that are not taken in Westminster is a sort of halfway house between taking your seat and not taking your seat. Perhaps he would like to comment on the sums of money that have been put into the coffers of Sinn Féin by the British Government and the British Parliament that they will not take their seats in.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Lord Morrow: Thank you. Mr Dickson made a very good point. He does not always make good points, but he has done it today. *[Laughter.]* Sinn Féin not taking only goes so far: when it comes to taking the cash, we will have that all right. We like that; we like the smell of that and we like the pounds.

Therefore, the expenses are very good, and they will have those.

Returning to the debate, the reason why we say that a strong DUP team will have the biggest influence of any party in Northern Ireland is simple. The SDLP have already made it very clear that they are tied to the Labour Party, so they are already bought and sold. Sinn Féin will not be there, as we have said, at least for this Parliament. All the other parties are far too small and insignificant and so will have absolutely no influence. They will take their seats, and rightly so, but they will have absolutely no influence at all. Therefore, in a hung Parliament, it will be left to the DUP, potentially, to be kingmakers. There are those who might want to deny that, but reality sometimes speaks much louder.

In the motion, we have an opportunity, and that is why we are enthusiastic about voting for it. The motion states very clearly that it:

"further notes that the votes of Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland could be critical in relation to the formation of the next Westminster Government".

Every pundit and opinion poll to date has suggested that it will most likely be a hung Parliament. All the pollsters are united on that issue. Therefore, we can see that Northern Ireland could and maybe will have a real influence after the next election.

Mr Dickson spoke about the Member who will leave her seat on 7 May, who, he said, has put in a great performance. Well, all good things come to an end, and that will be the case for Naomi on 7 May. However, there are others. Her successor will carry on and do a superb job in the Houses of Parliament.

Sinn Féin tells us that they are opposed to austerity and do not want welfare cuts or anything like that. What did they do to try to stop them? Absolutely nothing. They would not speak to the Government, the people who make those decisions, and it was left to the DUP and others to try to influence the Government and say that the austerity measures were too steep. The result was that we were influential in making many changes to those measures. Hence, they let down the working-class people of Northern Ireland, whom they claim to represent.

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

Lord Morrow: They turned their head, looked the other way and walked away, but, come the new Parliament, the DUP will not do that. We will stand up tall and strong for the people of Northern Ireland. The House can be assured of that.

Mr McKinney: I begin by recognising the opposition to the motion of Sinn Féin. Rosie McCorley stuck rigidly to her view. It has been said by other Members who spoke that perhaps she and Chris Hazzard could have had a conversation with Mickey Brady, who is sitting two seats down, or with Michelle Gildernew in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

The comments from the Sinn Féin Members in this room are fixed; they have said that they will not take their seats. Therefore, are they saying, when the opportunity comes, as it has in the past, for elected Members from Northern Ireland to go to Westminster to vote against war, that Sinn Féin will reject that opportunity?

Well, you have heard it here. Sinn Féin would be given the opportunity to vote against war, like the SDLP did.

Mr Hazzard: You saved Iraq, all right.

Mr McKinney: And you sat in your seats, all right, but they were in comfy back kitchens somewhere and you had no impact. Are you also saying that, given the opportunity of taking the concerns of the hard-pressed people of Northern Ireland and the vulnerable people of West Belfast, North Belfast, Derry and Strabane right to the heart of those who write the cheques, Chris Hazzard, were he elected in South Down, would not go and defend those people? Not that he will get elected in South Down, now that we are into party election broadcasts.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes, I will.

Mr Hazzard: The Member's sister party was in power for over a decade. Name me one time that your party was able to get a favour for vulnerable people in the North.

Mr McKinney: You have done absolutely nothing. We have —

Mr Hazzard: Your sister party was in power for over a decade —

Mr Speaker: Order. All comments must be made through the Chair.

Mr McKinney: I will answer it. Chris Hazzard is enjoying a life here in politics that follows 40 years of violence that his party supported and which the SDLP said had to come to an end. We said that politics was the only answer and that peace was the only answer. During the political process, we said that power-sharing was the way forward. What did Sinn Féin say about that? They rejected it all and came kicking and screaming to it. What did we do through our influence at Westminster? We furthered that proposition, and we helped deliver devolution here.

What we need to do now is make sure that devolution is beginning to work. How can we do that when the block grant is being strangled by a Tory system that would be supported by the DUP, by the way? Remember, once again, that it is also being supported by a vote for Sinn Féin. A Sinn Féin vote in an abstentionist position gives more power to the Tories to cut. *[Interruption.]* You might laugh, Chris, but do not laugh when you meet the people from the Downe Hospital tomorrow who will have to listen to you on the one hand saying, "We feel your pain" but on the other saying that you will do nothing about it.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: I will.

Mr Hazzard: The Member has raised health. When the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill went through the Assembly, Margaret Ritchie was missing for 15 of the 16 votes. What did Margaret Ritchie do for health when it came to it?

Mr McKinney: Margaret Ritchie's record in standing up for the people of South Down does not take any criticism whatever. You will not be there, and, by saying what you are saying, you make an argument for going. Maybe now you are listening to Michelle Gildernew, and maybe now Mickey Brady would like to intervene and explain where he stands in relation to all this.

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way and I will explain? The remarks I made were taken totally out of context. When asked the question, I said, "All policies can be reviewed" — "all policies", not "a policy". I wish that people would stop misquoting me because it suits their purposes.

Mr McKinney: And that policy, of course, will include abstentionism or non-abstentionism, eventually, potentially, maybe.

I return to the comments of the proposer of the motion, Mr Colum Eastwood, who spelled out exactly what the situation here is. The poll of polls in the newspapers at the weekend showed that the Tories and Labour are both on 34%. There will be a hung Parliament, potentially. While the DUP spells out everything that that will do for them potentially, Colum has articulated what, I think, is at the core of a lot of this. A lot of inequality is emerging out of the Westminster dialogue or concept, and that inequality is affecting the north of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is room for a Celtic coalition. Through that vehicle, there is room for the argument that it is undermining our vulnerable people, our economy and our people in general to be put forward. A Labour Government with that number of seats and with conversations from us will be able to put a strong case.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes, I will.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that it is time that the peace dividend, which was much talked about in the past, was delivered? Does he also agree that the beginning of the next Parliament will be a good occasion to argue and ensure that that peace dividend comes? All that we have had until now is sleight of hand in an economic pact, and no real new money has come.

Mr McKinney: I value the Member's contribution. The reality is that we sit here today with an economy that is 66% public sector and 34% private sector. It is a weakened situation and is exactly the reverse of the Republic of Ireland. That 66% public sector is being constrained, and it would be constrained further by a Tory Government. As the SDLP articulated in its manifesto and will articulate going forward, we want a prosperity process. Remember, as I said, that it was an SDLP problem-solving approach that made the difference and said that violence would not pay and that, if anything, violence was destroying this place and pushing a united Ireland even further away. The aftermath of that has continued to do so. You only have to look at the strain on our health service and on our people with major mental health difficulties. You have the republican movement to thank for much of that.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes, I will.

Mrs D Kelly: Like me, has the Member discovered on the doorstep that, by and large, people are concerned mostly about our public sector, health, education and good services? At least our party stood up and voted against the Budget that Sinn Féin endorsed in recent Assembly debates.

Mr McKinney: Sinn Féin would have loved the opportunity to say that it voted against that in Westminster, but it cannot do that, because it will not take its seats. That is why it loves the concept of taking all that into a side-deal scenario.

Mrs D Kelly: They are there for the wine receptions.

Mr McKinney: You are right: they are there for the wine receptions, but they would love to take it off into a side-deal scenario where they could try to negotiate for themselves — ourselves alone — but not for the people of Northern Ireland and not for ambition for here.

All those years ago, it was the SDLP who said that violence was wrong. It was our plan for power-sharing. Now that you are quoting Séamus Mallon, you will recall "Sunningdale for slow learners". It was our plan for power-sharing way back in the 1970s that culminated in the political developments in the later part of the last century.

Mr Bradley's point is absolutely right: the Westminster Government employed, if you like, a fire-and-forget policy for devolution. They gave us the power, and now they are cutting the purse strings. The SDLP, for one, will be at the forefront against that agenda in Westminster, not sitting in a back kitchen.

Mr Sheehan: What have you been doing up to now?

Mr McKinney: We have been doing it and winning the arguments. We will continue.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McKinney: When we said, "End violence", you all said no. You all said that it would not be power-sharing. Now you are all saying no when we talk about a prosperity process. We will win the argument.

Question put.

Mr Speaker: Standing Order 27(4) provides that where, within a reasonable time:

"two tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two tellers".

The motion is passed.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the potential for a hung Parliament following the Westminster elections; further notes that the votes of Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland could be critical in relation to the formation of the next Westminster Government; and calls on all Members of Parliament returned from Northern Ireland to play their full part in achieving the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland, in particular in relation to the block grant and welfare provisions.

Adjourned at 5.05 pm.

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