



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 21 June 2016
Volume 114, No 9

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Retirement of the Clerk/Chief Executive

Mr Speaker: Members, today is our last sitting before the Clerk/Chief Executive, Trevor Reaney, retires this Friday. Although I have been working with Trevor closely for only a few weeks, I cannot allow today to pass without the Assembly recognising his contribution.

I am the third Speaker whom Trevor has worked with during his almost eight years in post. I know that he has been held in very high esteem by my predecessors, his colleagues in other legislatures and the staff in the secretariat. Of course, in recent days, he was officially recognised by Her Majesty The Queen. In my short time in office, I have gained a fuller appreciation of the pressures and responsibilities that fall on the Clerk. Over the last eight years, amid a number of periods of political deadlock and disagreement, Trevor has been a steadying influence, keeping this institution in readiness for future developments and supporting and advising the Speaker and the Assembly Commission on some very sensitive and challenging issues at very difficult times.

Trevor has also been instrumental in advocating changes and improvements at a time of challenging budgets, with a focus on how important this place is to the people whom we represent. As Clerk/Chief Executive of the Assembly, and during his time as chief executive of the Policing Board, Trevor has been in key positions throughout the development of our political process. I know that he will personally be reassured that he is leaving us at a time when we are free to continue the business of expressing political differences in the Chamber without the stability of the organisation any longer being in any doubt.

There is no doubt that Trevor's personality has aided him in his success. He has remained

calm even on the worst days here. I have yet to hear of any example of him uttering a cross word.

He is known for his support of colleagues and I know of his concern for the welfare and interests of his staff. That all speaks well for Trevor's fundamental decency and, for that, he will be much missed. While Trevor is retiring from the Assembly, I know he will continue to be active in other ways, in particular, in his charity work, his community work and his church involvement. On behalf of the House and the staff of the Assembly, I want to express our thanks and gratitude to Trevor for his services over the years. We give Trevor, his wife, Liz, and his family the warmest wishes for whatever the future holds.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Like you, Mr Speaker, I do not want this moment to pass without having the opportunity to say thank you to Trevor and to pay my own tribute, not just for his work in this job but in his previous role as the chief executive of the Policing Board, when I was a member there, and as chief executive of Craigavon Borough Council.

Trevor, you have built a reputation for being fair and honourable and, in this particular line of work, that is not always easy to achieve. You were present when I was sworn in as Minister of the Environment, Enterprise Minister on two occasions, Finance Minister and, latterly, as First Minister — we have been through quite a lot together, Trevor.

I speak not just for myself, but for many colleagues who are here and those who have been Members of the House, when I say that we are grateful for all that you have done and the service that you have given. I know that dealing with politicians is not the easiest of jobs and, with responsibility for 108, the task is multiplied many times. However, in all of that time, you have carried out your duties with great diligence and professionalism. No one who has ever dealt with you could fail to be impressed by the manner in which you have

approached your responsibilities and served us all.

Trevor, you have been in post for as long as this period of stable devolution has been in place and you have always proven yourself to be a rock of stability and a sound source of wise advice. In the past eight years, we have faced many difficulties, crises and challenges but your presence has been a constant throughout. As First Minister of the Assembly, I want to pay tribute to you and to thank you for that stability. As the Speaker said, although you are retiring from this post, I know that it is not the last that we will see of you in public life, and we wish you well. Thank you for all that you have done. I look forward to working with Lesley, your successor. She has big shoes to fill. Those of us who come after people with big shoes know what that is like. I wish her well and we look forward to working with her. I wish you every success.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: On behalf of the SDLP, here in the Assembly and more generally, I wish Trevor all the best. On one level, Trevor's career demonstrates that he is a glutton for punishment because he jumped from the frying pan of Craigavon Borough Council into the fire of the Policing Board. Then, at risk of mixing my metaphors even more, once bitten, twice shy, he jumped from the frying pan of the Policing Board into the fire of the Northern Ireland Assembly. In that way, he was a glutton for punishment, but, in a much more important way, Trevor demonstrates commitment to public service. There have never been harder places of public service than councils, the Policing Board and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In my opinion, the highest responsibility in public service that Trevor Reaney held was with the Policing Board during the implementation of Patten and the new beginning to policing. In my view, since 1998, that has been the single biggest paradigm shift, and Trevor Reaney was part and parcel of that.

Of course, in all of that, he needed a partner. It is not for me to tell the story, but there is a story, as Trevor knows, in relation to the age at which he became engaged and subsequently married. Maybe before the end of this week, he will share that story, because I think it is for him to share, not for me to tell. He has had a partner and wife for many, many, many years, of which many of us would be envious, I am sure. On behalf of the SDLP, I offer him and his wife, Liz, every success in their future endeavours.

Ms Ruane: I echo what our Speaker, First Minister and, indeed, Alex Attwood, have said. I am speaking for Sinn Féin, because Martin McGuinness is over at a football match that is happening tonight somewhere. Martin asked me to pass on my best wishes and thanks to Trevor for the enormous work that he has done. I wish Trevor all the best in his retirement, but I do not believe it will be a real retirement because I have already heard about some of the work that he plans to be doing. I have enjoyed very much working with Trevor. I did not work with him on the Policing Board, because he had left it when I joined it — he had left it to come here — but I worked with him very closely on the Assembly Commission. He showed tremendous leadership in very difficult times on the Assembly Commission. He played a key role in helping to establish the first women's caucus, which other legislatures are very envious of. I worked with him on the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association. Indeed, at one of those meetings, Trevor got very sad news about his father and headed up the road; his father had passed away.

I have been working with him on the Speaker's team. We had our last meeting, this morning, with Trevor. I know that this is his last week here and that this is his last day in the Chamber, so I am sure it is a bittersweet day. I am sure you are looking forward to your retirement, but I am sure it is also a very sad day.

I hope your family enjoy having time with you. We often met in corridors, late at night, as we wondered whether we could book hotels, as business was going on until two or three in the morning. Trevor was always one of the people to go to. I congratulate him on his recent honours and on the work that he has done in the public service, and I very much look forward to working with him in the future. I have no doubt our paths will cross again.

Mr Swann: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party Members — current and past — who have served and known Trevor, I thank you, sir, for your guidance. Indulge me, Mr Speaker, I do not want to speak through the Chair, but to Trevor. I thank you for your guidance and support in the time that you have been here and for the neutrality, professionalism and understanding that you have brought to this place and its Members. That steadying influence, within the Chamber and outside it, has helped many a Member through a difficult time. It is the personal understanding that you brought to your role that has been truly valuable in this place.

Your charity work has been mentioned. I know that that is something that has been, and is, dear to you, and it is something that you intend putting a lot more of your time and effort into. We wish you well as you take forward those worthy and worthwhile endeavours, and we wish you well in your community works. Much has been made of Trevor as a public servant, but it is the work that you have done behind the scenes that has been a great benefit to Northern Ireland and this place. That is why we think that you were richly and well rewarded in Her Majesty's Birthday Honours with an award. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, we wish you well, not on your retirement, because we know you are not retiring, but in your next endeavours. We hope that you have a safe and enjoyable long life to enjoy that.

Mr Ford: I have heard it said that Trevor Reaney is not the kind of person who appreciates being made a fuss of. Therefore, I probably should speak briefly and not repeat everything that has already been said, so as not to add to his embarrassment. However, I am delighted that he will be suffering a certain amount of embarrassment at present due to the positive words that have been said from all round the Chamber. In particular, I am very much reminded of the comments that Alex Attwood made about his role in the Policing Board and the crucial role that was performed there before he came to the Assembly. That was at a time when life was not particularly easy, and things were not terribly smooth.

Those of us who have been here since 1998, as Alex and I have been, will recognise the very significant achievements that have been made by the secretariat in general in the last few years under Trevor's leadership and the excellent work that he has carried out, building on a career of dedicated public service over very many years elsewhere.

10.45 am

I have had the pleasure of knowing Trevor and Liz in a slightly different way — as mutual parents of students at Queen's. One of the things that I find amazing about Trevor is that, whether at that kind of informal occasion, when you are rejoicing in the successes of your children, or during the work that he has done in very difficult times here, he has been relentlessly cheerful, relentlessly positive and always optimistic in looking for the way in which the best good can be done for everyone. That is something that does not sit easily with many public servants, but it is an exemplar that we have seen in Trevor's work here. I was

delighted that, just last week, Anne and I had the opportunity to have a brief conversation with Trevor and Liz to congratulate him on the award of the CBE, which was a richly deserved recognition of a full career in public service, not just in this place. We trust that he will have a long and very happy retirement in which to enjoy it.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further 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 Ó Muilleoir: Mora duit ar maidin. My good wishes to Trevor as well, and, if there is a football indulgence this morning, I wish the Northern Ireland team well and the Irish team well for tomorrow. I believe William Humphrey gave his ticket to Martin McGuinness — no greater love has any man. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage

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. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I call Ms Sinéad Bradley to move the motion.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. That is an error on our part. It is being moved by Mr Justin McNulty.

Mr Speaker: As this is the first opportunity for Mr McNulty to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a

maiden speech is made without interruption — that is, unless the Member chooses to make controversial remarks.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you clarify whether it is in order for a Member to move a motion to which their name is not attached?

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while the point of order is checked.

I ask Members to resume their seats. The point of order raised by Lord Morrow is upheld. I call Sinéad Bradley to move the motion.

Ms S Bradley: I beg to move

This Assembly notes that 42% of premises in rural areas do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed; further notes the urgent need for better provision of broadband and expansion of mobile phone coverage in rural areas; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop further proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland has a modern telecommunications network that enables existing businesses to compete and to ensure that all areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including our rural communities.

As expected, I have not come prepared to move the motion. However, the SDLP was confident in putting the motion forward. As was the case for many Members in the House, during our campaign and canvass, access to good, reliable quality broadband was repeatedly brought up on many doorsteps, particularly in rural areas.

I will cite one example that comes to mind from my own canvass. I met a young girl who had a great entrepreneurial spirit and was very eager to convert what was essentially a family garage into a potential business. Speaking to her, it was clear to me and others that simple barriers to business promotion, like lack of access to broadband, were, in fact, acting as real barriers to growth. She had gone to the lengths of costing out the possibility of having to change the rating structure for her garage for change of use. All that aside and even though she had a very sound business case, I was disappointed to learn that she made the decision not to go ahead with that business proposal purely based on the fact that she could not compete with others within the sector without access to good and reliable broadband.

On returning to the SDLP group, when we were having our discussions about how canvasses had gone and what the messages were on the ground, it quickly came to light that there is a clear demand across some pockets of urban areas that have yet to be serviced and, particularly across rural areas, that broadband is not accessible and is not there when we need it, which is hampering the betterment of our economy and local economies.

When I spoke to others, I realised that there has been a change in culture. Access to broadband is something that family units almost expect as a utility now. Long gone are the days when it was listed alongside electricity and telephone lines. Broadband is now something we look at when we are using curriculum structures for doing homework. There is a growing demand for it, especially for the entertainment factor it brings. Many households across Northern Ireland will recognise the arguments that happen when one member of the family is on an iPad and there is a rush around the house to see who is doing what. It is about trying to prioritise whose access to broadband should trump the others'.

Many parents will recognise that argument. I think that it happens in many houses.

I suppose that, today, I would be particularly mindful of the potential blockages to economic growth that exist. Based on that, I urge all Members of the House not just to support the motion but to really look within their own remit. We talk about the House coming out of its silo mentality and thinking. I urge all Members, across their remit on different Committees to, please, look at opportunities to see where and when access to broadband can be increased and bettered.

Mr Storey: As I rise to contribute to the debate, I think that it is important that we should, at the outset, say that we all agree on the importance of having access to good broadband provision. Obviously, we come to the debate with another aspect, which is that it reminds us of the important role that the Government play. Often, this House and Governments generally do not get good press around what they do or do not do. However, when we come to the issue that we are debating, it is important that the Government play that role of stimulating, providing and assisting.

When we look at the many statistics, which I am sure that the Minister and others will undoubtedly give us on the issue in the House today, there is one fact that, I think, we would do well to remember, which is that, over the last

eight years, something in the region of over £60 million has been invested by previous Executives, and will be committed to by this Executive, to help to provide for broadband provision. Undoubtedly, the figure will be given to us that something in the region of over 95% of Northern Ireland will be covered by broadband. That is all to be welcomed. All that is to be applauded. However, I concur with the comments made by the proposer of the motion, eventually.

I cannot resist saying that the Opposition really do need to have a look at Standing Orders. We have been told about this dynamic Opposition that we will have; that it will be incisive and really get to the issues. Well, we need to have a look at Standing Orders. I have to commend the Member in all that. Members in the House know that I say many things, but I never make them personal. I trust that Members understand that. I commend her in the comments that she made.

Today, across the House, many examples will be given from our constituencies. I can take you to the town of Bushmills in my constituency of North Antrim, where, in that rural area, a business that has to depend on clients in the City of London cannot get the broadband speed that it requires to do its business in an accurate and appropriate way. In fact, it was suggested to that business that what it should do is move into a town such as Ballymoney, Coleraine or Ballycastle and then that service could be provided. In many ways, that undervalues the importance that we place on our rural communities and in having rural businesses. If we want to see, as I have no doubt that the Minister does, a spread of the financial benefit, it has to be not only in urban areas but in rural areas. I certainly encourage the Minister — I welcome the fact that he is here to speak on this issue — to continue to work with the providers. Let us remember that while the Government can stimulate and provide a certain degree of money, they still have to involve those providers. It is not good enough that they say, "Oh, but there are alternatives to having fibre. There is a lovely cabinet outside your door." In this particular case, my constituent can see the —

11.00 am

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that broadband is fundamental, particularly in rural areas, to developing business and taking it forward? In my area, we have many black spots where small businesses and rural communities cannot access the Internet. Does he accept that much

more needs to be done, concentrating in particular on rural communities?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: I concur with the Member. With the exception of Members who are from the city of Belfast, there are very few Members who do not have a rural element to their constituency. Rural proofing was mentioned in the House yesterday. As a legislature, we are good at bringing forward legislation, but we have to ensure that those pieces of legislation are enacted and are fit for purpose so that, when it comes to an issue such as this, an obligation is placed not only on the Government to provide the services but on those who provide those services in the private sector. The private sector is always very good at coming knocking on the door of the Government and saying, "You have a duty to do this for us. You need to help us", and the leaders, plural, of the Opposition will tell us —

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

Mr Storey: — that it is incumbent on the Government to provide. However, it is equally incumbent on the private sector, which has a responsibility in this area, to work more proactively to ensure that the areas where there are black spots are delivered for and that we continue to make progress on this vital issue.

Ms Archibald: Broadband provision and mobile phone network coverage, as everyone in the Chamber will recognise, are issues that we deal with regularly in our constituencies, probably more so in rural constituencies like mine of East Derry. I am speaking today in support of the motion. As the opposition parties have often been at pains to state to those of us in government, when you put forward things that we can support, we will support them, and that works both ways. A modern telecommunications network that enables existing business to compete and ensures that areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including rural communities, is something that we can support.

Many telecommunications issues can be raised, but I will focus on a couple of things. First, I was disappointed that the motion referred only to ensuring that areas are attractive for foreign direct investment and enabling businesses to compete. We in Sinn Féin believe that, to grow our local economy, it is also vital to encourage indigenous entrepreneurship. While I accept that similar conditions apply to both, I feel that it

is important to highlight the importance of indigenous enterprises. Encouraging start-ups and SMEs, as Mr Storey said, to remain in rural areas where they start their business is of the utmost importance to those local economies. It is important that SMEs have the infrastructure that allows them to get off the ground and grow, and that includes premises, transport and telecommunications. An online presence is vital to many small businesses, especially when they are starting off. Increasingly, social media is the method of choice for reaching customers and for marketing initiatives.

Secondly, for the purposes of attracting foreign direct investment, it goes without saying that a reliable and robust telecommunications network is essential. In fact, telecoms infrastructure ranks amongst the top factors in attracting companies to invest in an area, along with transport infrastructure and labour costs and, indeed, ahead of corporation tax, which is no surprise given that most companies, whether multinationals, public services or indigenous enterprises, are all looking at how they can use telecommunications to make businesses more efficient.

As we look towards a reduction in the corporation tax rate, which ultimately aims to encourage investment here, it is essential that we have all the other factors in place to attract investment and enable businesses to function effectively. That must, as the motion states, include all areas right across the North and not just the towns.

Finally, the right to request a connection to the universal service obligation speed would present a challenge in the North. Despite the numerous interventions to date to upgrade the networks, there are, as the motion states, still significant rural areas that do not have adequate or, indeed, any broadband coverage. Such programmes and initiatives that have been conducted or are ongoing are very welcome, but there is still some way to go.

In my constituency, pockets of areas that would not even be considered particularly rural or isolated have no broadband coverage. My parents live less than six miles from Coleraine, which is a fairly large town and the landing point for Project Kelvin, and a mile and a half from the main Coleraine to Derry road, yet they do not have broadband coverage. They have had to obtain satellite broadband, and that is the case for many businesses and residents in the Ballerin, Glenuillin and Drumsurn area. Alongside that, we often get complaints of failing mobile phone network coverage.

Like I said, the upgrading and access initiatives in place are welcome, including that for satellite broadband under the basic broadband scheme, although expectations must be managed. Those who believe that satellite broadband is an equivalent solution to conventional broadband may be disappointed, because, while it certainly does the basics, it must be noted that most packages come with data download limits that are comparatively restrictive. It will certainly cover things such as email and social media, but it means that streaming and other things that people take for granted are not realistic, and it is, of course, more expensive.

I support the motion. Perhaps the further proposals that the signatories to the motion suggest the Minister develop should include a strategy to target, area by area, the so-called not spots and ensure providers funded under any future initiatives target those areas to support rural business development.

Mr Aiken: I also pass on my thanks to the Clerk for his hard work and congratulate him on his honour.

I support the SDLP's motion. I want to talk about a few of the issues, and I will echo a lot of the things that Members have already said.

Throughout Northern Ireland, the concept of a universal service obligation (USO) is in rural areas and, increasingly, in some urban areas a bit of a hollow joke. In my constituency, over 8,000 premises are not connected; indeed, even when small and medium-sized enterprises have sought satellite broadband connection, several have been informed that they are in the shadow of retransmission positions. Indeed, getting 2 megabits per second, never mind 10 megabits or 24 megabits per second, is well outwith their reach. If we look at what is happening in London and increasingly in Manchester and areas that we are competing against, we see that areas there already have 200 Mb per second. That is what we need to aspire to.

We talk about Northern Ireland being the best place to do business. We are competing against the rest of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, but GB already has a superfast Britain policy. Unfortunately, I do not see a superfast Northern Ireland approach, which is something that we need to have. We need to address the issues with some urgency.

I have personal experience of BT Openreach taking over three months to connect my house to broadband, bearing in mind that my house is

only 75 metres from the green box and they were busily digging up my lane to try to achieve connection. That just shows that some of the frustrations that we have across the Province are very much to the fore.

When we talk to potential foreign direct investment investors, we find that the provision of superfast broadband and adequate broadband is key. Much more than that, we are trying to build the approach for our people. We are trying to encourage rural enterprises to develop and to ensure that more of our people get the benefits of having a broadband connection.

This is not Government bashing. One of most important things that we have to do is to have urgent discussions with the regulator to see what is being provided in Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind the amount of money, public and private, that is being spent on the process, we need to hold the providers to account. One of the things that I will ask the Minister —

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that, in my constituency of Lagan Valley, the only opportunity that we have to access broadband in the village of Hillsborough and within the curtilage of its rural dimensions is when we are sitting at the back of an Ulsterbus that has free Wi-Fi? That is certainly the extent of the service that we have in the village of Hillsborough and its outlying rural areas.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Member for the intervention. I do not think that we have a policy of asking Translink to have its Wi-Fi-enabled buses go around Northern Ireland to improve hotspots, but that is an example of some of the significant issues that we have. I am sure that every Member here would be able to intervene during this conversation to say that he or she has similar problems in his or her area.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I will indeed.

Mr Beggs: Would the Member be surprised to learn that some of our enterprise agencies still do not have superfast broadband and have not been prioritised and provided with the service that would enable small businesses to get online and win business internationally?

Mr Aiken: Unfortunately, I am not surprised. We need to look at this urgently. I ask the Minister to hold the public-private partnership to account on the issue and to talk to the regulator. Let us not dwell on 12 or 24 megabits per second; let us see how quickly we can, like the rest of the United Kingdom, get to approaching 200 megabits per second.

Ms Armstrong: I rise as a rural dweller and on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion. While broadband coverage has improved, there are rural areas that still do not have Internet or where access to the Internet is hampered by low speeds. There is a growing digital divide. While it is true that an increasing number of urban premises have superfast broadband, a significant number of rural premises — 42%, as highlighted by the motion — do not have universal service obligation speeds; indeed, some premises that I have visited have speeds of less than 2 megabits per second.

The Department for the Economy continues to deliver the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project, which is a welcome initiative that has already enabled broadband access for 47,000 premises. As we know, the project includes a clawback gain share mechanism that compels BT to return part of the investment when adoption of the new service passes the 20% mark in related areas. However, the scheme does not appear to measure how comprehensively BT serves the rural community. For example, in my constituency, which is the Minister's constituency, the coastal village of Cloughey along the Ards peninsula is deemed to have broadband. New green cabinets were installed, and residents certainly took advantage of the faster broadband packages available. However, on the periphery of the village, there is a small development called Castle Meadows located less than 200 yards from the main road that passes through the village. No green cabinets were installed there, and the residents of that part of the village are not being provided with the broadband speed to meet even the USO's 10 megabits per second. Is anyone looking at how effective the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project is in rural areas? Is the 20% update in the adoption of new services all that is measured?

In answers to recent written questions, the Minister has confirmed that he will know the amount of money available from the BT clawback in the autumn. As called for in the motion, I urge the Minister to review the broadband coverage achieved to date and put plans in place to ensure that no one in a rural

area is left lagging behind. I also ask that the Department review the clawback mechanism to see whether it is set at the appropriate level and is returning enough resources to allow the Department to maximise the delivery of broadband to isolated rural areas. I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is cold comfort to someone to know that most people in their area have high broadband speeds if they do not have access to it themselves.

I read with some consternation the suggestions on NI Direct that people who are not yet being provided with high broadband speeds could use the Internet facilities in their local library. Given the reduction in the number of libraries and the reduced opening hours in those that are left, this will not be a practical option for many people and is completely absurd for anyone trying to run a rural business.

In another answer to a written question, I noted that the Minister confirmed that his Department had no plans for intervention at present for mobile coverage. That is very disappointing. Isolated rural areas not currently covered by broadband are the very areas where it is unlikely there will ever be green cabinets.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that, particularly when it comes to mobile phone coverage, the Minister and his party are putting mobile phone users in Northern Ireland at extreme jeopardy by suggesting that we should vote to exit the EU, which protects mobile phone users and delivers lower costs on a daily basis?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for his points. Given that roaming charges in European states are being taken away this following summer, it is important that we consider the mobile phone.

It is imperative that mobile signal infrastructure is reviewed in conjunction with landline broadband. That way, when one is not available, the alternative should be provided. Satellite is not a realistic option as the download speeds are not appropriate for viable business use.

In summary, I urge the Minister to take the opportunity in the autumn to develop further proposals to enhance rural broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas.

That will be an investment that will enable the development of rural business and will open an

attractive offer for potential foreign direct investors and local business development.

As Obama said:

"another key to strengthening education, entrepreneurship and innovation in communities ... is to harness the full power of the Internet, and that means faster ... more widely available broadband".

11.15 am

Mr Lyons: I do not intend to rehearse the arguments that have been made already, but it is important to understand the importance of broadband for people, especially those in rural areas. We all know of the need for businesses, particularly farms, and students and households to have access to broadband, and we understand the importance of that.

I want to raise a few areas of concern, but it is important that we understand that progress has been made in the area. Sometimes, progress may be not as swift as we might like it to be. We can look at the facts and see that 96% of premises now have broadband of 2 megabits per second or higher. Average download speeds have increased by 3.5 megabits per second over the last year, upload speeds are better and there has also been an increase in 3G coverage across Northern Ireland. Particularly in my constituency, I have —

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I will give way.

Mr Aiken: The question about that is that we are talking about speeds of 2 megabits per second and 3G. The rest of the United Kingdom is talking about 4G moving on to 5G and 24 megabits per second and leading up to 200 megabits per second. We are trying to reinforce failure. I think that we should be looking towards doing more.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lynch: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will address some of those issues shortly, but we will never get 200 megabits per second in some of the rural areas in Northern Ireland; you are talking about some of the speeds that they are getting in the big cities across the water. I certainly want to see speeds and coverage increased everywhere.

We have to acknowledge that significant improvements have been made, but we need to

go further because that is no comfort to people in rural areas who are struggling to get access to the Internet. Various projects have taken place. We have the Next Generation Broadband project, the remote broadband service, the broadband improvement programme and the basic broadband scheme. All those have helped to increase the number of those who can access broadband.

We have particular problems in Northern Ireland, especially in rural areas. Probably the most common problem is that the average length of the line from households or businesses to exchanges or cabinets is much longer in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. We also have a problem in that the rural population in Northern Ireland is more dispersed than in other parts of the UK.

Despite the fact that progress has been made, it is still a very difficult situation for many rural dwellers. Some of the Members from the SDLP said that the issue had been raised with them when they were out on the doorsteps, and it has been raised with me frequently throughout my time as an elected representative. I understand the difficulties and real frustration that people have when it comes to not being able to access broadband. People feel aggrieved when they cannot connect or get the speeds that they want.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the criteria that should be seriously considered when providers are refusing to, maybe, be helpful in the provision of an appropriate broadband speed is for businesses in the rural community to be given priority? That is only one customer, as opposed to them having hundreds of customers, which makes it financially viable for them.

Mr Lyons: I certainly agree with the Member and what he has said, and I am sure that the Minister has heard that as well.

I want to commend BT. I suppose that we can give BT quite a hard time, but I have found it to be very responsive to the queries that I have put to it as a representative for East Antrim. It is important that that is put on record. Of course, large areas in my constituency around Carnlough, Glenarm and some of the rural area at Ballyboley are still struggling to get reasonable speeds, and we need to look into that.

I want to make a couple more points. First, I know that the Minister does not have responsibility for it — he should not be able to

interfere in the area — but I feel that it is unfair that companies can charge consumers the same regardless of whether they just about get a very basic speed or a far higher one. Those who are getting a very poor speed should not have to pay for a service that they are not getting in its entirety, but I understand that that is not the responsibility of the Minister. I ask the Minister to continue to invest and identify the areas in need, and to keep working and bringing in these projects and schemes that have been done in the past so that we can get higher broadband speeds and greater coverage.

I cannot sit down without referring to the comments that were made by Mr Dickson. We have heard that Brexit will cause World War III; we have heard that Brexit will cause economic calamity. We have been given all sorts of scare stories, and now Mr Dickson is suggesting that we will not be able to make telephone calls in the event of Brexit. We will not be able to send text messages. We will maybe just park that there, and I will spare his blushes any further.

I support the motion and hope that the Minister will continue to invest so that speeds can be improved for everyone.

Mr Milne: Before I go into my prepared piece, I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor. I also pay tribute to Trevor Reaney and wish him every success for the time ahead.

Much has been done over this past number of years to improve access to broadband and mobile phone coverage, such as the Next Generation project, the voucher scheme and, currently, the super-fast roll-out programme. While this is to be commended, it also needs to be acknowledged that not everyone has benefited or is benefiting from this. A large number of rural areas, many within my constituency of Mid Ulster, continue to experience difficulty in access, speed and reliability. Some have no access, some have limited access and many are unable to avail themselves of competitive pricing or the opportunities open to others. This patchy coverage has a direct impact on local services such as GPs, where records cannot be accessed in a timely manner or correspondence dealt with efficiently.

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

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Milne: I will.

Mr Aiken: One of the key issues already mentioned is the distance and what rural provision is throughout these islands. One of the issues that we should be addressing is the fact that there is no difference between the length of cables in Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, yet provision has managed to be achieved. Also, mobile telephone coverage is significantly better, as anybody who has recently been in rural Ireland has seen. This is not an issue that is basically just a Northern Ireland problem. We need to be able to hold the providers to account.

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

Mr Milne: Thank you for those comments; I agree wholeheartedly with them.

It impacts on businesses and the business community, which are in regular contact with my office highlighting the negative impact that a slow and inconsistent signal has on their business and expressing their frustration at the lack of the progress that can be seen in urban areas. It affects farmers, who are encouraged and rewarded for processing grant applications online, schools, which are always increasing their use of technology, and the recreational user, who is multiple in many households, all requiring access to the service, often at the same time.

Mobile phones and the Internet have changed the way that we interact and access our information. It has allowed many local businesses to expand into new markets and adopt new and innovative approaches. It has allowed for increased speed and efficiency and has also enabled the workforce to become more mobile, which breaks down some of the barriers to employment. For those who have excellent coverage and access, it is very much part of their lives. It is unusual to see a person without a smartphone. "Google it" has become a much-used phrase when we do not know the answer to a question.

I have witnessed much frustration when access to a strong signal is not instantaneous. Yet, for people in many locations, a poor signal or no signal is the norm, so there is an absolute need for fairness across the urban and rural locations. The Rural Needs Act, passed in this House a few months ago, required that rural needs be appropriately taken into account by public authorities in policymaking and service delivery. Its aim is for rural dwellers to enjoy the same quality of life as all others across the North.

I appreciate that telecommunications is not a devolved matter, but as it is not economically advantageous for private companies to bring these services to rural locations, they are unlikely to do so, rightly or wrongly, without government intervention and assistance. There was disappointment in my constituency when the mobile infrastructure project, a publicly funded initiative that it was hoped would correct the market failure in supply, failed to materialise, despite being granted the necessary planning permission to build the base station. There is a lot resting on the current Superfast Rollout programme, and, while I appreciate that it is a work in progress, it is unlikely to reach everywhere.

I ask the Minister to give his commitment today that he will make access to broadband and a mobile signal, regardless of location, a departmental priority. I also bring to the Minister's attention that, on three occasions, requests for a meeting with ETI Ministers by, for example, Mid Ulster Council fell on deaf ears. I ask this Minister to speak to councils not just in the Mid Ulster area but right across the North.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. We all recognise the need for an improvement in broadband and mobile services in rural and urban areas. Modern business and family life require fast communications through broadband and mobile phone systems.

Significant investment has taken place in recent years to improve the installation of broadband projects, including the Next Generation Broadband programme and phase 2 of the Superfast Rollout programme, representing an investment of over £60 million over the last six or seven years. We recognise that that is significant investment by DETI and other Departments, but more is needed to bring the service provision up to 10 megabytes per second, as stated in the USO — the universal service obligation.

It is important, as we move towards 2018 and the proposed reduction in corporation tax and seek to attract new business into Northern Ireland, that we are ready with modern, high-speed broadband and mobile phone services that are fit for purpose and that no area is disadvantaged by the lack of modern technology. Given our high number of SMEs and that over 70% of manufacturing is now outside Belfast, we are highly dependent on the Internet and high-speed broadband to be able to operate efficiently. Whether the business is in the Hollywood hills in North Down, for example, where there may be small

businesses, such as kennels or a quarry operation, effective, efficient broadband is essential for data handling and communication. The Department for the Economy needs to influence providers to get improved delivery in support of businesses and our residents.

Effective, efficient mobile phones are critical for business communications. It is so frustrating to have poor local services. If you travel a short distance down Massey Avenue and up to Craigtantlet, about two miles away, you find you are hit by poor service in a rural area. Does it matter that it relates to the low density of the population? That seems to be the major factor. Where there is low density, we get low investment. More needs to be done to encourage investment by the phone providers and to share existing facilities, such as masts. Planning, again, seems to be an issue, and we need to put more pressure on to improve the planning facility. More improvement is needed for customers, with improved services for all users.

Efficient and effective business delivery requires modern and high-speed communications. We recognise that our new Minister, Simon Hamilton, will continue to ensure effective delivery to make Northern Ireland a better place for business. I support the motion.

11.30 am

Mr Chambers: I thank the SDLP for tabling this worthy and important motion. It is an example of proactive opposition. It should focus our minds on the fact that we all recognise that many people in rural areas are unable to enjoy the high broadband speeds and reliable mobile phone coverage that many of our citizens take for granted.

The Consumer Council hit the nail on the head in a recent consultation response on the issue, when it stated:

"access to broadband can be viewed in the same way as basic utility services."

Now that many government services are being moved and promoted online, it gives us one more important reason to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to enjoy a top-end, quality broadband service. Online electoral registration, which we discussed in the House yesterday, is the latest example of that.

The project to introduce a reduced rate of corporation tax has been referred to and is

foremost in our minds. We are rightly focusing a lot of attention on the establishment of training provision to create the skill sets that, we anticipate, will be required as new employment opportunities open up. However, we should not take our eye off day-to-day housekeeping requirements that international investors will be looking for and expecting. Universal high-speed broadband and robust mobile phone coverage will be one such expectation, especially with so many people now working from home, which is a trend that will increase.

We need to recognise also that many small farmers are diversifying into other income opportunities and broadband is essential to accommodate their ambitions and help grow our economy.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware that there is a rural/urban divide in Northern Ireland? Currently, in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 37% of premises cannot receive a broadband download speed of greater than 10 megabytes per second, compared with 2% of premises in Belfast.

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

Mr Chambers: I am sure that the House sympathises with and shares the Member's concern at that statistic.

We also recognise how important tourism is to our economy. Visitors going to our must-visit locations expect to be able to use their iPads, tablets and smartphones. One bad experience can be the one recalled when visitors return home to share their stories with friends and families, who are our potential future visitors.

In conclusion, we should not imagine that broadband black spots are exclusive to rural areas. In my North Down constituency, there are many high-value rateable urbanised housing areas that are still receiving download speeds that would have been considered as snail's pace years ago. That is just not good enough.

After Friday and the result of Brexit, I certainly do not anticipate war. However, I hope that we will continue to enjoy the European grant aid that we have received to date to help us improve our communications network.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Before doing so, I pay tribute to Mr Reaney, who has now left the Chamber. He and I served together on

Craigavon council during some very sad and difficult times in the history of that borough, and he was a very steady hand at the helm. I pay tribute to him for his work on Craigavon council and also here at the Assembly.

I move to the debate in hand. As everyone agrees, broadband is an essential element to daily life, our economy and the learning skills of young people. Everyone, particularly Members from a rural constituency, will have experience of where broadband is non-existent or the lack of it severely hampers the promotion of rural life, whether it be in employment, industry or education.

As Members have also said, during the recent election campaign, when we were out knocking on doors and talking to people, it was a topic of conversation on many doorsteps. People should have access to a high standard of broadband, whether they be in Belfast city centre or on the shores of Lough Neagh in Maghery.

In fact, I was watching a programme recently that intrigued me. A fisherman off the Cornish coast was going out, lifting his lobster pots, taking photographs of the lobsters, tweeting them and selling the catch through social media. If you were a fisherman in Lough Neagh, you could not do that because the broadband connection would be insufficient for you to be able to lift your catch, tweet the photographs and sell it. Why should we not be able to do that? Why should the local infrastructure and local economy not enable that to be done, whether it is that old tradition of fishing off Lough Neagh or the new industries that are coming into our rural communities?

Of course, those who tabled the motion ignore the fact that there is already a commitment in the Programme for Government framework to increase broadband accessibility to everyone, particularly to rural communities. The Executive have recognised that in their commitments under the Programme for Government framework, which is out for consultation and which we are encouraging people to move forward to. The question is not whether we support access to rural broadband. The question is: how do we achieve it? Is it the responsibility of the Executive? Is it solely the responsibility of the Economy Minister? I would argue that it is not, because I suspect that major corporations are sitting back in their boardrooms saying, "Keep calm. Keep cool. Don't spend a penny. This will land on the Government's doorstep, and they can invest tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money into a service for us, as a private company, to

lay whatever infrastructure is required". When our telecommunications industries were privatised, we were told that that was the best way forward and that privatisation would offer competition —

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: One second.

Mr O'Dowd: — greater value for money and the services that are required. Clearly, it has not. I give way to the Member.

Mr Aiken: Thanks very much to the Member for mentioning that. One issue that we need to talk about is that there is already a significant debate about the relationship between Openreach, BT and other providers. One thing that we should do as a matter of urgency is to look at what is being provided by the private sector and holding it to account. Thank you for allowing me to intervene.

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

Mr O'Dowd: I was going to come to your point, Mr Aiken. Throughout this debate, you have made very valid points in your interventions. If we use millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to lay whatever infrastructure is required to provide rural broadband of the standard that we all expect and hand that over to the private sector, which then charges the same taxpayers who paid for the infrastructure to be laid in the first place, I want to know what comeback there is, what regulation will be in place, and what authority this or any other Economy Minister will have over those providers to ensure that they provide a fair and equitable service to the taxpayers who paid for the infrastructure to be laid in the first place. That is the debate that we need to have. How do we hold what are now private companies to account if we are going to hand over tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money for the provision of broadband? Of course, we could debate at length whether we should hand that money over or not.

One thing that is clear and that the House is obviously agreed on is that, if we allow the current service to continue, rural communities will be disenfranchised. We had a debate here yesterday about online registration. One Member referred to the fact that gun licensing is moving online. Car tax and tax returns are moving online. As we move towards a modern health service, healthcare will be delivered

online as well. If you are living in a rural community, will you have the same access to your GP or consultant online? If the infrastructure remains as it is, you will not.

A number of valid points have been raised during the debate, but the one that resonates with me most is how we hold to account those private companies that are sitting back and waiting on tens if not hundreds of millions of pounds of public money to be invested in their infrastructure.

Mr T Buchanan: My apologies for missing part of the debate. My comments will be brief. As you know, I have broadband provision in West Tyrone down as the topic for this afternoon's Adjournment debate, so we will be focusing on that later. I will keep these few comments broad.

Excellent broadband coverage is one of the fundamental components in the digital age for driving our everyday lives and our economy forward. Technology is continually advancing, and we need to ensure that we have proper broadband and mobile phone coverage throughout our constituencies. Black spots are a particular problem right across rural constituencies in Northern Ireland. It is about how we deal with the problem, because there has been a commitment from the Executive over the past few years to bring on faster broadband speeds and upgrade broadband services. However, that does not address the gaps that appear in rural areas, where we have farm businesses, small businesses, schools, schoolchildren and parents contacting our offices about the lack of broadband cover. It is essential for businesses and for children, who seek to study.

It is an issue that the Executive will have to face up to, but the question is this: how do we address it? As the Member who spoke previously said, there are private companies out there that we need to hold to account. There are those that we need to work with in innovative ways as we seek to bridge the gap that exists in rural areas. Over the next five years, the Executive will have to face up to how we make progress on improving broadband services in rural areas.

The motion is quite clear in stating that the problem still exists. I support the motion and ask the Minister to look at some innovative ways of working alongside the private sector to see how the matter can be addressed, in order to ensure that there is equality of service right across the constituencies for those who really

need it for their businesses as they seek to drive the economy forward.

Mr Mullan: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. In doing so, I will demonstrate to the House the harsh realities of life facing many of my constituents in East Derry. Many individuals and families, including farmers, have contacted me to express their deep frustration at the slow progress made with broadband provision across the constituency. From places such as Benone, Blagh and Drumsurn, which are on my doorstep, to places right across the constituency, such as Waterfoot, Kilrea and Glenullin in the east and Feeney and Claudy in the west, I have not seen any broadband improvement in recent years. That is in spite of having Project Kelvin in Portrush, a £28 million fibre-optic cable connecting my constituency to North America in a matter of seconds.

I understand that DETI spent a considerable amount of money on rolling out broadband schemes, but my constituency has yet to receive any tangible benefit from it, despite multiple promises of higher speeds and upgrades to service infrastructure. That failure to improve rural broadband services has exacerbated the digital divide, and that is having a severe economic impact on many business across my constituency. Business owners have told me that poor Internet connectivity is stifling their business growth, job creation and productivity in the area.

Many homes and businesses throughout East Derry struggle to obtain a mere speed of 2 megabits per second. What business would want to come and invest in an area that does not have the proper broadband infrastructure?

11.45 am

According to research carried out last year, 11% of Internet connections in East Derry have a speed of 2 megabits per second or less: in 2016, that is unacceptable. Compare that with areas like north and south Belfast, where the figure sits at a very comfortable 2% and 3% respectively. With the opening up of many online markets and the emergence of the digital economy, rural businesses simply cannot compete.

The broadband voucher scheme promised much to many rural businesses, but less than a year ago it was stripped of funding, leaving many rural businesses stranded and disconnected once again. I call on the Minister to clarify whether he or his Executive colleagues have plans to reinstate the scheme

and deliver fully on what was promised to so many rural businesses, especially those located in east Derry.

Satellite broadband and blue boxes have been used as stopgap provision in many rural areas, but they do not provide a consistent, reliable or stable connection.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that farming is one of the biggest industries in rural areas? Does the House realise that the PSNI is moving towards 100% of gun permit applications being done online by August? We are also looking at staged payments of the single farm payment to help the farming community in this time of austerity. To get those staged payments, at least 70% of applications will have to be done online. Does the Member agree that rural areas need to be looked at with greater detail and urgency?

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

Mr Mullan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. There is no doubt that the farming community suffers greatly from the lack of broadband. I sympathise with his comments and hope that the issue can be addressed by the Minister.

There are better long-term solutions. We simply cannot have a glass-half-empty approach for rural broadband; it is much too important for the survival of many businesses in rural constituencies like East Derry.

Mobile phone coverage is an equally important issue in my constituency, which is littered with what have been referred to in the Chamber today as "not spots" — areas where there is little or no mobile phone coverage. In preparation for today's debate, I went onto Ofcom's website, which details mobile phone coverage throughout the North. When I looked across the map of my constituency, I saw that areas surrounding Limavady, Dungiven and Magilligan Point were marked in red, which means that there is limited outdoor and indoor phone network coverage, whilst access to 3G and 4G Internet is almost non-existent. I understand that DETI, in collaboration with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport —

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

Mr Mullan: — had intended to improve service through a mobile infrastructure project with

£150 million earmarked to improve mobile phone coverage to over 60,000 remote areas in the UK.

The people of my constituency need assurances that the superfast broadband scheme —

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

Mr Mullan: — will reach them soon and that the mobile phone infrastructure will be progressed in a timely fashion.

Mr Robinson: I will highlight the difficulties that are being experienced by rural businesses when it comes to our telecommunications network. Last year, Minister, I had your DETI predecessor, Mr Bell, in the East Londonderry constituency to hear at first hand some of the problems that businesses experience. The Minister will confirm that yesterday I gave him the names of areas in Limavady where broadband provision is very poor. I deal weekly with constituents who are unhappy with their broadband and mobile phone coverage. In Limavady, it is often impossible to get good reception on some networks. Over the months, I have heard from the networks that relays are down or masts are giving problems, but there is no commitment to repairing the problem.

As the Minister is aware, I am committed to bringing employment to my constituency, but I am firmly convinced that the communications infrastructure needs enhancement to achieve this. I ask that he does what he can to ensure such improvement is supported.

Today's business relies increasingly on technology for transactions and product information, so limited high-speed broadband coverage places rural areas at a disadvantage. What is particularly annoying for people in East Londonderry is that Project Kelvin runs close to some of the areas that experience difficulties. Will the Minister consider looking at the possible use of the fibre-optic system of Project Kelvin to help to boost the connectivity in rural areas to high-speed Internet?

The website of the former Coleraine Borough Council says that this effectively makes Coleraine and Limavady an attractive digital suburb of the major cities in the USA, Canada, the UK and continental Europe. I hope that, with interdepartmental approaches, where required, all areas in Northern Ireland will soon be able to benefit from high-speed broadband and state-of-the-art mobile connectivity, and

become a base for business. Not only would that help the Northern Ireland economy, but it would help to make rural businesses sustainable and create employment. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Boylan. We are running pretty tight to the wire for time, so I advise the Member not to take any interventions.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I will say a few words on the motion, but, first, I pay tribute to Trevor Reaney and wish him and his family all the best for the future.

I commend the mover of the motion for the way she dealt with the situation and Mr Attwood for the fleetness of foot that he showed in getting the matter to the Clerk.

My colleague John O'Dowd adequately described what was needed to go forward with what the motion calls for. I will use three examples. First, the mover of the motion talked about how, when out canvassing, she met somebody who wanted to convert a garage or part of a garage to business use. In a case in my constituency, somebody wanting to do exactly the same thing sought assistance from the rural development programme. As part of that discussion, they started to talk about the provision of broadband and how difficult it was to get the proper speed for downloads and that.

Another example from my area is Tullygoonigan, an old creamery outside Armagh city. A number of years ago, it was taken over and turned into a number of units. The owner of the premises could not get people to take the units because of the download speeds. Thankfully, the previous Minister intervened, and the business is up and going and going very well.

I think that Mr Mervyn Storey was going to make a point about this. There was a case of a young lady who lives near the border and only about 500 yards from a cabinet that had been upgraded just recently, but it is on a different line. She can see it, but she came to me and told me that her son had to travel to an urban setting to download stuff for his homework.

I am sure that most of us have experienced such problems and examples. To be fair, my colleague Megan Fearon and I have met BT on a number of occasions, and I put on record my thanks to BT for the way in which it has dealt with some of this. However, as Members have commented — it has been a good debate —

the issue is that we need to look at the providers and hold them to account.

I want the Minister to touch on the NI broadband improvement project. In 2014, at the outset of that project, which had an investment of £23.5 million, the aim was to push a faster broadband service to an additional 45,000 premises: to date, 17,500 homes and businesses have been facilitated. We know rightly that, bar doing fibre not only to the cabinets but to homes, there are some rural areas where satellite may be the only solution. I want the Minister to give an update on where BT is with that. Most of us have a good working relationship with BT, but there is still a lot more to be done. For most of the people coming back to me, BT says that they can access broadband. However, when they phone up — some of them are already getting charged — and get routers out, there are problems. It is up to us and the Minister; if we are giving out public money to deliver, somebody has to be held to account. Maybe the Minister can give us a wee update on where we are with that programme. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):

I join others who have congratulated the outgoing Clerk/Chief Executive on his retirement. I think that everybody will join in wishing him a very enjoyable retirement and thanking him for the service that he has given to the Assembly and other parts of the public sector in Northern Ireland.

I thank Members from the Benches opposite for bringing the debate to the Assembly today. I fully recognise, as many Members have said during the debate, the importance of access to functional, modern and sustainable telecommunications networks and services in support of economic prosperity and business growth. In recognition of that, over the last eight years, my Department has led the way in the United Kingdom by channelling some £64 million of public funding into initiatives aimed at stimulating improvements in the reach, speed and quality of broadband services across Northern Ireland. It is important, therefore, to take the opportunity to place on record the progress that has been made in this key area. The latest infrastructure report from Ofcom has pointed to Northern Ireland having the highest coverage of fibre-based networks in the whole of the United Kingdom, at 95% across fixed and mobile technologies. That can provide a broadband service of 2 Mb per second or better. Ofcom has also reported that the average broadband download speed in Northern Ireland has continued to increase to 28.3 Mb per second, compared with a UK

average of 29 Mb per second. Specifically, my Department's broadband improvement project, which was mentioned by Mr Boylan, has already ensured that, for the first time, some 48,000 premises, largely in rural areas, have received access to at least 2 Mb per second and that just over 29,000 premises can now access 30 Mb per second or better.

I listened to the contribution of Mr Mullan towards the end of the debate, and I think that he said that there had been no improvement at all to broadband services in his East Londonderry constituency. The broadband improvement scheme is a good example of where we are making the investments that the motion calls on us to make to make improvements to broadband services in his constituency and others. Up to March of this year, the investment being made in the broadband improvement scheme has seen improvements to 164 exchanges across Northern Ireland. Some of those are in places like Claudy, Feeny, Kilrea and Limavady, all of which were mentioned by the Member. There is a lengthy list of others that, I am sure, touches on some of the areas that other Members talked about. It may not be perfect, but I do not think that anybody can genuinely stand in the Chamber and say that there has not been investment or there have not been improvements. In addition —

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister accept that some people in rural areas have an existing connection that is not as good as the new connections and the telecommunication companies are not allowing them to transfer? Whilst there are improvements for new customers in rural areas, it is the existing customers not being upgraded whom we would like to see help for. Will the Minister's Department work with the companies to address that issue?

Mr Hamilton: That is something that my Department does on an ongoing basis with various telecoms providers. I accept entirely the point that the Member makes; it is one that I could make myself on behalf of constituents who come to me on a frequent enough basis.

The point I was making in previous comments — this ought to be acknowledged, and I think it has been generally acknowledged in the House — was that there has been a significant investment in Northern Ireland that has taken

us ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom in its scale. That investment has tried to improve the service. It is not perfect — I am not standing here saying it is perfect — but the broadband improvement scheme is one good example of where investment has been made to try to enhance and improve broadband services, including his constituency, where of the 164 exchanges that have been improved some are in Downpatrick, Newcastle and Ardglass, which is a village I am very familiar with. There have been improvements, and investments have been made. I accept that it is not perfect, it is not right in every case and more work needs to be done, but that is what we are obviously trying to do.

12.00 noon

In addition to the broadband improvement scheme, my Department is managing the superfast roll-out programme, which, by 31 December 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband with speeds of at least 24 megabits per second to a further 39,000 premises, business and residential, across Northern Ireland. It is anticipated that, by the time those projects have completed, 87% of premises will have access to services of at least 24 megabits per second, compared with 77% when the projects began.

The motion refers to the United Kingdom's intention to introduce a broadband universal service obligation. Through that, it is expected that by 2020 everyone should have the legal right to request a broadband service of at least 10 megabits per second, subject to certain conditions. My Department has already expressed the view to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London, which is leading on the regulatory change, that the minimum should be at least 30 megabits per second. Perhaps that is not the several hundred that Mr Aiken was talking about, but I hope it at least shows there is a degree of ambition in my Department and the Executive over and above what DCMS in London wants, which is only 10 megabits. I accept that it is not several hundred, which, as Mr Lyons said, is a speed more likely to be in places like London, but it is at least a sign of some ambition on the part of this Department and the Executive that we want to see that USO raised from 10 to at least 30.

Mr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, briefly.

Mr Aiken: I am grateful for that, and I am glad to see that we have set an ambition for 30, but I would like to see an ambition pushing for much more. There are technological changes coming on fairly quickly that we should be at the forefront of and be able to do. When we look at the use of 5G technology, for instance, and how it is moving onwards, we see that we should be able to do a combine between fibre and mobile to be able to push it on. We want to see Northern Ireland work, and giving Northern Ireland the opportunity to have the highest broadband speed and connectivity possible will reinforce our position as a great place to do business. However, I thank you for your ambition.

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate the comments made by the Member. I think 30 acknowledges some degree of ambition over and above what the DCMS has. Whilst I would like to see it higher than that, aspire to it and want to make progress towards it over a longer time, I think getting a minimum of 30 for people, particularly those receiving less than two megabits a second at the minute, would be a substantial improvement in the broadband service they receive.

A universal service obligation, with its target date of 2020, will be provided on the basis of a reasonable request from consumers, with services delivered using the most cost-effective technology available. Consumers may be expected to contribute to the costs where they go beyond a reasonable threshold. While we wait to hear the full details, it is possible that the universal service obligation will include the use of various technologies in the most challenging areas. The motion notes that 42% of rural premises cannot currently achieve speeds of 10 megabits per second or better, as recorded by Ofcom in its 'Connected Nations 2015' report. While it is important to note that 86% of premises overall in Northern Ireland can access those speeds, I recognise it is important that as much as possible is done to improve access for rural premises going forward.

Mr Storey acknowledged the investment that has been made — I think Mr Dunne made the same point — recognised that improvements have been made and acknowledged that broadband access is, by and large, much better than it was a number of years ago. Yes, there is work to do. Sometimes I think we fail to compare ourselves. It is fair enough for us to look at ourselves and say that there are parts of Northern Ireland that are not as good as others, but we should compare it with other nations around the world, including the countries we are competing against for investment, which the

motion talks about. The OECD does analysis of the well-being of regions, and one of the indicators that it uses is access to services. The indicator that it uses to mark that is household broadband access. Northern Ireland's access to services rating in the OECD regional well-being index shows that we are in the top 16% of OECD regions for household broadband access. I would like to see it higher than 16% — it has been higher than that in the past — but that is not bad in comparison. I am not saying that I am settling for being in the top 16%, but that is not bad when you compare it with the countries that are in the OECD. This is not global; it is not every country in the world. This is the most advanced and most developed economies in the world: the likes of Japan, the United States, France, Germany and other parts of Europe. We may not be perfect, but when we compare ourselves with others we are doing quite well.

In this context, it is important to note that Ofcom also indicated that the roll-out of my Department's superfast programme with access to a speed of 24 megabits per second will cause this picture — the picture of 86% of households getting access — to improve and change rapidly and, I believe, for the better.

While the substantial investment that has already taken place resulted in a very welcome level of improvement and illustrates that much has been done to enhance provision, I recognise that the overall picture may not reflect the reality for some of our most geographically remote and demographically challenging locations. We recognise this, and my Department's ongoing initiatives are very much aimed at further enhancing our broadband infrastructure. In that context, I urge Members to recognise that alternative networks offer a viable option for the delivery of broadband services in the most difficult to reach and less densely populated areas.

Over recent years, my Department has supported projects that have extended fixed wireless and satellite broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland, with the capacity to offer high-speed broadband services. In January this year, my Department launched a scheme that allows consumers with a service of less than two megabits per second to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite service installed, subject to satisfying certain eligibility criteria. For the future, under the broadband improvement contract, BT can reinvest certain clawback funds when take-up exceeds specific thresholds. The final amount will not be known until the autumn, when plans can be developed to further improve the

coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland.

I also have to stress that telecommunications matters are reserved by Westminster and that my Department has limited powers to intervene in what is a fully privatised and independently regulated market. While public funds can and will be used to encourage private sector investment, it is ultimately a business decision for providers how and if they wish to participate in any joint venture. In addition, public funds have to be used in a way that ensures value for money while protecting competition and adhering to the rules on state aid. In that context, neither I nor the Department can direct or compel a network operator as to where it should invest or what technology it should use. However, I agree that, while recognising —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I am pushed for time. Can you be very brief?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sorry, Minister, I just misheard you there. Has your Department powers to compel where and when materials are used or what facilities are put in place?

Mr Hamilton: No, we do not. The Member and others touched on the point about it being a privatised and independently regulated market. We do not have the power to compel and cannot force companies to get involved in a joint venture. We will encourage them, and, to be fair, most telecommunications companies have been willing and receptive to that. I do not have the time to get into the Member's point in great detail now, but he made an interesting and relevant point.

I agree that, while recognising the significant advances that we have made to date, there is and will continue to be a need for the further evolution of and improvement in broadband and mobile infrastructure in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland. My Department is currently taking stock of what has been achieved and what is likely to remain to be done after the current initiatives have been completed. This is at an early stage, but it is already apparent that, if the ambitions of the draft Programme for Government with regard to improving Internet connectivity are to be realised — again, a point made by Mr O'Dowd — the costs, no matter what technology is deployed, are likely to require further investment.

I now turn briefly to mobile coverage. The UK Government have put in place an agreement

with the mobile network operators through which the mobile industry will invest £5 billion in UK infrastructure to increase coverage by 2017. It is envisaged that mobile not spots in Northern Ireland will be reduced to 0.3% of the land mass by the time that investment is completed. In addition, the mobile market in the UK is highly competitive and fast-moving, and the operators are constantly evolving their networks and developing new products and services that can offer better coverage and more adaptable packages.

I hope that the Assembly will recognise that Northern Ireland has made significant progress on the reach and quality of the broadband services that are now available. We have made that progress within the confines within which the Department is required to operate in developing our telecommunications networks. I understand and appreciate the importance of having access to a good broadband service not just to rural dwellers but to the many businesses located in rural parts of Northern Ireland. Broadband is now viewed as every bit as essential a service as water or electricity, especially for businesses. I want us to continue to encourage the use of alternative technologies that already exist and can bring solutions to rural parts of Northern Ireland where fixed fibre is not feasible.

I fully understand and appreciate the frustrations of those who cannot access satisfactory broadband speeds. My message to them is that we will continue to work with private sector providers to improve —

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

Mr Hamilton: — broadband availability, especially in rural parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): This is, I believe, Mr McNulty's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Mr McNulty: I will make the winding-up speech on rural broadband provision. Before I address the motion, I want to introduce myself to this esteemed institution and formally kick off my role as an elected Assembly Member for Newry and Armagh.

My first faltering steps down the rocky road of politics were greeted with a mixture of derision and disbelief. What is a former Gaelic football player with the County Armagh team of 2002

doing? What does a Gaelic footballer and manager know about politics? What right does he have to stand for the SDLP? My family, on both sides, has been involved in politics for four generations. My parents were founding members of the civil rights movement. My father was a member of the committee that organised the Newry march in 1969. They joined the SDLP at its inception and are still passionate, active supporters of the party. My grandfather on my mother's side, a Derry man, was in the RAF. He served in Gibraltar in World War II and went to live in Newry when peace came. He stood for election for the SDLP in 1974. That is a brief taster of the background that gave rise to discussion at our family table, so it was no surprise that I decided to follow in the footsteps of several family members.

As I stand here today, I am very aware of my party colleagues who represented the people of Newry and Armagh before me. My immediate predecessor, Dominic Bradley, served the constituency for the last 10 years. Before him, it was Séamus Mallon and the late John Fee. They have left big shoes to be filled. I am proud to follow in their footsteps, and, although I could not lace their boots, I will not forget the core values that they held dear.

I feel honoured and proud to be an elected representative of the great constituency of Newry and Armagh — lúir Cinn Trá agus Ard Mhacha. Our place is a place of wonderful historical, cultural, geographical, musical, sporting and economic heritage. We have Eamhain Macha; our cathedral city; Ballymacnab; an Port Mór; Creggan; and the mountain of the steep slope, Slieve Gullion. At the summit of that mountain of the steep slope lies the highest surviving passage grave in Ireland, from where our mythological heroes' ghosts survey an area of outstanding natural beauty. Sometimes, I dream deeply at night, convinced that I hear the Cailleach Beara's keen. Then, I awaken in relief, contented that I have not been transformed into an old, withered man.

I have travelled many parts of our county: Milford, Keady, Ballyhagan, the two Lisleas, an Mullach Bán, Killeavy, Middletown, Mullaghbrack, Corrinshigo, the Grange, Whitecross, Granemore, Tullysaran and Crossmaglen. I have kayaked the crooked lake, biked the Crooked Road and swum the Albert Basin. I have been inspired by our sporting icons: heroes in Gaelic football, hurling, ladies' Gaelic football, camogie, athletics, golf, soccer, bullets and rugby. Our Ireland captain is from Poyntzpass.

I have drifted away to the tones of our musicians, dancers, rhymers, bards and poets. An Curadmír. Our dramatists have always made me think a little differently.

Newry: our frontier town; our city of enterprise, ambition and endeavour. First Derivatives, Glen Dimplex, Norbrook: three colossi of commerce, industry and finance, sitting atop a multitude of microbusinesses. Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

12.15 pm

Turning to the motion, I am delighted to make the winding-up speech on behalf of the SDLP. The motion is vital, not only to my constituents but to the whole of Northern Ireland. That has clearly been reflected by contributors to today's debate. The contributions of Caoimhe Archibald, Mervyn Storey, Sinéad Bradley, Gerry Mullan and others are reflected in my speech.

In 2014, a broadband report ranked all 650 Westminster constituencies by the average speed of broadband. Belfast East and Belfast South were seventh and eighth respectively, but Newry and Armagh was ranked 448th. That is 448th out of 650 constituencies. The only Northern Ireland constituency ranked lower was West Tyrone, at 458th. That means that 447 constituencies in the UK have better, faster broadband than my constituents.

The same report put my constituency at 12th out of 650 when it came to constituencies with 15% of connections being slow, at less than 2 megabits per second. In fact, five of the 12 slowest constituencies for broadband are in Northern Ireland. That means that at least 15% of broadband connections in Newry and Armagh, South Down, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and West Tyrone, which, unsurprisingly, are all constituencies with a substantial rural population, are below 2 megabits per second. That is a shocking statistic when you look at the motion. We refer in our motion to the universal service obligation speed, which was proposed by the London Government in November 2015. The speed proposed is 10 megabits per second, which is much faster than the 2 megabits per second that is 15% of my constituents' best hope for Internet speed. Many premises in places such as Derrynoose, Madden, Killylea, Cullyhanna, Aughtaduff and Forkhill do not have any access at all.

Ofcom's most recent report stated that at least 14% of premises in Northern Ireland do not have access to the proposed universal service

obligation of 10 megabits per second. The deficit in service provision is most acute in rural areas. In border communities, 42% of premises do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed, compared with just 2% of premises in urban areas that currently fall short of the requirement.

Rural communities already experience significant isolation. That is being compounded by widespread digital dereliction, where businesses, schools, farmers and homeowners struggle to reach even basic levels of broadband speed and connectivity. Not spots, as they have become known, impact not only on business but on people living in rural constituencies, farmers, children's education and the ability to drive economic growth and productivity.

These are real experiences that our offices are dealing with week in, week out. Just last week, one gentleman from Armaghbreague was told by BT that he will never get broadband. His kids have to travel into Keady to the library to do their homework. There are similar stories in places such as Derrynoose, where in the community centre we met local businesses and broadband providers seeking new and innovative ways of providing broadband.

Reliable broadband is essential for competitive and successful enterprise in a growing digital economy. It is vital that rural communities and businesses have access to effective and affordable broadband if the digital divide between rural and urban areas is not to grow any wider.

Newry and Armagh is a great constituency, but things are not all positive. The motion highlights one area in which vast improvement is needed. Just last year, we saw a raft of posters erected claiming to be delivering broadband to south Armagh, but, again, our people have been failed. Just as the posters disappeared, so did those promising to deliver broadband.

Without the correct communication infrastructure, Newry and Armagh, as well as other rural constituencies, cannot attract the investment that is so desperately needed. Businesses tell me that lack of broadband holds them back and costs jobs not just in rural areas but in places like the centre of Newry. Despite years of lobbying BT, it was only through the use of the broadband voucher scheme that high-speed broadband was brought to the WIN industrial estate in the city. I place on record my thanks to Orla Jackson from Newry

Chamber of Commerce and Thomas O'Hagan of B4B Telecoms for working with us on that.

There are many other issues including health, education, infrastructure and investment that I will use my time here as an MLA to fight for in order to improve the situation for people in the constituency. Our young people need jobs at home, and we need solutions for problems facing our rural communities. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of building a truly connected Newry and Armagh. Improvements to broadband will not, in themselves, make Newry and Armagh a truly connected constituency; much more investment and infrastructural improvement is needed before that becomes a reality.

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

Mr McNulty: It will, however, go some way towards helping to ensure that our existing businesses are able to compete at a global level.

I want to finish by remembering two very important groups. The first is the leaders of the SDLP in my constituency: Séamus Mallon; Dominic Bradley and the late John Fee. The other group is the leaders of the SDLP, who are the reason why I am here.

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

Mr McNulty: To John Hume, Ireland's greatest.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McNulty: Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Assembly notes that 42% of premises in rural areas do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed; further notes the urgent need for better provision of broadband and expansion of mobile phone coverage in rural areas; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop further proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland has a modern telecommunications network that enables existing businesses to compete and to ensure that all areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including our rural communities.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The amendment has been tabled by the proposers of the motion. The motion and the amendment will be proposed and wound together, with 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take further action to establish an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act and to further protect animals from cruelty.

I also beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Minister of Justice" and insert

"to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act."

In proposing the motion on the horrendous subject of animal cruelty, I know that the issue is close to the heart of many across the Chamber and Northern Ireland, and it is one that makes me genuinely angry. You can see clearly from the briefing pack that there has been much consensus on the issue across the Chamber previously, and there have been many clear and agreed motions on it during previous Assembly mandates. There has been some positive action taken, and we wanted to acknowledge that in the motion. Yet, in spite of that, we bring the motion to the House today because of the genuine sense of frustration and the genuine concern among so many people in Northern Ireland. That frustration and dismay was raised with me many times on the doorsteps over the last six months.

For the purposes of the motion, I want to focus on non-farmed animals or, as they are more commonly referred to, domestic pets. There are hundreds of thousands of pet owners and animal lovers across Northern Ireland, and those pets give considerable love and happiness to many homes. The relationship between an owner and a pet is one of love and trust. Pets give incredible joy. They love, seemingly unconditionally, and see past our flaws when perhaps no one else is prepared to do so.

I am unashamedly a pet lover, and I know from speaking to so many people on the doorsteps that there are hundreds of thousands of genuine pet lovers and animal lovers right across Northern Ireland. Yet, all too frequently, we hear of shocking cases of abuse, cruelty and neglect. There is abuse or deliberate injury of dogs, cats and other animals; use and abuse of pet cats as bait or fighting fodder; and cases of neglect and starvation. The new opportunities of the 21st century — the Internet and online marketplace — have brought increased dangers and risks in the transfer of ownership of animals. There is disappointment that, despite all the strongly worded motions and despite the moves to amend legislation to strengthen sentencing, the point does not seem to be getting through. I hear weekly from constituents who are dismayed at what they hear about sentences for horrendous acts of animal cruelty.

We have tabled an amendment to the motion, and, although concerns were raised in the review about data protection and human rights issues in terms of an accessible register, this is an issue of considerable interest to people. In particular, people are dismayed that, when they want to sell an animal to someone, they cannot access information on who is disqualified from owning an animal. Some improvements have been made on that, but there is certainly strong interest in seeing further accessibility and further information on that issue. I firmly believe that the issue of data protection can be overcome, and I wanted to provide the Minister with the opportunity, given that she is a new Minister, to look at the issues — hence the amendment to the motion — and to bring forward further proposals, particularly in light of the recent review mentioned in the motion.

I welcome the actions so far. I welcome the review. It is clear from the various responses in the Chamber previously by all parties and a range of Ministers that there is genuine consensus that we should tackle the issue, yet there is still frustration that we have not been able to do that. My first act as the newly

elected Member for South Belfast was to go to the Bill Office and indicate my interest in putting forward a private Member's Bill on animal cruelty. That came about because it was such a key issue raised with me on the doors by so many people. There is such genuine frustration out there.

I have sat in my constituency office over the last number of months and heard horrendous cases. I heard from a cat owner whose cat had gone missing. Unfortunately, she had to view footage of her pet being thrown into a cage to dogs and being ripped apart. Anybody who has ever owned an animal such as a cat or a dog knows their personality and what they are like, so that is absolutely heartbreaking and horrifying for any animal owner. The hurt is furthered by what seems to be weak sentencing of the perpetrators and the attitude of some of the perpetrators afterwards, when they show no remorse and have not been given a significant sentence. It is incredibly difficult to comprehend some of the sentencing that is set down. Although, as a barrister, I understand the very good arguments that are often made against minimum sentencing, in this case, genuine concerns have been raised that, despite raising the other end and allowing judges the discretion to give more severe sentences, it does not seem to have had an impact on the quantum right across.

Animals give so much to individuals and families and to society. They augment our lives and provide so much love, kindness and joy. The abuse and misuse of that trust and the cruelty towards those so reliant on us humans for food, shelter and protection genuinely disgusts me. I know that it genuinely disgusts so many. It was clear at the doors that people want further action on this. They want to see those who abuse or neglect or are cruel to animals face a punishment that fits the crime. I hope that the motion before the House will provide a new and fresh opportunity in this mandate for us to join together to fight against and stamp out animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

12.30 pm

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate about animal cruelty and to consider what further steps the Assembly can take to clamp down on those who inflict cruelty on defenceless animals. In essence, the debate on a central register is about preventing crime against defenceless animals. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber would agree that crimes against

vulnerable animals are abhorrent and should not be tolerated in our society.

The Welfare of Animals Act 2011 is the statute that introduced a duty of care in respect of protected animals. It allowed for intervention and prosecution, as the previous Act had done, but it also provided new enforcement powers to allow action to be taken to protect animals from unnecessary suffering, even before that suffering occurs. The legislation also provided courts with the power to make a deprivation and/or disqualification order against an individual found guilty of committing an offence. While there is no provision in legislation for a central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences, I know that the previous Justice Minister was looking at the feasibility of such a register. I ask the new Justice Minister to take up the baton and to explore further what possibility there is of introducing such a register.

I know that the Department maintains a register of persons banned by the courts from keeping animals. However, there are issues with the sharing of that information among the enforcement bodies — DAERA, the councils and the PSNI — that require the implementation of new procedures and protocols. My understanding is that that would be relatively straightforward. More significantly, however, there are more complex legal issues around the sharing of that conviction data with non-statutory bodies, such as animal charities or sanctuaries that provide new homes for animals. As the previous Member mentioned, there are issues relating to freedom of information and data protection, for example, that would need to be resolved satisfactorily before non-statutory bodies could access a central register of the type that we are discussing.

I appreciate the complexity of some of the issues and know that there are major difficulties. However, as I said at the outset, the issue is the prevention of crime and the prevention of cruelty to animals. As it stands, someone who has been convicted of animal cruelty can go into an animal sanctuary and ask to take possession of one of the animals, take it away and perhaps inflict further cruelty on it or use it as bait in dog fighting or something of that nature. If there was a register, the animal sanctuary could access that register and find out if that person had been convicted of animal cruelty.

I accept that there are difficulties. However, I also believe that, if there is a will to get over

those obstacles, it can be done and a register can be established. I support the motion.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It is an important motion, and I welcome the debate. I agree that it is a bit like treading water. In 2014, we had a similar debate that started off with:

"That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of extreme animal cruelty". — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 94, p18, col 1].

Here we are in 2016:

"That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty".

That is not a criticism; it just tells you that, from 2014 to now, we have not progressed far enough. Of course, in 2014, we did progress. We got a review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. That helped to increase the sentence after conviction on indictment to a maximum of five years with an unspecified fine and on summary conviction to a maximum of 12 months with, I think, a £20,000 fine. There are a lot of things we can do to prevent cruelty to animals and deal with welfare. They include confiscation, disqualification, improvement notices and PSNI enforcement powers on dogfighting, for example. The legislation is there, and we have done well to get it in place. What it is all about now is implementing it.

Like the Members who have spoken, the Ulster Unionist Party is absolutely in favour of creating a central register of those convicted of animal cruelty. The Data Protection Act is only an obstacle and not an insurmountable obstacle that we can get past to implement this. It is something we know about and can work through, and I ask the Justice Minister to really put some effort into this so that we are not standing here having the same debate in another two years.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party also believe that there are other things we can do to help the legislation, such as to regulate the online advertisement of pets for sale, instead of having it self-regulated, along with breeder registration so that they work in conjunction and to improve welfare at slaughterhouses. We talk a lot of fluffy animals and see a lot of them on the television — cats and dogs — and people talk about cruelty to them, but the cruelty to some of our animals that go to slaughter is just as bad. We believe that every animal should be

stunned before slaughter. We are open to everybody's religious views and practices, but that is the most humane way to do it, and we think we should ensure that all animals are stunned. Although we have confidence in our slaughterhouses and the regulations for them, to give the public confidence it would be important to have CCTV in the slaughterhouses where animals are kept and slaughtered. When we look at greyhound racing and the regulations governing it, we can see that they need to be tightened up to prevent cruelty. That would include registration of the dog from birth to death and a database outlining all its injuries.

You can see that all the legislation we need to create a good animal welfare policy is there, but it is all about the message. How do we message this, and how do we deal with sentencing? Although we have got to the stage where we have increased sentences for animal cruelty, we are not actually applying them. I do not want to see anybody languishing in jail, but sometimes you have to say, "If you are going to do this continually, you deserve to go to jail". In April this year, a farmer — I will not mention his name, but he was a repeat offender — was convicted of cruelty to his livestock. He had 153 taken off him, and 18 had to be put down. Some of the animals were lying dead in sheds with other animals walking over the top of them. Some animals had not been fed, and some were not getting water. He got a five-month prison sentence suspended for three years and was banned from keeping animals for five years. That is just not enough for a repeat offender.

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

Mr Beattie: It is really important that we take action against these people, and I fully support the motion.

Ms Mallon: On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion and the amendment. I think it is fair to say that we are known as a society of animal lovers. In most homes where there is a household pet, it is held in loving regard; indeed, it is often regarded, as other Members have said, as a member of the family.

To most people and, I am sure, to every Member cases of animal neglect, cruelty, mistreatment and abuse are truly abhorrent. The pain inflicted from the act of cruelty on the animal is sickening, and the insight that that act gives us to the perpetrator is disturbing and should set alarm bells ringing. Therefore, I am

pleased to see that, as a direct result of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 and the Justice Act 2016, there are now stricter and harsher punishments for those who have been convicted of animal cruelty.

The 2011 Act introduced a duty of care in respect of all protected animals and created an offence of failing to take reasonable steps to ensure that the welfare needs of that animal are met. Importantly, it specifies that abandoning an animal is an offence, whether the animal is likely to suffer or not.

The Justice Act passed at the end of the last mandate amended the 2011 Welfare of Animals Act to ensure that those who are convicted have a harsher, more suitable sentence imposed on them. Among other things, it increased the maximum sentence for cases heard on indictment from two years to five and for summary cases involving unnecessary suffering and causing, attending or other involvement in an animal fight the maximum sentence increases from six months to 12 and the maximum fine from £5,000 to £20,000.

More than 4,000 animal welfare cases have been investigated by councils each year from 2012. I have spent time with the animal welfare officers of Belfast City Council as they carried out investigations. I pay tribute to their commitment, compassion and hard work. We must continue to support those who work on the front line. We must continue to ensure that all allegations of the abuse of animal welfare are investigated fully and that those responsible are held to account.

Between 2012 and 2014, there were 114 convictions for animal cruelty, 15 of which resulted in custodial sentences. It is vital that we unite with the public in our condemnation of those acts and fulfil our duty of care to the citizens and animals in this jurisdiction. A range of Members have indicated actions that, they believe, the Minister should consider if we are to effectively deal with animal cruelty. I think that, fundamentally, we must take the opportunity to pledge our support for the animal-based welfare organisations that work tirelessly to eradicate animal cruelty.

The SDLP shares the concern of the public about cruelty towards animals. The practice must be stopped and those responsible brought to justice. We are pleased to see this afternoon genuine support for animal welfare, and we join other parties in the House in supporting the motion and the amendment.

Mr Lunn: We will also support the motion and the amendment. I have some reservations about the wording, but the general thrust and spirit of the motion is fine with us.

There are obvious difficulties with having a central register, as outlined by Mr Sheehan. There is the question of data protection and the question of who has access to such a register. However, at the end of the day, if the Minister is capable of bringing forward something that allows the Department, the PSNI, statutory agencies and charitable agencies involved in this work to have access to previous records, it would be a good thing. It would also be a good thing —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes, go on.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that the Member obviously supports the thrust of the motion. However, given his latter comments, he will also appreciate that some of those agencies already hold personal information. Doug Beattie talked about repeat offenders: how can we tackle repeat offenders unless those who carry out the licensing function have that information and know that people have been banned from keeping animals?

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

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for that intervention. I do not disagree with him: I am just making the point that it is a difficult area. It is not a simple thing to establish a register. Who would it be available to?

I speak as a pet lover, as Mrs Pengelly did. I grew up with dogs, and, when I got married, I lived with cats — I choose my words carefully — for the last 40 years. I also twice had the experience of owning a horse, which is not something that I would recommend financially, but it certainly was a very pleasant experience.

12.45 pm

The amendment talks about "further and tougher criminal sanctions". Members made the point that the Justice Bill passed in February toughened up the sentences considerably. A five-year maximum sentence for animal cruelty is among the most severe in the UK, if not the most severe in these islands. The same Bill increased the sentence for causing unnecessary suffering from six months to 12 months and the fine from £5,000 to

£20,000, which is also very severe. I have a slight problem with where unnecessary suffering ends and animal cruelty begins. There must be some overlap there.

The problem lies not with the legislation or the level of sentences but with the courts. As in many areas of our legislation, the courts do not avail themselves of the available facility to really make a point when they are delivering these sentences. I think of a case in my constituency a couple of years ago, when a dog was sprayed with an inflammable liquid and then set on fire. Under the regime of a two-year maximum sentence, the court awarded a sentence of 10 months. Frankly, how cruel do you have to be to get the maximum sentence for something like that? This dog was set on fire. It lived in agony for a few days and then had to be put down. In the normal way, that 10 months was probably subject to remission for good behaviour. There was maybe even a discount for remorse; I do not really know offhand. This kind of thing makes a nonsense of the law.

There was the east Belfast case, when somebody who was kidnapping animals to groom them for fighting got a suspended sentence. What is going on? I heard about a case recently in which a father and son were disqualified from keeping horses for 25 years. They are now to be seen regularly at horse fairs with a relative, who buys the horses. That is outrageous. There must be some scope for a central register. Banning only the individual and not the household from keeping an animal in these circumstances seems completely off the wall. If I were banned for animal cruelty, my wife could go out and buy a pet. That does not make any sense to me at all. I feel strongly about that. I hope that the Minister will address those points in whatever she has to say today. In this country, we are all animal lovers except for the small number of people who clearly are not. Frankly, it is those people whom we need to deal with.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and the amendment. It is right that the House has taken a very strong view on animal cruelty issues. They were raised a number of times in the last mandate. To be fair to the DOJ and DARD, they are issues that not only the whole House but the Departments took seriously. It is important that we build on the good work that has been done. I congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion to show that, despite that good work, we do not regard this as a done deal, and we should constantly look for where we can improve things for the animal kingdom and combat cruelty. It was mentioned that we are a nation of animal and pet lovers. Sadly,

there is a small minority in Northern Ireland who seem to be prepared to inflict pain on animals. Indeed, some seem to take a perverse pleasure in that very deliberate cruelty, which goes beyond simple neglect. It is important that, at the start of this mandate, a very clear marker is put down that this is an issue that continues to exercise the House.

The motion states that a range of actions were taken in the last Assembly.

A very useful report was produced on the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. It is commonplace now to talk about the need for Departments to work closely together, and good work was done between DOJ and DARD in the previous Assembly to produce the report. When it was launched, there was, for the first time ever, an opportunity to get all the stakeholders together. That was very useful, particularly the discussion with the rehoming charities. A number of recommendations arose from the report. Practical action was taken on sentencing, which was endorsed by the House and included an increase in the maximum sentence and the opportunity for sentences to be reviewed.

It is important that we are not complacent on the issue. Although the House has stepped up to the mark, there is a clear signal that needs to be sent out, both to wider society about respecting animals and to judges. I know that judges closely guard their independence, and we have seen a number of custodial sentences handed out in recent years, but it seems to me that the message that is coming from across society has not always got through to the judiciary. Members will bring up individual cases, but mention has been made of fairly horrendous cases of cruelty that, when they have gone before the courts, even in recent months, have resulted in what most of us would regard as being relatively lenient sentences. There has to be a clear message sent to judges that they have to follow through on the public mood and public concern.

It has also been asked what further actions can be taken, and a range of things has been mentioned by some contributors, including the specific issue of greyhounds. That is an area in which there needs to be an examination of the law. The increasing risk from online sales, which is a developing field, needs to be considered. We want to ensure that proper regulation is put in place. It is very good advice for people to go to a rehoming charity if they are looking for a pet, for we see the tremendous work that volunteers do there.

This is something that is not confined to Northern Ireland, but we must make sure that there is proper regulation in place to ensure that we do not become a transit camp, either as a recipient for abused animals or as some sort of flow-through between different jurisdictions. It is important that that issue be reviewed, too.

There needs to be a clear examination of the issue of a central register. Mention has been made of the difficulties, and some of those can be overcome, but that requires a degree of thought, and it requires work with rehoming charities in particular. It seems a little bit incongruous that a pet could be given to someone who commits these crimes, and we need to ensure that we deal with the risk.

Trevor Lunn raises an important point, and in the wider examination of what we do with the data, although I appreciate that there are constraints —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will, yes.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that the Member is coming to the end of his time. It is easy for us all to say that things need to be done, but we need to be clear about what those things are.

Mr Weir: There needs to be a robust examination to ensure that we have something that is fit for purpose.

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

Mr Weir: It has been said, for instance, that, if we use a central register, we have to have something that does what it says on the tin and prevents animal cruelty. As Mr Lunn rightly pointed out, we need to make sure that we do not have a situation in which, for example, there is a specific ban on an individual owning a dog but that individual finds a loophole by getting a spouse, a son, a daughter or a friend to adopt the dog instead. I appreciate that how we police that will create great difficulties, and I look forward to the Minister's remarks, but we need a strong and robust system. Examination is needed to ensure that what we do have is the best possible.

In the context of the debate, it is evident that a very clear signal will yet again go from the House that we will not tolerate animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Weir: I therefore look forward to there being cross-party support to send out that signal to wider society.

Ms Boyle: I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being here at the start of the debate. I thank her and her colleague for bringing it to the House today. I will speak in support of the motion and the amendment.

I and others in West Tyrone were lobbied about animal abuse and cruelty during the election campaign. Rescue shelters there — for example, Grovehill — have expressed huge concerns about breeding and pet abandonment, and shelters are full as a result. Neutering schemes and behavioural advice are necessary. Some shelters are saying that education is required on breeds that are suitable to be domestic pets. This is just one area on which the shelters have concerns. There has also been a significant rise in malamute and husky breeds, which has been a concern for rehoming shelters and is due to people not being aware of a breed's needs before they acquire a cute wee pup.

There needs to be strict regulation of the trading of pets on sites such as Gumtree, DoneDeal and other social media sites, perhaps under a trade Act or for tax reasons. People who sell pets online rarely declare taxes. This also applies to the private sale of larger animals such as horses. In the equine world, DARD, now DAERA, has recorded data on how many horses are registered here, but there are still many that are not microchipped or have passports. Therefore, the DAERA figure is not an accurate reflection of the true figure. Unfortunately, it is, as others have said, extremely difficult to police the sale of animals online.

Having an accessible central register of those who are convicted of animal welfare offences and, as the motion says, those who are disqualified from keeping animals, is important. It should, first and foremost, raise the seriousness of animal welfare and protection, and sound education and advice on that is necessary. It should also encourage responsible ownership and better access to, and regulation of, puppy farms. One important area is to discourage the free-to-good-home appeal. People who have sought small domestic pets through free-to-good-home adverts have used them for baiting, which is deplorable and despicable. If there is going to

be a register, there also needs to be a vetting process for those who are buying online.

People have come to me and said how easy they found it to go into a pet shop and buy a domestic pet. So, pet shops need to have access to the register as well. Pet shop owners should be able to do frequent spot checks on people's homes before they purchase an animal.

The motion calls on the Justice Minister to introduce a cruelty register, which I support, and to ensure that those who are guilty of such offences are not able to adopt animals. I welcome the work that has been done, and the work that the Justice Department and DARD have done by joining forces. Bringing forward the implementation review in February was mentioned. That review warns, in its recommendations, that people should, and must, face tougher sentences and penalties under the law. Both Ministers launched the report on the review. The review was welcome and contained 68 recommendations aimed at enhancing communication. Again, it goes back to having good education.

It is important also to highlight that, in the Animal Welfare Party's manifesto —

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

Ms Boyle: They have sought sociological evidence of links between domestic violence and animal cruelty. That is one area that we need to explore. Healthcare workers and social workers need to be educated in that area to bring that information to the relevant authorities. I support the motion and amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is my understanding that the First Minister has rightly suggested some leniency in employment practices this afternoon to support the Northern Ireland football team. I was wondering whether the Office of the Speaker might be able to enquire whether some of the television screens in the Great Hall could assist Assembly staff who wish to support Northern Ireland and make sure that they keep up to speed with our progress.

Mr Speaker: I think you know that that is not a point of order, but it is an opportunity.

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time as Minister of Health. I inform the House that question 10 has been withdrawn.

Causeway Hospital: Missed Appointments

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health how many patients have failed to turn up for appointments in the Causeway Hospital over the last 12 months. (AQO 90/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Provisional data for 2015-16 indicates that there were 52,303 new and review attendances at Causeway Hospital. Some 3,779 patients, of whom 995 were new appointments and 2,784 were review appointments, did not attend their appointment, which represents a did not attend (DNA) rate of 6.7%. This is lower than the average regional DNA rate of 8.3% in 2015-16. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has the lowest rate of patient non-attendance of all the trusts: 6.5% in 2015-16 against the average of, as I said, 8.3%. Measures taken by the trust include using a text reminder service, which has reduced the did not attend rates for hospital appointments, and reminders are sent out three days prior to an appointment date with a telephone number to call if the patient is unable to attend.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer and congratulate her on her new post. I look forward to seeing her at the Causeway in the near future.

Minister, across the Province, how many appointments have been cancelled by the trusts? That is a rising problem.

Mrs O'Neill: It is. We need to come at this two ways. We need to address the issue of why patients cancel appointments, but we also have to be serious about hospitals cancelling appointments for whatever reason. Appointments can be cancelled by hospitals for a range of reasons, but I have set a target for 2016-17 that we must reduce by at least 20% the number of hospital-cancelled, consultant-led outpatient appointments. It is only fair that, when we ask people to respond better, we also ask the service to respond better and make sure that the maximum number of people can be seen in an appropriately timely manner.

Mr Mullan: Will the Minister detail how many appointments have been cancelled by the Causeway Hospital in the last year and the financial ramifications of that?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that figure, but I can make a general reference to the fact that appointments can be cancelled by hospitals for a range of reasons — for example, if consultants or other staff are not available — and appointments will be rescheduled or a patient treated elsewhere. Suffice to say, I regret any cancellations that inconvenience patients and mean that they have to wait longer. At times, that might be necessary, but I want it minimised as much as possible.

As I said, I have set a target for 2016-17 to reduce by 20% the number of hospital-cancelled consultant-led outpatient appointments. I acknowledge that performance is not where it should be and needs to be better. We need to get better at how we deliver the service. I look to the board and the trusts to continue to focus on the issue to make sure that we secure improvements in performance. The board will continue to work with the trusts to ensure that best practice, including the application of good waiting list management, is consistently applied to minimise the number of hospital cancellations. Consultants, for example, are asked to give at least six weeks' notice of planned leave or study leave, and the board meets the trusts regularly to monitor elective care performance, including the delivery of agreed volumes of core activity. The rate of cancellation of outpatient appointments

is one of the factors considered when assessing the delivery of core activity.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister outline what consideration is being given to providing patients, personally and publicly, with details of the time that they are expected to wait for an appointment following an initial referral from their GP? Does she agree with me that more accurate information should reduce the number of missed appointments?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we communicate well with patients. It is important that people are seen in a timely manner in relation to their medical needs. That is why we have the targets in place. We need to keep striving to reduce the waiting list targets. I have said in the House over the last number of weeks that the current situation is not sustainable and is not acceptable to me. We need to drive forward with improvements, which is about working with the board and the trusts and looking at the elective care plan; the Member will know that I have asked the trusts to bring that forward. I am keen to make sure that we drive down the waiting times for all the people who need urgent medical attention.

Ms Dillon: What responsibility is there on clinicians to ensure that the number of cancelled appointments is reduced? How does the Minister plan to tackle that?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we have to come at that by communicating with patients and asking them to work with us. If we are asking them to work with the service in relation to how they cancel appointments, we have to be upfront about the disappointing number of appointments cancelled because clinicians or other staff are not available. As I said, I have set a target for this year to reduce by 20% the number of hospital-cancelled consultant-led outpatient appointments. It is important that we send out the message very clearly that we want patients to help the service to be more effective. We can do that with strong communication and by making sure that the service does not cancel appointments unnecessarily.

Health: All-island Approach

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health how she plans to improve the all-island approach to health. (AQO 91/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A key priority for me will be the further development of all-island networks to tap into the benefits that collaboration on health

and social care services will bring to every part of the island. I have spoken with my counterpart in the South, Simon Harris, to explore how our health services can further collaborate on improving people's health. My vision of a transformed health service in the context of the upcoming Bengoa report and the announcement by the Minister in the South of a 10-year plan is an opportune time to strengthen and progress all-Ireland health.

There is already positive collaboration with the South through, for example, EU-funded initiatives, as well as cancer and cardiac services in the north-west. I commend the work that has been done to date between the health services, and I want to take those efforts to the next level. We face the same health issues, challenges and opportunities right across the island, as was highlighted by the 2009 North/South feasibility study: demographic change, health inequalities, mental health, obesity and substance abuse. Working together to address those would make sense on a number of levels. It would utilise the total population size to secure the sustainability of vulnerable services, where collaboration would realise real benefits for patients. It would deliver better outcomes for patients, North and South. It would achieve the more effective use of resources and investment in new healthcare initiatives, where we could share learning and best practice between our health services. We can work together particularly in relation to public health awareness initiatives.

I intend to build on examples of that collaboration, including the Altnagelvin radiotherapy unit, which will open later this year. It will make world-class cancer treatment accessible to patients living in the north-west of Ireland. It will add to the successful 24/7 primary PCI service at Altnagelvin Hospital, which was expanded in May of this year to make life-saving treatment available to patients from County Donegal. Good progress has also been made on the establishment of the all-island congenital heart disease network. I am confident that we will take the next major steps forward in achieving the network's vision of a world-class all-island service with our colleagues very soon.

Further priorities for my Department will include exploring opportunities for further collaboration in specialities such as organ transplantation, the treatment of rare diseases, the response to major trauma, alcohol and substance misuse and mental health, particularly the prevention of suicide and self-harm. At the heart of that collaboration is my commitment to put the interests of patients first and foremost by

delivering safe, high-quality health services and better outcomes for all.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her extensive answer. She will be aware that one of the most modern hospitals in Europe is the new acute hospital in Enniskillen, although it has its difficulties. I extend an invitation to the Minister to visit that excellent facility. What potential is there for a greater all-Ireland approach in public health?

Mrs O'Neill: I intend to get out and about to meet the people delivering the service on the ground right across the North, so I am happy to take the Member up on that invite at some stage over the next number of months.

As far as examples of public health are concerned — I have pointed to a few — the two Departments work closely on alcohol and drug misuse to ensure that we share information and best practice, and we have taken forward joint initiatives when appropriate. Recent joint initiatives include jointly commissioned research on the potential impact of minimum unit pricing for alcohol, a joint report on reducing alcohol misuse through addressing accessibility and availability, a joint resource on hidden harm and information-sharing on new psychoactive substances and learning from the legislation that has been enacted in the South. There is also a lot of work happening on obesity. We have an all-island obesity action forum, which is chaired by Safer Food and continues to meet and share information and best practice.

Other areas include anti-smoking campaigns and a smoke-free HSC. On mental health and promoting positive mental health messages and on suicide prevention there is excellent work ongoing by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. We have had the work that has been done on a self-harm registry. We have been working with the GAA, for example, through the Public Health Agency and the National Office for Suicide Prevention in the Twenty-six Counties. There are really positive initiatives on promoting good public health messages, and I want to build on that in the time ahead. I am delighted that after a recent conversation with Simon Harris, the Minister in the South, he agreed to work more cooperatively on how we can explore all the areas of mutual benefit.

Mr Swann: The Minister mentioned the children's cardiac all-Ireland approach, and I declare an interest in that. Will she give the House any indication of when the business case will eventually be signed off so that we

can turn this aspiration into a reality and start treating children on the island?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree on turning it into a reality, and I intend to do so over the next, I hope, short period of time. Obviously, we are reviewing the business case, and I hope that we are coming towards the end of that process. In the immediate future, we will be in a position to make an announcement, move forward and provide this vital service. There has been a very strong campaign for it, rightly so because it is needed on the island. We can provide a first-class service to all the children who are affected by heart problems as a result of congenital heart failure because we will work collectively. I hope to make an announcement on that in the coming weeks.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she give us an update on deep brain stimulation, which functions in Belfast, and what is being done to extend the service to patients in the Republic of Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any detailed briefing on that, but I am happy to respond to the Member. We are looking at all areas where we can work more collaboratively. Providing a first-class service means you need to have a certain number of patients to treat. When it comes to all these areas, there is a lot more scope for cooperation across the island. The Minister in the Twenty-six Counties has indicated his willingness to allow us to move forward and scope that out. There was a feasibility study in 2009 that highlighted key areas where we could work together, but we need to build on that and update it. I want to bring forward that work and explore where we can work best for the patients who need the service and how we can do that collectively.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her initial response, which detailed a number of cases. Some of them were cross-border issues around Altnagelvin, Enniskillen or Daisy Hill. Will the Minister highlight examples of specialisms that we have in Northern Ireland that could be offered to people across the entire island?

Mrs O'Neill: That is the work that we are involved in at the moment. When the feasibility study was done in 2009 — it is pretty much out of date now — heart surgery, for example, was identified as an issue. We have reached 2016 before we have been able to deliver that service. In my initial conversations with Minister Harris, I want to use that as a baseline or a starting point, but I want to look at what we do better. I am happy to provide you with a list,

outside Question Time, of what we assess that we can deliver that the South maybe does not have. That is part of the core work that we will take forward together. I do not want it to be a stretched-out process; it is work that can be done pretty quickly. As I develop my vision for the health service — he wants to deliver a 10-year vision — let us set out a plan where we can work collaboratively and provide first-class services to people across the island. This is a small island with a small population, and there are natural areas where we can work more collaboratively.

2.15 pm

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister to her Question Time, but I am disappointed that she has refused to meet in relation to the Causeway Hospital. Given that today she is interested in islands, can she give a commitment to the House that she will continue to provide healthcare for the only inhabited island in Northern Ireland, which is Rathlin in my constituency, and that the people there will get the continued care that they need, given the particular issues that they face daily?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give that assurance. I worked closely with the people of Rathlin when I was Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Legislation that I brought forward in the last mandate means that all Departments have a responsibility to protect the needs of rural dwellers, and people on Rathlin are, obviously, more isolated than most. It is important that we are mindful of the islanders and the services that they require and make sure that they have access to first-class healthcare.

In relation to not meeting you with your delegation, I am inundated with requests to meet. However, I can say that I want to make sure that I consider all the information that is before me. The previous Minister obviously halted the process in relation to the day centres because of the changes in the private sector. That was the right decision to take at that time. When the information is in front of me on my desk, I will listen to all the evidence, and I will make sure that I take a very informed decision going forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. It is good to hear of the Minister's commitment to enhanced North/South collaboration. Can the Minister say anything to allay the real concerns that exist about what negative impact there will be on existing, planned and future cross-border or North/South

services and projects in the event of the result of the referendum being that Britain and Northern Ireland leave the European Union?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be very aware of my party's position on Brexit. We have the same position on the implications that there will be for the North. If you look at research and development in the health service, you see that we have been able to draw down research money with Scotland and the South, which was quite significant. That is one example, I suppose, of the implications. I have listened carefully to the "Leave" campaign, which has very much majored on the health service and said that, if we pull out of Europe, we will have a lot more money to put into the health service. I do not see that being the case. It is a false argument and a scare tactic in relation to the implications in moving forward. Whilst we can only speculate on the outcome of Thursday's referendum, I believe that the challenges in the health and social care system will be there after Thursday. They are there before Thursday, and they will be there after Thursday. I do not believe that leaving the European Union will be the panacea to solve all the ills in the health service. That is certainly not my understanding or my assessment of the evidence that I have in front of me.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Outpatients

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Health, as of 1 June 2016, how many outpatients have been waiting longer than 52 weeks for their first appointment at Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQO 92/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The latest provisional figures for Craigavon Area Hospital show that at 31 May 2016, the most recent date for which figures are available, 1,623 patients were waiting longer than 52 weeks for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment. I have made it clear that patients waiting for that length of time to be seen by a consultant is totally unacceptable to me. Reducing the length of time that patients have to wait for elective assessments, surgeries and treatments is a key priority for me; it is one of a number of key priorities.

As I highlighted in my response to the first question for oral answer, lost capacity through missed appointments could have a significant impact on waiting times. Last year, over 8,600 new and review appointment slots at Craigavon Area Hospital were lost because patients did not attend their appointment. I know that many patients have a genuine reason for not being

able to attend their appointment, but every missed appointment is a lost opportunity for someone else to be seen. Again, I urge the public to let hospitals know, where possible, if they are unable to attend so that their slot can be reallocated.

As I indicated in my statement to the Assembly last week, the root causes of the problems in waiting times are representative of the wider challenges to the provision of world-class health and social care: an over-reliance on acute services rather than early intervention in meeting increasing demand, the financial constraints and slowness to bring about radical change and reform. My policy will be to adopt a balanced approach to taking further short-term action combined with longer-term change to address waiting times. It will take time and significant investment to bring waiting lists back to an acceptable level whilst, simultaneously, increasing capacity to meet increasing demand. I will continue to engage with my Executive colleagues to secure the additional investment that is necessary to transform the delivery of services.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her direct answer. I hope she can agree that statistics can often mask the hurt and pain that patients feel as they wait for an initial appointment, or, as I have found out recently, that of those who have had tests and get the results far too late.

In many ways, she has answered my supplementary, but how will she adopt a more patient-centred approach to addressing waiting times than we saw with her predecessor?

Mrs O'Neill: We all realise the impact on patients who are waiting to be seen. If you are unsure about what is wrong and are waiting to be seen by someone, there is worry and stress that has an impact on your health. It is important that we deal with the issue. We have to get waiting lists down and make sure we get to a position where we have a sustainable healthcare system. There is too much focus on acute services. We need to transform the health service to allow us to invest in primary care and take a preventative approach whereby we work more with our GPs, our allied health professionals and the people in the community.

If we are to move that way, the whole focus of the health service needs massive structural reform. I want to get to that position and for the Assembly to work with me to get to it. I am certainly committed to doing that in the time ahead. Whilst we deal with the short-term issues of getting patients seen and achieving

their appointments, we have to tackle the longer-term issues seriously, and I am committed to doing so. We have an opportune time now: Professor Bengoa's report is coming out in the next short while, and that will allow me to clearly set out a vision on how we move forward and get the political buy-in to deliver on that vision.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answers and congratulate her on her new post. In the November monitoring round, the then Finance Minister announced £40 million for elective care procedures, precisely to address those waiting lists. Will the Minister outline how much of that money was spent and, if it was not all spent, where the surplus went?

Mrs O'Neill: As you said, £40 million was secured in the November monitoring round. That was an attempt to address the short-term measures that are dealing with waiting lists. There was some success in that over 80,000 patients benefited as a result of the additional waiting list activity carried out in the latter part of the year. At the end of March, as a result of the £40 million, those waiting for their first outpatient appointment came down by 25%, and those waiting for admission for treatment came down by 16%. Those are significant outcomes in moving in the right direction, but we have a lot further to travel.

Of the £40 million, £21.5 million was utilised on waiting list activity, and a further £3.4 million that we were able to allocate brought waiting list activity spend to about £25 million. Eighty thousand patients benefited through the delivery of 54,000 additional outpatient assessments, 17,500 additional inpatient day case treatments and diagnostic assessments. In 2015-16, the balance of the funding was utilised for a range of pressures, particularly for domiciliary care and GP out-of-hours services, which have impacts on waiting lists and people being referred if they do not get primary care in the community.

In addressing the pressures, the £40 million allowed us to bring down the number of people on waiting lists and to put the Department on a firmer financial footing for 2016-17, avoiding the need to reduce any elective care services this year. It was an investment well worth making.

Ms P Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on her new role. As Chair of the Health Committee, I look forward to working with her, and I thank her for her answers so far.

It is not a popular thing to say, but we have used the independent sector in Northern Ireland health and social care for many years, and it has to play a part in bringing our waiting lists down in the short to medium term. Has there been a strategic approach to how we will use the independent sector over the coming months and years, and has the Minister had any conversations with the sector?

Mrs O'Neill: First and foremost with the waiting lists, it has to be about patient safety. That is why there has been an over-reliance on the independent sector to get people seen. I clearly identified that as a short- to medium-term issue. I look forward to working with the Chair of the Health Committee and Committee members on how we transform the service to allow us more money to invest in primary services. In the longer term, we want to provide those services in-house. The only way we will be able to do that is if we seriously transform how we deliver services.

In my first number of weeks as Minister, I have been out meeting staff and engaging with the trusts and people right across the sector, and there is a willingness to change how we do things. With a fair wind and with good political will in the Chamber, we can, once and for all, put report fatigue to bed. We have had so many reports, but now, with Professor Bengoa's report and the restructuring of the board — all the things combined — we have a massive opportunity to transform the health service. That will mean that we provide more services in-house, which is ultimately my objective. I have not engaged with the independent sector to date, but I am sure that I will in the time ahead. My priority is to make sure that we have a first-class health service and that all those services, by and large, are provided in-house.

Ms Seeley: How does the Health Minister hope to tackle the loss of 20% of our newly trained nurses, as well as a significant number of consultants, to England, which places huge pressure on our health system?

Mrs O'Neill: The loss of newly trained nurses in particular is one of the biggest challenges that we have in workforce planning. The Department established a regional nurse recruitment group in January this year to address proactively nursing workforce challenges. To date, the group has agreed the streamlining of all regional recruitment processes for band 5 nursing vacancies across the trusts to make it easier for nurses to navigate the recruitment process. That also includes the advertising of nursing vacancies

and regular interviews, the promotion and use of social media to engage with students and to communicate job opportunities and a joint approach by my Department and the trusts to engaging with university students in years 1, 2 and 3 to promote the local job opportunities that are available to them. The trusts will also make conditional job offers to third-year preregistration nursing students, pending successful completion of their degree programme and registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Alongside that, my Department commissioned the development of a career pathway for nurses and midwives to identify opportunities for local nurses. It was launched by the Chief Nursing Officer in November 2015. We continue to focus on making HSC an employer of choice for those wishing to pursue a nursing career. I am keen to engage with nursing staff. Next week, I will meet representatives of the Royal College of Nursing, and I am keen to talk to them about what else we can do to make sure that we retain newly qualified nurses and train more nurses. There is massive pressure on the system, and, even though we have been able to increase the number of nurses coming into the system this year, we need to do a lot more about training more nurses and offering more opportunities. We are working with difficult budgets, but we need to be creative in how we do that and how we can get more nurses into the system.

Western Trust: Learning Disability Services

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Health what action her Department is taking to support adults with learning disabilities affected by the £8 million underspend in learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 93/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that I start by acknowledging the concerns of the families and carers in the Western Trust who have been affected by the issues with adult learning disabilities services in their area. I want it to be clear that I fully understand their concerns and support their efforts to seek the assurances that they are entitled to from the trust that their loved ones are being provided with appropriate and effective services. That is why, in my first few days of office, I sought an urgent and detailed briefing from my officials on the issue.

On the basis of that briefing, it is now clear to me that there is a historical issue with funding for adult learning disability services in the

Western Trust. However, I assure the Member and local families and carers that action is now being taken to address that, starting with the development of a long-term plan by the Western Trust to quantify and address any spending gap. The trust will be fully supported in its work by the Health and Social Care Board and my Department. Families and carers will be fully engaged too.

It is also my intention to monitor closely the trust's progress in the coming weeks and months on the issue. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to what families and carers are saying, which, to date, has raised some questions about the trust's handling of the issue. In the light of that, I am seeking an explanation from senior trust officials of their actions leading up to and including the statement that was made on 10 May.

Mr Hussey: Any of the Members from the western part of the Province who attended meetings with the parents and, indeed, with the trust will recognise the shock and horror that was expressed by those parents. It appears to have been a 20-year underspend, Minister, and, as you are aware, there will be a debate on the issue next week. How much, in total, has not been spent on adult learning disability services in that 20-year term? Will you again assure the House that the elderly will not be victims of any compensatory payments by the trust? It has made a suggestion that it will take the additional funding from the elderly.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has time for a short response.

2.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I want to assure the Member that I will ensure that the plan to rectify what has been identified as a problem will be fully communicated to parents and carers. I assure you that the board will also work with the trust to quantify the money that we are talking about: £8 million has been mooted, but I do not know whether that is an accurate figure at this stage. We are still working with the trust to identify that, but I can assure you that we will ensure that we will work with the families and those people with a learning disability who have been affected by the underinvestment that has clearly been there over the last number of years.

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

Fatal Foetal Abnormality and Abortion: Working Group

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health, after welcoming her to Question Time, to state who is right and who is wrong, given that, in a plenary debate on 10 February, the House was told that a working group was being set up to look at the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities and abortion, with, yesterday, the Attorney General telling the Court of Appeal that the group was up and running, albeit that, in a letter that he received from the Minister, dated last Thursday, she said that the group is not up and running. (AQT 61/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Well, I will not answer for the Attorney General: you can take your issue up with him. I can say that the Executive did, as you rightly said, set out that there needed to be a working group on fatal foetal abnormality. Simon Hamilton raised the issue with the Executive when he was Health Minister. I can confirm that the terms of reference for the group were proposed and drafted and that the membership of the group was discussed with the former Justice Minister. I can confirm that the terms of reference were not formally signed off, so, consequently, the group has not met. However, I am looking at the issue and giving the matter careful consideration. I will meet the Justice Minister over the next number of weeks. I intend to discuss how we take the issue forward. As current Health Minister, I want to meet families who have been impacted by fatal foetal abnormality and then decide how we move forward as quickly as possible to bring clarity to the issue of fatal foetal abnormality in the health service.

Mr Nesbitt: The impression was given four months ago that it would report in six months — in two months' time — and now we hear that it has not even met. Once again, this House is a Dickensian Bleak House, where citizens arrive in hope and leave in despair. Why does the Minister think that this panel is even necessary given her undoubted support of motion 122 at her party's 2015 ard-fheis, which committed to a call for a legal framework to be introduced that would allow women to access abortion services under the circumstances of fatal foetal abnormality?

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that he has not unearthed any new secret: it is my party position that we think that there should be legislation that allows women to be supported in relation to fatal foetal abnormality. The legislation that needs to come forward will come from the Department of Justice. I want to work

with the Justice Minister. I also want to engage with women who have been impacted. This afternoon, I will meet Sarah Ewart. Obviously, everyone knows Sarah's story. I want to engage with her because she is someone who has actually gone through the experience of having a child with fatal foetal abnormality. It is important that we take decisions that are based on evidence and that we take the right decisions. I do not think that it is any shock that I will speak to the Justice Minister over coming weeks. We have a meeting scheduled. We will discuss the issue and will be able to move forward.

Health Inequalities: Executive Discussions

T2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health whether she has spoken with her Executive colleagues about health inequalities. (AQT 62/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Not as yet; I suppose that we are four weeks into the new mandate. Certainly, it will be a focus for me. It is important that we tackle health inequalities, which is why we need to transform the healthcare system to allow us to do that. Unfortunately, at the moment, no Minister has been able to tackle and actually invest properly in order to deal with health inequalities because there simply was not the funding to do so. All the money is, I suppose, being sucked into dealing with the acute sector. Unless we shift that focus, we will not get to the point where we can tackle health inequalities. I have identified it as a priority. I know that the Executive will want to have a discussion on the way forward and how we do that. I am very keen to explore that with them.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree that it is not good enough that your life expectancy depends on where you live.

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. We have to tackle the root causes of why people get sick in the first place. We have to try and get a breakdown of the correlation between people who live in deprived areas and their health outcomes; for example, tooth decay, cancer diagnoses and all those things. For me, as Health Minister, this is something that needs to be a priority. We have to get to the point where we tackle those issues head on, where we invest in prevention and have a very strong public health message. Very positive work is happening and has been happening for quite some time. We have a strategy for illness prevention and health promotion. I want to see that through.

However, I think we can do much more. In order to get us to that point, we have to really reinvigorate, and look at structural issues in, the health service.

Fatal Foetal Abnormality and Abortion: Working Group

T3. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Health, to follow up on the question asked by his leader, why the terms of reference for the working group have not been signed off, to outline the reasons for the delay and to state whether there are any significant issues about which the Assembly should be made aware. (AQT 63/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No, there are not. I have just answered the question. I told you my position in relation to fatal foetal abnormality and being able to support those women who are in a crisis situation. I have been given the work that has been done to date — the terms of reference that have been drawn up — and I intend to sign off on them when I have had a conversation with the Justice Minister over the next number of weeks.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. May I ask that the discussion be taken forward with a degree of urgency and the information brought back to the Assembly as soon as possible? The delay is unacceptable for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: A meeting is already scheduled.

Addiction Services

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the addiction services available here and the importance of ease of access to those services. (AQT 64/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we tackle the issue and support people who want to get help. I am sure that the Member is aware of Northlands in Derry and the issue of funding. I am going to take up an opportunity to visit it and talk about the service that it provides, which, I am aware, is a first-class service that people value very much. It is important that we invest in addiction services and support people who are at a time in their life when they are most vulnerable. I do not have figures in relation to the current investment in addiction services, but I am very happy to provide that to the Member in the future.

Mr Durkan: I am very heartened by that answer from the Minister. Will she clarify that she recognises the valuable role of the community and voluntary sector in delivering addiction services and is committed to working with it and listening to it when designing services in future?

Mrs O'Neill: We all recognise the value of the community and voluntary sector's work. It alleviates a lot of pressure in the health service, and, without it, the service would be stretched a lot more. So, yes, I value the work that it does, and I want to work with it and move forward on how we can work together, how we can be more innovative about how we work with people and how we can be more creative in changing and structuring how we deliver services to those in need.

Mental Health Issues: DOH Prioritisation

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health how she and her Department will prioritise mental health issues. (AQT 65/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Since becoming Minister, I have made it clear that mental health is one area that I will prioritise. We all recognise that mental health problems are a significant societal challenge that need to be addressed. I intend to address some of the historical underinvestment, but, equally, I accept that the health and social care budget in general is under extreme financial pressure, as are the Executive as a whole.

In my assessment so far in relation to mental health services, we invest annually about £250 million. That is an increase of £50 million a year compared with the position a decade ago. Also, it is significant to note that nearly 60% of mental health funding is spent on community services compared with 40% a decade ago. That shows that there is a lot more early intervention, crisis response, home treatment and the use of evidence-based psychological therapies.

There are gaps in service provision and funding, and I want to use all the information that I have to best identify how we move forward. I want to work with clinicians and people who are providing the service, as well as the community and voluntary sector. When it comes to taking positions on the new comprehensive spending review, I want to make sure that we properly invest in mental health and help the most vulnerable.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister minded to advance a perinatal mental health approach?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. There has been some work done on it to date. There are plans for a perinatal mental health and a mental trauma service. Also, I omitted to say in my original answer that there will be study into eating disorder services, which will report in December. The lack of provision of a dedicated specialist and bespoke perinatal mental health service is a significant gap here. I want to be able to move forward with that. There are potential opportunities for us to do that on an all-island basis. That is something that I want to pick up with Simon Harris TD over the next number of weeks.

The 'Integrated Perinatal Mental Healthcare Pathway', which was published in December 2012, is being updated. That provides the regional guidance for all health and social care professionals who come into contact with pregnant women to ensure that their mental health problems are identified as early as possible and that we make sure that we have the appropriate support services in place.

The estimated cost of providing that service is about £1.9 million. Perinatal mental health is an issue that I can remember championing in the previous mandate from 2011, when I was on the Health Committee. It is certainly another area where I think we can do some good work. I want to explore that further with the Minister in the South to see whether there is any way that we can work together to deliver it quicker.

Nurses: Recruitment

T6. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Health how confident she is that everything that needs to be done is being done to ensure that we can successfully recruit the nurses who are very much needed across our hospitals. (AQT 66/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, nurses are key to service delivery. They are the backbone of the health service. I want to work with the Royal College of Nurses to make sure that there is better workforce planning. A lot of work has been done in that area. A number of additional nurses — I think it is 100 — are coming in to start their training this year. I think that that is significant, but we need to continually keep that under review. I do not believe that 100 nurses will fill the gap that has already been identified there, so I want to work with nurses and the royal college to make sure that we bring

forward the correct number of nurses in the future. There have been significant improvements in nursing numbers over the last number of years. There are an additional 186 nurses in our trusts compared with the number this time last year. That shows that we are moving in the right direction, but we certainly have further to go.

The Department invests heavily in training new nurses every year, with the provision of university fee and bursary support. We also continue to work with the nurses on education and continuing with education. The other area that we have been looking at is the return-to-nursing programme, and we recently committed additional funding to commission an increase of 100 nurses. That will also allow us to take get more nurses back into practice. So, while I think that there are major challenges, we are moving in the right direction, but we certainly have a further way to go.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that answer. I declare an interest as I have family working in nursing and midwifery. Minister, do you agree that there needs to be a much greater focus on encouraging our young people to enter the nursing profession? Do you also agree that they should be paid a proper wage for the difficult job they do, and that less emphasis should be put on agency nurses and nurse banks?

Mrs O'Neill: I do agree with you. The Department and the trusts are working particularly with new nurses who are training. In an earlier answer, I referred to the fact that about 20% of nurses decide to leave once they have qualified. It is about trying to talk to those nurses to say that there are opportunities and make sure that they are aware that there are opportunities here.

I think that nursing staff deserve to get fair pay for the job they do. I think that we have massive challenges here, not least because of continual Tory Government cuts to the block grant. That being said, I want to work with the nursing profession to make sure that we do absolutely everything we can to maximise the numbers in the service and make sure that those nurses feel supported, because obviously we value the work they do, day and daily, in supporting patients.

Suicide and Self-harm Prevention

T7. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Health, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, to outline the steps her Department is taking to

address the high level of self-harm and suicide in our community. (AQT 67/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Again, as I said earlier, mental health is a priority for me, and I seriously want to work with groups on the ground providing services, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, which I very much value for working with people who find themselves in crisis or want to ask for help and some support. I certainly want to prioritise that area of work. I want to review what services we provide and how they are provided. Lifeline has recently been reviewed, so we are going to be moving forward with that. I want to make sure that we deliver on the Bamford vision. I think that there is so much that we can do. If the Department can be a wee bit more creative in working with the community and voluntary sector, we can be more effective on the ground.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that the Protect Life strategy is out for consultation and that that will close in the next number of weeks. Does she agree that, while strategies are important, we need the resources and the finance to back those up?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I absolutely agree. When we come to review the strategy, we want to make sure that we get it right, listen to everybody and look at what has been good and what has worked. We also need to look at the challenges in rural areas compared with urban areas, because sometimes they can be very different. We need a proper review of all that as we move forward. Yes, I think there is underinvestment, and I think we need to shift the balance of the investment that has occurred to date. I have a very difficult financial picture in front of me. That said, this is an area where I want to prioritise some work.

2.45 pm

Justice

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time.

Race Hate Crime

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the work her Department has taken in conjunction with the PSNI to address race hate crime. (AQO 105/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): I thank the Speaker for his kind sentiments.

My Department's community safety strategy contains a commitment to tackle all forms of hate crime and the harm it causes through prevention, awareness, education and support for victims and communities. To deliver on this commitment, my Department chairs a multi-agency hate crime delivery group that takes forward a range of actions to combat hate crime from the criminal justice perspective.

The PSNI holds membership of that group and is engaged in a number of specific initiatives alongside my Department. These include the hate crime advocacy service, jointly funded by my Department and the PSNI, which provides a consistent point of contact for victims who require advice, support and assistance on a practical and emotional level. Dedicated bilingual advocates to assist victims of racial hate crime are engaged through this service, and there is the hate incident practical action scheme, which is funded by my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Communities. That scheme can provide victims of hate crime with personal protection and safety measures to help them feel safer in their home. My officials and PSNI officers also recently participated in Good Practice Plus, which is a Europe-wide project led by the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. The project facilitates sharing and embedding of best practice in tackling hate crime right across a range of operational agencies in the countries involved.

More broadly, my Department will be working with the Executive Office to take forward those aspects of the Executive's racial equality strategy relating to racist hate crime. That work will form part of addressing the wider societal issues that ultimately manifest through racial hate crime. At a local level, policing and community safety partnerships deliver targeted projects, including initiatives to influence the attitudes of young people, with a view to increasing awareness of diversity and difference.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for her answer. I recognise much of the work that is ongoing. Given the recent reported and alleged race crime in the Minister's constituency involving several members of the police, will she give us an assurance that a proper and fully independent investigation will be carried out? Does she agree that we need to ensure that there is zero tolerance of racism across all our services?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I am aware of the recent

incident in my constituency regarding the actions of off-duty PSNI officers in Portstewart, and it has been reported that the PSNI is looking into a hate crime element of that. Investigating the matter is an operational issue for the PSNI. If the Member has any concerns, I suggest that he takes them directly to the PSNI. I will say this: there should be zero tolerance of all incidents of hate crime, whether it be racial or sectarian, and my Department is certainly keen to support that.

Mrs Palmer: Does the Minister share my concern that the rhetoric employed by some people in the debate on Brexit has the potential to encourage racism and increase race hate crime? Is she confident that the law is sufficiently robust to deal with the minority of people who think it is acceptable to spread race hate via social media?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. I entirely agree with that sentiment. I think the language we use, whether it is about Brexit or any issue, is very important. As politicians, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that the words we use do not instil any sort of hate within people through who they are directed at. In the context of the legislation that looks at that, through some of the initiatives that my Department is involved in, we are trying to tackle that, but I certainly take the point that more could be done, and I am quite happy to engage with the Member to, hopefully, see a way forward in that respect.

Ms Mallon: I welcome the Minister's unequivocal statement that there should be a zero tolerance approach to all hate crime. Does she share the view that legislation in this mandate for equal marriage in Northern Ireland can help to develop a more tolerant, inclusive and respectful society here?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. It has been well established that I would support equal marriage, and I will certainly try to have those conversations with my Executive colleagues. That topic does not really fall within my remit, but, as an Executive, we are there to discuss the issues. It is something that I am quite keen to do, and I have said from the outset as a Minister that I will try to do that.

Conflict-related and Legacy Inquests

2. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to make funds available for over 80 conflict-related inquests, as requested by the Lord Chief Justice. (AQO 106/16-21)

10. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to raise the provision of adequate resourcing for legacy inquests at the next meeting of the Executive. (AQO 114/16-21)

Ms Sugden: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 10 together. I welcome the work that the Lord Chief Justice has undertaken to develop his proposal for the completion of 56 outstanding legacy cases and have discussed with him the urgent need for funding to be made available under the terms of the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements to enable him to do so. My predecessor submitted a proposal that covered funding for legacy inquests over the initial 19-month period to the former Executive, but it was not included on the agenda prior to the election.

Without resolving the issue of the resourcing of investigations of outstanding Troubles-related deaths, we are failing the families of victims. I am committed to making progress on the matter and will, in due course, discuss it with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and my Executive colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Declan Kearney.

Mr Eastwood: Can I get a supplementary question?

Mr Speaker: Sorry. Colum Eastwood.

Mr Eastwood: Thanks, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her answer. I think that she understands that so many families have been waiting for far too long and should not have to wait any longer, given the fact that we are at the point at which we are able to do something about some of those cases. She said that she will meet her Executive colleagues "in due course". Does she agree with me that it is a matter of utmost urgency and that the Executive need to make a decision urgently to make sure that we can request the funds to be drawn down to allow the Lord Chief Justice to do the job he began in advance of this mandate?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Yes, I agree with you: I think that it is a matter of urgency that we approach this issue. Indeed, without going into any specific details, I have had initial discussions with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I am confident that, as an Executive, we will approach the issue and that we will do it sooner rather than later. It is really about having those discussions and trying to

ensure that we move forward in the best way. I agree with the Member: these families have waited for far too long. The reality is that the legacy inquests will go ahead whether it is within five years or 25 years. I think that we owe it to the victims and the families of the victims to try to do it sooner rather than later, so that we can start dealing with the past and move forward.

Mr Kearney: Guím gach rath ar an Aire san Aireacht nua s'aici. I welcome the Minister to her new portfolio. Does she recognise that the continued refusal by the British Government to lift their veto on maximum information disclosure in relation to matters of the past is an increasing source of anger and concern in the wider community?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind sentiments and for his supplementary question. There are significant challenges in dealing with legacy issues and the past. To enable us to move forward, we are having discussions within the Executive, and those are conversations that we need to have with people outside the Executive. I am committed to ensuring that we do that. If there are concerns with the challenges that we face, I am more than happy to listen to them to see whether there is a way around those challenges.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a question, they should continually rise in their place.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. In response to Mr Eastwood's supplementary question, she said that, having met the First Minister and deputy First Minister, she was "confident" that we would make progress on this matter in a short time. Given the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister failed to place this on the Executive agenda previous to the election and that they failed to allow me, as the then Minister, to make an urgent decision, will she explain on what basis she is confident, please?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, I want to put on record my thanks for the work that he has done up until now. A lot of the detail that I have been put over in my Department alludes to his work as Justice Minister, so I just want to put that on record.

I am confident that we will be able to find a solution to this problem. The difference between me and my predecessor is that I enjoy a level of support from the First Minister and

deputy First Minister in a way that, perhaps, was not possible for him as a member of a political party. I am confident moving forward. It is no secret that the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the wider Executive have committed, particularly in this mandate, to working together. I am confident that we can do that. Of course there will be challenges, but, right now, Northern Ireland needs an indication that we are about getting things done and moving forward. I am confident that we will address this legacy issue.

Mr E McCann: Does the Minister agree that, while the matters we are talking about are commonly presented in this Chamber and in this part of the world as difficulties arising from two hostile communities with grievances going back a number of years, when representatives of the state murder its citizens, the truth should be told without recourse to concepts such as national security and that this is not a nationalist issue but a democratic issue? The state must be held to account when it kills its citizens.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. We need to look at all aspects of the issue that you raise. I agree that we need truth from all sides. As Justice Minister, I will not concentrate on one community; I will look at all aspects. If concerns such as yours are raised, I am quite happy to take them forward and try to address them as best we can. To move forward, there needs to be a sense of truth. Let us have those honest conversations so that we can move forward.

Paramilitary Panel Report

3. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to implement the recommendations contained in the Fresh Start panel report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. (AQO 107/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I welcome the report by the independent three-person panel and take this opportunity to place on record my thanks for its hard work and commitment in producing a comprehensive report. The report represents a positive way forward for dealing with this difficult issue. When we published the report, we committed to publishing an action plan setting out how we will work together to take forward the recommendations. The recommendations are wide-ranging and complex, and associated actions will need to span much wider than issues of policing and justice.

My Department is coordinating work across all Departments and with relevant criminal justice agencies to prepare an action plan based on the recommendations and the commitments in section A of the Fresh Start Agreement. The action plan will come to the Executive for approval, and we will publish it in due course.

Mr Douglas: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time and wish her all the best. What is the Minister's view on the panel's recommendations to address the barriers to disbandment of paramilitary organisations?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and his kind wishes. In the report, the panel set out what it identified as barriers to the disbanding of paramilitary groups and ways in which those might be addressed. I fully appreciate, as I am sure will the Member, that these are difficult and sensitive matters. We are in the process of putting together our action plan. We are considering the recommendations carefully and will set out our response in due course.

Mr Attwood: I will quote what Séamus Mallon said to the first Oversight Commissioner for Patten:

"I wish you all the best for now."

Is it the case that, six months after Fresh Start, not one penny of Fresh Start moneys has been released to the PSNI and the NCA to tackle the threat of organised crime in Northern Ireland and on these islands? When will moneys be released to the PSNI for that purpose?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and good wishes. I wish him the best for always, because I am that type of person. *[Laughter.]* I appreciate the Member's comments. There needs to be political agreement on the moneys being released. It is critical that we move forward in doing that. From my perspective of leading the Justice Department, I am keen to ensure that we have political agreement on moving forward so that the moneys can be released. As I mentioned in my earlier response on legacy inquests, these problems will occur, and they will not go away. We need to deal with them, and, as Justice Minister, I am committed to ensuring that we start to address them.

Ms J McCann: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Will she join with me in commending the important work of community restorative justice schemes, as acknowledged in paragraph 4.16 of the panel report, and

particularly the role of Community Restorative Justice Ireland?

Does she agree with this recommendation:

"the Executive should put in place a dedicated fund ... to provide enhanced ... resource over longer periods"

for this type of work?

3.00 pm

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes and for her supplementary question.

I commend the work of the community and voluntary sector in tackling different aspects, in the area of justice and in the wider public service. They play an important role. I am a big advocate of the community and voluntary sector, from the perspective that those people are best placed to understand and facilitate their communities. I will certainly look at other ways in which my Department can facilitate the community and voluntary sector in trying to deal with these problems, which are very close to home.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the Justice Minister to her first Question Time. Has she any concerns over the ability of the Executive to work towards the disbandment of paramilitary groups, given the intimate relationship between one of the Executive parties and the main and still existing paramilitary organisation in Northern Ireland — namely, PIRA — and the other party's history of flirting with other paramilitaries over many years, such as Ulster Resistance?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes and for her supplementary question.

As I said to Mr Douglas, I appreciate that these are difficult and sensitive matters, but it is a case of trying to move Northern Ireland forward. To do that, we need to start addressing the issues honestly. If that means engaging with people, by all means, we have to do that. It is not about justifying their existence but about being part of the process of moving Northern Ireland forward. I am of a generation that wants to see things being done in Northern Ireland. I am a representative of people, and, if that means that I can contribute in some way to moving Northern Ireland forward, I will.

We have to take these difficult decisions. It is why people put us in the Chamber to represent them: so that we can make decisions on their

behalf. I am quite happy to do that and to try to get a better outcome for Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: The report on ending paramilitary activity states that tackling segregation will be vital to building a society in which paramilitarism no longer exists. It recommends ambitious targets and milestones:

"to measurably reduce segregation in education and housing".

I therefore ask the Minister what she believes is an ambitious target for increasing integrated education and what actions she will be proposing, as a member of the Executive, to deliver that outcome.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. I am familiar with the fact that the Member has an interest in the area of integrated education. Generally, it is something that we should be moving towards. Forgive me, but I am not over the detail of my Department and have not yet come to a conclusion as to what my priorities will be. I realise that these conversations need to be had. It is not just about adults having these conversations but about bringing the kids along with us to ensure that we do not find ourselves in a situation in which our communities are segregated.

Given the Member's interest in the area, I would certainly welcome a conversation with him to see how he feels we can broach the subject. As I said, I have not quite set my priorities yet, but, as some Members will already be aware, I am inviting all political parties, including the smaller ones, to come forward with their ideas for justice so that I can see whether they can form a part of my priorities for the next five years.

Legal Aid Reform: Savings

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the savings made through legal aid reform in the 2015-16 financial year. (AQO 108/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Legal aid is demand-led, and expenditure fluctuates depending on the volume of cases and their complexity and outcome. The spend on legal aid in the 2015-16 financial year was £92 million. The total spend was affected by barristers in the Crown Court's withdrawal of services, which reduced the number of cases completed last year.

The reforms that have been introduced, including the introduction of standard fees in the

criminal courts and the removal of very high cost cases, will realise savings of some £19 million per annum when fully implemented. The first of the reforms introduced in the civil courts, relating to the authorisation of counsel, have already delivered savings in excess of £1 million.

Further reforms will be brought forward in this financial year. In particular, standard fees for family proceedings cases will be brought forward to replace the current system. It is estimated that that will realise savings of £3 million per annum. Proposals for changes to the scope of civil legal aid will also be brought before the Assembly later this year and are aimed at delivering further savings.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for her answers and wish her well in her new post.

In the Northern Ireland Audit Office report released today, which I have in front of me, recommendation 8 on page 37 mentions the need for the agency to:

"embed its counter fraud strategy."

Will the Minister give us an assurance that she will use her influence on the agency to establish a reliable estimate of the value of fraud in the legal aid system and take further steps to build an effective counter-fraud culture within the agency?

Ms Sugden: I thank Mr Dunne for his supplementary question. He will appreciate that the report was published this morning. I will take time to consider it carefully. I welcome that the report acknowledges that progress has been made and that we are continuing to deliver on our reform programme, which has not been fully implemented. Indeed, the Member will be aware that my officials will be speaking on the report when they next meet the Committee. I acknowledge the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General in scrutinising my Department's progress against the recommendations made previously.

Mr Swann: Minister, I welcome you to your new position from the Opposition Benches. The Legal Services Agency's accounts have been qualified since 2003. Is the Minister hopeful that that qualification will be removed from the 2015-16 account?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. I welcome his kind wishes from the Opposition Benches, and I also wish them well. Forgive me; I am not over the detail of what you

asked, but I am quite happy to come back to the Member in writing with an answer on that.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Under the current legal services legislation, the agency does not have any powers to carry out inspections of the offices of legal representatives. Is the Minister satisfied with that, or is it something she might look at?

Ms Sugden: I thank Mr Lunn for his kind wishes and for his supplementary question. Again, I am not overly familiar with the detail of that, but I will come back to you with an answer.

Kingsmills Inquest

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of developments in the Kingsmills inquest. (AQO 109/16-21)

Ms Sugden: First, I express publicly my sympathy for the families on the loss of their loved ones. That day, 5 January 1976, was one of the most tragic days in the history of the Troubles, when 10 workers were singled out on their way home from work and gunned down. Therefore, the holding of an inquest some 40 years on is a welcome development for the families, albeit it has been far too long.

The Kingsmills inquest opened on 23 May 2016 before His Honour Judge Sherrard. On 31 May, the coroner received correspondence from the Crown Solicitor indicating that new evidence had come to light inasmuch as a match had been identified for a palm print found on a vehicle thought to have been involved in the attack. The families were apprised of this development on the same day. Following submissions from legal representatives, the inquest continued on 8 June but has been adjourned until today.

I recognise the importance of the inquest system to deliver a proper and robust investigation into the deaths that resulted from this atrocity. Like the families, I welcome that a new investigative avenue has been identified. That must be fully explored. As the conduct of the ongoing inquest is a matter for the coroner and the police investigation is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Allister: The Minister had no difficulty making adverse comments about the Brexit campaign, but she seems a little more reticent about an inquest that falls under her jurisdiction.

Surely it would be legitimate and appropriate for her, as Minister, to seek explanation about how palm prints that have been in the possession of forensics for years and examined multiple times were identified only after the inquest started and with the consequence of the delay in the inquest. What does it say of the probity and thoroughness of previous investigations that this situation has evolved? Is she satisfied with that? What steps are being taken to rectify such situations in the future?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I draw his attention to my comments on Brexit and the language that we use in trying to move Northern Ireland forward.

The police investigation is a live investigation. At this stage, I cannot comment on the timeline for the conclusion of the investigation or any elements within it.

Mr Sheehan: I also wish the Minister well in her new post.

Does she agree that the urgent establishment of all of the mechanisms for dealing with past, as agreed under the Fresh Start Agreement, provide the best opportunity to secure maximum recovery of the truth and justice for all families and individuals who suffered as a result of the conflict?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind wishes and his supplementary question. Yes, I do agree, and I think we need to move forward on dealing with the past, whether that is with the legacy inquests or the historical investigations unit. Cases such as these demonstrate the need for doing that to finally give victims and their families a response to something that they have been dealing with for many years.

Mr Bell: I congratulate the Minister. This is my first opportunity to do so in the House, and I welcome her having taken the very courageous decision on a very difficult post. I wish you well in that.

The Minister will be aware that the Kingsmills massacre is a festering sore that, until justice is done, will never allow proper reconciliation and healing in our society. Can the Minister assure the House that no stone will be left unturned in seeking that justice, because there is scepticism about the Provisional IRA's involvement in what was a sectarian massacre akin to what we have seen in Kosovo and other horrendous areas? Can she also confirm that,

if the Provisional IRA is found to be responsible by due process of law, it will be held to account for what was a heinous sectarian atrocity?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his good wishes and for his supplementary question. I do recognise that this was an atrocity and it is a journey that will not end with the outcome of the inquest. Indeed, a lot of the outstanding inquests that we need to take forward, hopefully sooner rather than later, will have a similar impact on the victims and their families. On this inquest, it is a matter for the Coroner to hold people to account, and any police investigation is an operational matter, so it is difficult for me to comment. Moving forward, it is something that we need to address, and we need to do so sooner rather than later.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister fully accept the content and findings of the Police Ombudsman's report into the Loughinisland murders, and does she agree that the remarks made by the Secretary of State were unhelpful and deeply disrespectful to the families and the victims?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Again, the Loughinisland report is an operational matter for the PSNI, so it is difficult for me to comment on that. I will say this: in 1994, six men did not come home, and that is a travesty. Whilst this report might provide some comfort to the families, the journey that they are on will not end. This is an indication of a lot of these types of inquest in Northern Ireland. As I said in answer to a previous question, we need to be careful in how we put these things and be very mindful of the fact that there are victims here. Working with my Executive colleagues, it is something that I hope to address sooner rather than later, so that Northern Ireland can move on and to ensure that we are dealing with the past in the most appropriate way.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Justice Minister agree that the investigation into the Kingsmills massacre demonstrated the need for a robust system for investigating the past? What negotiations is she involved in to establish institutions to do this?

Ms Sugden: Yes, I do agree that it demonstrates that, as will other events that, inevitably, come before us. To reiterate, I am speaking with my Executive colleagues to seek a way forward in trying to deal with these issues.

Crawfordsburn Country Park: Antisocial Behaviour

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice whether she has raised the issue of antisocial behaviour at Crawfordsburn Country Park with the PSNI. (AQO 110/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The issue of addressing antisocial behaviour at Crawfordsburn Country Park is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I can let you know, however, that addressing antisocial behaviour is a strategic objective for all policing and community safety partnerships and that the Ards and North Down partnership has set aside over £95,000 to address the issue this year. I can also advise that, in May 2016, Translink, Ards and North Down council, Lisburn and Castlereagh council and the PSNI ran a joint operation for five consecutive weeks, which helped to reduce antisocial behaviour at the Crawfordsburn Country Park and beaches. As a result of the joint operation, calls to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for its services were drastically reduced.

3.15 pm

The Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is also a designated member of the policing and community safety partnership, has robust measures in place to deal with any antisocial behaviour incidents in the park, including a ban on alcohol. The Ards and north Down policing district command unit has also developed an effective collaborative working relationship with Translink, the council and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which will manage the park, and there will be ongoing monitoring to ensure that everyone enjoys the facilities at the park over the summer months.

Mr Speaker: I regret, Mr Chambers, that there is no time for a supplementary. That ends the period of time for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Explosives Find: North Belfast

T1. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Justice, after congratulating her on her appointment and the assured manner with which she has answered questions during her first Question Time, whether she has received a security briefing about the explosives find in north Belfast last night. (AQT 71/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind remarks. I welcome him to the Assembly and look forward to working with him on any issues he wishes to raise with me in respect of my Justice remit.

I have received a briefing about the suspected explosive material that was taken out of circulation last night. Those who have such explosives have no regard for public safety and do not conduct anything with care. In fact, their intent is to cause havoc. Unfortunately, that can cause injury or killing. I also find it incomprehensible that the explosive material was found in a residential area. I reiterate that there can be no justification for that type of action. Those who are responsible should be held to account for their actions.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. Will she brief the Assembly, after a proper forensic examination of the explosives has taken place, on whether, as reported, there was 1.5 kg of Semtex and whether it is newly acquired or part of some historical find of explosives that should have been long since decommissioned?

Ms Sugden: I agree with the Member; it is a worrying find. However, it is an operational matter for the police to investigate. I suggest that he contacts them directly if he has any questions particular to that incident.

Drug Abuse and Antisocial Behaviour: Newry and Armagh

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice, after wishing her well in her new role, what her Department is doing to work with other agencies to address the problems of drug abuse and antisocial behaviour in the Newry and Armagh area. (AQT 72/16-21)

Ms Sugden: As I mentioned to other Members, we have a community strategy that deals with various agencies in tackling drug or alcohol abuse. We work with the PSNI and the local policing and community safety partnerships and other various agencies in trying to do that. It is something that we take very seriously.

I spoke in a debate a couple of weeks ago in respect of psychoactive substances, but it is important to note that alcohol can be as damaging as any other type of drug, including ones that are legal, such as prescription drugs. It is something that my Department is committed to, and we are keen to engage to see whether we can stop that type of activity.

Mr Boylan: In light of the announcement that Armagh courthouse is to close, what extra services can you provide to support people who need assistance with addiction?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that legal challenges to the closure of Ballymena, Lisburn and Strabane courthouses were submitted to the High Court in early May. All three applications for leave to appeal were heard on 16 June, and leave was granted. The substantive appeal hearing will not take place until autumn — the end of October, I believe — so it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the closure of those courthouses while ongoing legal action is in effect.

Magilligan Prison: Future Upgrade

T3. **Ms Archibald** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time and wishing her luck in her role, to state whether, following her visit to Magilligan prison last week, she envisages an upgrade of the facilities there in the near future. (AQT 73/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes. Indeed, I extend my kind wishes to my constituency colleague, who is new to the House following the recent election.

Yes, I had a very positive visit to Magilligan. It was positive in the sense that it was important for me to get out and see my prison estate and determine what work needs to be done. For me, the visit reiterated that a refurbishment of Magilligan really needs to take place. Prior to my becoming Minister, that is certainly something I advocated. It is now about how I can build on the work of my predecessor to realise the outline business case that has been approved and how we can maybe put the appropriate funds in place to try to move it forward.

Ms Archibald: I thank the Minister for her kind wishes and her answer. As you said, the facilities in Magilligan have long been highlighted as not fit for purpose. Will the Minister acknowledge that it is important for the rehabilitation of prisoners and for allowing the prison staff to do their jobs effectively that they have adequate facilities?

Ms Sugden: Yes, entirely. I think we need adequate facilities across our prison estate not just in Magilligan but in other establishments in Northern Ireland. Certainly, my Department is

committed to trying to realise bringing new facilities forward. It is a case of trying to ensure that the current outline business case is appropriate and looking at how we can move it forward through funding.

Proceeds of Crime: Recovery

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, what role her Department plays in the recovery of assets and the proceeds of crime. (AQT 74/16-21)

Ms Sugden: An assets recovery scheme is run through my Department. It takes assets that have been recovered and shares them among appropriate community and voluntary sector groups. Depending on the crime, it might help the victims. I think it is a great scheme and a way of ensuring that crime does not pay. Indeed, the proceeds of crime can go back to its victims. Various groups that I sit on — I am thinking mainly of the Organised Crime Task Force, a multi-agency group that I chair — recover assets on a cross-jurisdictional basis, and we then decide what to do with them.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. Recently, Minister, I was approached about assets by someone involved with the Sea Cadets in Ballymena. We saw on television recently that, across the water, some boats had been confiscated, and he made a case for them. What more could you do, Minister, to distribute this information to community groups, which have a valuable role to play, to make sure that they know that they can avail themselves of some of the assets that have been received by the Department?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. By all means, I think there is a role for my Department and, indeed, all the Departments within the Executive, to better inform, if you like, the community and voluntary sector of how they can make use of public funding, particularly in areas such as this. Having that engagement with the community and voluntary sector moving forward is one of the aspects of the Programme for Government that I am really content with. I know that officials in my Department are working on a strategy to identify the really fantastic community and voluntary groups out there that provide a service to our community, let us face it, on our behalf. It is an important concept moving forward and one I hope the Executive will fully realise when we have an action plan on our programme.

Loughinisland: Secretary of State's Comments

T5. **Ms Mallon** asked the Minister of Justice, while accepting her comments about the operational aspect of the Loughinisland report and it's being a matter for the ombudsman, and also accepting genuinely that she is coming from a very compassionate place on the issue, to state whether she agrees with the Secretary of State's comment that collusion is a "pernicious counter-narrative" or agrees with the thousands of people who have signed a petition because they profoundly disagree with the Secretary of State's comment and find it deeply offensive. (AQT 75/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. The language used should be very carefully considered, because this is, and rightly so, a very emotive issue that we are dealing with. I think that some of the comments need to be considered in that light and, more than anything else, in mind of the victims and their families. I would certainly take care with the language I use.

Ms Mallon: Part of the response to dealing with collusion lies in inquests. Is the Minister pressing for a paper to go to the Executive before recess that focuses on the release of resource for inquests to give some comfort to the many families who are waiting and waiting?

Ms Sugden: Yes. My Department certainly is trying to encourage us to move forward on the legacy inquests. The Lord Chief Justice's plan to deal with all the inquests sooner rather than later is something that my Department is very supportive of. As I mentioned in response to earlier questions, it is something that I think that we will move on. I hope that that will happen sooner rather than later. It is certainly something that I am encouraging very much at the Executive table.

Bonfires

T6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her post and wishing her well, whether she agrees, as we approach the marching season and the bonfire season, albeit acknowledging that a lot of work has been carried out in the PUL community to reduce tensions, particularly with bonfires, that it is still unacceptable to see posters, effigies and images being burned on bonfires. (AQT 76/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Of course it is unacceptable; all incidents of hate crime are unacceptable, whether it be sectarianism or racism. The people responsible for that type of activity need to be held accountable for it. It is the police's role to investigate that. All incidents of hate crime are unacceptable.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. A number of sites have become notorious, such as the Ballycraigy Road and the Dublin Road in Antrim. We have seen the continuing burning of posters and effigies in my constituency in Banbridge and Portadown. Does the Minister not agree that the PSNI should treat it more seriously and treat it as a hate crime?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. If he has examples of specific ongoing incidents, I suggest that he directs those comments to the PSNI, even through the Policing Board. Again, it is an operational matter, which I find it difficult to comment on. Indeed, it would not be appropriate for me to do so. To reiterate: incidents of hate crime are unacceptable. I appreciate where you are coming from, so, in trying to deal with this particular issue, I would direct the Member to the PSNI.

Legal Aid

T7. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, why, in light of the report released today that states that, in the four years from 2011 to 2015, there was an annual increase in legal aid costs, with £92 million mentioned for 2015-16, the reforms that were introduced to reduce legal aid costs have not delivered and to state whether much more needs to be done. (AQT 77/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his good wishes and question. I appreciate why people think that the reforms to legal aid have perhaps not been fully realised in the way in which they were set out to do. A number of reforms have been implemented to date, although a number have not. It is fair to say that £19 million in savings will be realised when they are fully implemented. Does that suggest that we should look to further reforms? Perhaps. This is a new mandate, with new representatives and new opinions. I am more than happy to listen to the views of people who think that we need to go further in reforming legal aid.

From my perspective, legal aid should very much be about helping the most vulnerable in society to get access to justice. Access to

justice is my overarching aim of what we intend to do in that area. If that means looking at the current process, that is something that we should certainly explore.

Mr Speaker: Mr Anderson, there is time for a quick supplementary and a quick answer from the Minister.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. I sat on the Justice Committee in the previous mandate and heard many debates on this. Do you agree that much more needs to be done to bring the legal aid bill down further?

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: A quick answer, Minister.

Ms Sugden: We should certainly look at that issue.

Mr Speaker: Members may wish to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we return to the debate on animal cruelty, I wish the new Minister of Justice all the best. It is always good to get through your first Question Time. Well done.

Private Members' Business

Animal Cruelty

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take further action to establish an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act and to further protect animals from cruelty. — [Mrs Little Pengelly.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Minister of Justice" and insert

"to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act." — [Mrs Little Pengelly.]

Mr Stalford: Concern about the welfare of animals is nothing new. In fact, we can be proud that, in this part of the world, the first animal welfare legislation was introduced in 1635. Throughout history, people have always been concerned about the welfare of animals because we recognise that we have a duty to them to protect them. In the words of Bernard Rollin, a pre-eminent animal rights activist:

"dominion does not entail or allow abuse any more than does dominion a parent enjoys over a child."

I think that that is right. It is right that we have a moral obligation to protect animals from cruelty, neglect and ill treatment by others.

Over recent times, there has been an increasing awareness of our obligations in that regard. All Members will have been deeply horrified by the case of Cody the dog who was burned so cruelly by evil and wicked people. In my constituency — I am sure that Members from all 18 constituencies can attest to this — we have reported to us horrific instances of animal cruelty, be that animals being starved, beaten or mistreated. It impresses on us, therefore, the need to act. A deterrent is important, which is why I welcome the measures that have been taken in toughening up sentencing, but it can go only so far.

What we are aiming for and what everyone would like to see is a societal attitudinal change on how we treat animals. Education is important, which is why I am pleased that one of the policies that we detailed in the DUP animal welfare policy during the election was the importance of responsible pet ownership being taught in schools. That is a good idea. In this Assembly term, we should look at the provision of resources to young people and children and educating them as to how they should look after the animals that they want to keep as pets.

Speaking to our culture and attitudes, I believe that, in this day and age, there is absolutely no place for circuses that use wild animals. The outlawing of that practice — I am glad that the Justice Minister is still in her place — would send a very powerful message about the attitude of society. A vigilant public is a

watchful guardian against animal cruelty. A recent Millward Brown survey that was carried out for the USPCA showed that very few people were aware of whom they reported animal cruelty to or who the responsible authority for dealing with it was.

In a previous guise, I served on Belfast City Council for 11 years, along with the Member for North Belfast. I am glad that the council supported and pushed through a simple measure that cost only £10,000, which was the provision of a sticker to go on every ratepayer's bin in the city advertising the telephone number to call if people suspected animal cruelty or neglect. In that simple way, through a small step that did not cost a lot, we aimed to increase public awareness of how to report cruelty to animals.

The motion mentions a register, which I absolutely support. Concerns have been expressed about data protection and what have you. Ultimately, I believe that, if people takes it upon themselves to torture, mutilate or starve an animal, frankly, whatever considerations there may be about protecting their data, the balance of the law should not be on their side. We certainly should not allow a situation to exist

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Stalford: I will. We certainly should not allow a situation to exist in which such people would ever have access to animals again.

Mr McKee: This is a very important debate. Everyone in the Chamber will be appalled at the thought of animals being neglected or harmed. Indeed, coming from a farming background, I know that my duty was not only to raise animals but to do so within certain standards to ensure that they all had a reasonable quality of life. In fact, Northern Ireland's farmers produce food to animal welfare standards that are among the highest in the world. The vast majority of local farms here are responsibly run, recognising the huge importance of good animal welfare and husbandry. Unfortunately, however, there are people in society who think that it is acceptable to inflict suffering on what are, most often, totally harmless animals, whether pets, wildlife or agricultural.

Animal welfare is an issue that has already been receiving a higher profile in recent times. As a country of supposed animal lovers, our local papers and news bulletins include mentions of animal abuses all too often.

Although there are well-known cases, such as that of Cody the dog, there are many more that simply go unreported. Some people are caught and punished, but many others get away with it completely. Not only have too many people been getting away with it but those who are caught have been getting away too lightly.

The 2011 Act was a major step in the right direction, but its implementation was pretty poor. The best way in which to deter people from committing animal cruelty is to convince them that the risk of being caught is so great and the subsequent sentence so strong that it simply is not worth it. Unfortunately, however, although the 2011 Act gave us the powers, it was not followed by punishments. In 2010, the year before the new Act, there were just four custodial sentences, but, by 2013, this had fallen to a measly two. What a mockery of the law? When, following an infamous case in east Belfast, the four men who had been convicted of one of the worst ever cases of animal cruelty here were seen joking, laughing and taunting the police as they walked free from court, that was probably the clearest example in recent times of how we have still not got the balance right and how the punishments are not fitting the crimes.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way on that particular point. Does he agree that what made it worse was the sentences that were handed down by the judiciary in that case? You rightly describe it as one of the worst cases of animal cruelty, but the way in which the judges dealt with it and the lenient sentences handed down were nearly more shameful than the crime itself.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKee: That is a very good point. That was probably the clearest example in recent times of how we have still not got the balance right and how the punishments are not fitting the crimes. I therefore very much welcome the Public Prosecution Service's new power to refer unduly lenient animal cruelty sentences to the Court of Appeal.

For the time being, we believe that the PPS is the best safeguard to ensure that people convicted of this awful crime face the full consequences.

I am happy to support the motion's call for a central register; in fact, it was one of the key policy priorities in the animal welfare paper that we produced earlier this year. There is a strong

case for improving the information currently collated and stored about those found guilty of inflicting suffering on animals. It is essential that our enforcement bodies, including the PSNI and local councils, are able to quickly access and share conviction data among themselves and the wider public. In addition, collecting conviction data could assist local animal welfare charities to make decisions more confidently about who is a suitable owner.

In addition to a register, however, other key steps are needed. The scourge of puppy farming and the accompanying upsurge in the online sale of pets presents authorities with major challenges. It remains effectively unregulated, and some people are making an awful lot of money from animal suffering. I hope that the new Department is actively considering ways to tighten the sale of pets in that way.

Finally, I make the point that animals involved in the provision of entertainment must be treated with the same care and compassion as we expect for our pets. I fully support the motion.

Mr McMullan: First of all, I congratulate the Justice Minister on her first day at the podium.

Animal cruelty is one of the most difficult sections of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 that we, as legislators, have to deal with. No matter how many laws we make and fines we impose, there are always those in our communities who continue to inflict pain and suffering on defenceless animals. We must now look at other deterrents in the continuing fight against animal cruelty.

The motion calls for a central register of those convicted of animal welfare issues or disqualified from keeping farmed or non-farmed animals. I have listened with great interest to the debate, and there has been little talk of farm-reared animals. They all come under the Welfare of Animals Act, and I am surprised that they have been left out so much today.

In the last mandate, the Agriculture Minister, Michelle O'Neill, called on the Justice Minister to look at how a register could be set up. I know that there are problems with data protection and that there, and I will listen with interest to what the Minister has to say. I am in favour of a register, but we must see the courts doing their job. As other Members have said, it is no good having laws when the courts only give offenders a slap on the wrist. I agree with the Member that, when we see people coming out of court laughing and joking, the deterrent is not there.

As I said, the register would also apply to farm-reared animals. Cruelty happens to them too, although, thankfully, not on the same scale as to non-farmed animals. DAERA veterinary inspectors, when required, can carry out rigorous ongoing programmes of farmed animal welfare inspections. Those inspections are part of the statutory cross-compliance surveillance to assess whether on-farm welfare meets the standards laid down in the legislation; in other words, if a farmer is not adhering to cross-compliance regulations, he can be fined twice. First, he can be fined by the Department and face a heavy fine that comes out of his single farm payment. When that is done, he can also be fined later by the courts. That deterrent is not being publicised. He can be hit with two fines. Inspections can also be carried out as a result of information from the public or from vets in meat plants. When a vet inspects a carcass in a meat plant, he can see whether there are signs of cruelty. That can go back to the farmer, and he can be taken in for cruelty even when the animal is dead.

3.45 pm

Some dog breeders carry out the online sale of animals, which causes those animals great stress and pain. I ask the Minister to look at that area. We have the Welfare of Animals Act, and, in the schedules, there is every animal you can think of from chickens, goats and calves to pigs and cattle, but there is nothing about pups, the conditions that breeding establishments have to adhere to or the size of whelping cages. I asked some councils to send me information on the data that they carry for that, and it is a piece of paper that you would see a primary 1 child filling in at school. There is nothing about the size of cages. We have seen on television pups and dogs crammed into cages. The law must crack down on these unscrupulous dealers and owners. Before a member of the public makes a purchase, they can inquire as to whether the animal comes from a reputable dealer. We must do all in our power to protect farmed and non-farmed animals from those who take great delight in inflicting pain and distress on defenceless animals.

I will take the opportunity before I finish to ask the Minister to look at a ban on trophy hunting. People go out to Europe or Africa, shoot defenceless giraffes and other animals as trophies to take back home. We have the power here to ban the import of hunting trophies.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McMullan: I ask the Minister to look at that.

Ms Lockhart: I support my colleagues who have tabled the motion. We all know the preciousness of animals in our society, whether they are kept as pets or for livelihood. As someone who was brought up on a farm and lives on a farm, I know all too well the value that animals can and do bring to society. There is no doubt in both cases, whether animals are kept for livelihood or as pets, that there should be an aim and a common purpose that the health and well-being of the animal is key for the owners.

So often, we hear of high-profile cases — they have been mentioned throughout the House today — but we have to be mindful of the activity that goes on underground and the high number of cases that never make it to the media. We have to engage in awareness raising and education around the reporting of animal cruelty. The Member for South Belfast Christopher Stalford mentioned the initiative that he brought forward in Belfast City Council, and he has to be commended for that. As a Government, we should strive to ensure that initiatives like that are rolled out in all council areas.

The implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act in 2011 has given more teeth to our councils and to those dealing with animal cruelty. For instance, it is important to note that, in the last year in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) council area, 583 cases were investigated. There were 972 visits and, as a result, nine cases of seizure and seven prosecutions. The implementation of the Act is starting to bear fruit, and we are starting to see progress on that.

That also links to the issue of the central database that my party wants to see implemented. The seven people who have offended and have been prosecuted should be listed and should not be allowed to keep animals in the future. I spoke with the local authority earlier today, and I asked it about this situation. It said that, when it is licensing dogs, for instance, it asks if anyone has been disqualified, but the situation is that there is nowhere they can go to check the information. There is no central point for the local authority to go to and ask, "Is this information correct?". A central database would definitely go some way to ensuring that those who have offended do not and will not keep animals again.

The 2011 Act also gives magistrates and judges the power to imprison offenders for up to five years on conviction of a cruelty offence. I

encourage the Minister today to ensure that the judiciary are minded in that way when dealing with such offences in court, because nothing else will deter that type of activity. I do not agree with just a slight slap on the wrist; they should have appropriate sentencing and fining.

I welcome the fact that the legislation covers the sale of animals to a person who may be engaged in using animals for cruel so-called sports. However, there remains a disjoint between our enforcement bodies. I therefore call for greater collaboration, with shared intelligence and proactive operations to find these people and to bring them before the courts.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned so-called sports: does she agree that we need to remove the provision in the animal welfare Act that exempts hunting from the protection of animals against unnecessary cruelty?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Lockhart: Thank you. That has certainly been under debate, and I imagine that it will be before the House in the future.

Going back to the issue at hand on the implementation of a central database, I believe that that is a step that we can take. Certainly, I am not opposed to looking at all of that in the round going forward. As elected representatives we have a duty of care as much as reasonable owners do. Our duty is to legislate on the matter and to allow the courts to deal with it when offenders are brought before them.

I think of my constituency, and I welcome the fact that, in Banbridge, for instance, we have a very successful dog sanctuary that takes in dogs that have been left at the side of the road or dumped. It is sad that that charity has to rely solely on donations; as an Assembly we should look at better financing the charities that help in that regard.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Lockhart: I support the motion today, and I trust that the Minister will take on board the issues.

Mr Robinson: In a previous debate, I mentioned how the Internet could be a positive tool to help local businesses develop. This animal welfare debate flips the coin, and we

see that there is, on occasions, a darker side to the Internet. Sadly, that includes selling, giving away or transferring animals. My concern is to ensure that vulnerable animals, including family pets, are treated in the correct manner, given our duty of care. I commend the various animal cruelty organisations for the sterling work that they do.

The report highlights issues of concern that I would like to raise. First, how is the socialisation of a puppy sold online monitored and quantified before sale? Secondly, are there any plans to have online animal sale points specifically registered so that additional welfare checks can be carried out? Thirdly, are there any proposals in development to lay out minimum staffing levels at breeding kennels? Fourthly, what action is being planned to increase sanctions for licensed dog breeders who break the law and cause suffering? Those are important points that I would appreciate the Minister addressing. At this stage in my contribution, I wish her well in her new post. I would also appreciate it if she could outline what steps have been taken to establish an accessible central register, as mentioned in the motion.

I believe that all of us want to ensure animal welfare of the highest standard to protect pet animals, in particular, and to avoid unnecessary suffering of or cruelty to all animals. I support the motion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Chris Lyttle, who has four minutes.

Mr Lyttle: I am delighted to speak in support of animal welfare and against animal cruelty. I support the principle of the motion: that the Assembly says "No" to animal cruelty and will legislate for zero tolerance of animal cruelty. I experienced at close hand the heinous case of animal cruelty in my constituency of East Belfast, where we saw pets and loved animals being stolen from homes and used as bait to train fighting dogs. People were brought to the courts, and there was public outrage at the leniency of the sentencing that was applied in that case. I am proud, therefore, that an Alliance Justice Minister, David Ford, took action to ensure that there was an increase in the maximum sentencing available for animal cruelty in Northern Ireland. It was increased to a maximum of five years, placing it amongst the toughest sentences on these islands, through the Justice Act 2016.

I know that the amendment mentions further and tougher criminal sanctions. I am unsure how specifically the DUP proposes that they

should be enhanced, but perhaps they will mention that in the summing-up of the motion. As organisations like Northern Ireland Says No to Animal Cruelty and the League Against Cruel Sports have said, one of the key ongoing problems is ensuring that those maximum sentences are administered and enforced by the courts. I was proud to be part of a public rally on 14 May this year where almost 1,000 people turned out in support of the call for tougher sentencing in cases of animal cruelty. The Attorney General stated that he feels that the sentences act as a deterrent, yet the high number of cases we have seen this year begs to differ in that regard.

The motion also mentions a central register. I know that the Alliance Justice Minister previously actively scoped the feasibility of an animal cruelty register, and I look forward to hearing from the new Justice Minister about how that could be progressed. I understand that there are problems about what agency may oversee banned offenders and check they are not in contact with animals, and I understand that some human rights legislation makes it difficult to extend bans to full addresses to ensure that anyone who lives at that address who has been banned cannot own an animal. It would be hard to deliver that enforcement.

Members mentioned online sales. Puppy farming remains a huge problem for our society that should perhaps be debated in its own right. There are recommendations in the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act, which pertains to the DUP Minister of Agriculture, on ensuring that that issue can be addressed more robustly, particularly, as the Member for South Belfast Christopher Stalford said, to raise awareness of to whom people should report animal cruelty. There is a recommendation for a public website and an awareness campaign, and, hopefully, that is something the DUP Minister of Agriculture can take action on.

Others Members mentioned wider animal cruelty concerns in our society, such as the need for a ban on hunting, a ban on the use of snares and a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses. Again, it is my understanding that they are actions —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Lyttle: — that the DUP Minister of Agriculture can take, and we certainly hope to see those brought before the House.

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): I thank those who tabled the motion, which raises the really important issue of animal welfare. For me, it is so positive that we are debating the motion early in the mandate, because I have no doubt that each one of us, when on the doorsteps, heard concerns from our constituents about animal welfare during the election. I thank Mrs Little Pengelly and Trevor Clarke for bringing it forward.

The motion and debate acknowledge the work that is already under way as a result of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The review was carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, supported by the Department of Justice. The motion also touches on the challenges faced in tackling the scourge of animal cruelty in our society, particularly given the impact that technology has had on the sale and transfer of animals.

Public opinion is strong on the need for us to protect animals, promote welfare and bring to justice those who inflict harm and suffering. We have heard a wide range of concerns today about the farmed and domestic animal sectors, online selling, access to data, the inappropriate criminal justice response to cruelty and the need to educate more and promote animal welfare. Before turning to the detail, I give a commitment now: I will write to my Executive colleague the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring the detail of today's debate to her attention and to seek a conversation about whether there is more to do to ensure that the arrangements for protecting animals are as robust as possible.

4.00 pm

Like all the Members who have spoken, I am an animal lover — unashamedly, like Mrs Little Pengelly. I grew up with pets in my family home, and I have absolutely no understanding of what motivates people to commit such abhorrent crimes. While it is worth noting that my Department has a specific role in animal welfare, I am keen to explore this with my Executive colleague.

The motion calls for further consideration of tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences and those disqualified from keeping animals. Several members noted the joint review, and Mr Beattie referred to the progress being made. Mr Sheehan stressed the need to prevent crimes against animals. For instance, tougher sentences have been legislated for and will be

commenced on 1 August this year, as was alluded to by Mr Lyttle. I also welcome the fact that DAERA and the councils have put a proposal to the Judicial Studies Board offering a briefing on animal welfare issues. That proposal is being considered.

During the review, those calling for a central register or alternative system for sharing conviction data argued that it would assist in the enforcement of the 2011 Act. Mr Weir referred to the need for robust systems, perhaps more generally, and that is something I would like to discuss with my DAERA colleague.

Under the 2011 Act, the statutory duties for enforcement fall to three bodies: DAERA, in respect of cases involving farmed animals; councils, for cases involving non-farmed animals; and the Police Service of Northern Ireland for cases involving wild animals or more serious animal welfare offences, including those involving other forms of criminality. My Department's involvement relates to the general policy on disclosing information on criminal convictions.

It may be helpful for the record if we note the detail of the new sentencing arrangements, some of which Ms Mallon touched on. As many of you will remember, in March 2014, the Assembly called for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in conjunction with the Department of Justice, to review the implementation of the 2011 Act, particularly sentencing guidelines and practices, to ensure that maximum effectiveness is brought to bear to combat animal welfare crime. Although sentencing was a key issue for the review to consider, engagement with key stakeholders identified other important areas where animal welfare arrangements should be examined to see what, if any, improvements could be made. Those areas included the arrangements for how the 2011 Act was enforced, how the various enforcement bodies worked together and how best to serve the public.

The review team published its interim report in February 2015, setting out emerging findings and recommendations. Responses to the public consultation that followed indicated broad support for many of the recommendations and highlighted additional matters for the review to consider. Dog breeding, in particular, was an area that attracted significant interest.

The issue of sentences for animal cruelty offences, which is the main aspect of the review that is relevant to my Department, was considered in detail. While sentencing in

individual cases is a matter for the independent judiciary, which must take account of the relevant facts and circumstances of any case, the role of my Department is to ensure that a suitable legal framework exists to provide courts with appropriate powers to deal with all cases of animal cruelty. That includes ensuring that the maximum penalties available to the courts are appropriate. However, I appreciate that members of the public will be frustrated when they hear about awful acts of animal cruelty and will rightly want to see appropriate sentences handed down.

One of the key recommendations for my Department arising out of the interim report was that the maximum penalties should be increased. In examining that matter, the review considered factors such as the penalties available in neighbouring jurisdictions for animal welfare crime and considered the sentencing framework more generally to determine what the appropriate sentencing powers should be. The 2011 Act already provided Northern Ireland with the highest maximum penalties in the UK and provided for the most serious cases in Northern Ireland to be prosecuted in the Crown Court with a maximum penalty of two years. In the rest of the UK, animal welfare offences are summary only offences. The review also recognised, however, that, since the introduction of the 2011 Act, the Republic of Ireland has introduced new animal welfare laws that carry a maximum penalty of five years.

While it was clear that the maximum penalties in the 2011 Act were strong, a combination of factors, including the serious nature of some of the most recent animal cruelty cases, resulted in the review recommending a further increase. That recommendation was warmly welcomed in the consultation that followed the interim report, so much so that the former Justice Minister and Agriculture Minister accepted the recommendation at that point and agreed that it should be implemented as soon as possible. The necessary legislative provision was included in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 — again, Mr Lyttle alluded to that — and was debated by the Assembly earlier this year, which many of you may remember. My officials are preparing an order to commence a number of provisions of the 2016 Act, including the higher penalties for animal welfare offences, which, it has been agreed with the Department, will come into effect on 1 August 2016.

I want to highlight some of the key changes to increase the maximum penalties. For cases heard in the Crown Court, the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 will increase the maximum sentence from two years to five

years. In the Magistrates' Courts, the maximum sentence for more serious offences has increased from six months to 12 months. The 2016 Act also changes the mode of trial for certain animal welfare offences to allow for the prosecution of the most serious cases in the Crown Court, where new higher maximum penalties will apply. Those offences include the breach of a disqualification order, which the review considered as part of its wider approach to preventing those disqualified from obtaining an animal. Until that point, it was only possible to prosecute those cases in the Magistrates' Courts. The changes provide Northern Ireland with amongst the toughest maximum penalties for animal cruelty of any jurisdiction on these islands.

Alongside increasing the maximum penalties, my Department has extended the range of offences captured by the unduly lenient sentences scheme to include certain animal welfare offences. These changes, which have recently come into effect, allow the Director of Public Prosecutions to refer Crown Court cases involving unnecessary suffering and causing, attending or other involvement in an animal fight to the Court of Appeal if he believes that the sentence handed down is unduly lenient. Together, the measures significantly enhance the law on animal cruelty.

I turn now to the matter of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals. Calls for the introduction of a central register raise two distinct issues.

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes, go ahead.

Mr McMullan: The PPS put in place two criteria for prosecutions in relation to farmed animals: one is the assessment of available evidence, and the other is the public interest. Can you explain that? What is the public interest part of the assessment for?

Ms Sugden: It was seen that we were to have robust sentencing for some of that, but the public interest, particularly in recent cases, drives a lot of things we do in the Chamber and how that is relevant to legislation. It is important that we take into account the public interest, particularly in these cases, and see how best we can serve the people of this area.

I come back to the central register and the two distinct issues it raises. The first relates to access to conviction data for three enforcement

bodies: DAERA, councils and the PSNI. The review recognised the need for all enforcement bodies to have access to relevant animal cruelty data. At present, DAERA and the PSNI have access to all relevant conviction data, and work is ongoing to provide councils with similar information. Councils can, however, already access animal cruelty conviction data in cases that they investigated. Those arrangements provide enforcement bodies with the information required to monitor compliance with the legislation effectively. Mr Clarke was concerned about this issue: law enforcement organisations certainly have access to the information they need.

The motion raises the prospect of an accessible register. I understand the motivation for this, and it was considered in the review. It is a complex area, and I know that there were calls for either a fully open register or for data to be made available to rehoming organisations. The review listened carefully to the concerns of stakeholders calling for animal cruelty conviction data to be shared more widely. Stakeholders argued that the information would, for example, be helpful in assessing the suitability of those seeking to rehome an animal. I understand the desire to ensure that animals do not fall into the hands of those who have been convicted of animal cruelty or disqualified from keeping an animal by the courts. The review team listened to those concerns seriously and considered the matter in some detail. It is fair to say, however, that the evidence did not demonstrate a clear need for such arrangements, nor did it point to exactly how the central register might be formulated or what precisely it might seek to achieve. The review recommended that a central register should not be introduced.

Mr Lunn acknowledged the difficulties with a central register but urged that we explore whether there are any solutions that we have not yet thought about. Certainly, I am willing to listen to Members who have expressed an interest in the area. I can explore the detail behind this more fully, and I will discuss it with my Executive colleague in DAERA.

What makes the issue difficult is that information relating to convictions is sensitive personal data. In Northern Ireland, such information is managed through a system known as the criminal records viewer. Due to the nature of the information, only organisations involved in the criminal justice system and a small number of other government bodies have access. Even within those organisations, the ability to view conviction data is very tightly controlled.

Each organisation has to be able to demonstrate a specific business need and that it has appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that the information is handled securely.

I know that some contributors to the review felt that, as convictions —

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Sugden: Sure.

Mr Stalford: Does the Minister accept that, in this day and age, it may not be beyond the realms of possibility that the data can be processed? No one is talking about everyone's criminal record being available to any person selling animals. Surely it cannot be beyond the realms of possibility that convictions that relate specifically to animal cruelty can be kept on a register that can be accessed by those responsible for the trade in animals?

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the sentiments of the Member, and others have expressed similar views. These are the challenges around establishing a central register. I am quite content to see whether there are ways around the challenges. I will work with the Member and others who have expressed a similar view to see whether we can overcome those challenges.

The review considered the findings of the Information Commissioner, where he has determined that convictions are pronounced in court before a very limited audience, and, as time passes from the date of the court, the memory of those present diminishes. The commissioner therefore considers that convictions handed down in court are not public records or information in the public domain.

Although organisations involved in rehoming animals have an important role to play in animal welfare, that role is not, and should not be, an enforcement role. That is a role for the statutory bodies. I am also mindful of the potential for conviction data to be misused if it were to be published on an accessible central register. The review also investigated other more limited options for disclosure and found that, despite potential legal difficulties, it might be possible to share conviction data in certain circumstances. However, broader consideration of relevant factors, including how such a system might work in practice, revealed that any method for disclosure would be resource-intensive and would result in resources being diverted away from front-line enforcement. That may have a detrimental

impact on animal welfare. The review found that protecting resources for front-line enforcement provided the best approach to tackling animal cruelty.

The review team also consulted with enforcement bodies to determine the extent of non-compliance with disqualification orders. It found that there was limited evidence to suggest that individuals disqualified from keeping animals have approached rehoming organisations. The review sought to address concerns regarding animals being rehomed with those who have been disqualified. To gain a deeper understanding of the issue, the review engaged with rehoming organisations to find out more about the rehoming processes already in place. An event was held in February for animal rehoming organisations, and the review heard of effective systems and protocols already in place to assess rehoming applications. Mr Weir kindly attended and spoke at the event, and I am glad to hear that he found it interesting. The event was helpful in providing a forum to share many of the excellent processes in place and to seek to build on those arrangements. The charities go to considerable lengths to avoid rehoming with people who are unsuitable, and we will all be happy to pay tribute to their excellent work. This goes well beyond avoiding matching animals to unsuitable people: they really make exceptional efforts to put the right animals with the right people — people who will love and care for them. That involves home visits, check-ups and fantastic practical help and advice.

I will briefly refer back to the review's sentencing recommendation. In that proposal, we have taken on board the concerns of those seeking to ensure that animals do not fall into the wrong hands, which is why the offence of breaching a disqualification order has been made a hybrid offence.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to please bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Sugden: Although I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to debate animal welfare issues today, policy decisions around how best to maximise the effectiveness of agricultural welfare provisions are a matter for the Agriculture Minister. However, I gave a commitment earlier to work with my Executive colleague to see how best to move forward the issue.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke to wind up the debate on the motion and the amendment.

Mr Clarke: I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. I listened carefully to what the Minister said. I am sorry: I should have begun by welcoming her to the debate and wishing her well for her term of office.

I listened carefully to her words on the review. The review team suggested that concentration on central registers and stuff like that would divert resources from front-line enforcement. However, that suggests to me that there might be less need for enforcement if animals were not placed in the wrong properties in the first instance. Therefore, it may not be a necessity to have so many people in the front-line team.

I am trying not to hang on the Minister's words, but she said that sentences in some cases could be reviewed. Only today, the MP for North Antrim contacted Emma when he realised that this debate was on. He had asked for an appeal against a lenient sentence for animal cruelty, and he got a letter back from the PPS on 16 June. The word back from the PPS was that this was only for cases from the Crown Court and not those from the Magistrates' Court. Some of us do not necessarily know whether cases are going to the Crown Court or the Magistrates' Court. Ultimately, we know that animals are being abused and mistreated in our communities. That is typified by what people have said in the Chamber today about their own experiences. It is not for us to get confused about whether stuff is in a Crown Court or Magistrates' Court.

4.15 pm

The good Member allowed me to intervene in relation to the case in east Belfast. That case typifies that the judiciary has got it wrong. In many cases, sentences cannot be appealed because they do not fit within the remit. Three people who put cats in a cage and let dogs pull them apart can go in front of the judiciary and leave the court in a jovial manner with a suspended sentence. Any right-thinking person, including you, Minister, would agree that that is too lenient. It troubles many of us.

Mr Lyttle made a point about some of the things that the previous Minister did. The motion is not trying to take anything away from what the previous Minister did or from what Ministers from any other Departments have done. What we are trying to say is that we still have not got it right. Things are still not right, and we want to

make them better. Chris Lyttle wanted to hear from the DUP about what we want to do to make it right.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member agree that there was almost unanimity around the Chamber on the issues that we were debating? It is unfortunate that the Member for East Belfast, and the Member for North Down who is no longer in his place, decided to introduce an element of partisan politics into the discussion. That actually demeaned the issues that were being discussed.

Mr Clarke: I agree wholeheartedly. That is what I was coming to. It seems more a case of sour grapes about the fact that those Members missed a trick and set the bar too high for themselves to take the role of Minister. I am thankful that Claire Sugden came up to the mark. I am thankful that she is here today and is taking her brief and this issue seriously, as are all the Members in the Chamber.

It is not for us to suggest to you, Minister, how to do your job and how to go about things. The motion is merely making a suggestion about a central register. I will give you an example. Others talked about family pets. I have a family pet, which was advertised on the Internet by a local council, and I contacted the council about the dog. Council officials told me that they could not release the dog until a certain date the following week. The reason for this was that they had to keep the dog for so many days before they could release it. The interesting fact about that particular case was that the wardens knew where the dog came from. They knew the family involved, because they had visited the home on so many occasions. I am told that what happened, as a regular practice, was that the door of the property was opened in the morning and the dog was pushed out onto the street. They were not being responsible dog owners, but the council had no power to do anything with them. The owners were so caring about the dog that they did not come to collect it from the pound on this occasion. Thankfully, it came into our care and we have given it a good, caring home. As there is no central register, that family could have gone to another charity the following day and took a dog regardless of how they were going to care for it. There is no concern about how people acquire these pets. In the same way as you can go into Tesco and buy a litre of milk, you can go to a

rehoming charity and get a dog, a cat or any other animal.

I read today's information pack and looked at some of the statements in the newspapers on harrowing cases of people abusing animals over the last couple of years. There is nothing to say that those three gentlemen in east Belfast cannot go to a neighbouring constituency and purchase a dog, a cat or any other animal, because they are not on a central register. Their neighbours may know that a case has been brought against them, but some people in the area where they are purchasing the animal will not know. A central register is the only way that we can overcome this problem. Three Members referred to the case of Cody, the dog that was set on fire in Lisburn. There is nothing to prevent any of those people going into any establishment to get another dog.

Reference has also been made today to social media. Some social media sites have started to get it right and are taking responsibility by suggesting to people that their adverts will be taken down, particularly when they are offering dogs free to good homes. Many of us know — I think that it was Michaela who said it today — that these dogs are being used for baiting. That is the last thing that anyone in this Chamber wants to see, so the sooner that we can actually ban online sales and keep a register of those who have been convicted of cruelty and prevent them from acquiring animals, the better.

We are not serious if we continually debate this. Members said this has been debated: yes, it has been debated, and it will be debated again. We will continue to debate it until we get it right. We have not got it right. That is why Emma and I asked for the motion to be debated today, and I am thankful to all those who took part in the debate. I will briefly go through some of the things that people said.

Emma talked about a fight against cruelty, and that is exactly what it is: a fight against cruelty, and most Members want to join in that fight. She talked about how it makes her angry, and it makes me angry, too. Whenever you see sites, such as YouTube or elsewhere, on which people still advertise dog fighting and you can go on and see it — in this day and age — that makes me angry. It disappoints me that we do not have a robust system to bring this to an end and prevent these people from keeping animals.

Doug Beattie talked about us having progressed the issue, and he said that it had been debated. We know that it has been

debated, but we do not want to continue debating it; we want a system that is robust. One of the ways that we see of achieving that is a central register. It was interesting to note, Minister, that when you said that the review talked about a clear need, it was not that they could not do it; I suggest that they did not want to do it. That is how I view it. There is no reason why we cannot do this; there is no willingness to do it. I am not saying for one second that that was on your part, but that is my view, and we need to change the attitude of some of the individuals in the Departments.

Nichola Mallon talked about harsher sentencing, which is something that none of us will disagree with, because we see suspended sentences given to people who abuse and destroy animals. To get off with a lenient or suspended sentence is absolutely ridiculous in this day and age. They should be behind bars and prevented from keeping animals for life, and the only way to do that, Minister, is to keep a central register.

Trevor Lunn talked about the ban, and I think he had a valid point when he said that the ban can be against individuals in a household. I have three children in my house, plus my wife and myself, and if one of my children was banned from keeping animals, there is nothing to prevent the rest of us from keeping animals in the same house. I think that that is wrong, Minister, because the same people, with the same mindset, are in contact with those animals. That should be removed. Those are all suggestions that we are looking at to try to get tougher on animal abuse in Northern Ireland.

Peter Weir acknowledged the work that has been done; again, these are general themes that are coming across today. More needs to be done to improve this.

Harold McKee talked about how people were appalled by the treatment of animals. That is apparent here today, and it is apparent by the number of people who wanted to contribute to the debate, and I thank the Member for his contribution on that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I support this motion, and I appeal to the Minister to do more, now that she is in the role, and fill in the gaps where the previous Minister did not get it right and take us much further, so that we can have a central

register and prevent people from abusing animals in our society today.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Just to let the House know, I have three hens and two cats. I did have four hens, but, unfortunately, a fox got one of them. I am delighted that this debate has been held here today because we have to do everything that we can to protect animals.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Broadband Provision: West Tyrone

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members will have approximately six minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: I know that there is something very important on this evening and we are holding some folk here, but broadband provision in West Tyrone is an important issue. I want to look at it from a slightly different angle. I want to look first of all at the positives in broadband cover in West Tyrone before moving on to the more negative areas.

In this digital age, one of the fundamental components of our economy and our everyday life is excellent broadband cover. Establishing a reliable and high-speed broadband infrastructure has been a priority of this Government over past years, and DETI made considerable progress on the matter. As we start this new term at Stormont, one of the main priorities must be to continue to improve the broadband infrastructure across Northern Ireland. One of the consistent cornerstones of the previous Executive was working with the private sector to develop and implement a strategy that would ensure that Northern Ireland had world-class telecommunications infrastructure in broadband capacity, access and cost.

DETI, with my colleagues Arlene Foster and, later, Jonathan Bell at the helm, had a strategic vision for Northern Ireland to be a leading broadband region in the UK and for homes and businesses across Northern Ireland to have 100% broadband coverage and access. That important infrastructure development is a work in progress, and, whilst it is a priority of the Government, it continues to be the backbone of economic development in our region.

I am an MLA for the predominantly rural constituency of West Tyrone. West Tyrone is an area of two extremes with regard to broadband. On the one hand, Omagh was chosen as the location for a back-up hub for Project Kelvin, which is a €29.5 million collaborative initiative that connects Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with north America. Omagh is host to the hub that would take over if anything went wrong with the main hub in Belfast. It is important to note that.

We are on the cusp of a digital wave, which has the potential to attract global companies to the west of Northern Ireland through the Project Kelvin hub. Since Omagh Enterprise Centre tapped into the Hibernia Atlantic US-Europe cable connections, which are part of that cross-border initiative, it has been attracting world-class industry to West Tyrone. At that location, Omagh has one of the fastest broadband connections in the UK, enabling it to compete with the likes of the New York Stock Exchange or the London Stock Exchange. This broadband infrastructure project that links Northern Ireland to north America has unexpectedly provided a unique connectivity opportunity for businesses in the local area to tap into. Indeed, since Omagh Enterprise Centre saw the potential of that opportunity, it has been working with Invest NI to attract major players in the digital field to the west of Northern Ireland.

Thanks to Project Kelvin, we have a unique opportunity in Omagh through the hub, which means we have a base in the constituency where potentially world-class digital companies could base themselves, with the broadband connection being second to none. It was refreshing to see that companies had the vision and foresight to tap into the excellent resources in the heart of my constituency. We have 65 companies in the Omagh Enterprise Centre, and there are over 300 jobs there. There is the potential to increase that to over 100 companies and over 500 jobs. At this juncture, I invite the Minister to come down to see the work that is ongoing at the business centre in Omagh and the potential there. Not only do we need to highlight the discrepancies and failures in broadband in rural areas throughout West Tyrone, but we need to highlight and sell what we have. We need to get the Minister to look at what we have and the potential to expand in West Tyrone.

4.30 pm

This is a clear example of how the establishment of broadband infrastructure across Northern Ireland has presented opportunities for places like Omagh. The choice of Omagh as a backup hub for the Hibernia Atlantic broadband company has provided a unique opportunity for the constituency. Omagh Enterprise Company tapped into the unique opportunity that has moved its vision closer to reality, and it is now working hard to attract investment into the area in a digital capacity. Such vision is precisely what West Tyrone needs, and it ensures that the west of the Province has a chance to compete on a global scale. The opportunities at stake here are not to be underestimated, and we could see Omagh as a digital hub for huge global enterprises in the future.

Despite the amazing opportunities in Omagh town itself in the enterprise centre, all we have to do is drive a few short miles into the country to find that there are many pockets of the constituency where households have extremely poor, if any, broadband cover. According to Ofcom, the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area has the lowest broadband speeds anywhere in Northern Ireland. Added to that, the area is predominantly rural, and that is compounded by the patchy availability of broadband cover. There are huge gaps between rural and urban broadband accessibility. Ofcom noted that average download speeds are almost twice as fast in urban areas as in rural areas due to rural premises being that much further away from their nearest fibre cabinet. That disparity in

broadband cover is frustrating. While successive Departments have invested in seeking to change that, broadband cover for rural areas in Northern Ireland remains consistently at 40% of premises having access to superfast broadband. That is the challenge we face and the challenge we have to seek to address. Most households and businesses in West Tyrone are immediately at a disadvantage simply due to their location. It is unfortunate that, despite significant investment in broadband infrastructure, this continues to be the case.

Other options need to be found to counteract these pockets of unavailability and slow or practically nil broadband cover. More needs to be done to encourage huge companies such as BT to invest in cabinets in rural areas to develop their coverage to put it straight into the homes of those who are too far from fibre-enabled cabinets. In addition, rural areas have the greatest number of lines currently incapable of supporting speeds above 10 megabits. In 2015, 2% of urban areas in Northern Ireland did not have access to superfast broadband and 42% of premises in rural constituencies had no chance of accessing superfast fibre-optic broadband. That is the disparity between urban and rural areas.

The blight of poor provision has a devastating impact on companies and is a debilitating factor for businesses trying to compete in a global market. I have to say that, even with such poor infrastructure in some areas, the manufacturing industry continues to do fairly well within West Tyrone. Precision engineering is a niche market in West Tyrone and is thriving and growing. It is one example of how, with our skills and the attitude of businesses, the manufacturing industry can adapt and be a world leader, despite the difficulties across that sector and with the broadband infrastructure in rural areas.

I am aware that the Department has alternatives, such as satellite broadband, but that is simply not suitable for some people in a lot of areas because of cost or other issues. Businesses in rural areas are affected, disrupted and hindered. Schoolchildren are at a disadvantage when they want to do homework or study online. Farm businesses are suffering and are hindered due to the poor quality of online access. Work between Departments such as the Department for the Economy and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs must be coordinated. They must collaborate to ensure that rural areas are no longer the poor relation of urban areas. Our constituents should not

expect poor broadband coverage simply because of their location. That is simply unacceptable in the digital age that we live in.

Access to high-quality mobile and Internet services is vital to our increasingly online social and economic lives here in Northern Ireland. While much good work has been and continues to be done, much more needs to be done to close the gap between urban and rural areas, as householders and businesses in West Tyrone continue to be subject to the slowest broadband speeds anywhere in Northern Ireland.

One of the most frustrating things in West Tyrone is that we have constituents who are living on one side of the road and are not doing too badly with broadband cover and yet somebody living on the other side cannot access broadband at all. You also have instances where somebody is living fairly close to one of the fibre-optic boxes but cannot access it because it is in a different postcode area or whatever. The Minister will know that I have put through quite a number of issues to the Department regarding constituents, whether they be farmers, homeowners or in small businesses, who are struggling with their broadband cover. I fully appreciate today that this is a real, challenging issue for the Assembly and the Department. We need to look at some innovative ways to see how we can address the gaps that exist in rural areas and West Tyrone.

It is also important today that we in West Tyrone highlight the benefits of what we have. We can continue to grow that, attract businesses to West Tyrone and create a balance, rather than just presenting a negative image to the Assembly today about the difficulties that we have. We have huge difficulties, but we also have the ability, outside of Belfast, to provide companies with the highest speed of broadband that they can expect to have right across Northern Ireland.

I thank Members for being here for the debate today.

Mr McAleer: I take the opportunity to commend and thank Thomas Buchanan for bringing this very important issue to the House today. It is great to see the Minister here to listen to the debate. The debate follows on from another very important one that Barry McElduff tabled last week to do with rural roads. Indeed, Ross has tabled an Adjournment topic next week in relation to learning disability, so West Tyrone is fairly having a say in the last few weeks before recess. It is great to see the voice of West

Tyrone being heard very loud and clear here in the Assembly.

I will pick up on some of Tom's points. Broadband is an essential commodity. All of us are out and about in the constituency. West Tyrone is a two-thirds rural constituency. Some of the most isolated areas of the North and, indeed, Ireland are in West Tyrone. When you go up into the Sperrins, it is extremely isolated. The people in those areas feel very disconnected. Their broadband coverage is not very good at all. That is compounded by poor public transport. The roads could do with an injection of funding as well. People feel quite disconnected and isolated.

Broadband covers all aspects of life. It is not a commodity; it is absolutely essential for life now. Children need it for homework. Businesses need it, as does the farming community. Tom will know from being on the ARD Committee with me in recent times that perhaps the main thing to get the faster payment of single farm payments is for farmers to fill in their applications online. That is the key ingredient for the speeding up of single farm payments. Not having quality broadband in certain rural areas is undermining the Department and Minister's attempts to get the faster payment of single farm payments. We hope for earlier payments, year on year, to help farmers to cope with the financial crisis that they find themselves in.

As such, I welcome the fact that the commitment to improve broadband connectivity is one of the Programme for Government indicators. That is good news; it is good that that commitment is there.

It is important that people make their views known. I think that the consultation period ends on 22 July. I know that people out there feel that broadband is a massive issue in their communities. Stakeholders and individuals should have their say in the PFG consultation process and make their views known. I welcome the comment made by the Minister that the Executive wants the universal service obligation (USO) threshold raised from 10 to 30 megabits. That is a really good commitment from the Executive.

Drawing on the debate earlier, a couple of things jumped out at me. I note and welcome the fact that there has been progress in recent years, and I suppose it is a fact that there is 95% coverage across the North. One of the big figures that jumped out at me was that £64 million had been spent in the past eight years on trying to improve connectivity throughout the

North. That is £64 million of public money going largely to private operators to fill the not spots that we experience across the area. Whilst we have had good progress in recent years, it is not good enough. In West Tyrone, along with many other constituencies across the North that have been mentioned, there are very large not spots in rural constituencies. It is really important to draw on that £64 million and put a focus on the private sector, which has been granted millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. We need to see exactly what it has been doing to provide connectivity to rural areas. It is a huge issue.

While preparing for this debate, I came across a review of a report from Scotland. Comments made by the Connectivity Secretary, Fergus Ewing, indicated that they had been doing a lot of work on mobile infrastructure in Scotland. They have been getting 4G and preparing for 5G. They have been working very closely with the private sector on initiatives to expand the 4G and prepare for 5G. They are dealing with the same mobile operators as we are here, and, even though it is a Westminster initiative, the Scottish Government have taken it forward as their own. It would be worthwhile exploring, in conjunction with the Connectivity Secretary, some of the initiatives that they have looked at, for example, business rates relief for operators and investing in the construction of new and enhanced infrastructure. It might be an idea to look at some of the good or best experiences in similar parts of the world that we could draw on here.

This has been a worthwhile adjournment debate. It put a focus on West Tyrone. When we were out and about, particularly over election time, it hit us as a massive issue. It is great to see the Minister here, and I encourage him to work with Executive colleagues and look at other areas and other countries to see what practices or lessons we can learn from other parts of the world to improve the connectivity that we lack in many rural areas in West Tyrone and throughout the North.

Mr Hussey: I begin by thanking Mr Buchanan for bringing the issue before the House, and I thank the Minister for being here. I look forward to his visit to West Tyrone to see what is available.

It seems strange that in the county town of Tyrone we have Project Kelvin, one of the most advanced Internet services in the world, and can get in touch with North America, yet, from Omagh, we have major difficulty getting in touch with north, south, east or west Tyrone. Reference was made to the rurality of West

Tyrone. In Greencastle, we had businesses that could not transmit their paperwork through to their suppliers or pay their staff because the Internet had gone down. We talk about rurality and isolation, but, in Malin in County Donegal, which is not, for those of you who do not know it, the centre of the universe — it is on the most northerly tip of the Republic of Ireland and is further north than we are, sitting here — you can get full broadband facilities. Yet, you cannot get that three or four miles outside the county town of Tyrone.

There has been reference to people doing their homework. I look across the Chamber and see few who would have used the Internet to do their homework, with the exception of you, Mr McCrossan. I look across at the oldies over there, and I know that they, like me, were glad to have a biro and a piece of paper. When I did my degree with the Open University, I had to send off my assignments via the Internet. It was marvellous to hear that Doctor Who sound as your computer whirred into action. The Tardis was about to land, and you hoped that it landed in time for you to get your assignment in before the deadline. Many's the time, by one or two minutes, I managed to make it and get the assignment away.

4.45 pm

There are people in Tyrone who would love to hear the sound of the Tardis arriving in their home, because then at least they would have some sort of Internet connection. They do not have it. Doctor Who had a blue box. We talk about the green boxes that are scattered throughout Tyrone, and we know that some of them have so many wires coming out of them that they may as well be the Tardis. It is impossible for all the systems to work from those boxes. There are also suggestions that there are green boxes scattered throughout West Tyrone that are not connected, because it does not make financial sense for BT to have them connected. It is waiting for more and more customers to become available, and then the famous box may be connected. Why is that? At one stage, BT boasted that 99% of the United Kingdom was covered by broadband. I know that there are Members who do not like to recognise the fact that this is part of the United Kingdom. BT used to say, "It's good to talk". It is good to talk until you want to talk to BT. BT would not engage with me about our constituents on the Edenderry Road in Omagh, which is less than three miles from the town centre. They are on the Beragh telephone exchange but cannot get access to the Internet. Strangely enough, when questions to the Minister appeared, BT wanted to talk. BT

phoned me, but BT was not willing to come to Omagh. BT wanted to meet me here in Stormont. I have now discovered what the problem is: BT does not know where BT78 and BT79 are, because it has never travelled outside greater Belfast. It does not know where Tyrone is. It does not know where Omagh is.

In the 21st century, it is scandalous that somewhere like Malin in the back of Donegal can get full-strength broadband but, three miles outside Omagh, you cannot get broadband. In a lot of our rural areas, you might as well have a tin can and a piece of string, because that would be the most effective form of communication.

I listened to the debate on the provision of broadband. We in West Tyrone have been very badly serviced. Mr Buchanan is correct: we have great provision in Omagh, we have great facilities and the broadband works. We have a great working population. That is wonderful in the town, but we cannot forget the rural dwellers. Mr McElduff is famed throughout the world for using the expression "rural proofing". We need to have broadband rural-proofed. There is 3G and 4G: some parts of Northern Ireland would be glad to get a G — anything at all — because they are not getting it. Why is West Tyrone being forgotten about? I know that the issue will be dealt with as part of the Programme for Government. Can we have an assurance that, by the end of the mandate, everyone in West Tyrone will have access to broadband? Be it 1G, 2G, 3G or 4G, we want access.

I thank Mr Buchanan for bringing the topic to the House. I am glad that the Tardis has landed. Let us hear it taking off again, and let us hear about broadband being available in West Tyrone.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, welcome this all-important debate and thank my constituency colleague Mr Tom Buchanan for bringing it to the House. I also welcome the Minister and his attention to this all-important issue.

We have just come out of an election, and this is a problem that we picked up on at every rural door. Ross is right. Barry has heard it, I have heard it and every MLA before us in our constituency has heard it. It is not a new problem. Tom, on a point that you made, this is not about being negative; this is real life. It is real life for the people of West Tyrone, particularly those in the more rural parts of the constituency.

It is great that we have Project Kelvin in Omagh, with everything that it could potentially deliver for the area, but that in itself is not enough. That is only one area. West Tyrone is a hugely rural constituency, and the people feel very neglected. I could ramble about the figures and the costs and the money that has been spent elsewhere, but I am going to talk about the real-life aspect of this particular situation. I am going to talk about the people who are trying to run businesses in our constituency — a constituency that has been rife with unemployment, social deprivation and lack of investment for a long number of years. This is not a new problem, but it could help to address the very real difficulties that we have in relation to the local economy.

Ross is right: businesses cannot get their staff paid. There is a major flaw right there. That should not be happening in 2016. Businesses cannot get their orders out in time, which has a knock-on effect for the reputation of that business and on the person who is purchasing the materials. It is limiting our capacity, as a constituency, to truly expand economically. People will not invest in a constituency that cannot meet the basic needs in relation to broadband. In 2016, broadband is a vital strand of any infrastructure, and that needs to be appreciated by the House. To hear that a particular area does not meet the needs or the costs is utterly ridiculous. There are 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland, and each and every person, from one end of those to the other, has a right to access that service.

That is only one area. There are also schoolchildren, as Ross rightly pointed out. Some in this House may have used a biro or a pen, but we have come much further than that — in relation to homework, at least, but certainly not in relation to broadband. We need to get real about these issues. It is feeding into the migration issues that we face in Northern Ireland — emigration issues, in fact, but in particular the migration. Students do not want to come home from Belfast because they have no access to the Internet. They cannot communicate with their friends — the most basic thing. As Mr Buchanan rightly pointed out, you may have broadband on one side of the road while the people on the other side of the road do not. That is hugely frustrating. To a large extent, it is discriminatory, although I do not like using that language. I want to know what the Department is going to do, on a meaningful basis, to actually deal with this issue. There is no justification — the Minister is listening — for the lack of investment, funding and delivery around this particular issue in my constituency.

It is an issue in relation not only to broadband but to telephone coverage. I will give an example from when I was canvassing — a very real insight. I needed to get access to a phone, and I said to someone with me, "Can I borrow your mobile?", and they said, "We have no network, Daniel." So I went to the next house and had a conversation, and I asked the lady, "Can I use your landline?", and she said, "I'm sorry, but there was a lightning strike, and we haven't had a BT landline for a few weeks. We have made contact with BT. They have ignored us and ignored us and ignored us. We have no Internet and we have no mobile signal." Complete and utter isolation — that is an example of the reality. We have much to talk about of benefit, yes, in central Omagh and the central parts of Strabane, but when you go to the farther roads, people are utterly, completely isolated, neglected and ignored. Those who are benefiting are talking about the slow speeds, and some say that that is satisfactory because they are getting some broadband. It is a neglect of a rural community and of all rural constituencies. It must be addressed, Minister, and addressed in this mandate. It cannot go beyond that. We are not going to suffer any more excuses.

Ms Boyle: I also thank Mr Buchanan for bringing this very important Adjournment debate to the House today.

I want to commend the work that has been done thus far. Obviously it is not enough for us in West Tyrone. I believe that, as others have said, we can and should be doing more. I just want to talk, as others have talked, about examples of how it affects people's lives if they do not have any broadband access, never mind good broadband access. I know of a home that has three modems — one in the living room, one in the kitchen and one upstairs in the bedroom — just to get some sort of coverage. This is a family that has school-going children who depend on broadband access for school.

I am also aware of a young teacher who lives in Plumbridge and works in Strabane. She drives home to Plumbridge every day after school, has her tea and drives seven miles to her brother's house to get broadband access because she has none in her home, even though it is set up for that.

Those are just some of the issues that we hear about daily. In areas such as Glenelly and Aghabrack — other Members know where these areas are — people leave their homes and drive their cars to get access to broadband and phones. That should not be happening in this day and age.

I have said here before, and I have heard others say, that there is no incentive to build small businesses in rural areas because of the lack of broadband and phone access. In my opinion, as the previous Member to speak said, that is discriminatory. We need to have a specific concentration of high-priority areas to allow for a fit-for-purpose broadband infrastructure.

Declan McAleer and others mentioned the private sector providers. They have a responsibility because they have received public money to provide a service with coverage in rural areas. Users who receive their service from the private sector are experiencing varying degrees of outage, which is not acceptable. When we, as elected representatives, contact those providers, there is an inconsistent approach to responding to us, which is not acceptable either.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: I will indeed.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that, in the exact context in which she is speaking, Douglas Bridge, in our own Strabane district, is an example of that? There was a cut-out, and when my office contacted the provider — I am sure it was the same in your office — we were asked for the phone numbers of absolutely every person in that area who was directly affected, and they would not address us otherwise. That was unacceptable.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for his intervention. Absolutely; I have experienced that in my office, as have others. Indeed, the consequence of this has an impact on people's ability to go about their daily business and their work. Support must be given to those who are affected, and a proper line of communication must exist from the provider to the user, because that is not happening. As Mr McCrossan said, if they are not going to get back to us, they are not going to get back to the service user either.

I want to pay tribute to the services that our libraries provide. In my home town of Strabane, many children from rural areas are picked up from the school bus by their parents and driven to Strabane to use the Internet facilities that our libraries provide. I want to commend the libraries for doing that. Many of them have after-school clubs, which helps. I am also

aware, going back a number of years, of families who did that. My predecessor as MLA, Claire McGill, raised the issue of small post offices in rural areas, and not much has changed. That was over five years ago, and there is no reliable broadband service in parts of Aghabrack, Aghyaran, Glenelly, Killeter and Killen.

We do a lot of talking in the House about having a high-quality workforce in the public and private sectors, but how are we going to allow for that when our young people cannot stay at home to study or, as the previous Member to speak said, will not come home from university at the weekend because of bad access to broadband? I was on the Finance and Personnel Committee in the last mandate, and we talked a lot about flexible working patterns, but those do not work for people who live in rural areas, even though the then Department of Finance and Personnel said that it had provided for that through rural proofing.

I am also aware of two young friends who live in the rural area of Aghabrack. In the morning, when one family picks up the child from the other family to get to the school bus — they live a field apart — they have to sound the car horn to let the other family know that they are on their way to pick up the child because they have no other way of communicating inside the house or outside it. Their landline does not work and their Internet service is very poor.

5.00 pm

Today, I have two young students with me from my hometown of Strabane; Ellie and Marissa. They have spoken about their school friends coming into school literally in tears because they have been unable to complete their coursework. That is a sad reflection on society and what we are meant to provide. I am delighted that the Programme for Government provides for good-quality broadband. I would like to hear the Minister's views on that in his summing up.

It has also been said to me that people in many rural areas are just happy that there are defibrillators in their areas because God forbid that a home had to call 999. That applies not just in West Tyrone but in other rural areas and constituencies.

I am thankful to the Member for bringing the Adjournment topic to the Floor of the House. This is one issue that we are not going to let rest. We will continue until we get proper broadband —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Boyle: — and Internet services in West Tyrone.

Mr McElduff: Where would you start? It is so bad. This really needs to be tackled. At the end of the day, it is more about people than it is about technology; the same as the roads debate last week was more about people than it was about roads. I would suggest to the Minister, in all seriousness, that, if he wants to go down in history and leave a great legacy as a Minister for the Economy, he could do worse than take up the challenge of ensuring the provision of first-class broadband in constituencies like West Tyrone by the end of this mandate, as has been suggested by other Members who have spoken. The Programme for Government should reflect that. The Minister should set himself the ambition and target of sorting this out in a major, comprehensive way in the next four to five years — sooner if possible. I am really trying to convey to the Minister from the outset that this is a massive priority for rural citizens.

Some months ago, I met his predecessor, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Jonathan Bell, in Netherleigh House. I brought with me rural council representatives. In anecdotal fashion, Minister Bell told me that he was familiar with our community; he was once a social worker in the area and had stayed in a bed and breakfast in Seskinore. He enquired about the family in Seskinore and I told him that that family had a great word on him except when it came to broadband. Broadband is dominating the minds and thoughts of people in West Tyrone to a huge degree.

Tom Buchanan, who sponsored the debate, was right when he emphasised the entrepreneurial side of things in West Tyrone and Tyrone. He mentioned the niche area of precision engineering. I think that it is a well-known statistic that 80% of the world's quarry manufacturing equipment is made in County Tyrone. I could easily spend a lot of time or my remaining time giving the Minister a tour de force of rural areas in West Tyrone. He might think that I will have done that by the end of this speech, but I do not think that I am doing it because I am just touching the surface. Take an area like Clanabogan between Omagh and Dromore. You have a major tractor-selling company there at Corradinna Road, JB Barrett Tractors. It is a significant employer that has no or poor broadband all the time. How can it do business?

In the Creggan area, you have a very distinguished building contractor, J&M Begley. Its tale of woe — its recent experience — really needs to be retold here and now. It was eight days without any Internet provision, between 17 May and 24 May, trying to run a business that operates solely on the Internet. It was an extremely distressing time for the company, as it had the following deadlines to meet: wages processed on the Internet every Thursday to Revenue and Customs; subcontractor return posted on the Internet by the nineteenth of the month every month; VAT due before the end of the month to Revenue and Customs, with the deadline fast approaching; and Southern VAT due before the nineteenth of the month. Revenue and Customs was contacted. The position was explained to it, and it could not believe that, in 2016, the Internet could be off for eight days. It was quite adamant, because it is quite ruthless, that the company has to pay the fines of £100 per day, I think it was. The Southern Government charge was a €400 penalty. The company is irate, the company is distressed and the company is disadvantaged in meeting crucial deadlines.

When I was in the Trillick area during the recent election — it does not take an election to hear these messages, but they certainly get reinforced over a four, five or six-week period — I met a farmer in the Kinine area of Trillick who could not fill out his single farm payment form online at a time when the Minister's colleague Michelle McIlveen is pushing farmers towards online completion, as did the previous Minister, Michelle O'Neill.

An electrical engineer, a young man from the Derryallen area of Trillick would love to work one or two days a week from home —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his — sorry, you have a few more minutes.

Mr McElduff: No problem. I am very grateful for your latitude, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. An electrical engineer, a young man from the Derryallen area of Trillick cannot work from home but would be offered that facility by his Belfast-based employer should this be got right.

Last Saturday —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McElduff: Do I have half a minute or just six minutes?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Three seconds.

Mr McElduff: OK. I will just leave it at that. We want to end this major economic disadvantage.

Ms Armstrong: I thank Mr Buchanan for bringing forward the debate. As a rural dweller, I know that having issues with broadband can cause absolute distress in homes with teenagers. It is not a luxury or an indulgence; it is a utility. Believe me, when you have kids at school or are trying to run a rural business, it is not a luxury; it absolutely is a utility.

I very much welcome hearing about the Omagh hub approach, and I would like to see that replicated across Northern Ireland, because, where there is a hub approach, you can see broadband being spread out into the rural areas around it. I believe we should consider how we identify the gaps in rural areas. Mr Hussey talked about 99% of the UK having broadband provision. I would like to challenge that. As I mentioned in the debate earlier, while there are some villages that claim to have broadband, when you look into the detail of it, you see that the periphery areas, which are not close to a green cabinet, do not. So, when someone says there is 99% coverage, is there, and has there been a good enough review in rural areas of those streets, towns and roads where the provision is not very good?

I think there needs to be a targeted approach to reach those rural areas where broadband is not yet available or speeds are not of a good enough standard, because this is hurting rural businesses. It is making them uncompetitive. Those businesses that I have spoken to have told me that it is hurting their sales and marketing strategies. They are not able to brand themselves globally, and, as far as online banking is concerned, you may as well forget about that. A while back, when they talked about doing away with cheques, how many rural businesses went into panic mode because online banking was not available due to the lack of broadband?

I believe that rural proofing is a necessity in this issue and that any future proposals must be rural proofed. It is not acceptable for rural people to be expected to have slower speeds than urban dwellers. I think, therefore, that it must be a priority for the Minister and the Department to ensure that rural areas receive a fair coverage of broadband.

I would like to see cross-departmental consideration on the issue. As I said, when you are the mother of a teenager and you see the

homework that is expected to be done online, printed out and with reports completed, as well as the absolute panic in your child's eyes when they realise that the library shut at 4.30 pm and there are no alternative provisions available for them, you feel that it is not fair.

We need to work with Education on that. GPs and hospitals depend more and more on linking through reports, but that is impossible if broadband speeds are not good enough or, indeed, if broadband is not available. We want to develop our rural businesses and build entrepreneurship. I read with some interest that, through the Bring IT On campaign, we are pushing to see more and more young people become coders, but there is not much point in that if young people do not have access to appropriate broadband when they go home in the evening to take forward what they have learnt during the day. We need to improve connectivity because, more and more, Departments are putting information on NI Direct or moving to apps. That is not a lot of use if you do not have broadband at home and cannot access it.

I am concerned about BT but not because of the work it has been doing to roll out green cabinets; that has been quite successful in the majority of places. However, when you phone up after a new green cabinet has gone in, they say, "Sorry, we are not in your area". The mapping system is out of date. I am keen to challenge BT by saying, "Are you up to date with what your engineers are doing?". It is important that we consider that our rural customers are not getting the best provision from BT because its mapping system is not up to date.

Mr McAleer talked about the draft Programme for Government framework, in which almost every outcome will depend on improved Internet connectivity. In fact, if we want to achieve many of the outcomes, the indicators say that we need improved Internet connectivity.

In summary, West Tyrone is not the only rural area in Northern Ireland that is being let down. There are a significant number of rural areas and pockets across Northern Ireland where the lack of broadband provision is not only harming our rural businesses but stagnating and stopping our young people getting involved in the IT industry.

Mrs Barton: While I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I have great empathy with my colleagues from West Tyrone and further afield. The issues of broadband and mobile not spots

are exactly the same. Yes, some villages have benefited, but, unfortunately, rural dwellers appear to have been forgotten about or neglected. Is that because, in the long term, superfast broadband to those areas would not be economically viable? Furthermore, we have the situation in Fermanagh and South Tyrone where people living within a few hundred metres of a new green box cannot receive fast broadband as, historically, the infrastructure that already exists means that they have been connected to a green box six kilometres in the opposite direction and are, therefore, out of range of the fast broadband. That needs to be looked at.

We then have the situation in Lisnaskea, where green boxes are located at either end of the town and the centre of the town is outside the range of either green box, because many of the businesses were originally connected to the exchange directly in the town centre that cannot be upgraded. Surely that indicates that some thought needs to be given to upgrading the already out-of-date historical infrastructure.

Yesterday, we debated the proposed closure of the electoral offices and the difficulties of registering online due to limited broadband. Farmers, who traditionally live in rural areas, cannot avail themselves of the facility of registering their newborn animals online and thus keeping their registers up to date. Many have to travel some distance to their nearest Agriculture office, at extra cost to themselves, to do that. Farmers are also encouraged to submit their single farm payment applications online for quicker assessment checks by Department staff and, of course, quicker payments, which all farmers need these days. We tax our cars online, bank online, book holidays online etc. None of that can be done.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Barton: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: The Member mentioned applications for farming and car tax. Does she agree that the difficulty, as I said to fellow Member Michaela Boyle, is in getting through to these people? The car tax agency is now in Swansea, having moved from Coleraine. Again, there is a disconnect: they do not know where West Tyrone or Fermanagh and South Tyrone are. That is a huge issue.

5.15 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but we will not have time to give you an extra minute.

Mrs Barton: OK.

I totally agree with the Member. These people have no idea of the geography of the area.

We have another problem in that the divide between the broadband available seems to be getting greater. In England, they have up to 200 megabits. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, we are trying to get 2 megabits. Something needs to be looked at. Over many years, questions have been asked in the House about broadband and mobile connectivity, and a substantial amount of money has been allocated for upgrading both. However, connectivity and mobile not spots remain a major issue that is very important for the people of the west.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):

I congratulate the Member on securing the debate on broadband provision in West Tyrone, which developed into a debate on broadband provision in several other parts of the country as well. I think that this is my first opportunity to say this: I could almost refer Members to the comments that I made some hours ago, having debated the issue at length in the Chamber this morning. It is an opportunity to highlight some of the important issues that were discussed earlier during the debate on Northern Ireland's telecommunications network and to hone in specifically on West Tyrone.

Again, I congratulate the Member on securing the debate, and I am very happy, in due course, to visit Omagh in his West Tyrone constituency, particularly the Enterprise Centre, which I am familiar with already, and, indeed, some of the other superb businesses in the West Tyrone constituency. I do not think that anybody who contributed to the debate suggested for a second that West Tyrone was not a hive of some very good industries and businesses and, indeed, has the potential to be more. I am very happy to travel down to West Tyrone and visit some of those businesses over the coming months.

I begin by stressing that, as Minister for the Economy, I fully recognise the importance of access to fast, dependable Internet connectivity in the world of business as well as a growing reliance on online access for various educational and social needs. Broadband has quickly become essential for everyday life. I am, of course, familiar with many of the issues raised during the debate from personal

experience in my constituency, particularly on broadband provision in rural areas. My Department is fully committed to working to deliver improvements to our telecoms connectivity as set out in the draft Programme for Government. Over the last eight years, my Department has channelled some £64 million into a number of projects that have significantly raised the reach, speed and quality of broadband services across Northern Ireland and had, at a time, put us ahead of other UK regions. Those initiatives have undoubtedly had a positive impact in the West Tyrone constituency.

A briefing report produced by the House of Commons Library in January this year identified that 60% of premises across West Tyrone can access superfast broadband services of at least 30 megabits a second. In addition, it reports that, in the constituency, 88% of premises currently have a broadband connection of greater than 2 megabits a second, 56% of premises have a connection of greater than 10 megabits a second, and 30% have a connection of greater than 30 megabits a second. Importantly, this suggests to me that some 30% of premises that can access a broadband service of 30 megabits a second or greater have not yet taken up a faster service. Anyone wishing to find out whether they can access a faster service should visit the Openreach website, where there is an availability checker that can search by phone number or postcode. The report also shows that the average broadband download speed across the West Tyrone constituency stands at almost 21 megabits a second, which I acknowledge is lower than the Northern Ireland average of 28.3 megabits a second.

I will set this in the wider context of our investment in improved services across Northern Ireland. My Department's Northern Ireland broadband improvement project has already ensured that, for the first time, 48,000 premises that are largely in rural areas have received access to a broadband service of at least 2 megabits a second and that just over 29,000 premises can now access services of 30 megabits a second or better. I pointed out in the earlier debate that that £24 million broadband improvement project has, up to March 2016, led to broadband improvement work at 164 exchanges across Northern Ireland, many of which are in the West Tyrone constituency. Forgive me if I get some of the names wrong, but, looking through the list, I know some of the geography of the area. Carrickmore, Castlederg, Beragh, Drumquin, where Mr Buchanan is from, Fintona, Gortin, Newtown Stewart, Omagh, Sion Mills and

Strabane have all benefited from that £24 million investment in the broadband improvement scheme.

If I am quoting him correctly, Mr McCrossan said:

"there is no justification ... for the lack of investment",

but there has been investment. I accept that it is not perfect, ideal or where anybody would want it to be at, but it is not right to say that there has been no investment. There has been investment, and we need to look at ways in which we can improve that investment, target it and use different technologies to ensure that those who are a little bit further away and harder to reach can get better broadband speeds. There has, however, been some investment. As a result and as the figures have shown, there has been some improvement in accessing better broadband speeds.

It was reported that, at 31 March 2016, almost 7,100 premises across West Tyrone could access new broadband services delivered through the project. Although that presents a reasonably good picture overall, I recognise that more can always be done to increase the coverage of faster broadband services in places such as West Tyrone. That is why my Department is engaged in ongoing initiatives that are aimed at further enhancing our broadband infrastructure. For instance, under the broadband improvement contract, BT will reinvest certain revenues made when take-up exceeds a specific threshold. The final amount will not be known until the autumn when plans can be developed to improve further the coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland. Additionally, my Department is managing a contract for the delivery of the superfast roll-out programme, which, by the end of 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 24 megabits per second, to a further 39,000 premises, both business and residential, across Northern Ireland, including in West Tyrone.

Members may already be aware that Ofcom reported that 42% of rural premises and 2% of urban premises cannot currently achieve speeds of 10 megabits per second or better. That is largely due to Northern Ireland's premises having some of the longest line lengths in the UK, as a result of population spread. However, Ofcom did add that the deployment of my Department's superfast programme will change that landscape rapidly. It is anticipated that, by the time that the projects have been completed, some 87% of

premises across Northern Ireland will have access to services of at least 24 megabits per second, compared with 82% when the project began.

Alternative networks can also offer a viable option for the delivery of broadband services in the most difficult to reach and less densely populated areas. Over recent years, my Department has supported projects that have extended fixed wireless and satellite broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland, particularly in West Tyrone. In January, my Department launched a scheme that allows consumers with a broadband connection of less than 2 megabits per second to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite broadband service installed from a list of registered providers, subject to satisfying some eligibility criteria.

It might be helpful to remind Members of the constraints within which any intervention that is taken forward by my Department has to operate. As many Members will know, telecommunications matters are reserved at Westminster, meaning that my Department has only limited powers to intervene in what is a fully privatised and independently regulated market. In addition, initiatives have to be designed in a way that meets state-aid rules, which require us to be technology-agnostic and to ensure that any procurement is open and competitive, with the overriding aim of ensuring value for money and delivering the maximum benefit for public funding. Although public funds can and will be invested in the development of telecommunications networks, it is ultimately a business decision for providers to decide on how and whether they wish to participate in any scheme. In that context, neither I nor the Assembly can direct or compel a network operator on where or when it should invest and what technology can be used.

My Department is reviewing what has been achieved to date and considering what will need to be addressed after the current initiatives have been completed. Although still at a very early stage, it is already apparent that, if the ambitions of the draft Programme for Government on improving Internet connectivity are to be realised, further investment is likely to be required, no matter what technology we deploy.

I hope that the run-through of what we have been doing and the impact that that has been having has been beneficial in presenting to Members a record of achievements to date in the West Tyrone constituency, as well as providing an overview of what is ongoing to

enhance telecommunication infrastructure across Northern Ireland and a summary of plans for future intervention at both a devolved and national level. I fully appreciate and understand the concerns and issues that have been raised by Members from West Tyrone. They are concerns and issues that could be and are raised by people who live in my constituency, as well as by those in other parts of Northern Ireland. I want to see us build on the £64 million that has been invested in broadband projects since 2008, which has brought about significant improvements. There is still more to do to improve broadband access, and I am committed to doing my best to achieve better broadband speeds for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.25 pm.

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