



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 20 June 2016
Volume 114, No 8

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Assembly Members

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, at the start of today's business, I want to inform the House that I wrote to the Speaker of the House of Commons last week to express our sorrow at the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP. I have asked him to pass the condolences of the Assembly to her parliamentary colleagues but particularly to her family, who have experienced a heartbreaking loss.

In this place, we have too much history of elected representatives from all sides of the Chamber being subject to threat or attack, but that makes it no easier to understand Jo Cox's murder. At a time of deep cynicism with politics across the Western World, Jo Cox will now shine out as a model of the role that we value as elected representatives: to be devoted to working with our constituents as we seek to improve our society on their behalf.

It should be of immense pride to Jo Cox's family that the tributes to her have demonstrated clearly that she was held in high esteem across the political spectrum. At a time when bitter and negative political debate is often more likely to dominate the airwaves, the tributes to her are a reminder of the fact that respect, good working relationships and friendships do exist in politics regardless of there being different parties holding different political views. Perhaps we all need to reflect on why it takes such a tragedy to remind our society of that.

As Speaker of the Assembly, I want to underline that it is for all of us to defend the important democratic right of elected representatives everywhere to engage with their constituents on the ground despite the personal risks and challenges that it may present. However, for today, let us recognise that a family has lost a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother. I know that I speak on behalf of the whole Chamber when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of Jo Cox MP as they grieve.

Matter of the Day

Jo Cox MP

Mr Speaker: Mr David Ford has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Jo Cox MP, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members will have three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has been completed.

Mr Ford: Last Thursday, we were all shattered to hear the news that, in the early afternoon, a Member of Parliament had been attacked and then, in that rather sombre statement from the police, that she had died. It is right this morning that, as MPs prepare for an almost unprecedented sitting at Westminster, those of us in this democratically elected Chamber take time to pay our tribute to Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the remarks that you have already made about the letter that you have written on behalf of us all to the Speaker of the House of Commons. I am sure that that action will be endorsed by everybody here today.

Of course, Jo Cox was much more than an MP. As you have just said, she was a much-loved daughter, sister, wife, mother and friend, and her death has clearly touched a very wide circle in her constituency and far beyond. The circumstances of the death are well known and do not need to be rehearsed in detail: a Member of Parliament shot and stabbed outside a library where she regularly held a constituency surgery, meeting the needs of her constituents. That is the norm for public representatives in every part of the UK.

What has emerged since that tragedy is that Jo Cox was a very exceptional person. Although she had entered Parliament only last year, she had already established a very strong reputation and made a very considerable

impression on her fellow MPs through her courage, compassion and commitment. That came following a route to Westminster that was not the easy route taken by some, of working for the party and then inheriting a safe seat. She had a substantial career, in which she worked on behalf of some of the world's poorest people in her capacity for Oxfam, where she campaigned on Syria and worked with people in Sudan, and she had a very significant effect on public opinion and on the formation of public policy. I believe that she then showed all that is best in politics. It was her wish and desire to serve her own neighbours: the people of the constituency in which she lived, where she had her roots and where she had been brought up. That perhaps made her more approachable than some MPs, but it may also, tragically, have made her more vulnerable.

Too many public representatives are subject to a tide of vilification for the work that they do, and it seems to be an issue that particularly affects women in public life, who are subjected to torrents of abuse from men who feel that they have some sort of right to spew out hatred. We need to recognise what has happened in this context.

Finally, let us remember the words of her husband when he paid tribute and said:

"She would have wanted two things above all else to happen now, one that our precious children are bathed in love and two, that we all unite to fight against the hatred that killed her."

That would be a real, living tribute to her.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): This is a very sad day for politics in the United Kingdom. I join others in thanking you, Mr Speaker, for the action that you have already taken in conveying to the Speaker of the House of Commons our deepest sympathy to her colleagues there.

The murder of Jo Cox was shocking. It was undoubtedly a tragic event that will live long in the memory. Thankfully, the murder of a Member of Parliament is a rare event, but we feel the loss all the more because of that. Outside of the murders carried out by Irish republicans in connection with the Troubles in Northern Ireland, this was the first murder of a Member of Parliament since 1812. Perhaps nowhere more than in Northern Ireland, we on all sides of the House understand the pain of the loss of a colleague, whether as Members of the Westminster Parliament, the old Stormont Parliament or those more broadly involved in politics in Northern Ireland. Although the threat

to those involved in politics here is not what it once was, we must all still remain vigilant. However, we must never close our doors to those who elect us or become detached from those who send us here.

Last Thursday was a dark day for politics because it was an attack on the whole democratic process, but, of course, it was, above all, a tragedy for Jo Cox's family and close friends. We especially remember her husband Brendan and her two young children.

I did not know Jo Cox personally, but it is clear from the many tributes to her and from talking to some of my Westminster parliamentary colleagues that she was a remarkable individual and was going to have a very strong, maybe even exceptional, career. Our prayers and sympathy go out to all those who knew Jo Cox personally in the difficult days that lie ahead.

Jo's murder serves as a timely reminder to all of us involved in politics that, despite the differences that we may have on one issue or another, there are values that are shared across the political spectrum and that we must never lose that thing that unites us. That was something very clear that came from her husband.

We owe it to her and to ourselves to conduct ourselves in a manner that is consistent with the best traditions of democracy. That does not mean that we should not argue or differ, but it does mean that we should do so in a more respectful tone than is sometimes the case. When I took over as First Minister, I made a call for us to do politics differently. We have made progress, but let this event help us to redouble our efforts in Northern Ireland.

On this day, let us remember the words of President Kennedy that civility is not a sign of weakness and remember that this dreadful event can bring a new civility to politics and not just for a few days. It can be seen as a new start in how politics is done.

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): First, Mr Speaker, I thank you for giving us the opportunity to say a few words on the terrible murder of Jo Cox. I also thank you for writing, on behalf of all of us, to the Speaker of the House of Commons, expressing our deepest sympathies and condolences to her colleagues at Westminster.

Obviously, in the first instance, when a terrible event like this happens, we think of the family. We think of her husband Brendan, her two children, her parents, her sister and the wider

family circle. I am sure the deepest sympathies and condolences of all Members go out to them at this tragic time. I also extend sympathy to the Labour Party, to her party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and all those in the Labour Party who had huge respect for Jo.

She obviously was an exceptional person, and to be killed in the way that she was killed was a total contradiction to the goodness and energy that she displayed through her work for some of the most underprivileged people, not just in her constituency but throughout the world. She was an internationalist, she was a feminist and she worked at the coalface with Oxfam with many people who had suffered as a result of conflict. For her to be killed in this way is absolutely terrible.

I also thank you for referring to the fact that, in our own circumstances over many years, elected representatives from parties on all sides of this House also lost their lives. That was the case for my party more than any other party in this Assembly.

All of this has to serve to inspire all of us to ensure, particularly given what we came through during the conflict here, that we continue to work together with a positive and constructive spirit and in a spirit of generosity with each other to ensure that we continue to move forward and be an example, as we have been, to those involved in the resolution of many conflict situations throughout the world.

This has been a very tragic event, but it is quite clear that the outpouring of grief, respect and sympathy for Jo Cox and her family shows that love will win out over hate in the end.

12.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I did not know Jo Cox. I would not pretend to have known much about her work as a Member of Parliament or previously with NGOs and on causes, but it is impossible not to be deeply impressed by what one has read and heard about that work from the many tributes and obituaries since Thursday's terrible, terrible events. That said, this is, first and foremost, a personal and family tragedy. As with the other speakers, my thoughts and prayers are with the two young girls and her husband, Brendan, whose words were so swift, so assured and so inspiring that it was difficult not to think of Gordon Wilson in the aftermath of the Enniskillen bombing.

As well as being a personal and family tragedy, it was an attack on democracy. It would be remiss not to remember those who have lost

their life as democrats in this country. Jo Cox was the first female MP, as I understand it, to be murdered. Robert Bradford, of course, was the first Northern Irish MP to be murdered during the Troubles. In November 1981, he was doing what Jo Cox was trying to do last Thursday: serving his constituents by holding a surgery in a community centre in Finaghy in Belfast. He was gunned down, along with, I believe, a council worker from that community centre who was also murdered on that very black day. Of course, he was not the only Ulster Unionist to die, but no party has a monopoly on the death of elected politicians during our Troubles. Sadly, we know only too well what it is like to see others attack the democratic process.

The best thing we can do to honour the memory of Jo Cox is to reaffirm ourselves to exclusively peaceful means and to recognise that, in a democracy, you will hear things you do not want to hear and see things you maybe do not want to see but the way to fix that is not through violence or murder but through persuasion, debate, belief in your cause and promoting it in an exclusively democratic manner.

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I thank you for contacting the Speaker at Westminster. I totally affirm the sentiment and condolences that you have expressed on our behalf.

Mr Eastwood: I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for the action you took to send our condolences to the Westminster Parliament. I add my condolences and those of my party and send them to Jo Cox's family, friends, constituents and party. I think we have all been moved by the manner of her death but, I think, even more so by the way in which she lived her life. Jo Cox was an internationalist, a human rights defender and a loud and determined advocate and voice for the voiceless. I think the best legacy she could ever have hoped to leave would be a whole new generation of people inspired to care about and campaign for the rights of the downtrodden.

It was sad this morning to listen on RTÉ radio to Mairead McGuinness and Joan Burton talking about the online and sometimes physical abuse that many of our colleagues across this island and across these islands — many of them women — have had to suffer from online trolls. I think of Máiría Cahill and other people who, every morning, wake up to a tirade of abuse. If there is anything we should do as a result of the murder, we should put our face against that type of activity. Nobody in our society who puts their name and puts themselves forward to do

public good and to represent their constituents should have to face that level of abuse. All of us in the House need to send out that message very clearly today. I wish and hope that Jo Cox's family are able to find some comfort in the outpouring of support they have received in the last number of days.

Ms Bailey: Like others in the Chamber, I did not have the privilege of knowing Jo Cox, but I have listened over the past few days and heard about her legacy and the work she carried out. I feel inspired that people such as Jo Cox put themselves forward for public life and that they can come forward and see value in every human being. I extend the deepest condolences of the Green Party to Jo's family, particularly to her husband Brendan and her two young children, who have shown tremendous strength and bravery in the face of such horror.

Jo was brutally murdered in her constituency while carrying out her duties on Thursday, and it was a direct attack on democracy. We, in Northern Ireland, are no strangers to such actions and intimidation, and I am glad that so many people are standing up in sympathy with Jo's family and expressing condolence along with everyone in Westminster. There has been talk about the reasons why this has happened, but we should all be aware and, for today, take a lead from Jo's family and focus on that which unites us and not that which divides us.

Mr Carroll: I offer our sympathy and solidarity to Jo Cox's family on her tragic killing. There has been an outpouring of grief across these islands at the tragedy. There has also been a big outpouring of grief and sympathy from people in Gaza and Palestine, a cause that Jo Cox firmly supported, and among those campaigning for Syrian refugees. Jo was a friend of refugees and campaigned in support of those who are fleeing war, poverty and destruction. It is important and appropriate on this day — World Refugee Day — to remember and commend the important campaigning work done by Jo in the field. As Jo's husband said after her tragic killing, we need to unite against hate, and her death shows the dangers of hatred and the dangers of the far right and those linked to far-right and fascist organisations. It is a reminder to us about the job that we still have to do to combat fear and racism and the challenges that we face in combating those who want to whip up fear and hatred against migrants and refugees.

Mr Allister: This was a chilling and a gruesome murder that has robbed our nation of what

appears to have been a very able and blossoming parliamentarian, and our nation will be the poorer for that. It is an assault on the democratic process, and, as a component of that, here in this part of the kingdom, we feel that too. Above all, this is the loss of a loving mother to two small children aged five and three, the same ages as my own grandchildren, and I can well imagine the unspeakable devastation of the loss of their mother. Whatever else we think of, I am sure that each of us is thinking, first and foremost, of a grieving husband and bereft children at the hands of wickedness.

Mr Nesbitt referred to the fact that we have empathy from our experience of having an MP from our own shores gunned down doing the same public service as Jo Cox. Robert Bradford, while serving his constituents at a surgery, was brutally cut down by gunmen who have never been brought to justice. I trust that all who today empathise and express sympathy about Jo Cox have done all that they can to bring to justice the murderers of Robert Bradford. Some, in the past, have saluted and glorified in such terror. Last Thursday's events are a salient reminder of how wrong that road is. I trust that there will emerge from this a respect for human life that, hitherto, some have not had and that this will not be a brutal killing that is misused, as some journalists have misused it, for political purposes.

This is a tragedy beyond measure for Parliament and for family, and it should not be exploited beyond that.

Mr Lyttle: I first learned of the brutal murder of Jo Cox from my wife. She spoke to me as a spouse with some experience of intimidation and threat. Perhaps because I learned of it, first, from my wife, first and foremost in my thoughts have been Jo's husband, Brendan, and her children and family, and they will continue to be foremost in my thoughts and prayers at this time.

It is clear that Jo Cox was a brave and courageous woman, dearly loved by her husband, children, family and colleagues. She was passionate about her family, her constituents and the values for which she stood: tolerance, inclusion, social and international justice and compassion over hate. It is clear that she dedicated her life to the now urgent challenge of extinguishing hate-inflaming myth-making in our community, particularly around the issue of immigration. I heard it said this week that we have to be inspired by her courageous and compassionate life rather than intimidated by the evil and hate that caused her

death. It was an attack on not only Jo, but her values and representative democracy, and we, therefore, have to heed the courageous and dignified call of her husband, Brendan, to unite against hate in her memory.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next items on the Order Paper are motions regarding Committee membership. As with similar motions, they will be treated as business motions, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Jennifer McCann replace Ms Caitríona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Education. — [Ms Ní Chuilín.]

Resolved:

That Mr Pat Sheehan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ní Chuilín.]

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Executive Office that it wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) summit that was held in Glasgow on 17 June.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, in accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-sixth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which took place in the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Glasgow, on Friday 17 June 2016. The deputy First Minister, junior Minister Fearon and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make this statement on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD; the UK Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon David Mundell MP, Secretary of State for Scotland; the Welsh Government delegation was led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM; the Isle of Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Hon Allan Bell MHK; the Government of Jersey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst; and the Government of Guernsey by the Chief Minister, Deputy Gavin St Pier.

The British-Irish Council plays a unique and important role in developing and furthering links between its member Administrations. It provides a forum for exchange of information and collaboration on matters of mutual interest, and it fosters positive, practical relationships across these islands.

At the beginning of the meeting, the Council observed a minute's silence following the death of Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen, and offered condolences to her family.

The Council reflected on recent elections across a number of member Administrations and discussed how the Council could continue to promote cooperation on issues of mutual interest, such as economic progress in member Administrations, education and closing the attainment gap, housing and healthcare.

The Council also noted there might be scope for new areas of cooperation based on

emerging priorities across these islands. The Council discussed the forthcoming referendum on the UK's membership of the EU.

12.30 pm

Ministers with particular responsibility for unpaid carers met in advance of the summit to consider a detailed paper prepared by the Council's social inclusion work sector. The discussion was then taken forward by heads of administration. The Council acknowledged that carers are an integral part of society, caring for family, friends and neighbours affected by physical or mental illness, disability, frailty or substance misuse. The Council noted that whilst caring can be a positive and rewarding experience, high-intensity caring in particular can result in poor carer mental health and physical difficulties. Across member Administrations, carers policy sits within a wider context of tackling economic, health and social inequalities and, with regard to young carers, within the holistic, child-at-the-centre approach. The Council reflected on the benefits of preventative approaches rather than crisis-led responses, as well as greater integration of services at a local level.

The Council agreed that further action is required to support carers. Member Administrations committed themselves to working together in order to further their knowledge and understanding of good practice in supporting carers, especially with regard to young carers and older carers; carer identification; and telecare, telehealth and assistive technology. Member Administrations will work with partners in the statutory and third sectors, in communities and in academia to take forward this agenda. The work sector paper will be published on the BIC website.

The Scottish Government updated members on the work which has been done to take forward the ongoing review of the council's work. The Council agreed to examine further whether there are common policy objectives in emerging and established programmes for government across member Administrations and whether there is scope for further collaboration. The Council also agreed to the introduction of a task-and-finish approach to the work of the current BIC work sectors, to ensure continued relevance, and endorsed the forward work plan agreed by the collaborative spatial planning work sector. Work on the review will now be progressed by the Welsh Government in advance of the next summit.

The Council noted the Secretariat's end of year report and agreed a new Council

communications plan for the period 2016-18. It welcomed the publication of the BIC annual report 2015. Finally, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Welsh Government.

Mr Nesbitt: The First Minister has already made clear she is for doing things differently and yet this statement seems as light on detail as any previous BIC statement, with bland commitments to discussing areas of mutual interest like the economy, education, housing and healthcare. Can the Minister detail any actual initiative which will benefit the people of Northern Ireland, or — given, as she said, this is a forum for the exchange of information — did the delegation learn anything new?

Mrs Foster: We absolutely did. I thought it was a very interesting agenda, and actually the BIC has been reformed in so far as we are doing things in a different way now. The Ministers directly involved have a pre-discussion on the particular area of issue, and then they bring that discussion to the full meeting. That happened on this occasion in relation to carers. I am sure that the deputy First Minister and Minister Fearon will agree that it was a very worthwhile discussion where we actually learnt about what was going on in the different member Administrations in terms of valuing unpaid carers in society. For example, in Scotland they have a young carers festival, which I think is something we should very much look at. They also have an older-carers parliament where older carers can voice their concerns and deal with the difficulties they face on a day and daily basis.

We learnt, for example, from the Chief Minister in Guernsey that they are using the postal service on their island to knock on the doors of elderly people and to call with them while they are delivering postal communications. The Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, Mr Allan Bell, gave a lot of detail about what they are doing to deal with those carers who have left caring — in other words, the person that they were caring for has passed on or has gone into an institution — and how they deal with the grief and the isolation of no longer being the main carer for that person. It was a very good engagement in relation to that principal piece of work that was carried on, and I very much look forward to the next summit in Wales.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her BIC statement. Will she elaborate on what business was discussed around the member Administration priorities?

Mrs Foster: There was quite a good, free-flowing conversation about where the different Administrations find themselves at the moment. A lot of the Administrations had just been returned at their election and, like us, are in the midst of forming their Programme for Government and looking at where the priorities should be. Others, such as the Isle of Man, are coming towards the end of their Administration, so they were able to share some of the issues that have challenged them. For us, it is very strange to look at the Isle of Man, because it has an unemployment rate of 1.3% and finds it difficult to find people for jobs. They are looking for people to come in to take jobs, and they have an elderly population. It is very interesting to hear about the different challenges that attach themselves to different parts of the British-Irish Council and to hear from Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man in the British-Irish Council because, otherwise, we would not hear from those Administrations. It is good to have those links.

Mr Lynch: The First Minister spoke about carers. Was any area of collaboration identified in the social inclusion meeting on the important work of carers?

Mrs Foster: The group will take forward work in the whole new area of using new technologies, particularly in telehealth and tele-care. We could get really involved in that, given our position on telehealth and tele-care and some of the very good work that has been carried out, particularly in the Belfast Trust. We need to look at how we can support young carers and the carers of older people, including older carers. It appears that there are more and more older carers in our society, sometimes caring for adult children with learning disabilities. Those people have very particular needs because they have great concerns about what will happen if they pass away before their children. We need to look at that as well. A good deal of discussion took place on the issue, and we look forward to those matters being taken forward.

Mr Attwood: Has any thought been given to convening the next meeting of the BIC earlier rather than later, in the event that, this Thursday, there is a vote to leave the European Union, not least because of the likely outcome, which is that the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will vote to remain? Do you see a role for the BIC in the deeply unfortunate scenario of the United Kingdom deciding to leave the European Union?

Mrs Foster: I am neither a prophet nor a daughter of a prophet in any way, and I will not say which way any member Administration will vote on membership of the European Union. We had a conversation about it, and, as I said, the next scheduled meeting is to take place in Wales. Ordinarily, that would take place in the autumn of this year, but were it to be the case that the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, we may well come together sooner to have discussions in relation to the British-Irish Council.

I find the British-Irish Council a very useful forum in which to have discussions at a higher level than, perhaps, we do ordinarily. It is a very useful forum to bring together not only all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom but, of course, Ireland and the islands. The answer is yes: we will come together sooner rather than later were it to be the case that the vote is to leave the European Union.

Dr Farry: My question is also on Europe. Given that the First Minister is the only leader or co-leader of any devolved Administration in these islands who advocates a Brexit, will she relay whether concerns were expressed by the Scottish or Welsh First Ministers or an Taoiseach about the implications of a Brexit for collaboration between the regions of the British Isles, particularly the creation of some type of border for people or goods on the island of Ireland or between the island of Ireland and Great Britain or the effect on investment decisions arising from the distortion of the single market?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure how many questions I have to answer from that one question. We had a very respectful and civil discussion on the European Union referendum. People understood that there were those of us in the room — I was not alone — who held a different view from that of the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and of the Taoiseach. As I say, we had a very respectful discussion, but we recognised — this, I think, is one of the Member's questions — that the British-Irish Council is a useful forum in which to come together in the event of a "Leave" vote to have further discussions about our relationships. As I said, that will take place sooner than the scheduled meeting, which was to have been in the autumn.

Mr Logan: My question was on whether any mention was made of how the British-Irish Council would respond to the outcome of the referendum on the European Union, and I thank the First Minister for her conclusive answers.

She answered Members' questions on that topic very well.

Mr McElduff: I note that the British-Irish Council is examining common policy objectives in emerging and established programmes for government. There is also cooperation in areas of work such as education and closing the attainment gap. Will the First Minister elaborate on that area of work?

Mrs Foster: One of the key priorities for the First Minister of Scotland in her current Administration is closing the educational attainment gap, so much so that she has appointed former Finance Minister John Swinney as Education Minister. That is, obviously, a very good appointment, and I have a lot of respect for John Swinney in that job. We had a good discussion, and the First Minister shared what she believes needs to happen to close the gap in educational attainment, and we contributed on the issue. She made the point that it is important that head teachers are given some authority in their schools, which I strongly agree with. When there is a strong, effective and good head teacher, there is a good school. She believes that that is the way forward.

We were able to talk about our early intervention programmes that have been initiated. In particular, the deputy First Minister referred to the literacy and numeracy programmes that we rolled out through OFMDFM. I talked about the early nurturing schemes that we brought forward, which help children who are perhaps in homes that need a bit of extra help to get them ready for school so that, when they then go to school, they are ready to learn. We were able to contribute, and we can have good, strong conversations on the issue, particularly with the Government of Scotland.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the First Minister for her answer on how the British-Irish Council is dealing with the urgent priorities of each member Administration. Does she agree that having willing Governments, cooperating without threat or coercion, is precisely the sort of model that we should be looking for in the future? Our pro-European friends could learn from such a model.

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. As I said, we were able to contribute on all the issues that we discussed around the table. I thought that it was a good and open discussion and, as I said, it was respectful. When eight delegations are together from the different parts, we will take

different views on issues. However, the key to all this is to have respect for each other's views and to listen to what is going on in each Administration to see whether we can learn or indeed take away points for our own Administration.

12.45 pm

Ms Mallon: Can the First Minister provide, or lodge in the Library, an update on the work of the BIC housing subgroup and its forward work programme? Can she provide details of other priorities that might be taken forward that are referred to in her statement but not detailed?

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely. The housing work stream is proceeding well. This is one of the work streams where we take the lead. We take the lead on collaborative spatial planning, housing and transport. The housing work stream is proceeding well with a clear focus on policy challenges of interest across all the Administrations, namely housing supply and indeed housing's role in wider regeneration efforts. The reason why it is not detailed in the statement is because we have decided to focus in on a particular area at each summit. This summit was looking in particular at carers' issues. I think that it worked very well. I think that the next summit — I stand to be corrected — will deal with collaborative spatial planning. Each of the summits will take forward each of those issues in turn. I think that it is working very well.

Mr Allister: In the discussion on the referendum, I am sure that it was not lost on the First Minister that three of the Governments at the table represent territories outside the EU, yet all the Governments at the table are members of the common travel area. Did she therefore draw attention to that fact in order to debunk the myth that, if we were outside the EU and liberated from its shackles, we would lose the common travel area, when patently there are countries already outside it that continue to enjoy it?

Mrs Foster: As I say, there was a very good discussion around the European referendum. Tellingly, I thought some of the most interesting contributions — probably because I had not heard them up until then — came from the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. Each island had a different perspective as to how, if we were to leave the European Union, that would impact on them in particular. The Isle of Man, to be completely open and frank with you, was very concerned about a "Leave" vote. They believed that it would have a very great impact on the

Isle of Man because of the way in which they operate within this system to get their United Kingdom money. Ian Gorst from Jersey was very interesting. He was very clear that it was a decision for the United Kingdom and that whatever happened, they would respond accordingly, work with it and deal with the issues. Again, Gavin St Pier from Guernsey was very keen, obviously and understandably, that he protected the interests under protocol 3 after next week's, as it was last Friday, referendum.

There were differing views on how the European referendum would impact on each of the Administrations, but they, like me, believe that, whatever happens this week and whatever is the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom, we will all have to deal with the issues in front of us. As I said at that meeting, we in Northern Ireland have come through a difficult period, particularly last year, and we are determined that we will continue on the route that we are currently on, which is to build a strong, prosperous Northern Ireland. Those who say that the peace process will be damaged by leaving the European Union are wrong because it is a matter for people here in Northern Ireland to continue to build peace and have a strong Northern Ireland.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group eight clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

The uprating order is an annual order that provides for the uprating of specified social security benefits from April each year. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is required to review annually the level of benefits in relation to the general level of prices. Where the general level is greater at the end of the period under review, benefits are increased by at least that percentage. Apart from 2014-15 and 2015-16, when the uprating of certain working-age benefits was limited to 1% because of the economic climate at that time, the level of uprating is mainly based on the increase in the consumer price index (CPI) at the end of the previous September. That is the measure of price inflation considered most appropriate for this purpose by the Westminster Government.

There is no perfect measure of inflation. However, CPI is the headline measure of inflation in the United Kingdom and is considered to be less volatile than RPI. Some commentators consider that it better reflects the inflation experience of pensioners and benefit recipients. Uprating by CPI ensures that, at the very least, benefit levels maintain their value against inflation.

The consumer price index for the 12-month period to the end of September 2015 showed a negative growth rate at -0.1%. That rate means that price-indexed benefits have retained their value in relation to the general level of prices. Therefore, the Secretary of State has determined that these benefit rates will remain unchanged for 2016-17.

When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an uprating order under section 150 or 150A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, my Department is empowered to make a corresponding order. I stress that there is no power to increase benefits by a different or greater percentage to that provided for in the order made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Turning to those rates that are in the uprating order, let me say that the Westminster Government gave a commitment that the basic state pension will be uprated in line with the

triple-lock guarantee; that is, by the highest of the growth in earnings, the growth in prices or 2.5%. The average weekly earnings statistics for the quarter ending July 2015 showed an annual growth in earnings of 2.9%. Therefore, the basic state pension is increased by 2.9% to £119.30 per week, which is a weekly increase of £3.35 — the biggest real-terms increase of the basic state pension since 2001.

The pension credit standard minimum guarantee, that is, the means-tested threshold below which pensioner income need not fall, also rises in line with average earnings at 2.9%. The single-person threshold of this safety-net benefit has risen by £4.40 to £155.60 a week — the biggest real-terms increase since its introduction. For couples, the increase is £6.70, taking their new total to £237.55 a week. As a result of the uprating order, we will be spending an additional £79 million on social security in 2016-17 — money that will go into the local economy.

I appreciate that many of us would like to do more, but as I have already stated, my Department is empowered to increase the rates of benefits only to the same extent as those payable in Great Britain.

I am sure that all Members will wish to ensure that pensioners in Northern Ireland can continue to receive these new increased rates of state pension and that the poorest pensioners are protected. I am sure that Members will, therefore, join me in supporting the order.

Mr Eastwood (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2016 and the subsequent statutory rule were considered by the former Committee for Social Development. As the order now falls under the remit of the Committee for Communities, the Committee, at its meeting on 16 June, agreed that it was content for me, as Chairperson, to speak on the motion.

As mentioned, the Committee for Social Development first considered the Department's proposal to make the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2016 at its meeting of 18 February 2016 and was content for the rule to be made. When the statutory rule was subsequently brought before the Committee on 10 March, the Committee was content, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly. The Examiner has not identified any issues with the rule.

As the Minister indicated, the order is already in operation, and, today, we are simply being asked to approve it. The order is one of a series of statutory rules relating to the annual uprating package for rates of social security benefits, pensions and allowances. The Department has advised that it has no power to deviate from the rates and amounts specified in the order made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I recommend that the order be approved by the Assembly.

Ms Gildernew: I concur with the Chair of the Committee for Communities. I also make the point that, given the fact that pensioners are on a fixed-rate income, they sometimes find it very difficult to deal with changes to costs that they cannot avoid. I am thinking, particularly, of the cost of fuel and of their vulnerability to fuel poverty. We welcome the fact that these benefits are being increased, but we will keep a very close eye on how pensioners are coping and whether they are able to manage, given that costs are outside their control and that they do not have any kind of financial flexibility.

Mr Beggs: I wish to say a few words on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. This is part of an annual exercise, and there is very little change to our social security benefits in the annual process year to year. It is important that we make increases and adjustments to maintain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, but the reality is that we cannot afford any other changes that would fall upon our limited block grant.

On some of the entitlements affected, I too welcome the 2.9% increase indicated by the Minister in the basic state pension and the increase in state pension credit. I know that many vulnerable pensioners will greatly benefit from that little bit of additional money. It is particularly welcome in the context of the consumer prices index showing a negative growth rate of -0.1%. Of course, that means that many of the contributory and non-contributory benefits will not be increased in 2016-17, because they have maintained their value in relation to prices.

We are discussing the motion in the context of gross disposable household income in Northern Ireland being the smallest, or worst, in the United Kingdom. We are receiving, on average, 81.5% of UK average earnings, and I have no doubt that that is not unconnected to the over-reliance on social security in many parts of Northern Ireland. We need a safety net and parity in welfare payments, but, above all, we need economic growth to take more of our people out of welfare and into work.

In our role of providing constructive opposition, the Ulster Unionist Party indicates its support for this confirmatory resolution.

Mr Givan: I thank Members for their contributions. I also thank the previous Chair, Mr Maskey, for it was his Committee that considered the issue in the previous mandate. I thank it for the way in which it engaged on the issue at the time.

Obviously, there is support for the proposal that has been brought forward. The Deputy Chair of the Committee, Ms Gildernew, raised an important issue about poverty among pensioners and the lack of flexibility they have to be able to respond to issues that affect them but which are beyond their control.

That is why the Department has been taking forward a strategy called Supporting People, which is maximising income through the uptake of benefits. That has been a success. We want to make sure that people who are entitled to the various strands of support receive that. The Department will take that forward because we want to make sure that our pensioners and, indeed, other vulnerable people who are in receipt of welfare support get the benefits that they are entitled to. We want to have greater focus on getting that information to people so that we can help to tackle the issues that they face.

1.00 pm

I trust that addresses the issues, and I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Landlord Registration Scheme

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

Mr Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.

I rise to commend the motion to the Assembly and to accept formally the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party. I apologise on behalf of my colleague Fra McCann, who was to speak on this but is unwell. It is nothing too serious, thankfully. There is nothing to report in that regard, but, nevertheless, he was due to speak today. Most Members will now well understand that Fra McCann has had a singular focus on the provision of housing, particularly social housing, for people right across our society for many, many years. He regrets that he cannot be here to speak to this motion directly.

I remind Members that, as far back as 2007, Fra McCann tabled a motion in the House to have a landlord registration scheme introduced, and that was passed with the support of all Members and all parties. That was appropriate, and it was good that it happened, but it took a further seven years before the scheme for registration was agreed through legislation by the Assembly, with 25 February 2015 the cut-off date for complete registration. However, many of us will have thought at the time that it was important to have robust legislation in place to underpin the scheme. The Minister at the time, on balance, thought that a light-touch approach would be more appropriate, and time will tell how effective that will be. Of course, many of us argued that we need robust legislation to tackle poor quality of housing standards and the lack of accountability that was very evident in that sector. The balance, of course, was to not impose an overly bureaucratic burden on landlords, many of whom own a very small

number of properties. In many cases, it is one or two houses. At the time, the then Minister felt that it was appropriate to have the balance with a light touch. As I said, the effect of that remains to be seen.

We have tabled the motion again because, in the last period of time, we have had some conflicting figures. It is important that I remind the House that, in written responses in the last mandate, on 25 February 2015, we were advised that 37,000 landlords had registered providing details of 72,000 tenancies. In another written answer, in March that year, the figures were that 35,000 landlords were registered providing details of 77,000 properties.

In February, we had a record that 33,000 landlords had registered, providing details of 70,000 tenancies. We were then given a further report on 1 March 2016, which stated:

"over 46,000 landlords have registered with the Landlord Registration Scheme and provided details of over 97,500 private tenancies."

It is therefore estimated, using figures from the 2011 census and the house condition survey, that 98% of private tenancies have registered with the scheme. That would obviously be very good and an important and fairly high figure, but it is important for the Minister to endeavour to get us as up-to-date figures as he can. Clearly, there are some considerable inaccuracies in at least three of those previous questions and the responses to them.

The private rented sector obviously leads the way numerically, in volume, in the provision of social rented accommodation over the Housing Executive and housing associations, which, between them, have 135,000 dwellings, including family, sheltered and supported housing. In that context, given the sheer volume of people who are reliant on the private rented sector, it is important to get accurate figures. It would also be interesting if the Minister could, if you like, try to bottom out how many people have not registered over the last 16 months or so — in other words, how many have not complied with the deadline — and, if any landlords have not complied, what action, if any, has been taken. The same obviously also applies to the tenancy deposit scheme. As many Members will know — the Minister will certainly know, and the Department will be well aware of it — the Assembly took forward those two pieces of legislation in an attempt precisely to protect those who live in the private rented sector and, given the essential importance of

the private rented sector, to make sure that people will not be at the mercy of some poor landlords.

As representatives, most of us will have worked with landlords and tenants over the years and know that the vast majority of landlords are very professional and provide very good accommodation. Of course, as in every walk of life, there are others who are less professional. There are some who are much less scrupulous, and some people are therefore forced to live in housing that is certainly not up to standard. Therefore, we want the Minister to have an urgent review of the effectiveness of the landlord registration scheme to ensure that people are protected if they are living in unfit accommodation. Many of us will understand that there still too many people — there should not be any — who live in accommodation that is unfit in this day and age. Of course, we remind ourselves that the sector is in receipt of somewhere in the region of £300 million-plus. That was the last figure in 2013-14, and it is a huge amount of public money that is paid out by way of housing benefit to a sector that, very often, is not as regulated as it should be.

I commend the last Minister, Department and Assembly for passing the HMO legislation, which is, in a way, related. Clearly, it dealt with the whole question of the need to have proper regulation and proper accountability to ensure that landlords and tenants are protected against those among them who are less than professional. The reason why we are more than content to adopt the Alliance Party amendment is that it has included letting agents, which was a concept that was embraced in the HMO legislation.

It is also important to recognise that the former Department for Social Development, now the Department of Communities, is taking forward an overall review of the private rented sector. Given the sheer volume of houses and homes provided by that sector, it is essential that we start off the mandate with the very clear signalled intention of making sure that there is enough social housing provided for people by the Housing Executive, housing associations and, of course, the private rented sector, and that it is going to pertain long into the future. It is essential that the sector is fully and robustly legislated for and regulated. That will protect both landlords and, of course, tenants, far too many of whom, as I said, are living in unfit accommodation in this day and age.

I take the opportunity to commend this morning what I consider to be a brave intervention by Sandra Moore from the Welcome Organisation

and Kerry Anthony from Depaul, who have tried to address the issues of begging in the street and homelessness.

All of us are keen to make sure that not one citizen is affected by homelessness or has to endure that condition, but it was a brave intervention, because it might not always seem the most popular thing to say. It may even jar with many of us who, when we see people on the street, think that they are, of course, vulnerable. If you listened to the interview with Sandra and Kerry, you know that, given their background, history and work experience, they are very sympathetic to the needs of vulnerable people. More importantly, they are professionals and experts in the field, and they draw attention to the issue in this day and age.

As I said on behalf of Sinn Féin, at the start of this mandate, we need to give a clear signal that housing and the well-being of tenants are important to all Members. We need to make sure that we provide adequate social housing in urban and rural communities, that those homes are fit for modern living and that all tenants, whether from the Housing Executive, housing associations or the private rented sector, are protected. We also need to make sure that landlords are protected from less-than-scrupulous tenants, because this can cut two ways.

On that basis, I commend the motion and thank the Alliance Party for tabling its amendment, which can only help. I urge Members to show their support for the concept of robust regulation, and I ask the Minister to take forward an early and urgent review of the effectiveness of the landlord registration scheme.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Delete all after "scheme" and insert

"and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants."

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak again on this important issue today. I thank Mr Maskey for his indication of support for the Alliance Party amendment, and, through him, I pass on our best wishes to Fra McCann, who is not feeling too well. I commend Mr Maskey for the work that he did as Chair of the then Social Development Committee, which dealt with this and many similar issues, and the

way in which the whole Committee and Assembly came together to deal with these matters of robust regulation.

Today, I am standing in for my party colleague Naomi Long. I am sure that at least the Minister will be delighted to know that she is in France, preparing to cheer on the Northern Ireland football team. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the motion, in conjunction with the amendment that we propose. As I said, I am delighted that the mover of the motion is willing to take the amendment on board.

The landlord registration scheme was an important first step in bringing about protections in a fast-developing sector. Since the introduction of the scheme in 2014, recent figures suggest — although perhaps some of those figures are in dispute, and it would be helpful if the Minister could clarify them — that 46,000 landlords have registered, and we possess details of 100,000 rented properties across Northern Ireland. Before 2014, 100,000 homes were being rented in Northern Ireland, with little knowledge of who the landlords were, what their function was besides being a homeowner and agent, or, more importantly, what their responsibilities or lack of responsibilities to tenants were — all of which we should expect from a good landlord.

It is on the last point that I have a personal connection to the motion and I am sure that many others in the Chamber do as well. I remember constituents coming into my office and telling me about the appalling conditions of properties that they were renting through a private landlord: the damp, the failure of heating systems, the ill health of their children — all the things that caused great concern to me and to many constituents across Northern Ireland who were living in properties that were in significant disrepair and had landlords who would not engage with tenants unless the rent was overdue.

At this stage, the landlord registration scheme has increased tenant confidence, introduced accountability and transparency, and ensured that landlords cannot shirk their responsibilities. The scheme is and must be praised for bringing hidden landlords into the open for the first time.

1.15 pm

Today's motion takes a further step by calling on the Minister for Communities to review the scheme. That is vital, given recent statistics, which show that the rented sector will increase massively, with home ownership falling to 60%

within the next 10 years. That reality, combined with the failure of the last Executive to build a sufficient number of homes for our rising population and a property market that prices out first-time buyers with exorbitant initial deposits, has fostered what is known as "Generation Rent". We need to ensure that tenants are protected by reinforcing regulation, the legislation and the rules. This desire was contained in our manifesto, which stated that we would support the introduction of legislation to improve the regulation of the private rented sector.

The amendment that Paula Bradshaw and I have brought today widens a positive motion through including the regulation of letting agencies. That is important, given the meteoric rise of the private rental market. It has been observed that a number of letting agencies are using the unregulated nature of the sector to fabricate fees and now treat a vital sector as a moneymaking scheme. A recent study by Housing Rights found that the basic initial checks, which take a few seconds on the computer, can incur a charge of up to £100. The Alliance Party feels that this is unjust and unfair, and we believe that our amendment will help to tackle a practice that preys on people in desperation and treats them as victims rather than as clients in a modern and progressive society, where the renting of property is something that we should be able to laud.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member recall evidence given by some letting agents to the Social Development Committee when examining the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill? They indicated that all that they did was let the property, while others had a maintenance role. Do you agree that there needs to be a clear distinction of responsibilities so that everyone knows their responsibility moving forward, rather than have a situation in which we have those who simply let and walk away?

Mr Dickson: I entirely agree with the Member's intervention. It is vital that the tenant knows exactly where the lines of responsibility lie and that that responsibility be clearly set out in appropriate agreements.

I endorse the motion due to the positive impact that, I believe, it will have on tenants who currently have to live in an unregulated environment. The landlord registration scheme is a positive first step, but we must now

encourage the Minister to take the next step. The amendment, alongside the Sinn Féin motion, will take us forward in this important area.

Mr Bell: This is an important motion, and I am happy to speak in support of both it and the amendment, which reflects what we want here, which is proportionality and a reasonable way forward. There is always a necessary balance to be struck between the landlord and the tenant — I should declare an interest as a landlord, Mr Speaker — and, as we look towards regulations, we want to protect both the tenant and the landlord, who in many cases provides a vital service. I refer to what Mr Dickson said earlier about the consultation by Housing Rights and consultations in Dungannon, Coleraine and Belfast.

It is important to look at the reasons that people rent. For 10%, it is flexibility. They are not going to put down permanent roots, be that for family or employment reasons. For 11% — this is the challenge for us — the waiting list for social housing is simply too long. We have heard good news in recent weeks from some of our social housing associations, which have thought outside the box, and we encourage them to see how investment can be brought in. The big sector in the survey — a third of our people — is those who simply cannot afford accommodation.

That group made up one third of the respondents. It is important that we look to good practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We have the Private Rented Housing (Scotland) Act 2011, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and the Renters' Rights Bill in England.

In my constituency office, tenants often speak to me about the affordability of the sector and the difficulty in getting repairs done. I have major concerns about landlords who are acting irresponsibly. Without breaking any confidences, I know of single parents in my constituency whom we have referred on to the environmental health office at Ards and North Down Borough Council. If the environmental health office accepts that the accommodation does not meet the necessary standards, it puts recommendations in place. One would have thought that, when that happens, the private landlord immediately acts to get the necessary repairs in place. Often, and I am sure I am not alone, I find in my constituency surgeries that, even when the council's environmental health office has acted and explained what needs to be done, there then begins a process, with them saying, "We do not need to do it that way; let me get a different plumber or joiner, or get in

someone different", because the landlord reckons they can solve this problem, for example, just by putting in a dehumidifier. This is an actual experience, without breaching anybody's confidence, where a single parent with several children is unable to use her own bedroom in her own home. We go into a process of almost interminable delay while these negotiations go backwards and forwards. The three critical areas that we need to address are affordability, repairs and standards.

In conclusion, we want to see a proportional response from the Minister. It is the first opportunity that I have had to welcome him to his post. We want to see a balanced approach that looks towards effective regulation and protects the tenant and the necessary sector, the private rented sector.

Mr Beggs: I just want to pick up on some of the comments of the Member who spoke last. I, too, support the view that there needs to be balance in what happens. I declare an interest in this subject, to the degree that my son is a student renter of accommodation and my dad is a landlord. I see the issue from both sides.

Where exactly are we with this in Northern Ireland? What is our housing situation? We need to be careful, as we go forward, how we impact on tenants — we need to ensure that we bring about improvements — but also that we do not contribute to homelessness.

Our population is growing, and the average size of households is becoming smaller. It is estimated that we need over 11,000 new houses a year just to maintain stability. The Housing Executive has indicated that it needs 1,500 new houses; perhaps that has gone up to 2,000 homes, given the economic situations. The private sector has been building 4,500 houses a year. That means that we have a gap. There is a shortage of houses. How is it going to be filled? Will the Executive produce the money to do it? If they are, where the funds? I pose this question: are we going to be reliant on the private sector to help those who are facing homelessness today? We need to make sure that the decisions we make do not worsen the situation so that more people become homeless. We may have great intentions, but I argue that we need to take great care in bringing about changes.

Will any proposals address rogue landlords? That is the key issue on which I will judge any proposal, not on the amount of bureaucracy and cost for the nine out of 10 good landlords, where there are good relationships between landlord and tenant. What we do not need are

additional costs that will be passed to the landlord and on to the tenant. We do not need bureaucracy; we need action where it is actually needed.

There have been a number of changes in the housing situation in recent times. We have had the new deposit scheme requirement for new purchasers, so fewer people have been buying houses. Recently, there have been changes to HMRC taxation rules. Some of those who invested may get cold feet. We have introduced a landlord registration scheme for houses in multiple occupancy. I participated in that, and I am well aware of the need for it and am fully supportive of it. We have our landlord registration scheme and tenancy deposit scheme.

As I said, the vast majority of the relationships are good. Indeed, a 2012 survey showed that 88% of tenants were fairly or very satisfied with repairs and 8% were fairly or very dissatisfied. Like others, I come across constituency cases where I feel that landlords are not carrying out their duty. I commend the actions of the Housing Rights Service and councils' environmental health officers for their actions in trying to bring to account those who are not responding to need. One of the ideas floated in some of the surveys that the Department has carried out is for an arbitration service where there are disputes. Instead of dealing with everybody, we may just need a system to deal with a dispute. Some 87% of tenants supported the creation of an arbitration service. I think that that has some merit going forward.

There is a small number of disreputable landlords who knowingly flout the law, and we need to make sure that we address them. I noticed that, in Scotland, comments have included those saying it is unnecessarily cumbersome and requires a large amount of data, yet it would not even assist landlords with tenants who were misusing their property or were in rent arrears or even advise them when they had left the property so that repossession could occur. We need to make sure that we have balance as we go forward. I noticed that Shelter Scotland indicated in 2009 that, after three years, it was failing to weed out the minority of bad landlords.

I reiterate what I am saying: we need a system that will deal with the offenders and those who are not carrying out their responsibility to tenants, rather than have additional costs that will ramp up bureaucracy. Let us deal with the problem, not create another bureaucratic system.

Ms Mallon: I support the motion and the amendment. I also pass on my good wishes to Fra McCann. Fra is a steadfast campaigner on homelessness, and his contributions on the issue are always honest, passionate and worth a listen. I also declare an interest as the owner of a house that is out for rent.

In recent times, I have had the very humbling experience of listening to Father Peter McVerry. Father Peter is a campaigner on this issue in Dublin. He works at the coalface, but he is also vociferous in challenging government and landlords to responsibly and urgently address the issue. Peter very powerfully makes the case that there are five fundamental human rights: the right to food; an education; healthcare; work; and a home. I believe that all the evidence is there to show that the home is the anchor that holds other aspects of your life together. The distress and negative consequences that flow from not having a home are felt in families and households right across Northern Ireland, not least in my constituency of North Belfast. It is certainly a serious problem that requires serious and urgent action.

The private rented sector has an important part to play in providing quality, affordable and sustainable housing solutions. Successive studies and surveys, including the house condition survey, have shown that, generally speaking, the Northern Ireland private rented sector works reasonably well, with high reported levels of tenant satisfaction. Those findings are to be welcomed. However, as many of us also know — Members testified to this during the debate — a number of tenants do not find themselves in the situation of having a responsible and active landlord. In fact, many are faced with an unresponsive, or in the worst cases a neglectful, landlord. I have visited constituents in homes with a growing list of outstanding repairs. I have visited a home where the landlord has refused permission for minor adaptations needed for the health and well-being of a child. Sadly, like other Members, there are similar cases I could recall in the debate.

1.30 pm

It is important that we acknowledge that the vast majority of landlords are good and responsible and provide a high level of service, but it is equally important to acknowledge that a minority do not provide the same level of service. The challenge for government is to create a system that increases standards while protecting tenant and landlord and without adversely affecting the majority of tenancies that are working. The landlord registration

scheme implemented last year is a useful step. It allows us to capture data and gather knowledge, and its publication enhances accountability. The circulars that are sent to landlords, advising them of their rights and responsibilities, are also helpful. However, registration is not regulation, and it is right that the departmental review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector is under way and that it is looking at licensing, accreditation, security of tenure and affordability. I urge the Minister to ensure that, following the review, swift and timely action is taken.

It is important to remember that a high-quality and affordable private rented sector is part of the answer to resolving the acute housing shortage that we face, but it will only be successful in addressing the challenge if it is accompanied and supported by other housing solutions. That requires building more social and affordable homes, particularly in areas of high demand. It requires investment in and access to early intervention and prevention support to help stop people finding themselves homeless in the first place. It also means supporting people to live in their home through programmes like Supporting People and Housing First, alongside targeted support to the most vulnerable, including on-street access to mental health and addiction recovery services. It also requires the reform of the common selection scheme, with allocation based on objective need at its heart.

While that list is not exhaustive, those measures combined will go a long way to addressing our housing crisis. Ending homelessness is achievable; it is doable. It just requires the political will to achieve it.

Mr Stalford: In my constituency, as I am sure, we will hear later from Paula Bradshaw, housing is probably the biggest issue that people come to their Assembly Member about. In starting a discussion about this, it is important to consider some basic first principles. The first thing is that there are 48,000 landlords, the huge majority of whom are small landlords who hold one, two or maybe three properties. Those individuals are making a contribution towards meeting housing need, as has already been said. The reason measures such as those we are discussing today are necessary and should be built on — we all have experience of this — is that, when you suggest to a constituent that they consider the private rented sector, rather than Housing Executive accommodation, 99 out of 100 will back away, afraid of that prospect. There are reasons for that. I welcome the fact that we

have embarked on a review, and it is important that we are looking at taking it forward into the future. I hope it will allow us to close the gap that exists in people's perceptions between social housing and the private rented sector. People should have the same confidence that a private landlord will repair their property or ensure that their home is maintained as tenants have in the Housing Executive. That is why I think that some of the measures undertaken by the successor Department to DSD are welcome. In protecting tenants' rights, for example, the tenancy deposit scheme secured 66,000 deposits totalling £37 million. This is real money that people put down as a deposit on a home. They are entitled to have it back, and, through the scheme that was introduced, we have been able to ensure that that is the case.

The Private Tenancies Order details the responsibility that landlords have to their tenants and to the local authority. It is important that we increase awareness and education around that, particularly amongst tenants, so that they know the responsibilities of their landlords to them. There may indeed be a role for local government to take on. I cannot help notice that there are plenty of Belfast people who want to contribute to the debate. In the city, we have seen what was our council taking the lead on lots of issues and increasing public awareness of them. This is one area where local government has a role: increasing people's awareness of their rights if they are in the private rented sector.

The Department is in the process — I am sure that we will hear more from the Minister on this — of reviewing the progress that has been made in this area, and I welcome that. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about a sector that accounts for more than 100,000 properties throughout Northern Ireland, so it is in everyone's interest — landlord and tenant alike — that we set in place rules and regulations that allow the full potential of those 100,000 properties to be exploited for the purpose of solving or at least making a contribution to solving the problem of housing, which is very real in constituencies like mine and Nichola Mallon's.

All of us want to create a system where people are treated fairly and are not exploited whilst maintaining the rights that people have over their property. I am not a landlord, but I understand that, if people own property, we cannot tie them in red tape either. This is a delicate but important area of public policy, and it is essential for all our constituents that we

strike the right balance between protecting people and protecting the rights of landlords.

I have one final point. I am a South Belfast representative, and we have seen there what happens when landlords get it wrong.

Ms Gildernew: I am delighted to speak in the debate. I also send my best wishes to Fra, who absolutely lives and breathes this stuff and is very sorry that he cannot be here.

Back at the formation of the Housing Executive around 45 years ago as a result of the eviction in Caledon in 1968, a points system was developed in an attempt to prioritise housing need and ensure that people in the highest need got housed. The Housing Executive has done an amazing job over the past 45 years, but unfortunately it has not been able to build in recent decades. As a result, we have an acute housing shortage, which Members have talked about today.

There was rapid growth between 2006 and 2011 and an investor-led housing boom during those peak years. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, particularly in and around Dungannon, where there are lots of manufacturing and food processing jobs, the need for houses took off to such an extent that the Housing Executive and the housing associations could never keep up. We need the private rented sector to meet that need, but that is not to say that there does not need to be regulation. I welcome the fact that we have landlord certification. I welcome our motion and Alliance's amendment to it. As Alex said, the light touch that was applied originally is probably not robust enough.

I welcome the fact that an energy performance certificate is needed. A house has to be energy-efficient, which is hugely important, especially when you see the level of fuel poverty that exists, not just among vulnerable families. It is fairly prevalent at every level, so we need the energy performance certificate —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: I will keep an eye on the time. Come back to me in a minute or two.

I welcome the fact that we have the energy performance certificate, but I cannot understand why we do not have an unfitness certificate. That was talked about, and there was a decision to prioritise the properties in the poorest condition with a date being kept under review. Unfortunately, we can see the

dampness in many new builds as we walk past them, and we know that those houses are not necessarily well ventilated or dry. We also know about the problems that come from that. If you live in a property that has a problem with damp, it is in your clothes and is on you. It is hard to live an active and full life if you are embarrassed by the state of your house and what that entails. Probably more seriously, there is proof of the link between inadequate housing and the risk of ill health and disability. There are also links to poor mental health, lower educational attainment, unemployment and poverty. We recognise that there is a need for a quality standard in our private rented sector to ensure that landlords meet the needs of the people to whom they rent properties.

I also recognise how hard it is at times to get a house. I supported a family recently in a marital break-up, where the mother lived with the children in the family home and the father could not get a house for love or money in the town that he was from. He did not have anywhere near enough points to get onto the social housing ladder; the private rented sector was his only option. I disagree with comments made by Christopher Stalford: cost is a prohibitive factor for a lot of people going into private rented, especially if you are in full-time work on the minimum wage and are not entitled to top-up benefits. The gentleman whom I am talking about could not get a house that his children wanted to visit him in. That is so sad. We are talking about a man in a marriage break-up whose children did not want to visit him in the temporary accommodation that he lived in. We worked hard to get him a house that his children would call home as well and where he was able to fulfil his duties as a dad. He loves his children; he wanted them to be able to spend part of the week with him. That was very difficult for him.

I will give way very quickly —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. She made the point about energy performance certificates. I simply wanted to ask her — I think, from what she said, that she will agree — whether, now that we know the level of energy inefficiency in our housing stock, we should require minimum energy efficiency standards for letting.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Gildernew: It all has to be kept under review. Obviously, we have to have proper regulation. Energy is such an important thing. If you spend more than 50% of your income on heating your home, there are other areas that you absolutely cannot afford to cover. We have to ensure that all the certifications and regulations are robust and meet the needs of our families and people living in the private rented sector.

Ms Bailey: For most of my life, I have lived as a tenant in the private rented sector. I want to make sure that the House is aware that regulation is so badly needed in that sector. There is no standard for tenants: the heating, insulation, conditions and decor that come with a house is very haphazard. I have lived with my two children as a single mother — we have heard an example given today — in the private rented sector. I have paid extortionately high rents. I have paid letting fees just to apply for houses. I have lived with more than half my income going on trying to heat through electric bar heating in the private rented sector, as well. I have lived with damp and in very bad conditions.

I have also been made homeless. My children and I ended up in a hostel through no fault of our own; it was simply because the landlord wanted to change the contract. I did not know my rights at the time. I was given notice to quit, and I thought that I had to quit, so I did. I left myself homeless through not knowing my rights. I spent four months with my children in a hostel on the Ormeau Road, not because I was a bad tenant but because I did not know my rights. There was no single point of contact to find out what my rights or options were. When I put that in a letter to the then Social Development Minister, her response was that she was glad to see that the system was working properly.

1.45 pm

We have a lot to do to acknowledge what happens in the private rental sector in Northern Ireland. The latest figures show that 21% — just over a fifth — of our population live in private rental accommodation. While the landlord registration scheme was, absolutely, a good first step, it was a first step that we need to move far from. The tenancy deposit scheme still does not give adequate protections. It contains a time bar loophole: after six months, tenants can no longer apply to get their deposit back. In my experience of living in the private rental sector, I never got my full deposit back.

We highly recommend that the Minister, in looking at what we need by way of tighter regulation of letting fees, consider following in the footsteps of Scotland, where letting fees were made illegal in 2012. In Northern Ireland, people can face letting fees of anything from £30 to £120 a time, and then they have to pay a month's rent in advance. On top of the deposit, that is a huge cost, little of which ever comes back to the tenant. There is a huge body of work to do in bringing the tenancy deposit scheme, the letting fees and the regulation of landlords together into one piece that we can all use to help tenants, who make up, I repeat, one fifth of the population in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind the House that we have until 2.00 pm, when we will break for Question Time.

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It is my duty to respond to specific points. If I do not cover something in my general comments, I will certainly come back to Members in writing. It is worth noting that the contributions of Members are incredibly well informed. They are testimony to the work that MLAs do in their constituencies. We all have a significant caseload of constituents who need support in housing, and the contributions made today reflect that MLAs are in touch with their community and are active, particularly in trying to help the most vulnerable. We have heard the stories from Members. Ms Bailey's personal story is one that will resonate with people. She speaks powerfully about that and will, I have no doubt, make a powerful contribution to the issue as we consider it in the future.

Let me wish Fra McCann all the best. He is one of the MLAs who very quickly came into the Department, wanting to meet me to talk about housing. I have no doubt that he will have a particular interest in this, as he has had for a number of years. He brings a lot of experience that I want to utilise in addressing the issues that we need to face.

I welcome the opportunity to respond formally to the motion, which calls on me:

"to review urgently the Landlord Registration Scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants",

and the amendment:

"... to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is

sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants."

Before I talk about the scheme that has been in operation since 25 February 2014, let me provide some background on why the landlord registration scheme was introduced. In recognition of the growth of the private rented sector, the Department developed 'Building Sound Foundations – A Strategy for the Private Rented Sector' for consultation in 2009. The key focus of the strategy was to support the development of a healthy private rented sector in Northern Ireland. The two key, main changes introduced as a result were landlord registration and tenancy deposit.

With landlord registration, it was recognised that there was a lack of basic information surrounding the composition of the private rented sector that made it difficult for councils to fulfil their regulatory role of monitoring and ensuring compliance with the law. There was no central capture of data on the numbers, location or portfolio size of private landlords, although local knowledge may have been built up over time. Private landlords tended to operate across council boundaries, and, as the knowledge collected on an individual council basis was not held centrally, the information was not used to best effect to regulate the sector. The absence of centrally held and accurate data about the private rented sector contributed to a lack of confidence, perceived respectability and accountability. In addition, councils tended to react only when complaints or difficulties were brought to their attention, rather than in a proactive way through education and awareness, as well as enforcement when necessary.

The majority of respondents to the 2009 consultation provided overwhelming support for a mandatory Northern Ireland register of landlords. Most respondents felt that it should be proportionate, light-touch, not intrusive and inexpensive in order to minimise the burden on landlords. Councils advised that such a register should have inbuilt data protection to allow relevant information to be used to facilitate good information sharing, better tenancy management and enforcement as necessary but should be restricted to designated bodies to protect landlords' personal information.

When the landlord registration regulations were proceeding through the Assembly, it was made clear that a register of landlords was very much a first step to making improvements to the sector. The scheme gave councils the information that they needed to be proactive in ensuring that a private landlord adhered to the

law already in place, and there were no regulatory functions or powers attached to the scheme.

The scheme has been very successful in what it was set up to do: to have a register of landlords with details of their properties. Currently, over 48,000 landlords are registered with the scheme, and over 100,000 private rented properties are registered. The private rented sector is characterised by a lot of small landlords who own one or two properties. Members raised that issue. The current figure is 101,000 private rented properties registered. On average, 400 properties a month are being registered. Clearly, more houses are being registered, but more need to be registered, given that it is compulsory for landlords to do that.

Landlords also get help when they register. On registration, they receive a landlord registration toolkit, which provides vital information and advice on landlords' responsibilities when renting out properties. My Department also issues quarterly newsletters to registered landlords making them aware of any changes that may impact on their letting of properties and other general information that may be of use to them.

As part of the drive to inform and professionalise the sector, the Department is part-funding the level 2 award in letting and managing residential property delivered by the Chartered Institute of Housing. The purpose of the course is to make private landlords more knowledgeable and better qualified and, in the process, to enhance the entire private rented sector of the industry. The funding for the course is over the next three years.

Prospective and current tenants are also helped. They can check whether a landlord is registered or whether the property that they are thinking of renting with the scheme is registered. That enables them to make a choice when considering renting in the private rented sector as to whether they want to live in an unregistered property.

My Department is carrying out an evaluation of the scheme that will help inform the forthcoming review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector.

I turn briefly to the other main change introduced as part of Building Sound Foundations: the tenancy deposit scheme. The scheme was introduced on 1 April 2013, and its purpose was to put in place arrangements that would safeguard a tenant's deposit and provide

a means to allow disputes between landlords and tenants on such deposits to be dealt with independently and speedily at no direct cost to either party. Previously, the only available option to a tenant in attempting to get a deposit back was to take a landlord to the small claims court.

It was clear that the establishment of a tenancy deposit scheme would provide specific support for more vulnerable individuals and families and would help to ensure that they are able to access private rented accommodation when necessary. The scheme provides an effective means of managing the deposit arrangements and of giving tenants and landlords real encouragement to behave properly and look after a property, as well as facilitating disputes when they arise without additional costs to either party. In the three years since the introduction of the scheme, up until 31 March this year, 10,305 landlords/agents have protected 65,658 deposits, amounting to almost £36.6 million.

The HMO Bill was passed in the Assembly earlier this year and received Royal Assent in May. The Bill recognises the higher risks of living in an HMO with a more robust regulatory system that introduces a mandatory licensing scheme that will ensure higher physical and management standards for houses in multiple occupation accommodation.

We need to have a balance across the broader private rented sector between the need to protect tenants and to encourage a vibrant and effective sector in Northern Ireland. That is at the heart of the current review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector. The aim of the review is to consider the current and potential future role of the sector and assess the effectiveness of current regulation, identifying where improvements can be made to help make the private rented sector a more attractive housing option.

In November 2015, the Department launched a discussion paper for consultation for the first stage of the review. The paper did not contain any firm proposals for change; rather it invited views from those living and working in the private rented sector. A total of 85 responses were received, and the Department conducted a further survey of tenants, which received over 1,000 responses. A number of themes have emerged from the consultation for further consideration and analysis. They include the need to look at the case for introducing a licensing scheme for all private landlords; protecting tenants from fees charged specifically by letting agents; addressing the

inconsistencies in letting fees and the services provided to landlords and tenants by letting agents; considering whether letting agents need to be regulated, although this may be for the Department for the Economy to consider under consumer legislation; considering the need for an independent dispute resolution or advice service, including a mediation service; concerns around the current eviction process, in that it is costly, lengthy and not fit for purpose; the support available for vulnerable tenants living in the private rented sector; improving awareness among landlords and tenants of their roles and responsibilities; and the view expressed by landlords that grants for improvements would incentivise the sector and help upgrade the housing stock.

Some of the positives that came out of the private rented sector tenants' survey included the fact that 98% of tenants had a written tenancy agreement and over 80% had a positive relationship with their landlord. The main issues that tenants commented on included the affordability of rents, the handling of repairs and the standard of some accommodation.

When the discussion paper was issued, the Department gave a commitment that it would issue a consultation document by the autumn of this year with clear proposals on the way forward. The Department will use a similar process to the discussion paper, engaging with representatives from the sector in the first instance to further discuss the findings of the discussion paper and gather evidence to make recommendations for change. Over the next number of years, I want to focus on improving the regulatory framework in a targeted way and maximise all opportunities to improve the quality of the private rented sector, making the private rented sector a more attractive housing option for a wider range of households.

I will now address specific points raised by some Members. Mr Stewart Dickson and Ms Gildernew asked about issues related to the fitness of properties. There are existing powers under the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 for councils to ensure that properties are fit. This is an area that we are examining as part of the review of the private rented sector as well as conducting a review of the current fitness standard.

Mr Maskey asked about the number of landlords not registered. I alluded to the point that, currently, on average 400 houses a month are being registered. The latest condition survey indicated that there were 125,000 private rented properties, so Members can do

the maths. Currently, there are 101,000 registered properties, and we believe that there are 125,000, so there is an issue that needs to be addressed. Councils have powers to impose fixed penalties on non-compliant landlords, and there is specific information on that.

I undertake to correspond directly with Members on some of the other points that have been raised. I conclude by thanking the Members concerned for tabling the motion. It is an important issue that affects all of us, and we need to get the policy right going forward. I will undertake that review, and I will have concrete proposals in the autumn that we will put out for consultation and that, I believe, will have a positive impact in addressing a lot of the issues that Members have raised today.

Mr Speaker: This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next to speak will be Paula Bradshaw.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time.

Pork Farmers: West Tyrone

1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how her Department is supporting pork farmers in West Tyrone. (AQO 61/16-21)

Mr McCrossan: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her elevation to her new role.

Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am aware of the difficulties facing pig farmers right across Northern Ireland, including West Tyrone, as a result of depressed pork prices. Whilst the factors contributing to depressed prices are outside DAERA's control, my Department will continue to work to build the resilience, efficiency and competitiveness of the sector and to help farmers cope with future market volatility. To that end, my Department is working to facilitate access for our pig sector to key third country markets for pork exports, including China and Australia.

I am aware that many farm businesses are experiencing cash flow issues during this period of low returns. I have written to the local banks and financial institutions to arrange a number of meetings over the coming weeks to discuss what further measures the banks, together with my Department, can take to assist the industry during this difficult trading period. I also intend to meet the two main pork processing companies in the near future.

My Department is continuing to support the pig sector through the provision of education, training and research to improve efficiency and sustainability. We will continue to make the most of measures through the new rural development programme to help ensure that farmers are better equipped to meet the challenges ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Can she also outline what her Department has been doing to secure access to new trade markets and, in particular, update us on the discussions with Australia and China? Pork producers are really keen that the Chinese market be opened up.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, he is absolutely right that pork producers and processors are looking for access to those markets. Securing access to markets in the likes of Australia and China remains a top priority for my Department. It is hoped that securing access to new trade markets such as those in China and Australia would mean greater returns for the pig sector and would help to mitigate the effects on producers of future price fluctuations. Therefore, securing approval to export may help to mitigate the impact of other market forces.

My Department awaits a response from China on the remedial actions our pork processors have taken following the inspection in April 2015. I spoke with the Chinese consul general to Northern Ireland, Madam Wang, quite recently. She has been incredibly helpful. I am waiting for a response via her offices. My Department also hosted Australian inspectors in April 2016, and we await their written report later this year.

As you would expect, my officials are also working closely with the industry to make it aware of the opportunities available to those markets already open for export.

Mr T Buchanan: I commend the Minister in her new role and wish her well in the future. Can she inform the House what Europe is doing, if anything, to help the hard-pressed pork sector here in Northern Ireland?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose I will leave it up to him whether he believes it to be enough. The Commission's main tool for stabilising the pig-meat sector in times of crisis is the provision of private storage aid, which provides aid to processors to assist in the costs of storing pig meat that is surplus to demand. In response to the difficult market situation, the Commission offered a private storage aid scheme for pig meat in January this year, with local processors receiving approval to place 195 tons into storage under the scheme. Overall, the EU scheme removed over 90,000 tons of pork products from the market at a cost of nearly €28 million.

Whilst pig prices here are still around 12% below 2015 prices, at 106p per kilo, they have risen by 5p per kilo over the last couple of months. An improvement in prices has been seen across Europe, and I hope that it continues. The Commission has stated that it continues to monitor market conditions in the sector and has indicated that it will consider the possible introduction of a new private storage aid scheme for pig meat at an appropriate time.

In March 2016, the Commission set up a new export group called the meat market observatory as part of the package of support measures for the sector. The group is scheduled to meet for the first time on 15 July. The Commission has also set up an agricultural markets task force, which is looking at the functioning of agricultural markets and the farmers' position in the food supply chain. I am pleased that we have a local representative — Dr David Dobbin — on the task force.

Northern Ireland also receives European funding for the rural development programme 2014-2020, and there will be opportunities for the pig industry to avail itself of support through the new farm business improvement scheme (FBIS), which includes a package of measures to support sustainable growth in the farming sector. The FBIS business development groups and farm family key skills measures have already been launched, and, subject to necessary approvals, the FBIS capital scheme will be rolled out next.

Mr McAleer: Does the Minister have any plans to expand and develop the links that have been made in China as regards the pork industry?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. We are still waiting for a response from China in relation to remedial actions for the pork sector. Any opportunities that there are and that may open up in future will be explored, and I will be very keen to work alongside DEFRA and others in relation to that.

Deciduous Woodland

2. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how her Department plans to increase deciduous woodland locally. (AQO 62/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: As the Member is aware, it takes a considerable time to grow a forest. Forests now cover 8% of Northern Ireland, from almost nothing at the beginning of the last century, and the area of forest is slowly increasing.

The Department has two schemes. The first is delivered by Forest Service, which plans to reopen the forest expansion scheme in July 2016 and aims to plant woodlands of five hectares or more. The first tranche of the scheme received applications for over 330 hectares of new woodland. We issued offers for over 250 hectares and have received claims for 184 hectares, including 108 hectares of deciduous broadleaf woodland. The second scheme is managed by the Department to support the planting of smaller native broadleaf woodlands and will open as part of the environmental farming scheme.

While I was at the Armagh County Agricultural Show in the very beautiful Gosford Forest Park, I had the opportunity to speak to a very enthusiastic forestry consultant who specialises in indigenous trees and to hear of the schemes she has been delivering alongside local farmers. Northern Ireland's forests and woodlands are an important resource. I plan to visit a number of forests and sawmill businesses over the summer to understand how deciduous and conifer forests contribute to economic development, as well as improving our environment and providing places to visit.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Steven Agnew.

Mr Agnew: Thank you —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, my mistake. I call Jim Wells for a supplementary question. I will then call Steven Agnew.

Mr Wells: And I will go and rebuild my life. I welcome the Minister's answer. Does she feel that the range of policies that are in position in DAERA are sufficient to meet the need for increased deciduous woodland planting in Northern Ireland?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The rural development programme budget is sufficient to pay for 1,800 hectares of new planting, and I hope that landowners will respond positively to the new scheme, which allows for up to 100% of eligible costs. If demand increases above expectations, I will review the funding that is being made available for that.

I am aware that the rates of grant and funding available through forestry schemes are not the only factors that landowners take into account. However, this is a good opportunity for those

thinking about diversifying away from farming to consider.

Mr Chambers: Would the Minister support a target for increasing woodland cover being included in the Programme for Government, as was the case previously but which was noticeably absent from the last one?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The 2006 forest strategy identified a long-term aim to increase woodland cover to 12% of the land area by 2050. That was to provide people in Northern Ireland with access to the same level of forestry benefits as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The forestry chapter in the rural development programme aims to create a further 1,800 hectares of woodland by 2020, as I outlined. That will make a small but positive contribution towards our aim of 12% woodland cover. Obviously, we will look at that as we move forward and as the Programme for Government is consulted on.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister provide an update on the proposed transfer of Cairn Wood to Forest Service? Is she today in a position to guarantee that public access will be retained?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. As he is aware, Forest Service currently manages the trees at Ballysallagh Forest, most of which are on land owned by Northern Ireland Water, and access to water and land around the reservoir currently remains a matter for Northern Ireland Water. In the last mandate when I was the Regional Development Minister, the Member and I spoke on several occasions about the sale of the site. Indeed, I know that he is keen to retain public access to the site, and that was key to those discussions. My colleague Gordon Dunne was particularly helpful following discussions that he had with Forest Service in opening up further discussions with it.

At this stage, Forest Service is considering a positive business case for the transfer of land to my Department's ownership, but there are still some key issues to be resolved. Forest Service is clearly the best organisation to manage the trees, but it needs Ards and North Down Borough Council, or a partner of equivalent standing, to take responsibility for managing public access, which was of primary concern at the time of the proposed sale and, indeed, was reinforced by councillors and MLAs at that time. I am aware that Forest Service has written to the council, and the council is looking at that at the moment.

Mr Lyttle: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment as well, and I thank her for the update on Cairn Wood. Is she willing to meet me about the developments on that particular issue?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have met him before, and I am willing to meet any Member on any issue relating to anything in my Department, so, of course, that is not a problem.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

3. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the business continuity risks involved in the relocation of her departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. (AQO 63/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: Executive agreement to proceed with the relocation to Ballykelly is already in place, and the contract for construction has been awarded to J H Turkington and Sons. As I progress with the plans however, I am acutely aware of the importance of business continuity and the need to have plans in place that take account of retaining crucial skills and corporate knowledge. That is particularly so given the potential scale of staff turnover both in and out of my Department over the coming years. I am currently considering a detailed staffing plan that sets out which posts will relocate to Ballykelly and when they will relocate. To ensure any risk to business continuity is effectively managed, my intention is to phase the transition of posts so that the skills and corporate knowledge needed can be preserved. That approach will mainly see corporate service support posts move first by December 2017. The skills required for those posts are of a generalist nature and are available throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

A balance certainly needs to be found between relocating posts from Belfast to Ballykelly alongside retaining key skills and corporate knowledge. In taking the move to Ballykelly forward, I want to reflect further on the plans at this stage to see what best suits the long-term needs of my Department, whilst ensuring that the new site at Ballykelly is a success and provides opportunities for people who live in the north-west of Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Dr Farry: I welcome the Minister to her new post. She will be aware that her permanent secretary said to the relevant Committee that it

could take until 2029 — yes, you heard me right — for this move to be completed. Bearing in mind that it will cost the public sector money, what assessment is the Minister making of the risk to business continuity and the service that her Department provides to a whole range of stakeholders? Is she prepared to give the House a guarantee that there will not be any impact from this costly move?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question and note his concerns. I have said that there are risks associated with it, particularly around the loss of skills and corporate knowledge, and I am very keen to ensure that that is not to the detriment of my Department. I am considering various options around the transition, and I note that there may be opportunities to broaden the remit of Ballykelly, but I maybe need to have those discussions with Executive colleagues and see whether there are any plans to broaden this out to the wider Civil Service to give further opportunities for those living in the north-west to work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Mr Swann: I welcome the Minister to her new post. Minister, some of your party members have been mischievous about our party's stance on Ballykelly, and it has been purely on the financial side rather than disingenuous to our reflection in the north-west. Can the Minister explain why her Department did not look at the DVA offices in Coleraine as a viable alternative?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, I am not aware whether that was discounted or not or at what stage, but I am happy to look at that. As we stand at the moment, we are moving forward with the construction of that site and are looking to make best use of it.

Mr Robinson: Coming from the constituency of East Londonderry, I obviously welcome the development at Ballykelly. Can the Minister remind the House of the benefits of the scheme?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The relocation of a Civil Service departmental headquarters was one of the recommendations in the independent review of policy on location of public-sector jobs. The proposed relocation will stimulate the local economy through increased local spending; provision of high-quality and high-value public-sector jobs; and potentially jobs associated with the construction and ongoing servicing of a new building. The relocation will also help to share

wealth across the economy and contribute to better-balanced economic growth by commencing to address disparities in the distribution of public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lynch: The Minister talked about the scale of the transition. Does she have any confirmed timetable?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The building design construction consultant was appointed in January 2016, planning approval was in February 2016 and we appointed the contractor in March 2016. Construction will start in September this year, and the handover of the building will be in 2017. It is hoped that the first people to use that building will do so in January 2018.

Mr Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Can she provide details on the number of people in her Department who have taken up voluntary exit rather than relocate to Ballykelly, and detail what amount of money that might cost?

Miss McIlveen: At this point, I can only give the Member a very general overview of that, but the relocation will see approximately 600 posts move, which represents about 20% of the total departmental staffing of 3,000. An HR strategy is in place which will provide the overall direction for the people element of relocation and details the detailed work completed so far. As far as possible, no one will be forced to move to Ballykelly. If it is being inferred that people perhaps took voluntary exit because they did not wish to move, I will say that it has been made quite clear throughout the process that no one will be forced to move.

I have had conversations with a number of people in and around that.

While the majority of the current headquarters staff do not wish to relocate, expressions of interest have been gained via surveys across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Those show that there is significant interest in taking up posts in Ballykelly.

Bovine TB: Food Production

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the impact of bovine tuberculosis on food production. (AQO 64/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: As you are aware, bovine TB is a complex disease and the costliest animal health problem in Northern Ireland. Total programme costs amount to some £27 million to taxpayers and £10 million of compliance costs to farmers. The programme receives around £4 million of funding from the EU each year.

Cattle herds are tested at least annually, and animals that respond positively to the skin test are removed to slaughter, with compensation paid at full market value. In 2015, DARD slaughtered 12,130 animals as a result of TB. That included reactors, negative in contacts and interferon gamma positive-only cattle. I should stress that, at any time, even at current disease levels, around 93% of herds are free from the restrictions associated with TB and open for trading purposes.

I am aware that food production is impacted when a herd has a TB breakdown. Associated losses include the consequential loss of milk and beef production etc when animals are slaughtered prematurely as reactors before the optimum time. In addition, there can be temporary production losses: for example, a drop in milk yield or weight gain as a result of increased testing in a breakdown herd. While that impacts on individual farmers, I stress that the overall programme protects our ability to trade. The value of milk production is some £480 million annually, and the value of the beef sector is around £394 million annually.

It is our aim to eradicate TB from Northern Ireland, but that will be a long-term strategy and industry support will be essential

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for her response and wish her well in her role. TB will be one of the biggest challenges moving forward, and there has been no significant improvement over the last 30 years. Minister, you have the TB partnership working group, and I assume that it will look at the full extent of TB and, therefore, that our efforts will not be restricted to the bovine population but extend to the wildlife population in seeking to identify a means of better dealing with TB and driving those figures down towards what they are in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Scotland.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his questions. As he said, an industry-led strategic partnership group was established in 2014 to develop a comprehensive and practical long-term TB eradication strategy and implementation action plan to progressively reduce TB levels in cattle here and, ultimately, eradicate the disease from the cattle population

in Northern Ireland. The group comprises a chair, four independent members and two DARD ex officio members. The aim is to reduce TB disease levels and costs by the greatest degree in the shortest time using the least resource.

The group is reviewing evidence in preparation for the production of its TB eradication strategy and subsequent implementation action plan. Although the group was tasked to provide a TB strategy and plan to us by December 2015, the work has proved more complex than originally envisaged. In addition, it wishes to obtain an independent socio-economic analysis of its emerging recommendations before finalising the strategy.

I am disappointed that the work will not be concluded more quickly. It is important that the group has considered all the issues to ensure that a robust and well-considered strategy is produced. I can give a commitment to Members that the issue will be prioritised by me to try to reduce disease levels in the cattle and wildlife population.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister tell us how many incidents of bovine TB there have been this year, how that compares to previous years and whether there has been an increase or decrease?

Miss McIlveen: I do not have the exact figures but, in 2015, 12,130 animals were slaughtered as a result of TB. I can get the exact figures for the Member and provide those to her.

Mr McGlone: According to the media reports yesterday, there are limited amounts of available vaccine to eradicate or limit TB. Has the Minister made further inquiries about the amounts available and has the Department ruled out the possibility of a cull of badgers to deal with the prevalence of TB?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that there is a global shortage of human and badger BCG vaccine. This has affected supplies in 2016. You will be aware that we use this through the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) programme in the Banbridge area. I can confirm that, in 2015, DAERA had sufficient badger BCG vaccine for the second year of the TVR projects. In the first and second years of the research, we used the Danish strain of BCG vaccine to vaccinate caught badgers. The current supply of that is unable to fulfill any order for the vaccine in 2016 and there has been an indication that stocks are low. The Welsh Government and DEFRA

have suspended their vaccination programmes. However, we have been able to source a limited supply of expired badger BCG Danish vaccine from the Welsh Government for use in our TVR project for 2016. This will provide us with continuity for the research as it progresses into the third year. My officials are in the process of organising a stakeholder event with farmers in the TVR area to update them on the development.

I have not had a conversation with my officials about a cull.

Mrs Barton: We have had a disastrous approach to tackling TB from previous Ministers. Today, will you state exactly how you intend to improve on that. You talked about a vaccine. Is there anything else?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief in her response because we are nearing the time for topicals.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. As I have stated, the TB strategic partnership group will be coming back to me in the autumn with recommendations that we hope to look at and move forward on. The TVR programme is ongoing. At the end of this, in addressing this problem, I want to have healthy cattle and badgers and a healthy ecosystem.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time and declare my interest as part-owner of a small herd of cattle and land on which a badger sett stands. What lessons have she and her officials learned from the failure of the cull in England, where, according to Owen Paterson, the badgers moved the goalposts.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister give a very brief response?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. As he will have heard in my response to the previous Member, I have not had a discussion with officials about a cull. At the moment, the focus has been on the recommendations that are likely to come forward from the group and the TVR project.

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

Dump: Mobuoy Road, Campsie

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after

wishing her well in her new role and acknowledging that she will face some difficult issues, to provide an update on how one such issue that is close to his heart and his home, the illegal "super dump" at Mobuoy Road in Campsie, is being dealt with now. (AQT 41/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. He has been very close to this because of where he lives and through his previous role. Of most concern is the protection of the River Faughan, which forms the western boundary of the site and is designated as an area of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation.

2.30 pm

The key priorities for the Department are to protect the water quality and the public water supply in the river and to ensure that any site clean-up provides value for money. The size and complexity of the Mobuoy waste site means that its remediation will not be a quick fix. Three feasible remediation options have been shortlisted, namely excavation and disposal, containment and on-site treatment, with preliminary costs ranging from £20 million to £140 million. Work is ongoing to detail the options further, and I expect a full report of the remediation options for my consideration in December 2016. In the meantime, I have tasked my officials to ensure short-term measures are in place to protect the environment and human health.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been successful in securing £400,000 to launch phase 1 of a small business research initiative (SBRI) competition, in partnership with Innovate UK, to stimulate the development of innovative remediation treatments for waste illegally deposited at Mobuoy Road and mitigation of its impact on the surrounding environment. The project has received £400,000 from the Northern Ireland Executive's pilot SBRI challenge fund. The outcomes of the competition will further inform the remediation strategy for the Mobuoy site.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that update. I commend the work of those NIEA officials who have been left literally to clean up a mess made by criminals but made easy by the actions or inactions of Departments in the past. Could the Minister give me an assurance that she will seek to find the funding necessary for a public inquiry into the situation at Mobuoy either from her departmental budget or with the help of her Executive colleagues?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the Mills report and the number of recommendations that were made in relation to that. Work has been ongoing to address the recommendations of that report. The activity is subject to ongoing criminal proceedings. The previous Executive did consider suggestions for a public inquiry, but, due to those ongoing actions highlighted, the undefined resource implications did not conclude agreement on a public inquiry before the end of the last mandate. As far as I understand, those reasons still stand. I would need to see the outworkings of the criminal proceedings before we would make any decision.

EU Referendum: Rural Community

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether she has a view on the EU referendum debate and to state how the rural community should vote on Thursday. (AQT 42/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Unlike some other parties, the Democratic Unionist Party has a clear line with regards to this week's referendum. We are Eurosceptic and believe that Northern Ireland is better off out of Europe. Over the last four weekends, I have been to rural shows throughout Northern Ireland. I have been to shows in Ballymena, Ballymoney, Armagh and, most recently, Saintfield. It is clear from the majority of our farmers and, in particular, our fishermen that they are tired of the red tape and bureaucracy that is coming from Europe. They are tired of having to jump hurdles to get a diminishing amount of funding. Europe is doing little to help to support many of the hard-pressed sectors to survive the current downturn.

I am confident that Northern Ireland farming will survive outside Europe. The "Remain" and "Leave" camps have accepted that there will be support available to UK farmers outside of Europe. I am confident that there will be the free movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and that other countries from outside the EU will look to take the high-quality produce coming from our farms, our seas and our processors.

I do accept that there are many unanswered questions if we leave the EU, but there are as many, if not more, unanswered questions if we remain. Nobody knows how much funding will come into Northern Ireland after 2019 or what rules will be connected to that funding. There is

only one guarantee I can give the House this afternoon: as the new Minister, regardless of whether we are in or out of Europe, I will guarantee that I will defend the interests of Northern Ireland, whether in Brussels or in London. I will work to ensure that Northern Ireland farmers and fishermen can survive and grow after this week's referendum.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. Can she give the House a reassurance that farmers will still receive their single farm payment this year, irrespective of what way the vote goes on Thursday?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have picked up some concerns that, if the UK votes to leave, farmers may not receive their single farm payment this autumn. This, I have no doubt, is part of the confusion and some of the misinformation that has been associated with the referendum campaign. If the UK votes to leave Europe this week, we will enter a period of negotiations between the EU and the UK that will take at least two years. That will decide how the UK leaves and over what period. As I said, I am confident that farmers will continue to receive support regardless of the outcome of the referendum debate.

Oil Spill: Port of Larne

T3. **Ms Seeley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after wishing her all the best in her new role, for an update on her Department's actions following the oil spill on the east Antrim coast, caused by a business in Larne, on Saturday 11 June. (AQT 43/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: NIEA was notified by the Larne assistant harbour master of a heavy sheen of oil in the water at the Port of Larne at 8.55 am on Saturday 11 June. He also stated that a pungent smell had been noted very late on the Friday night and that the fire brigade had been called out but that nothing had been seen on the water. On receipt of the report, NIEA staff were tasked to the area to investigate. Caterpillar NI Ltd contacted the water pollution hotline at 11.43 am on Saturday 11 June to report that storage tanks within its factory located on the Old Glenarm Road had overflowed and that red diesel had made its way into the site's surface water drainage system. Surface water drainage from the site is discharged into the Irish Sea through a sea outfall. Caterpillar was unable to confirm at that time the quantity of fuel that had been lost or when the discharge happened. Subsequently,

Caterpillar NI released a press statement saying it had lost 40,000 litres of red diesel on Saturday 11 June and it regretted the mistake and was working to address the consequences. The company also stated that it had employed environmental contractors. My Department lifted statutory samples that weekend, and, over the next few days, a representative of the company will be interviewed under caution with a view to prosecution.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for her response. What measures does she intend to take to prevent incidents of this sort reoccurring?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. Obviously, this is something that my Department is very keen to ensure does not happen again. We will work alongside companies and the agriculture sector to educate and inform them, but, at the same time, I think we need to set an example and ensure that those who pollute our waterways are prosecuted.

Brexit: Payment of Farm Subsidies

T4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on what basis she can give the commitment, as referenced in today's 'News Letter', that, in the event of Brexit, farm subsidies will be paid by the UK Treasury. (AQT 44/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. Of course, we have no guarantees that we will get the same amount of subsidy from the EU post-2019. The direction of travel, as she will be aware, is towards a flat payment across Europe, which would disadvantage Northern Ireland farmers in comparison with those in eastern Europe. Of course, where we are, there are no guarantees being inside or outside Europe, but we can be sure, from remarks made by the Prime Minister, that UK farmers will be looked after.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Minister recognise that the UK Government do not place the same priority on supporting rural communities and farms as we do here in Northern Ireland? I ask you this: how can you be confident that they would get the same level of support from the UK Government, who have different priorities?

Miss McIlveen: Over the last number of years, there has been an over-reliance on European moneys coming through. I think that we will all have to re-prioritise, and I certainly do not think

that we can ignore the fact that one in four of our businesses is employed in agriculture, forestry or fishing. It is for all of us to make sure that we make the best case for our farmers when we are negotiating with the Treasury.

Challenge Fund

T5. **Mrs S Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the challenge fund. (AQT 45/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: The challenge fund has been a very positive initiative. It was brought forward as a result of the carrier-bag levy revenue, which is over £4.6 million. From 2011, almost 600 environmental projects have been completed across Northern Ireland, and the fund has enabled schools, communities and all at grass-roots level to become engaged in enhancing a shared environment through the delivery of local environmental projects. The projects are a diverse range and include helping wildlife, creating green space, providing learning experiences and cleaning up the local environment. It has been a very positive fund.

Mrs S Bradley: Given the Minister's positive response, is it her intention to commit to funding the challenge fund for years ahead?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. As she is aware, the former Department of the Environment did not launch a 2016-17 fund prior to the formation of my Department. However, I have noted the success of it and intend to review the estimated 2016-17 carrier-bag levy income against existing commitments. It is something that I will look positively on, although I cannot guarantee anything at this stage.

Coupled Payments/Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

T6. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after congratulating her and wishing her well in her new role, whether she intends to implement the recommendations of the consultation carried out by the former Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which were to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or areas of natural constraint. (AQT 46/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have listened carefully to the views of farming stakeholders. There was little

support from them to use funding from pillar 1 to operate a future areas of natural constraint (ANCs) scheme, either by top-slicing or by transferring moneys to pillar 2. I do not believe there are any convincing arguments to introduce coupled support schemes in Northern Ireland during the current CAP period. Therefore, I do not intend to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or an areas of natural constraint scheme under pillar 1 of the CAP. Furthermore, I do not intend to introduce a pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfer to fund an areas of natural constraint scheme in pillar 2 under the rural development programme.

On support for ANCs, the options are not new moneys but would operate by redistributing pillar 1 moneys from the disadvantaged area and lowland to the severely disadvantaged area, reinforcing the existing redistribution in that direction, arising from the move to a flat-rate payment scheme.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. It will be welcome news to many farmers that there will be no further additional cuts to the basic payments in order to fund other schemes. Has she ruled out any future support payments to farmers in the severely disadvantaged area?

Miss McIlveen: I recognise that support payments, including pillar 1 support, are important sources of income on farms in the severely disadvantaged area. I am still considering options, but, given the pressures on the budget of my Department and the Executive's Budget, providing any additional support will be challenging. I cannot ignore long-term value for money nor indeed the redistribution of pillar 1 moneys, which is occurring as a result of the transition to flat-rate support in pillar 1.

LEADER Programme: Update

T7. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the LEADER programme and how it will benefit rural businesses. (AQT 47/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: LEADER is delivered by the local action groups (LAGs) through the rural business investment scheme. It can support rural microbusinesses and small businesses with capital grants to start up new businesses or expand existing ones. The key driver is to create new jobs and help expand the rural economy. Applicants must attend a funding workshop in their area, at which the application process will be explained to them. They can

then submit an expression of interest to their LAG. If deemed eligible, they will be invited to submit an application for grants at the appropriate time.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry that there will not be time for a supplementary.

Finance

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Fáilte romhat a Aire, go dtí do chéad Tráth na gCeist. I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time.

Corporation Tax

1. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister of Finance when the Executive will decide whether the reduction of corporation tax is affordable. (AQO 75/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle agus a Philip. Philip, you and I had this dance on my card previously, but it always a good sign when someone comes back for another dance late in proceedings. No doubt we will continue this discussion around corporation tax into the future.

I am absolutely confident that a corporation tax rate of 12.5% from April 2018 is affordable, and I am pleased that we are making good progress towards that goal. My Department has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Treasury and HMRC to put the administrative preparations in place. I have written to the British Chancellor, Mr Osborne, seeking to increase the pace of discussions on the deduction to the block grant. I intend to get the best deal possible for all the people we represent, no matter where they come from, and to minimise the cost to the block grant. Over the summer, the Executive will prepare a multi-year Budget with resource DEL plans to 2019-2020. It is planned to present a draft Budget to the Assembly in the autumn, which will reflect estimated costs for a corporation tax rate of 12.5% from April 2018.

Having combed over this issue in the last week, a couple of things are clear to me. One is that the vast majority in the House is resolved to deliver on corporation tax. A date and rate has been set. The vast majority is confident and has faith in my ability to lead our top negotiation team with the Chancellor to make sure that we

do not come short on the deal that the reduction to the block grant is as small as we can make it. I hope and trust that I have the good wishes and goodwill of every Member of the House in that onerous task.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for his answer. No doubt we will dance on this issue again. The Minister has previously said that the corporation tax reduction cannot be confirmed until the secondary benefits have been negotiated with the Treasury. Was this crucial detail not confirmed in the so-called Fresh Start Agreement because the wool was pulled over the Executive's eyes or because the Executive genuinely dropped the ball?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I hark back to Trevor Lunn: do not despair. I say this to the Opposition: have faith. I am confident that we will stay absolutely resolute in faith with the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement. I am confident that we will deliver to the House and our people a deal on corporation tax that is fair and proportionate. I am also confident that, when we enter negotiations, those will be tough. When you see the agenda being led by Mr Osborne and his colleagues, you know that they are ruthless when it comes to matters monetary and will fight to get the best deal for London. However, I can assure you that I will fight to get the best deal for Ballymena, Ballymurphy, Fermanagh and Derry.

In your original question, you asked when we would decide that the deal has been cut. We play our cards close to our chest, but I am highly confident that we will get a deal that I will be proud and pleased to bring to the House.

Ms Hanna: Sorry for cutting in on this dance. It is worrying that, every time we have gone into these negotiations, we have come out with something a little bit weaker. Does the Minister agree that having a well-trained and well-skilled workforce is essential to capitalise on the benefits of low corporation tax? Does he agree that, to achieve this, reinstating investment in higher education should be a priority?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Gabhaimse buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a ceist. I thank the Member for her question. I agree with her that what we are trying to do is deliver high-value jobs. High-value jobs require a skilled workforce. My discussions with both vice chancellors have been very active over recent weeks. We are all on the same page that corporation tax cannot succeed alone. We need to deliver the infrastructure. You know the resources that we

have put into infrastructure and our commitment in capital budgets, but we also need to sort out skills and education.

In the monitoring round, I made a good start to that. I showed our resolve and determination, but we need to make sure that the jobs that we bring in are life-changing jobs, sustainable jobs, best-in-class jobs. For that to happen, we need to get behind the two main universities — there are more than two universities, of course — which want to deliver those top-class graduates.

Mr McKay: The Minister will not need reminding that the Treasury often operates as a law unto itself, so I welcome his commitment to fight ferociously for the best deal possible — a fair deal for our Assembly. Can he not only outline the negotiation up until we get the 12.5% but remind the House what we will have once we secure a fair deal on corporation tax?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I am aware that the Member's constituency has been dealt more hammer blows with the closure of major manufacturers in recent years in a planned closure, so I know that his interest in corporation tax is fuelled by only one issue, and it is the only reason we want to reduce the rate of corporation tax: to create thousands of jobs. While the figures are there — over 30,000 new jobs by 2030 — we should reduce it to the individual. Last Friday, I met a young man called Thomas at the bottom of the Shankill who was seeking work. This morning, I met young graduates who were starting work at PwC down at the Waterfront. For every young person to whom we can offer a job — a well-paid, sustainable job — rather than offering them what was the emigrant boat and is now the aeroplane to Canada or Australia, I say to the Member that, yes, we think it will increase output by at least 8.5%. Yes, we think it will be a dramatic step change, but we should it reduce it to the individual — every person to whom we will be able to give the dignity of employment because we have reduced corporation tax.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I welcome the clarity given by the Minister on the certainty around corporation tax. Northern Ireland certainly needs a game-changer, and I think that this is a real opportunity to change the game for the better for so many of our young people. That certainty was hard fought for and hard won, but does the Minister agree that, when negotiations on the secondary effects continue, it is important that the rest of the Executive is out selling the prospect to businesses to come to

Northern Ireland, to ensure that it becomes the game-changer that it has the potential to be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: One thing that the Member touches on is that this is not a spectator sport; there is a role for every politician, business leader and community leader to show the proposition that we offer to investors and indigenous companies who want to invest further. As we move forward and bring our best game to the negotiations with Treasury, I am confident that the points that you make about the bright future that we envisage for all our people are put front and centre. The Treasury has to understand that a prosperous society here will mean that we do not have to go back to Treasury and ask it to support the many projects that we wish to fund from our corporation tax resources in the time ahead. I am confident that, while there will be a reduction in the block grant at the start, we will attract more companies and investment here over a number of years, and the take from corporation tax will rise from the base that it will be at when it is first reduced.

Mr Allister: Last week, the Minister's officials told the Finance Committee that the latest calculations showed that, in the first year, the reduction to the block grant could be £270 million: is that affordable?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: That is actually the Treasury calculation. We are now going into negotiations with our colleagues in Treasury, and we will decide what is affordable for our people and what is fair and proportionate. I am not going to negotiate in this room, but everyone, including the Treasury, knows that I will seek the very best deal. Officials have, of course, presented the modelling done by Treasury, but I would like the support of everyone here in challenging everything that the Treasury brings to the table. Let us challenge it robustly, because the alternative is to sit on our hands and say that we cannot do better and we might as well go home. That is not my intention in the assertive and positive negotiations that we will have with Treasury in the time ahead.

Fiscal Powers

2. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to expand the Executive's fiscal powers. (AQO 76/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabhail leis an Chomhalta as an cheist a chuir sé. My starting point is that I believe that Members of the Assembly are best placed to make decisions in the interest of the people

who elect us. It is no secret that I have said that I would like this Government to have more fiscal levers under our control.

The transfer of corporation tax powers, which we have just discussed, sets an important precedent, and I hope that it will spur us on to taking greater control of our destiny. I hark back to that. Everything that we do — *[Interruption.]* Dia leat. Bless you. Everything that we do to try to take further powers is done because I believe in Members of the House. I believe in their genius, their ability and their talent to make the right decisions for the electorate when they control these fiscal levers. Any day of the week, I would rather put my faith in the Members of this House than in the Treasury.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: How does the Minister's desire to achieve additional fiscal powers correspond with his party's decision last year to hand our welfare powers back to Westminster?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: My apologies: I should have called Ian Milne for a supplementary. Will you hold that question? I call Ian Milne for a supplementary.

Mr Milne: Fadhb ar bith, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a dhéanamh leis an Aire as na freagraí sin go dtí seo, agus ba mhaith liom mo chomhgairdeas a dhéanamh leis as a phost nua.

I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Also, congratulations on your new job; I wish you well for the future. No doubt, the Minister will be aware of the current VAT rate of 20%, which is holding back our tourism potential. As a Mid Ulster MLA, I am aware of our tourism potential, with the Seamus Heaney centre, for example, in Bellaghy and lots of other local attractions. What is the Minister's view of the impact of the VAT on our hospitality and tourism sectors?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom comhgairdeas a dhéanamh as an cheist a chur. I admire the Member for standing up for his rights and making sure that he got his supplementary in, despite the ruling of the Chair.

Ba mhaith liom cuireadh a fháil cuairt a thabhairt ar Dhoire theas. Ar ndóigh is fada an bhaint atá agam leis an cheantar sin. I look forward to visiting the Member's constituency.

As he knows, I have very strong south Derry roots, and I look forward in particular to visiting the Seamus Heaney centre.

The VAT rate of 20% is a tax on tourism and a burden on hospitality. If you want to see how to do it right, you can see what they did down south, where they reduced the hospitality rate to 9%. Tourism has created more jobs south of the border in the last four years than any other sector. Unfortunately, European rules — I hope that they are still there on Friday — do not allow a state to have a different rate of VAT within a region. That said, it is my intention that we should control all these levers. There is no greater example of flexibility than that applied by the sovereign Government in Dublin to secure the recovery of tourism.

I have no doubt that the Seamus Heaney centre will be a huge success, and I wish the hospitality sector in south Derry every success. If there is anything I can do to help that, you can be assured of my support.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I now call Robbie Butler and thank him for his patience.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Now that the Minister has had time to prepare his answer, I will have to think of a different question. No, I will stick with the first one, if the Minister does not mind. How does his desire to achieve additional fiscal powers correspond with his party's decision last year to hand our welfare powers back to Westminster?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Thank you for not changing the question. I am not sure whether I should pull my punches — maybe I will not — given that the Ulster Unionist Party joined forces with the Conservatives at the 2010 election that ushered in this awful era of austerity. "Austerity" is just a bland word for hardships for ordinary people. As the bishops of England said, it places the heaviest burdens on those with the narrowest shoulders.

The Ulster Unionist Party should be very wary of getting into that particular scrap.

3.00 pm

Whatever tactics were used by the House to ensure that we protected the most vulnerable, I endorse them. We have managed to put in place the most generous mitigation package in these islands for those on welfare benefits, for the disabled and for those who would have been faced with the bedroom tax. You can be sure that, when it comes to dealing with the

Treasury, it knows that, when it faces this Government, it faces a strong adversary.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. On fiscal powers, I appreciate that VAT came about because we entered the EEC back in the 1970s. Mention was made of a reduction in our VAT level. Another tax that was brought in was air passenger duty (APD), which was really brought about only to deal with a green tax on our airlines. If we exit Europe, will you support the doing-away with VAT and APD?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabhail leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his mischievous question. As Minister, I am not allowed to speak on Brexit, so I will not. However, as an individual, I have told you where I would like to be and what I hope to wake up to on Friday morning.

If you really believe — I suspect that you do not — that the Tories introduced air passenger duty to protect the environment, you came up the Lagan in a bubble. The Greens were in favour of air passenger duty, because they did want to stop the damage to the environment from the burning of petrol, and so on. Whatever they think, it is clear that the Tories introduced a tax that is OK for London — it has not taken anything from Heathrow's advance — but that is clearly an imposition on us. Air passenger duty is one of the taxes that we would look quite differently at if we could control it, but, of course, to all these things there is a cost.

Irish Government Engagement

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Finance what engagement he has had with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in the Irish Government. (AQO 77/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Buíochas arís leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I recently met Eoghan Murphy TD, the Minister of State for Financial Services, eGovernment and Public Procurement, and I have arranged to meet Minister Michael Noonan this Wednesday in Dublin. I have also been in correspondence with Paschal Donohoe, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and I anticipate meeting him in the near future.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you, Minister, for your answers. What is on the agenda for your meetings with the Minister? I assume that you will meet him after the Brexit vote, which may or may not change

the agenda for the meeting. There are certainly major issues of common concern and opportunity between the two jurisdictions. Will you outline what your agenda will be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You are tempting me to speak about Brexit. I am going to resist that. I am meeting the Minister on Wednesday morning. He will ask me how it is going, and I will tell him that it is going well. We will confine ourselves to that.

I was trying to think desperately of something in your constituency, Mr O'Dowd, that is on the agenda, but you can be sure that the Narrow Water bridge will be on the agenda, as will the pledge to fund the A5. I stand to be corrected, but I think that it was €400 million originally. We have reduced considerably from that. I think that we are down to €75 million maximum from the Irish Government. The Ulster canal is certainly a project on the agenda, as is Waterways Ireland and the cross-border bodies. The real issue is not one of asking Minister Noonan what he can do for us but what we can do together to improve the lives of all the people whom we represent. It is about cross-border cooperation between Finance Ministers. Broader than that, in concert with ministerial colleagues, it is about how we can work together for the common good. As part of that, in speaking with Minister Noonan shortly after my election, I said that I am a big advocate of the Belfast to Dublin economic corridor. That passes through Newry, which is not in your constituency either.

It is a getting-to-know-you meeting. I hope to work very closely with Minister Noonan, Minister Donohoe and Minister of State Murphy in the time ahead.

Mrs S Bradley: I certainly welcome the Minister's answers, thus far, particularly his reference to the Narrow Water bridge, which I am delighted to hear about. Will the Minister elaborate on that? Given that such a commitment has been expressed in the House and with the Southern Government, are we at a level of discussions at which we can start to debate timelines etc?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for her question. I have been in Newry, and I was at the Narrow Water bridge site last Friday, with the Principal Deputy Speaker. Before I answer the question, I will say that I think there is great potential in Newry, reaching down as far as Rostrevor, and it seems to me that it is untapped potential. It also seems that the example and exemplary progress of First

Derivatives, under Brian Conlon's leadership, shows us what can be achieved in that part of the world. Take it, first, that I am an ally for any attempts in that constituency to improve people's lives and build prosperity.

In terms of the Narrow Water bridge, the Member may be aware that a report will go to the North/South Ministerial Council in July — I think it is 7 July, but I am not sure if we have nailed down a date yet. That report will reflect back on the Fresh Start Agreement, which references the Narrow Water bridge, and it will talk about the great potential that it has to boost tourism and to be a cross-border, cross-community link that will transform the way that tourists and visitors will view that part of the world, as well as being an enormous asset for local people.

I hope that when we get that report, we can get the pledges of support that were there previously. I am sure it was distressing for the Member, as it was for all of us, that that fell. In my view, that project should have gone ahead. European money was there, local council money was there and both Governments were on board. I think it is a matter of great regret that it fell, but if I can do anything to resuscitate — that may be the word — the project, the Member can be sure that I will do so. I was heartened by the visit on Friday. Gerry Adams was there as well, as was the cross-border committee. It seems to me that people have been waiting for a long time, and to deliver the bridge would be a great peace dividend for that area.

Equal Pay

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on how he plans to address the issue of equal pay for PSNI, Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Office personnel. (AQO 78/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have been briefed by my officials on this issue, and I am aware of the difficulties involved in attempting to resolve the problem. It is a longstanding issue, as the Member knows, because there was correspondence from you on it a considerable time ago, and it is an issue that will require due consideration.

Resolution of the issue will be difficult, as it has been established in court that NIO and PSNI staff have no legal entitlement to the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement. It would require significant funding, and, given the already challenging departmental budgets, it is

unclear where the money would come from. Any resolution would undoubtedly have to take account of the repercussive risk that other groups will demand similar treatment, as well as the serious risk of undermining the original equal pay settlement, both of which would, of course, require even more funding. I know that it is an issue that the Member has worked very hard on, but I do not think that I can bring him a positive answer today for the reasons that I have outlined.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response, so far. The Minister will be well aware of the people concerned and their concerns that they appear to have been overlooked and, in fact, forgotten by the Assembly. You mentioned in your response a figure. Can you tell me what the figure may be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have much sympathy with those who are affected. You are right: they had no part in ending up in the situation that they ended up in. While I do not want to go for one figure, I have to say that if we go down this avenue, there is no saying where it will end, because the original Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement may unravel, and there may be other groups who say they were also left out. So, it becomes a particularly fractious and difficult issue. I will resist putting a figure on it, but if you contact me after this, I am willing to ask officials to discuss the issues with you.

Let me say what Minister Sammy Wilson said in response to you in 2013. I know that Mr Wilson is here today, and he will be delighted that I am quoting him. He said:

"The arguments put forward by those lobbying on this issue do not change the fact that the position in terms of eligibility has been clear from the outset of the equal pay settlement and this has now been upheld in the County Court, which found that the settlement applied only to periods of service in the 11 NICS departments and did not apply to bodies such as the NIO and PANI/PSNI, who had lawfully received delegation for pay matters, which was still in effect during the relevant time period. No legal liability has been established upon which to base any rationale to approve payment of the settlement to PSNI staff."
[Official Report, Bound Volume 85, pWA148].

I am sorry I cannot be more positive today on the issue for the Member.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. I also welcome him to his first Question Time. Given, Minister, that you are only a short time in your post, have you had or do you intend to have any discussions with personnel on this matter, given that these are serious concerns about equal pay?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have not made it to Strabane yet. I did sneak into Derry, but I have not made it to Strabane. Of course, I have not been invited yet, but I hope to be in that part of the constituency as well.

This is a very difficult and fraught issue. Members know how tight money is, and they know that, within budgets, there are enormous pressures. Whatever Committee you are on or Department you are in, you know that we are fighting against a reducing resource budget between now and 2020. It is down 4-5%. We face enormous pressures. I have every sympathy for the issue. I had a full meeting of our top team on the issue at 8.00 am last Tuesday. It was on my desk, and it came up on the doorsteps that I canvassed, and I am sure it came up on the doorsteps that Ms Boyle canvassed. I do not see an easy way through this because I cannot imagine where we will get the money from. If we did get the money, we would open a Pandora's box of claims. I have great sympathy for those affected, but I do not see an easy way through.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that we are working with what is not a bottomless pit of money. Irrespective of whether there is a legal issue, there is a point where there is a moral understanding. A number of these individuals were not aware that, because they were under the Civil Service based in Westminster and not the Northern Ireland Civil Service, there was a difficulty. I think there is a moral understanding about those who were contracted out, maybe working in other Departments, who have lost out dramatically because of this. There needs to be some understanding that we will attempt to do something. I am asking the Minister about the moral perspective.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The only thing I think I can say is that that, again, increases my sympathy. There is a moral obligation, but, unfortunately, sometimes a moral obligation cannot be monetised. I will say this: I have not made a decision. You can understand from the things I am saying that I think it would be very difficult to find any way to find the money to make the settlement when there is no legal obligation and it could open up a Pandora's box of further claims. The only thing I think I can say to Mr

Girvan is this: I have not made a decision, but I will make an early decision. As Mr Hussey pointed out, the issue has been around since 2013 and before that. So, I hope to make an early decision, but I have not made a decision yet.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:

Christopher Stalford is not in his place. I call Catherine Seeley.

Block Grant: Cuts

6. **Ms Seeley** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any discussions he has had with the British Treasury in relation to cuts to the block grant. (AQO 80/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have already had an initial discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, where I expressed my strong opposition to the austerity agenda. As Members may be aware and as I just mentioned, we are facing a real-terms reduction of 4.5% in our resource DEL by 2019-2020. On top of this, I also indicated my desire, in talking with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to have a working relationship. I think that is important. We may be on different sides in many arguments, but I think we also have to have a working and productive relationship. I have no doubt that, in the short time ahead, we will intensify our negotiations not only with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury but with Chancellor Osborne. A letter went off to Chancellor Osborne last week about corporation tax, but that also covers other issues I had written to him about. I think it is very important that we have a productive and fruitful relationship not only with Minister Noonan and his colleagues in Dublin but with our colleagues in Wales and Scotland, as well as with Treasury.

It is early days, but I hope there will be very regular contact. I also hope to make sure that I represent robustly everyone who votes for the Members gathered here today.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for his response. This is my first opportunity to wish him well in his new role. What was discussed in meetings with the Finance Ministers of Scotland and Wales?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to make his answer very brief because we have to move to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We discussed a little bit of football in Wales, although it did not go well for them. They avoided talking about football in Scotland. The Finance Minister of Scotland, Derek Mackay, asked for a regular working relationship, as did Mark Drakeford, the Finance Minister of Wales. This was the big point; together, we represent 10 million people, so when we make a point to the Treasury about raiding our coffers or not being fair and proportionate, we speak for 10 million people.

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

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Budgetary Decisions

T1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance, after declaring an interest as having been a fire officer up until last month, whether he shares his party's previously stated position that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service should be reclassified as a front-line service for budgetary decisions. (AQT 51/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: It is a case of moving out of the frying pan and into the fire. You are welcome here. Of course, we had one of the most evocative moments of the last Assembly mandate when the firefighters came here and we saw what a real lobby looks like. I do not have the full details of that issue, but you can take it that we consider the Fire Service to be vital to our society. It is a service that we stand behind. I am happy for the Minister of Health, who is also responsible for the Fire Service, to come forward with proposals. You can be sure that they will receive a sympathetic ear.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for that considerate response. Earlier this year, and while I was still in the Fire Service, the Assembly passed a Ulster Unionist motion calling for the Executive not to risk public safety or the lives of my former comrades. Will he give a commitment to work with the Fire and Rescue Service along with the Fire Brigades Union in the run-up to the next Budget?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Absolutely. That was on the day that I was referring to, and we voted in favour of that motion. It shows you the strength of a very powerful lobby when 100 firefighters arrive at the Assembly. We are usually tremendously supportive of what they ask for and that remains a priority for me. It is not my Department, and budgets are under pressure, but you can take it from me that the Fire

Service is an integral, vital and key part of everything we do. I know that you will be a strong advocate for our firefighters in the time ahead.

Arm's-length Bodies: Rationalisation

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the rationalisation of the arm's-length bodies, especially following the reduction in the number of Departments. (AQT 52/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The rationalisation of the arm's-length bodies and our commitment to reform them has formed an early part of the briefings I have received. For what it is worth, it was a commitment in Sinn Féin's manifesto before the election as well. There is no one in the House who believes that we could not do a better job of rationalising the arm's-length bodies. At this stage, I have no particular recommendations to make. Of course, many of those arm's-length bodies do not come under my Department but report to other bodies. However, if we can find a way to deliver the same level of service or improve it with a more mainstreamed delivery system, I think the Member would support that. While respecting the independence of the arm's-length bodies — I believe that every one of them fulfils a vital role — I am open, as are some of the agencies themselves, to looking at ways of getting a bigger bang for our buck.

Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let us make sure that we advance in a way that includes and values everyone and recognises the contribution of those arm's-length bodies in the past and in future.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for his response. However, given the emphasis that the 2011 Budget placed on this rationalisation only for nothing to happen in reality, can he explain whether the Budget review group is now, effectively, dead in the water?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have not been here since 2011, so you cannot visit all the sins of my fathers and mothers upon me. Nevertheless, I take the point that there has been much promise and not enough action. It is a live issue; do not consider it moribund or dormant. It is an issue to which we will return and it is an issue on which all Members of the House, including you, will have input to make and I look forward to that. There is work to be done and 2011-16 in my view, has been too long, but I know that the Executive are committed to making progress on this. Now that we have

moved, as the Member said, from 12 to nine Departments, it is an apposite time.

Business Rates: SMEs

T3. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to review the small business rate relief scheme to allow it to be more accessible to SMEs, given that he will be aware that increasing business rates for small businesses is a major concern in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency. (AQT 53/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. He has voiced concerns about the grass-roots retail economy in Fermanagh in particular, and the pressures that it is under. He can be assured that I share those concerns. It is my intention to give as much help as possible to small businesses.

We have had a review of small business rates, and we are now in a larger review of the entire rating system. I have been meeting with my officials on this. I would like to bring forward proposals which are perhaps a little bit bolder. He will be aware that I recently met the chief executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and he pointed out a site beside Brewster Park which has been empty for 20 years and talked about a productive economic asset being lost. Of course, it does not come under rates at all.

I am happy to give the Member this assurance: without small businesses and small to medium-sized enterprises we do not have an economy, so we need to have prosperous main streets, prosperous towns and prosperous cities. The "spray and pray" approach of business rate relief for small businesses is not making enough difference. With the Member's permission, I hope to bring forward proposals that will be more focused.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister also confirm whether, as part of the proposals of reform for non-domestic rates, he will impose rates on charity shops?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for the supplementary. It is not my intention to impose rates on charity shops. I am aware of the difficulty it presents to us when a landlord who may be unscrupulous and who does not want to pay half rates — there is 50% relief on empty premises — so he or she decides to put a charity in and therefore avoids the rate obligation while charging the charity rent.

There is a problem in some of our busiest commercial main streets, and we need to prevent landlords from doing that.

I have met the charities, and I think that it is going to be part of a wider review. I met the NI Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) on Friday, and this was one of the topics. Most charities want to make a contribution. They make their contribution through the wider charitable works but, at the same time, we need to make sure that our high streets prosper. I am sure the Member has a view on this. Is there a time when we say that five charity shops on a street is enough, or can there be six or seven? In my constituency of South Belfast sometimes traders say that the balance is wrong because people are saying we cannot shop here. On the other hand, every one of those charities makes a great contribution. I look forward to hearing the Member's views on that matter in the time ahead.

NAMA: Micheál Martin's Comments

T4. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of Finance whether he is aware of a speech made by Micheál Martin in the Dáil last Wednesday, stating that there was something rotten in the state of Denmark and that evidence would likely emerge in relation to the sale of the NAMA loan portfolio, and, if so, does he agree with Deputy Martin that the nothing-to-see attitude from Governments is no longer tenable. (AQT 54/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I did not catch all of Micheál Martin's speech but, as I am sure the Member is aware, his Government were deeply involved in the issues, problems and crash which led to the setting up of NAMA and left us with this mess — this corrosive mess — which has been NAMA, the NAMA loan book and Project Eagle.

The pledge I give her is that my Department will release all the information we can to her. I view the NAMA scandal as an abomination. The public is entitled to know if anyone benefited from the misery of so many people — many people caught in negative equity, and many people who did lose properties.

In the time ahead, whether it is Micheál Martin or anyone else, I think that I can say, as we have said previously, that the Irish Government need to do more. There have been calls for a legislative commission of inquiry. I think that we really need that. Those of us in the Department of Finance and other bodies here will do our best to provide the information. I really do think that it is time for the Irish

Government to do more. I hope that that happens in the time ahead. I presume that that is what former Minister Martin was speaking about.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Can he outline what information his Department will release in response to the request from the Committee for Finance to release previously redacted or withheld information?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Yes, I can. You will see later today, I hope, when the papers go out to the Finance Committee that I will honour my pledge; I will release all the information that I have in my Department relating to NAMA. As I said, whatever side of the table I am at, I am on the same side as the Committee. My pledge remains the same that any information that is relevant to the NAMA inquiry should be released to the Committee. Today, I have gone back, as I promised, looked at the documents that had been released previously and removed redactions that were there. There were very few minor redactions which the Committee did not ask for; for example, relating to bank employees who were worried about their jobs. I have removed redactions. I hope that you receive those fresh papers later today.

There has been an attempt to prevent me from releasing one piece of information. I repeat my pledge to you at Committee: I am resolved to release that piece of information to you as well, regardless of that attempt, which we take seriously — we need to take counsel over the next 24 hours — because I believe that it is also in the public interest.

EU Money: Northern Ireland Share

T5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance to confirm that Northern Ireland's share of EU money is decreasing year on year. (AQT 55/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I think that this is a loaded question. Funny — I read the figures this morning, and they are staggering. The Peace, INTERREG and RDF moneys that have come in to this part of the world are absolutely staggering. I think that there has been almost €2 billion in Peace money. INTERREG money is up around €1.2 billion. I know that the Member has great faith in Westminster. I am not entirely sure why. If I were a betting man, I would not bet on our friends in the Treasury being as generous post-Brexit if that were to happen — please God, it does not — as they are letting on.

Yes, the Peace programme is coming to an end. I think that 2021 will see the end of Peace IV. We need to double down and go back to Europe — post-Friday if circumstances are permitting — and say that, in fact, now is the time to reinforce your commitment rather than decreasing your commitment to building peace and prosperity here.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister, but I am not so sure whether I got an answer. Given that the UK Government pay in the region of £20 billion into Europe each year and that, year on year, our funding from Europe is reduced, can the Minister understand why support for leaving Europe is growing?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I am very respectful of anyone who wants to vote to leave on Thursday, but, for the life of me, I cannot understand how anyone in this part of the world would vote to leave, because, for the last 15 years, I have heard politicians from all sides of the House say that foreign direct investment should come here not only because we have great and talented people but because we are a gateway to Europe. In fact, in my view, our future prosperity and success in business — in particular, the foreign direct investment that we wish to attract through corporation tax — is predicated upon our membership of the European Union. You are making me talk about Brexit, which I forswore not to do.

European Funding

T6. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance, while continuing the European theme, to outline the possibility of using projects such as the Narrow Water bridge, which is an excellent example of peace and reconciliation, to lever in additional European funding, plus other examples where European funding would make a project viable. (AQT 56/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist, a Charál. Sílim go dtuigeann tú cé chomh tábhachtach agus atá tacaíocht na hEorpa don obair atá ar bun againn. I think that the Member understands the key importance of Europe's support for everything that we are trying to do here in building peace and prosperity. It is an apposite time on Friday. We have an opportunity to go back to Europe and say, "This is how you have to win the hearts and minds of people even more so; by reinforcing your commitment to the peace process."

The European project was born out of a wish to see an end to war. I think that that is one

reason why the European Union understood the importance of our peace process. They got it, and they responded generously. I hope that, in the time ahead, not just in Narrow Water but in many other projects, including entrepreneurial projects, research and innovation and life sciences, we will continue to have strong support from our European colleagues.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Tá brón orm, a Charál, níl go leor ama againn don supplementary. Members may take their ease while we change the top Table. That ends Question Time.

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Landlord Registration Scheme

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants. — [Mr Maskey.]

Which amendment was:

Delete all after “scheme” and insert

“and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.”. — [Mr Dickson.]

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for all the contributions agreeing to accept the Alliance Party amendment. In many cases, when individuals or families seek to rent a residential property, it is due to a change in their personal circumstances. It may be a positive move relating to a new job in a new town, but it can be due to a breakdown in family relationships, redundancy, or, like many cases in South Belfast, as Christopher Stalford highlighted, people arriving from other parts of the world with basic English and little knowledge of our laws and their protections.

In the latter cases, the people involved will be incredibly vulnerable, as referenced by Nichola Mallon, and anxious to secure a safe place to live as soon as possible. This insecurity leaves them susceptible to accepting living conditions and contractual agreements that people negotiating from a position of strength would not even consider.

In circumstances in which letting agents broker rental agreements, we in the Alliance Party feel that they have an important role to play in protecting the tenant. As Alex Maskey pointed out, letting agents operating in the sector are aware of the good landlords and the unscrupulous ones — the ones who provide safe, clean accommodation; and those who

disregard the needs of their tenants, with a fixation only on profit-making.

The amendment would positively govern the duty of care to tenants and, as Roy Beggs pointed out, provide clear lines of responsibility for repairs, for example. We also know of cases in which the letting agents do not act with total consideration for their tenants. We heard from Clare Bailey that administration and upfront fees can be very expensive and without justification. As Michelle Gildernew said, that can lead to tenants having to choose in the first month whether to pay the fees or feed their family.

The amendment is not anti-business. The inclusion of the clause is also to regulate letting agents. It will bring about an equitable and balanced structure, as articulated by Jonathan Bell, between the basic needs of the tenant to secure shelter and the commercial needs of the landlord and the business.

We often hear about cleaning up business practice. The amendment, in the context of the full motion, will show that the Assembly is on the side of the people, on the side of good practice and on the side of fairness in society.

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I am absolutely delighted that, given that it is so early in the mandate, we have business in the Assembly for which there seems to be cross-party support, albeit that there are some differences coming from different positions. Some Members placed more emphasis on issues that they deal with in their constituency than others. The Alliance Party amendment strengthens the motion. We are keen to look at that, because, at the end of the day, this is about providing protection and making sure that the duty of care is honoured and respected.

Alex Maskey laid out very clearly at the start that, in 2007 — I remember this, because I sat on the Social Development Committee at the time — we were quite concerned about the fact that there were not any mandatory regulations, particularly for landlords. At that time — this was certainly my opinion, although Alex possibly did not articulate it — when I used to hear the Department talk about light-touch approaches to mandatory registration, I thought that that meant looking after landlords rather than protecting the needs of citizens and those people sleeping on settees, which, in my constituency, affected three generations. I was completely baffled by that, and even more so when I found out that the legislation was not brought forward until seven years later. I understand why it takes a long time for

legislation to come in, but it should not take seven years. That is why we have called for a review. Alex touched on the point about conflicting figures throughout the period, and although, in his contribution, the Minister — this debate is my first opportunity in the Chamber to thank and welcome him — clarified some of those figures, I suspect that they will change, given the fact that the private rented sector is in such demand because of the appalling nature of our housing waiting lists, which are set to get worse. I therefore think that we need to look at ways in which to tackle the issue.

Alex Maskey pointed out that vast sums of public money go into the private rented sector. Our opinion is that the more regulation and reviews that there are, the better. I have spoken to many landlords in my North Belfast constituency, and I know that South Belfast — Christopher Stalford and Paula Bradshaw know this, too — and North Belfast are probably the two most high-demand areas in the city for private rented sector housing. I certainly know that South Belfast has the highest number of HMOs.

From our point of view, vast sums of public money are going into the private sector, and we need to make sure that public money is being protected. More importantly, what came out of this debate is the fact that some of the conditions that people endure in the private rented sector are completely unacceptable. I think that everyone across the House said that.

Stewart Dickson touched on the fact that we do not want to be over-bureaucratic. The same issues kept coming up in different contributions. The first was about making sure that this is not over-bureaucratic. The second was about making sure that the review provides a good outcome rather than be seen as another process with no outcome. No one wants that, particularly people on housing waiting lists and tenants living in private rented houses that are, frankly, not fit for human habitation. The third issue was the whole matter of letting agents and the need to reinforce legislation.

By calling for a review, we are giving the Department an opportunity not only to listen to what has been said in this debate but to come back to the Committee in particular with some suggestions about how it is going to be done.

One thing I was very heartened about was what Jonathan Bell, Roy Beggs, Nichola Mallon and others said, which was interesting. I would like to say that I have no interest to declare. I do not own a house, and I am not a landlord, but, like many other people, I know what it is like to

sleep on someone's sofa, what it is like to be in a hostel and what it is like to move from pillar to post. None of us wants that happening on our watch. I have to say that the private rented sector has begun to respond to some of the demands, and I believe that those responses came about only because of the pressure from government. Pressure has to come, and it has to be consistent and applied consistently.

Michelle Gildernew is a rural MLA. She tells us that in every Committee meeting, and she told us again today. As a city girl, I accept that there are acute needs in rural constituencies, and the housing stock needs to be looked at. With industries such as manufacturing growing in Dungannon and other areas, the demand for private lets has increased. When demand increases, there are landlords — I know that, in my constituency, unscrupulous landlords are in the minority — who will overcrowd houses, ignore health and safety, as well as some of the issues that Jonathan Bell raised, do everything that other people would find abhorrent and bring in as many people as possible to get as much rent as possible. Therefore, we need to ensure that, first, we try to fulfil, as best we can, our duty of care, which every MLA mentioned, and, secondly, that letting agents and landlords reach the best standards possible.

This is probably where some of us will disagree, although not enough to divide the House. The minimum standards, for me, are making sure that there is proper health and safety; that accommodation is properly furnished; that the landlord does not have the ability to hike up the rent whenever he or she feels like it; and that they fulfil their statutory obligations in terms of rent books, conditions and all the rest.

The landlord registration scheme was mentioned, and it demonstrates that, when statutory instruments are used to enhance the rights and entitlements of people, they work. The difficulty that we have at times is that the pressure is taken off, and, when the pressure is taken off, poor and vulnerable people usually feel the brunt of that. None of us wants that.

We also need to look at the housing waiting list. I understand that a lot of people are very loyal to the Housing Executive, particularly those who remember why it was put in place in the first instance, but, as a public housing authority, it is a public landlord as well. This is really around mandatory registration with private landlords: if even half the standards were set in the private sector that are set in the social sector, we would be going some way, but that is still not good enough.

Looking at the review, the Minister's officials, I am sure, will have quickly taken down a list of things that were mentioned. We need to give the Department the space to address some of those. As the Minister said, every MLA who spoke, regardless of their experience in the Chamber and that, is a seasoned activist, campaigner or lobbyist or has, as a neighbour, lived beside people in the private rented sector. They will know what it is like — to talk about Clare's experience — to see a family moved out at 10.00 pm on a Friday because a landlord has put them out. They will know what it is like when people have been given less than 28 days' notice to quit. They will know what it is like when the landlord decides, "You are not getting your full deposit" and makes up some erroneous reason for it. People are pushed into massive poverty traps.

Michelle Gildernew and others mentioned the impact of poor housing on health. That cannot be overestimated. It is massive, and the way in which the private rented sector has gone in the past is that it is costing people to live there because they have no choice. We need to create opportunities so that people have choices that they can afford and that will not push them further and deeper into poverty and, indeed, further and deeper into the interest of loan sharks. I have seen that in my constituency. You grow up hearing stories of the tick men coming to the door, but that has become accepted as inevitable. I do not think that any of us will accept that that is inevitable, and I do not think that any of us ever should. The motion and the amendment not only will have a good outcome but will send a clear message out that the new Minister, the new Department and the MLAs in the new mandate collectively want to make sure that we have the backs of those in the private rented sector.

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

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.

Electoral Offices: Proposed Closure

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

3.45 pm

Mr T Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat of closure.

I will speak solely to the motion. I note the amendment that has been selected, but, at the outset, I inform the House that we will not support it. We do not believe that the Executive should pursue the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland; we would rather work with the NIO in a bid to keep the offices open and ensure they are properly and adequately funded.

The proposed closure of the regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh has caused widespread concern among not only the unions and employees but all shades of political persuasion across Northern Ireland. Proposals to centralise the six regional offices in Belfast at a time when we are already witnessing decreasing turnouts at elections in Northern Ireland simply do not make sense. With a turnout of 62.3% in 2007 down to 54.7% in 2011 and, most recently, 54.2% in 2016, the proposals will further damage democracy and lead to fewer people being on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in our schools and communities.

For many of the electorate in rural communities, the regional offices are their first point of contact. Whether it is the elderly, the young, the disabled, first-time voters or those with literacy problems — whatever it is — the regional electoral offices are their first point of contact when they require help filling in their registration forms, need electoral identity cards or have any other difficulties or problems they need resolved. That face-to-face contact with staff is invaluable, and losing it will have detrimental consequences for the electoral process right across Northern Ireland.

I know there is an aim to pursue online registration. While I have no difficulty with that pursuit, in isolation from the regional offices it will fail to deliver, given the ongoing infrastructure problems with broadband throughout our rural areas and the many people who simply will not utilise the online services. Such a system will be successful only if it is run in conjunction with the electoral offices.

The regional offices also provide an excellent service in our schools encouraging our youth to register and providing them with electoral identity cards. The question that is, quite rightly, being asked is this: if the regional offices close, who will promote the register and provide the outreach services in and around our schools to instil confidence in the electoral system in our younger generation?

In looking through the 2015-18 Electoral Office for Northern Ireland corporate plan, I noted that its mission statement is:

"To ensure public confidence in the efficiency and integrity of voter registration and election processes in Northern Ireland."

Yet it has to be said that the very proposals it is pursuing propose to do the very opposite to that. The regional offices are the anchor of the electoral system in Northern Ireland. If we take a ship and remove the anchor from it, it will go all over the place and probably, at the end of the day, sink. If we do not keep the regional offices, the anchor of electoral services in Northern Ireland, there is no doubt that they will diminish and sink.

Looking at the risk assessment in the corporate plan, I can see that the potential risks are extremely worrying. I know that only the potential risks have been flagged up, but, with the introduction of the new online registration system, there is a potential risk that the associated technical or operational problems could lead to a loss of public confidence or to an electoral register that is inaccurate or not

comprehensive. That could lead to reputational damage and a loss of public confidence.

To go on to resources, the risk is that the electoral register will not be comprehensive or accurate, resulting in the recommendation for a full canvass and a further demand on resources. Inadequate staffing could result in statutory deadlines not being met, elections not run successfully and reputational damage to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

Again, when we look at service delivery, there is the risk of being unable to deliver an effective service to the public, loss of public confidence and so forth. We know that this is only the potential risk but let us weigh it against what happened in England. When they introduced online registration, 800,000 voters were lost. That causes each one of us grave concern, and it raises concerns for the future of the electoral system in Northern Ireland should they continue to pursue the proposals that we have before us. That is why we are calling on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to reconsider these proposals and adequately fund the regional offices in Northern Ireland.

It is disappointing, but, I suppose, not surprising, that these proposals have been put forward, with the closure of at least two, if not three, offices imminent, prior to a consultation process and without any discussion with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and little or no discussion with the local councils as to how they could accommodate the offices and how this system could be funded if it were within the local council areas. That, in itself, is an absolute disgrace.

We call on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to withdraw the proposals, rethink their position and enter into discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and local councils in the areas to see how this matter can be properly funded and, perhaps, placed within the setting of local councils and still continue to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

I urge the Chamber to support the motion.

Mr McKay: I beg to move the following amendment:

Delete all after "calls" and insert

"on the Executive to pursue the transfer of the functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, including appropriate funding, to ensure

local accountability for the provision of electoral services."

I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it to the House. I am moving the amendment on behalf of Sinn Féin.

I think that all 108 Members received a letter from NIPSA concerning the action that has been taken. The letter also highlights the lack of accountability regarding local politicians. I think it refers to the unaccountability of the NIO and the Chief Electoral Officer. That is why we have put forward an amendment that, at the end of the day, this is a decision that we should be taking. We should be taking a decision that safeguards this service, especially for rural communities, which are going to be acutely impacted by the decision to close these offices.

A couple of weeks ago, I stood on the picket line in Ballymena with the local workers of that electoral office. I did so along with other MLAs from all the parties locally, so we are unanimously opposed to the decision there. But, we are all 108 locally elected politicians who are powerless to do anything about this. That is why we should see these small — I have to say they are small — but significant functions being transferred to Belfast. If you look at the responsibilities that we have in education, policing, justice and housing, we all work together and make decisions in those areas. Locally, there would have been a lot of issues about decisions in those areas 10, 20 or 30 years ago. In that context, surely, setting up an independent but accountable electoral service should not be an issue, and I do not believe that it is. We have shown in recent times how mature an Assembly and Executive we can be. We should move forward with confidence and take on more powers to ensure that we protect local services and workers.

Look at the list of offices to be impacted: Ballymena, Banbridge, Omagh, Derry, Newtownabbey and Newtownards. If all those were to close, it would leave a huge gap in rural constituencies. There would also be an impact on older people. There has been much discussion by the Electoral Office of online registration and doing things through the Internet. A lot of older people, and some younger people, would rather do things by pen and paper. They would rather go to their local office to seek advice on how to fill out the form, which can be quite intimidating to some of us as well, and secure that very basic right to vote. The same applies to the request for photographic identification.

In recent years, it has become harder and harder to secure your vote. In that context, it does not make sense that support to secure the vote is withdrawn from those on the ground when they need it more than ever. I am sure that most people picked up anecdotes when canvassing in the recent election. When I was in Carey on the far north coast of Antrim outside Ballycastle, I spoke to a man who was coming 100. He was going down to the local school at Barnish to place his vote and said that he had photographic ID on his disability badge. Of course, it was not acceptable, and, although he tried, he did not get his vote. There are so many cases like that of people losing their vote unnecessarily. If all these decisions roll out, where would that man go for help with photographic ID to ensure that he is on the register? He may have to go to Belfast from Carey. He did not have a computer in the house. That shows the barriers for certain electors in our constituencies. These are all big questions that need to be answered first. We should not put the cart before the horse.

In four months' time — in October — the Electoral Office plans to close the Ballymena office. It will be yet another closure for Ballymena town, and the Electoral Office is simply allowing the lease to lapse. I have contacted Graham Shields, the chief executive, as have all the local MLAs, and he replied that:

"It would not have been sensible to enter into a new lease in Ballymena in light of plans for the introduction of digital registration."

He said:

"I would encourage you to participate in the public consultation exercise when it is launched in the autumn of 2016."

Why would anybody representing North Antrim participate in the consultation when the office is effectively already closed? The decision, it is quite clear, has already been made. The lease is being allowed to lapse, and I believe that the Electoral Office, for its own reasons, has agreed that the service should be centralised towards Belfast and Newtownabbey, initially. That is the shape of things to come.

The electoral office in Ballymena has served the people of North Antrim and Mid Ulster for many years. They have worked diligently and proactively. They have provided advice and support not only to the voters and those on the ground but to us as candidates, party workers and directors of elections. They have provided an absolutely fantastic service for many years.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. It was before his time, but this is not the first time that we have suffered in North Antrim from proposals by the Electoral Office.

The electoral office in Ballymoney was closed and moved to Ballymena, so we have seen a gradual withdrawal. I concur with the Member's comments on the staff in Ballymena. Does he also recognise that this is yet another issue that has affected North Antrim for the second time? The first time, an office was removed from Ballymoney.

4.00 pm

Mr McKay: I concur absolutely. I remember the Ballymoney office. I was in it, so I have been about for a long time. Ballymoney is a case in point. We have seen the impact that there has been on Ballymoney of job closures and the withdrawal of services like the electoral office. The impact is still being felt there. Unfortunately, what we see in Ballymena is almost a mirror image of what has happened in Ballymoney over the past 10 to 15 years.

The Electoral Office has done a fantastic job. It has provided a fantastic service across all the constituencies and, quite simply, it does not deserve to be treated like this. If the Electoral Office is to have a consultation, let us have a fair one. Let us not make any decisions beforehand. Of course, Electoral Office workers in the rural constituencies, in all the offices that are outlined for closure, were proactive in their work. They did the outreach to schools and they set up photographic ID clinics in the many villages and hamlets across the rural constituencies. All that is absolutely essential. You have places like north Antrim, Tyrone and Fermanagh where Belfast seems very far away. We see the acute need for those services to continue for the time ahead.

To conclude, I agree with the proposers of the motion that the NIO and the Chief Electoral Officer need to reconsider these proposals, but we also need to step up to the plate. This decision, as regards local offices, will affect local workers and have a huge impact on local democracy. I believe that the people who should be making the decision about this need to be local politicians.

Mr Swann: I apologise for going back to North Antrim, because that constituency is represented by the last Member to speak and an earlier contributor. However, it is the state of the electoral office in Ballymena. Support has been shown by all the parties for the local office

and the work that it does. One of the things that we have to concentrate on is the fact that the office is being closed while the consultation is ongoing and only starting. So to us in North Antrim, Mid Ulster and even that certain section of East Londonderry that uses the Ballymena office the decision has already been made.

In his opening comments, Mr Buchanan referred to the input of local councils. Let me put it on record that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council worked to try to facilitate a continual presence. It made offers of premises to the Electoral Office to enable it to retain a presence in Ballymena while the consultation was ongoing. That work was invaluable, and I hope that it bears fruit. I am not prepared to give up on it already.

One of the reasons the Electoral Office has put forward to support its ability to close regional offices is registration online and what a great success that will be. Members have already mentioned the invaluable face-to-face service that people rely on. We have just witnessed, in the last week, the complete collapse of online registration in England and Wales, due to people trying to register for the Brexit campaign that is coming forward. We in Northern Ireland should learn that lesson. We have an excellent facility in place that relies on and supports the face-to-face service that we need to provide, plus an online facility that could be provided and enhanced. We in Northern Ireland cannot forget the independent work of the Electoral Office. That is why we cannot support the amendment: it relies on independence. Its work relies not so much on who gets on the electoral register, but the work that it does to ensure that the people who are on it should be on it, and that the register is not abused or misused.

In the last monitoring round, the Finance Minister allocated £5.3 million to the Electoral Office for the running of the last Assembly elections. I know that we have no ministerial response but surely, given the call in the motion and from the House today, some moneys could be found to retain the presence of those offices, at least while the consultation is ongoing, to allow the democratic process to take place.

I would like to thank the staff who work in the Ballymena office for the work that they do and congratulate them on it. Although we have seen pickets and reduced labour, I know that the staff there have made sure that everything is in place. They have gone the extra mile to make sure that no service fails while they are there. However, look at those staff as individuals and the relocation that is offered.

Ballymena office staff are being offered temporary relocation to Mallusk for a short period until the Mallusk office is closed, when they would be transferred to Belfast. There is no doubt that this is about a centralisation of our electoral offices. Look at the decision on a personal level: a Ballymena family who have already lost two breadwinners due to the job losses at Michelin will now have to face another job loss because of the decisions of the Electoral Office. Look at the impact that it will have, yet again, on Ballymena.

The House, in its last session, passed a Rural Needs Act that specifically aimed to make sure that our rural population and our rural towns and villages are not adversely affected by decisions. The Northern Ireland Office should look to its responsibilities and duties under that Act. We will support the motion but, unfortunately, not the amendment.

Mr McCrossan: I support the motion. This is a very important issue across Northern Ireland, but it affects my constituency directly, which is the reason why I am speaking about it. It is somewhat ironic, given that we face probably the biggest decision of a generation this Thursday, that we are in the Chamber to discuss the closure of electoral offices. The SDLP stands full square behind the staff of these offices. It is vital that the Chamber also shows that support and solidarity in opposing these punitive and anti-democratic budget cuts.

It is important to remember that, over the last six years, electoral offices have already faced a reduction of 25% in their operating budgets. The new proposals by the NIO amount to a further 17% reduction. These cuts have already impacted the services available for rural communities such as my constituency. Yet again, the further cuts and the closures of electoral offices are not in Belfast but spread across many towns that serve rural areas. This, in itself, will have ramifications for local populations and rural communities.

The budget cuts proposed are mainly due to the upcoming introduction of an online registration system, as Members who spoke previously said. What consideration has been given to the quality of broadband services in rural areas? What consideration has been given to the fact that, as mentioned, in my constituency and others, there are many people, especially our older population, who do not have access to a computer and are not computer literate? How are they supposed to register or receive advice if there are no regional offices? The question of whether the Northern Ireland Office proposals

were subject to rural proofing legislation also has to be asked.

The proposals put forward are to have a centralised office in Belfast with a helpline for anybody who has any difficulties with the registration process. However, I know at first hand, as I am sure other Members do, how invaluable the human interaction in these offices has been and continues to be. The advice given on, for example, having the right documents in order or having the registration form properly completed has proven valuable when we, as Members, are assisting constituents with getting on to the voting register. As Mr Buchanan and others said, voting numbers are dropping year in and year out. We need to be doing more to encourage people to register to vote and to use their right to vote. This will be a disincentive and put many people off, particularly those in rural communities.

It is important to remember that the Omagh office in my constituency serves West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I am sure that my colleague Mr McPhillips, who also feels very strongly about the issue, will agree with me that it serves our constituencies very well. Martin Fox and his staff in the Omagh Area Electoral Office — I met and joined them during the industrial action — provide a first-class service for the people of my constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That service is now at risk as these proposals will lead to the loss of four full-time staff.

The last thing that West Tyrone, or any other rural community for that matter, needs at this time is further job losses or redundancies, and certainly a further reduction in rural services. It is not all just voter registration and nomination papers that the electoral offices deal with. The Omagh electoral office serves the wider community through its outreach programme every year. Representatives visit 25 schools across the constituency, ensuring that our young people are properly informed and prepared for registering to vote for the first time. They also stress to them the importance of using their vote. It is my concern that that important outreach programme and the linking-up with many secondary schools in West Tyrone and across many other constituencies will be completely hampered under the proposed new arrangements.

In the long term, it is vital that all options be considered; for example, how the regional offices can be facilitated and, indeed, linked to local councils. I know that the Omagh office is

situated close to our local council buildings, and consideration must be given to how we can use the premises to house services for constituents, including services provided by the electoral offices.

The SDLP will not be supporting today's amendment proposed by Sinn Féin. We will be supporting the motion. The amendment calls for the devolution of electoral powers to Northern Ireland where this Assembly would dictate its own fate. For obvious reasons, we will not support the amendment, but we will call on the Secretary of State and the NIO to reconsider the decision and ensure that the local service is protected and remains across Northern Ireland.

To conclude, the cuts would dramatically impact on the democratic rights of my constituents and others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCrossan: Issues that specifically surround rural areas have not been thoroughly considered, and outreach programmes for our young people would be severely hampered.

Mr Ford: There is no doubt, particularly coming just a few weeks after the Assembly election, that there will be considerable support in the Chamber for the work that is done by the staff of local electoral offices. We all have a relationship with our local office and tend to get to know the staff over a period of years, although I do recall an occasion five years ago when I called into the Newtownabbey electoral office and a temporary member of staff looked at me and asked me whether I had a connection with any of the political parties, so it is not perhaps always that clear. I am, however, happy to say that the permanent staff know me, possibly rather too well.

In that context, we can also welcome the work that they have done on issues such as registration and election running. I have certainly cooperated with them to ensure that all schools in South Antrim take the opportunity to see that those who are of rising voting age get the chance to register and are encouraged in that direction. We have seen good work being done by electoral offices, but we also need to be realistic and acknowledge that just because something has worked well does not necessarily mean that the current pattern will continue to work well.

I have concerns about the way in which the proposals have been put forward. It is absolutely clear that we have not seen any detailed strategic planning. We have seen an instant response and ad hoc decisions taken to deal with financial problems without proper consultation and without proper consideration of what the best way to provide electoral services might be. It might well be that we do not need the network of offices that we currently have, if arrangements were made for partnerships with local councils, or if arrangements were made for registration events to be run in consultation with citizens advice bureaux or other organisations within the community.

Just because the existing pattern of offices has worked up to now does not necessarily mean that that is the right way. What concerns me is the fact that we are being presented with a scheme for closures that is being implemented, in some cases, without any consultation and a system that is being put forward without any real consideration of how to maintain the local contacts. They may not need a permanent office, but they do require some sort of local activity and some opportunity for the work to go on. There is no doubt that, when we switched to individual registration a few years ago, we saw a reduction of numbers on the electoral register. We need to ensure that we work hard to get the numbers as consistently high as they should be, because, sadly, I know from experience that it is much easier to ensure that somebody is removed from the electoral register when the person dies, which, of course, is the right thing to do, than it is to get somebody new who has moved into an area on the register.

The call in the motion to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat is unrealistic. I think of the comment made by Mr Swann, which was that we should not be doing this until we have worked out the long-term future and know more about what the need is, but that is not what the motion states.

4.15 pm

I fear that there is mixed language in the amendment. The functions of the Electoral Office comprise administrative functions and legal duties that it discharges on behalf of the Northern Ireland Office, which has responsibility for running elections in Northern Ireland. I am not sure how you transfer the administrative functions away from the NIO, when the NIO will retain the full legal and legislative functions for ensuring that elections in Northern Ireland are run properly. There is a mix-up in the way the

amendment is phrased, which means that it is simply unworkable.

We have to be realistic in this Assembly. It is too easy to assume that we can continue to provide the pattern of services that we have been used to across a range of issues without giving any consideration to the realities of the difficult public finances we live with. Frankly, I am not sure how we are going to face up to the difficult decisions around health that will probably be required when Professor Bengoa reports if we cannot face up to the reality that we cannot simply react with a knee-jerk and protect the complete pattern of electoral services that we have. Yes, we need to ensure we have some proper plans for the future, and we need to ensure that we maintain local engagement, but to suggest that that is done simply by making no change whatsoever is unrealistic. We should be insisting on a genuine and meaningful consultation on the way that services will be delivered in the future, on the proper way of ensuring contacts with local communities and on the proper way of ensuring that online registration, as we move towards it, is carried out in a meaningful way. That does not mean that we can continue to pretend that we can provide services without any change whatsoever.

Mr Anderson: I welcome this opportunity to speak on this very important matter for people across Northern Ireland. My colleagues and I brought this motion before the House, because we recognise the important role that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland plays in our democracy.

We are deeply concerned about the current proposals, which, if implemented, would see the closure of regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards, Omagh and Banbridge, which is located in my constituency of Upper Bann. We have witnessed electoral offices having to deal with a 25% reduction in budgets over the past six years, with an additional 17% reduction proposed for 2020.

I am fully aware of the important role that the electoral office in Banbridge plays in democracy and political procedures. The office has four full-time staff and nine part-time employees, who provide a key link for the public when they are doing things such as vote registration and receiving and submitting postal and proxy vote applications. They have also carried out a range of registration and electoral ID events, which have focused on enhancing the number of people on the electoral register.

I commend the regional electoral office for getting in contact with places of education to encourage the younger generation to become registered so that they can fully participate in elections by exercising their democratic right to vote. Activities carried out by my regional electoral office in Banbridge are replicated across the other regional offices.

Mr Dunne: Will the Member give way?

Mr Anderson: OK.

Mr Dunne: Does the Member agree that the proposed closure of the electoral offices — including the one in Newtownards, which services 170,000 people, does an excellent job and provides a good and friendly service — will have a very negative effect? We have also lost the annual canvass. Do you agree that this will undermine the integrity of the electoral registration system?

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

Mr Anderson: Thank you. I thank my colleague for that intervention. I agree with everything that he said: we cannot allow any further erosion through the proposals that they are bringing forward, which will further damage the electoral process. I agree with his comments.

Significant focus has been put on increasing the use of technology to carry out online electoral registration. Whilst I welcome the fact that there are some positives from adopting that approach, it has to be recognised that there are other points to consider. Whilst we have seen enhanced rural broadband provision recently, we still face many challenges as we seek to enhance provision across Northern Ireland. It also has to be noted that a number of people would find it difficult to secure access to such technologies and therefore successfully complete registration in this way.

I therefore firmly believe that the complete centralisation of Electoral Office functions is not the way forward.

In the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's business plan for 2015-16 it is stated:

"EONI is committed to the continuous improvement, not only of the services it provides to the public and other stakeholders, but also of the leadership, support and development opportunities available to its staff."

If the proposed closure of regional electoral offices takes place, I, as a political representative, am fearful that democracy could be damaged, because the Electoral Office would simply no longer be able to play a key role in our communities. Moreover, it is highly likely that a significant number of staff would lose their employment. That tends to contradict the statement taken from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's business plan 2015-16.

We must all recognise that the staff in our regional electoral offices do work of significant importance not just at election time but throughout the year. We have to understand that, if many of the Electoral Office services are centralised in Belfast, engagement with the wider Northern Ireland public would be severely impacted. We all want to see more and more people engaging with the political process and exercising their vote. By closing our regional electoral offices, we will only be further hindered in our efforts to encourage voter registration and political engagement. If the closures take place, I firmly believe that democracy in Northern Ireland will be dealt a severe blow. That cannot be allowed to happen, as no one benefits from democracy being damaged. I support the motion and encourage everyone in the Chamber to support it too.

Ms Boyle: In speaking on the amendment, I will say that, as a party, we feel strongly that electoral services and provision should be close to the people and communities here, particularly in rural areas like Omagh, Strabane, Fermanagh and south Tyrone. The proposal to close six regional electoral offices should not and cannot go ahead. That is a message that we need to send clearly today to the NIO. To those who suggest that the proposal is to move to a high-technology online voter registration system let me say that it will not work. It will not work in my area, and it will not work in areas of West Tyrone where, in this day and age, we still do not have proper broadband infrastructure or the modern technology that the proposal talks about.

The Member who moved the motion, Mr Buchanan, is bringing an Adjournment debate to the House tomorrow on the lack of broadband services in West Tyrone. That raises this question: how will that be for people getting registered online? It will not happen in my area. People are already being disenfranchised in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone because they do not have proper broadband services, and that puts their fundamental right to vote at stake. I have been an elected representative since

2010. My office and those of others in the Chamber have worked well with Omagh's chief electoral officer, Martin Fox, and his staff, who provide an excellent service and not just at election time, as they provide an all-year-round service. To take away that service locally will have devastating consequences for democracy.

The right to vote, as has been said, is a fundamental human right, but there remains a lot of people out there who are continually disenfranchised by not being registered to vote. They include minority groups, young people, homeless people, people who are disabled and many others who lack access to a vote for a variety of reasons, including poverty, illiteracy, not understanding the electoral process or fearing it. However, one way of combating disenfranchisement is the growth of staff in our electoral offices and having staff with expertise in the area reassuring the public and giving them face-to-face contact with the information they need and help with filling out forms and getting electoral ID. That is what the Omagh electoral office does, as I said, day in, day out. Accepting my party's amendment, which calls on the Executive to pursue the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office, ensuring funding and accountability will help the staff in the Electoral Office to do that very process of helping people with forms etc.

As stated by others, the electoral offices have had a reduction in their budgets over the last six years, and a further 17% is proposed by 2020. This has been done by stealth over a number of years. I want to speak about the office in Omagh. West Tyrone has had its fair share of cuts and job losses in the public sector, and we already feel vulnerable. The people in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are extremely angry and annoyed at this. Recently, I stood with Martin Fox and his staff and other members of my party, when they held their picket outside their offices. People are extremely angry and concerned about the service being lost to their area. In Strabane, there is a proposal to lose the courthouse. I am glad to say that a judicial review (JR) has been brought forward by the legal profession on that matter, and I fully support that and hope they are successful. How many more services have to be eroded from our constituency?

NIPSA and the unions are also calling on management to conduct a full accommodation review to consider options to co-locate electoral offices and council offices. That is an option we should explore.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: Yes, I will.

Mr McAleer: Does the Member agree that it is highly unlikely that any of the proposals have been rural proofed and that, in light of the recent passing of the Rural Needs Act, they should be reconsidered?

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

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right: as far as I am aware, the proposal has not been rural proofed. That is something that we also need to explore regarding, in particular, the closure in Omagh.

Your vote is your voice, and it is every citizen's right to have a say in their future and in how their country is governed. It seems personal when a body like the NIO tries to take away that right, which is exactly what will happen. I believe it is discrimination against the person. A healthy democracy ensures that all members of the public have equal access to the political process and if this proposal goes ahead —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Boyle: — I believe that the NIO is putting obstacles in the way of people's right to vote.

Mr Robinson: The motion is similar to the removal of the DVA office in Coleraine and the proposed closure of the courthouse in Limavady. More jobs being removed from the regions of Northern Ireland is unacceptable and will see a reduction in the already stretched services that constituencies receive. We must remember that the decisions have been taken without any proper or full consultation, which is absolutely undemocratic.

I can testify to the importance and value of the regional offices, especially during election time. A local office has local knowledge and relationships with parties that can prove invaluable. To remove that service would be a false economy and would limit the value of the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland. I appreciate the service, advice and support that the Londonderry office gives to me and my staff, and I am sure that many other MLAs and elected representatives will provide testimony to the value of the regional offices. My East Londonderry colleagues and I have often organised registration events with the regional office, and that close working relationship could be lost by having a centralised office in Belfast.

I commend the staff who work in the Londonderry office; they all provide a very good service.

I want to see more people on the register and voting: that, I believe, will be undermined by centralising the service — something that the Bain report was opposed to. Will the Minister guarantee that the registration work being done with schools will continue? Hopefully, that is an important means of engaging our young people in the democratic process.

The motion calls on the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland:

"to retain and fund adequately all regional offices".

I wholeheartedly support that view. Democracy has to begin at a local level. Therefore, regional offices that understand the regions they cover are essential. I wholeheartedly support the motion as proposed by my colleagues.

4.30 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I rise to support the motion but not the amendment and, in doing so, apologise for missing the start of this important debate. It is important, because we are talking about an institution whose key functions include voter registration and the accurate return of election results. We expect it to do that informed by a set of values, including accuracy, impartiality, professionalism, efficiency and, dare I say when, sometimes, tetchy candidates are prowling the halls waiting for the declarations, by displaying endless patience and courtesy. Have we any issues with the Electoral Office in those regards? Perhaps we could test its delivery against performance, as reported by the Chief Electoral Officer in his latest annual report for 2014-15, in which he makes reference to no fewer than 22 targets and development objectives. The only failures — there were only a couple — were reported against third-party failure and, therefore, beyond the control of the Electoral Office. Maybe we could benchmark that against the performance of the last Executive and their failures with regard to the social investment fund, childcare —

Mr Storey: You should speak to Danny Kennedy.

Mr Nesbitt: —and the development of Maze/Long Kesh, which is nothing to do with Danny Kennedy, as the Member will well know.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members to address their comments through the Chair, please.

Mr Nesbitt: Certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker. Through the Chair, I ask the man speaking from a sedentary position to check his facts.

The number one target amongst the 22 related to getting more electors onto the electoral rota, and they succeeded in spades, with a five-figure sum. So, I think that they are doing a pretty good job, which raises the question, "Why change?". It is something the Northern Ireland Office is not very forthcoming about. I stood with my colleague Philip Smith in Newtownards, a couple of weeks ago, in support of the staff of the Newtownards office. They reported a huge lack of information flow from the NIO about why it wanted to change. One thing that was made clear was that we do things differently from Great Britain. If that is the argument, surely we should pack up the devolved institutions and go back to direct rule from Westminster. That is no argument.

The second question is, "Will people travel to Belfast to register to vote?". It is hard enough to get them to Newtownards. Then, the argument is, "Perhaps they will go online". The anecdotal evidence from England is that they need more staff because people are filling in their online forms inaccurately and need staff to contact them to point out the inaccuracies and walk them through completing the forms. As we have heard from other Members, Internet access is a huge issue in parts of Northern Ireland, particularly the rural parts. So, we are effectively, de facto, potentially disenfranchising a large section of our people.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He is highlighting that we should ask the question, "What is the problem with our current system?". We do not have enough young people registering. A solution is online registration, but to switch wholly to that, and solving one problem, do we not risk creating a new one for older people and rural people?

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

Mr Nesbitt: The Member has a point: online registration is fine if you have the facilities and the capacity to do it. So, we need to have broadband access right across Northern Ireland. We also have to take into account the fact that some people might not want to do it. I understand that the PSNI's firearms and explosives branch, for example, wants future

licences for firearms to be exclusively online. This may, potentially, exclude people, whose enjoyment comes from having firearms, from that sport. It should be a choice, not something that is compulsory.

Of course, the question, "Is this all about saving money?" has been raised. Let us look at the 2014-15 returns. The Electoral Office is a £2.3 million business. More than half of that money goes on the staff — basic pay, overtime, employers' national insurance and accrued superannuation and the rest. We are told that there are no plans for redundancies at this stage. The Ards staff have been told that they will be invited to travel to Belfast. So, where are the savings? It is not in that half of the pie.

Will it be in telecommunications, printing, stationery and postage? The latter three add up to £200,000 a year. Will it be in premises? Premises are only just more expensive than printing, stationery and postage at £243,000, which includes headquarters, and the figures are not disaggregated to tell us about Ards and the other subregional centres that are under threat.

What is clear is that, if there are savings, they are small beer, but at a huge risk. Target 1, which I mentioned, saw 15,993 more electors on the December 2014 register than in the previous year. Without clarity from the Northern Ireland Office, the savings from the proposed closures could be as little as £1 for every new registered voter. The risk, of course, is that, under a new regime, you get no new voters, and the electoral roll not only ceases to grow but starts to shrink.

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

Mr Nesbitt: Let us keep it impartial, professional, efficient and cost-effective, but above all let us make it easy for voters to register and exercise their democratic right.

Ms Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion and the amendment tabled by my colleagues and me. It is important that we have local accountability for the administration of elections in the North, which could be achieved by bringing the functions of the electoral offices under the control of the Executive.

At a time when we seek to devolve more powers to local government to improve delivery and accountability at a local level, it seems a contradiction to be seeking to centralise the

services of the electoral offices. The reasons for and benefits of decentralised public services are well known: improved efficiency and effectiveness by having services delivered by regional managers. This, of course, depends on the professional ability of those managers, and I am sure that many of us in the Chamber would undoubtedly speak highly of the quality professional service that we receive from our local electoral offices, which benefit from years of experience in delivering their services.

On the other hand, centralised services such as those being proposed are often criticised for rigidity in procedures, longer decision-making times and a lack of ability to adapt to local situations and needs. As much as any other public service, electoral services should be delivered at a local level. The ability of individuals to exercise their democratic rights in exercising their right to vote could be undermined by the closure of local electoral offices.

Although I am certainly in favour of making use of technology to improve and streamline services and service delivery, this should ultimately go hand in hand with human resources. Some services — Members have already touched on this — currently delivered by electoral offices at a local level could not be delivered online, for example the processing of photo ID applications at a local office. It is not reasonable to expect individuals from right across the North to travel to Belfast to access this service. It is vital that, no matter what, the Electoral Office maintains its connection with local communities and schools to ensure that individuals are, in fact, able to obtain IDs and postal proxy votes and registrations as required.

There is no substitute, however, for a local office that gives individuals a personal service. My party colleague Mr McKay has already given an example, but I will give another. On election day in May this year, I was contacted at around 7.00 pm by a constituent who told me that her husband's postal vote had not arrived. Despite being an elderly gentleman in poor health, he had gone along to the polling station to vote, but was told that he could not vote because he was on the postal list. I contacted the Electoral Office and was informed that his postal vote had definitely been sent out. To cut a long story short, over the next hour it transpired that the gentleman's postal vote had gone to his son's house, which is right next door to his own house, and they had the same name. I contacted the Electoral Office again and was told that it would not be accepted at the polling station but could be hand delivered

to our local electoral office in Derry. That is exactly what the gentleman did. He exercised his democratic right to vote, and it is unlikely that that would have been the case if the only electoral office in the North was in Belfast.

In conclusion, I encourage everyone to respond to the consultation once it opens and to put forward the arguments for maintaining local electoral offices. I am happy to speak in support of the motion and the amendment, and urge all Members to do the same.

Mr Irwin: Like many Members, I am concerned by the proposal to close electoral offices across the Province. As someone who operates a busy constituency office, I know that our love of elections in Northern Ireland means that having an electoral office within a suitable distance is vital. I have found it very useful, especially when constituents wish to register to vote or change their address. They have the convenient option of travelling a few miles to Banbridge in order to speak directly to an Electoral Office staff member. That has been a tremendous benefit to people who, for example, wish to obtain an electoral identity card. They can do so at their local electoral office, where their picture can be taken free of charge.

Mr E McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will, yes.

Mr E McCann: Does the Member agree that a one-off opportunity for the Electoral Office workers to press home their point with the British authorities will arise this Thursday and Friday, when they will be expected to work late into the night to deliver the verdict on the European referendum? Were they to decide — I urge them from this place so to decide — to take industrial action on that day, would that not do more to bring attention to the validity of their case than anything that might be said or done in the House? A nil-all result in the European referendum would be a big win for the Electoral Office workers and for all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute added to his speaking time.

Mr Irwin: OK, and the Member has made his point.

It is also useful that proving address or identity details can be done in an electoral office setting to save sending important documents by post and being without the documentation for a time prior to its return. This is made possible only by

having an electoral office in the locality and face-to-face contact with Electoral Office staff.

We are all aware of the many deadlines that exist in the run-up to an election and how confusing this can be for the public. It is when deadlines are drawing to a close that the local electoral office really proves its value. I can only imagine the sheer number of people who will be left without a vote in circumstances when they have, for one reason or another, left registration or applying for a postal vote to the last minute. I fear that a trip for someone in Newtownhamilton to the central electoral office in Belfast with, perhaps, a registration form, particularly if that person is working or caring for someone or, indeed, if that person was elderly, would pose a significant problem.

I feel that the closure proposals will affect people's democratic participation. That should be avoided. The Electoral Office in Northern Ireland has done tremendous work, along with elected representatives, to increase participation in the democratic process. We have seen considerable increases in registration due to various awareness campaigns. It would surely be a retrograde step to make access to the very service that ensures the right to vote much more difficult.

On that basis, I fully support the motion in asking that the closure proposal be halted and that the future of electoral offices across the Province be secured to ensure that participation in the democratic process is encouraged and facilitated through easily accessible localised services.

Ms Lockhart: I support the motion that my colleagues put forward today. As someone who represents the Upper Bann constituency, which includes Banbridge, where one of the electoral offices is located, I support the retention of these offices in local areas.

We have all been through an election and recognised the value that these offices bring to our constituents. People come to my constituency office daily asking for information about voting registration, postal votes and ID cards, and I believe that having that face-to-face contact in an office that people can travel to by public transport or by their own methods is vital. It is important that we, as elected representatives, encourage voter registration. I believe that, if we strip our local towns of these offices, it will do nothing to ensure that young people and others who live in our constituencies take that step to register.

As a young person just recently elected, I think that we need to do more to engage.

The entire electoral registration system certainly needs reform, but that does not in any way mean that we strip local towns of that particular service.

4.45 pm

I believe that online voter registration should be improved, enhanced and introduced in Northern Ireland, because I think that there is section of the community that would benefit from it, but I recognise that we cannot solely leave it to online voter registration because of issues around rural constituencies and access to broadband. I recognise that there needs to be reform and that we need to change how we do things, but that certainly does not in any way mean stripping areas of these offices.

This morning, I took the opportunity to contact our local office. In the Upper Bann constituency, 85,753 people are registered. At the recent election, I noted with interest that over 12,776 people were registered under late registration. It is vital that we note those statistics and recognise that the offices are servicing those people in the best way possible. I want to commend the staff who work out of the Banbridge office. They are fantastic. They do a very good job of servicing the people and us as elected representatives and of handling elections. I want to support wholeheartedly the efforts that are being made to retain the services. We also think of what they do around going into schools and encouraging our young people to get on to the register and exercise their democratic right.

The most important thing that people will do in this society is cast their vote for a party that they believe aligns with their policies. We have to make it easy for people to be able to do that. To do that, we should be retaining our local offices. Four full-time staff and nine part-time staff in the Banbridge office could lose their job or be required to drive to Belfast, which would impact on their family life. We talk about encouraging and enhancing family life in the home. Asking people to do this is unreasonable.

I call on those who are making this decision to think long and hard about it, do what is right by the people of Northern Ireland and do not always think of the small amount of money that they may save — may save — if they proceed down this route.

Mr O'Dowd: Has this decision been taken by the Electoral Office to improve democracy? No, it has not. It has been taken because of austerity. The NIO has cut funding to the Electoral Office. The office is then in a position in which it is trying to recoup savings out of what is already a limited budget. Mr Nesbitt read out some of the budget headlines and asked where those savings would be made. Talk of turning to a fully electronic system, where people register online, have their postal and proxy votes online and have their photo IDs processed online, is all a side issue. This is about the Conservative Government cutting funding to the NIO, and the NIO cutting funding to the Electoral Office. It has nothing to do with democracy.

In fact, what it does is impede democracy because, as many Members have already said, it is becoming more and more difficult to vote in this society. It is becoming more and more difficult to get on the register. Once you are on the register, it becomes more difficult to get the proper ID. Once you have achieved all of that, you have to go through the process of voting in an archaic way compared with how it is done in many other societies. The motion is about protecting democracy and the right of people to register, to have photographic ID and to be able to vote.

Many contributors have quite rightly commended the work of the regional electoral offices. I have to say this: despite their very valiant efforts, not enough is done to ensure that people are on the register. There is not enough engagement with post-primary schools. There is not enough electoral registration and proactive canvassing to ensure that people are on the register.

During the most recent Assembly elections, in my area, when we called for electoral ID clinics and registration clinics to be held, we were turned down because, even at that stage, they did not have enough staff and resources. Those clinics went ahead, and because they were organised by local community groups, several hundred people were registered. Those community groups came together and did the work that should have been carried out by the Electoral Office. Several hundred people, who otherwise would have been denied, had the option to vote. So, I commend the work of those in the offices, but let us be very clear: even now, with those regional offices, there is not enough being done to ensure that people are on the register and that citizens have the democratic right to vote. The closure of these offices will not assist that; it will actively make the situation worse.

When Catherine Seeley and I joined the picket line outside the office in Banbridge when staff took industrial action, the staff came forward with alternatives. They said, "Why don't we share accommodation with the local council? Why is there not more imagination put into this, because the savings that they are trying to achieve are through leases and rents in the regional offices". So, the staff standing on that picket line were being more imaginative than the Electoral Office in this case. They wanted to keep the offices local. They recognised that there had to be savings made, but they also recognised that the key work that they carry out needs to be carried out locally and people need to have access to it.

That brings me to the amendment. What is there to fear from the Executive pursuing the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office? I remember during negotiations a long time ago, we brought forward the proposal that the transfer of policing and justice powers should be brought forward. Did I or any of our delegation know the fine detail of that? No. Were the t's crossed and the i's dotted? No. After that, there was negotiation around what that framework would look like and what inbuilt protections there would be.

Mr Ford is concerned about the independence of such a move. That independence would have to be protected. How will you protect it? The legislation to transfer the powers would have to come through the Assembly, so there are inbuilt protections for everyone involved.

The SDLP are going to oppose the amendment. I am not sure why. Do they not have confidence in their ability as legislators to ensure that the powers and governance of the electoral system are protected —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am nearly out of time. As legislators around the Chamber, we are the defenders of democracy in this society. We are elected to participate in democracy —

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

Mr O'Dowd: The transfer of powers to this Assembly is the way forward. Mr Nesbitt said that the NIO was not very forthcoming in its response —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — but Mr Nesbitt opposes the amendment. Mr Nesbitt should support the amendment in that case.

Mr Aiken: I support the motion but not the amendment. I am new to the electoral process, and the support that the office in Newtownabbey gave was absolutely invaluable to me as a candidate and to my election team, which was able to understand a lot more about the electoral process and work in South Antrim. It has helped considerably my constituents for the Assembly elections and the forthcoming EU referendum. It has been absolutely important for people to be able to register and discuss registration face to face.

It was interesting to listen to the discussion today about some of the issues and costs. If some of the costs are less than a quarter of a million pounds when looking at potential housing for electoral offices, the offer of using council facilities is an excellent idea, and it is one that I encourage the Northern Ireland Office to look at.

We know that we have significant problems with broadband provision. If South Antrim is anything to go by, it will be very difficult for online provision to be an appropriate way of doing things in the future. So, the question I have is this: why are we doing this? What is the practical value of doing this? What is the problem creating instability in the system? What savings are likely to be made? Why can we not oppose this? We should reconsider it. The series of closures appears to be contrary to the regional provision of our democratic process.

Mr Storey: I commend my colleagues for tabling the motion, which I support and which follows on from a promise made to staff in the electoral offices that we would take this issue to the House. I think that is to be welcomed.

I want to make a few comments about the amendment. I notice that Mr McKay made reference to the fact that we should go for the amendment because it would ensure local accountability and that, because the NIO is not accountable, there are all these problems. However, the same Member has no difficulty in supporting the Parades Commission — the most unaccountable organisation in Northern Ireland. In a few weeks' time, he will trip in through the door of the Parades Commission to tell unaccountable, unelected individuals his woes, which he will want them to act upon, and then we will not know the reasons why they did certain things. Of course, double standards know no bounds sometimes in these issues, so

let us not get carried away too much with us being champions for accountability. We need a wee bit of consistency on that.

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I am happy to give way.

Mr McKay: I point out to the Member that we are more than happy to see the devolution and transfer of powers for parades as well. If the Member's party would like to hold further discussions with us about that, we would welcome sitting down with you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Storey: I will be happy the day on which the Parades Commission is placed where it rightfully belongs: in a Sadducee's grave from which there is no resurrection. I assure you that that is a day that should come very quickly, because it is the most useless organisation this country has ever had, and I can tell you that we have had some useless organisations.

I turn now to Mr Nesbitt, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. Maybe those two things are —

Mr Nesbitt: That was very good.

Mr Storey: He wanted me to rewrite history and say that somehow Danny Kennedy was not a member of the Executive when he made reference to the fact that there was a previous Executive. I am glad that he was only giving the House advice on the Electoral Office today and was not giving us advice on how to run elections. I am also glad that he was not the director of an electoral campaign.

Mr Nesbitt made some valid points. This is an issue of concern: the removal of a service that has already been reduced. In my constituency — I referred to this — we lost the electoral office in Ballymoney. Now they are proposing to take the one out of Ballymena, even though there was a proposal on the table, as the Member for North Antrim referred to, about the office accommodation that could be offered in Braid. I hope that that will still be seriously considered because, if it is about savings, there are savings that can be made.

Let me conclude by paying tribute to the staff in the Electoral Office. Yes, I would like to see votes counted a bit quicker; maybe that would reduce the overall burden. I still think we need a quicker process for counting our votes. However, that does not take away from the

professionalism and independence of the staff. That is an important issue, because let us remember that, in the past, there were those who were quite happy to abuse the electoral system. That is why we need to ensure that, in Northern Ireland, we have an independent, robust and accountable electoral system, which is what we receive from the Electoral Office. I support the motion but not the amendment.

Mr Allister: An accessible electoral office is an indispensable part of a workable democratic process because it is there to facilitate those who wish to enquire about registration, to facilitate registration and to return postal ballots etc. If you draw that out and centralise it to one point, you diminish the interface between the electorate and the functioning of the election, and that is a retrograde step. This, therefore, is a retrograde step, and it is one that the Northern Ireland Office should certainly not proceed with, because it is going to diminish the electoral experience in Northern Ireland, which is not in people's interests. So, I totally back the motion.

I think the amendment is wholly misguided, because the Electoral Office and its affairs are excepted matters.

It oversees elections not just to this House but to Westminster, and it would be an absurd proposition if oversight of those elections, as part of the functions of the Electoral Office, were transferred to this devolved House when it oversees elections to the sovereign Parliament as well. There is good reason why this is an excepted matter and that is how it must remain; but that is not good reason for diminishing the service and making it less efficient and less effective.

5.00 pm

In the case of Ballymena, we have lost so much. We will lose the courthouse if the last Minister has his way.

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

Mr Allister: We have lost many big manufacturing firms, and we will now diminish the town further by losing the electoral office. I trust that the offer by the local council to facilitate the service will be taken and that this facility will be saved.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Members for a very robust debate. I have taken down a few notes

but I have only five minutes and I want to make my own points as well.

Sinn Féin decided to table the amendment because it believes that the Executive could carry out the functions of the Electoral Office. This would ensure the local accountability, integrity and independence that we need for the provision of electoral services. I am deeply concerned by the thought that we could lose our franchise in rural constituencies. If anybody thinks for a minute that this move will make it easier for people to vote, they are very misguided.

Points have been made about electoral ID clinics, schools outreach and postal and proxy votes. I will mention two groups that have not been mentioned. First, we have a very vibrant foreign national community in and around south Tyrone and, this year, an individual from the South Tyrone Empowerment programme was up every day with busloads of people to get them registered to vote and to get their electoral ID. Portuguese people do not need a passport to travel within the EU. They have an ID card that allows them to do that, but they cannot use that ID card to vote with. They all have the ID card but they cannot use it to vote with and we have put that issue to the ambassador. They do not have passports, so they absolutely need electoral ID. So, there is a very vibrant foreign national community that needs to have access to those offices to get their electoral ID.

Many of you talked about schools outreach, but young people who leave school at 16 are not part of that. With those who leave school at 16 or 17, there is always a flurry, when they turn 18 and 19, to get registered because they realise weeks or days before an election that they are not registered to vote and that they will miss out. Those two groups are very strong users of the service.

Like many others, I was on the picket line in Omagh. I want to bring to Members' attention that the Omagh office services, as others have said, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and West Tyrone. People from Blacklion and Garrison will not go to Belfast to leave in a postal or proxy vote form, and they will not go to Belfast for an electoral ID card. Those people will end up not getting the opportunity to vote.

Many Members will remember a very infamous previous British Secretary of State by the name of Jeff Rooker, who brought in PPS 14, which then became PPS 21. I would say that Theresa Villiers knows as much about rural Ireland as Jeff Rooker and cares even less than he did. I do not believe that this is an improvement in the

service. I believe that we absolutely need to ensure that we have local accountability. Having people working in local offices and having the ability to access a service locally is crucial to our ability to cast our vote and use our democratic right. We have a very short space of time to be involved in the consultation and we need to ensure that our voices are heard across the board.

The amendment is important, and, while we can call on the NIO to do more, the NIO, really and truly, is not that bothered about whether somebody from Garrison gets their postal vote. We need these services to be transferred to the Executive to enable people to have the ability to run these offices in a very fair, impartial and accountable way and to bring the decision-making back into the North of Ireland and outside the NIO.

I am very agitated and anxious about the motion. I spoke about the issue when we were returned as MLAs in Omagh. Like others, the Omagh staff made the point that Omagh council had offered them the use of its premises if that would help to save money. Those are the kind of creative ideas that we need to look at. We need to ensure that the offices remain open.

The amendment is important. We need to ensure that we are not back here again, in five, 10 or 15 years, debating the same thing. We need those functions to be transferred to the Assembly to protect the future of rural constituents.

Mrs Cameron: I support the motion and would like to thank my party colleague Paul Frew for bringing it to the House.

Each and every one of us in the House is here as a result of the democratic process. We have been returned by our peers to represent the public interest and ensure that their voices are heard in the development of legislation. I for one — I am certain that I am not alone — am extremely grateful that we have the privilege of living in a democratic society, and I recognise how fortunate we are that we have that freedom.

Since its inception in 1972, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland has been integral to facilitating the democratic process for the residents of Northern Ireland. It has provided a vital and fundamental role in ensuring that people can easily engage and participate in and contribute to the process. I have no doubt that, without the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, we would not have the same number of people

registered to vote, nor would elections be managed as efficiently and as impartially.

I was, therefore, greatly concerned to learn of the plans to close the six regional offices that have provided such a vital community service to so many. I believe that, if those plans proceed, we will see a decrease in voter registration, a lack of access to electoral identity cards, a fall in those participating via postal or proxy voting and, ultimately, an increase in voter apathy. With electoral turnout widely in the region of 50%, we must do all that we can to ensure that we make political engagement as easy and as transparent as possible in an attempt to increase that figure and prevent any further decline.

I appreciate that the Electoral Office, like so many Departments, faces increasing financial constraints, and we must make savings to live within our means, but I feel that the closure of the offices will be detrimental. I similarly appreciate that it is moving towards digital voter registration in line with the rest of the UK, which, I hope, will encourage more people to register to vote. We live in a generation that is led by technology, and the ability to register to vote via the Internet, at any time of day or night, should be embraced for its convenience and accessibility. I sincerely hope that that will encourage more of the younger generation to participate, as, at times, they appear somewhat disengaged with politics.

Conversely, in my constituency office, the vast number of calls requesting information and guidance on voter registration and postal and proxy voting come from the older generation. I am concerned that the closure of local offices will mean that those people will simply not vote, as the once-familiar process will have changed greatly. There are, of course, the inevitable jobs losses that could come with the office closures and the impact that that would have on those individuals must not be forgotten.

As I am sure that all Members did, I recently received a letter from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Ben Wallace MP, which acknowledged the importance of maintaining the ability of the electorate to exercise their democratic right. I hope that Mr Wallace has recognised the strength of feeling within Northern Ireland to maintain local services and will reflect that when it comes the time to make his decision on the future of local offices. Mr Wallace's letter went on to refer to the possibility of closer working with local councils to continue to provide a local electoral service. I sincerely hope that, should the worst-case scenario be

arrived at and the local offices close, at the very least, provision can be made for the service to be maintained, for instance at the local council offices, and that the highly experienced Electoral Office staff can be redeployed to fill those roles. I was heartened that Mr Wallace refuted the speculation that electoral services would be available only in Belfast and hope that efforts are focused on retaining a local service.

The central principle of today's motion is protecting the democratic rights of the people of Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge the need to reform the Electoral Office to save money, but the closure of the local offices is not the way forward. I implore the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office to maintain and protect the future of these offices to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland continue to avail themselves of the same unparalleled access to the democratic process that we have enjoyed for the past 44 years.

I will move on to some of the comments by other Members in the debate. I welcome the fact that so many Members have seen fit to speak in the debate; it has certainly been well contributed to. The proposer, Tom Buchanan, led off the debate. He stated that he was not supporting the amendment and that he wished to work with the Secretary of State and the NIO to retain the six electoral offices. He referred to the declining turnout at elections in Northern Ireland. He said that he had no difficulty with the introduction of online services, but that they needed to be run in conjunction with local electoral offices. He also asked who would promote the work in the community and schools, as is done currently. He spoke of the risk to public confidence from online registration; we are all aware of what happened recently in England in regard to that.

Daithí McKay moved the amendment and spoke about the Electoral Office from a public rep's point of view. He spoke about being powerless in the situation, and that is where his party's proposed amendment comes in.

Robin Swann also spoke about the local office in North Antrim and the fact that Ballymena is being closed before the consultation is finished. He praised Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, which has worked hard for a solution, without joy. He talked about the complete collapse of the online registration system in England last week. He did not support the amendment. He said that money should be found, at least temporarily, to ensure that the Ballymena office remained open.

Daniel McCrossan supported the motion and said that the SDLP was standing four-square behind the staff of the offices. He spoke of his concern for rural areas, asked about the provision of broadband services and talked about those who are not computer-literate. He said that there was a need to do more to encourage the public to vote.

David Ford spoke about his relationship with the local office in Newtownabbey, but he stressed the need for realism in the proposals. He also spoke about the lack of proper consultation. He talked about the reduction in numbers on the register and the need to keep them up. He said that the motion was unrealistic and that we needed to face reality, but that we should insist on genuine consultation on the issue.

Sydney Anderson also spoke on the motion. He talked about the important role the Electoral Office plays in our democracy. He talked about the budget reduction of 25% and, as we all have, had something to say about his local office, in Banbridge this time. I think that everybody has had good reports of how helpful staff have been in each and every constituency.

Michaela Boyle spoke to the amendment. She had a clear message to the NIO that the six offices should not be closed. She talked about modern technology and broadband services in West Tyrone, or the lack thereof.

George Robinson also contributed. He worried about the reduction in local services and spoke about the importance and value of the local office. He said that to remove the service would be a false economy.

Mike Nesbitt was in support of the motion but not the amendment. He said that there was a huge lack of information flowing from the Newtownards office and questioned the change. He also questioned whether the public would travel to Belfast to register to vote, and I greatly doubt that too, with bus lanes. He also referred to proposals to move to a completely online process for firearms licensing, and how this will not work for all people.

Caoimhe Archibald questioned the logic of centralising the services and said that electoral services should be delivered at a local level. Some of the services would not be available online, and she gave an example of a constituent she had dealings with over the election period.

5.15 pm

William Irwin spoke of services such as getting an ID card and photographs taken for free, and of the Electoral Office's value.

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

Mrs Cameron: I will indeed. He also spoke of the fear that votes will be lost through the proposed changes. He also spoke about the tremendous work of the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland, and I think that that is a good line to end on because we all have very good things to say about Electoral Office staff in particular.

I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate. I support the motion.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 35; Noes 49.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms Archibald, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Carroll, Ms Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr E McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrath, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Boyle and Mr McKay

NOES

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Palmer, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson and Mr Robinson

Question accordingly negated.

5.30 pm

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat of closure.

Assembly Business

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was listed to ask a question to the Minister of Finance. Unfortunately, a family emergency took me away from the House. I apologise to the House for not being in my place during the Finance Minister's Question Time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you for relaying that to the House. I hope that all is well on the domestic scene.

Adjourned at 5.31 pm.

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