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Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 November 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, on Friday afternoon, I received a media query to ask whether I would recuse myself from any future decisions on Assembly business in relation to Charter NI and the social investment fund. I replied to make it clear that I had already done so. I had, in fact, made it clear to my office on 24 October 2016. However, it is only right that the Assembly is the place where I should make a fuller statement on the issue. It is not normal that any Speaker would speak to the House about constituency interests, but I recognise that I should do so today.

I make it clear that, while I have offered advice, I do not hold and have never held a position as adviser to Charter NI. My involvement with Charter NI, as an organisation working on the ground in my constituency, has been no different than it would be with any organisation in my constituency seeking advice from its elected representative. I have supported Charter NI in projects that it is working on for the benefit of my constituents. All Members know that they will act similarly for organisations in their constituencies. Similarly, like Members from other parties, I was appointed as a constituency member to my local steering group for the social investment fund.

When a first question for urgent oral answer was received in relation to Charter NI on 24 October 2016, I gave consideration to whether I should take the decision. Given the time pressure, I proceeded to take the decision, but, in doing so, made it clear to my office that, if future decisions were required, it would be prudent for me to delegate to avoid any perception of conflict. As a consequence of that, when a second question for urgent oral answer was tabled on 8 November, the decision was delegated to the Principal Deputy Speaker, in line with the instruction given to my office on 24 October. The Principal Deputy Speaker then considered the procedural advice and made a decision on the basis of it.

With hindsight, I accept that it would have been better had I followed my initial instincts and also delegated the first question. I apologise unreservedly to the House for not having done so. Members can be assured that I will err on the side of caution in the future.

In accordance with the direction I gave to my office on 24 October, should any further procedural decisions be required relating to Assembly business around the social investment fund in East Belfast or Charter NI, I will again use the ability to delegate, which has been given to me under Standing Order 5(2). The Speaker's Office is diligent in recording when such decisions have been delegated, but, for the future, when a decision or oral question or similar item is communicated, if it has been delegated, the Member will also be made aware of that when receiving the answer.

I am advised that it is unusual for there to be a direct conflict between a Speaker's constituency role and procedural decisions that may have to be taken. There are occasions when issues might come up related to our constituencies or other interests when the Deputy Speakers or I are in the Chair. In most circumstances, those are not problematic, but Members can be assured that, when a perceived conflict arises, we take account of it. For instance, it was very clear last week that questions on the social investment fund may feature prominently during questions for oral answer to the Executive Office today. I made clear to my office on Friday morning that I needed to consider whether it would be wiser for me not to be in the Chair for those questions as would normally be expected, and I will not be.

I want to make some additional points. Members may be aware that one of the issues I have been frustrated about in recent weeks has been trying to get across that the political reasons Members may give for accepting an item of business or, indeed, speculate as to why it has not been accepted, are not the same as the procedural considerations the Deputy Speakers and I take account of. That is why

Members may sometimes reach different conclusions. In my letter to party leaders on 21 October, I made clear that the best way for me or, indeed, any of us to assure our independence and impartiality is to base our decisions on our procedures and precedents. While Members may not always like the outcomes, they can be assured that that is the approach I have taken.

I want to remind Members that I informed the House last week that I intend to bring forward new rulings on Matters of the Day and questions for urgent oral answer in the new year to make Members aware of the factors I will take account of. I have clearly noted the increased demand in this new mandate, and Members can expect that to be reflected in the new ruling.

Finally, I want to remind the House that, like other Members, I am elected to represent a constituency, but I am more constrained in how I can do that. For instance, I cannot raise constituency issues on the Floor or make public comment on areas of political debate. As someone who has always found working for constituents the most rewarding part of being an elected representative, I will admit that this is one aspect of being Speaker I have found particularly difficult. As I said, Members can expect me to be extremely cautious in the future in relation to where my responsibilities as Speaker and a constituency Member interact. I will be having further discussions with my officials on that. However, I ask Members to be conscious that I, too, have constituents to represent.

I have clearly heard and understood the concerns that Members raised. I hope that a number of points are now on the record to make it clear that lessons have been learned and steps taken for the future.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be of assistance if guidance was given to Members that their membership of the steering committees under the social investment fund should be declared on the Register of Members' Interests?

Mr Speaker: I think, Mr Allister, that I will seek advice on that — you can also seek advice on the matter — from the Clerk of Standards.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your statement, you said that there are occasions related to constituency or other interests where there would not be an issue that would be problematic in making a ruling, and

you then referred in that regard to perceived conflicts of interest. I suggest that you consider that, where there are issues that might be problematic, and indeed where there may be perceived conflict of interest, it might be a better course of action for you as Speaker to take the advice of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Deputy Speakers in order to ensure that there is a full hearing among you and your colleagues in relation to rulings that might be made when it comes to issues that might present as perceived conflicts of interest and where there are indeed issues that are problematic.

Mr Speaker: I will reflect on your comments, Mr Attwood, but I do have to say that I have confidence in the Speaker's team in the Assembly.

Ministerial Statement

Prisons: Mental Health

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to make her statement, I remind her that Standing Order 18A(2) requires her to make a written copy of it available to Members at least 30 minutes before delivering it in the Chamber. The Minister has failed to meet this requirement this morning. The Business Office received the statement only at 11.49 am. Therefore, in accordance with Standing Order 18A(2), I ask her to state the reason for this prior to making her statement.

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I apologise to the House for the lateness in supplying the Business Office with my statement. It was an administrative oversight on our part. I will ensure that it does not happen again.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Sugden: I wish to update Members on matters relating to mental health in the Northern Ireland Prison Service following recent deaths in custody.

First, my thoughts and sympathy are with all those who have been affected by the recent deaths in Maghaberry Prison. Every death in custody is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for bereaved family and friends. It greatly affects prison staff, particularly those officers who have worked with these vulnerable people and have come to know them. It is also a tragedy for other inmates who are affected, too.

As Justice Minister, I take extremely seriously the responsibility that is placed on me to care for every individual in custody in Northern Ireland. It is a very sad fact that the prison population includes groups of highly vulnerable people and, for some, the confinement regime itself presents a significant burden on their mental health.

Since November 2015, there have been five deaths in custody in Northern Ireland, four relating to mental health issues. On 17 November 2016, the prison population totalled 1,533. Of these, 417 were recorded as having a mental illness, and a further 740 prisoners were recorded as having an addiction. That amounts to just over 75% of the prison population.

The needs of those who are in prison are complex. In comparison with wider society, disproportionately higher numbers of prisoners present with mental health problems and personality disorders. In addition, the problems that are associated with alcohol and substance misuse, mental illness and generally poor coping skills are all higher among the prison population. Research also tells us that people who are in custody are more likely to have either undiagnosed or unmet health needs. For many, their first mental health diagnosis occurs only when they are in custody.

The Prison Service supports vulnerable prisoners through the supporting prisoners at risk (SPAR) process. This helps staff to identify at an early stage behaviours that suggest that a prisoner may be in personal crisis and in need of additional and immediate support and care. The emphasis is on individualised care of the prisoner and engagement to understand what is causing the distress.

12.15 pm

The SPAR process is designed to be a short-term crisis, first-aid management tool; it is not designed to provide long-term care or to address underlying issues such as poor mental health or historical trauma. The process provides for an immediate plan for keeping the person safe, a swift assessment of the concerns causing the crisis and a pathway for longer-term interventions and support to prevent or reduce a recurrence.

However we portray it, the custody environment is not designed to deal with those experiencing severe, chronic mental health issues. Whatever level of training we provide to staff, they remain prison officers. The Northern Ireland Prison Service cannot meet the challenge alone. We need the ongoing help and support of the Department of Health, other Departments and partners across the justice system and in the wider community. Prison officers play a vital role in assessing and supporting vulnerable offenders during periods of crisis. Countless lives have been saved by prison officers who identify prisoners at risk and care for them successfully. We owe them a debt of gratitude for the work that they do around the clock to keep prisoners as safe as possible in very challenging circumstances.

The management of the Prison Service, governors and their teams work tirelessly to reduce the rate of self-harm and to prevent suicide. Identifying and supporting prisoners with mental health issues remains a high priority for the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

However, not every episode of self-harm can be prevented. Tragically, some suicides will happen despite the best efforts of staff. The Prison Service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which deliver healthcare in prisons, are committed to providing effective services to vulnerable people in custody. The Health Minister and I want to reassure the Assembly and the public that we are working together on this issue.

Following the most recent tragic death at Maghaberry, a meeting was held on Friday 18 November to develop a community response plan. It followed the same model that is adopted when there are potential clusters of suicide in the community. The aim of using that approach is to detect a potential suicide cluster and thereby prevent further deaths by suicide. Full investigations into the circumstances of the recent deaths at Maghaberry are ongoing. Whilst it would be wrong to pre-empt the findings of the Prisoner Ombudsman or a coroner's inquest, I believe that it is crucial to act immediately. I also believe this is the first time that this model, which has been used successfully in the community, has been adopted in a prison in Northern Ireland. The objectives of the work are to identify and support those potentially at risk through timely and coordinated support from all sectors; to coordinate local and additional resources through the response period; and to monitor and evaluate the response put in place.

Furthermore, the Prison Service is working in partnership with the South Eastern Trust to review suicide and self-harm policy. The new policy is still in development, but it is likely to adopt a two-strand approach to the management of prisoners at risk. The first strand is called proportional response, and that encompasses the essence of providing keep-safe care through positive staff engagement and immediate response and intervention if required. The second strand is called tailored support, and that will provide a multi-agency approach to prisoner-specific, medium- to long-term care. All mental health and therapeutic care streams will be managed in partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and facilitated by the Northern Ireland Prison Service through tailored support.

The Department of Health and the Department of Justice are continuing to liaise in respect of a joint healthcare and criminal justice strategy, covering the health and social care needs of people at all stages of the criminal justice journey — whether they are suspects, defendants or are serving sentences — in Northern Ireland. The draft criminal justice and

healthcare strategy and action plan have been through consultation, and an analysis of the responses has been completed to inform the final strategy. It is an excellent example of how Departments can work together. I expect it to be finalised, agreed and brought forward for implementation as a matter of urgency.

Minister O'Neill and I have agreed to conduct an immediate review of vulnerable people in custody. Officials from both Departments are working together to define the structure, scope and time frame of that review. I know that Members appreciate the scale of the challenge in respect of mental health in prisons and the need for joined-up partnership working to address that challenge. I hope that Members also agree that, at a strategic and operational level, steps are already being taken to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals in custody.

Mr Beattie: I welcome the statement from the Justice Minister. I honestly believe that she is working towards dealing with the issue. It is good to see that she is working with the Health Minister to deal with the issue because it needs a joined-up approach. That must be welcomed. I have spoken to her on a number of occasions; she is absolutely sincere. I applaud her for the work that she has done so far.

I have raised this issue before: the SPAR process that she talked about is effective only if we have the right level and number of prison officers. Sadly, we are lacking that.

I have raised that concern before. The Prison Officers' Association raised the issue of manning levels with the First Minister and asked for action. That was on 10 October, and I do not believe that there has been any action taken.

If I may, I will say another thing to try to add value.

Mr Speaker: Mr Beattie, I ask you to come to a question.

Mr Beattie: Sorry. Has the Minister considered a system of trauma risk management for immediate management of prison officers after an incident?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question and for his continued interest in the area. We have spoken on a number of occasions, not least on the issues that he raises today. I welcome that support.

Yes, there are issues in prisons with staffing. It is something that some of the representative organisations that I have met have raised with me. Indeed, we are trying to find ways to better facilitate that, but it will not be easy. It will not be a challenge met overnight, but I do understand that there are serious consequences. To give the Member reassurance, I can say that it is something that I have a focus on. I am keen to support prison officers, and we have had a conversation in recent weeks on how I have been trying to do that. I will announce in the next few weeks further support for prison officers around extending help from the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) both to serving and retired prison officers. I believe that there will be positive benefits from that; namely, helping with our sickness absence rates. Hopefully, that measure will enable us to have the full quantity of prison officers so that we can better care for prisoners.

I am pleased that the Member recognises that the issue is something that I am keen to tackle. We have a number of challenges. I cannot tackle those challenges overnight regrettably, but I am working towards doing it and am keen to listen to prison officers as much as possible to see what we can do to move forward.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for her statement, albeit it was late. I welcome the content of the report. The community response plan seems to be common sense. I also welcome the review of the suicide and self-harm policy and the work on the draft criminal justice and healthcare strategy and action plan. Even with that multilayered approach, is it still the case that psychologist reports are being, at worst, ignored and, at best, left uncommunicated? Is medication being prescribed quickly enough, and are the drugs dispensed getting to the prisoner patient quickly enough? Will the Minister reassure me and the House that that issue will be looked at seriously and urgently? Will the reviews, strategies and action plans help deal with psychoactive substances? We know them to be a real problem in our prisons, contributing to the desperate behaviour of prisoners and the state of their mental health. Will support for prison staff be ingrained in all these policies and action plans?

Ms Sugden: I will address the last question first. There absolutely needs to be support for prison staff, because, ultimately, anything that we do will begin with them. I have said that in the House many times before. Prisoner officers are critical to trying to address this particular

problem. I will seek to support them as much as I possibly can, whether that be through training or personal support for them.

The Member raised a valid point about the use of psychoactive substances in prisons. Those, as well as the use of other drugs and alcohol misuse, contribute to a lot of the problems that we are seeing with mental health in prisons. The review of vulnerable people in custody that I announced today will look at those particular issues. It is something that we are keen to address. One death in custody is one too many. It is deeply regrettable that we have had two deaths in a couple of weeks and four over the past year. The nature of prisons is that they are very challenging. I want to do as much as I can to stop this happening again, but I am not sure that it will be the case.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister and welcome this collaborative approach. What outcomes do you hope to achieve with the Health Minister and the criminal justice system around repeat offenders and those who are going through a revolving-door process in our prisons? They are mainly young people with mental health issues and psychoactive substance addictions before they enter prison.

Most of them, when they enter prison, are locked up for 23 hours a day; we heard that at the Justice Committee on Thursday past. Some of them are using psychoactive substances as an escape and release from being locked up for 23 hours a day.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. What I would like to see out of the review and this collaborative working is that health and social care for people in the criminal justice system should be there before, during and after their time in custody. The Member is right to suggest that there are incidents of reoffending because we are, perhaps, not most effectively putting in the appropriate supports for people who find themselves in custody. When they go back into the community, they do not perhaps get the support that they got whilst they were in custody. Therefore, it is one of the vulnerabilities that is manifested when they come out.

This approach needs to be a holistic one between the Health Minister and me and other agencies along the route right throughout the criminal justice system and in the community, where support also needs to be in place. We need to take a critical look at health and social care in prisons. I hope that the work that the Health Minister and I will take forward will

reveal some of the areas that we can address effectively.

Mr Attwood: Last week, during a long meeting, the Justice Committee looked at a report into one of the tragic incidents in the prison. It was confirmed that — Mr Frew indicated this — it took eight days between a prisoner being prescribed an increase in medication and that being actioned. Given that there is meant to be joined-up work between the health side and the prison side, were the systems that are currently in place today to be stress-tested is the Minister confident that those sorts of incidents would not arise again? Will she give a guarantee that, in taking forward the community response plan, she will involve in that work people from the independent third-sector voluntary and community organisations that deal with self-harm and suicide at the front line and not just involve those who represent public bodies?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely. I think that we can do better in terms of the work between the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which provides healthcare in my prisons. Since becoming Minister, and with my relationship with the Health Minister, there has been an increase in partnership working. Even in respect of the Programme for Government, when we talk about collaborative working, there is that essence of moving forward. We are in a much better place than we ever were before in terms of working together.

We are announcing today that we will strengthen that even more. We need to be mindful of the fact that whilst people are in our custody they should have the same access to health and social care as they would outside custody. In my mind, that is their basic right. There is a real opportunity to get this right so that people in custody get the service that they are entitled to.

The Member is absolutely right about the community and voluntary sector. The community is not just the statutory organisations; it is the community that people in custody go back to. I believe that the community and voluntary organisations are best placed to provide that support because they know these people best and they know their communities best. There is a real strength in the community and voluntary sector along with this work, so yes, I can give that assurance.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. It refers to a proportional response and the need for:

"immediate response and intervention if required."

In the recent case of self-harm, prison staff and senior prison staff stood by for over half an hour and watched while a man slashed his own groin and then blinded himself manually. Is the Minister satisfied that, whatever comes out of this review, prison staff will be encouraged to take the initiative and take responsibility when required and stop this sort of thing if it is being observed rather than wait for somebody to give them guidance?

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

Ms Sugden: I certainly hope that, whatever comes out of the review, we can provide a more immediate response so that incidents such as the Member described do not happen.

This has to be tackled with a holistic approach. Officers need to be given the right training and skills to deal with this in the immediate environment, and we need to look at the healthcare side to ensure that we do not get to that point.

It has to be a full review of mental health in prisons. Our Prison Service saves lives on a day-to-day basis, and that cannot be overlooked. However, more work could be done, which is why this review comes at a very appropriate point.

12.30 pm

Mrs Cameron: I very much welcome the statement from the Minister of Justice. We had a lengthy Committee meeting on Thursday of almost five hours, and two hours were spent speaking to the health trust on the Sean Lynch case of serious self-harm. During the meeting, I asked a psychiatrist, Dr Bownes, about psychoactive substances, and I was quite distressed when I realised that mental health is an additional factor to these substances. I specifically asked whether, if a prisoner did not present with mental health issues and took these substances, the outcome could be the same, and the answer was yes. How will the Minister rid the prison estate of these substances, which are attacking brains, which was the answer I was given?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. Psychoactive substances are

completely dangerous and have the repercussions that you have suggested. Tackling drug and alcohol misuse in our prisons is a challenge; indeed, an amnesty has been conducted recently to rid prisons of these substances. The point of the amnesty was to highlight the danger of the substances. This is about educating prisoners about drug use and putting other procedures in place for people who bring substances into prisons. It is something that we need to strengthen, but I am assured at this stage that we are doing what we can. I take the point about psychoactive substances, and the two very much go hand in hand, whether it is the misuse of drugs or mental health problems. It is something that we need to look at, and it will form part of the review we have announced today.

Mr McCartney: The complexity of what we are dealing with cannot be overstated. In the last Question Time, I mentioned the assessment of prisoners as they came in, particularly to Maghaberry, and whether it was effective enough. Also, on resources and the use of resources, the Anne Owers prison review team was very specific that better deployment of resources could be brought into place with the three mini-prisons in Maghaberry. I have stated that I think that that proposal has been, at best, ignored and that there is a degree of resistance to it. Will the Minister revisit it? Perhaps it will allow her some resource as she goes forward.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. The SPAR process, as I have outlined, is a very immediate short-term approach to tackling mental health in prisons; it was never intended to provide a long-term solution for dealing with prisoners in our care. Certainly, any approach taken forward will need to have more focus on prisoners who present with mental health problems; 75% is not an insignificant number. This is something that we need to take very seriously; indeed, I hope the review that we have announced today alongside the Minister of Health will take into account how we can best tackle this moving forward. I am keen to look at what we need to put in place to ensure that this is not as much of a problem in the future.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her statement. Earlier, my colleague mentioned the psychologist's report either being ignored or, at best, not being committed to. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that during the review, which I welcome, she will look at this particularly difficult area?

Ms Sugden: Yes, I certainly can give that assurance. We need to look at this area — it is deeply complex — and how we can best address it.

I am quite happy to have as full a review as we need to on the issue, and, if that includes providing a report or anything further, I am quite happy to do that, too.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome many of the short-term measures that you have embarked on, especially in conjunction with the Health Minister. You talked about the lack of training and the appropriateness of prison officers looking after people who have been diagnosed with mental health issues. Notwithstanding that, those subject to custodial sentences will find themselves looked after by prison officers. Are you satisfied that the training, specifically the induction training that our prison staff get, is appropriate at the moment? If not, are you looking to address that in the short term as well?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. I am quite happy to look at that. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the most recent deaths, we sharpened our focus on the current training to try to understand whether it was appropriate in terms of what we can do to try to ensure that, in the short term, such deaths do not happen again. I think that we need a wider review of prison officer training, but, as my statement said, it will not be for prison officers alone to tackle the issue. Prison officers, as you know, are there to do a job of caring for people in custody. We need that work to very much coincide with the service that the trust provides through health and social care in our prisons. I think that it is appropriate that we also look at it as part of the review to see whether there is anything that we can do. I believe that we need to better support prison officers in the job that they do so that they can better care for prisoners in custody. I am happy to look at that from the perspective of looking after prisoners but, most of all, from the perspective of supporting officers in their job.

Mr Poots: I understand your apology, Minister, and I am sure that the statement not being received in time was nothing whatsoever to do with you.

Obviously, the Minister inherited a circumstance in which there are not as many prison officers on the ground as there should be. Does she recognise the importance of having an adequate number of prison officers in the

interests of the prisoners and, indeed, the prison staff? The mental health issue does not affect purely prisoners; given the stress that prison officers are under, many of them have severe mental health issues and are off sick at the moment.

Ms Sugden: I very much recognise that we have challenges in the Prison Service, particularly with sickness absence among prison officers. I am keen to look at and address that. I want to understand the problems in my prisons so that I can best address them. I have been speaking to the various representative bodies, and they have outlined those concerns to me. I cannot tackle it overnight, but I am giving it my immediate focus and will hopefully be able to get some satisfactory outcomes as soon as possible.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement this afternoon. I think that it is very encouraging. I want to focus on those prisoners who are engaging in the process. As Members will know, people with mental health issues have a low mood, and it is very hard for them to engage, let alone sustain their engagement, in therapies and support services. How will you tackle the wider cultural issue in prisons and make the mental health of prisoners everybody's business and responsibility?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. The fact that, since I have become Minister, we have had an awful lot of focus on mental health in prisons demonstrates my commitment to trying to make it an issue that is very much on everybody's agenda and which is a priority for everyone. You raise a very important point about the complexities of mental health in prisons, given that there are those who do and those who do not engage in the process. I think that, to an extent, that is where the difficulties with tackling mental health issues in prisons come in. I believe that we need to take a more holistic view of health and social care in prisons and that, working with the Health Minister moving forward, we need to have a focus on that. I give an assurance to the House and to the Member that we need to have a focus on it.

I reiterate: 75% is not an insignificant number; in fact, it is quite a significant number, and it would be remiss of us if we did not put a focus on this. It is something that I am keen to do moving forward, and I hope that my statement has confirmed that to the House.

Mr Beggs: The recent Prisoner Ombudsman's report indicated that drug misuse has been a factor; indeed, that is an issue that officials highlighted at the Justice Committee on Thursday as inhibiting clinicians and mental health professionals in treating prisoners. Does the Minister recognise that there are regional variations in preferences for drugs? We apparently have a regime that follows the model in Scotland, where cocaine and opiates are preferred. There have been trends in drug misuse in our prisons with psychoactive substances, in particular, becoming more prominent. Will she ensure that we have modern technology with appropriate testing for the drugs that cause the problem?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for raising the issue. There is, indeed, a problem with drugs in prisons, but there is also a problem with drugs outside prisons. He is right to suggest that we need to have a focus on it. We very much have to tailor-make our approach to addressing drugs in prisons in a way that is specific to Northern Ireland. As the Member rightly points out, the preference for drugs in Northern Ireland is different from other parts of the United Kingdom.

I am happy to look at it. I recognise that it is a problem, particularly because it goes hand in hand with mental health issues, and it would be remiss of us if we did not look at the problems around substance misuse while looking at mental health problems.

Mr Ford: I also thank the Minister for her statement. I particularly welcome her references to the commitment of the Minister of Health to work closely with her on these issues, something that was not always the case in the relatively recent past. Will the scope of the review that she has announced today include the specific issue of the potential establishment of a secure psychiatric facility, or will it deal solely with existing prison facilities?

Ms Sugden: We are at the very early stages of the review that we intend to take forward. We need to look at all the opportunities and options within our remits to understand how we can best address the problem. It is not something that we will not look at; indeed, in taking forward the review, we need to look at everything and understand what is best for Northern Ireland.

Mr E McCann: I put it to the Minister that there has been a broad welcome around the House for her statement. Does she understand that, out in the community, as we say, many people will take it with a pinch of salt? They will get the

feeling that we have been here before. There have been tragedies and scandals, promises of investigations and statements that lessons have been learned, yet, as we have seen in recent days, the same thing happens again.

Given that we have had all the praise for our prison officers, will the Minister explain what consideration of staffing can explain the fact that prison officers watched while one prisoner used his thumbs to gouge his eyes out and others killed themselves? Why can they not be held to account like any other public servant? Is it not arguable that prison officers in Northern Ireland have received a bit too much support —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I think that the Member has asked his question.

Mr E McCann: — too automatically, when we should look more objectively at these things?

Ms Sugden: No, certainly not. Up to this stage, we have needed to better support prison officers. My saying that we should do that is not just about prison officers; if we better support prison officers, we will better support the prisoners in our care. That is where it begins, because, ultimately, prison officers are at the forefront, day-to-day, of looking after individuals in custody.

I have never been before the House to announce a review such as this, and I am keen to take it forward. Mental health in prisons is an issue that features regularly in discussions in the House, and it would be irresponsible of me, as the Minister, if I did not address it in a robust and efficient way. One death is one death too many, and I certainly do not want it to be on my conscience that I did nothing about it.

I assure the Member that, alongside the Minister of Health, I am very serious about taking the review forward. I do not think that we can highlight individuals when discussing the wrongs and rights of this. We need to take an entirely holistic approach, and I reiterate that that begins by supporting prison officers because they will better care for the prisoners in our custody.

12.45 pm

Opposition Business

Agriculture: EU Funding

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): 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 in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the risks to multiple streams of funding posed by withdrawal from the European Union; further notes that over 70% of all European funding to Northern Ireland falls under the common agricultural policy and other rural funds, which provide approximately £350 million each year to farmers, representing 87% of annual farm income; acknowledges that the agri-food sector accounts for 3·25% of Northern Ireland's gross value added, which equates to £1·1 billion at basic prices and approximately 71,500 local jobs and that existing strategies in these sectors, such as Going for Growth, make no provision for the withdrawal of European Union funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how she intends to uphold the First Minister's commitment that farmers can be provided for as well, if not better, if Northern Ireland leaves the European Union, and to detail how she will develop a strategy to provide for and secure the long-term sustainability of the agricultural and agri-food sectors to ensure no loss of assistance to farmers arising from the withdrawal of existing European Union funding.

I speak in support of the motion as a representative of a predominantly rural constituency. I am very aware of the importance to farmers of the current funding that is available to them as a result of our EU membership. I am also aware of the concerns amongst farmers about the future. Those concerns and that lack of security are also about the viability of their farms and livelihoods if the Executive fail to secure replacement funding for what will be lost if we are forced to leave the European Union. That applies not just to our farmers but to businesses and the agri-food sector as they prepare their business proposals. None of these people leaves it to the last minute to develop their proposals for job creation, additional investment and the

likes; they prepare them over three, four, five or six years along with their propositions, business plans etc. The availability of funding is integral to that.

As the motion states, over 70% of EU funding to Northern Ireland falls under the common agricultural policy and other rural funds. That amounts to approximately £350 million each year to farmers, which is 87% of the annual farm income. The agri-food sector is worth over £1 billion at basic prices and supports around 71,500 local jobs. We know that the Executive Office is aware of those facts, as they were in their letter to "Dear Theresa":

"A further key issue for us is the agri-food sector, including fisheries which represent a much more important component of our regional economy than it does for the UK as a whole. This is reflected in the fact that approximately 10% of UK receipts from the CAP accrue to Northern Ireland (accounting for the majority of our EU funding) and a large proportion of our food and agricultural output is exported to other EU and non-EU countries. Our agri-food sector ... is therefore uniquely vulnerable both to the loss of EU funding, and to potential tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade."

Our Minister of Agriculture, when she welcomed the UK Minister for farming to Northern Ireland in October, said:

"In 2015, total farming income would have been negative without subsidies".

The response from the UK Minister for farming did not make it into the local Minister's press release, unfortunately, but, luckily, journalists were present to report that he told the sector stakeholders at the meeting that the agriculture industry would have to:

"move away from the notion of subsidies".

When the UK Minister for farming tells the Executive that:

"We want to ensure a thriving future for a food and farming industry that is innovative, competitive, profitable and resilient",

Members should know and the farming industry will know that he means that there will be cuts in the funding available to the agriculture sector when the UK leaves the EU.

What we have here is the conundrum of a Government in Westminster who are driven

towards low food costs but, at the same time, given what this Minister has said, ostensibly want to remove the subsidy for farming. I do not know how those two equate. I have not met a farmer yet who can answer that question, and they are the practitioners on the ground.

The UK farming Minister would probably prefer there to be no subsidies and, therefore, no cost to the Treasury. That, of course, would devastate our farming industry and our agri-food sector and, indeed, because of its heavy reliance on agriculture, our economy. It would, in particular, decimate our small farmers. Agricultural land and the food it produces would be increasingly under the control of fewer and fewer large landowners, and that is not the type of society we have here. Rural Northern Ireland and, indeed, rural Ireland, by its very history and development, is traditionally smallholding.

As the local Minister of Agriculture said, our farmers are at the heart of our agri-food industry, which has an annual turnover of almost £5 billion and 20,000 employees. We are not just talking about the loss of standing programmes of EU funding; there is also the provision of a package of measures aimed at addressing emerging financial difficulties experienced by farmers, particularly those in the dairy sector. I am sure I am not on my own in attending meetings with farmers, some very substantial, particularly in the dairy sector, where they say they find it very difficult to make ends meet in the production of their quality produce. That sector recently has included the provision of EU milk production reduction aid and exceptional adjustment aid from the EU. Access to those emergency funds would also be lost if we leave the European Union; instead, it will be the responsibility of the Executive to respond to the needs of a farming sector in financial difficulty, and they will have to find the funds to support farmers in need.

The guarantee on EU funding for the agriculture sector that the British Secretary provided relates only to pillar 1 funding. In its letter to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Treasury said it will reassure:

"the agricultural sector that it will receive the same level of funding that it would have received under Pillar 1 of CAP until end of the Multiannual Financial Framework in 2020".

The Assembly can, I hope, agree on the scale of the challenge the Executive face with the loss of EU funding in the agriculture and rural sectors. To date, the Minister's response has been to create a Brexit consultative committee.

I hope — we will probably hear more from the Minister — that, at this time, thoughts are being given at Executive level at that consultative committee to the development of a strategy — a strategy that does not leave us in a situation where our farmers and our agri-food sector, come 2020, drop off the edge of a cliff financially and otherwise. That has to be avoided at all costs. Irrespective of what people's views are on Brexit or not to Brexit, we must at all costs avoid that situation.

The Executive seek to influence the negotiating position of the British Government in the EU as a whole and with the Irish Government in particular. That must be done. The British Government will decide on their negotiating position on their own, whatever committees the devolved regions sit in on. We will be told what that position is when the negotiations with the EU have concluded. By then, it will be too late. That really will be too late. My colleague Margaret Ritchie and I attended a meeting with Michael Creed recently with members of the Ulster Farmers' Union. We have a supportive friend in Minister Creed and, indeed, in his deputy Minister, Andrew Doyle. We collectively need to work more with them.

The SDLP opposed Brexit. We campaigned to stay in the European Union, and we continue to argue against Northern Ireland being dragged out of the EU against the clearly expressed wish of the people here. The deputy First Minister and his party colleagues can issue as many press releases as they like, but that will not be the argument put forward by the Executive in their discussions with the British and Irish Governments. The Executive have a responsibility, therefore, to plan for the future. The DUP and Sinn Féin have a responsibility to alleviate the concerns of those in the agriculture sector who are fearful for their livelihoods, their jobs and, indeed, their farms.

If the Minister of Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs intends to uphold the First Minister's commitment that, if Northern Ireland leaves the European Union, farmers can be provided for as well, if not better, we need to hear detail. We need to hear how she will develop a strategy, potentially along with her colleagues in the Department for the Economy, to provide for and secure the long-term sustainability of the agriculture and agri-food sectors. If there is to be no loss of assistance to farmers arising from the withdrawal of the existing European Union funding, the Minister needs to set out her red lines for negotiations with the British Government. Farmers and everyone in the agriculture sector need to know

what those red lines are or if red lines have been developed.

As the Minister knows, she has a responsibility to protect our farmers and the agriculture sector as a whole from the austerity that this British Government have a record of imposing in other areas of spending. People need to know what the strategy is. The economy needs to know. Agri-food and agriculture families need to know about it. Our rural areas need to know about a pending and developing strategy. Everyone says that to me. Let us start to develop the strategy now and not leave it until it is too late.

Mr Poots: It is a privilege to speak on the issue. First of all, Northern Ireland farmers voted overwhelmingly to get out of Europe. That is something that the House needs to reflect on when it debates agriculture and rural affairs.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to Mr Poots for giving way. I wonder if he could give us any shred of evidence on which to base the statement that he has just made.

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

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving me an extra minute. All the polls suggest that around 80% of farmers voted to get out of Europe, which strikes me as overwhelming. If the Member was talking to farmers in his constituency, he will know that that was overwhelmingly the case. When I went round the doors during the election before the referendum, farmer after farmer was saying, "We want to get out of Europe". Why did they want to get out of Europe? Because, over the 45-odd years that we were in Europe, it managed to invent something like 2,800 regulations affecting farming. That is one for every week that we have been in Europe. Farmers have been regulated to death. Farmers could not get on with the work that they needed to do, because they were so busy looking at the regulations. They were in fear of some mandarin coming to their farm as a result of the European regulations.

Ms Dillon: Thank you very much; I appreciate you allowing the intervention. Does the Member not agree that numerous agri-food sector stakeholders have said to the Committee, "We need those regulations to remain in place in order to secure the quality of our food moving forward and to be able to gain access to markets"? I also know that from my

meetings with stakeholders over the summer months.

Mr Poots: I am not sure what regulations the Member wants to keep in place, because many of the regulations that are being applied are not practical and, as a consequence, actually damage the industry. They create an inability for farmers to operate as profitably as they should be —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: — and they are not contributing to the environment in the way that they should. I note that the Member's name is on the Order Paper: maybe, when he is on his feet, he can clarify whether he voted to leave or stay in the EU.

Mr Swann: It was not going to be part of my contribution, but I am happy to say that I voted to leave. I was going to ask the Member about the regulations. He knows as well as I do that farmers often complain that the regulations are not coming from Europe, and the problem is our Department's interpretation and implementation of some of the regulations.

Mr Poots: European auditors were over the week before last, ensuring that the regulations were being applied. Northern Ireland has already been fined as a consequence of not applying the regulations as Europe saw fit. In Michelle Gildernew's term as Minister, we were hit very heavily with fines that we have been appealing ever since. Do not be in any doubt that Europe applied those fines.

Where do we go in looking forward? The decision has been made to get out, and farmers backed that decision. Why did farmers back the decision? I attended a debate with Martina Anderson one day, and she could not get it that farmers do not want handouts. Farmers do not want handouts; they want to make a bit of money from the work that they do. They want to be properly paid for their labours, as opposed to waiting for a cheque coming in every December.

1.00 pm

That cheque is very useful and helpful, and it always beats a poke in the eye. Nonetheless, farmers want to be freed up to make a bit of money from their own farms and hard labours, as opposed to being environmental custodians who are paid to do that. They will be environmental custodians, by the way, because they have been doing that for many

generations. In that respect, farmers want to get out and sell their produce. The UK imports £21 billion more in food than it exports. Everybody should be able to see the opportunity that exists. If Europe is silly enough to insist on imposing tariffs — I think that Juncker and a few of them are — it will lead to many more millions of pounds flowing into the coffers of the UK and out of those of European countries. In that instance, we would have an opportunity. Say, for example, to make things simple, there was a tariff of 10%. If the price of beef were £4 per kilo here, it would be £3.60 per kilo in the Republic of Ireland; if milk were 25p per litre here, it would be 22.5p per litre there. That would put the Northern Ireland farmer at an advantage, not a disadvantage. People talk about soft and hard Brexit. For the agriculture sector, a hard Brexit would probably work well because of the £21 billion difference between what Britain buys and what it sells to the rest of Europe. That would put Northern Ireland farmers into an advantageous position.

In terms of aid, everybody knows that the deal that was done in 2013 will not be repeated in 2020 because the accession countries are going to get more money. Consequently, the UK would be contributing more and getting less. Farmers were going to be worse off under the 2020 deal in any event. I am glad that we can make our own deal, and we will work with people like George Eustice, who has an ear for what the farming community wants, to get the best deal possible for Northern Ireland farmers.

Ms Archibald: I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I support the motion. I believe that the development of the strategy to ensure the future sustainability and, indeed, survival of one of our most important sectors must be a priority. The contribution of the agri-food sector to the economy of the North is outlined in the motion. Though I will not rehearse it, it most certainly must not be understated. Our farmers depend very much on payments received, which amount to some £265 million per year in basic payments. The single farm payment, and other payments such as those from the agri-environment schemes and the areas of natural constraint (ANC) scheme, ensure that farmers have the means to survive. Without those, as Mr McGlone outlined, farm incomes would have been negative last year and in four of the five previous years.

Continued levels of support must be ensured to secure the future sustainability of farming and the agri-food industry. For Sinn Féin, the best way to ensure it is through the negotiation of special circumstances for the North to remain as part of the EU in an all-island solution. That

has been our consistent position. In that scenario, the North would remain subject to the common agricultural policy and current system of payments, which is in place until 2020, when the new arrangements will be negotiated. There are, of course, many critics of CAP and some criticisms are genuine, though I doubt that many would disagree with its overall objective, which is to:

"increase agricultural productivity and thus ensure a fair standard of living for agricultural producers; stabilise markets; assure availability of supplies; and ensure reasonable prices to consumers."

These are entirely relevant to our farmers still, and many of the stakeholders, as Linda outlined, have presented to the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, again and again, outlining the need for fair prices and market stability. They also highlight the need for continued support to farmers and the importance of environmental schemes.

I am sure that many of the issues that are being raised currently in terms of the priorities for the agri-food sector post-Brexit will form part of the negotiations over the direction of CAP post-2020. However, the difference is the policy objective of those doing the negotiating. The importance of agriculture has always been a priority for the EU. Part of the criticism of CAP is the amount of the EU budget that goes towards it. The same importance and policy priority is not placed on agriculture by the British Government, who have repeatedly argued, including in the previous CAP negotiations, that direct payments do not represent value for money.

In October of this year, George Freeman, the chairman of the Conservative Party policy board, said that once people realise how much cash was being sent spent on farming subsidies, they would want it to be diverted to hospitals, unless Ministers could make a strong case for how the money was being spent. Referring to farming subsidies post Brexit, he said:

"in no sector is the shake out from Brexit going to be more profound and there is a lot of negotiating to do ... There is quite a big piece of work to be done to explain to the public properly why the British agricultural industry is a key strategic sector for the UK — which I don't think has been explained well."

He went on to say that the Government would protect payments to unprofitable hill farmers but other areas were "likely to change". He said:

"We are going to end up supporting bits of farming that clearly would not work without some support. I just think the British electorate would say 'hang on a minute, we understand why marginal hill farmers, and people who could not exist without support, need some help'. But they may have a problem with 'you mean we have to write a big cheque every year that we used to turn a blind eye to when it was Europe'."

From our perspective, I guess that, if we were being optimistic, we could take comfort from the recognition in his comments that some types of farming will need to be supported, but the overall sentiment on the level of budget being directed towards farming supports is far from encouraging.

Earlier this month, George Eustice, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, outlined his vision of the future farming policy under five basic criteria, which included promoting food security and maintaining a high standard of animal welfare. In his final criterion, he stated that, if farmers were given a fairer share of the value of the supply chain, they would not need the subsidies that they now depend on. That point is more than a little bit ambitious. It is difficult to see how that could be achieved, certainly in the shorter term. Indeed, many predict that, without subsidies to farmers, food prices would escalate to cover the cost to producers.

There is also the issue of trading and of competing with the EU, as recognised by the House of Commons paper on the policy impacts of Brexit. It highlights the uncertainty around the kind of future CAP that UK farmers will be competing with, as the policy is currently being simplified and will be reformed for 2021.

Therefore, the signals coming from the British Government are not encouraging. The Minister has her work cut out for her to develop a strategy that will secure the future of our agri-food industry under the finances available from the British Government. It is my belief that any future strategy must encourage sustainable production and best agricultural practice, have a strong focus on —

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

Ms Archibald: — the importance of harmonising farming practices with good environmental management and provide adequate support for the sectors of farming that struggle to be profitable on the land available to them. Achieving —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Thank you. The Member's time is up.

Mr McKee: I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate. No matter what way we voted in the referendum, we all have an obligation to work quickly and effectively to ensure that our farmers are supported after the UK leaves the European Union. It would be easy to assume that most farmers voted "Remain", given the fact that up to 87% of Northern Ireland's total farming income comes from the single farm payment, but that is not necessarily the case. In fact, during the referendum, I spoke to countless farmers in south Down who were so frustrated with what they considered to be unwarranted and excessive regulation that they were voting "Leave", even though they knew that there was nothing decided on what a future support model for agriculture would look like.

Many farmers voted to leave for many different reasons. It is therefore unfortunate that some people are unfairly trying to tag them to the phrase "Regrexit" and that individuals, such as the privileged Earl of Sandwich, are taking it upon themselves to make sweeping statements about farmers having voted without understanding the consequences. Farmers knew exactly the gravity of what they were being asked to vote for, and those who voted "Leave" should not be dismissed so arrogantly, as they probably had more dealings with Europe over the past 40 years than most other groups of people here.

Nevertheless, few sectors of the local economy face being affected as much as our local agri-food industry. It is therefore disappointing that not even the most basic preparations were put in place before the referendum by the Minister, her Department or DEFRA. Whilst I very much welcome the subsequent commitment from Philip Hammond that the Treasury will make up the shortfall in EU funding to farmers, it is nothing more than a stopgap. Last year, the UK received around £3 billion of support, and, of that, almost 10% came to Northern Ireland. Therein lies the danger, however, because if Northern Ireland were to receive only a proportion of future funding through the Barnett formula, we would be looking at receiving only approximately one third of what we receive at present.

The comments of George Freeman, the MP in charge of the Prime Minister's policy board, were concerning, and I hope that they were not a reflection of where the Conservative Party is heading on the issue. He is most likely not the only Member of Parliament who would like to see funding for our farmers being diverted elsewhere, as previous Labour Governments were also in favour of reducing key agricultural subsidies.

There are some people who think that Brexit is an opportunity to end agricultural subsidies. They make all sorts of claims ABOUT how other models work best and ask why one sector should be given support over another. However, the same people often overlook the vast sums of money that could be considered subsidies that are granted to other sectors. For instance, the Executive have already spent well in excess of £60 million on small business rates relief, and our universities receive hundreds of millions of pounds in public funding. I am not arguing against that, but it is important to remember it to dispel the notion that farmers are in some unique and privileged position. The reality is that most developed countries, whether they are in the EU or not, provide some form of public funding for farming communities, and I fully expect that to continue to be the case in Northern Ireland.

A key priority for the UK Government should now be to support and maintain a strong farming industry at home. The advances in our outputs, the continuing penetration into new export markets and the sheer level of innovation mean that the industry, at a high level, is almost unrecognisable compared with only a decade or two ago. For many farmers who continue to work the land, the industry remains uncertain. Price volatility over recent years has demonstrated starkly just how unpredictable making a living from it can be; indeed, over recent times, the only certainty that some farmers had was that, come December, they would receive their single farm payment. There now exists a policy vacuum that needs to be addressed quickly. I ask the Minister to listen carefully to the concerns raised in today's debate.

Mr Ford: I should probably start by declaring an interest, as my household is a beneficiary of EU funding.

I welcome this motion from the two colleague parties of Opposition. I am not sure whether it is an indication that on Opposition days we can expect motions to become longer and longer as both parties get every point they want into them. The motion is, nonetheless, a

comprehensive and appropriate one that I will support, although it might have been improved if an amendment that I had suggested, which referred to the potential threats to trade, had been included.

The motion correctly states the size of EU funding to Northern Ireland agriculture as £350 million a year. It does not state the proportion of the UK funding that we receive, although Mr McGlone, in proposing the motion, made the point, which Mr McKee repeated, that Northern Ireland gets 10% of UK funding. That is the first potential threat to Northern Ireland agriculture: if the Treasury were to operate on a start-afresh basis and our funding was allocated on the basis of the Barnett formula, we would be talking about 2.9% and not 10%.

We have the much trumpeted guarantee of the equivalent of EU funding levels until 2020, which, given that it will take until 2019 at the earliest for the UK to leave the EU, is not much of a long-term guarantee. All the evidence is that the UK Government are likely to seek to reduce the funding that they provide to agriculture, so there is a severe likelihood that, after 2020, we will receive something less than 10% of something less than £350 million. If there is any political support for agriculture in the Conservative Government, it certainly does not go to the grass-based farming of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the less-favoured areas of England; it is entirely concentrated on the arable farmers of southern and eastern England. There is a significant threat.

Of course, there are other issues. It is not just about farming; there are key issues with the other jobs that farmers provide either upstream or downstream. A massive number of jobs will be affected, whether in the small-scale hardware-type businesses that supply farmers and cater for their day-to-day needs or in the major, in many cases multinational, food processors. We all know about the concept of an economic multiplier in jobs being provided, but what we do not always acknowledge is that the multiplier can go downwards as well as upwards. If farming goes down, there will be a severe threat to businesses in our high streets, small local agribusinesses in rural areas and to some significant employers of large numbers of people.

1.15 pm

The third threat we face concerns cross-border trade. It is simply not realised how integrated food production has become on this island over the last 40 years. We are a long way from the

economic war that de Valera tried to wage in the 1930s, pretending that Ireland could be entirely sufficient without dealing with the UK. Every week, thousands of pigs come north for processing. Virtually every week, thousands of cattle go south. At this time of the year, tens of thousands of sheep go south. Millions of litres of milk go north and south between production and processing. All of those potentially face major difficulties with the likelihood of a hard border being imposed in the event of a hard Brexit. All those people run the risk of suffering in a way that would be just as significant as the loss of direct subsidy, if they cannot trade in the way that they have been used to.

Whilst there is some potential for the development of new processing facilities in a way that would meet the needs of producers on both sides of the border, all of that is at an economic cost. It is the opportunity cost of failing to maximise the use of the facilities that already exist at the expense of buying others. The potential difficulties in cross-border trade could increase the monopoly powers of some who buy the produce of farmers.

There is also the wider threat of access to EU markets. People may moan all they like about regulations, but, if we are to export, we need to see people adhering to the current level of regulation.

All of that suggests that the motion should be supported, and there is a real need to see the Executive providing us with a lead.

Mr Irwin: I am interested in the debate as one who, as a farmer all his life, has had to grapple with the ever-increasing and ever-encroaching grip of the European Union on our agriculture industry and, critically, on our farmers and their families. It is clear that no one in the UUP or the SDLP has listened much to the people they allegedly represent. Certainly, they have not paid much attention to those in the farming community who, like me, are sick, sore and tired of the EU's meddling and bureaucracy. The Opposition — or so-called Opposition — still appear to struggle with the fact that a democratic vote, namely the referendum, delivered a result that will eventually see the UK, of which Northern Ireland is an important part, leave the European Union. Despite some current delays, I believe that the process will gather pace and that the negotiation phase will be an important procedure to ensure that Northern Ireland is best served in a post-Brexit landscape.

Through my busy constituency service, I receive many calls from farmers from across

the Province, and many of the matters they bring to me focus on issues regarding EU rules and regulations and the application of those rules. There are never calls with cheers of support for the EU, I can tell you; rather, they are calls regarding the pitfalls and the reams of paperwork in complying with the lengthening list of EU directives. As my colleague said earlier, is it any wonder that polls told us that 80% of farmers were voting to leave the EU?

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will, yes.

Mr Poots: Will the Member recognise that another important element of the food industry is fishing — I tried to get Mr McKee to give way, but he would not — and that 80% of Irish fish are caught in British waters, 50% of Danish fish are caught in British waters and the Spaniards are never out of British waters? There is a huge opportunity for the food industry in terms of fishing as we go forward out of Europe.

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

Mr Irwin: I thank the Member for his intervention. Certainly, fishermen look forward to being out of Europe. They have suffered horrendously under Europe.

The argument presented by the Opposition hangs its hat on the issues of the EU budget and what benefit the agri-sector gains from EU membership. It is therefore worth noting that Commissioner Hogan has given a basic maths lesson on the economics of EU membership. At the time of campaigning, the "Remain" camp made a big deal of the impact that leaving would have on support for farmers. It was not difficult to work out that giving €20 billion to the EU and receiving less than €10 billion in return has not been a good deal for the UK. The fact that Mr Hogan now warns of a €3 billion black hole in the European budget is further proof of the ridiculousness of this system. Mr Hogan, in a recent interview, offered only two possible solutions to plug this gap: the generation of new sources of income, which will necessitate new agreements by member states and cost member states more; or a cut in EU expenditure. Surprise, surprise, he suspects that the latter will be the choice.

So there you have it. For years, the UK has been forced to pay vast amounts into the EU while getting a vastly reduced return, and this latest announcement from Mr Hogan is certainly no advertisement for continued membership.

The result of our exit from the EU will be that member states end up paying more into the EU to get even less in return or, alternatively, they can decide not to pay any more but still get less in return in order to plug the black hole. It does not sound like a great system, does it?

Brexit has presented a very real and important opportunity to bring about a system that benefits our agri-food industry in Northern Ireland and a system of support based on the realities of food production here. We have a quality of produce that is second to none. Our standards of production are excellent and far exceed the standards in many other countries. Our farm-gate to plate traceability mechanisms are also of an extremely high standard. These are huge positives for our industry in competing in a post-Brexit landscape.

Since Brexit, most farm-gate prices have increased substantially. Pig prices, cattle prices, sheep prices and milk prices have all increased over the last number of months. When I was speaking to the Ulster Farmers' Union the other day, it told me that pensions have been boosted big time because of Brexit. Theresa May has guaranteed support for farmers going forward, and I am content, as a farmer, that the type of support system made available post-Brexit will encourage growth and, crucially, be less bureaucratic. Indeed, these mainstays of any future system have already been committed to by DEFRA, and I know that our Executive, including Minister McIlveen, will ensure that these principles of growth, promotion and assistance are adhered to.

Ms Dillon: Neither Mr Poots nor Mr Irwin indicated whether their party will support the motion. Given the wording of the motion, I think that it would be difficult for all parties in the House not to support it, because I imagine that, regardless of our position on the EU referendum, we all want the Minister to do the best she possibly can to support our farmers in the future.

The agri-food sector is, without a doubt, one of the most important, if not the most important, sectors in our economy and, as such, must be protected. I met numerous stakeholders over the summer months and many concerns were raised, from funding to workforce issues. The workforce issue has not been acknowledged yet today. Many of the workforce in the agri-food sector are non-nationals and come from other EU countries. The big concern that a lot of businesses raised with me was about their workforce and how they will sustain that into the future. Concerns were also raised around regulation and legislation, and, as I mentioned,

those in the agri-food sector have raised their concern that the regulations will be changed or reduced, which would affect the quality of our food and the reassurance that we could give about the quality of our food to countries in and outside Europe.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: I will.

Mr Poots: There are regulations that require farmers to ask the Department for permission to clean out a drain, to cut down a tree that is more than six inches in diameter or to plough their fields at this time of the year. Does the Member honestly believe that those regulations are good and beneficial for the environment? Most farmers think that they are an absolute nonsense?

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

Ms Dillon: Go raibh maith agat. First, it is the sectors out there that tell me we need the regulations. I am not saying that everything that comes from Europe is perfect: there are many difficulties and challenges with Europe. I accept that. However, this is what the sectors are telling me, including the Agri-Food Strategy Board.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much to the Member for giving way for a very brief point. Would the Member accept that a lot of what we are hearing about growth is based on the growth of our export markets and that many of the states that anticipate the exports will demand the same standards, particularly in food regulation?

Ms Dillon: Absolutely; that is the very point stakeholders made when I met them.

What this would mean for cross-border movement of livestock and produce is another big concern for all the sectors. Less regulation and red tape for farmers was quickly exposed as a red herring by those I met for all the reasons outlined, including concerns about the quality assurance of our food. Really what they told me is that the one thing we have going for us, as a small region, is the quality of our food and the standards it meets.

Our producers in every sector, whether arable, beef, pork, lamb or poultry, are facing significant challenges due to volatility in the market, and they rely very much on financial support. Farmers are being asked to apply now for funding under the farm business

improvement scheme, but, in order to establish the long-term viability of any plan for their farm, these farmers need income security and we have no idea what support, if any, will be given in future. I am deeply concerned about how farmers will be supported into the future, what access there will be to other markets and what tariffs might be in place. We are relying on the British Government to step up to the plate, because we will not have any say on future funding measures.

Let there be no mistake: we are all acutely aware that the Executive are already struggling in the face of Tory cuts, so there will be no excess in the Executive Budget to offer support to farmers. Those in the British Government who campaigned for "Leave" talked about targeting savings at the health service. I do not recall them saying that money saved by Brexit would be targeted to support farmers in the North. Our party's position on the EU referendum has been very clear. One of the reasons why we argued and continue to argue for the North to remain in the EU, in an all-island settlement or however it works itself out, is that the big losers will be our farmers, agri-food sectors and rural communities, which have not been mentioned today. More people than farmers rely on support from the EU in rural areas.

We need to be clear that the future income of farmers is very uncertain. I call on the Minister to seek assurances and to give detail on what future support might look like. We need that detail soon. Farm businesses cannot forward-plan in the current climate of uncertainty and in an information vacuum. The Minister also needs to review the Going for Growth strategy in the light of the EU result. We have to look again at how other markets will be targeted. There are also other issues such as labelling. All this was raised with me when I met stakeholders, not least the Agri-Food Strategy Board.

Mr Anderson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. We all recognise that the agriculture sector plays a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland economy, with approximately 70,000 people employed in the agriculture and food processing sectors. The Minister for DEFRA, George Eustice, has recently noted that food and farming are worth more than £4.8 billion a year to the Northern Ireland economy. I have no doubt that, moving forward, the agriculture sector will continue to play an important part in our economy, providing resources and employment to many of our people.

As a rural dweller myself, I have regular contact with many farmers and food producers, and the view of the overwhelming majority during the referendum campaign was that the United Kingdom would be best served by leaving the European Union. Many made the point that they are massively restricted by European over regulation and that by leaving the European Union a new dynamic could be shaped, providing the agriculture sector with more freedom and opportunities.

Some people are of the view that there is much uncertainty about leaving the European Union, but we have to recognise that, had the people of the United Kingdom decided to remain in Europe, our future financial support arrangements would, indeed, be far from certain.

1.30 pm

Since the referendum, there has been a range of positives for the agriculture industry. We have seen, for example, farm-gate prices improve, partly due to exchange rate movements. As such, there have been improvements in the price of sheep, cattle and milk for local farmers. In line with this, I welcome the fact that, in recent weeks, the Treasury has guaranteed structural and investment funds for projects that are signed up to the point at which the UK leaves the European Union. That follows a commitment that was given in August to maintain current levels of CAP support until 2020. I echo the Minister's recent comments on the matter, particularly on the fact that we now have the chance to develop support structures that are more tailored to our needs and not restricted by unnecessary bureaucracy.

I take this opportunity to commend the Minister for her work to date on Brexit. It is encouraging that, during her short time in office, she has met Cabinet Ministers, including the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, as well as engaging with counterparts from other devolved Administrations and the Republic of Ireland. The Minister has always projected the need for Northern Ireland's voice to be heard and listened to clearly as we move forward. I particularly welcome the fact that she, along with the Economy Minister, has set up a Brexit consultative committee to provide a forum to engage effectively with representatives from agri-food bodies, farming unions, trade bodies and environmental stakeholders. This committee will be useful because it formalises discussions between the Government and key industry stakeholders so that open discussions

and debate can be taken account of as policy and negotiating positions are developed.

I am fully aware that future trade and support arrangements will be very important for the agri-food industry. That can be highlighted by the fact that approximately 70% of the output of the food and drinks sector is sold externally. Whilst there will be challenges as we seek to secure the best deal as we leave the EU, it is important that we do not overlook the opportunities that, I believe, will be presented. Open trading arrangements should continue with existing markets. There should be a much more progressive approach to developing new markets across the globe. I believe that we should seek to develop trading arrangements that are advantageous to Northern Ireland. We also now have the chance to create a new support scheme after leaving the EU that should have less red tape and be much less problematic to operate than the scheme that is in place at present.

The people of the United Kingdom have given a clear and indisputable mandate for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. It is now vital that all political representatives, no matter which side they were on during the referendum campaign, focus their energies on securing the best deal for everyone. I know that the Minister will continue to engage with key stakeholders in the weeks and months ahead, ensuring that Northern Ireland's interests are put forward in a constructive manner. I wish the Minister and the Executive well as they seek to ensure the best deal for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. Agriculture is the main land use in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Across much of the constituency, farming is the most important industry and source of income. We must never lose sight of that. Whilst other areas of rural Northern Ireland can sometimes depend on the public sector, for instance, to support households and the local economy, in the south-west we are seeing a concerted withdrawal of those types of jobs. What we are being left with are local businesses being supported well below the average level by Invest NI and an Executive who are not fully committed to meeting the local infrastructure needs of the area. Whilst I have no doubt that the local well-educated entrepreneurial workforce will continue to make the area work for them, it reaffirms the importance of the area's agriculture industry.

Northern Ireland agriculture is facing a tough new era, and the farmers whom I represent are

facing it even more so. Those farmers are primarily grassland-based, producing beef, dairy or sheep. A large percentage of land is under the severely disadvantaged area (SDA) land categorisation. On that point, as the Minister is here, it would be remiss of me not to urge her to expedite the decision on the future of the ANC scheme. Whilst many farmers are beginning to wonder what support will look like after 2020, many farmers in Fermanagh in particular are already wondering what their support will look like after next year.

It saddens me to say it, but I believe the Executive are displaying a real lack of understanding of what farming on marginal lands really means in a practical sense. No matter the type of farm or land, the vast majority of farmers are united in their anxiety about what post-2020 will bring. It is essential that the local Department and DEFRA at Westminster get the next model right. Whilst I fully understand that that will take time, and the Chancellor, to be fair to him, has provided a bit of breathing space up to 2020, five months after the referendum, claims by our local Department and Minister that it is too early to know are starting to run a bit thin. Whilst it is clear there was a failure by the local Executive to even consider a Brexit vote, that does not really matter any more; what matters now is certainty for local farmers. Right now, there is a dearth of it.

There are over 6,000 farm businesses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which is a far greater number than in any other constituency in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of those are in receipt of support from the basic payment scheme. They are not only making a living off the land but tending and supporting it. We have some of the best scenery in the country, but that would be impossible were it not for the farmers, whose animals keep the fields grazed and carefully maintain the vast areas of local habitats. The vast majority of farmers are not simply making a living from the land; they are the custodians of the land. Therefore, it is essential that the UK Government recognise the continued importance of and need to be financially supporting our local farmers. Never before has it been so important for farmers in Fermanagh and South Tyrone to have a representative in Parliament who is prepared to take his seat and work for the greater good of the constituency.

I have one final point I wish to make. The agri-food industry has thrived on the free movement of European labour. We need only think of towns such as Dungannon to realise how dependent local businesses, such as Moy Park, are on access to such labour. As such, I urge

the Minister, in her discussions with the UK Government, to ensure that the concerns of those sorts of businesses, as well as those rightly concerned about the border, are reflected.

Mr O'Dowd: By this stage of the debate, the facts and figures of the cost of European Union membership, exports etc have been reeled out by various Members. However, I want to put on record that the UK's contribution to the EU is not £20 billion; it is, in fact, £11 billion, with around £5.4 billion coming back. The North is actually a net winner in that, because we benefit more as a region from membership of the EU than perhaps others.

What is at the heart of the debate? What message are we looking to send out? We are all trying to reassure farmers and rural communities that they will be OK. I cannot offer that reassurance, because I simply do not know. You could argue that, if we remained in the European Union, the next CAP round of funding would be a very difficult negotiation. If we had a Government in Westminster that were linked to or had a significant interest in rural and farming communities, we would be in a better place. We do not have a Government in Westminster that are linked to or have a significant interest in farming and rural communities, so we are at a disadvantage going into the next CAP negotiations. The Irish Government in the past have assisted in those negotiations, but, in the absence of CAP, we are relying on the same British Government, which have not been to the forefront of negotiations on CAP, to look after farming and rural communities.

Are we confident that that will be the case? I am not. I am certainly not confident that we have a Government in Westminster who are interested, as much as every side of this House, in the farming and rural community. One only has to look at those who are now gaining access to Downing Street. Nissan, headed by a French-born Brazilian businessman who runs a Japanese company, has greater access to Downing Street than any member or representative of the farming community. Large international banking organisations headed by citizens from throughout the world have greater access to Downing Street than any representative of the rural or farming community. What does that tell me? It tells me that the future interests and economic drive coming from Westminster will not be based on agriculture and rural communities.

Mr Poots pointed out that there is a £22 billion difference between what we export to Europe and what we import from Europe. How will we fill that gap? How long will it take to rebalance an economy and to turn that round? Who will support farmers in increasing their production as necessary to turn that deficit round? Will the Pootses, the Irwins, the Fords or the McMullans still be in farming after that? I do not know. I suspect that the strategy will be greater and greater movement towards large farm production and to production isolated from the traditional farming landscape that we see in this society, where we still have many smaller rural part-time producers. I suspect that we will see a movement towards larger and larger farms. Who will be the losers in that? Our rural communities will be the losers in that context.

There are uncertainties around remaining in the EU, without a doubt, but there are completely uncharted waters in leaving the EU. We know that 87% of farm incomes are supported through EU contributions and that over 87% of our agricultural produce and agri-food produce is exported. What have we done? We have put at risk 87% of farmers' income, and no one in the House can guarantee that it will be replaced, at whatever level. The tariffs on agricultural produce being exported are crippling, and there is a reason for them being crippling: every nation wants to protect its agricultural and farm producers.

We have placed an almost impossible obstacle in the way of our farming and rural communities. The farming and rural communities out there need to listen to the fact that no one in the Chamber can guarantee their futures. They need to make their voices heard loud and clear on this subject.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr O'Dowd: Reassurances and wish lists are for Christmas. We need reality checks — in the Chamber and outside the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The next speaker is Mr Maurice Bradley. As it will be Mr Bradley's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is a convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. As a cautionary note, however, Mr Bradley, if you choose to express views that might provoke an intervention, you are likely to forfeit that protection.

Mr M Bradley: It gives me great pleasure to speak on the motion today. While this is my

maiden speech, I do not intend to digress from this important issue too much, as it is an issue of importance to the people of East Londonderry. I ask Members to bear with me and afford me the opportunity to make a few comments about my journey to this place.

First, I pay tribute to Gregory Campbell MP, my predecessor. Gregory is a well known political figure, especially in East Londonderry, which he continues to represent in Parliament. I am honoured to follow his footsteps into the Assembly, a place that he has been very familiar with since being elected to the 1982 Assembly. Gregory will, no doubt, be missed in this place for his wit and ability as a Member as well as a former Minister.

I ought to say a few things about me. I have worked in the newspaper industry since 1969. I have been active in local football as a player, coach and legislator, and I am a founder member of Coleraine FC Academy. I also served as a councillor, alderman and mayor on the old Coleraine Borough Council for almost 19 years. I am proud to have been elected at the May Assembly election, along with my colleagues, Adrian and George, to represent East Londonderry for the DUP. It is a tremendous honour, and I thank all those who voted for me and the DUP, which retains its pole position as the leading party in the constituency, having the first three candidates elected at the count. I am fully aware that the electorate has put a great trust in me, and I know that there is a great responsibility to represent them on issues such as this one concerning agriculture.

1.45 pm

East Londonderry is a beautiful constituency that stretches inland from Coleraine to Dungiven and includes the beautiful coastal stretch from just beyond the mouth of the River Bann to Lough Foyle. It is a vibrant and friendly place, rich in culture and history, Coleraine being the first known human settlement in Ireland.

Members are only too aware of the importance of agriculture to our economy. Food and farming are worth £4.8 billion a year to Northern Ireland, and the sector employs some 70,000 people. My party, which holds the Ministry responsible for agriculture, knows only too well the importance of securing the best for farmers in Northern Ireland. That is why our Minister, Michelle McIlveen, met the farming Minister, George Eustice, back in October to ensure the best possible deal for our agri-food sector post Brexit.

Our First Minister, my party leader, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, has, since 23 June, been about putting Northern Ireland first in this debate. As a result, with the appointment of a new Prime Minister, she has ensured that Northern Ireland will play a key part in the negotiations that lead to us leaving the European Union. That is welcome and demonstrates that we are not shying away from responsibility to our farmers and other agri-food sector workers. We all want the best outcome for Northern Ireland, and, in order to ensure that we get that outcome, we must all work together to achieve that rather than use the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union for political ends.

The United Kingdom is to leave the European Union. That is what the people have said, and, while the House might be divided on the issue, no amount of political point-scoring will change that. Our national Government have guaranteed farming subsidies until 2020, in line with current EU policy. Beyond that, whether we are in the EU or not, the future remains to be determined. However, we must all ensure that our farmers and agri-food workers are not left behind.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Mr Gerry Mullan, who will have a full five minutes but no extra minute for interventions.

Mr Mullan: Like previous Members who have spoken, as an MLA for a constituency with a strong agricultural presence, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Our agri-food industry is a key driver for the Northern Ireland economy, with the farming and food processing industries generating turnover in 2014 of around £5 billion. The Going for Growth strategy is hugely important, as it is a long-term road map for the future of the agri-food and drinks industries. It would be remiss of me not to thank all the individuals and agencies involved in the strategy, including the Department, the Agri-food Strategy Board and the many local businesses and individuals who are directly involved in the delivery of the strategy. I welcome the progress that has been made in the sector, especially when taking into account the 2016 implementation update concerning the farm business improvement scheme, the business development groups, Farm Family Key Skills and the Food Fortress scheme. All of those are positive developments and must be welcomed.

There needs to be a reality check here, as the agri-food strategy is hugely predicated on access to the single market, EU funding streams and EU programmes in order to meet

its targets. The single market is particularly important to Northern Ireland's food and drink industry, as it sells a much higher proportion of its food and drink exports to the EU — 83%, compared with the UK average of 60%. Northern Ireland's food and drink export trade with the EU brings in over £1 billion to the economy. Meat exports account for over a quarter of that export value at £280 million, with dairy and eggs a close second at £240 million. Therefore, the future outside the EU will be extremely tough for Northern Ireland's farming community. There is no point in any political party here today pretending otherwise.

For decades, our farming community has been reliant on EU funding streams to stay afloat in a very unstable and unpredictable market, and it is that exact funding that has facilitated growth in the agri-food sector. CAP payments alone have amounted to some £2.5 billion in the last 10 years, which represents around 70% of all EU money received by the North. Those subsidies —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mullan: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: Will the Member comment on the misinformation and gross exaggeration in the motion, which claims that approximately £350 million each year comes to farmers from CAP? If whoever drafted the motion had troubled to walk into the Business Office and pick up the resource accounts of the Department, he would have discovered that, for the latest year, 2015-16, the figure is £258 million. Why is the motion trading exaggerations and misinformation?

Mr Mullan: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has a very short memory. If he remembers a big red bus with figures on the side of it, he will know the meaning of misinterpretation and putting out inaccurate figures.

To continue, those subsidies support 25,000 farms in Northern Ireland and an almost 50,000 strong agricultural workforce, whose futures are now very uncertain. Undoubtedly, we now face huge uncertainty around what relationship Northern Ireland will have with the EU, including the Republic of Ireland, and whether farmers will face crippling tariffs to sell their goods and excessive red tape due to rules around inspections and, as was mentioned, labelling.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mullan: OK.

Mr McGlone: The Member mentioned red tape, which has already been raised today as an issue. The Committee has been given research that shows that much of the red tape emanated in the first instance from Westminster, and, to go back to a point made earlier, it is down to its interpretation by the local Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind the Member that he has only 15 seconds. As I indicated, there is no additional time.

Mr Mullan: My goodness. What is clear, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): What is clear is that the Member's time is up.

Question Time begins at 2.00 pm. I suggest that the House take its ease. This debate will continue after Question Time, when Minister McIlveen will be called to respond.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: We will start with listed questions. Before I call the Member to ask the first question; in response to points of order that have been raised in recent weeks, I remind Members that, in accordance with Speaker's rulings, supplementary questions should be related to the topic of the lead question but it is for Ministers and not the Chair to decide whether they will answer questions.

Ministerial Code

1. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 461/16-21, and his letter to them dated 18 October 2016, whether they are still open to a meeting on expanding the role of the Assembly Standards Commissioner to include investigating alleged breaches of the ministerial code. (AQO 686/16-21)

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): The Member will be aware that a meeting between us has now been arranged. I look forward to hearing his views on how alleged breaches of the ministerial code should be investigated.

Mr Agnew: I thank the deputy First Minister for agreeing to meet me. I am sure that he will be aware that that had not yet happened when the question was submitted. He may be aware that I originally proposed the extension of the powers of the Commissioner for Standards in the previous mandate and that, unfortunately, my proposal was blocked by —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Agnew: — the DUP. When the deputy First Minister responded to me on the matter the last time, was he speaking on behalf of himself and the First Minister?

Mr McGuinness: My answer today is quite clearly on behalf of the First Minister and me; we have agreed to meet the Member. There

have obviously been previous discussions in the Assembly about extending the role of the commissioner but that did not find favour with the Assembly. If there is a complaint against a Minister, the Assembly has the power to gather signatures from 30 people. The matter can then be brought to the Assembly and it will be for the Assembly to decide what action needs to be taken.

The important thing is that I conceded during the previous Question Time that it was an issue for the Member and that we were willing to discuss it. We have agreed to have the meeting. If any others in the House feel as strongly as the Member, we are very willing to include them in that meeting if that is acceptable to the Member.

Mr Nesbitt: On the broad question of standards, does the deputy First Minister think that the role of the Speaker has been damaged by current revelations and, indeed, by his statement to the House earlier?

Mr McGuinness: I do not think that that is an appropriate question in the context of the question that has been asked by Steven Agnew. I note that there is an opportunity for a Member of the Ulster Unionist Party to ask a question during topical questions. If that person chooses to ask that question at that time, I will answer it.

Ms Boyle: Is the Minister satisfied that the current mechanisms relating to alleged breaches of the ministerial code of conduct are fit for purpose?

Mr McGuinness: More importantly, the Assembly has decided that they are fit for purpose. The First Minister and I are in agreement that the current mechanisms relating to how alleged breaches of the ministerial code are dealt with, as provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, are fit for purpose. They provide the appropriate level of safeguarding that, when an allegation is made that a Minister had breached an element of the ministerial code, such an allegation will be dealt with appropriately, robustly and fairly.

Members will be aware that the Assembly, rather than the First Minister and I, ultimately has the authority to adjudicate on alleged breaches of the ministerial code. Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides for a motion for a resolution of the Assembly that a Minister or junior Minister no longer enjoys its confidence due to a failure to observe the terms of the ministerial pledge of office. As I said, that

mechanism can be triggered with the support of at least 30 Members and can result in the exclusion of a Minister from office for a period of time, a reduction in their remuneration or censure in the Chamber.

The current arrangements have, thus far, found favour with the Assembly, but we are absolutely open to further discussion about that.

Racial Equality Legislation

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how they plan to strengthen racial equality legislation. (AQO 687/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: With your permission, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, junior Minister Fearon will answer the question.

Ms Fearon (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Our Department will soon commence a review of the current Race Relations Order and other relevant legislation. We remain committed to achieving racial equality here and want our legislation to be a model for other jurisdictions. Our 10-year strategy sets out an ambitious but achievable programme to take this forward. Clearly, this will be an extensive piece of work, and it is important that we have legislation that is thorough enough to meet current and future needs.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra. I thank the Minister for that answer. I take the opportunity to commend the Minister on the work that is being done with refugees. Will she provide an update on the 2016-17 crisis fund?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for his question and for recognising the good work that is being done for Syrian refugees relocating here. Just last week, junior Minister Ross and I met the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and, just today, we received a letter expressing his gratitude and commending us on the work that is being done. He was very touched by the experiences of refugees living here and wanted to pass on that message regarding their experience under our operation.

The crisis fund and the minority ethnic development fund are key delivery mechanisms of the racial equality strategy, and the Red Cross is responsible for administering the £100,000 budget of the crisis fund. It is there for vulnerable migrants, destitute refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups. It

is there for people who are in a crisis situation, providing immediate and very precise help to get them out of a hole by giving them food, clothing, heating, electricity or short-term accommodation. The crisis fund makes a real impact; in fact, it has made such an impact and been such a success that Scotland and Wales are looking to replicate the model.

Mr McPhillips: Will the Minister outline why the Executive Office failed to send anyone to respond to various international human rights treaty reporting bodies, one of which concerned racial equality?

Ms Fearon: The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has commended the racial equality strategy and our approach to several things. I am happy to write to the Member with more information if he wants to come back to me with specifics.

Mr Kennedy: The junior Minister will be aware of criticisms from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission and others about the non-participation of the Northern Ireland Executive in international reporting cycles, for example the International Covenant —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to a question?

Mr Kennedy: — on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Will the junior Minister undertake to ensure full participation in future reporting cycles?

Ms Fearon: Absolutely. The rights and entitlements that our ethnic minority communities have here are hugely important to us. I have already said that the UN has commended our approach to refugees, so I see no reason why we would not participate fully in upcoming committees.

Ms Armstrong: Given that the Executive have not progressed any form of equality legislation since 2007, how can we be confident of progress during this term?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for her question. One of the key actions identified under the racial equality strategy is a review of current race relations legislation. Legislation has to be a priority, and reviewing that legislation is a massive piece of work, but it is important that we get it right. For me, that will be time well spent. We very much hope to see

new racial equality legislation in place in the 2017-18 financial year.

PFG 2016-2021: Consultation Responses

3. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their initial assessment of the responses to the consultation on the Programme for Government 2016-2021. (AQO 688/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: The consultation on the draft Programme for Government was launched on 20 October and will run for eight weeks until 23 December. It is clear, even at this early stage, that there continues to be strong support for the use of an outcome-based methodology and developing the programme and the opportunities that it affords for collaborative working and helping to make people's lives better. It is clear that people and organisations are on board with our approach, and we are greatly encouraged by the levels of engagement from every sector. Over 800 responses were received to the earlier consultation conducted on the draft Programme for Government framework, with almost all indicating support for the approach being taken.

The programme agreed by the Executive is highly cross-cutting and collaborative, with joined-up working across departmental boundaries and with dynamic partnerships being formed with local government, the community and voluntary sector and the private sector. It is a new way of doing government, and the Executive are committed to ensuring that it translates into better services and better outcomes for all. We want this to be a Programme for Government in which everyone plays a part. People can do that right now by engaging in the consultation and by telling us about the things that matter most to them and how we can make them better.

Ms Bunting: It appears that the collaborative approach has been successful. Will the deputy First Minister outline how he and the First Minister will continue that approach with other organisations, including the business sector?

Mr McGuinness: The extensive consultation that took place in the first stage will now continue during the next phase, and we are heartened by the interest and the support that there is in relation to how we move all of this forward. As I have clearly indicated, there is now a further public consultation on the full Programme for Government. That is under way and will run until 23 December. The First

Minister's and my aim is to have a final version approved by the Executive and endorsed by the Assembly after we have had the opportunity to consider the funding position around the end of the year. To that end, we will engage with as many groups and individuals as possible on the Programme for Government framework over the course of the consultation.

As with the consultation process, we want as many people as possible to have their say. Work will continue, led by senior officials in relevant Departments, to identify key stakeholders and partners and to further refine the delivery plans to help to ensure that we put in place the collaborative partnership and actions needed to deliver against the desired outcomes. The Executive will also shortly consult on an economic strategy, an investment strategy and a social strategy, and further development of each of those will be coordinated with the Programme for Government and the Budget process.

Mr Aiken: Page 25 of the Programme for Government makes it clear that Northern Ireland goes into energy deficit by 2020. Is there any commitment to an early explicit statement by the Executive that the integrated single energy market is being pushed forward vigorously and the North/South interconnector will be built?

Mr McGuinness: Of course, that is something that we are tremendously interested in, not just us here but, obviously, the Government in the South. I suppose the Member will be aware that planning applications have been made North and South and are under consideration. We await the outcome of that with considerable interest.

Mr Lynch: Can the Minister outline who was involved in the process to develop the framework for the PFG?

Mr McGuinness: The parties to the Fresh Start Agreement last autumn agreed that a Programme for Government framework adopting an outcomes-based approach would be developed. All of the parties on the previous Executive were involved in a detailed process to develop the draft framework, and the parties continued to engage actively throughout the development phase until the framework was concluded after the election. None of those involved in the process expressed reservations during the engagement period, so the parties that are now expressing opposition to the draft Programme for Government framework are either being opportunistic or did not understand

the process in which they were engaged. It was significant that the Ulster Unionist Party chickened out of membership of the Executive. It left the Executive, and, of course, the SDLP, which was part of the process of deciding on this way forward, without any objection, decided in the aftermath of the election that it would chicken out of the Executive also.

Ms Bradshaw: Why are there no numerical targets against any of the indicators in the draft? How credible does the deputy First Minister feel that the Programme for Government is, if the public are not able to measure whether progress will have been made?

Mr McGuinness: The public have declared themselves totally satisfied, in the main, with our approach in relation to the outcome of the first consultation, which drew in something like 810 submissions.

All those matters will be considered as we go forward in the second phase. In the aftermath of that, we will have a further conversation about how we take the whole process forward. I am satisfied that the public are content thus far. I have not heard that criticism from anybody in the group of 810 who made submissions. I am quite willing to listen to what they have to say. In the time ahead, there will be opportunities for people to have their say on these matters.

2.15 pm

Brexit: Parliamentary Approval

4. **Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will present a legal challenge to the United Kingdom Government's appeal to overturn the High Court's decision that parliamentary approval must be given before the process of European Union withdrawal can start. (AQO 689/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: The First Minister and I are listening carefully to the arguments in the Miller and Dos Santos application before the High Court in London and in the McCord, Agnew and others applications in Belfast. At present, however, all relevant lines of argument are being ventilated by the existing parties.

Mr McGrath: The deputy First Minister will be aware that Nicola Sturgeon has respected the majority will of the people of Scotland in supporting the legal case brought forward to the

Supreme Court. We need a wee bit more information other than another case is doing it.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr McGrath: Why are this Government not supporting that initiative?

Mr McGuinness: In this instance, it is quite clear that the Member is asking a question that he knows the answer to. The answer is quite clearly that, in the run-in to the referendum, our partners in government were on a different side of the debate from us. That is like the fact that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, who are now a combined Opposition, are on opposite sides of the debate, with the Ulster Unionist position being that the people have spoken — the context that they speak about is the UK — and that you should get on with it. It is quite clear that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists are divided on the issue.

Where the First Minister and I are united is on the fact that we were able to write to the British Prime Minister outlining a series of grave concerns that we have about the implications of Brexit for how we protect the interests of the people whom we represent. The good news is that, during the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, which I will speak to when I give a report on it in the Assembly tomorrow, we were able to put in place a high-level working group of civil servants in our Department, the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs to take forward the work that we will have to deal with in the time ahead. From my perspective, we are consistently getting very confusing reports out of London. They are confusing not just for people in the political process but for the general public and people in the business community. As we go forward, it is very important that the British Government at least tell the devolved institutions what their objectives are in the context of a negotiation with the European Union. Thus far, they have failed to do so.

Mr Stalford: Does the deputy First Minister agree that it is the sign of a responsible and mature Government that, regardless of whether you were for "Remain" or "Leave", you work with the situation as you now find it?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Stalford: Does he agree that that is what a responsible Government should do rather than,

in a similar vein, refusing to meet the future president of the United States of America?

Mr McGuinness: As we go forward, the implications of Brexit for all of us and for the people whom we represent, whether it is the business community, the agri-food industry, the community and voluntary sector or our educational institutions, place a massive responsibility on those of us who had the courage to go into government together to ensure that we deal with the set of circumstances before us. As I outlined, we dealt with it by writing to the British Prime Minister. I noted that, on this morning's 'Good Morning Ulster', the leader of the SDLP described that as weak, which is absolutely ridiculous. He then criticised us because of the length of time that it took the Prime Minister to respond. It was the Prime Minister's responsibility to respond; it was not our responsibility. What we have been doing is getting on with the work. We have given instructions to all our Departments to be up to speed on all this in the time ahead. Our contribution to the North/South Ministerial Council and the formation of a high-level working group shows clearly that we are very active in trying to deal with a set of circumstances that denies us, for example, full information about where the negotiations will go if and when article 50 of the Lisbon treaty is triggered.

Mr Smith: What discussions has the deputy First Minister had with the First Minister regarding the Supreme Court appeal? Are they any closer to producing an agreed, joined-up post-Brexit plan for Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: I think I outlined during previous answers that the First Minister and I are very much engaged in the process of ensuring that we work with the Irish Government to protect the interests of all the people who live on this island.

In terms of the court case, I will go back to my previous answer to the SDLP. The Member asked a question he knows the answer to. In politics, I think that is OK, because the DUP was on one side of the debate in the run-in to the referendum. We were on the other side of the debate. That is democracy; that is politics. I have to live with that, even if I did not appreciate it. But I have to deal with the outcome of all that, and I think the First Minister and I have been very sensible in how we are trying to deal with the situation and are ensuring that, by working closely together through all of our Departments and with the Irish

Government, we do everything in our power to ensure the issues we raised in the letter to the Prime Minister do not affect us negatively. Those are things like the border. We do not want any border between North and South. We want support for our agri-food industry and our education establishment. We want future funding for our institutions.

As regards the common travel area, we can look at the number of businesses in the North that are totally dependent upon people who have come from eastern Europe to work. They work very positively and productively within our businesses. For example, Wrightbus in Antrim has something like over 20% of its workforce from eastern Europe. Those are critical issues that we are very exercised about, and, in fact, rather than sniping from the sidelines, we are actually doing something about them.

Mr Lyttle: Does the deputy First Minister agree that a legislative consent motion should be brought to allow the Assembly the opportunity to debate and consider the terms of any article 50 proposal?

Mr McGuinness: I speak on behalf of the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. Whether our partners in the Government favour that is a matter for themselves. Speaking personally and on behalf of my party, not on behalf of the DUP, I would absolutely be in favour of a legislative consent motion.

Mr Allister: Happily, the deputy First Minister is helpless when it comes to stopping the United Kingdom from leaving the EU. Let me ask him this straight: has he any approval from his partner in the Government, the DUP, for a status for Northern Ireland that would dilute our leaving in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr McGuinness: I think the entire process we are engaged in is in a state of flux. Nobody — neither me, the First Minister, the Member who has just spoken nor any other Member — can put hand on heart and say that they know what the final outcome of all this will be. One thing is for sure: we have a duty and responsibility to protect the interests of the people we represent. Again, speaking personally, I would be in favour of a designated status within the European Union. *[Interruption.]* It is a matter for all the parties. The Member would not, obviously, be in favour of that and believes the overall vote should take precedence over the fact that the people here in the North voted to remain and the people of Scotland voted to remain. That creates a problem for the British Government,

and it also creates a problem for the European Union, which is the fact that we have, in these devolved institutions, a very clearly expressed wish by the electorate that they see their future is in Europe. As far as I am concerned, in the upcoming negotiations everything is on the table.

Brexit: Ministerial Discussions

5. **Ms J McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions in relation to leaving the European Union at the recent Joint Ministerial Committee and North/South Ministerial Council meetings. (AQO 690/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: The most recent Joint Ministerial Committee meeting took place on Wednesday 9 November, and the last North/South Ministerial Council meeting took place on Friday 18 November 2016.

At the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting, we outlined a number of the issues that are of particular importance to us. We made it clear that we expect to see engagement on those and other matters intensify and deepen over the coming weeks and that we are determined to work together to champion the interests of the people we represent.

We had a very good meeting with the Irish Government on Friday at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary in Armagh. I will be making a detailed Assembly statement tomorrow morning, Tuesday 22 November, on our discussions.

Ministers have also had discussions at various NSMC sectoral meetings that have taken place in recent weeks and months, and that engagement is ongoing. Indeed, both Governments have agreed that the North/South Ministerial Council plenary should meet again in the first quarter of 2017. In light of the UK referendum to leave the EU, the focus for Executive Ministers throughout all of these discussions has been to ensure that our unique position is recognised and our requirements are understood on how we can ensure the best possible outcome for all of our people.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that you have already mentioned the different engagements, but can you elaborate on what engagement has taken place with the Irish Government, particularly to identify issues of mutual interest and to exert joint influence on the British Government and the EU?

Mr McGuinness: As I said earlier, there is ongoing engagement between officials up to the head of the Civil Service level. Specifically, we are engaging with the Irish Government through the North/South Ministerial Council, and the respective Administrations have been carrying out an audit of border issues. That was discussed at the plenary meeting last Friday, 18 November. We will also engage further on Brexit via the British-Irish Council (BIC). The next BIC meeting is scheduled for next week in Cardiff.

Mrs Overend: Can the deputy First Minister explain his assessment of the approaches of the devolved Administrations in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh?

Mr McGuinness: It is not my duty or responsibility to speak on behalf of Scotland and Wales. I only have authority to speak on our own behalf. There are other factors at play, particularly in relation to Scotland, which I am sure the Member is acutely aware of. No doubt, the First Minister and I will have further conversations with our ministerial colleagues during the next BIC meeting. I think I said it was next week; in fact, it is the end of this week. In all of those discussions we are very conscious of the responsibility that devolved institutions have to the people whom they represent. In Wales, the people of Wales voted to leave; in Scotland, the people of Scotland voted to remain; the people here voted to remain; and, of course, the people in England voted to leave. That leaves us with a very challenging situation to deal with. No doubt, the reports that are coming out of London, almost on a daily basis, about the apparent inability thus far of the British Government to have a collective view as to how to approach these negotiations are also exercising the devolved institutions.

Dr Farry: The deputy First Minister and I agree on the need for special status for Northern Ireland, but does he also recognise that if this is to get traction with the whole community, including with unionists, it has to be sold in very pragmatic terms around the interests of Northern Ireland and, therefore, be decoupled from wider constitutional aspirations and the issue of a border poll?

Mr McGuinness: Obviously, the situation that we are dealing with is hugely challenging; of that there can be no doubt whatsoever. The issue on the constitutional position revolves around the reality that we have a scenario in which we have just been through a referendum which has, in some sense, decided the direction

of travel for the British Government — a situation that we have to deal with. As I said in my earlier answer to the Member for North Antrim, as far as I am concerned, everything is on the table. Nobody can put their hand on their heart and say exactly how this negotiation is going to work itself out or where we are going to find ourselves in a year's time or two years' time during the course of any negotiation. All of the reports out of Europe clearly suggest that it looks like it is going to be a hard Brexit, and that seems to be accepted by a lot of commentators and, indeed, many within the political process in London. If it is a hard Brexit, I think it is going to have very dramatic repercussions for devolved institutions, particularly ourselves who are in this unique position of having a land border with a country that is in Europe.

2.30 pm

In the time ahead, in the discussions that we will see happen between our officials and between the First Minister and myself and the Taoiseach, the best way forward for us is to work very closely together so that we can reach an outcome that can then be put to the British Government and the European Union as the combined wisdom of both Governments, North and South. The top priority for us is protecting the interests of the people that we represent — I am talking about the people represented by every single Member of this House.

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

Charter NI: CEO

T1. **Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister stands by his call on the Charter NI CEO to stand down. (AQT 496/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: This is a very unfortunate situation. The difficulty about where we find ourselves is the impact this is having on a fantastic programme — the social investment fund (SIF) programme — that will bring enormous benefits to people all over the North by getting young people into employment and preparing a pathway for them, supporting families and supporting educational initiatives and many other initiatives that are born from the desire of local communities who make the decisions on what projects they want pursued. The fact that we have had this debate over the last couple of weeks has been very unhelpful indeed.

I was at Altnagelvin hospital this morning with our Health Minister, looking at the new radiotherapy unit. I was asked by the BBC, in the aftermath of that visit, what my position was in relation to our Speaker. I was able to tell them that our Speaker would make a statement at 12.00 noon. The Speaker has made the statement, and I accept it.

I stand by my remarks that Dee Stitt should recognise the damage that has been done to Charter NI and the local community in east Belfast and that he should stand aside. I do not for one minute believe that he will do that as a result of me saying that, but there is a responsibility on him to sit back and recognise the damage that has been done to an organisation that he is part of. He also should think of the bigger picture. In the steering groups and the different initiatives that have been undertaken all over the North —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the deputy First Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McGuinness: I will just finish on this point: there is a considerable concern among many of those groups that their funding could be frozen. That is very, very sad. Of course, it will not be frozen, but that is a big difficulty.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the deputy First Minister of the two-minute rule. If the Department needs time to respond, it can request it.

Mr McNulty: Has the deputy First Minister discussed the issue with the First Minister? What action will the Executive take if Mr Stitt continues in position?

Mr McGuinness: I have discussed the issue with the First Minister. Our ability to take action in relation to Charter NI is very limited under employment law. However, I reiterate the point I made earlier: the best outcome would be for the person in question to recognise that his contribution in the time ahead would be a negative one and would not be in the interests of Charter NI, the people of east Belfast or the many other groups throughout the North who are working away on delivering tremendous projects for local communities.

Fresh Start Agreement: Reconciliation

T2. **Mr Kearney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First

Minister agrees that, given it is 12 months since the Fresh Start Agreement, all political parties and sections of society have an incredibly important role to play in the development and promotion of reconciliation and healing. (AQT 497/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member. Twelve months on from the signing of the Fresh Start Agreement, it is incumbent on all of us — every political party, the community and voluntary sector and everybody in a position of influence in the community — to recognise the importance of the process of reconciliation. I have been on the record a number of times in recent months stating my view that the next stage of our process has to be reconciliation. Tremendous work is taking place in the community, but people in leadership positions also have a huge responsibility to challenge themselves over whether enough has been done to inspire more and more people in local communities to recognise the importance of reconciliation.

I say that knowing that there are people in our society who are not interested in being reconciled. I think, however, that they are very much a minority and that the overwhelming mood of our people is for the continuation of what is a successful peace process into a phase of reconciliation. I have no doubt that, given the right leadership, more and more people will rally to that flag.

Mr Kearney: Go raibh maith agat as an fhreagra sin, a LeasChéad Aire. Minister, do you agree that the reconciliation and healing agenda must be placed at the heart of government and public policy, both in this region and in the context of the all-island institutions?

Mr McGuinness: I absolutely agree. It is critical that we in these institutions play our full part in showing leadership to people in the community on what is undoubtedly the best way forward. This is a process that has inspired the ending of conflicts in other parts of the world. We recently had a visit from President Santos of Colombia, who told the BBC and anyone else who was interested in his story that he was inspired by the peace process here. That is a credit to everybody who contributed to that process and, in my view, to every party in the House, but we need to go further. We need to recognise that there are challenges ahead, not least in how, on an ongoing basis, we reconcile what was for a long time a very divided community. My party is certainly up for that,

and it is incumbent on all of us to challenge ourselves consistently.

I have gone out very far in challenging republicans, I suppose, over our contribution to reconciliation. Some people do not like what I have done, and I respect their view. One of the arguments put to me is that I should not do that because there is no reciprocation. My answer is that that is not a good reason for me to stop. If you are genuine and sincere about reconciliation, you have to do everything in your power to make it work. I do that work on the basis that we will eventually get it right.

Charter NI: Employability Scheme

T3. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, in relation to the Charter NI employability scheme, the deputy First Minister accepts that fewer people on the ground benefit when there are multiple layers and large administration costs, given that he said that benefits can result from the scheme. (AQT 498/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: The Member will be aware that we went out to consultation at the beginning of all of this. It is one of the most consulted-on programmes that we have ever been involved in. The process was open and transparent. The whole purpose of the SIF project was that we would have not a top-down approach but a bottom-up one, empowering people in local communities to decide for themselves what communities required as a priority. Putting in place such a process incurs costs. That is unavoidable if it is to be conducted properly. Our civil servants have been meticulous, even to the point of criticism from some that it has taken too long to put this in place.

We are now in a position in which the £80 million has been effectively allocated to projects. As we go forward, we can consistently ask ourselves whether there are ways that we could have improved that during what was a pilot scheme, for want of a better word.

Mr Beggs: The deputy First Minister alluded to the many, many years that it has taken for the funding to reach the ground, and he again says that it is important to get things right. This is language that we have heard before.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Beggs: Will he accept that the process has been fatally flawed and that there are inappropriate processes and a lack of accountability for the decision-making that went along with it?

Mr McGuinness: No, I will not accept that it was fatally flawed; in fact, practically every party in the Assembly, including the Member's, has been involved in the process from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that, even though people have now seized on what is a very sad situation in east Belfast in an effort to criticise the overall SIF programme, when the First Minister and junior Minister Fearon went to Enniskillen last week for the opening of a £900,000 investment from SIF, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP were tripping over themselves to get into the photographs.

Google Announcement

T4. **Mr M Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, in light of technology giant Google's announcement last week of plans for a new building in London — a vote of confidence in the UK as a technological hub — they envisage any spin-off for Northern Ireland given that the Project Kelvin interconnector in Coleraine provides the most secure connection between Europe and America. (AQT 499/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Obviously, we are keen to see this developed. Project Kelvin does tremendous work. The First Minister was recently in the United States, and I followed that with a visit of my own to the west coast of the United States and met our west coast advisory group, which is a tremendous group of people based in Silicon Valley. We continually seek to ensure that we can attract foreign direct investment that will benefit us in the new digital age that we live in. It is an ongoing body of work for us, for our bureau in Washington and for Invest NI, and we are very focused on trying to ensure that, when opportunities are created, we can take advantage of them.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the deputy First Minister for that answer. Given the connection that we have in Coleraine and the opportunity to sell Northern Ireland plc across the IT sector, I am hopeful that Coleraine could play a role in adding to the sector and attracting much needed investment into the area. Are you aware of any firms interested in investing in the Coleraine project?

Mr McGuinness: I am conscious of what is potentially a huge development at Ballykelly,

which I think will bring enormous benefits to people in the north-west, including Coleraine, Limavady and my city of Derry. I was there recently speaking to the purchasers of the site. They have huge plans for the site, and I am very encouraged by what I hear. Obviously, we are consistently, through trying to attract foreign direct investment, focusing on an aspect of work that the First Minister and I are agreed on: to ensure that companies that are interested in coming here recognise that there is a big world outside Belfast, including the north-west. We are publicly on the record as having stated that. That will very much be a focus of our Programme for Government in the time ahead in terms of the issue of decentralisation.

The other aspect of Ballykelly is the fact that, for the first time in the history of the state, we will have a Department — DAERA — effectively located outside Belfast on the Ballykelly site. That, in itself, will bring further encouragement to people in the area that we are putting a focus on the need for decentralisation.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Lynch: As my question involves the social investment fund, I declare an interest as a member of the western steering group.

T5. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister will give reassurance that the social investment fund will be delivered for communities as intended. (AQT 500/16-21)

2.45 pm

Mr McGuinness: I do not have a shadow of a doubt that the projects that have been undertaken by steering groups and local communities will make a massive difference in the effort to tackle underachievement, disadvantage and marginalisation. The First Minister and I have visited projects in recent times. Indeed, we were in Fermanagh only last week for the unveiling of a fantastic new extension to Fermanagh House. I have gone to different parts of the North and have spoken to people who are very focused on employability and on getting young people on a pathway to employment. We are talking not about a couple of dozen but hundreds who are involved in these projects all over the North.

It is clear that the social investment fund is making a massive contribution to tackling underachievement. The beauty of it is that it is not us telling local communities how they should go about choosing their projects; the

local communities choose the projects themselves. I reiterate the point that, in the face of opportunistic criticism in recent times, all major parties in the Assembly have been represented on the steering groups. It is quite ironic that, in the aftermath of the controversy in east Belfast, people are taking potshots at those who are doing great work all over the North. That is very unfair.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, there is not time for a supplementary question; time is up.

Economy

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Broadband: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

1. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the discussions his Department is having with broadband and mobile phone providers to increase connectivity in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQO 701/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): My Department has ongoing discussions with the communications industry on issues affecting consumers across Northern Ireland, including in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. My officials meet regularly with representatives of the major telecommunications providers, which operate in this privatised and independently regulated market. Ongoing investment by mobile network operators has led to increases in mobile coverage across Northern Ireland, however I recognise that services still need to be improved. In Northern Ireland, 99.3% of premises are in areas where there is outdoor 4G coverage from at least one operator, and 3G coverage is among the best in the UK.

There are regular meetings with BT to discuss the roll-out of broadband under the contracts managed by my Department. In June, BT reported that 5,607 premises have benefited from the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and 1,390 have taken up new broadband services. BT also reported that the superfast roll-out project has improved services to more than 500 premises in the Fermanagh and Dungannon areas. The contract with BT has a mechanism whereby funding can be reinvested when take-up of services exceeds a certain threshold or underspends are identified.

This is currently around £3 million and we have begun clarifying where these funds might be used.

It is important to recognise that where fixed-line broadband is not viable, other technology alternatives are available. In particular, for premises that continue to have access to services of less than 2 megabits per second, my Department offers assistance with the cost of installing a basic broadband service using satellite or wireless technology. It ensures that no household or business that meets the eligibility criteria need pay more than £400 to access a broadband scheme over a 12-month period.

We will continue discussions with the telecoms industry and with other interested parties, especially through the consultation phase of the draft Programme for Government.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the approach his Department is taking to recover some of the £258 million clawback owed to the UK Government by BT on broadband contracts? Will he outline whether he will direct these funds to rural areas?

Mr Hamilton: The figure that the Member quotes of around £250 million is perhaps the totality of the potential clawback across the United Kingdom. Gain share, or clawback as it is sometimes referred to, comes in when uptake exceeds expectations for the broadband improvement contract that was initially agreed with BT. As I mentioned, the estimated figure for Northern Ireland is around £3 million. We are in a process of identifying where that might be best spent. Obviously, that will have to be consistent with value-for-money principles and targeted to where there is most need. As we have already invested, as I outlined to the Member, in his constituency, which I recognise as an area that has issues with getting acceptable broadband speeds, I am sure that some of that £3 million will be invested in his constituency. At this stage, I am not able to say how much or where, but I am sure that we will target some of that £3 million at Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answers thus far. Are you aware of concerns raised by the border councils through their Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) report 'Fibre at a Crossroads'? In particular, it outlines many practical solutions to providing greater connectivity and achieving equitability

recompense from BT for its failure to adequately support my constituents.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to make sure that their questions are short.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. A couple of weeks ago, I met a delegation of ICBAN representatives, which was led by my party colleague Councillor Paul Robinson, who came to discuss their 'Fibre at a Crossroads' report with me. We had a useful discussion. I have a lot of sympathy for the points that they made about ensuring that people in border counties, particularly Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and other parts of Northern Ireland have acceptable broadband speeds. While the Member is critical of BT — and I have been critical of BT sometimes in the House — we have been able to make a substantial investment in the broadband infrastructure across Northern Ireland. Some £64 million has been invested across Northern Ireland since 2008. As I pointed out to Mr McPhillips, some 5,600 premises in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency have benefited from the broadband improvement project, and 1,390 have taken up new broadband services.

I also point out to the Member and the House, as I have done on other occasions in the Assembly, that whilst there is a focus, as there is in the ICBAN report, on getting fibre into premises, at this time, alternative technologies such as wireless and satellite broadband are available. Support is provided through my Department for alternative technologies for those who cannot get an acceptable broadband speed through fibre or cannot get fibre at all.

Lord Morrow: Have the black spots and gaps in broadband provision in Fermanagh and South Tyrone been identified? Will the Minister give his reaction to the proposed changes by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister can choose which question he answers.

Mr Hamilton: I very much welcome the news last week that the Advertising Standards Authority has taken a decision to reform or change the rules on advertising broadband speeds. The Member and the House might recall that, some months ago, I wrote to the Advertising Standards Authority particularly on the issue, which had been brought to my attention by Members such as Lord Morrow, of

the perception in parts of Northern Ireland, because of advertisements that appeared on billboards, in newspapers and on television, that broadband speeds of 30 megabytes per second and beyond were achievable. However, in parts of Northern Ireland, such speeds are not accessible. People were buying broadband packages from providers and paying the same as what I pay for having that sort of speed in my home, and I do not think that that is fair. That was the basis upon which I wrote to the ASA, and I am glad that it has identified the problem and will change the rules next year.

This is, in part, an infrastructure problem. The Member mentioned black spots. In respect of the £3 million of gain share that I mentioned in response to Mr McPhillips, we are in contact with councils to get them to do an audit of their area to identify where there are black spots with a broadband speed that is not acceptable. I think that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, if it has not started, is about to start its audit. I look forward to getting that information back because I believe that councils will be in a good position to identify where there are weaknesses and black spots. That will then help to inform where we spend that £3 million of clawback that we will get as a result of the broadband improvement project.

Ms Gildernew: I suggest that the Minister spend some of that £3 million in BT70, because my children are about to divorce me.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to her question?

Ms Gildernew: I listened carefully to the Minister's answer. What more can he do to maximise connectivity to black spots and hard-to-reach areas?

Mr Hamilton: We have made a lot of investment over the last number of years. As I pointed out before, some £64 million has been invested in broadband projects since 2008. That helped to give Northern Ireland the competitive advantage of being the first region with 100% broadband capability in the whole of Europe. We have not maintained that advantage in recent times in spite of the considerable investments that we have made. I want to regain that competitive advantage. It is not just about helping households to get a good speed of broadband; it is also about helping our economy. I have visited some companies, including some in the Member's constituency, that sometimes struggle to get the speed that they require to do business in an increasingly closely connected global economy. I want to

make sure that those businesses have that competitive edge. We are looking at options that, although some considerable investment would be required, would give Northern Ireland back its competitive advantage in broadband connectivity.

Apprenticeship Levy

2. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. (AQO 702/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The apprenticeship levy will be introduced in April 2017. The collection of the levy is a reserved matter for the UK Government. It will impact on all employers with an annual pay bill in excess of £3 million. Her Majesty's Treasury announced on Monday 14 November 2016 the apportionments for the devolved Administrations. Northern Ireland will be allocated £76 million, £79 million and £82 million over the next three years. However, Her Majesty's Treasury has removed £52 million due to a reduction in funding for existing apprenticeships in England and a further £29 million reduction to the public-sector contribution to the levy, which will result in a £5 million pressure on the overall block grant. Importantly, approximately £80 million was spent by the Executive on work-related training for businesses, including apprenticeships, in 2015-16. Over the past four years, £86.5 million has been invested in apprenticeship training alone.

It is important that employers have access to the appropriate skills training, particularly in the form of apprenticeships. I want to ensure that support for skills is based on a quality offering and value for money. I intend to consult employers and other interested stakeholders to seek their views on the implications of the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in Northern Ireland. That consultation will be designed to take the temperature of the business community and focus thoughts regarding the needs of businesses in terms of skills and apprenticeships.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Steve Aiken. *[Interruption.]* My apologies; I call Naomi Long.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. The Finance Minister and the Economy Minister have set out an approach that will, effectively, mean that businesses will pay the apprenticeship levy but there will be no additional investment in skills as a result. Is there any scope for the Minister to undertake to

ring-fence money for additional spending on professional, technical and vocational skills, so that we do not end up with a disgruntled sector that feels that it is paying additional money as an apprenticeship levy but is not getting anything additional in return?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to keep their questions brief.

Mr Hamilton: I thought that the first answer was so comprehensive that it answered all the Member's questions.

To be completely frank and honest, I think that the apprenticeship levy is a bad thing. It is called a "levy", but it is a pretty brutal and crude tax on businesses in Northern Ireland that, as the Member identified, already pay through other taxes for skills training provided by government and others. The Member is right to point out that, since taking office, I have been in very close contact with the Finance Minister in regard to this. What we receive back from Treasury through that levy/tax is incredibly important for the next steps and what we can provide for employers.

As I mentioned in my original answer, whilst the Treasury, in typical Treasury style, tells us, "Here's £76 million that you're going to get next year", it is taking some £52 million off us with the other hand. When you take the public-sector contribution of £29 million out of that, we are in a net negative position of £5 million. One interpretation of that is that it is eating into the £80 million-odd that we pay annually for skills training for businesses.

I am completely aware of the concerns of many employers. I have been very much in close contact with businesses about this since taking office. I want to take their temperature — that is the purpose of the consultation — and ask employers and other stakeholders what ideas they might have and what they think of the current skills training that we provide for businesses. It will then be a matter for the Finance Minister and me to discuss, particularly with regard to the Budget that will come to the House before the end of the year, what we might be able to do to ensure that skills training of the highest quality is still provided for businesses in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his comments so far. A lot of the questions have been answered, but one of the things that many of

the companies that I have been talking to and that you have been talking to —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Aiken: I am getting to the question.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Aiken: Despite the considerable disquiet among Northern Ireland businesses about the shortfall in skills training — *[Interruption.]* Wait for it. How does he envisage that our companies will not be penalised —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member take his seat for a minute? I would like the Member to be able to make his point, and I ask him to ask his question.

Mr Stalford: Brevity is a skill.

Mr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed.

This is the question: how will we ensure that many of the Northern Ireland companies that will pay this tax, particularly the ones that have the majority of their business in Great Britain, will not decide to move their headquarters and training there because they see this as very much a case of double taxation?

A Member: Well done.

Mr Aiken: Thank you.

Mr Hamilton: I think that my bad influence is rubbing off on Members during my Question Time with the lack of brevity in some of the questions, never mind the answers that I provide.

That is one of the concerns that I have always had with the levy, and it was also a concern for the previous Minister for Employment and Learning. At this stage, whilst I have concerns and there are employers who are in the space that the Member talks about, I have not yet heard from anybody specifically saying that that was their intention. As is often the case, it is much more sophisticated than that. Whilst they may feel that they are being double taxed, those employers are based in Northern Ireland for a range of reasons, particularly, in relevance to the question, reasons why they continue to provide training from bases here.

As I said, I do not like this tax or levy. It is punitive and harmful. You can clearly see how harmful it is to Northern Ireland's public finances. I have a challenge on my hands to ensure that we continue, given the reductions, to maintain the level of spending on apprenticeships and other skills training for businesses. Be assured that, given the centrality of talent and a skilled workforce to Northern Ireland's proposition for inward investment and the growth of local businesses, I will be determined to do that in what will be a very difficult budgetary climate.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his comments, particularly for placing on record our concerns on the apprenticeship levy. Will he outline to the House how much his Department invests annually in apprenticeships, given the important role that they play in the economy?

Mr Hamilton: My Department continues to invest a considerable amount in apprenticeships and in a reformed apprenticeship programme that seeks to have a higher quality of apprenticeship, learning lessons from places like Germany, Switzerland and Austria. I want to maintain that high quality, regardless of what the Government do on the levy and regardless of what they do, in my belief, in watering down what apprenticeships are in England. I am onside with Scotland and Wales in wanting to maintain very high-quality apprenticeships. We have been investing considerably over the last number of years. In the last financial year, just short of £20 million was invested in level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships, and, with higher-level apprenticeships, which are an incredibly important new part of the offer that we make in apprenticeships, some £1.1 million was invested at levels 4, 5 and 6. Over £20 million annually has been invested in apprenticeships alone.

I visited Deloitte last week, and it has almost acted as a pioneer in taking forward higher-level apprenticeships. It shows that sectors that you would not ordinarily associate with apprenticeships are now getting involved and taking on apprentices at that higher level. If there is a good side to the apprenticeship levy, I hope that it is that it encourages many employers not traditionally involved in apprenticeships to look at the options, and there is, of course, government support for that.

Ms Archibald: Last week in his statement, along with the Minister of Finance, the Minister outlined that the apprenticeship levy was of no benefit to the North, and again today he said it

was a bad thing. Will you make that case to the British Treasury?

Mr Hamilton: Yes. The case has been made, and I know that my colleague the Finance Minister has been dealing directly with the Treasury. I have raised similar concerns through the Department to the various Departments that have looked after the issue. It has now shifted back to the Department of Education. I am seeking a meeting with the Department of Education to discuss a range of issues, but I will, obviously, take the opportunity to raise concerns about this issue as well. It is something we have been lobbying on, and I know other devolved Administrations have been doing likewise. I know they feel very similarly to us about the damage they believe this is doing not only to public finances but possibly to skills training for businesses moving forward.

Student Engagement

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any engagement he has had with the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland since May 2016. (AQO 703/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I have not yet met the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), but I hope to be in a position to do so in future. My officials meet representatives from that organisation on a regular basis to discuss a wide range of issues affecting the higher and further education sectors in Northern Ireland. Officials from my Department's further education division have met the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland to facilitate the provision of training for newly elected student members of college governing bodies and attend an annual induction event for all new governing body members. My officials have also met representatives of the body to discuss a variety of issues related to higher education.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his response. Does he not agree that, given his level of interaction with various universities and the like, it is crucial that he meet the students' representative bodies about issues such as education, for a start, but about the likes of services and fees as well?

Mr Hamilton: As I pointed out to the Member in my initial response, I have no issue meeting NUS-USI, and I hope to do so in the not too distant future. As the Member will appreciate, my diary is busy and could be filled time and

time again with the range of requests I get, but I hope to meet NUS-USI in the not too distant future.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister outline whether he has had any discussions on the back of his engagement with key stakeholders in the higher education sector? What are his views on any increase in tuition fees, considering the shortfall of over £50 million in university funding?

Mr Hamilton: I have had a range of discussions with the universities and others about the financing of the sector. I am very clear — I have been on record saying this in the House and elsewhere — that I want to see the higher education sector, which is important not just for education but for the future growth of our economy, financed on a sustainable footing moving into the years to come. There are, clearly, pressures on my budget in higher education, and I want to have a sensible and mature discussion, particularly in the context of the upcoming Budget, about how we might sustainably finance the HE sector in the years ahead.

Mr T Buchanan: What is happening with Northern Ireland postgraduate students whose loan applications were incorrectly proposed by the Student Loans Company?

Mr Hamilton: The postgraduate students whom the Member mentions have been treated disgracefully. Those were postgraduate loans for English-domiciled students that were introduced by the UK Department for this year. They wrongly approved loans to 85 ineligible Northern Ireland students. A review found that 54 were eligible, but there are still 31 who are ineligible, 18 of whom actually received a payment. They are all important, but those 18 are the particularly important ones, because when those people received that payment they spent that money on equipment, accommodation or whatever it might be to help them to do their postgraduate studies.

Whilst it is a matter for the UK Department for Education, Student Finance England and the loans company, it is their errors that have caused distress. I have written to Jo Johnson, the Minister of State in the Department for Education, and to the Student Loans Company asking them what they are going to do to satisfactorily address the issue, which is not in any way, shape or form the making of the students from Northern Ireland who have been affected.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister tell us which stakeholders in the further and higher education sector he has met?

Mr Hamilton: I cannot give the Member a comprehensive list, but I have met Ulster University and Queen's University, and I am meeting the Open University this afternoon. In the broadest definition of the HE sector, I have met quite a few other stakeholders. As the Member will appreciate, there are a huge range of stakeholders across the HE sector, all of whom I will want to keep in very close contact with, particularly our universities, as I grapple with a range of issues, some of which have been mentioned here at Question Time.

Electricity Market

4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the security of supply in the local electricity market. (AQO 704/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The generation capacity at our three conventional power stations, existing interconnection, including the restored Moyle interconnector with Scotland, and the additional 250 megawatt capacity at Ballylumford that became available in January of this year ensures we have enough capacity to meet all electricity demand forecasts to 2020. Emissions legislation could further impact on the Kilroot coal-fired plant, in particular, from 2020. My Department is working closely with the Utility Regulator and the system operator (SONI) to consider how best to ensure our security of supply after this point. If it is considered necessary, I will agree on further actions to safeguard our electricity supply.

The second North/South interconnector will be considered by the Planning Appeals Commission in February next year, and this project, along with other plans such as the proposals by Evermore Energy for a new gas-fired power station in Belfast, battery storage by AES, the Gaelectric compressed air energy storage project and the Islandmagee gas storage project, has the potential to contribute to our future security of supply.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that the Ulster Unionist Party is proposing a motion on energy to the Assembly tomorrow. Will he take the opportunity tomorrow to indicate what his plan B is, should there be a further planning delay in the North/South interconnector?

Mr Hamilton: I look forward to the debate tomorrow. It provides the House with an opportunity for a debate that, I hope, is proposed in that spirit. If it is, I will certainly respond in kind. This is a challenging issue. The Committee visited SONI last week and will have got a very clear indication of the seriousness of the issue and the many challenges that face us. If the motion is brought to the House tomorrow in that spirit, I will respond in kind.

The Member is fairly new to the Ulster Unionist Party, but he already has that fatalistic tendency that runs through the Ulster Unionist Party like a stick of rock. He has written off the interconnector before it goes to the Planning Appeals Commission hearing next year. The Member is right: it is an incredibly complex issue. I want it to run through its planning process properly, and we will leave it to that. I am committed to the principle of the interconnector. It is essential not just for our security of supply in the longer term but, moving forward, for making any integrated single electricity market viable. It is an incredibly important project, and we, as a Department, have a record — not least in terms of the short-term contract that was put in place with AES when the Moyle interconnector was agreed — of stepping in when there have been problems and taking decisive action.

The Member's party is always keen on talking about plan Bs and resigning itself to failure right from the start, but this is not something I will do. I will work away to make sure the interconnector happens, as it is such a vital piece of infrastructure for electricity and security of supply in the short and long term.

Mr Robinson: What does the Minister intend to do to support the future development of renewables in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: There is already considerable support for renewable electricity in place, and Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) support will remain in place until 2037. It has been a successful policy for increasing renewables-generated electricity. In 2005, before the NIRO was introduced, electricity consumption from renewable sources was about 3% in Northern Ireland. That has now grown to 25.4% at the end of last year, and we are well on course to meet our 40% electricity consumption by 2020.

There is already a considerable amount of renewable energy on the grid. There is also a considerable amount with offers, and some

more will receive offers. I believe that we will not only meet our 40% target but, when all those offers are met and are on grid, have the ability to generate 100% of peak demand electricity from renewable sources, which is around 1,800 MW per year.

3.15 pm

In many respects, it has been a successful policy. It has, in reflecting on what future policy might be, had an impact on the grid, which is a scarce and precious resource. At present, there are no storage options, although I mentioned some possible storage options in my original answer. Of course, as with everything, we need to consider the cost of a replacement for the NIRO. Previously, NIRO costs were spread right across all UK consumers, so Northern Ireland got a reasonably good deal out of that. Any replacement will be across just Northern Ireland consumers, and that will, of course, have an impact on the affordability of electricity in Northern Ireland. I obviously have to carefully consider that in the future development of renewables policy.

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

Universities: Teaching Excellence Framework

T1. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy to give an absolute guarantee that the teaching excellence framework (TEF) is in no way intended as a link to tuition fee levels in Northern Ireland. (AQT 506/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The teaching excellence framework, as I understand it, does what it says on the tin. It is about raising the standards of teaching in our universities. One criticism that I can recall from even before taking up this post is that, whilst universities rightly and understandably continue to focus on research — we want to see our universities continue to do that, and there is some promising progress in that regard — there is a view that there has perhaps been less focus on teaching standards. We all want to see the very good balance between teaching and research remain. I say to the Member that, in terms of future sustainable financing of the sector, the teaching excellence framework is not one of the things that has been considered in that context. What I want to see is the sector, which, as I mentioned previously, is a very important sector not just to education but the wider economy in

Northern Ireland, put on a sustainable footing for the future. That is obviously at the forefront of my mind as I consider the issue of financing our universities.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he also give a guarantee, although what he said was far short of a guarantee, that the TEF will not be used as leverage to remove the tuition fee cap in Northern Ireland? Will he consider responding to the calls to put a TEF panel in place in Northern Ireland?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister can choose which question to answer.

Mr Hamilton: I think that I counted about four, but I will do my best. I think that the teaching excellence framework is a good thing in and of itself, and I do not think that we should get it into a situation where it is mired in other debates. I want to see the sector sustainably financed. We need a good, strong university sector in Northern Ireland. I am very mindful and cognisant of the concerns expressed by that sector and how it believes that it is falling behind its counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, elsewhere. I want to ensure that Queen's University, Ulster University and the Open University, which are doing a good job in Northern Ireland, particularly in their research and how that is aligning better with our economic needs, have the finances now and into the future to allow them to continue to do the good job that they have done already.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Nelson McCausland is not in his place.

International Trade

T3. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the steps his Department is taking, as part of an outward-looking economy, to allow Northern Ireland to attract further international trade. (AQT 508/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Member will be aware of two things that I have announced in recent times to try to enhance trade. We are starting from a very strong base already. We had a 9.5% increase in exports from Northern Ireland in the last year, and we are the only UK region to post an increase. New figures are due out very soon. That was backed up by the Ulster Bank's purchasing managers' index (PMI). It talked about a "surge" — I think that is the word used — in exports in the last number of months. Not

wishing to prejudge those statistics in any way, shape or form, not least because I do not want egg on my face, there has been some good anecdotal evidence on the progress made over the last number of months in respect of exports.

I have put in place a trade accelerator plan that is looking at building on that success. It also has the aim of encouraging more exporters to get into selling their goods and services outside the region for the first time. Even though we have had that 9.5% increase, it has been on the back of a decrease in the number of exporters. There has been really good performance, but we want to see more people selling their goods and services outside Northern Ireland, and the trade accelerator plan is aimed at doing that. It is providing more support for exhibitions, market study visits and trade missions.

We are also in the process of developing an international trade plan, which is entirely about making Northern Ireland an outward-looking trading nation, getting an increased Invest NI presence in key markets and setting up a trade advisory board to assist me in developing new export strategies. We are also undertaking a whole range of different endeavours to try to capitalise on the growth that we have and, indeed, the huge opportunities that will exist in the years ahead.

Mr Stalford: Minister, the strong connection that many people in the United States have to Northern Ireland is one asset. There has been change in the political scene in America recently. What assessment does the Minister have of the election of a new president and its ability to impact on Northern Ireland's trade with the United States?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to note that there has been change in the US, with the surprising and unexpected win of Donald Trump. These are very early stages in Mr Trump's Administration. In fact, he is not in post yet, so he does not even have an Administration in place.

The Member is right: the US is an incredibly important trading partner for Northern Ireland. It is our second biggest export destination, and we sold around £1.5 billion worth of goods to the US in the year ending June 2016. That was a staggering 74% increase year-on-year and a really tremendous achievement by Northern Ireland exporters. It is also an incredibly important source of inward investment, with around 175 US-owned companies operating in Northern Ireland, employing around 24,000 people. The president-elect has said many

things, but he is not in post yet and has not taken his agenda to Congress. I wish him every success in his job and think that we should give him a chance, because we all need America to succeed. Northern Ireland has benefited from America's success in the past, and we want to benefit from its success in the future.

The Member and the House will understand that, even if the new president reduces corporation tax, as he has indicated, it is not just for tax reasons that many companies from the US invest in Northern Ireland. It is about skills, and I am increasingly aware of the importance of skills in attracting companies from all around the world. Take, for example, a cybersecurity firm called Black Duck. It is a Massachusetts-based company that has invested in Northern Ireland. It is expanding its business to here, which will create around 50 new jobs. It looked at opportunities in the US but decided to come to Belfast and Northern Ireland because of the skills of the talented people here. It is a much wider issue than tax, and, whilst we hope to reduce our rate of corporation tax to get us into other markets, we have to keep an emphasis on the importance of skills in our economy.

Universities: Funding

T4. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline whether our universities will be subject to further budget cuts following the Chancellor's autumn statement and in his own budget for 2016-17. (AQT 509/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Member is asking me to prejudge two things. He is asking me to prejudge an autumn statement that is to be made tomorrow, although I accept that, if you have read every newspaper that has been published today and listened to every news bulletin, you will probably have much of what is in the autumn statement in your hands or in front of you on the television screen. He is also asking me to prejudge the discussions and deliberations that will take place in the Northern Ireland Executive.

I note from what the Prime Minister has said today that she intends to see an increase of £2 billion in research and development expenditure. That will be a good thing for universities right across the United Kingdom, and, hopefully, for Northern Ireland. That will build on our success that was demonstrated in figures published last week on research and development that showed a 24% increase in R&D expenditure in Northern Ireland. That took

us up to around £750 million worth of expenditure by businesses, the public sector and universities. Universities accounted for around a quarter of that total increase, which was around about a 9% increase. If there is money coming from the autumn statement for research and development, I hope that our universities will be able to benefit directly from it.

Mr Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Hopefully, this time, you will not need a crystal ball. Will the Minister outline what assessment his Department has undertaken with regard to EU funding to higher education? There are great concerns in my constituency that a withdrawal of EU funding for research will result in redundancies and in the closure of courses.

Mr Hamilton: There is a range of European funds that our universities and colleges have accessed down through the years. This issue will be part of the negotiations that will begin at some stage next year. I understand the Member's concerns, however I point out the guarantees that the Chancellor has given, particularly in respect of Horizon 2020 funding. So, anything that is approved whilst the UK is still a member of the European Union will be guaranteed beyond our exit.

I have said before in the House, and I will repeat it, that Horizon 2020 is a project that is not limited to European Union member states. There are about a dozen states outside the European Union — Turkey, Norway, Israel and others — that have availed of Horizon 2020 funding in the past. In fact, the state that had the highest per capita spend of the predecessor of Horizon 2020 — FP7 — was Israel. So, there are opportunities, even after UK exit from the EU, for us to avail ourselves of funds like Horizon 2020.

Manufacturing Firms

T5. **Ms Lockhart** asked the Minister for the Economy to join her in welcoming the recent growth announcement by the Upper Bann-based company Almac and to say what support his Department gives to similar manufacturing firms to help them reach their full potential. (AQT 510/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I join the Member in congratulating Almac on its growth. Here is an example of a firm that is part of a growing life and health science cluster in Northern Ireland, which is outward-looking, is selling more, and had a 50% increase in its exports over the last

year. Almac is a core element of that growing and important sector to our economy, so I congratulate it on its success. We want to see local firms growing in Northern Ireland, but we also want to see them expand their reach internationally. Even though this investment is in the US, it will solidify and support jobs in Northern Ireland and, importantly, in the Member's Upper Bann constituency.

The manufacturing sector, in spite of what some in the House, and some outside it, will want to say, is a strong sector in spite of some recent notable setbacks: employment in the sector has increased by over 4% in the last year. Support offered between 2011 and September of this year by Invest Northern Ireland (INI) has accounted for nearly £300 million of assistance; that is 7% more than the assistance that has gone to the services sector. Sometimes, there is a perception that the services sector does better from INI support. That is not the case. That investment of nearly £300 million has promoted 14,000 new jobs over the last five years and has had a total contribution of around £1.9 billion of investment in the local economy. So, a range of support has been made available and will continue to be made available for manufacturers like Almac and others who are growing their businesses, selling outside Northern Ireland, and looking to expand.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will the Minister assure the House that he will continue to prioritise the skills that manufacturing businesses require? It is evident when I am out there that they want us as a Government to look at the skills set that they require.

Mr Hamilton: I know that there are issues with a range of companies in the Member's constituency operating in very different sectors. As I have said today and previously, I am acutely aware of the importance of skills to Northern Ireland's proposition not just for inward investment but for the expansion of indigenous companies. So, I absolutely want to ensure that, as we look to a future where we have a reduced rate of corporation tax, that is not the only thing that we are going out to the world to offer. We also have to offer a strong pipeline of skilled workers. That will include helping companies in the Member's constituency as well as those prospective inward investors who, if the evidence to me is anything to go by, are increasingly coming to Northern Ireland. The differentiator as to why they are coming to Northern Ireland over other locations is the skilled workforce that we have.

3.30 pm

Coleraine Enterprise Zone

T6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the enterprise zone in Coleraine. (AQT 511/16-21)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask for a very quick answer.

Mr Hamilton: The pilot scheme for the new Coleraine enterprise zone was formally designated by Her Majesty's Treasury in August 2016, just a few months ago. It offers enhanced capital allowances and is the only enterprise zone in Northern Ireland that offers 100% enhanced capital allowances for qualifying expenditure in the first year. A company called 5Nines, which operates and develops data centres, already has planning permission for the site. That planning permission goes back to 2013. As a Department, we will put in place a monitoring and evaluation plan to identify emerging benefits that could be derived from the enterprise zone. I see it as an important part of the growing tech sector in Northern Ireland which is employing around 30,000 people. It is growing across Northern Ireland, in the north-west, in Belfast, in Newry and in all parts in between.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Social Investment Fund: Audit

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Nicola Mallon has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should continually rise from their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically for a supplementary.

Ms Mallon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what audit has been carried out by the Executive Office on all aspects of the social investment fund to date.

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): All organisations in receipt of departmental funding are subject to governance and financial management checks to ensure their capability to manage public money. This includes, first, a review of the organisational structure to ensure that a board and appropriate management structures are in place and, secondly, a review of the financial and governance processes to ensure that the necessary policies and procedures to manage and account for funding are in place and implemented effectively. This process involves on-site visits and ongoing verification throughout the duration of the project to ensure compliance with policies and implementation of the necessary checks to account for all expenditure. Full checking and validating of spend by lead partners is carried out by the Department, which includes supporting evidence of costs incurred and payments made. The social investment fund (SIF) programme is also subject to normal internal and external audits, which include sample auditing of individual project spend.

Ms Mallon: Is the deputy First Minister completely satisfied that no conflict of interest exists in Charter NI or any other organisation funded by the social investment fund?

Mr McGuinness: The whole issue of conflict of interest was dealt with by the steering groups. We have to remember that the social investment fund is very much community-led. Given the focus on the community developing and prioritising projects to address local needs, a process to manage any conflicts of interest was put in place. Steering group members were required to declare conflicts of interests when potential projects were being proposed.

Where a conflict was declared, the steering group member was not permitted to be involved in any discussion or decision around the prioritisation of the proposal. Steering group members involved in the procurement of service delivery organisations were required to declare any conflict of interest in relation to those bidding. If a conflict was declared, the member was no longer involved in the tender and evaluation process to select a preferred bidder. Procurement was in accordance with public procurement policy, and the social investment fund money is provided to organisations that are working for the benefit of the community. No individuals benefit financially. Therefore, I think that it is very clear that this was dealt with during the work of the steering groups.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister makes much of normal checks being carried out by his Department on governance and financial arrangements, yet it is clear that his Department has no central registry of which members of the advisory panels attended which meetings. Such a simple thing is not even held by the Executive Office.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Nesbitt: Is that, in his opinion, good scrutiny?

Mr McGuinness: I think that, in my original answer, I made it clear that we can be satisfied with the governance of this entire process from the very beginning.

I remind the Member that, during the initial stages of all of this coming to fruition, he was Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which discussed this matter. All that I can remember is the criticisms, which were legitimate at the time, given that it was a new process, about the length of time that it was taking to bring this to fruition. Never at any stage was there anything from the Member about the controversy that has erupted recently or the questions now being asked about the governance of the entire process. It was the most consulted-on process imaginable. Representatives of the Member's party sat on the steering groups. In the last number of years, I did not hear any of the criticisms that are now being voiced. Those are being voiced only as a result of the controversy — the legitimate controversy — that has erupted over Mr Stitt in east Belfast.

Mr Stalford: Further to the question from the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, can the deputy First Minister confirm that Mr Nesbitt's constituency colleague Mr Philip Smith sat on a SIF steering group, as did Ulster Unionist councillors, including some in south Belfast?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Stalford: If there was a lack of scrutiny in the process, the Ulster Unionist Party must take its fair share of the blame in that regard.

Mr McGuinness: Yes, I can confirm what the Member has just said. It was quite obvious to everybody from the very beginning that representatives of all the major political parties in the Assembly were participating in the steering groups and in all their decisions on the way in which the process was to be taken forward. Everybody needs to remember that it was agreed by everybody from the very beginning.

Mr McCartney: I represent a constituency where there are a number of these projects doing valuable work on the ground. Can the Minister confirm that many of these projects have now moved into delivery phase? Will he take the opportunity today to reassure them, despite some of the claims and suggestions being made, particularly by people who call themselves the Opposition, that none of these projects will be halted? Indeed, they will create more photo opportunities for members of the Opposition in the future.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the deputy First Minister, I remind Members to keep their questions brief.

Mr McGuinness: During Executive Office Question Time earlier, I mentioned the concern among different projects, areas and steering groups that, as a result of the controversy in east Belfast, finance to other groups will be halted. I want to dispel absolutely any notion that we will call a halt to any of the other SIF projects. In many instances, the projects are up and running, and they are providing valuable contributions to tackling disadvantage and marginalisation in communities. It is very important that we give that reassurance here today.

These are projects that are delivering incredibly for people who are trying to find pathways into employment. They are delivering on educational issues, on supporting families and on a wide range of other issues that we can

absolutely stand over and have no concern about whatsoever. It is unfortunate that, as a result of the debate around Mr Stitt, we have ended up with some of the opposition parties calling into question what is happening in other communities throughout the North. That is very unfair.

Ms Hanna: The deputy First Minister refers to a register in which steering group members declared their interests and recused themselves from decision-making. Where and when will this register be placed in the public domain?

Mr McGuinness: That will be decided very shortly. We are very conscious of the discussions on many of these issues. The question has been raised, for example, of whether minutes were taken in east Belfast. My understanding is that minutes were taken. In the time ahead, decisions will be taken on the minutes and the issue that the Member has just mentioned.

Mrs Long: The deputy First Minister cannot claim that he was not aware of my party's concerns about SIF because they are on the record from many years ago. However, perhaps he can answer this specific question. GEMS is the larger, more experienced organisation when it comes to managing and delivering community-based employability schemes. Can he explain precisely what added value Charter NI, this smaller and less experienced organisation, actually brings to the project for the management fee that it is paid?

Mr McGuinness: All of that is obviously an interesting conversation to have. *[Laughter.]* At the end of the day, I outlined, in my initial contribution to answering the question from the Member for North Belfast, a complete breakdown of how all this is audited and how we, as a Government, are satisfied. There has not actually been an allegation from anybody, even in the Opposition, that £1 of the £1.7 million was misappropriated in any way. There has been no such allegation whatsoever.

Mrs Long: That is not what I asked.

Mr McGuinness: We work on the basis that, if there are specific allegations to be made —

Mrs Long: That is not what I asked.

Mr McGuinness: — people should make them and we can have them investigated. And if there then needs to be a police investigation, we can ensure —

Mrs Long: That is not what I asked.

Mr McGuinness: I think it is exactly what you asked.

Mrs Long: It is not what I asked —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member not to intervene from a sedentary position.

Mr E McCann: I fully accept that there has not been a wing of money lost, not a wing of that 1.7 million quid. This debate and controversy has been sparked by the case of Mr Dee Stitt and the question of whether he was an appropriate person to be employed at public expense by Charter Northern Ireland, despite his alleged paramilitary role. Is it not the case that he was employed in that position at public expense not despite his paramilitary role but because of it, and that this reflects British Government policy, effectively endorsed by the Executive, which amounts to paying public money to buy off paramilitaries?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that questions need to be brief.

Mr McGuinness: I do not accept that argument at all. There are many SIF projects right throughout the North. I remember, when there was some controversy around this issue, that somebody saw a headline in 'The Irish News' that this was a slush fund for paramilitaries. Where are all these paramilitaries? We can talk about Dee Stitt, but the basis on which he was employed by Charter NI is really a matter for Charter NI. It has absolutely nothing to do with the Executive or the British Government. This was a scheme that the British Government had no involvement in whatsoever; it was brought forward by our Executive on the basis that it would deliver substantial gains for marginalised and disadvantaged communities. The scheme is doing that, right throughout the North. In this one instance, yes, we have a controversy. The controversy resides around, in my view, the ridiculous — almost laughable — interview given by Mr Stitt to 'The Guardian' newspaper, which brought him into public ridicule and, in doing so, created massive problems for Charter NI. Indeed, we end up having to discuss it here today as a result of that controversy.

The Member is absolutely wrong. This is a great scheme that is delivering on the ground, including in the Member's constituency. Again, I dispel the notion that we are going to freeze the scheme. It will continue until such time as

the £80 million is spent, productively and in the interests of communities.

Mr Agnew: It is intolerable that those who wish to wear suits by day and balaclavas by night are paid from public funds. What lessons have been learned from this fiasco to ensure that the First and deputy First Minister will have the power to act if such a circumstance were to arise again?

Mr McGuinness: I suppose that that is one of the more positive points that has been made during this conversation. Obviously, lessons will have to be learned, but, at the same time, I have to place on the public record that there are many people who were formerly associated with the UDA, and there may even be people out there who are associated with the UDA, who have made very powerful and positive contributions to peacemaking and the work of reconciliation.

There are also many people within Irish republicanism who make very positive contributions to peacemaking and reconciliation. It is important that, as we go forward, we do not try to use the situation in relation to Mr Stitt to call into question the motivation of many good people who, for many years — in some instances, decades — bought into supporting this peace process. Cheap shots do not work. We have to deal with the realpolitik of how we resolve conflict and try to involve as many people as possible in the resolution of conflict. If that means working with people who are former paramilitaries or who might even be associated with the UDA, as is the case in the allegation that has been made in recent times, but who are making a positive contribution and are not involved in violence or criminality of any description, I think that it is very important that we do that.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister: Is this not a mess of the Executive's own making because of their rejection of open competition in the appointment of lead partners? On the question of whether it is a slush fund, can we have an audit of how many paramilitary convicts are on the SIF payroll, including from the deputy First Minister's IRA fold?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The deputy First Minister can choose which question to answer.

Mr McGuinness: As usual, the contribution by that Member is not worth an answer.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the structures and processes of the social investment fund were cleared, went through and satisfied the full business case process, were cleared by the accounting officer of the Department, were cleared independently of the Department by the Department of Finance and Personnel and were periodically reviewed throughout the process and policy development by the public-sector exemplar, the gateway review process?

Mr McGuinness: Yes, I absolutely agree with the Member and, what is more, all that was well known in the Assembly.

Mr McMullan: Does the Minister believe that the SIF delivery model represents a unique and innovative delivery model to tackle disadvantage?

Mr McGuinness: Yes, I believe that it does. From the very beginning, we were determined that this would not be a top-down process and that it was an opportunity for people in local communities to identify a series of projects that would be funded by SIF to enhance and enrich the lives of the people whom they lived among. I think that it has been a tremendous success, apart from the difficulties with delays and the length of time that it took for what was a new and innovative project. There is absolutely no question or doubt whatsoever that the SIF project is delivering fantastic, worthwhile benefits to local marginalised and disadvantaged communities throughout the North.

Ms S Bradley: Considering the deputy First Minister's continued confidence in the governance of SIF, despite the serious questions that have been raised in the House and elsewhere, when does he intend to publish a full list of all organisations that applied to SIF, all those who received money from it and how much they received?

Mr McGuinness: When the Member says "serious questions" about this fund —

Ms S Bradley: The governance.

Mr McGuinness: Even the governance of the fund. The reality is that we are talking about this today only because of a situation that developed over one person in east Belfast. Let us not use that to cast aspersions on the many other good people throughout the North of Ireland who are making fantastic contributions towards enriching the lives of the people whom they represent.

In response to the second aspect of the Member's contribution, we will take into consideration what has been said about how we deal with that in the time ahead. I have no principled opposition to full transparency for this project.

Dr Farry: When I was Minister for Employment and Learning, we funded GEMS through three strands of money to deliver community-based employment programmes without any difficulties. By contrast, when we funded Charter, we had management difficulties.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question, please?

Dr Farry: Can I, therefore, ask the Minister to answer Naomi Long's question: what value added is provided by Charter, a smaller organisation, for its management fee as opposed to the management of GEMS, which is a larger and more experienced organisation?

Mr McGuinness: On the work that Charter NI has been doing, one thing that shines through in all the controversy there has been about this in recent times is that nobody has called into question Charter NI's motivation. In fact, all I hear on radio programmes is that nobody is casting aspersions on Charter NI, that it does a fantastic job and that it delivers for the local community. Of course, it is involved in the employability schemes in east Belfast. So, whatever about what has happened, on how Charter NI has conducted its affairs, apart from the controversy around Mr Stitt, nobody that I have heard has raised any questions whatsoever about its contribution towards enriching the lives of people in east Belfast through the different projects, including important employability projects, in that area.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister give his reassurance that the social investment fund is being delivered as intended?

Mr McGuinness: Yes, I absolutely believe the social investment fund is being delivered as intended, apart from the controversy in east Belfast. Some individual members of the Alliance Party certainly voiced opinions at the very beginning of the process, but I heard very little from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which, obviously, looked at the process from the very beginning and declared itself satisfied with the consultation that took place and the transparency in what was a unique process that tried to empower local communities to decide for themselves what best met their needs.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes this item of business. Can Members take their ease while we change the top Table?

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I ask you to review the Hansard report. Standing Order 19(5) says that Members who ask legitimate questions are to receive full answers to their questions. At no time during this discussion did I receive an answer to the substantive question that I put to the deputy First Minister, and under Standing Order 19(5) — *[Interruption.]* Some of your colleagues are trying to usurp your role. Standing Order 19(5) says that I am entitled to a full response. I would be grateful if you would review the Hansard report to clarify whether I have misunderstood things, and, if I have not received an answer, to ensure that I will in writing.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is an experienced politician and has been here for a long time, so she is well aware that that is not a point of order. She is also aware that it is up to the deputy First Minister to answer as he sees fit. So, that was not a point of order, but the Member has had an opportunity to put her concerns on record.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Will you explain how, when a Member quotes Standing Orders at you, you can say that it is not a point of order? It clearly is a point of order under any possible terms.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I have made my decision on that, and we will move on. I ask that Members take their ease while we change the top Table.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Mr McGuinness used this discussion to imply that some of the criticisms of SIF from parties such as mine were new and by implication, therefore, to some extent opportunistic. SIF was published in September 2011, and before the calendar year was out, the Ulster Unionist Party published a response to the consultation that contained our critiques and concerns. Our chief concern was the exercise of control by OFMDFM. I appreciate the opportunity to balance the official record.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's comments have been noted, but that is not a point of order, as he well knows.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Given the statement

made by the Speaker to the House this morning, I ask you to consult with the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers about the ruling you made in response to the point of order raised by Naomi Long. This is a matter of accountability to the Assembly under Standing Orders, and it is a matter you should discuss with the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers — something that has not happened in the past.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has also had the opportunity to make his comment in the House. We will —

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Principal Deputy Speaker. Perhaps when the Speaker is reviewing the ruling, he will note that two former Ministers spoke here today. Perhaps we can have some record of when they were accused of not answering questions at Question Time.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order either. We must move on.

Mr Attwood: Further to the point of order that I made, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, are you saying to the House that you are not going to consult with the Speaker on the proper interpretation of Standing Orders?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has already written to all Ministers on the Executive to remind them about the importance of replying.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am a new Member and do not have a copy of Standing Orders in front of me. Perhaps you can direct me to the Standing Order in which it states that the ruling of the Chair in matters of debate and procedure is final.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Certainly. The ruling of the Chair is final.

Ms S Bradley: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am also a new Member, and further to the previous contribution, can we then be communicated with if there has been, based on this decision, a change to my understanding of the point of order that Mrs Long raised?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: There has been no change, and we will move on. I am not taking any further points of order. Members can take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): We are currently taking our ease, but I will come back to you, Mr Swann.

Order. We have now taken our ease. Mr Swann, you have a point of order.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you provide clarity to the House about when points of order can be refused to Members asking legitimate points of order?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I advise Mr Swann that it is a matter for Members to stand and raise points of order, which are generally taken by the Speaker or Deputy Speakers and then considered with their content.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Maybe the Speaker's Office will look at the number of points of order that have been coming in in recent times and the fictitious nature of huge numbers of them. In fact, for the vast majority of points of order, the Speaker is ruling that they are not a point of order. Perhaps that is a matter that needs to be addressed and —

Mrs Long: Yours is fictitious. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. *[Laughter.]* Order. I am tempted to quote:

"Let those without sin cast the first stone."

[Laughter.]

We must move on.

4.00 pm

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I have received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 21 of November 2016 be extended to no later than 8:30pm. — [Mr Attwood.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The motion is carried and the House may sit until 8.30 pm this evening if necessary.

Members — *[Interruption.]* Is that a point of order, no?

Mr Aiken: No, I am just watching the clock.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I thought that you were keen to join the club.

Opposition Business

Agriculture: EU Funding

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the risks to multiple streams of funding posed by withdrawal from the European Union; further notes that over 70% of all European funding to Northern Ireland falls under the common agricultural policy and other rural funds, which provide approximately £350 million each year to farmers, representing 87% of annual farm income; acknowledges that the agri-food sector accounts for 3·25% of Northern Ireland's gross value added, which equates to £1·1 billion at basic prices and approximately 71,500 local jobs and that existing strategies in these sectors, such as Going for Growth, make no provision for the withdrawal of European Union funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how she intends to uphold the First Minister's commitment that farmers can be provided for as well, if not better, if Northern Ireland leaves the European Union, and to detail how she will develop a strategy to provide for and secure the long-term sustainability of the agricultural and agri-food sectors to ensure no loss of assistance to farmers arising from the withdrawal of existing European Union funding.
— [Mr McGlone.]

Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I note the motion and thank the Members for providing the opportunity to discuss this. Mr McGlone is not alone in representing a rural constituency. I, too, represent a largely rural area and one that has a dependency on the fishing industry. I am very mindful of the issues that affect that industry also.

I agree with Members that we need to be strategic in our thinking and develop a strategy to provide for and to secure the long-term sustainability of the agricultural and agri-food sectors in Northern Ireland. Since coming into office, I have taken that very approach. I am very aware of the failings of the current CAP policy but have used whatever powers I have to make decisions that protect the long-term sustainability of our agriculture and food processing sector. That is why I have ensured that more than 90% of our farmers have received an advance to their 2016 basic payments; that is why I have opened up the first phase of the farm business improvement scheme capital element, which will allow our

farmers to make long-term strategic decisions; and that is also why I have led trade missions on behalf of the industry to SIAL and China to look at opening new high-value markets for our produce. Harold McKee pointed that out in his contribution and said that he is keen to see that happening. I am actively pursuing that.

Let me provide some context around this issue. A number of Members have referred to this. Current CAP payments are guaranteed up to and including the 2019 scheme year, which is the 2020 EU budget year. After that, there is no certainty as to the type of agricultural support measures that will be adopted by the EU or the budget that will be devoted to them. Let me be clear: even if the UK had voted to remain within the EU, we would give no assurances to farmers on what support they would receive. Added to the fact there are no assurances on the finance within the EU, I believe that the way the scheme was delivered has lost the confidence of our farmers. It is interesting to note that there has been some recent questioning of the effectiveness of area payments, given that they are untargeted, and calls to consider whether more can be done to assist farmers to cope with market volatility. The EU debate on CAP post-2020 is clearly in its early stages, and it remains to be seen what ideas will be taken on board by the EU Commission.

My colleague William Irwin noted Commissioner Hogan's recent remarks on a potential €3 billion deficit in the CAP budget once the UK leaves the EU. The advantage for us of leaving the EU is that we can design our own policy that gives us the scope to remove the unnecessary bureaucracy that is associated with the current arrangements and make it better suit our local needs.

We know that CAP support payments will no longer apply when we leave the EU. The Treasury has made a commitment to maintain current levels of CAP support to farmers to 2020 for pillar 1 funds, rural development, including environmental programmes, and for R&D projects signed up to before we leave the EU. Mr McGlone was incorrect to state that there is no commitment in place for pillar 2 funds post-2019.

That gives us time to develop a new UK agricultural policy framework. My long-term aim for the industry is to promote a sustainable, competitive, high-performing, knowledge-based agri-food sector that is prosperous and compliant. That means that the sector will be more resilient to shocks and challenges, have high standards of animal health and welfare,

deliver for the environment and have increased market access for agri-food products.

It is clear that we are not going to have a system like the one we have currently. Why would we copy a system that is broken and is not working for many of our farmers? This creates the opportunity for us to look at a different type of agricultural policy for the UK that will provide the necessary incentives for our farmers moving forward. Various models are being studied, and on his recent visit to Northern Ireland George Eustice, Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, shared some of his early thinking on future UK agricultural policy, including a move away from subsidies towards insurance-based income support payments. He mentioned the Canadian, Australian and other models that could be considered. He is looking for fresh ideas and is not closing the door on anyone with ideas on what that might look like.

I want to clarify a point made by Mr McGlone. George Eustice did not state that he would scrap all subsidies; he said that he wanted to remove the current broken system and replace it with one that supports productive agriculture, helps manage risk and rewards farmers for sustaining the environment.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Rosemary Barton talked about farmers living in marginal areas. I believe that a new scheme can be introduced that will allow for farmers to be rewarded for managing sensitive landscapes. On funding for the areas of natural constraint scheme, the Member will be aware that I did not support a transfer of funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2. I am still considering other options, but, given the pressures on budgets, providing additional support will be challenging. I welcome Mr Eustice's vision for a future agricultural policy but will press to ensure that it caters for the needs of agriculture in Northern Ireland. We do not have to look to what we had before; there is the opportunity for something different. We can develop something bespoke for the United Kingdom.

Many Members have mentioned the bureaucracy coming from EU regulations. Whilst we will need to ensure that we have equivalent standards to allow for trade to continue to grow when we leave the EU, there will be opportunities to bring in legislation that suits the United Kingdom and not the wider EU. Farming by dates on the calendar is not good for either the farmer or the environment. Policies can be introduced that are based on evidence, and some examples were recently published in the land management strategy.

As a region, we will look for some flexibility within the framework offered, because as a region we are unique. The agri-food sector in Northern Ireland is much more important to the local economy than is the case in other parts of the United Kingdom. Around 70% of the output of the Northern Ireland food and drink sector is sold externally, while 29% of raw milk and 39% of lambs produced on Northern Ireland farms are processed in the Republic of Ireland; indeed, there is movement of many agricultural goods and processed foods across the border in both directions every day of the week.

I welcome the report published last week by the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA), 'Brexit: Challenges and Opportunities for Northern Ireland Food and Drink'. This highlights the importance of our agri-food sector to the local economy. It is helpful to have a view from the industry. Engagement is key in the process, and I look forward to further discussions on the report. Those discussions and the report will make an important contribution to our thinking as we move forward.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone raised the issue of access to migrant labour. The NIFDA report provides up-to-date information on the migrant labourers employed in the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland and calls for continued access to migrant labour. This is something that I will seek to achieve; indeed, I have raised it at meetings with various Ministers. It has not been forgotten. As my colleague from Lagan Valley Edwin Poots has already outlined, the report clearly demonstrates how the United Kingdom relies on the importation of food. According to the NIFDA report, the UK imports £2 billion of poultry products, £1.4 billion of beef and lamb, £1.2 billion of dairy and £1.1 billion of other products. This offers Northern Ireland processors tremendous potential if we do not get a free trade deal with the rest of the EU.

David Ford talked about the treatment of a hard border and the impact on the product that trades between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. When having the debate, we need to take a holistic overview and look not just for potential problems but for opportunities. Future trade and support arrangements will be extremely important for the future prospects of the Northern Ireland agri-food industry. I will seek an outcome where future relationships with the EU and the rest of the world are no less restrictive than they currently are with regard to both tariff and non-tariff barriers. Rather than contemplating the possibility of new barriers to trade and their negative effects, we should strive to retain current access

arrangements in the short term and create new export opportunities in the longer term.

Export markets have always been important for our industry, but there is a need to tread carefully to ensure that vulnerable agricultural sectors are not sacrificed for gains in other areas. With the decision to leave the EU, in future the UK will be in a stronger position to pursue trade deals that will be in our best interests. I have already been in China speaking to the Government at various levels and picked up no concerns about their willingness to trade with the UK if we are outside the EU.

Long-term planning is important in any sector and is no less so in farming. Therefore, any change in support mechanisms or levels of support would need to involve a period of transition. Significant thought is being given to a UK agricultural policy framework that delivers the market and non-market outcomes that the agricultural industry is uniquely positioned to deliver. Importantly, agricultural support also requires the use of restrictions on imports to protect the sector from lower-cost producers who face different standards and constraints with respect to tax, employment and the environment. We need to be mindful of countries such as Brazil, New Zealand and Australia.

As I started by saying, we need to be strategic in our thinking and develop a strategy to provide for and secure the long-term sustainability of the industry. Significant work has already been initiated in my Department to progress my priorities, which are to ensure that we replace the common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy with appropriate UK frameworks that underpin the sustainable growth and competitiveness of the agri-food and fisheries sectors and safeguard our continued ability to trade effectively and profitably both inwardly and outwardly.

As Members will be aware, I have had many meetings and discussions with Ministers to discuss the important issues that need to be resolved in the months ahead. In addition to meetings with my Welsh, Scottish and Irish counterparts, I have met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, David Davis. I have impressed on them the importance of the agri-food sector to our economy and sought an assurance that we would be kept closely and directly involved in the agricultural, environmental and fisheries policy and trade agendas as they unfold over the coming months and years.

I have also met Andrea Leadsom and George Eustice and impressed on them the unique position of our agri-food sector. As I have already indicated, I hosted a visit by George Eustice last month and facilitated his meetings with agri-food, environmental and fisheries stakeholders and departmental officials. My officials continue to engage with officials from Whitehall, the other devolved Administrations and the Republic of Ireland. That engagement will continue as we formulate our negotiating position for leaving the European Union as a whole United Kingdom, ensuring that we maximise the benefits for Northern Ireland. I have also met virtually every stakeholder from the agri-food, rural development, fisheries and environment sectors. As you are already aware, I have set up the joint Brexit consultative committee with the Economy Minister, Simon Hamilton.

Our Departments also engage with a wider range of stakeholder organisations at ministerial and official level outside those arrangements as necessary and in line with the normal course of business.

4.15 pm

Our future agricultural policy framework is a particularly important issue for the Northern Ireland Executive, and I welcome the time that the House has spent discussing it. As John O'Dowd said, there would be uncertainties with remaining in the EU, but we are in uncharted waters that provide significant opportunities for not only us in the House but our farmers. I and the wider Northern Ireland Executive will be a strong voice at the negotiating table. I am committed to engaging with those who are in a position to make decisions that will benefit the sector. I want a mature debate about the future framework, not one dominated by funding without consideration of what that funding might be used for. The advantage of leaving the EU is that we can design our own policies that give us scope to remove the unnecessary bureaucracy associated with the current arrangements that Members have referred to today. They will then much better suit local needs.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her reply to the debate. Minister, you talked about funding and what it could be used for. That is the crux of the motion from the Opposition today. It is about what will replace EU funding for our agriculture sector. We hoped that the debate would engender answers to the unknowns, what solid proposals are being put forward, even by your Department if not the entire

Executive, and how that preparation is being developed.

There is a feeling in the AERA Committee that there is a lot of talk and stakeholder engagement without hard and fast proposals. That feeling was demonstrated by the contributors today. Patsy McGlone talked about the need to alleviate concerns in rural communities. Edwin Poots talked about the threats and benefits of tariffs. There is uncertainty there. My party colleague Harold McKee talked about supporting a strong farming industry at home but said that, currently, there was a policy vacuum as to where we will go once we leave the EU. That is the uncertainty that has an awful lot of stakeholders and our industry asking questions at the moment. The UFU is engaging far and wide on where the industry is going. I think that there is commonality in the House today: we want to support our industry, and, I think, we want to support you, as Minister, and your Department in coming forward with solid proposals that will support our industry.

John O'Dowd talked about the uncertainties and said that we could not give farmers reassurances. Minister, as you rightly pointed out, we cannot give farmers reassurance on what the next common agricultural policy will be. However, we now have an ability to start to give Northern Ireland farmers the reassurance that they need. The debate is no longer about Westminster and Brussels and how we will support our farmers; the debate here and now in this place should be about how we support our farmers and the measures that we will put in place to do that. I had hoped to get a little more out of your response to the debate today. You talked about a lot of things that are being put in place and how markets will interact with the international world, and rightly so. However, the UK will negotiate those trade deals. The debate was asking for reassurances that we could give to our members and farmers, and my colleague from Fermanagh and South Tyrone touched on that. When does the replacement for the ANC scheme come forward? Those are genuine concerns. We had representation from the hill farmers at a recent Committee meeting.

What alternatives are the Executive looking at? I heard about engagement, but I did not hear, "This is what we could do" or "This is what we're looking at". You referred to George Eustice's comments at the DUP fundraising breakfast, where he talked about a move away from subsidies and towards insurance models. The insurance models currently in place in New Zealand and Canada are an underpinning

factor of what is there, but they also engage an awful lot of government support. The New Zealand model allows five-year set-asides that are tax-deductible against the Inland Revenue. If you, as Minister, are negotiating with the UK Government on that, we would be keen to hear that. We would be keen to explore how that can be developed and how that can help. The US market also looks at insurance-based systems, but they are highly competitive and highly costly to the farmer, and they rely a lot on the farmer being able to set aside money in the good years. Unfortunately, our farming industry has not had the good years to enable it to put that money to one side. The Canadian Going for Growth model for 2013-18 is a policy initiative that has support measures in place. They look towards a business risk management tool, which puts the farmer under a lot of pressure to put forward a business plan. There has to be some certainty on prices for him to proceed in that way.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. First, for clarification and for the record, it was not a DUP fundraising event. Secondly, will the Member, in light of all that he says, clarify to the House whether, when campaigning on the issue, he voted to leave the European Union or to remain? Clearly, that would give us an indication of where he is going with this.

Mr Swann: I appreciate Mr Storey's intervention. If he had been here for the entire debate, he would already know that I answered Mr Poots on that point. Where it is in relation to this debate, I am not entirely sure.

Mr Storey: What was the answer?

Mr Swann: I told him that I had voted to leave. I have no problem with that. Check in Hansard, but I have never seen in Hansard where the Economy Minister stated which way he went. Maybe you could answer that as well.

I go back to the hour-and-a-half debate that we have had. It has been positive with regard to support for our farmers. I note that the Minister noted where we were going on that. There has been consensus in the House that we need the guarantee of insurances, and that is what our agriculture industry is asking for.

In the last few minutes of Mr Mullan's contribution, Mr Allister made an intervention in which he queried the validity of the £350 million referenced in the motion. So that it is in Hansard and on the record, I clarify that the single farm payment was £266.3 million and the rural development programme was £83.1

million, giving a total of £349.4 million. The motion refers to "approximately £350 million", so we were not that far off. Mr Allister should check his figures before he starts casting aspersions on our motion.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. He raised a valid point about the Canadian system and so forth. Has the Member any thoughts on what George Eustice is talking about when he refers to having an insurance policy for farmers whereby there is a minimum price? When times are good, that is OK; when times are bad, we have a Government-backed insurance policy that ensures that prices never drop in the way that milk prices have dropped over the last two years?

Mr Swann: I said in response to the Minister that I had noticed that there were references to where the Minister had gone with regard to insurance policies. They are currently in New Zealand, Canada and certain states of America, but they rely heavily on farmers having good years that enable them to put that money to one side so that they can reimburse members.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Allister: The Member suggested that I had misled the House, I think. May I refer him to the latest resource accounts of the Department for 2015-16? On page 136 and page 139, where the figure is repeated, the total EU aid and single farm payment and other EU programme income for 2015-16 is a grand total of £258 million, £231 million of it in respect of single farm payment and area aids. Far from the suggestion that it is £349 million, the latest figure is £258 million. The question is this: why does the motion exaggerate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. The Member will know by now that interventions should be a little more pithy.

Mr Allister: I will try to be more pithy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I look forward to reading Hansard.

Mr Swann: I will wait for Mr Allister's pith to come forward. He refers to the single farm payment. The rural development programme was £83.1 million. If you add the two together, it comes to £349.4 million.

Mr Allister: In what year?

Mr Swann: In 2015-16.

Mr Poots: It is over five years.

Mr Swann: Over five — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. The Member has the Floor; go ahead.

Mr Swann: I was winding up before Mr Storey's intervention earlier on. As I said earlier, the contributions to the debate have been positive, and I hope that the House will support the motion to put in place mechanisms that will support our agriculture industry once we withdraw from the EU.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 59; Noes 34.

AYES

Mr Aiken, Ms Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr E McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McGuinness, Mr McKee, Mr McMullan, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Smith, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKee and Mr Swann

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the risks to multiple streams of funding posed by withdrawal from the European Union; further notes that over 70% of all European funding to Northern Ireland falls under the common agricultural policy and other rural funds, which provide approximately £350 million each year to farmers, representing 87% of annual farm income; acknowledges that the agri-food sector accounts for 3.25% of Northern Ireland's gross value added, which equates to £1.1 billion at basic prices and approximately 71,500 local jobs and that existing strategies in these sectors, such as Going for Growth, make no provision for the withdrawal of European Union funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how she intends to uphold the First Minister's commitment that farmers can be provided for as well, if not better, if Northern Ireland leaves the European Union, and to detail how she will develop a strategy to provide for and secure the long-term sustainability of the agricultural and agri-food sectors to ensure no loss of assistance to farmers arising from the withdrawal of existing European Union funding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The House will take its ease while we make changes to the top Table.

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

Rural Schools: Draft Strategic Area Plan

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive, so if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move

That this Assembly, noting the failure of the attempt at area-based planning for schools in the previous mandate, expresses its concern at the proposals contained in 'Providing Pathways Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020'; believes that schools in rural areas will be most at risk from the proposals; calls on the Minister of Education to detail what rural proofing measures were undertaken during the development of the proposed area plan; and further calls on the Minister to introduce legislation for a statutory presumption against the closure of rural schools similar to the protections already in place in England and Scotland.

It is with great concern that the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP bring this motion to the Floor of the Chamber. The draft strategic area plan for school provision, as put forward by the Minister of Education, is flawed. It is concerning that it is based on the same sustainable schools policy that underpinned the previous area plan and was called into serious disrepute by the Public Accounts Committee only a few months ago. It shows a complete failure on the part of the Minister to seriously address the issues that are faced by primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland, not least of which is the funding crisis, but, importantly, there are also systemic problems with underachievement and educational inequalities. Instead, it threatens struggling schools with closure, targets rural communities and creates a sense of panic in the schools system that takes the focus away from children in the classroom.

Our first major concern is that the plan is based on bad statistics. In answer to questions for written answer from the Ulster Unionist Party leader, the Minister indicated that 439 primary schools and 104 post-primary schools will be in budget deficit by 2019. According to the sustainable schools policy, that is a measure of sustainability. First, while all those schools will be showing a budget deficit in 2019, 11% of the primary schools on the list are actually showing clear evidence that they are reducing their deficits, so to put them on the list is particularly unfair. Perhaps a little more time and support would allow those schools to get back.

Another important issue is that 80% of the post-primary schools on the list, and 88% of primary schools, are in rural areas — 88%, Mr Deputy Speaker. What are those areas to do if their schools are attacked with closures? Where will those children go? Thousands of children will be dispersed into alternative schools. Where will they be taught? Out on the tarmac?

The consultation document states that:

"The education budget has been unable to provide the level of investment in the exiting estate ... that is required."

The new plan will change nothing. Unless the Minister has a few billion in his back pocket to fund capital development, I do not understand how this is to be orchestrated. What savings are to be made? The plan states that 80% of the budget given to schools is used for staff salaries, but the same amount of teachers will be needed to teach the same amount of pupils. To my knowledge, the only saving that may be made is to the small schools support factor, which sits at 3.82% of the aggregated schools budget. To be honest, the Minister is fooling no one if he is going to insist that that measly sum makes the dispersal of thousands of children worthwhile.

4.45 pm

A second concern, and I have said this before, is that any area plan should be proposed with gusto, highlighting fabulous opportunities that should be forthcoming and educational advantages that should be realised. How, as the Minister has suggested, will the closure of schools improve the quality of education? We still have no indication of this. It is simply presumed that bigger schools are better schools and smaller schools are inferior. I suggest that many teachers, principals and, indeed, parents and pupils will be offended by this statement. The Minister suggests in the

plan that we continue to face some challenges, and, indeed, there are eight listed in the consultation document. I am not in disagreement with him on the challenges listed. Indeed, I could add a few myself. What I am not clear on is how exactly the proposal, which would see the decimation of rural schools, would solve these problems.

Rather than addressing the funding crisis, the Minister is using it to drive his own agenda of school closures. He is creating a state of panic and fear in rural areas, where parents are wondering whether the school that their children attend will still be around in three, four or five years. If a school is labelled as unsustainable, as the Minister has done, it drives parents and pupils away in fear and plunges the school into a further state of crisis.

Legislation such as that which we are proposing was passed in England in 2006 and in Scotland in 2014, and, in Wales, the current Education Secretary, just last week, announced changes to the school organisation code, which will see the inclusion of a presumption against rural school closures.

The rest of the UK has recognised the special place that rural schools have in their communities. They recognise that pupils in rural areas deserve the same opportunities as children in other areas and recognise the challenges they face, such as small pupil numbers, budget and resource pressures, and greater difficulty in recruiting teachers, head teachers and staff. Rather than punishing rural areas with threats, fear and school closures, the Minister needs to work with schools to find innovative ways of ensuring that a quality education can be delivered in rural areas.

In Wales, 78 rural schools have closed since 2010, which is approximately 20% of the school stock in these areas. Many argue that the presumption against rural school closures has come too late, as some children as young as four and five are travelling for up to an hour to reach the nearest school. I do not want to see that happening in Northern Ireland. I would like to see children in rural areas protected against this. A statutory presumption against rural school closures will go some distance in ensuring that this takes place.

The legislation in England has been in place since 2006 under section 15(4) of the Education and Inspections Act. This legislation does not mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong, and a proposal must be clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

When producing a proposal, the proposer must carefully consider the likely effect of the closure of the school in the local community; educational standards at the school and the likely effect on standards at neighbouring schools; the availability and likely cost of transport to other schools; any increase in the use of motor vehicles, which is likely to result from the closure of the school and the likely effects of any such increase; and any alternatives to the closure of the schools.

These are simple checks and balances that can help ensure that closing a rural school is really the only option available and that all other options and costs to the community have been considered. In 10, 20 or 30 years' time, when many of us are long gone, there will be another Education Minister with his own agenda and perhaps another strategic area plan. Legislative measures such as the examples that we have suggested will give long-term transparency and accountability around decisions being made on rural schools, putting simple checks and balances in place to ensure that all options have been considered.

At the end of the day, this is the education of our children that we have in our hands. Indeed, the Minister has more responsibility than any of us, and I hope that he is not afraid of accountability. Is he afraid that a measure such as this will expose flaws in his agenda? If so, he has serious questions that he needs to ask of his proposals. If he is not afraid, he will have no issue with putting protections in place for those living in rural areas.

In conclusion, I hope that this afternoon's debate can be a constructive one. We all want an improved education system for our children. Mature decisions need to be made with regard to planning for the future — mature decisions not masked in fear.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the publication of the Education Authority's 'Providing Pathways Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020'; acknowledges the concerns that there will be over the proposals, particularly in rural areas; believes that every pupil, regardless of whether they live in a rural or an urban area, should have access to quality education in a viable and sustainable school, contributing to achieving the draft Programme for Government outcome to give our children and young people the best start in life; believes that the best way to achieve this is through an effective area

planning process involving managing authorities and sectoral support bodies; acknowledges sensitivities around the provision of the schools estate in both rural and other areas; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward a strategic small schools initiative to ensure accessibility to a quality education, particularly for isolated communities."

The amendment stands in my name and that of my colleagues on the Education Committee; namely, Carla Lockhart and Phillip Logan.

I do not think that there is a single Member who will disagree with the sentiment in the amendment that every pupil, regardless of where they live, rural and urban, should have access to quality education in a viable and sustainable school in order to give our children and young people the best start in life. I am certain that every one of us could put our hands up for that. Where we differ, of course, is on how that might be best achieved. I and my party, the DUP, feel that the most effective way of achieving that is through an area-planning process involving managing authorities and sectoral support bodies, as stated in our amendment. We do, of course, acknowledge that that must be done in a most sensitive way, particularly for isolated communities.

That is why we are calling on the Minister of Education today to commit to bringing forward a strategic small schools initiative to ensure accessibility to a quality education, particularly for isolated communities. Small rural schools are and have been a vital part of life in Northern Ireland. Indeed, they are the heartbeat of their community. Alas, over the past 40 years, many of our small rural schools have disappeared. As a councillor for some 40 years, I can well remember many battles fought in an attempt to retain those schools, but, owing to lack of children attending, some rural schools were not sustainable. School closures were not confined to rural schools, as some of our village schools were impacted on as well.

I am not saying that a school, either urban or rural, should never be closed. To adopt that position is just to bury one's head in the sand. What I am saying is that, before a school, particularly a rural school, is closed, all the issues must be carefully considered, not least the direct and indirect impact that such a decision will have on its community. Rural schools play a key role in local communities, particularly where small, isolated communities live alongside one another. Such schools are often the focal point for communities, and their proposed closure causes concern among the people who live there. Removing a school from

a village will leave a big hole in that community. Rural proofing must be carried out before a rural school is considered for closure, and certainly before a decision is published, as adverse publicity could impact on a school. Many jobs can be lost as a result of a school closing: teachers; local caretakers; groundspeople; school secretaries; classroom assistants; and bus drivers. Sometimes those are part-time posts, but, nevertheless, they are important to the holder of the post and our rural communities. All those positions play a vital and important role in our rural schools.

I represent a very rural constituency. I think that I am right when I say that it is the largest in the UK geographically. It has to be said that, during the long years of the Troubles, many families living in border areas were compelled to leave their home for security reasons. That impacted on children attending rural, isolated schools, and I have no doubt that the terrorist campaign that was waged was directly responsible for the closure of some of our rural primary schools, particularly along the Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh border areas. It is also true that some of the teaching staff in isolated rural areas were brutally murdered. We should all reflect on the impact that those serious incidents had on families and children across the whole community who were connected to the schools affected. My party leader was caught up in a bomb attack on a school bus that she was travelling on when on the school run. I ask you what mindset was at work when a school bus was targeted by terrorists. Hopefully, that sort of activity is now behind us, and we have truly moved into an era in which such incidents are never again repeated.

We must have an efficient, effective, acceptable and trustworthy strategic area plan. It must be one that the Assembly and our community has total respect for and confidence in. It should be the basis for educating all the children from our community, regardless of their social, political or religious background or intellectual ability; it should be all-encompassing and designed to ensure that no one is left behind. I accept that that is a huge challenge, but it is hopefully one that the Assembly, the Minister — I believe that he is — and the Education Authority are up for. I have said that I want to see an education provision where no child is left behind; that is something that I believe in most sincerely. In my book, it must include those on the margins; it has to reach out to the less privileged, if that is the correct terminology; and it must be all-inclusive to include the post-primary, primary and special education sectors. I am convinced

that, if that is achieved, a massive step in the right direction will have been taken.

We should all be looking for an assurance from the Minister today that no pupil will be disadvantaged because of the location of their school and that rural communities will receive equality of treatment when accessing education that meets their needs and prepares them for their future. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about the important facet of rural proofing in taking education provision forward. If I may, I will impress upon the Minister that, if and when a school's numbers are assessed as unsustainable, consideration should be given to its retention as it may be vital for the area. I do not for one moment underestimate the challenges that our rural schools face. However, I am persuaded that, with the right approach alongside responsible and creative thinking, our rural communities can enjoy the same effective delivery of education as their urban counterparts.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will agree with me in finding it strange for the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, to come to the House to talk about legislation and then, in the same vein, about treating everybody fairly. When they were in charge, they introduced article 64 of the Education Reform Order 1989, which we are now encumbered by and which places a duty on the Department to promote and facilitate Irish-medium and integrated schools. Therefore, when it comes to dealing with schools, the Minister cannot act because of how he is shackled by what those two parties signed up to in the Belfast Agreement.

Lord Morrow: Unfortunately, inconsistencies are not a new phenomenon in the House. I understand clearly what the Member has said, and I thank him for it.

I am encouraged that Minister Weir has visited many of our schools since he took up his post and will have witnessed at first hand the superb job that principals, teachers and others do. All of them take pride in their schools and give of their best to ensure that, under their charge, their children get the best start in their education. Under the common funding scheme (CFS), school funding is very often a matter of debate. I am of the opinion that the Minister should examine the CFS to ensure that it is fit for purpose and that schools are being adequately funded to deliver the best possible outcomes. Our rural schools are vital for the sustainability of rural communities. I suspect that that will be emphasised by most, if not all, who participate in today's debate, whether they

are in favour of the motion or the DUP amendment.

In conclusion, I believe that one thing that we can all agree on is that we want the best possible outcomes for our children and young people as they prepare themselves for a very competitive world. I trust that, as a result of today's debate, we can go forward united in our determination to achieve these outcomes.

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "mandate," and insert

"calls on the Minister for Education to ensure that the findings of the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate's report are taken into consideration and applied when looking at the sustainability of rural schools and that a proper, efficient and effective consultation with local rural communities is completed prior to any decision being taken to close or merge smaller rural schools."

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I confirm that we are unable to support the original motion because it calls for the protection of the schools estate; it is about buildings rather than what is best for our rural children. I live in a rural community; as a child, I attended a rural school; I have a child who attended a rural primary school and who is now at a rural post-primary school. As a rural dweller and an MLA who serves the largely rural constituency of Strangford, I have fought, and continue to fight, for services to be located in rural areas.

5.00 pm

I believe in the sustainability of rural communities. During Question Time, I have questioned various Ministers to ask what they are doing to ensure that rural proofing applies to policies. However, I cannot support the ongoing provision of a school in a rural area if it is not meeting the educational needs of our children. The official Opposition motion calls for the retention of schools in rural areas but does not mention the educational opportunities for children. I want the best for our children and that is not achieved by sitting in a largely empty room, in an underfunded declining education system, struggling to survive in order to keep buildings open.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Not just at the moment. As the chief inspector has said:

"All learners need, and indeed are entitled to, the highest quality of education and training if Northern Ireland is to aspire to being world class. I believe we have excellent capacity within and across sectors of education and training that will, if appropriately applied, help us to meet and resolve the challenges we face in order to be even better."

In some cases, the future of rural schools is called into question because the numbers attending are so low that the school is simply no longer viable. The number of teaching staff is affected and children no longer have access to an education system that will enhance their skills, talents and abilities. It is not good enough to state that a rural school must be protected. The motion calls simply for the protection of the school estate and does not mention the very heart of the issue: what is going to be better for rural children?

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way now?

Ms Armstrong: Not just at the moment. In the chief inspector's report for 2014-16, she states in relation to rural schools in paragraph 33:

"There is also a small difference in inspection outcomes between smaller and larger primary and post-primary schools, with larger schools tending to do better in inspections than the smallest. For primary schools, this difference only becomes meaningful at low enrolment levels and for rural primaries between those with less than 105 pupils and those above."

I do not believe that rural children should be put at a disadvantage, just because some people want to retain a building in an area. The needs of the child should come first.

In the PAC 'Report on Department of Education: Sustainability of Schools', recommendation 4 confirms the need for the Department to commission a review of the approved enrolment figure recorded for every school. It is extremely important that the Department has up-to-date records of the current and expected enrolment for each school. This will ensure that appropriate area-based planning is considered and positive action can be taken, well in advance, to support rural schools to take steps to safeguard against falling below the approved enrolment figures and the negative impact that that will have for pupils, or consider alternatives, whatever they may be. At all times, the matter must be based

on a child-centred approach, not to protect a building or jobs, and that applies to schools in urban and rural areas. The PAC report recommends, in recommendation 1, that there is transparency, consistency and clarity in decision-making, based on both quantitative and qualitative data. In recommendation 5, it repeats that decision-making should be based on robust evidence and data collection.

If fact-based evidence is available, the Department, the school and the school community, including families and prospective pupils' families, will have a full picture as to why a rural school may no longer be viable. Schools, particularly primary schools, are deeply seated in the communities that they serve. If evidence suggests that enrolment numbers are in decline, the community must be made aware of the issue and be involved in the decision as to how to provide the best education for children. In recommendation 8, the report confirms the need for an engagement strategy or, as it calls it, a "buying in" to the process" or, as I prefer, community consultation. In the Alliance amendment, we clearly state that:

"a proper, efficient and effective consultation with local rural communities is completed",

as part of any consideration to merge or even close a school.

The Department of Education and the Education Authority need to engage in a meaningful consultation and not just pay lip service to local communities. Local communities need to feel that they are part of the process of helping to decide what is best for their young people and what education provision they want to see in the local community. Far too often, schools hear that they are being earmarked for closure without proper support from either managing authority. A one-size-fits-all model will not work; and what works in one rural community may not work in another. That is why it is vital that the community is involved in any discussions about the future of education in their area.

The only rural school in this country that we should give special consideration to is St Mary's Primary School on Rathlin. The reasons for supporting a primary school on Rathlin are clear. The island is cut off from the mainland regularly, making it impossible for primary-school children to travel to and from school each day. Unlike post-primary provision, there is no boarding option for primary-school children in Ballycastle or the surrounding area. Therefore, it is right that we should support a

primary school on Rathlin for the small number of children living there. The school should be protected because of its unique island setting. The motion refers to protections against closure as used in England and Scotland.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way and for mentioning Rathlin, which is in my constituency. So that the Member is well versed, I welcome the fact that Rathlin has increased its pupil intake to 10. It is making progress because the community sees it as its local school and because social housing has been delivered on the island. It is a good news story, and I thank the Member for giving support for Rathlin.

Ms Armstrong: We have to remember that the scheme used in England and Wales for small, isolated rural schools was created to protect schools like the one on Rathlin because of their unique geographic location. We do not have areas like the Highlands and Islands of Scotland or north Yorkshire. We have only Rathlin. There are children in Scotland and England who have to travel in excess of 20 miles — sometimes many, many more — to get to a primary school. I ask each and every one of us this question: how many schools do our children pass on a 20-mile journey from home? In my case, it is probably about 10 primary schools. It is not wrong for children to have to travel to school. My daughter travelled over three miles every day to get to her local rural primary school. Many rural children travel to school every day without that journey having a negative impact on their community.

In conclusion, I agree that the Department should do better. Area planning decisions must be based on robust evidence and accurate data to take into account all school enrolments. The PAC report asked that, following a review of enrolments, the Department quantify how much surplus places cost. As the PAC identifies, that would provide a driver for change as it would identify how much resource could be invested more effectively in the education system. If the Department concentrates on ensuring that children are provided with a quality education system, it can ensure the sustainability of the school estate to allow for the stabilisation of enrolment numbers and provide a wider choice for pupils of educational opportunities and leisure, cultural and sporting activities.

As I said, I will not support the original motion. I believe in children, not buildings. As a mother, I want my child and all children to have access to the best education, and, like many rural families, I am content for my child to travel to access that education. I acknowledge that the

DUP amendment recognises the sensitivities around the provision of the school estate, and I welcome the DUP's acknowledgement of sectoral bodies such as NICIE and CnaG, but this is not about buildings and ownership of land. Hard questions need to be asked: why are we keeping a school open? Why are we not putting the pupils' education first? I cannot support its call for a strategic small schools initiative, as I fail to see how different that approach will be from the official Opposition's position of a statutory presumption against closure.

Proper governance does not mean promising populace protection. We need to review the school estate, as outlined in the PAC and the chief executive's recommendations. That includes consulting the community so that they know the impact that small pupil numbers have on the educational opportunities for their children. Armed with facts, people can help to make decisions about education provision in the local area. We need to put the pupil, not buildings, first, and we should not be keeping a school open for the sake of it. The Department must learn from the Education and Training Inspectorate's reports and stop working in silos. We cannot afford to maintain the school estate in the way it is because it is reducing opportunities for our children.

Mr McElduff: I will make the first part of my contribution in my role as Chair of the Education Committee, and then I will make some comments from a party political perspective.

The first thing I want to say as Chair of the Education Committee is that the primary-school population is growing, the post-primary population is not growing, and most of that reduction is happening in non-selective schools. It appears that, in the time ahead, the focus — not all of it, but, perhaps, most of it — of the Department and the area planning process may lie in the direction of primary schools, but I stand to be corrected.

In the last mandate, around 26 schools were closed; there were 14 amalgamations involving 31 schools, two thirds of which were primary schools; and the number of vacant desks reduced by just 4,000. The Department had often quoted a disputed number that was much higher. Area planning tends to raise controversial issues, but it is necessary in order to plan school provision efficiently so as to deal with demographic changes and, of course, financial challenges.

Members will be aware of some problems with the process in the last mandate. For example, the primary schools consultation feedback took the Education Authority over one year to analyse. It was not without its problems. There was uncertainty in schools, and some said that the application of sustainability indicators appeared to be inconsistent. Rural schools felt that, in many cases, area planning was being used to further an official agenda of closing small schools. Others even argued that Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspections were being used by the Department to undermine school sustainability and lead to school closures.

The motion references presumption against closure in other jurisdictions. One of those jurisdictions introduced ministerial call-in for controversial school closures etc. This society, uniquely in these islands, has the Minister making the decisions on development proposals relating to very small changes to enrolments in schools.

To conclude my comments as Education Committee Chair, the Committee wants a clear statement from the Minister on the way forward in relation to the small schools support factor. That is vital to the survival of primaries in rural areas with fewer than 105 pupils. The Committee wants certainty that sustainability measures will be applied transparently and consistently to all schools; wants confirmation that all sectors will work together to share educational provision efficiently; wants to support innovative local school-sharing solutions; and wants, obviously, a process that feels fair to all sectors involved in it. Parents with children in special schools are part of the process for the first time, and they want assurance that the added-value nature of special schools will not be lost in an attempt to standardise provision.

As a Sinn Féin MLA, I will say in Irish that we will support the DUP amendment. Tá muid ag tacú leis an leasú seo. I want to make three concluding comments. I submitted a written question to the Minister asking him to outline whether there is a body of educational research and evidence to demonstrate or refute the case that primary schools with more than two year groups in a single class produce poor educational outcomes. The Minister acknowledged that that body of educational research does not exist. Last Friday, when I visited St Mary's Primary School in Strabane, I met a group of principals. They were at pains to point out that composite classes work and produce good outcomes.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Weir: You will get an extra minute.

The Member mentioned having more than two year groups in a class, and there is the direct reference in paragraph 34 of the ETI report to that, which specifically highlights that composite classes spanning more than two years can be much more challenging for the teacher and limit opportunities for children to develop socially. So there is a degree of evidence, particularly when we are talking about where it goes beyond two year groups.

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

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his intervention. That needed to be said, because there is a contest. Among the principals that I met last Friday, there was a howl of protest when that point was made to them in a provocative way to tease out their response. I communicated to those principals that they needed to make arguments based on educational research and evidence.

My final point relates to Irish-medium education, particularly post-primary provision. There is a need for a second post-primary in Belfast, and there is a need for a strong Irish-medium post-primary school in the north-west. Gaelcholáiste Dhoire is shaping up to be that.

Mr McPhillips: As an MLA for one of the most rural of these counties, I welcome the opportunity to speak on today's motion. Needless to say, the issue of rural school closures is one that Fermanagh and South Tyrone and its people are unfortunate enough to be accustomed to.

It is my view that the proposals in the draft area plan are a direct attack on rural education provision, and the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, as the Opposition, have tabled today's motion to let everyone else know that, when government consultations are launched, the decisions have been predetermined and it is just a case of rubber-stamping them. No amount of public engagement or consideration given to the Rural Needs Act will change the fact that that is what makes debates like this so important.

5.15 pm

It is with deep regret that we bring the motion to the Assembly. I would have hoped that the value of rural schools to many communities across the North would be self-evident to the Minister. What is clear, however, from the proposals in the Education Authority's 'Providing Pathways' plan is that rural schools are being targeted by stealth. Rural schools represent 55% of Northern Ireland's primary schools and 20% of post-primary schools. Needless to say, the proposals put forward by the Education Authority will greatly impact on them. They are, by their nature, more likely to have smaller, composite classes and fewer people attending sixth form.

The proposals will have a devastating impact on the west, as the organisation of education will serve only the best interests of places like Belfast, Derry and other built-up areas, which leaves rural areas like mine to take the hit. That cannot be allowed to happen. The Minister can be assured that I, as a representative for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, will not sit back and allow the erosion of rural education in my constituency, which will be disproportionately impacted on if the current plan goes ahead. I fully support increasing educational outcomes for our young people, whether in primary, secondary or tertiary education, when there is evidence-based policy. However, just like my Opposition colleagues, I question the motive behind the proposed plan and whether it is really based on finance rather than educational outcomes.

The Minister has failed to show how small class numbers impact on educational achievement. He noted last week that there was some evidence, but he failed to elaborate. In preparation for today's debate, I did some research with others and found an interesting study conducted in Finland, whose education results greatly exceed Northern Ireland's and, indeed, the rest of the European Union states. Finland is in the top 10 world rankings for maths, reading and science, yet just over one quarter of its state-run schools have 50 or fewer students. I do not advocate the need for that number of pupils in the North, but it proves that there are merits in smaller schools, and they can greatly increase educational outcomes with the right guidance and policies stemming from the Executive. What we have seen to date, however, are attempts to erode rural education services as a cost-saving exercise, pretending to put children's interests first while in reality, behind the scenes, it is a cost-saving exercise.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McPhillips: In a moment.

I want to mention the impact that rural school closures will have on local communities, as I know that there is a devastating effect on my community. Rural schools are very much part of the fabric of these communities in providing not only education but jobs and consumerism. Removing schools will have much wider implications for the local economy, and transferred redundancies will not resolve that.

I give way to the Member.

Mr Storey: Will the Member clarify for the House what he deems to be a sustainable number in a rural school, given that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has stated that a figure of 84 could be used, which is a four-teacher school? Does the Member agree with that, and is that how he would define a rural school?

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

Mr McPhillips: As has been stated, each school should be determined on its own merits. To take a rural school out of any area is to take the heart out of a community. There are also significant issues concerning secondary schools and sixth forms that are outside today's immediate debate but are equally important. The Education Authority's back-door plan to close rural schools is not based on inadequate education provision or financial mismanagement; it is a cost-saving exercise that, yet again, plans to erode vital local services. I urge support for the motion.

Ms Lockhart: I am grateful to be able to participate in the debate. As a party, we want to provide sustainable, high-quality education for all children and young people in Northern Ireland regardless of background, social mobility or location and to see a fair and equitable offering that gives children the very best start in life and enables them to fulfil their potential.

Having been educated in a smaller-school setting in rural Tyrone just along the border area, I know all too well the importance of rural proofing and the need to protect and invest in services that, for many years, suffered as a result of the Troubles. My primary school was particularly small, with my class of seven being one of the biggest. I moved on to a post-primary school that was also small, so I know all too well the needs of rural areas and the need for area-based planning to take into account the specifics of an area and not just to look at the cold, hard figures.

I stand in the House today to commend the systematic and empathetic way the Minister has approached this matter to date, and I have no doubt that, going forward, whilst he will not shirk his overall responsibility, he will do what is best by the school estate and ensure that children have a sustainable and high-quality education service. There is no doubt that a rural school education is unique within a small school setting. The educational and pastoral care are exemplary, and I personally have benefited from those offerings. However, with its benefits also come some disadvantages and challenges for the children and the dedicated teaching staff.

There is no doubt that problems exist in smaller schools, sometimes with the lack of breadth in their offering, be it curriculum, the formal offering or the extended offering. They sometimes have difficulty attracting and retaining staff to leadership positions, and existing staff having to fulfil several roles sometimes deters them from developing specialisms in particular areas. So, yes, whilst we have to look at the overall picture, it is important that we do not do so through rose-tinted glasses and that we say, "It is the children and their education we are putting first".

We are all responsible politicians — well, most of us — and therefore we all know from our life experience that not everything can stay the same. We must shape a new school estate that meets the needs of the area in which it operates, ensures that the children whom it serves achieve improved educational equality and improves the experience for all its users. I welcome the Programme for Government's commitment to our children, and, to that end, I am utterly confident the Minister will ensure there is an improvement in educational outcomes, a reduction in educational inequality and an improvement in the quality of education provided.

There is no doubt that empty school places and the surplus capacity are having a detrimental impact on our overall budget for schools, and therefore it is imperative that a rationalisation of the school estate happens. We are all too aware that —

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way on that issue?

Ms Lockhart: Absolutely.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member agree with me that the figures on empty school desks need to

be reanalysed and that the schools that were built 30 or 40 years ago do not necessarily have the same number of empty school desks now as they did then, so whenever we base decisions on figures such as those, that should be looked upon first?

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

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, figures do need to be looked at, but I also draw the Member's attention to a meeting that we sat in just a number of hours ago in one of the Committee rooms when we were told by principals that there is a major problem with funding, that empty school desks and spaces are at the heart of that and that it needs to be addressed. The Member has to take responsibility whenever she brings forward motions like this and should not use our schools and our children as a political football, which is what is happening in this place today.

We are all aware that it is the responsibility of the Education Authority to liaise with the sectoral representatives, and I believe that will be a vital component of a comprehensive plan that meets the needs of the specific area. I know that in my constituency there is a very clear model of how not to bring forward an area plan, and I have only to think back to the mess that was made around the Dickson plan, when a plan was brought forward that was not transparent and on which there was no consultation with communities.

Mr Storey: Poor regard for the facts.

Ms Lockhart: The Member makes a point about who supported it. That has given us a basis to work from. There must be community consultation with parents, because we are a party that is fundamentally wedded to ensuring that parental choice is adhered to. I firmly believe that, with a change in strategic leadership and a Minister committed to parental choice, there is an opportunity to ensure that our estate is fit for purpose in the 21st century. It may in some instances cause pain and anguish, but for the long-term sustainability —

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

Ms Lockhart: — it is vital that we work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland.

Ms Seeley: As my party colleague Barry McElduff has outlined, we will oppose the

motion and vote in favour of the amendment from the DUP.

I accept that, as detailed in the draft plan, the nature of the North's education system, with its range of school management types, means that in proportion to the number of children and young people to be provided with places there is a higher number of schools than would be the case elsewhere. An area plan should be welcomed, and in fact I do welcome the vision outlined in the document, but I also appreciate why some are cautious. In an area as small as the North, we need to make decisions based on a vision of the whole of the North and in the interests of our young people and the quality of the education they receive. Any such vision must also have input from pupils, parents, teachers and principals, as well as the managing authorities and sectoral support bodies suggested in the document.

Most importantly, decisions must not be economically driven but pupil centred. Concerns regarding small rural schools should therefore be listened to and taken on board. I personally caution against any correlation between school size and educational attainment. We must acknowledge that small schools exist because bigger schools are simply too far away. However, I welcome the DUP amendment, which calls for the Minister to bring forward a strategic small schools initiative — evidence that the Minister is not only listening to concerns raised since the publication of the report but responding to them.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Ms Seeley: I will.

Mrs Overend: Does the Member acknowledge that in May 2013 Sinn Féin actually voted in favour of a statutory presumption against rural school closures? Is she flip-flopping on that now?

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

Ms Seeley: I thank the Member for her intervention. Our Education Ministers, including the most recent, John O'Dowd, made decisions based on pupils, their attainment and the value of the education that they receive. I am confident of that.

I want to note in particular the vision outlined for the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council area, which I represent. It includes a commitment:

"to establish additional learning support and autism specific provision",

within primary and post-primary schools, although I think this also requires us to incorporate special educational needs (SEN) and autism-specific training into teacher training courses. There is also a commitment to provide further opportunities for children and young people to learn in specialist settings attached to mainstream schools, and I welcome that. That would further the wholesome development of children with additional educational needs, as well as their peers. The document also commits to ensuring equitable access to the entitlement framework pathways, so that all our students have access to a wide curriculum. This will undoubtedly help keep our young people engaged in education for as long as possible.

Whilst the area plan:

"will inform the shape of educational provision for: primary schools; post-primary schools; special schools; and learning support provision in mainstream schools",

it fails to mention education other than in school (EOTAS) and juvenile centres, and this is a failing. For example, 33 EOTAS centres currently exist and provide education for over 600 pupils. Their experience of education should be included in any vision moving forward.

I want to give a specific mention to SEN provision across the North. It is absolutely vital that we reinstate full-time provision for all children, and in order to do that, as the draft plan states, we have to:

"improve the geographical accessibility to special educational needs provision",

and:

"provide for projected growth in special educational needs support".

Data indicates that 143-plus additional special school places will be required over the next three years. We must plan for that. Children with additional educational needs should enjoy the same full-time provision as those who have no special or additional needs.

Finally, over 69% of schools make provision for preschool children.

Let us work to get that figure to 100%. Post-primary provision is offered in 87% of special schools. However, a number of them do not make 16-plus provision. That is simply not good enough. The final plan must also address that.

I welcome the draft plan but hope that the Minister takes into consideration the areas for improvement. I urge that all decisions are based on the needs of children and young people and not the elasticity of the purse strings.

5.30 pm

Mrs Barton: I have some serious concerns about the draft area plan, particularly in the context of the area planning process. As my colleague Sandra Overend stated, the Public Accounts Committee also had concerns. In its published report, it stated that there was too much focus on three quantitative criteria for the assessment of sustainability and that the process of addressing surplus spaces under the plan did not meet its aims and the reliability of the data presented in the sustainable schools policy was called into question. The Committee actually stated:

"the evidence base supporting the sustainable schools policy falls far short of acceptable standards and the Department is basing decisions about the future of schools on inaccurate information."

The Committee also said that, despite the reduction in surplus places, the long tail of underachievement had not, in fact, improved at all and that engagement with key stakeholders around area planning was poor. Now, the Minister assures us that, this time, things will be different and everyone is now around the table. However, the truth of the matter is that the Minister can give no guarantees.

With all that in mind, I am extremely concerned and baffled that the Minister is taking a decision to take this old, discredited proposal and try to pass it off to the House as if it were a new and improved idea. If the Minister had been serious about a credible, functional strategic area plan, he would have started fresh with a new sustainable schools policy and area plan that would meet the needs of children and communities, a plan that could really address underachievement, look at inequalities in the system and take a more holistic view of the education system instead of applying blunt instruments such as a school's financial position or its enrolment trends.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for giving way. Given the Member's long history in teaching, would she not agree that the pupil:teacher ratio is quite important in budgeting and that, if we were to address that and reduce it, it would leave more money for extracurricular activities and tackling educational attainment?

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

Mrs Barton: I believe that the pupil:teacher ratio is most relevant to the teaching of children in the classroom. Certainly, extracurricular activities are important, but, very often, schools bring in grants to assist with those.

In recent years, we have seen many schools being able to turn stats around, as at Movilla High School, where enrolment was suffering and outcomes falling. Now, it has gained its best GCSE results in years, and enrolment is on the up. With help and support, that could be facilitated in many schools across Northern Ireland.

What other options has the Minister looked at? We live in the 21st century, and there are lots of examples across the globe where the use of technology has transformed teaching and learning in rural and more remote areas. Has the Minister considered that? Of course, that would require the Executive to address the issue of broadband connectivity in Northern Ireland, which we spoke about earlier. What about taking serious measures to address the school funding crisis by allowing schools to have better control over their own budget?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. She may not be aware of this, but, a couple of weeks ago, I wrote to all schools in Northern Ireland to ask whether they desired greater autonomy and for their views on the bureaucratic burdens that are placed on them. Essentially, the idea was to ask them what they would want with that greater level of autonomy. The Member may be a little behind the times when it comes to what is already happening.

Mrs Barton: I await those answers.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way on that issue?

Mrs Barton: Yes.

Mrs Overend: I am certainly aware that schools have been written to, Minister. I have heard stories from schools about the letter

being very vague. They need detail on certain proposals.

Mr Weir: The whole point is that the proposals come from them.

Mrs Overend: Yes. The answers are not there.

Mrs Barton: Schools have been calling for more control over their budgets for years. The overall investment in our education system is embarrassing. Of the four nations of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland spends the least per head on primary and pre-primary education. We must seriously think about investing more in our young people and their future. Adequately and strategically supporting education will have benefits across the board. It will improve the health and well-being of our future population, support the prosperity and economic growth of our country and strengthen rural and urban areas. The list goes on. The current plan proposed by the Executive of school closures —

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

Mrs Barton: — and disinvestment will be disastrous for our young people. I ask you to join me in making a real start to addressing that crisis and supporting the motion as it stands. The face-saving amendment from the DUP —

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

Mrs Barton: — essentially allows its Minister to get away with doing nothing. We cannot —

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

Mrs Barton: — support that.

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you provide clarity on the role of officials and special advisers in the Officials' Box during debates? Are they there to support the Minister in his role or Government members in their interventions?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Perhaps you can provide some more detail to the Speaker's Office around that for clarity. I am not entirely sure, from here, what you are referring to. I presume that you will provide that detail to the Speaker's Office.

Ms J McCann: I begin by echoing what my two colleagues said: we will oppose the motion and support the DUP amendment.

I welcome the general direction of travel of the draft area plan. It puts the needs of children and young people at the heart of the planning process. It states that it wants a broad and balanced curriculum for all our children. Given the number of debates that we have had on education, particularly over the past couple of weeks, it is key that all our children and young people have as much choice as possible in the curriculum. It is not just about academic subjects, although they are very important; vocational subjects need to be part of the curriculum as well. It is about skilling up our children and young people for life by giving them the life skills that they will need. It is not just about their academic achievements but about giving them the skills to deal with life's problems and difficulties.

The plan also seeks to close the attainment gap. That issue should be of great concern to all of us and the wider community. There is clear evidence — we have heard it time and again in the education debates, and no doubt we will hear it in the next debate — that links deprivation, poverty and exclusion to underachievement and poor educational outcomes. They act as a barrier to learning for some of our children and young people, and that is something that we need to change. It is important that we ensure that young people born into social and economic deprivation or poverty get the support that they need. They are entitled to as much help and support as any other child, no matter what type of family background they come from.

I want to say again — we have had this in debates — about the excellent results in my constituency of West Belfast in educational outcomes. It clearly shows that, when the right intervention is made in those areas, the children shine and their potential comes through. Every child has a right to have its potential fulfilled, and I believe that those interventions and programmes of support help to do that.

My colleague Barry McElduff mentioned the need for another post-primary Irish-medium school, particularly in north Belfast and the north-west. That is crucial because more and more people are learning through the medium of Irish. That is an important issue.

I want to touch on the EOTAS provision, which, in my opinion, is not given the recognition that it deserves. I hope that in the final area planning it will be. I have seen it at first hand with

programmes like New Start in west Belfast. We all want children to go to mainstream education, but, for whatever reason, mainstream education just does not suit some children's needs and does not do it for them. Therefore, interventionist programmes that provide one-to-one support and which support the whole family are clearly the right way for some children to have the opportunities in life that other children have. I hope that the final plan will do that.

I also want to say, and the Minister is aware of this, that it is not about buildings. The previous Minister, John O'Dowd, did excellent work on bringing the entitlement framework forward. It is not just about school buildings, but school buildings sometimes can be crucial, particularly in an area where, for instance, they do not have sporting facilities in a school. The Minister will be aware of the campaign in the Colin area of west Belfast for a new school. It is essential that all our children have access to those opportunities. It is about building a community; it is not just about a school. I would like to see those regeneration projects being taken forward in the overall plan. As I said, we have debated all sorts of things over the last number of weeks, for example, nurture units and autism provision.

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

Ms J McCann: I want to say that we will be supporting the DUP amendment but not the motion.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I perhaps find myself in the unusual position — following on from the last Member — that quite often in the House when we have new Members there is a maiden speech that has to be dealt with. I do not know if that was a valedictory speech on behalf of the Member opposite. I met the Member recently on the issues around Colin. Obviously, I am not going to talk directly on this. It would be inappropriate for me to talk about individual schools, although I will wait, perhaps, to see an imaginative proposal from Mr McPhillips who will, maybe, be having a merger between Brollagh and Helsinki in the future. The limits of imagination are not constrained in the House.

I will start with a note of consensus. I might come down to a second item later, but there is at least one item that I agree on with the proposer of the motion. Relatively early on in her speech — I hope that I quote her correctly — she said, "I do not understand". I agree with her: she clearly does not understand. Most

obviously, shown by her intervention on autonomy, in which she complained that I had written to schools asking for their views on autonomy and then complained that it was vague because it did not tell them what autonomy they should be getting. Now, if Members do not see the irony in that then, perhaps, it is no wonder that this motion has gone so astray.

On the process of area planning — it should be made clear, and to be fair to the SDLP they referred correctly to the Education Authority plan rather than the Department plan. However, when I made a statement in the House on this, I made an appeal across the board — it is clear that some have embraced this — that we need to look at this in a mature fashion. Yes, there will be some tough decisions and there will be something that is painful, but, in the same way as there has been a degree of embracing around Bengoa, there is a realisation amongst the vast majority of the Chamber that there is a wider strategic direction that needs to be taken. It is the same with area planning. Therefore, it is very disappointing that that mature response has not been met by the proposers of the motion. Even before the consultation on the draft area plan has concluded, they have rushed to prejudge it and talk about a raft of closures and put up the stockade as regards the status quo.

5.45 pm

The debate has also been characterised by a degree of scaremongering, pretending that every rural school is simply going to close and that there are going to be no opportunities for new thinking on that. The word "panic" was mentioned, and I am sure that, as we acknowledged, there is concern, but it has to be said that in the face of that concern there are some who are trying to deal with it maturely and some who are trying to fuel concern and panic and increase scaremongering. The movers of the motion seem to be falling into that category.

The missed opportunities in area planning in the past were mentioned. There is condemnation in the first line of the motion of the failure to grasp area planning in an effective manner in the previous mandate, and there is some valid criticism there. Lessons have been learned from that, and we are now in a situation where, on area planning, there is a representative from every sector around the table. However, it ill behoves those who criticise failures in area planning in the past that, when there is an opportunity for all of us, afresh, to have area planning in which everyone is involved, particularly those from the

community, with a completely open consultation, they immediately take steps to scupper it.

A number of contributors, particularly the proposer of the Alliance Party amendment, put it very succinctly. This should be about pupils rather than school buildings. The school estate should be there to service the needs of pupils and not the other way around. That is what the proposers of the motion seem to have missed. I would accuse them of wanting to put protection around every school in Northern Ireland so that the school estate does not change. To be fair to them, that is not the position that they have taken. They want to have separate legislative protection for all rural schools, but if this is deemed as something necessary to provide a degree of protection, where is the level of protection for any schools outside rural areas? If you are a pupil in Belfast, Londonderry, Portadown, Ballymena or Magherafelt, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP are happy on their own terms to simply abandon you. You can operate in a different sphere from that of rural schools.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No. I have heard enough from you today. You have given yourself enough rope and I do not want to give you any more.

At times, there has been a range of selective quotations in relation to this. Whenever we look at the criteria that are in place, there is criticism of the sustainable schools policy. I will come to that later when I talk about the amendments. The six criteria for assessing a school's viability are as follows: a quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; a sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. I would simply pose this question: which one of those six criteria is no longer relevant? It is clear that the question is about more than the numbers through the door or the financial position. We have rural proofing in every Executive policy and in every motion passed in this House. When it comes to protections, mention was made of what we should be seeking and there, at least, is one thing that I will agree with. We should be looking at a degree of balance. Taking any development proposal in a wider context about sustainable schools, there is that level of balance. However, it is also the case that there are problems with the status quo in terms of the school estate.

It has been accepted — I have not heard any particular objections to this — that over the last

10 years, for instance, in net terms, about 100 schools have disappeared in Northern Ireland. There has been an acceptance that something has to be done about the school estate. The case for change is educational and financial. From a financial point of view, you cannot get away from the educational side of it. Mention was made of the inspectorate report and I appreciate that it was too late to give a direct response to the Committee Chairperson, Mr McElduff, in relation to that. Again, the report says that larger schools tended to do better in inspections than smaller schools and in primary schools, the specific difference that was highlighted — where it becomes meaningful — is where we move on the question of sustainability.

Similarly, it referred particularly to composite classes that spanned more than two years, in which ensuring adequate progression in learning and planning becomes more of a challenge and the opportunities for children to develop socially and emotionally are limited. While the focus has principally been on primary schools, there is a small but significant difference between larger post-primary schools that have more than 500 pupils and smaller schools. There is a clear indication and specific figures show that, for schools with fewer than 105 pupils, there is a statistically significant difference in inspection outcomes. It becomes more pronounced the further down the scale you go. When you get down to 85 or 60 pupils, that has an educational impact. We cannot pretend that that is not the case. There is no doubt that there are some excellent teachers, principals and schools delivering excellent results for their children. That is why the sustainable schools policy goes beyond a simple numbers game and looks at quality. There is no doubt that having very small schools makes it more difficult for some of our pupils.

I cannot deny that there is a financial aspect to this. The teaching cost per pupil in primary schools with fewer than 50 pupils increases by more than 50% when compared with a school of over 100 pupils. This is not driven simply by finance, although we spend £27 million directly on the small schools initiative and another £8 million on principal release, but there is an economic aspect to it. The economic aspect is that it is not a question of storing up money to be taken out of schools; it is about the redistribution of money. It is about ensuring, for example, that, if a school is not needed, transferred redundancies will ensure that teachers who want to go can do so, meaning that we teach our children more effectively and efficiently. Therefore, it is about ploughing the

resource into the remaining schools. The financial aspect to this is that the system gives too little to schools, and we need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for that.

The process has been mentioned, particularly by the proposer of the Alliance amendment and others. In the current consultation on the draft area plan and as we move towards annual area plans and individual development proposals, that process will be open to everyone. I encourage everyone to contribute to it. The focus should be on the needs and desires of the community and, particularly, on the pupils.

The two amendments are mutually exclusive. I will support the DUP amendment. However, I clearly acknowledge the bulk of what was said by the proposer of the Alliance amendment, and I do not have a problem with it. Its position is much more realistic than that of the motion. I accept that there needs to be sensitivity. There will be concerns out there, which is why, as I mentioned in a statement when the area plan was first mentioned in the Assembly, there will be a need to ensure that isolated communities are not simply left too far away from a school.

The proposer of the motion mentioned that she did not want children being driven for more than an hour to get to school. There is recognition that there has to be some practical limitation on distance. I am happy to accept the amendment tabled by my colleagues. I have mentioned it previously, and there will need to be some protection for isolated schools, the most obvious example being Rathlin Island, which has already been highlighted. Like other Members, it is an area that I know well, and, with the best will in the world, whatever the mechanics —

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way. I accept his support for the DUP amendment today. Will he accept the important addition that proper efficient and effective consultation with local rural communities will be an important addition to the process?

Mr Weir: I am happy to give that assurance. Obviously, as the Member knows, unlike other settings, we cannot simply amend on the hoof, but it is important that there is that proper consultation.

Above all, the status quo needs to change from a financial point of view and an educational point of view. The key driver in all of this — there are sensitivities, and we can ensure that consultation takes place — is the needs of our pupils moving forward. We should look to protect the educational interests of pupils, not

the educational interests of school buildings. That is the distinction that I will draw between the amendment that has been put before us and the failings, I believe, of the original motion.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I thank my colleague Kellie Armstrong for moving the Alliance Party amendment today.

It is important that we consider the context in which we set ourselves today and listen to educators. We hear from school principals across Northern Ireland that there is a financial crisis facing our schools. Our Education Committee heard from one principal who said that, in 30 years of teaching, he had never known teacher morale to be so low. We have heard that the addition of superannuation costs and National Insurance costs to school budgets are the straw that broke a rather large camel's back. We have also heard that the only remaining reductions that many schools can make are to staff levels and staff hours and that some schools in Northern Ireland face hundreds of thousands of pounds of deficits within the next three years. That impacts on the provision for children with special educational needs, on families and on the educational outcomes that we can achieve for children in our society.

Principals in Northern Ireland also have concerns about the common funding formula, the use of free school meals as a criterion to assess social and educational need and the fact that investment is focused not on early years but on post-primary. Every principal and teacher whom we talk to emphasises that at the forefront of their concerns is not the buildings or the staff but the outcomes that we achieve for children and how we, as an Executive and an Assembly, will lead change to see the necessary reform to address the significant challenges.

Ultimately, the major concern being raised by teachers with our party and the Education Committee is the elephant in the room: we have too many schools, too many unfilled places and an unwieldy and ineffective administration. They clearly want to see wholesale systemic reform, and it will undoubtedly need courageous political leadership and bold cross-sectoral area planning if we are to achieve those aims. Perhaps most importantly — this has been put forward capably by my colleague Kellie Armstrong MLA today — it will need robust, inclusive community consultation and engagement if we are to bring communities along with us on the change process.

We as a party do not believe that we need to see statutory schools protected. There will, of course, be schools, in particular rural schools, that need protection, but we can consider those on a case-by-case basis. My colleague Kellie Armstrong set out the unique example of Rathlin Island, but there are small towns in Northern Ireland with as many as three primary schools. There are good examples of learning area groups coming together to maximise resources through collaboration, but this key question remains: if we do not rationalise and reform our education system, what else will we ask our schools to cut from our children's education? I do not think that there is any avoiding the fact that tough decisions that will be difficult for political parties and local elected representatives to support will have to be made, if we are to ensure that all children in our community have access to quality education in a sustainable school,

We will, therefore, for the greater good of everyone in this society, need much more responsible political leadership than we have been used to.

6.00 pm

Mr Logan: The Minister spoke very well about our amendment, and it is clear that the Ulster Unionist Party does not understand the draft strategic area plan. There is one thing that I cannot get over about its motion, and that is that it does not mention pupils or what is best for them. It reeks of all the luxuries of being unaccountable and not having to bear any responsibility.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I wish to address our amendment first. Schools are not closed for absolutely no reason. The purpose of the area planning process is to implement the Department's sustainable schools policy. The primary objective of that policy is to ensure that all children get a first-class education in fit-for-purpose facilities, regardless of background or where they live, and make the best use of the resources available for their education. It places the needs —

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I am happy to give way.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member agree that, in the sustainable schools policy, rural schools are defined as all schools outside Belfast and

Londonderry? Earlier, the Minister referred to schools closing in Magherafelt, Newry and elsewhere. That is a nonsense.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Logan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. With regard to rural schools, there is no separation when it comes to dividing the money. Those schools are rural schools and are as important as urban schools.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I am happy to give way to the Minister.

Mr Weir: Thank you. There are two definitions of rural. There is the specific definition in the sustainable schools policy (SSP), but the motion makes a general reference to rural. In the Northern Ireland Executive and, indeed, the Assembly, rural areas are defined as settlements of below 5,000 people. There is relevance because it is not specifically or purely tied in with the state of schools but goes wider with the protection of rural areas.

Mr Logan: OK. The sustainable schools policy places the needs of our children and young people at the heart of the planning process. Area planning aims to ensure that children and young people have access to educational pathways and a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs. It is not focused on achieving a projected level of savings, but, rather, focuses on maximising the impact of available resources by working towards a network of schools that are educationally and financially viable. The criteria and their associated indicators are not used in robotic fashion to close schools, but concerns about a school's viability are often addressed when enrolments have fallen to an irreversible level. In such cases, the criteria provide a framework for early identification of emerging problems so that possible remedial action may be taken. The annual area profiles published by the Education Authority are based on three of the criteria and enable managing authorities to keep schools that are in danger of becoming unsustainable under review.

The topic is emotive, and, as Lord Morrow pointed out, many stakeholders are involved in a school — pupils, parents, teachers and support staff. When faced with the prospect of potential closure, schools are protective and passionate — rightly so. Schools —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I need to make my point and get on. Schools are not closed lightly or without consultation. Instead of putting in protections for rural schools just because they are rural, I believe that there should be a case-by-case approach — we mentioned Rathlin, and rightly so. Schools have to deliver for their pupils, regardless of their size or location. That is why we need a strategy so that small schools can be helped to deliver. Smaller schools face challenges, but, with a pragmatic approach and innovative and creative thinking, it is possible to ensure that education provision is available as close to a pupil's home as possible.

On the motion, if the previous Minister and his officials marched to the top of the hill and retreated, I accept that that is a failure, but we in this party are determined to take the tough decisions that need to be taken. We acknowledge that burying our heads in the sand is not a viable, long-term option.

As regards the concerns over rural schools, the Rural Needs Act 2016, which received Royal Assent in May, placed a duty on public authorities, including councils, to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting and implementing policies. The Department of Education has to meet legal obligations to give due regard to rural needs when reviewing the SSP and the area planning process.

When funding is being allocated, schools in urban areas are treated exactly the same as those with similar characteristics in rural areas. The Minister has stated that he recognises that funding is a significant issue and that all schools face difficult choices and ongoing challenges to ensure that they live within their budgets. We heard from the principals earlier today. That was a very helpful meeting, and it highlighted some of the issues we are trying to get across in our amendment.

As Chris Lyttle mentioned, the Minister wishes to examine the common funding scheme to ensure it is fit for purpose, the best possible support is given to all schools and the maximum advantage is being derived from the moneys allocated. In the common funding scheme, small schools support funding seeks to reflect the needs of smaller schools in delivering the curriculum.

The Education Department's sustainable schools policy is the framework used for assessing viability, and it is a key driver for the area planning process. The sustainable schools policy was rural proofed, and, as the Education Authority's draft area plan is based

on the policy, we can be assured it is rural proofed. Let me be clear about this: what we have here —

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

Mr Logan: — is a sensible approach to the schools estate that puts pupils first, with an acceptance that isolated areas cannot be abandoned.

In closing, I also believe there needs to be choice for parents.

Mr McGrath: I support our motion as presented today. I suppose the most interesting element I want to take time to recognise is that everybody in the Chamber has the interests of our children and young people at heart. That is something that has impressed me during the debate. Whilst we may differ in some of the ways we want to work through that, we all start from that basis.

I also feel that, when it comes to the amendments, the DUP amendment and our motion are very similar. In fact, when I read through the amendment, the only difference I can see is that ours calls for legislative grounds against the presumption of closure of rural schools. That is not there; a thorough case is being asked for by the DUP. So, I see very little difference. The fact that we are all here today in this playing field and are all arguing in the same direction for our children is good. We even appreciate some of the contributions from the sidelines.

We are not against the need for area planning. We would question, though, the measure by which closures would be decided as suggested in the consultation. There are many different things referenced throughout the consultation about what should be taken into consideration, but, time and time again, the Education Authority makes reference to numbers. It talks about levels at which a school is sustainable. It even gives us it in percentages. It tells us the numbers, and that is what makes me nervous, because, to me, that means a line is being drawn in the sand where it is saying, "That is the level at which we will be making our decisions". It is on that basis that we have our greatest concern for those in rural communities.

Rather than simply identifying schools with enrolment levels deemed to be of concern, with the first step in addressing them being to close the school, the attitude needs to be about how we protect the schools from closure, with

closure being the last resort, rather than saying, "Enrolment levels here are low. Let's just simply throw away the keys". That is why I have to question the integrity of 'Providing Pathways', the area planning document.

I take issue with what seems to be an attempt to window dress some of the numbers in a way that makes them seem slightly worse than they are. For example, the document attempts to highlight the schools with low numbers that would face closure. It begins by citing the number of schools, and then it jumps to citing the percentages of those that have less than the desired numbers. I worry about the lack of openness and transparency there, because it makes it sound as though it is a low percentage rather than giving us the exact figure of the number of schools. When you churn that through, you see that it works out at roughly 300 rural schools and 174 urban schools. Under its definition of the figures in the document, it would be less than it wants them to be. That is where it starts to get a little bit worrying, because it is not just a handful of schools. We are not talking about one in each county; we are talking about 300 rural schools that do not meet the numbers. That is a very high figure.

We are not denying that problems exist and that they have to be addressed. We are simply saying that a more holistic view of how to deal with these problems should be considered, and we think that that more holistic approach is true area planning.

I also think the consultation is particularly weak. Twelve questions completed SurveyMonkey-style with barely enough room for 200 words for a qualitative response does not make you feel as though you are getting a good and proper opportunity to be able to respond.

Schools are at the core of any community, and, particularly in rural areas, communities are built around local schools. Schools connect people, they bring jobs to often remote areas and they instil a sense of ownership and belonging to an area that families live in. I attended a small rural school, and, right at the end of the 1970s, when I started, it was threatened with closure due to having small numbers. It was saved then, and now it is a vibrant, forward-thinking and modern school with over 135 pupils. People are queuing up to attend that school. If we had simply been taking the numbers approach of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it would have been shut down, and it would not have been there. Right around that school a small community has been built. It is used for community facilities, it is seen as a community

resource and it is part of that community's identity. If it had simply been asked to look at numbers back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it would have been closed, and it would not be there. Indeed, a quality school is more than —

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with the Member to an extent. The same thing happened at Springfield Primary School on the edge of north Belfast, between north and west Belfast. When I first got elected to Belfast City Council in 2005, there were 72 pupils: there are now over 176. However, does the Member also agree that, as well as providing a good school, it has to provide a good education and academically deliver for children? Is that not something that the Member needs to draw attention to in his speech as well?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that we can take it as a given that we want the best educational outcome for all of our children in all of our schools, and closing them is not necessarily the way that may result in a better education. Lumping schools together, merging them and having larger class sizes may not be the approach that needs to be taken, and that is the substance of what our motion says. It says that the presumption should be that you do not close the schools. We are not saying that you do not close a school; we are just saying that the presumption should be that you do not close them and that you have to exhaust all other possible decisions and methods that could be taken to provide the education. That is where there is a bit of a difference between the interpretations. It is not saying that you do not close; it is saying that the presumption should be there that you do not close. That is not just to be used in a way where you say that you presume that you are not going to close and then go off and close them; it is about saying that there needs to be a thorough process that you need to follow.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, certainly.

Mrs Overend: That is the same presumption against rural closures that the DUP and Sinn Féin voted in support of in May 2013.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. Her use of history is much better than mine, her having been here before. It is always great to see how quickly people can change their perspective on matters when they

are in different offices. I hope that we can stick to the spirit of trying to get good educational outcomes for our children, and a presumption against closure would certainly help that.

As for the amendments, I am a bit concerned about the DUP amendment. I worry about the word "accessibility". It is not really detailed any further than ensuring "accessibility" to a good education. That accessibility could be interpreted as a school 20 miles, 25 miles or 30 miles down the road and that is where we will provide that education. That would be concerning, because we do not feel that that is fair. It is not accessible to put children through lengthy journeys to and from school.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: No, we have heard enough from you today, thank you. I think that is an answer that you used earlier.

No one is saying that a school should be available on every road or on every street, but simply covering up closures by using the term "accessibility" is a bit crass.

I move to the Alliance amendment. Last week, the ETI Chief Inspector's report was mentioned and how that could be considered in any decisions that are taken forward. I think that, to be fair to the Minister, he would always consider the ETI reports. That is the purpose of them. They make the reports so that you can consider them when you make your decisions in the future, so I do not think that we need to specifically provide legislation for that. It also talks about how you need to consult and how you need to work with communities and how you need to assess with them whether or not a school should be closed. We feel that, if you have a presumption against closure, that will be part of that process of consulting the community, discussing with them, asking them for their views and allowing them to be part of the process. Therefore, we feel that both of the suggestions that are in the Alliance amendment are part of our motion.

We propose the motion to stop a process of rural closures. We have heard anecdotal soundings from within the Department that it wants up to 300 closures. That would be disastrous for our community and especially our rural communities, particularly if it is to be done simply by numbers. Introducing a legislative presumption to keep rural schools open would provide some comfort to teachers, parents and pupils that small schools will not automatically face the chop. It is for that reason that I commend the motion to the House.

6.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if amendment No 1 is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 66; Noes 26.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Ms Gildernew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Mr McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Middleton, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Robinson

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Kennedy, Mr E McCann, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McGrath and Mrs Overend

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Education Authority's 'Providing Pathways Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-

2020'; acknowledges the concerns that there will be over the proposals, particularly in rural areas; believes that every pupil, regardless of whether they live in a rural or an urban area, should have access to quality education in a viable and sustainable school, contributing to achieving the draft Programme for Government outcome to give our children and young people the best start in life; believes that the best way to achieve this is through an effective area planning process involving managing authorities and sectoral support bodies; acknowledges sensitivities around the provision of the schools estate in both rural and other areas; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward a strategic small schools initiative to ensure accessibility to a quality education, particularly for isolated communities.

6.30 pm

Poverty and Deprivation

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

Ms Mallon: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern that, according to the Department for Communities, around 376,000 or 21% of people in Northern Ireland live in relative income poverty before housing costs; notes that, in June 2015, the High Court found that the Executive had breached a legal duty by failing to adopt an identifiable strategy setting out how they proposed to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need; further notes that the Programme for Government consultation document published in October 2016 refers to a new social strategy in relation to these matters; and calls on the Minister for Communities to publish an overarching strategy and long-term plan, including budget allocations, which outlines specific targets and timelines to reduce poverty and deprivation and tackle social exclusion and ensures the application of resources based on neutral criteria that measure deprivation irrespective of community background or other affiliation.

It is with sadness that I propose the motion, which has, as its genesis, the unacceptable and shameful fact that one in five people living here are living in poverty; that over 125,000 of our pensioners live on low incomes, with over 18,000 of them forced to spend their senior and final years living in severe poverty; and that according to the Department for Communities' own statistics, more than a quarter of our children — that means a staggering 122,000 — are living in relative poverty after housing costs.

It means that one fifth of our population, at every stage in their lives, are living in poverty. Babies are being born into a life of poverty, and the only exit from poverty is at the point of death. I am only too familiar with that injustice in North Belfast, where many people come to my constituency office and share with me their struggles to make ends meet. They are forced

to rely on the generousities of charities and food banks. Many of them are living with their children in hostels for indefinite periods, and so many, many more are living in substandard accommodation, literally choosing between heating their homes and eating. All of this is having a devastating impact on their physical and mental health, because a life in poverty is one that cripples your educational and employment opportunities and it literally steals years from your life.

The facts speak for themselves. If you live in one of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, you are more likely to experience the horror of infant mortality, as infant mortality rates are 16% higher in the most deprived areas than in the least. Suicide rates are three times higher, self-harm admission rates are four times higher and twice as many people experience mental ill health in our most deprived areas than in the least deprived areas. For men and women, if you live in one of our most deprived areas, you face fewer years of good health and a shorter life expectancy.

If this reality does not shock us all into action, what will? Certainly, the new Programme for Government; the Children's Services Co-operation Act, for which Mr Steven Agnew deserves great credit; the draft children and young people's strategy; and the requirement for an anti-poverty strategy, albeit following the essential legal challenge last year, provide a new impetus for a concerted Executive action on poverty, and child poverty in particular, which remains consistently high and consistently higher than poverty rates for working-age adults and pensioners. However, these cannot be parallel processes. If we are to seriously tackle poverty, there must be a coordinated and interconnected approach within an overarching strategy.

The first and most fundamental requirement to achieve this outcome is for the overarching anti-poverty strategy to include a proper and agreed definition of poverty that is consistent with international standards on socio-economic rights and reflects material deprivation and an income that falls below an adequate standard of living.

This definition, and, as a direct result, the long-term plan and allocation of resources, must, as the motion points out, be tied to neutral criteria that measure deprivation irrespective of community background or other affiliation. This definition exists. It is exactly the definition provided by Mr Justice Treacy in his ruling last year, when the Committee on the Administration of Justice, the human rights

NGO, with the support of the Public Interest Litigation Support service, had to bring a judicial review to force the Northern Ireland Executive to adopt an anti-poverty strategy. Given the importance of his ruling, I hope you will indulge me if I read out just a part:

"The concept of 'objective need' is obviously central to the statutory provision, the intention of which is to remove or reduce the scope for discrimination by tying the allocation of resources to neutral criteria that measure deprivation irrespective of community background or other affiliation."

However, you would be forgiven for thinking that this had never happened, because the Programme for Government, and the amendment tabled by the DUP, delete and dismiss this definition and legal ruling. Perhaps the DUP will share with us its rationale for that deletion. A question for Sinn Féin today is whether it continues to support the DUP in this deletion and dismissive approach.

The truth is that you cannot address poverty without clear targets. It is because of the deletion of Mr Justice Treacy's ruling and the lack of detail in targets, timelines and budgets that the SDLP cannot support the DUP amendment. We need targets. If we are to get serious about tackling poverty, we must have targets. This is not just my view; it is the evidenced truth to which all research and experience point.

We are continually asked by the DUP and Sinn Féin, "So, what would you do?". Let me take the rest of my time to delineate some of the critical interventions we believe are required if we are to prevent another generation from being consigned to poverty.

You cannot and you will not lift individual families out of poverty without an enhancement of household income. It is as simple as that. Yet the reality faced by our poorest and most vulnerable is one of cuts to their income when they are already struggling to make ends meet. This is thanks to an Executive that have handed their fate to a Tory Government who, rather than seeing the human impact, see nothing but austerity.

We need to have benefit levels set to a minimum standard sufficient to meet the income needs of families. We need to ensure that when decisions are taken on benefit sanctions, it is very clear that we measure the impact that they will have on the children in those families. That does not happen at the moment.

Other targets that should be included in a robust, overarching anti-poverty strategy include strengthening employment rights, given that 45% of those living in poverty are in work. It must contain plans to keep people in work and help those who are out of work, including our disabled, to find work. Social clauses in procurement have an important role to play. The provision of high-quality, affordable childcare is critical because of not only the evident benefits to the child but the employment and financial benefits that it brings to their parents and, through an increased tax base, to the wider economy. Yet, we still await the childcare strategy. In the meantime, excellent childcare facilities like that provided by the women's centre childcare fund, which also helps to empower mothers in areas of high deprivation, are facing the very real prospect of having to close their doors and turn away those mothers in need.

If we are to successfully tackle child poverty, we need to have coordinated early intervention support to families in crisis, including those affected by bereavement, family breakdown, illness and substance misuse. We need integrated early years support to help ensure that children living in poverty can reach their developmental goals before they start school. We need to reduce the costs of education. We need to reduce educational inequalities so that children in poverty achieve as well as their peers and have an equal chance of a future without poverty. We need to address homelessness for families with children by providing additional resources for housing.

The SDLP and the Ulster Unionists met today with the anti-poverty sector, and I want to thank all those organisations — there were many — that came to meet us to discuss what needs to happen if we are to seriously tackle poverty. It is fitting if I end with a comment that very much found consensus in the room. It was very simple but striking:

"It is not rocket science. All the research is there. It is about implementing what has been demonstrated to work."

Mr Stalford: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the latest edition of the 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin' detailing the levels of poverty across Northern Ireland; further notes that section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was the subject of a judicial review in June 2015; and welcomes the Executive's

commitment, as outlined in the recent Programme for Government consultation document, to publish a new social strategy that aims to improve the lives of those in poverty through a range of specific interventions that will tackle poverty, social exclusion and deprivation on the basis of the objective need."

I would like to start with a quote from Seth Godin, an American entrepreneur. He said:

"Poverty is an iron ceiling, a ceiling four feet off the ground, a ceiling that forces those who live with poverty to spend their days hunched over, on the edge of fear and humiliation".

That is absolutely right. It is right that we, as elected representatives, understand and appreciate the moral as well as the political imperative that is placed upon us, as the public's representatives, to do all in our power to tackle poverty and need in our society.

I want to respond to one point that was made by my friend Nichola Mallon from North Belfast. I do not put my faith in any Tory Government to look after the people of Northern Ireland. I put my faith in these institutions and in all of us, as elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, to do the very best for the people who sent us here. I say to the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists that it is a shame that they lacked the faith in themselves to put their hand to the wheel, join us in government and make a contribution in government to tackling the problems that she mentioned in her speech.

The Programme for Government (PFG) is operating in a new way from previous Programmes for Government. The draft framework was published and that gave people an opportunity to have their say on what they think should be in the final PFG. The final PFG has been put out for consultation and that is reflective, I believe, of the different approach — the outcomes-based approach — that we have considered in the House. I think that people welcome that approach and welcome not only the fact that the Government have focused on outcomes, which are vital when dealing with issues around poverty, but that there has been an increased opportunity for people throughout the country to have their say on what they would like to see in the Programme for Government.

In 2014-15, the average weekly household income increased by 3% from the previous year to £420 per week or £21,900 per year. The percentage of people in Northern Ireland in absolute poverty decreased by 1% in the

previous year. There has been a decrease in the percentage of persons of pensioner age in relative poverty in 2014-15 from the height of 30% in 2008-09.

Those are positive developments that, I think, everyone around the House would welcome as such. We must never be complacent, however, and should recognise the scale of the problem we face. Some 20% of individuals in Northern Ireland live in absolute poverty before housing costs. That includes 23% of children, 18% of pensioners and 19% of the working population.

6.45 pm

I have been a public representative since 2005. I do not underestimate for one second the scale of the problem. I know, for example, as a representative of South Belfast — other representatives of South Belfast can attest to this — that, in our constituency, there are islands of deprivation surrounded by seas of plenty. They can sometimes be missed. Taughmonagh, for example, is included in the Upper Malone ward when it comes to the Noble indices of multiple deprivation. There are real problems in all our communities, and I believe that everyone in the House, whether in government or in opposition, is determined to tackle them.

It is important that the figures are accurate. It is not appropriate to compare Northern Ireland poverty figures with those for the rest of the UK on a before-housing-cost basis, due to the different ways in which water charges are collected in Northern Ireland. The Members who tabled the motion understand that, and I hope that they will reflect on it.

Fuel poverty is an enormous problem: 42% of households live in fuel poverty. That is one of the areas that I would like the Government to focus on when the PFG is published. It cannot be right in this day and age that pensioners who have worked all their life, paid their National Insurance and made a contribution to society should be forced into a position in which they have to choose between eating or heating their home. That is wrong in an advanced industrialised society such as the United Kingdom.

The previous contributor mentioned the need for a multifaceted approach to tackling poverty, and I absolutely agree. That is why it is important that, going forward, the Government continue to have a strong focus on job creation. Job creation is one prong in the battle to defeat poverty. The 'Households Below Average

Income' report showed that the risk of working-age adults being in relative poverty is starkly higher for those not in work. Those not in work have a 59% chance as against a 13% chance of falling into poverty. Obviously, one of the focuses going forward has to be on job creation and transforming the Northern Ireland economy into an outward-looking economy that can attract jobs and investment for all our people to enjoy and benefit from, regardless of their background, as the motion states.

It is important to note that, between 2013 and 2015, the Government have enabled over 9,000 people to avail themselves of £30 million of benefits that otherwise would not have gone to them through the benefit uptake team that the Government operate. That is important. Members from all parties will have constituents who come to them unaware of the benefits that they are entitled to. Not only does that money help the families who are entitled to it but it helps the economy because they spend the money in local shops and boost it in that way. It is right that government helps people to access money to which they are entitled.

Nobody in the House is content that any of our citizens, least of all the children or pensioners of Northern Ireland, should be left in poverty. I came into politics to make life better for people; I believe that that is the case for all Members around here. I believe that we are all motivated by a desire to do good for our constituents, make their lives better and improve their standing. It is for that reason and that reason alone that I am content to move the amendment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I suppose I am not really surprised at the tone in which the debate was opened. I do not think there is anybody in the Assembly who does not have concerns about poverty and deprivation. I want to say that, but, while we are involved in politics in this institution all day long, I think there is an element of playing politics with this issue. I also think the motion falls short, to be quite frank. It falls short on the figures, because it is all done on the measurement before housing costs. I listened to Nichola Mallon, and I am sure other speakers from the SDLP will say the same; I do not know what the Ulster Unionists will say. It is as though those parties were never in the Executive and poverty has just been occurring since May 2016. I do not believe in taking the approach of looking at before housing costs. It effectively misses out on some 9,000 people who live in poverty and income poverty. That is worthy of consideration. If we are really about tackling poverty and deprivation, you can find those 9,000 among the people who are behind

the statistics; they are the people I and others have referred to as the top 10% of the most deprived.

I found one thing regrettable about the opening of the debate. Sinn Féin did not hitch its wagon to any Tories; it never has and never will. I want to make that completely clear. Christopher did that for his party, as is his prerogative, and I will do it for ours. We were collectively adamant about ensuring that the mitigation packages that were brought in as part of Tory welfare reform were about trying to offset the worst impacts of poverty on people, but we will not talk about that, sure. We will also not talk about the impact of partition; we will not talk about that either.

One thing I think we can all agree on is that the notion of people's experience of poverty is particularly acute when you look at access to employment, childcare, benefits and facilities. The premise on which the motion was moved was the Executive fulfilling their duty — section 28E, I think it is referred to — to bring forward an anti-poverty strategy. Everyone knows our position on this; it has been very clear. We support the fact that there should be and will be an anti-poverty strategy in the social strategy.

Christopher moved the DUP amendment. I would like to see it talk about patterns of deprivation as well. Perhaps the Minister in his summing up could refer to that. It is very clear that, as part of the consultation we are in now, particularly on the Programme for Government, a social strategy and what an anti-poverty strategy looks like need to be addressed. We also have to recognise there are some levers that impact on poverty and deprivation that are not within the remit of the Executive. For example, it is shown that one of the greatest impacts on poverty in particular — I am sure many of us have spoken on this previously and will today and for ever more — especially on the working poor, is tax and how benefit policies impact here. You have only to look at the report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies entitled 'Child and Working-Age Poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020', which sets out the rising levels of poverty here. That is directly correlated to the British Government's approach to tax and benefits policies.

The Executive have already stated that they will bring forward a social strategy. That will be in line with their legal responsibilities as a result of the outcome of the judicial review. Like many others, I will look forward to not just the Department for Communities but all Departments ensuring that their resources are targeted on objective need.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry, I will not, because I am coming to the end.

Mr Attwood: You will get an extra minute.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, it is OK; I do not need it. Thanks anyway.

Mr Attwood: *[Interruption.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I really do not.

I want to talk particularly around —

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to talk about ensuring that the legal responsibilities are brought forward as part of the Programme for Government. On that basis, we will support the amendment from the DUP; we will not be supporting the original motion.

Mrs Palmer: We on the official Opposition Benches take no pleasure in bringing this motion before the House. The facts are incredible: 376,000 people in Northern Ireland, which is a staggering 21% of us, live in relative poverty. That figure is larger than any settlement in Northern Ireland bar Belfast; it is nearly five Bangors, around seven Omaghs and more than triple Lisburn.

The two parties in the Executive have been lead parties of government for almost 10 years. They may try to pass the buck, as we have already heard from the two Members who spoke previously. They can and do try to blame others for their failings. They will blame the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. They will blame the Conservative Government at Westminster. They will blame the Dublin Government for poaching our jobs and investment. One day they will blame the EU for interfering, and the next day they will blame the impact of uncertainty over Brexit. The only thing that they do not accept is any responsibility themselves. The DUP and Sinn Féin are in government as a partnership; they are two sides of the same coin. They need to learn the lesson that with power comes responsibility. They have had the power for nine years; it is surely time that they took some responsibility. Sooner or later, the realisation will dawn on them that there really is nobody else to blame.

What have they delivered in the decade in which they have been in charge? Look at the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Time and time again, the same names appear. For how long will we tolerate those names standing on the most-deprived lists? Even the High Court ruled that they had breached a legal duty by failing to adopt an identifiable strategy setting out how they proposed to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. We need an integrated strategy to protect the vulnerable; one that looks at welfare, education, housing, health, justice, training and employment, plus the arts, leisure and culture. We must put people at the heart of the intervention strategy. I believe that we could learn some lessons from the Dutch model, which targets government spending at those most in need and seeks to move them out of poverty. We need to end the current reality in which families find themselves in a revolving door of poverty.

The most vulnerable need a voice in this debate. There has to be a genuine will to achieve real change. Instead, the supposed flagship is the social investment fund. It was to be the silver bullet; their big idea to tackle poverty and deprivation. As the last few days have shown, it has fallen far short of those aims. In terms of governance —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Palmer: No, I will not. I am busy.

First, they could not give £80 million away. Then, when they managed to spend some of it, it turned out that they were handing millions of pounds of public money to people who have attracted almost daily negative publicity. There has clearly been a major failing over the lack of transparency and openness in terms of which groups could apply for funding. Some groups and organisations that have the skills and capacity to deliver were excluded. There has also been a major failing in terms of how costs such as management fees were paid out.

In my constituency — I know that the Minister is waiting for this — the Resurgam Trust is living proof that the strategic investment fund can do great work. From my own experience, I cannot speak highly enough of the work that it has done. Sadly, however — this is key — Resurgam appears to be the silver lining in a very grey cloud.

In closing, the Executive need to get serious about eliminating poverty, and the first step is taking ownership of the problem. We need a strategy and a long-term plan. It has to be

detailed and effective to reduce poverty and deprivation and tackle social exclusion, and, most of all, it has to deliver.

7.00 pm

Mrs Long: I welcome the opportunity to speak on today's motion, which is calling for action and clarity from the Minister on what he intends to do to tackle poverty and deprivation in Northern Ireland. From the outset, I want to make it clear that we will be opposing the amendment, as it is simply a case of the Minister's colleagues trying to take the approach of the ostrich and burying their head in the sand and pretending that these issues will be dealt with by the Executive's current approach.

The data and figures reveal that there is a significant number of people in Northern Ireland living in vulnerability. Moreover, history does not particularly inspire faith that this issue is going to be alleviated any time soon. I wish that it were possible that we could simply agree on a motion, between all of the parties, in order to actually tackle the issue rather than engage in this kind of fractious debate.

The figures that we have in front of us reveal around 376,000 individuals, that is 21% of our population, living in relative income poverty before housing costs. That is an increase of 1% on last year's figures, or an increase of nearly 20,000 people living in relative income poverty since last year. We need to take that seriously and there has been some debate, and rightly so, in the Chamber already about how poverty should be measured and which measures should be applied. There is, of course, a range of measures that can be taken on poverty. However, the more important debate tonight is about what we are going to do to tackle poverty. That is where the crux of the matter lies.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) highlighted, in its June 2016 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin', that during the period of 2014-15, a quarter of children were living in poverty. That should cause us significant concern. Whilst I agree with the Member for South Belfast about poverty amongst older people, we should not neglect the fact that poverty, particularly amongst children, has a long-term impact as well as an immediate one. That poverty will impact on their current health, well-being and educational attainment in the present. However, it has been shown repeatedly that it will also have long-term effects on life expectancy and employment opportunities. Therefore, it is hugely important

that we tackle the issue of child poverty in particular.

Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on the Executive to adopt a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. This was then reiterated at St Andrews and, since that time, year after year, we have been told that the Programme for Government, reports, programmes and so on will actually tackle the issue.

To be clear, for those Members who have raised the issue of this year's Programme for Government process, we have not criticised the process that has been adopted by the Executive, on this occasion, in going for outcomes-based measures. We have been supportive of the process. However, we are free to criticise the programme, the content of that programme and, indeed, the lack of content of that programme. The change process does not justify why we would not continue to do what it calls for in the motion, which is to develop a strategy.

As noted in the amendment, the Executive was indeed subject to a judicial review in 2015. However, it should be noted what the court actually said. It noted that we had used the basic template of the 2008 'Lifetime Opportunities' report as proof that it had a strategy to tackle poverty and deprivation. Mr Justice Treacy quite rightly ruled that the Executive was attempting to present an unfinalised and inchoate strategy to tackle a vital and important issue. I think that that needs to come to an end, and it needs to come to an end extremely quickly. As a result of inaction, we are where we are today, where 25% of children, 35% of single mothers and 21% of working-age adults now live in relative income poverty.

Welfare reform changes — some will dismiss the impact of the UK Government, but it should be recognised — have a significant impact on the Executive's ability to tackle poverty. So we need, all the more, an urgent and robust strategy in place to actually assist those who are most vulnerable and economically marginalised and to deal with social exclusion and deprivation. I want to see an action plan, a proper strategy, backed up by detailed targets, goals and budgetary allocations. I am sure that there is no one in the Chamber who would not wish to play a constructive role, working with the Executive and not against it, to deliver a fair and more prosperous society for everyone.

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

Mrs Long: I believe that the application of resources based on neutral criteria is the right way to go and does not prevent us tackling pockets of deprivation. I endorse the motion and call on the Minister to bring forward his strategy as a matter of urgency so that we can assist him with his work.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mrs Emma Little Pengelly, I advise her that she has up to three minutes.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I will just have to speak very quickly. I am absolutely and genuinely passionate about helping people break free from poverty. It is something that I have had a genuine interest in for some considerable years, but not just as an issue. I have worked at it and tried to bring about a change in the way in which government does policy in order to bring about the positive changes that we want to see.

The issue is this: why do we want to tackle poverty? We want to tackle poverty because it has bad outcomes for people in health and education and has negative impacts on the happiness and healthiness of their lifespan. I have only three minutes, so I will touch very briefly on a number of points raised in the debate. First, I want to speak briefly about the court case that was taken by CAJ. In my view, the challenge to the then OFMDFM at the time under section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was based on CAJ's misunderstanding of the concept of objective need. It is very important for us to consider that.

In fact, CAJ had a concern that Delivering Social Change funds widened the criteria from simply 10% on spatial deprivation. I had been very critical of the approach of using spatial deprivation as the only criterion for determining objective need, and I want to turn very briefly to that point. There is an obligation on government to distribute funds and services on the basis of need. We all accept that. Of course, that need should be objective. However, there has traditionally been an ignorance or misunderstanding of what it means.

Government distributes services in a number of ways. Universal services are targeted at families and at family and individual needs and on the basis of spatial deprivation, based on NISRA's multiple deprivation spatial indexes. The exact methodology deployed depends on

what the objective or outcome is. It is right that the health service target the urgency of the need of the individual: that is objective need. It is right that all children who have an educational need get education universally free at the point of delivery: that is educational need and it is objective need. It is right that those in poverty and unemployment get access to the same benefits in the same circumstances right across Northern Ireland: that is objective need. It is the objective need of the individual.

What it is not is arbitrarily drawing a line under those areas in the top 10% for spatial poverty evidenced by the multiple deprivation areas and excluding all those above the line. A postcode lottery criterion does not work, save in circumstances in which spatial poverty is proven to compound the negative outcomes or in which a necessary cluster of initiative clientele requires geographical targeting.

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

Mrs Little Pengelly: In conclusion, I hope that the Minister considers the issues that I have raised about objective need and that Members across the House start to see objective need on a much wider basis than simply spatial need, which was part of the issue in the court case.

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I thank those Members who brought forward the motion for giving us an opportunity to engage in debate on what is a very important issue. It is fair to say that we all share the same objectives when it comes to tackling poverty and wanting to help people who need that help. Where we maybe differ is on the means and process by which we want to take that forward.

I take Mrs Long's point about wishing to have a motion on which everyone in the Assembly can unite. Maybe that is something that the Opposition can consider if they wish to engage, certainly with me, on motions that they want to bring forward. I am happy to engage with them, and if we are able to find agreed positions, we can have agreed motions on important issues such as this. That is something that I will actively consider.

Mr McCartney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mr McCartney: Perhaps when they are considering that, the Opposition will allow us more than an hour to discuss such a topic.

Mr Givan: The point is well made about the ability to have a fuller debate about this issue at the end of Opposition day business. It is an offer that I will make to the Opposition parties, because we can agree on how we tackle a lot of these issues. However, the Opposition may not want to go that far in engaging with Ministers and Departments to try to get motions that avoid some of the party politics that inevitably goes on. I understand that, as we try to get one over on each other, but, when it comes to an issue like this, it may be better to find some common ground.

I move to the substance of the debate, and if I leave out some particulars that Members highlighted I will visit Hansard and come back with more detail. The amendment is more worthy of the Assembly's support than the motion. I appeal to the Opposition parties to endorse the amendment so that we can have universal agreement in the House on the issue.

The most recent poverty figures available are for 2014-15 and were published in the 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin'. They showed that 395,100 people in Northern Ireland are living in relative poverty before housing costs; that is 22% of the population. The motion under-represents the scale of the challenge that we have to deal with. It is worth noting that, over the last decade and despite significant investment, the overall number of those in poverty remains the same. For example, the proportion of the population in relative poverty today is exactly the same as when Alex Attwood was the Social Development Minister in 2010.

That is why the approach that we are taking in the Executive's Programme for Government can make a difference. This is where I part company with Naomi Long, as she indicated that the Executive were continuing to do things as they had been done before. However, that is not the case: we are moving to an outcomes-based approach.

We either continue to do the same things in the same way and get the same outcome, or we change the way in which the Government do business; that is why the Programme for Government is being taken forward in a different way. Whilst I recognise that there has been criticism, we need to look at the way in which we addressed things in the past and ask ourselves why the difference that I believe we all want to make has not been made. Hence the change.

It is designed to help to deliver improved well-being for all our citizens. However, Members

will be aware that we have moved away from the approach used in the past that used a range of actions and targets that we simply ticked as we went along. That approach failed to reduce the numbers in poverty up until now, so, clearly, we need to do something different.

Part of the different approach will involve the publication of our first ever social strategy. That will, in effect, become the Executive's strategy for promoting opportunity for everyone and tackling poverty and social exclusion. I plan to bring it to the Executive in the coming weeks. I suspect that it will address many of the issues that Members raised here today, and, I believe, it will go further.

For example, it will identify those in poverty and outline specific interventions to support them. It will also identify those at greatest risk of social exclusion, and again, through specific interventions, look to further support them. Of course, we will do that based on objective need because I am well aware of the outcome of the judicial review last year. Members can be assured that I will address the issues that arose from that judgement.

I have been encouraged —

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for giving way. In the context of his comments, it is also looking at the patterns of deprivation outlined in the judicial review of last year. As the Minister said, as part of the consultation on the Programme for Government we will use debates like these and other opportunities for Members to come forward with alternatives that have not been expressed thus far.

Mr Givan: The Member raises an important point. Once this goes through the Executive, it will go out for consultation, and there will be a lot more specific detail —

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: If I can address this point, I will be happy to give way. We will go out for consultation, and that will give Members and the Committee an opportunity to drill down into more detail that will be available to address this. The Member said that poverty, social exclusion and the patterns of deprivation are all inextricably linked, and many of the actions will have a cross-cutting effect that will be in the social strategy. We recognise that some individuals and groups have different needs and face different challenges. To base the strategy on objective need, we will need to focus action where it is most needed.

7.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I look forward to the new strategy. Will his strategy outline specific targets and timelines to reduce poverty and deprivation?

Mr Givan: There will be a lot of specifics on the interventions that will take place. Members will not have too long to wait to engage on the specifics in the social strategy; they will get the opportunity to do that. I am sure that the Opposition parties will welcome that offer of engagement.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Let me make some progress, and, if I have time, I will certainly give way to the Member.

I am encouraged by the recent work that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has carried out. It suggests that our new approach to addressing poverty cannot be income-related alone. A broader definition must consider the whole person and not just what is or is not in their pocket. The Programme for Government is based on a similar whole-of-government approach that looks at multiple aspects of people's lives, reaching simply beyond income measures. Whilst we will be clear about how we measure poverty, we need to recognise, in seeking to address it, that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. We also need to be realistic about what we can do as a devolved Administration. There is no silver bullet for the issue, and our opportunity to intervene in many cases will be limited. However, we as an Executive have already shown that we can and will intervene, when required, to protect those in greatest need, and our welfare reform mitigation schemes are just one example of the difference that we can make.

I turn to Member's contributions, and I will give way to Mr Attwood in a moment. Mr Stalford raised an issue about fuel poverty. Again, the affordable warmth scheme targets households most at risk of fuel poverty. It provides a range of heating and insulation measures that improve energy efficiency in households that have an annual gross income of less than £20,000. The new targeted scheme replaced the warm homes scheme from April 2015.

Jenny Palmer, my colleague from Lagan Valley, highlighted a number of the issues around that. Let me say that I welcome her comments. I know that she was at the Resurgam Trust annual general meeting last week, as was

Trevor Lunn from Alliance and the Alliance councillors. Unsurprisingly, given the good work that Resurgam carries out, all of them — I think Trevor Lunn had to leave early — were more than willing to get photographed with the individuals involved with the Resurgam Trust. So it is something of note that the Ulster Unionist Party, through Jenny Palmer, is now making it clear that the social investment fund does good work, that that is recognised and that there are excellent examples of that. I hope that she will be able to prevail in her party in respect of the way in which she has spoken about what is excellent work. We will see a new facility being opened in the Old Warren that has been funded solely from the social investment fund. I give way to Mr Attwood.

Mr Attwood: There is one issue that I struggle with. Given that you seem to accept objective need and Justice Treacy's ruling in July last year, why have you and the DUP — this question is also to Sinn Féin — not accepted what the judge explicitly said? He said:

"the concept of 'objective need'"

in statutory provision is to remove or

"reduce ... the scope for discrimination ... by tying the application of resources to neutral criteria that measure deprivation irrespective of community background or other affiliation."

Why not say today that that will be part of the social strategy? Say it: yes or no.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up. He may consider replying in writing to the Member.

Mr McQuillan: I support the amendment. This is a very important topic, and I must speak in favourable terms on the actions of the Executive as demonstrated in the recent Programme for Government. It is worth pointing out that the signatories to the motion were members of the last Executive, so it is important to point out that the figures quoted in the motion relate to the time when their parties were in the Executive. Nevertheless, this is a very important issue that needs to be tackled, and I am confident that the Minister is committed to doing so.

The scale of poverty in Northern Ireland is much the same as it has been for in excess of 10 years. It is worth pointing it out that Northern Ireland is no worse off than England, where the majority of our nation's population

live. Wales comes out the worst, and Scotland does better than the rest.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. We have had a reasonable debate for a reasonable length of time. Does the Member agree with me that it is totally disappointing and wrong that the Chairman of the Committee, the co-leader of the Opposition, could not find it within himself to be present for a debate on poverty?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McQuillan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my colleague for raising that point. I was thinking the very same thing while we were debating the subject.

In my constituency of East Londonderry, as of August 2013, 23% of children were deemed to be living in low-income families. East Londonderry ranked fifth highest of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. This is, therefore, an issue that I am keen to see tackled, as I believe that no child should be left behind.

Poverty is primarily based on income levels, which are dependent on the availability of jobs, coupled with the level of skills and qualifications held by the local population, age and how healthy our population is — for example, having a disability can obviously impact on someone's ability to work and their life chances. Unfortunately, we have something of a postcode lottery, as income can depend on where you live and the number as well as the type of jobs that are available locally. East Londonderry has been hit by job losses, as has everywhere in Northern Ireland during the economic downturn. That, of course, has an impact on the standard and cost of living, especially as the price of essential goods is rising.

One way to help to reduce poverty is promoting benefit uptake, and I am pleased that, between 2013 and 2015, benefit uptake has increased due to the work of the Department, with an additional £30 million generated for 9,000 people. I encourage everyone to check their entitlement to benefits.

The Executive placed tackling poverty and social exclusion at the top of their agenda. Both are mentioned throughout the Programme for Government, and, perhaps, those on the Opposition Benches should look at it for themselves.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McQuillan: Yes, go ahead.

Mrs Little Pengelly: We have heard some conversation around the Chamber about the court case. Does the Member agree with me that the court case recognised the "plethora" — I think that that is a direct quote — of anti-poverty initiatives and actions taken by the Executive in the last mandate under the last Programme for Government to tackle poverty, not just income poverty but educational, health and other associated poverty? The court case recognised that, and the case was lost simply on the basis of the definition of objective need. It recognised the valuable work that the Executive had already carried out.

Mr McQuillan: I certainly agree with my colleague. She is far more qualified to speak on behalf of the judiciary than I am.

The key means of tackling the issue is job creation. That is why our Executive have been active in promoting Northern Ireland abroad as a place to do business. However, the issue of ensuring fairness and equality in the distribution of the new jobs has been identified by the Executive.

I look forward to the publication of the first ever social strategy for Northern Ireland in the coming weeks. It will clearly set out how the Executive will tackle the issues that impact on poverty. It is worth pointing it out that a special edition of the 'Oxford Review of Economic Policy' published in 2013 looked at the record of new Labour in tackling poverty. It concluded that, while it put additional resources into tackling the issue, how you spend money is more important than how much you spend. Governments need an effective means of establishing what works and the patience to see whether policies bear fruit in the long run. I believe that the new social strategy will do that. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Nesbitt: We have discussed poverty, but, as some Members have mentioned, you cannot do that in isolation without talking about the creation of jobs and good jobs — well-paid jobs — at that. We should be talking not just about poverty but about productivity and, indeed, prosperity. I think that the problem for the Government with prosperity is defined in their Budget document, which refers to the prosperity gap between Northern Ireland and Great Britain as measured by gross value added. The

document makes it clear that our GVA per head has:

"remained consistently at around 75 to 80 per cent of the UK average".

In other words, if one of our citizens has 75p to 80p in their pocket, a citizen in GB has the full pound. Indeed, the gap closed to its narrowest in 2007, the very year that the DUP and Sinn Féin took over the heart of our Executive Government.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: As your friend the Minister of Education made clear earlier, we have heard enough from you. I welcome the earlier intervention from the Member from South Belfast. It was that bizarre mix of Sinn Féin Ourselves Alone and the Dee Stittesque, "I do not trust Her Majesty's Government".

Nichola Mallon made clear the rather shocking statistics with regard to poverty, not least suicides and mental health in her constituency. I know that the parties of the Government like to say to the parties of the Opposition, "What are your ideas?". On mental health, I have been shouting loud and long that we need to do more. Last week, I was in London, and I took the opportunity to take the issue to the Prime Minister, Mrs May, who, heretofore, was unaware that, per capita, we may have the worst rates of poor mental health and well-being in the world. One of the significant reasons why our rates are so bad is that it is a legacy issue of our Troubles. Her Majesty's Government have set a precedent in the Stormont House Agreement of providing funding for legacy issues, with £150 million for truth, acknowledgement and justice. So, the precedent is set. It is not covered by the block grant, there are no Barnett consequentials, and I have asked Mrs May to consider intervening to help with mental health, which impacts on poverty.

Ms Mallon gave us the stats, and I notice that the DUP amendment tries to airbrush statistics out of the equation. It would rather note the latest edition of the poverty bulletin than express concern, as we do, that 376,000 people, or 21% of our population, live in relative income poverty before housing costs.

I know that the Minister says that we will do things differently in this mandate, particularly in terms of outcome-based accountability. We have had two documents, and the second one is currently out to consultation, but we must end

eventually at the point where there are delivery plans, and they must take on the shape of strategies, otherwise, I believe, the Government will end up back in the High Court.

Justice Treacy was very clear about defining a strategy. He quoted the 'Oxford English Dictionary', stating:

"The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'strategy' as a 'plan of action designed to achieve a long term or overall aim'."

He said that it has:

"to guide, to set a course. It must therefore be implicit in the idea of a strategy that that strategy must be identifiable, it must be complete, it must have a start, a middle and an end, it must aim to be effective, its effectiveness must be capable of measurement and the actions which are taken in attempting to implement that strategy must be referable back to that overarching strategy."

In other words, stakeholders must be able to lift the strategy and measure the effectiveness of the delivery of government with regard to these issues.

I understand that the Minister and the Executive will publish a social strategy. I believe that it will come towards the end of this calendar year or early in the next, but I also notice that NISRA, only today, opened a consultation on multiple deprivation measures. It wanted to know if we should stick with the seven that we have, namely income; employment; health and disability; education, skills and training; access to services; living environment; and crime and disorder.

I would be very happy to give way to the Minister if he could explain to me whether the publication of the social strategy will await the conclusion of the report on the consultation by NISRA, because the consultation is open until 15 January. So, will we get the results of that before you publish your strategy, or will we have disjointed government where we will publish a social strategy when the measurements that NISRA will apply may well change? Would the Minister care to address that issue?

Mr Givan: Obviously, we are at an advanced stage in respect of the social strategy, but the social strategy will go out for consultation. Therefore, if further information becomes available, that will feed into it. The Member

seems to be labouring on a range of points to do with recognising need and poverty. I know that that need exists. I do not need to go and stay in someone's Housing Executive house to get a grasp of the needs that there are in our community.

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to the Minister. I am not entirely clear when we will get the publication of the social strategy, but we shall await the outcome of the consultation on both the social strategy and the NISRA research.

I note, by the way, that the Minister says that we should work together and his door is always open. The last time that I asked for a five-minute meeting with the Minister, he was too busy to see me, and it was an issue to do with tackling deprivation in an area of multiple deprivation in Belfast, but so be it.

7.30 pm

On the social investment fund, I wish that some members of the Government and the Government parties would realise that life is not binary; it is not black and white. You do not have to be entirely pro the social investment fund or entirely against the social investment fund. What you can be is totally against poverty in our country. Jenny Palmer summed it up very well by taking those raw statistics and telling us that it is the equivalent of five Bangors, seven Omaghs or three Lisburns.

I fear that the result will be the result. I fear that, when we table motions, Executive parties simply wish to attack the Opposition for attacking the Opposition's sake. Mr McCartney seems to regret that we have only an hour for the debate, but I say to Mr McCartney that the time allocated for Opposition days is set by the Business Committee, on which you and the DUP have the majority of votes. We would very happily have a five-hour, a five-and-a-half-hour or a six-hour Opposition day. We had three debates today, and this happens to be the last. We were outvoted — you have the democratic mandate to do so — but I suggest that, having won the vote at the Business Committee, it is a bit rich to come back and criticise us for not having enough time. We are using all the time that is available to us.

In conclusion, we will not support the amendment, which tries to airbrush some important issues, not just the statistics but the definitions brought forward by Justice Treacy in his High Court ruling in June last year. I know that the Minister wants everybody to coalesce around a single vote. I encourage him and the

Government parties to coalesce around the motion. I think that that is a reasonable request.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 56; Noes 31.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Middleton, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Robinson

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Ms Hanna, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Mallon and Mr Nesbitt

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the latest edition of the 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin' detailing the levels of poverty across Northern Ireland; further notes that section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was the subject of a judicial review in June 2015; and welcomes the Executive's commitment, as outlined in the recent Programme for Government consultation document, to publish a new social strategy that

aims to improve the lives of those in poverty through a range of specific interventions that will tackle poverty, social exclusion and deprivation on the basis of the objective need.

Adjourned at 7.45 pm.

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