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They should be sent to:
The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
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Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 September 2014

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr D McIlveen: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. In his winding-up speech during yesterday's debate on the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Member for North Antrim referred to a member of our Executive, quite flippantly, as "Arlene". I wonder whether you would review the Hansard report in light of what was said, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and make a ruling. I think that the Member is Chief Whip of his party and should realise what is parliamentary when referring to fellow Members in this Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should be aware that it is a long-standing convention of this House that we address Members by their proper names and use proper titles. I encourage Members to maintain that fine tradition.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Further to the point of order that I raised yesterday, may I inquire as to whether you have come to a judgement on that matter?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, as you know. I am considering the matter and will respond. I take the point that was made yesterday that it should be dealt with urgently.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order: 24 hours have passed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I can read the clock as well. I told you that I am processing the matter. I hope that you are not challenging how the Chair addresses these matters.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order: not on this occasion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Not on any occasion, may I remind you.

Private Members' Business

Persecution of Christians in Iraq and Syria

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Wells: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with great concern the widespread persecution and genocide of the Christian minority community in Iraq and Syria; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to take immediate action within the international community to provide emergency aid and protection for this religious group.

When I tabled the motion, I had no idea how timely it was to become.

Overnight, announcements have been made that a coalition of forces — Arab states and the United States — has initiated bombing campaigns in Syria to attack the citadels of ISIS. That is quite a dramatic development, and many of us believe that it has not come soon enough.

For centuries, Iraq and Syria have been heartlands of Christianity. Indeed, many of us believe that the stories recounted in much of scripture were in areas that are now present day Syria and Iraq. Many believe, for instance, that the Garden of Eden was in Mesopotamia, which, of course, is the area between the Tigris and Euphrates, and we all know of the Damascus road experience of Paul, his conversion, which led to a strong and vibrant Christian community in that country.

Until recently, both countries had a strong Christian minority. The irony is that under

brutal dictators, such as the Saddam Hussein and the Assad regimes, Christianity was largely untouched by militant Islam. Right up until 2011, the Barnabas aid report stated that Syria was one of the freest places to be a Christian in the Middle East, and Syria had a Christian population of 1.5 million. Equally, in Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, Christians largely prospered. Indeed, many of us will remember that the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Saddam Hussein regime was a Christian. Things, unfortunately, have changed, and changed dramatically.

As my colleague Jim Shannon, the Member for Strangford in another place, said:

“the global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century.”

That is because what has been going on in those two countries has been extremely worrying.

Speaking personally, I initially tabled the motion in response to concerns expressed by a constituent from Newcastle, and I decided to do a bit of research. I have to say that I found looking at what is going on to the Christian and, indeed, other minorities in those two countries to be the most depressing time that I have ever had in the Assembly. I read things about what is happening to this persecuted minority that, frankly, I cannot repeat in the Assembly because they are so distressing. The result of that is that Syria has gone from a situation where there were 1.5 million Christians a matter of a few years ago to a situation where it is down to, perhaps, fewer than 300,000. A similar situation has happened in Iraq. Census returns in Iraq in 1987 indicated that there were 1.4 million Christians in Iraq, and now that population is down to an estimated 400,000, of which 284,000 are from the Roman Catholic faith.

By any indication, that is an extremely worrying and dramatic change. Indeed, what makes this very sad is that a large number of those Christians who left Iraq in fear of their life went to Syria, where, unfortunately, they have encountered very brutal death, terror and persecution. In Syria, it is reckoned that at least 450,000 to 600,000 people have fled and that 600 people have been martyred for their faith. Two senior Christian bishops — in a UK situation, I understand that they would be the equivalent of the Bishop of Liverpool and the Bishop of Manchester — have been kidnapped. Unfortunately, we do not know what has happened to them and fear the worst.

In Baghdad, for instance, in 1995, there was a Roman Catholic cathedral that had 1,500 families registered. Unfortunately, by 2014, that was down to 120. So, there has been a mass movement of people; there has been persecution; and there have been deaths. Why that has happened, of course, is that these strong, brutal regimes have managed to keep under control militant Islam. It is very much like the Yugoslavia situation with Tito. Tito managed to keep under brutal control the various ethnic minorities within what was then Yugoslavia. Once he died, there was an explosion of ethnic tension, and we all know the issues of places such as Srebrenica, where there was mass genocide. Unfortunately, the same situation is being repeated before our eyes. Within the term of this Assembly, there has been a massive loss of the Christian population in those two countries.

If that was bleak, the arrival of ISIS on the scene has made matters even worse. ISIS identifies the Christian community as having the same religious faith as what it sees as the Western oppressors. That oppression and victimisation of Christians has moved on to a terrible and even more sinister level. For instance, there are some towns now in Iraq from which the entire Christian population has fled. ISIS has made it very clear that it wishes to form an Islamic state — a caliphate — that will encompass large parts of Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, that caliphate already covers an area the size of England, Scotland and Wales. There seems to be no room whatsoever in that state for anyone who does not follow the Muslim faith. Therefore, there is a real risk that, within our lifetimes, the entire Christian population of both countries will be driven from Syria and Iraq. People may say that that is an exaggeration. When one considers that there used to be a vibrant Jewish community in both countries, and that now it is estimated that there are fewer than 50 Jews living in Syria and Iraq combined, that gives you an indication of what can happen when things go terribly wrong.

The militants are engaged in tactics and persecution that I simply cannot repeat in the House. They are brutal in the extreme. Indeed, they are so brutal that even al-Qaeda is embarrassed by their savagery. When we get to the situation where one of the most brutal terrorist organisations in the world is embarrassed by how Christians are being treated, something is certainly going dramatically wrong.

People ask, "What should we do?". We should not do what we did in Cambodia in 1975 to 79, where the West sat on the sidelines and an

estimated 1.3 million to 3 million people were murdered in the most brutal way by the Pol Pot regime. More latterly, in Rwanda, in 1994, the West, including us, stood to the side and allowed 800,000 Tutsis to be hacked to death. The lesson has been shown that, if we simply stand on the sidelines, it will inevitably lead to a situation where there will be more death and persecution.

I welcome the fact that the Department for International Development (DFID), the aid agency for Her Majesty's Government, has given £500 million of aid to Syria. Of course, many Christians will benefit from that. However, we have to remember that, in Syria, 130,000 people have already died. That is how serious the situation is. We need to do more. What happened last night is the step that is required. I know that there are huge difficulties in this House and the House of Commons about direct military intervention in the Middle East. We all have seen what has happened in Afghanistan, Lebanon and, of course, more recently in Iraq. It is a terribly difficult situation, but we have shown in Libya that we do not have to have feet on the ground in those countries to bring about regime change and an improvement in human rights. Now is the time for Britain to join the coalition of the Arab states that oppose the brutality. This has implications way beyond the shores of Syria and Iraq. The reality is that this militant organisation has made it clear that, once it establishes its Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, it is going to take its Islamic war much further and inflict more brutal attacks on the West. Therefore, we have a selfish interest as well as a humanitarian interest in doing something about this awful situation.

We cannot stand by and watch the eradication of the Christian community from the Middle East, which is what is happening. The irony is that there is only one Middle East state where the number of Christians has multiplied phenomenally in the last 60 years: Israel. The Arab Muslim population and the Christian population have prospered in Israel. That is the only state where people are allowed to practice their religious values without fear. Indeed, article 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that everyone should have the right not only to practice religious observance but to change their religion. That is denied in many Arab states. I hope that the House will join me in supporting those minorities that are suffering so much in the Middle East.

10.45 am

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu, agus tá mé iontach sásta tacaíocht Shinn Féin a thabhairt don rún. We welcome the motion, support it and understand very well its sentiment.

From the outset, it must be said that no one should be persecuted because of their religious beliefs. This debate is about the persecution of Christian communities in Syria and Iraq. Jim Wells laid out in very tragic detail the extent and nature of that persecution. The international community, and this is part of the tone of the motion, has a responsibility to do all in its power, and we include ourselves in that, to bring that type of persecution to an end. The irony, and Jim Wells touched on this, is that, as we speak, yet another chapter of military intervention is beginning. Many commentators are saying that, rather than resolving the issues in the Middle East and further afield, that will only serve to compound them.

It is very important that we state that everyone should have the right to live their lives and be free to choose who, how and when they worship. To ensure that that message is as clear and strong as it can and should be, we need to see that as a universal principle. Everyone has the right to worship free from persecution. The motion will send a very clear signal from here that we, in our own place, will not allow any persecution of anyone because of their particular religious beliefs.

It is important that we send a clear message that sometimes Governments, based on narrow self-interest, intervene and try to use the rationale that they are doing so to resolve a particular set of issues. In many ways, such action makes the space for other people to use it as an excuse for persecution. The situation in Syria and Iraq was predicted by many people because of the folly of military intervention. However, it is important that we send out a very clear message that those who are responsible for the persecution of the Christians in Syria and Iraq and many others who have other religious beliefs in the Middle East and elsewhere are the people who carry out that persecution.

In ensuring that we bring an end to that type of persecution, we also have to send a very clear message that narrow self-interest, military intervention and the making up of excuses for invading other countries only opens up Pandora's box. Jim Wells said that this particular community, particularly in Iraq, was not being persecuted. The consequence of military action is that it is. So, people need to

have very clear views on why they are taking particular actions.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. In the past, our nation or the United States have intervened in countries acting on information that transpired to be incorrect and whatever. Given the situation that Mr Wells has set out, which we all know exists, how does Sinn Féin feel it should be dealt with?

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

Mr McCartney: I am trying very hard to not politicise this debate, because the focus should be on the persecution of the Christians involved, but it is wrong to say that the information was incorrect. The inquiry was very clear that the information was made-up to ensure that there would be military intervention. So, whatever we do and whatever actions we take, we have to think through the consequences.

In that region, many actions are taken by Governments that have very narrow self-interests and do not think about the consequences. That is why I am saying very clearly that the persecution of these people is wrong and that the people who are responsible for that persecution are the people who are carrying it out. However, the rest of us cannot sit back and say that that did not come about as a consequence of wars that perhaps we supported and should not have.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to check that their phones are not on. There is a considerable amount of interference and feedback.

Mr Rogers: The current persecution faced by the Christian minorities in the Middle East and Africa represents the worst case of Christian oppression in living memory. I thank the Members opposite for tabling this motion. We had hoped in our amendment to widen it a little because persecution goes well beyond Iraq and Syria. In fact, I asked the deputy First Minister about this very issue during the first Question Time of this session.

The violence that is being brought upon Christian minorities requires not simply that this Assembly calls on the Governments in London, Dublin and Brussels to step up to their defence but that we, with those Governments, stand united not only in condemning these monstrous actions but uniting in urging the United Nations to defend those being persecuted.

I stand here today horrified by the inertia shown by the international community to combat these terrible crimes against minorities. The United Nations itself has been built from the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 states that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and religion, the right to change religion and to manifest their religion in practice, worship and observance.

The SDLP believes that it is a moral duty to speak out against those unspeakable acts of barbarism, mutilation and savagery. We need only to hear the testimony of Canon Andrew White, of St George's Anglican church in Baghdad, to know the horrors faced by those there. Canon White pleads with the world to take seriously the needs of those suffering and to recognise them. He recalls how men, women and children were massacred and slaughtered and minorities forced to convert or die.

His calls have been echoed by Pope Francis, who has called on the international community to recognise the plight of Christians, that religion cannot be used to justify violence and, in the cases of such unjust aggression, it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I, along with my colleague here, had the pleasure of meeting Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon, who believes that his country is under threat as well.

Let it be known that the aggressors are unjust and monstrous in their actions and must be stopped. Groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram have twisted the religion of Islam to fit their world view of religious hatred and intolerance; they use malevolent interpretations of Islam to justify the kidnap, mutilation or genocide of their enemies. The brutality of such groups has been well recognised. We just had the anniversary of the slaughter of 61 people in Nairobi's Westgate shopping centre; we have also had the recent horrific beheadings of journalists and the kidnap of Nigerian schoolchildren. My thoughts and prayers are also with the family of the aid worker Alan Henning, who is under threat at this time.

I urge the Assembly to call on the international community to end this campaign of violence and hate. Only through the combined voices of the Irish and British Governments, along with the EU, will our calls be heard. It is time that the UN acts on its self-proclaimed "responsibility to protect" to stop these aggressors.

The situation in the Middle East and Africa has proven that states have failed in their

responsibility to protect their populations from genocide and crimes against humanity. The conditions are right for the international community to assist those states in fulfilling their primary responsibilities to their communities. If extremist and militant groups will not respond to peaceful measures, it is crucial that the international community respond through direct, coercive measures such as economic sanctions and, if all else fails, through military action.

I therefore ask that the United Nations, as leader of the international community, fulfils four key roles necessary for the protection of Christian minorities internationally. The first is to provide safe havens and protection for displaced civilian populations and to deliver robust humanitarian aid to fulfil their immediate needs —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way and I appreciate the thrust of his speech so far. Economic sanctions can be used to apply pressure on governments. How does the SDLP believe that economic sanctions against ISIS or Boko Haram would have an effect? These are people who absolutely despise democracy and have no role in the international community.

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

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We have to look at how particular terrorist organisations get the funds to finance their campaigns. Maybe that is where the economic sanctions have to be imposed as well.

My second point on the United Nations is for the international community to bring justice to all those responsible on all sides. My third point is for the United Nations to use its powers to impose sanctions and embargoes to stop the flow of weapons, money and resources to those promoting and perpetrating acts of terror. Finally, it is for the international community, in coordination with local authorities, to work together to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to combat the aggression of fundamentalist groups globally.

In closing, I ask the Assembly to deliver a united message of condemnation towards the continued persecution and genocide of Christian minorities internationally. It is the moral responsibility of the Assembly to do all in its power to have London, Dublin and Brussels use their influence in the international

community and the United Nations to see that justice is served.

Mr Beggs: I thank Mr Wells for tabling this important motion, which I support. The persecution of the Christian minority and, indeed, other religious minorities in the area controlled by the so-called Islamic State has shocked the world by its brutality. In the 1990s, there were estimated to be more than 1.2 million Christians in Iraq, but now, of a population of some 35 million people, it has been estimated that fewer than 400,000 Christians remain. As was said, religious leaders and bishops have been kidnapped. Businesses and churches have also been bombed and attacked, even on Christmas Day. A Christian Minister of the Environment and public representatives have also been singled out and targeted by the militants in recent attacks. Initially inspired by al-Qaeda, Sunni fundamentalists ISIS have also attacked Shia mosques, funerals, religious shrines and neighbourhoods. It has been said that even al-Qaeda has recognised the brutality and futility of what has been happening and has backed away from some of the actions.

On 24 July 2013, 14 Shia truck drivers were singled out and murdered at Sulaiman Bek. This incident has similarities to the Kingsmill massacre. In that case, Protestant workmen were singled out and murdered by the IRA. It is not that long ago that we faced similar sectarian murders in Northern Ireland. We must all ensure that we protect our peace and ensure that the next generation here and elsewhere in the world is tolerant and protective of the rights of others.

In June this year, hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of Mosul, including the remaining Christian community, fled ISIS. During August in Iraq, which, as others said, is one of the oldest centres of Christianity, 100,000 Christians are reported to have abandoned their villages in the Nineveh plains following ISIS attacks. All this is clearly and grossly against a very basic human right. Article 18 is, as others said, the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Rather than civil and religious freedom for all, those with alternative beliefs to ISIS are advised to leave, convert to Islam or die. During 2011, the Syrian Opposition expressed their opposition to the ruling Ba'ath Party and against the leadership of President Assad. Riots escalated out of control, particularly when the regime used its army against its own people. A large section of the country was no longer controlled by the Government. IS, supported by international jihadists and discontented Iraqi Sunni

extremists, then turned on other opposition groups to impose its fundamentalist view of Islam. The Yazidi community has been forced to flee its villages, and it is not that long ago that we saw images of those people making their arduous journey through parching sun over mountains. Women were sold as slaves. Even last night, we saw that hundreds of thousands of Kurds from northern Syria were forced to flee to Turkey following yet another attack.

No one could fail to be moved by the story that I heard of a mother who gave birth yesterday being forced to flee her home into a world of uncertainty, without even shelter to protect her young child.

11.00 am

As previously stated, ISIS is one of the chief architects of the oppression and genocide. In recent times, it has targeted Western aid workers and journalists through gross, barbaric murders, as well as others whom we may not have heard about. What is religious or godly about the actions that it is carrying out? My thoughts and prayers are with Alan Henning and his family. He selflessly sought to provide aid to the vulnerable, was targeted and now lives under threat of execution. We must all work together, and I am pleased that a wider community has assembled, including Sunni Arab countries, to prevent the spread of this fundamentalist regime.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. In recent months, I have watched in horror and disbelief the reality of religious persecution in each of those nations as it has been brought abruptly into focus by the international media. In June, the Sunni militant group ISIS attacked Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, resulting in almost the entirety of its Christian population fleeing, mainly to the relatively safe Kurdish region, where they have since found themselves in extreme hardship and in need of vital aid.

The militants' ultimate aim in both Iraq and Syria is to create an ultra-Islamic state. That means that Christians are becoming more vulnerable in all spheres of life, with many reported to have been abducted, physically harmed or killed, and many churches damaged or destroyed. However, it is not just Christians who are affected. There was a mass exodus of up to half a million people from Mosul as ISIS have been attacking all, including moderate Muslims and those from other religious minorities in northern Iraq who do not subscribe

to its particularly radical interpretation of Islam. The real enemy is not Islam itself but its fundamentalism.

In the light of the worsening situation, I believe that it is imperative for the Westminster Government to take urgent and appropriate action to provide aid and protection to those persecuted people. As an Administration deeply immersed in Iraq and Syria, the UK Government cannot afford to ignore such an affront to civil liberties. Together with their international allies, they must do all that they can to protect those suffering from persecution in an already desperate situation. Further to that, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office should seek to engage with religious groups and national Governments to identify such atrocities and address their impact. I encourage all those who have not already done so to join my colleague Chris Lyttle and me in signing the current e-petition that calls for the Foreign Office to take decisive and immediate action to support those facing persecution in Iraq.

The focus of the motion is on the persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq, but, as others have already said, it would be wrong to assume that Christians are unique in facing religious persecution or that they are the only group deserving of aid and protection. My party colleague Naomi Long MP secured a similar debate at Westminster on the persecution of Christians, but she has also hosted a debate on the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. She has rightly stated, as have others, that the defence of freedom of religious belief, as defined by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is important not only for Christians but for everyone.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that persecution is a real and persistent issue in many other countries. In a watch list from Open Doors detailing countries where persecution of Christians is most severe, Somalia and North Korea also feature prominently alongside Syria and Iraq. In Somalia, pressure is increasing on the tiny Christian community in that Muslim-majority country. Islamic leaders and Government officials publicly reinforce the idea that there is no room for Christians and that there is a strong drive to purge Christianity from Somalia. Meanwhile, for the twelfth consecutive year, North Korea is where Christian persecution is most extreme. The godlike worship of the leader, Kim Jong-un, and his predecessors leaves no room for any other religion, and Christians face unimaginable pressure. Anyone discovered in clandestine religious activity may be subject to arrest,

arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture or even public execution.

The barbarism of the recent beheadings shown on YouTube has rightly shocked people, but how many of us are aware that, in the period between the first and second beheading, Saudi Arabia beheaded over 130 people? It still bans churches, yet we still send trade missions to the Gulf states and are often more silent than we ought to be when it comes to their abuse of human rights and suppression of religious freedom. I am not saying that we should not send trade missions, but we need to be consistent in our calls for freedom of, and freedom from, religion at home and abroad if it is to be meaningful. The right to have a faith and to practise that faith in private and in community with others is not a western construct but a basic and fundamental human right. Regardless of whether it is in Northern Ireland or northern Iraq, it is a right that should apply universally. On those grounds, I give my full support to the motion.

Mr Storey: I rise as one of the Members who proposed the motion, and I am glad to be associated with it. This is the centenary of what became known as the Great War — the war that was meant to end all wars. One hundred years on, we all know too well that war has not been eradicated and the world is not at peace. The world is a very unhappy and unsettled place. Indeed, all around us, there are many wars, and, as the scriptures refer to, rumours of wars, which is something that we should all pay serious attention to.

In a sense, it has always been that way, but, somehow, over the summer months, there was growing worldwide unease. Indeed, at times, it was palpable. Some have said that the world today is at greater risk than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. It seems to me that some threats of war and some areas of growing tension got more media attention and coverage than others.

We were right to focus on the implications of the air crash in the Ukraine and the impact on the deteriorating relationship between the West and Russia. We were right to focus on the worrying situation in Gaza during the days and weeks of the Israeli bombardment of the Hamas terrorist infrastructure. However, as the world monitored those events and other crises, another even more serious and alarming one was unfolding in Iraq and Syria. Few realised the scale of all that was going on until it was too late. As the world sat back, militant Sunni Islamic fighters ISIL marched into Iraq's second city Mosul. ISIL was relatively few in numbers,

but the Iraqi army fled leaving people to their fate. Meanwhile, the world just turned a blind eye.

It is a tragic reality that, all too often, mass persecution and ethnic cleansing of entire people, which can often amount to genocide, can almost be totally ignored by world Governments and the world media until it is too late.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Newton: Will the Member agree that it is the absolute height of hypocrisy for nations to be complaining about ISIS, yet, at the same time, they are willingly purchasing oil from ISIS, which is sustaining its murder and genocide campaign?

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

Mr Storey: I agree with the Member. I think that all steps need to be taken to ensure that whatever the actions of those who are involved in the persecution are brought to an end. That is an element that needs to be given serious consideration. There are those in this House, and it has been referred to already, who would like to rewrite history when it comes to dealing with persecution and ethnic cleansing. Let us remember and let us never forget that part and parcel of the terrorist campaign that we were subjected to in this country was part of ethnic cleansing of people because of their faith. Let us not forget Darkley. Let us not forget Kingsmills.

It is important for us to remember the developments that have occurred in Iraq have largely followed on from the war in Syria. Last year, David Cameron and the then Foreign Secretary William Hague were champing at the bit for the UK to support US-led strikes against President Assad of Syria and on the side of the rebels. I am no fan of Assad, but surely we would have been foolish to commit ourselves to military intervention on the side of the rebels. I am glad that, on that occasion, wiser counsel prevailed. At that time, some, including my party's MPs at Westminster, argued, quite rightly, that those who were opposed to Assad were as bad as him, if not worse, and that turned out to be the case. Those who fought Assad in Syria developed into Islamic State, and the current title that is given to this band of murderers is Islamic State. They need to be vilified and isolated in every possible way.

I want to commend and agree with some of the comments made by Judith Cochrane, particularly her reference to the organisation known as Open Doors, which is a Christian organisation that highlights the many places across the world where, today, people are persecuted because of their Christian faith. I may not agree with the theology of all those who fall under the banner of the Christian Church. However, those who pay attention and give allegiance to the Christian faith are being persecuted as we speak in the House today. I encourage members to go on to the Open Doors website and look at the 50 countries where, today, people are being persecuted because of their faith — not because of any other issue, but because of their allegiance to the Christian faith. We have a duty as Christians in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and other parts of the world to raise our voice because let us remember, Members, that, if this were happening in reverse, if it were being done by Christians, there would be a hue and cry about it. Therefore, I support the motion before the House. I trust that the motion will send a message out that what is going on cannot be ignored and must be addressed.

Mr Poots: When we look back on what has happened over the past number of years in Iraq and Syria, it should cause all of us great concern. Mr Storey has just mentioned the fact that the American Government, at one stage, were keen to go in and back those who were fighting against President Assad. I am thankful that the UK Parliament ensured that the UK did not get involved in that when it appeared that the Government intended to engage in that activity. Even at that point, it was very evident that the people who were fighting against President Assad had the potential to develop an even more militant and vicious regime than the one that existed. We have witnessed that over time; for example, in Egypt, where the Americans backed the removal of the then President Mubarak. There was then a much more Islamic state in Egypt that was much less tolerant of individuals and wanted to introduce laws that went against freedom and human rights.

In the first instance, we need to seek to better understand the Middle East. The imposition of Western democracy-style politics in the Middle East and in countries that are largely Islamic has not worked in the past, nor is it likely to work that easily as we look to the future. They have a different concept of life. They look more to leadership. The system of democracy is somewhat alien to them. However, as we look at what has been going on in Iraq and Syria in particular, we see that the level of persecution

against a range of people is wholly and totally unacceptable. All decent people should be able to stand up and make that case. We see very ancient peoples, such as the Assyrians and the Yazidis, being driven out. We see the old city of Nineveh — those of us who went to Sunday school all learned about Jonah and his work there. Of course, the scriptures say:

"my word ... shall not return unto me void".

Those who bowed the knee to Jehovah after Jonah took the word of God to those people are still bowing the knee to Jehovah/God, but they are being driven out and persecuted. The persecution that is taking place is absolute anathema to any decent person. The behaviour that is going on includes the ritual beheading of people and the rape of women.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. For terrorists such as ISIS, one of the key income streams is from holding hostages to ransom. Does he agree that it is very important that the international community gets an agreed position on hostages and ransoms? Some nations are paying ransoms and therefore threatening the citizens of other nations that do not.

11.15 am

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

Mr Poots: That is certainly a very valuable point. I note that another French person has been taken hostage in Algeria just in the last 24 hours. It is clear that countries that pay ransoms have more people taken hostage. I know the hardship and burden that that is. Through mission organisations, I know of people who have been taken hostage. Their policy was not to pay. That is a very hard policy, particularly when it is your loved one who has been taken hostage. However, if you ever go down that route, hostages will be taken over and over again, and ransoms will be demanded over and over again. It is not a sustainable policy. It would be much better if France and some other countries that pay ransoms ceased to do that.

Before Mr Humphrey's intervention, I was talking about how women are treated. Teenage girls are being taken. They are raped and made the slaves of men with multiple wives. It is appalling what is happening.

We can stand and look on at all this. We in the Assembly can wring our hands and complain.

However, the truth is that the only means of stopping ISIS is force. I welcome the efforts of others to stop ISIS. I welcome the air strikes that took place and stopped the massacre of thousands of people at that point in time. I welcome the efforts that are going on to get Sunni-led countries in particular to make a military intervention and put boots on the ground to stop these people gaining an even greater foothold in that region. If we stand and look on, we are guilty of doing the same thing as those who stood and looked on in the 1930s, when Hitler had his way and millions of people were slaughtered and subsequently in Russia, with Joseph Stalin, where 20 million people were slaughtered. As decent people, we cannot afford to look on.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Mr Wells and his colleagues for bringing the motion to the House. It is very timely. It highlights the very fact that the international community, for quite a long time, has ignored the specific and discrete persecution of Christians throughout the world. That is a very important thing to note. Indeed, it is worth quoting the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who, when talking about the persecution of Christians, said:

"this is a human tragedy that is going almost unremarked ... it is the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing. We are seeing Christians in Syria in great danger; we are seeing the burning of Coptic churches in Egypt. There is a large Coptic population in Egypt, and for some years now it has been living in fear. Two years ago the last church in Afghanistan was destroyed, certainly closed. There are no churches left in Afghanistan. Between 500,000 and 1 million Christians have left Iraq."

He has highlighted the fact that the world has been silent on the persecution of Christians. Yes, other minorities are being persecuted for religious and other reasons and we should show solidarity with them, but there is a specific problem in relation to the persecution of Christians. Some people have said that the persecution of Christians now is at a height greater than at the time of the early Christian Church. That is something for us to reflect on.

I refer to the remarks of the dean of St Columb's Cathedral in Derry, Dr William Morton. He quoted the Gospel of St Matthew. Quoting the words of Jesus, he said:

"'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'. This is the Gospel imperative of our

Lord. We can't ignore it. If we do, we do so at our peril. That account in St Matthew goes on to relate how, in the final judgement, there will be the distinction made between those who responded when the need arose, and those who did not."

What Mr Wells and his colleagues have done is raise that voice and respond. We may not be the most powerful parliamentary voice in the world, but I think that we are a significant voice, and we add significant force to the plight of Christians throughout the world.

It is important that we remind the world and, in particular, the United Nations that there is a duty imposed on world organisations and world Governments to comply with article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

That is the basis on which the world should intervene to protect the religious rights of people not just in the Middle East but in Africa and elsewhere in the world and, as Mrs Cochrane said, in North Korea in particular, where Christianity has been persecuted to a most extreme extent.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that religious freedom cannot be guaranteed by legislation alone and that we as legislators throughout the world need to promote attitudes of respect and cooperation in the service of the common good?

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

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important that we do not simply use words alone here. The United Nations, other countries and, indeed, the European Union must use a menu, as it were, of actions to deal with the protection of Christian communities. They are ancient communities that go back to the time of the apostles. It is important to remember that they are not colonists or people who have been imported; they have lived there for two millennia.

It is important that the United Nations implements its own doctrine, which includes the responsibility to protect, to provide safe havens, to provide protection for displaced civilian populations in order for them to maintain their culture and their historic heritage, to bring to justice those who are responsible on all sides for the violations that have been so properly identified here today and to have those violations dealt with by the International Criminal Court or, indeed, a specially mandated regional court. It is important that actions be taken and that we do not rely on words alone. Action should be taken. Leading people throughout the world have now come to the conclusion that actions must be taken, and people must be protected. If we do not do that, we — all of us — are failing. I hope that Members in the House will recognise that.

Mr Allister: I support the motion, and I welcome the fact that we are having the discussion.

It is pretty clear that any right-thinking person is absolutely horrified by what has been unfolding before our eyes in the Middle East. It is particularly disturbing to think that, in areas that, as Mr Wells pointed out, historically have significant Christian heritage, the blood-curdling, barbarous scourge of radical Islamism is liquidating in the most horrendous fashion imaginable any vestige of Christianity that they can find and doing so in the most cruel and unspeakable manner. It is right that we in a part of the world that takes for granted the freedoms and religious liberties that we have should raise our voice in defence of those who face such horrendous consequences just for daring to hold a religious belief and who, if they come even from a branch of society that is classified as being in any way associated with Christianity or any other unacceptable minority outlook in the Islamic State regimes, are, with unimaginable cruelty, put to death. It is right that we should be loud in speaking out against that.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that 80% of all those in the world who are persecuted for religious motivation are Christians, that we need to do more than simply make our voice heard and that we cannot stand by as we did in Rwanda and Cambodia and let this happen? The action that was taken last night has to be right. We have to take military action to prevent

the loss of tens of thousands more lives, Christian and non-Christian.

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

Mr Allister: Yes, I tend to agree with the Member. Although the history of interventions in the Middle East has been rather chequered and not always successful and, indeed, on occasions has unleashed even greater monsters, it is abundantly clear that the civilised world cannot stand by and allow the barbarism that is unfolding and building in Iraq and Syria to go unchecked. Therefore, I support the actions that have been taken and trust that they, in a sustained fashion, will be successful.

These are not people whom you can talk to. These are not folk who, as a consequence of dialogue, will see the error of their ways. These are people who know, pursue and want only the path of blood, and they have to be dealt with in a robust fashion.

The Member made a point that unfolds into a wider issue. We heard from Mrs Cochrane, for example, about the very deep-seated persecution and lack of liberty in Saudi Arabia, where they have a specific commission called the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which prohibits the practice of any religion other than Islam, and where the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is a crime punishable by death. You cannot possess any religious items, such as a Bible, and you cannot worship in public. Those are all manifestations, in themselves, of the intolerant imposition of Islam to the extinction of all else.

There is a question to be asked of the Western world because we all trade very readily and liberally with these states. Indeed, Invest NI, for which the House has some responsibility, has a trading office in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. How does that sit with our protestations this morning that we are appalled at the intolerance throughout the Middle East and the suppression of Christianity? That is a point that the House might also want to ponder.

11.30 am

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Business Office for making the time available for this very important debate this morning. I am conscious that there are many pressing issues closer to home, and I am sure that the temptation is often to set issues like this to the side. In politics, we learn very quickly to try not to get frustrated by things

that we hear, but there is one thing that at times frustrates me slightly as an elected representative: the view that we should concentrate only on those issues that are within our borders. I believe strongly that we have a responsibility as a Christian nation to speak out against intolerance, persecution and the murder of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world, which is happening daily, even as we are having this debate. I appreciate the opportunity for us to debate this very important issue.

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

Throughout the debate, I was thinking of the words of the apostle Paul:

"faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Paul goes on to recall a list of people who are referred to in Christian circles as the champions of faith: people who have, because of their faith, done immense things or had to make immense sacrifices. That is what I think is so poignant about what we are talking about today, because I think that the apostle Paul was trying to say that it is relatively easy to take a stand on the things that we can see, but it is not as easy to take a stand on the things that we cannot see with our physical eye. That is why I believe that these people who are suffering great persecution throughout the world are to be held in such high regard. They are standing up for what they believe, their faith and the principles that they hold on to very, very dearly.

The point has been made on many occasions that this is not entirely unexpected. Indeed, I can recall, almost 20 years ago, speaking to a man who was heading up the New Tribes Mission, an organisation that does what it says on the tin: it goes to places that have had absolutely no experience of Christianity and seeks to teach people about the doctrines of Christianity. I remember him saying, 20 years ago, that the biggest threat to the Christian Church was radical Islam. That was not particularly prevalent at that stage, but, as that man and the team that he was representing were going into various areas, they could see clearly the dangers that radical Islam was going to create for the Christian Church. As was pointed out several times this morning, that has been the case. I can think of an example that was brought to me. A young man who lived with his wife just outside Mosul in Iraq was sent a letter from Islamic State telling him that, if he did not leave with his wife, he would be beheaded. He ignored the advice, or the threat,

that he was given by that barbaric group. Subsequently, he was shot at on repeated occasions. He then found out that his wife was pregnant, so, for the safety of his wife and unborn child, they eventually fled to Jordan, where he is now living as a refugee. I suspect that the baby has entered this world by now, although it will have been relatively recently. The child has been born into a world with no home, no money and no quality of life. The young man — the father of the child — summed it up by saying at the end of an email that he sent to his family that he just wanted to get out of that hell. That is the suffering that is being inflicted on Christians throughout the region daily and weekly.

There is a misconception that this is confined to countries that are deemed to be very strict, very closed, and very religious. Last week, I, along with a colleague from the Assembly, had the opportunity to go to Tunis for three days, where I had a number of meetings with various representatives. Tunisia is regarded as one of the most liberal states in the Middle East and north Africa. Although it is 95% Islamic, there are all sects of Islam there, and it is regarded as probably the most secular country in the region. However, even though it is the most secular country in the region, it has been the greatest net exporter of recruits to Islamic State, with 2,000 young people from there estimated to have joined Islamic State in just the past year.

So, this is not a problem confined to the states that we would deem to be very radical and very religious but a problem throughout the region. Mr Wells made the point that we have seen reductions in the number of Christians year on year. He also mentioned the fact that the Arab spring had an unintended consequence, and I accept that. I would certainly not have been in the queue to stand up for Assad, Mubarak or any of the leaders who were toppled by their people. However, it is very clear that those leaders had managed somehow to keep a fairly tight grip on the ethnic tensions that were bubbling just beneath the surface. Since those people were toppled and sent packing, we have seen this boiling-over of ethnic tensions, which is culminating now in the persecution of innocent Christians.

Of course, as Mrs Cochrane said, it is not just Christians who have been persecuted. I have met people who were involved in the Morsi Government — the Government that were toppled in Egypt more recently — who were able to show me where they had had nails rammed through their fingers to make them convert or to hold them to account for a political

viewpoint that is not in keeping with the Muslim Brotherhood in control over there. The brutality that exists in those groups is really quite pertinent and shocking, as Mr Wells mentioned.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to go through all the points that were made, as time is moving on. However, Mr Maginness mentioned us being a small voice. He is absolutely right: Northern Ireland is a small voice. However, Northern Ireland is somewhere that many other countries are looking to to see what they can learn from our experience. It is not that long ago that the outside world was looking at Northern Ireland and saying, "I cannot understand why people are being murdered on the streets just because they put on a police or army uniform", or, on the other side of that, "I cannot understand why people are being murdered just because they are Catholic". People were looking at Northern Ireland, and they could not understand what was going on and why this was happening. Therefore, I think that we punch above our weight when it comes to the influence that we can have in these situations. I think that we in the Assembly have a responsibility to speak out and make that point clear.

All in all, this was a positive and constructive debate. I request that, through the Speaker's Office, a letter be sent to the Foreign Office in the United Kingdom to make it aware of this debate and to urge it to take whatever steps it can. It was predominantly a positive debate. Unfortunately, our prophet of doom in the corner decided to drop in one quip about the activities of Invest NI and where it operates. We have to be very careful that we do not tar all Arab states with the same brush. Of course, many sects exist in all these countries, but I would certainly not encourage any trade with any country that is condoning or justifying terrorism. I will leave it at that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with great concern the widespread persecution and genocide of the Christian minority community in Iraq and Syria; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to take immediate action within the international community to provide emergency aid and protection for this religious group.

Welfare Cuts

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30

minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the disastrous impact of welfare cuts in Britain, particularly on the most vulnerable in society, including families on low income, those with disabilities and those who are unemployed; asserts that a modern, caring society should place the protection of its most vulnerable citizens at the very top of its agenda and calls on the Executive to oppose this Tory cuts agenda.

I propose the motion to the House and ask Members to reject the amendment tabled by the DUP. At the outset, let me say that our battle on this matter is not with the DUP or, indeed, any other party in this House but with the Tory millionaires in Westminster. I believe that the Sinn Féin motion is quite simple and self-explanatory but fundamental in how the Assembly will define itself. Are we determined to defend our community against this ongoing and punitive austerity drive, and will we stand together united and resolute in our rejection of the cuts proposed by the Tories, who represent not one of our constituents?

The motion seeks to highlight the disastrous consequences already being experienced by people in Britain, where these cuts have been imposed and heavily criticised. We share the same concerns highlighted in Britain by all the main Churches, the trade unions, various charities and a number of MPs and NGOs. In this day and age, in a so-called modern and caring society, the need for food banks should be a badge of shame for any Government. The number of people made homeless or driven further into poverty, not to mention despair, should make any party unfit for government, and that is why Sinn Féin will not support the welfare cuts imposed by the Tories and, regrettably, now advocated by Members of this House.

Opponents of my party have suggested that we are opposing this cuts agenda here in the Six Counties because of our opposition to the very same agenda in Dublin. It should be said, of course, that the same mean-spirited and

uncaring attitude to the less well-off has been a hallmark of many of the policies in Leinster House, no less so than in Westminster, but I remind those opponents or so-called commentators that Sinn Féin made that opposition a manifesto commitment, North and South, simply because we are an all-Ireland party and precisely because it is the right thing to do.

We have been asked, or, more accurately, badgered, to support the Westminster-proposed Welfare Reform Bill, but, put quite simply, this is not reform but a pretext for cuts and, if those cuts are imposed, even more families will be driven into poverty. Let us remind ourselves that the Programme for Government commits us to reduce the levels of poverty and social disadvantage, while we also have legal obligations to reduce child poverty levels. Imposing these cuts flies completely in the face of those requirements, and my colleague Mickey Brady will outline some of the other more direct impacts that the cuts will have on many of the people who we collectively represent.

I have asked those who argue for the immediate implementation of welfare cuts why on earth they would want to impose these cuts when the British Government are struggling to impose them throughout Britain given the failure of their IT system.

We have been advised that up to £425 million that has been plowed into that system may be written off. So, I have asked this question: why on earth would we want to impose this policy and these cuts when the system is failing in Britain? Never mind the fact that the absolutely complex nature of the legislation is mind-boggling to some people — despite the fact that we were told that the benefits system was to be simplified — or the evidence from those who highlight the very negative impact of the cuts or that the coalition Government are split on key aspects of the welfare legislation, not least the bedroom tax. Again I put this question: given all that, why on earth would we want to impose those welfare cuts on people here?

11.45 am

The only response, of course —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I am not giving way, thank you. Members will have the opportunity to speak.

The only response that I have heard thus far to my question is that we have no other choice, that there will be no more concessions from London or that we have secured the best deal of the devolved Administrations, as they are referred to, through Nelson McCausland's little lucky bag of mitigation measures. Most people I know have easily recognised the opportunity that is presented to us, even now, as an Administration, with the promises that were made to Scotland in the days that led up to the referendum vote, but that discussion is for another day.

I also want to make it very clear that having personally and politically argued for all the measures referred to by Minister McCausland and other DUP spokespeople with many of my party colleagues — including Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, who did so directly with David Cameron — I, of course, welcome those measures, but they are not anywhere near close enough to what is required. Those measures are essentially administrative, and, important as they are, they do not address the issues of concern to many people out there, particularly women in our community, who believe that the purse-to-wallet policy is a very regressive measure.

While welcome, the measures will not address the fact that, according to representatives of the Social Security Agency in their day one briefing to the Committee for Social Development, the cuts from the Welfare Reform Bill will amount to somewhere in the region of £450 million. They told Committee members that and have made that publicly clear. That money will be taken directly from local people's pockets as a result of those cuts. Of course, NICVA and many others have been able to demonstrate, through a variety of reports, that that amount will rise to around £750 million annually if you take into account the fact that benefits will be frozen over the next number of years and will not rise with the cost of living and so on.

We in Sinn Féin argue that we have a choice. We stand beside and support the calls that have been made by our local trade unions, our church leaders, our charities, the NGOs and the wide range of community representatives who work with hard-pressed families and communities daily. I remind Members that all those groups attended the Assembly and gave evidence directly to the Social Development Committee when we took evidence on the Bill last year. I simply cannot understand why any political party that purports to represent those same communities can advocate imposing those cuts.

The DUP amendment essentially acknowledges and accepts that there are very negative aspects of the proposed —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: You will have the opportunity to speak. Thank you.

The DUP amendment essentially acknowledges and accepts that there are very negative aspects of the proposed welfare reform agenda that is coming from Westminster. It then simply hypes the package of mitigating measures and calls on us to implement the Welfare Reform Bill. Bizarrely, in my reading of it, the amendment really says that we should implement the cuts, which the DUP knows will badly affect many in this community, in order not to badly affect many in this community. It just does not make sense.

One thing should be made clear to the House by all the parties. Cuts are being imposed on services across all the Departments exclusively due to the real reductions in the block grant over a period of years. Imposing welfare cuts, fines or clawbacks of £87 million or £100-plus million will be another burden and, in our view, a burden too far for those communities. So, in essence, we have to address two key problems: a serious deficit in the Budget as a result of British Tory cuts to the block grant; and a further double whammy on the people we represent due to the benefit cuts. Those are two essential issues that people here continually try to confuse either themselves with or certainly the public with, and they have to be addressed.

My party has made it very clear that we are not in favour of these cuts proposed by the Tories in London, and we are at one on this with many voices across our communities. It is our job to protect our communities against these cuts, and we believe that we can. We believe that it is essential that we politically unite in the House against the cuts and for the people we represent.

If Minister McCausland believes that the Westminster proposals are now acceptable, he should introduce the legislation in the House and allow all the representatives to declare their hand, tell the people where they stand and democratically decide the fate of the Bill. Sinn Féin believes — I say this to all Members of the House — that it can make a difference if we stand together united in common purpose in a mature, rational but resolute challenge to the British Government's welfare cuts agenda.

I recommend the motion and reject the amendment.

Mr Wilson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"the negative impact of elements of the current welfare reform agenda in Great Britain; welcomes the proposed package developed by the Minister for Social Development in conjunction with the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the summer of 2013, which will mitigate the most negative elements of welfare reform; and calls for the implementation of this revised and improved welfare reform package for Northern Ireland to avoid the unsustainable cost of opting out of welfare reform, which will impact on public services, the most vulnerable in society, including families on low income, people with disabilities, people who are unemployed and the thousands of public servants who will face unemployment."

I have listened to the tired arguments of Sinn Féin repeated once again in the House. Let us go to the conclusion, first of all, of the speech that Mr Maskey made. It is quite clear that Sinn Féin has no policy other than to hurt the vulnerable and the people who need public services in Northern Ireland. The idea that, if we stand together and show common resistance to these Tory cuts, somehow or other the problem of the £87 million that is being cut out of public services this year, the £114 million that will be cut next year, rising to £1 billion in 2020, will go away. It will not; not with all the resistance in the world. What is he going to do? What is Sinn Féin going to do? Go down to DFP and lock the doors and say, "When you come for your money, we are going to stop you getting it"? That is not how it works. The money will come out of our Budget by somebody sitting at a keyboard in the Treasury and changing the amount of money that is available to the Executive for spending in Northern Ireland.

This nonsense that we are going to be the champions and resist is just palpable nonsense, and he knows that it is palpable nonsense. We will face the consequences of a policy of not adopting the welfare reform changes, which will cost us money in the Executive, and that will hit the poor. No departmental budget will escape the kind of reductions that will be required.

We already see the problems that £87 million is causing this year. As that escalates to £1 billion in five years, as we have to purchase a

computer system and pay the difference between what the rates would be here and what the rates would be in the rest of the United Kingdom, we will have to face those economic consequences. The people who require public services will face them. This is not a motion defending the poor. This is a motion to hide Sinn Féin's embarrassment at having to do something in Northern Ireland that it is condemning the Government for doing in the Irish Republic.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. When he is on the issue of Sinn Féin's embarrassment, would he agree that it must be slightly embarrassing that, last week in Limavady Borough Council, where Sinn Féin is the largest political party, a motion was passed that:

"calls on the Executive to agree to the welfare reform proposals as negotiated by the Executive which will help to mitigate the effects of the Westminster Government's proposals."

That was agreed by a nationalist-controlled council with no opposition from any councillor, and Sinn Féin is the largest party on the council.

Mr Wilson: Maybe what we are seeing there is that people on the ground, who recognise the disastrous impact of the policy followed by Sinn Féin — directed by its dictators in Dublin — are now turning against party policy and asking for a return to common sense.

Let us be clear what this is about: it is about saving Sinn Féin's blushes in the Republic, and the poor people who need public services in Northern Ireland are going to pay.

The second point that I want to make is this: the amendment that we have put down shows that, already, significant changes have been made. They have been dismissed as administrative changes, but they are not. The retention of the social fund, the escape from the changes in housing benefit, the help for people who would have lost money had housing benefit been removed from the rates, and help for people who have to get doctors' reports and go through assessments for their disability payments: all those are not administrative changes but real changes that cost the Executive money. The Executive have poured money into trying to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform. Of course, many of the other changes will ensure that people do not fall into debt, as they have in the rest of the United

Kingdom, because payments will go directly to landlords, will be split, or made on a more regular basis etc. Those are important changes, and the Minister is to be congratulated for having obtained those particular points.

My third point is this: we must introduce the welfare reform changes and face the bill that we must face, or the very top priority that Sinn Féin now wants for the agenda of the Executive — namely the protection of vulnerable citizens — will suffer. I have to say, however, that the priority for Sinn Féin seems to change every week. In some weeks, its priority is the health service; in others, it is its cultural agenda. The Education Minister can even, somehow or other, find money to transport youngsters across Belfast, against the legislation, but in defence of an Irish-medium school. Sinn Féin has a different agenda every week; this week, it appears that its agenda is the protection of the poor.

What is the best way of protecting poor people? It is to give them an opportunity to get into employment.

Mr McCartney: It is to stop the Welfare Reform Bill.

Mr Wilson: That is the best way —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. In case Members have forgotten, our standards of debate include courtesy, good temper and moderation. That involves allowing Members to be heard, and not to be shouting from a sedentary position.

Mr Wilson: I do not mind a bit of barracking from the other side, Mr Deputy Speaker. If there is a bit of barracking, it usually means that the point has hit home for them. The Members opposite know that, if they want to protect the poor, the one thing that you cannot afford to do is to have reductions in the budgets for the promotion of jobs, the training of people who need skills to enable them to get into work or promoting and building the infrastructure required for a healthy economy. Sinn Féin's policy will affect all those budgets so that vulnerable people who need to get into employment will have less opportunity to do so. The idea that, somehow or other, it helps to bury your head in the sand and get into a situation where you have to pay out money, is mistaken.

Of course, we also lose the ability to administer some of the benefits in the future. For example,

if we get to a situation where the system of administration of benefits in the rest of the United Kingdom varies and moves away from what we have here, we will not have the ability to help the poor.

By 2015, people who are getting family tax credits will not be able to make claims because the universal credit system will have moved in. By 2016, unemployed people will not have the ability to claim additional social security payments because the systems will have been turned off. By 2016, people on a low income who make housing benefit claims will find their ability to make those claims reduced unless, of course, we spend hundreds of millions of pounds on purchasing the computer system from the Department for Work and Pensions and paying for its upkeep. I do not think that you benefit the poor in Northern Ireland by putting money into the hands of computer companies, consultants and hardware manufacturers instead of tying into the system that we have in the rest of the United Kingdom.

12.00 noon

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

Mr Wilson: The motion is a motion for disaster. The amendment paves a way forward to save disastrous cuts to Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Wilson: I hope that the Assembly backs the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sometimes, Members' preferences on how a debate is handled might differ from that of the Speaker. I happen to believe that barracking is not acceptable, while cut and thrust is. I call Mrs Dolores Kelly, who I am sure was listening.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP supports the motion and opposes the amendment.

The SDLP has a long record of defending the rights of the most vulnerable in society and is totally opposed to the introduction of these punitive cuts. On that note, I commend my colleagues who supported a Bill in Westminster to mitigate the most detrimental effects of the iniquitous bedroom tax. It would be wrong not to ask Sinn Féin why, if it is so committed to opposing Tory cuts, its members do not go to Westminster to vote against them.

The SDLP is not opposed to welfare reform in itself. A change that would create a fair and more transparent system ought to be welcomed. Indeed, the Bill introduced by my colleague Margaret Ritchie was about protecting disabled people and supporting them if and when they were fit to return to work. These are cuts masquerading as reform and are punishing the most vulnerable people in society for an economic crash that they did not cause. The Executive must do their utmost to agree on legislation, practice and funding to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are not attacked by these cuts.

We have witnessed the demonisation of the disabled and unemployed in Britain as a means to justify the cuts. Like my party and me, the Assembly must reject the Tories' crass dichotomy between strivers and skivers and commit itself to protecting the most vulnerable. In Scotland, in the Expert Working Group on Welfare's excellent report, Professor Adrian Sinfield states:

"The active creation and maintenance of the false division between 'we the people', the taxpayers, the givers, in contrast to 'them, the poor, the benefit-dependent', the takers, has not only stigmatised its receipt and depressed take-up by many entitled to benefits. It also very effectively reduces attention to and support for more positive changes by shifting attention from problems of structure and agency in the labour market to the alleged failures of individuals."

Dignity and respect must be an important part of our social security system.

Others would like to introduce the reforms and dismiss the wealth of evidence that they have failed spectacularly in Britain. Only on Sunday, we learned from the 'Sunday Mirror' that there have been botched changes in benefits for people with disabilities. New figures now show that 329,000 of the 529,000 applicants waiting for personal independent payment claims are still waiting to be assessed and that waiting time has increased substantially. This is all the more shocking when we remember that Northern Ireland will be hit much harder than the rest of the UK if the welfare reforms are allowed to pass. The administrative changes agreed to date do not go far enough to tailor reform to the particular challenges that we face in Northern Ireland.

Nearly 800,000 people live in poverty in the North. I am sure that every Member can agree that that is a disturbing and totally unacceptable statistic. The cuts would only exacerbate the

situation and hit households that are already struggling. Of the 400 government districts, three of Northern Ireland's 26 are in the top four positions, and 11 are in the top 50. That is largely due to the prevalence of mental ill health and social deprivation that the conflict left in our society.

In my constituency, there is an estimated loss of £670 per working-age adult in Craigavon. In Banbridge, it is £560. In total, as the excellent report by NICVA and others suggests, £750 million would be lost to the Northern Ireland economy. There is no aspect of life that the cuts would not touch: housing, health, income or childcare. We have a higher proportion of disability living allowance (DLA) recipients than England, Scotland and Wales, and they will be adversely affected by the personal independent payment.

The infamous bedroom tax will adversely affect 33,000 people. Indeed, the social housing Minister said that 32,000 social housing tenants would potentially be affected by underoccupation restrictions. That was in an answer recently conveyed by Minister McCausland to my colleague Colum Eastwood. We should embark on a housing reform programme and build more houses.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way, and I am glad that she has raised the issue of the bedroom tax. Does she accept that her party introduced the bedroom tax for those in the private rented sector?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The former Finance Minister is well acquainted with the dearth of social housing right across the North. As he knows well, the sectarian geography here lends itself to a different establishment of need. The bedroom tax would impact even more adversely on people living in social housing here than on people anywhere else in these islands. We have heard Members —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I am sorry, but I am very short of time.

We have heard Members rehearse the Tory rhetoric that we are now so accustomed to, which accompanies these cuts: "Make work pay" and "The trap of benefits dependency".

The way in which to do that is by creating sustainable employment —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — across the North rather than penalising people who are not fortunate enough to work or are unable to do so.

Mr Copeland: Thank you for the chance to contribute to the debate, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I stand here with the two great power blocs to my left and right: the land of "This must be done" and the land of "This will never be done". The truth is that, until we see that which is to be done, it is hard to make up your mind. This legislation has been bogged down, I think, since 2012. At that stage, the Minister brought it forward, seemingly trying to implement it in its totality, including clauses that applied discounting as income compensation paid as a result of the London bombings. That was a slap in the face for many people here who were victims of bombings in the past.

We will not support the motion or the amendment. The Minister needs to bring forward the Bill and let the Chamber do its legislative job, which is to decide on it. It is wrong to assume that Northern Ireland is getting away in the smoke, because, to be frank, some of the reforms across the water have been shambolic. Universal credit was expected to be rolled out by the end of 2017. As of last month, 11,070 households were receiving universal credit. The policy in GB is clearly failing, and I see nothing to reinforce the view that it will do anything other than fail here. DWP is 986,740 short of the original target of moving one million people to universal credit by April. In fact, Iain Duncan Smith also missed his own revised and much downgraded target of 184,000. Given that there are currently 11,000 claimants, welfare reform is not working well there either. There are massive flaws, not least the fact that the male to female ratio of claimants is 7:3, with the vast majority of claims being from unemployed people under 25 — the easiest demographic to separate. Considering that universal credit is estimated to cost the taxpayer £12.8 billion, if progress is not made soon, the cost of this will be over £1.1 million for every person currently claiming it.

Welfare needs to be reformed to make the system better and to make it work for people who need it. I have buried people — I am sure that many of us have — from my constituency

who took their own life because of the outworkings of the previous system and the current system. I see little in the proposals thus far that indicates that we have taken any cognisance of the sheer and utter desperation of a vast demographic.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: No, Sammy.

Fighting a DLA appeal on behalf of someone who took their life because you were not available on the day that they needed you to go to an appeal is a very heavy burden. I am sure that there are others in the Room who bear it.

Essentially, this is a row between the DUP and Sinn Féin. It is down in the castle. Sort it out. Bring us the legislation, and, when you do, we will tell you what we think.

Mr Wilson: You have seen the legislation; you are on the Committee.

Mr Copeland: Bring it here. We hear lots of talk about the packages.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: No. We hear lots about packages. I cannot remember a single —

Mr Wilson: You sit on the Committee that investigates it.

Mr Copeland: Stop barracking, Sammy. I cannot remember a single thing that was given by the Minister. It had to be forced or drawn; it was protracted. That takes little cognisance of the people listening to this. The demographic that will be the most seriously affected is not the scroungers, even though they do not really exist, or the unemployed; it is low-paid working families with children. On the day that I sat on this seat and listened to a debate about how this was about making work pay, there were 67,253 people in receipt of unemployment benefit and 4,700 available jobs. It does not take you to be a mathematician to work out the odds on that.

If this must be done, bring it forward and do it. The proper place for legislation is in this Chamber. A debate of this nature a few days before it serves no purpose except to add further concern for those who are afraid of change, whether that change be good or bad. Looking at the mainland, we can see that this has not been well done. It has not been —

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

Mr Copeland: — efficiently done. Thank you for reminding me that my time has run out.

Mr Dickson: I oppose the motion and support the amendment.

My colleagues and I have no particular appetite for the full force of the reforms that are taking place in the rest of the United Kingdom. We recognise that there has been a negative impact in Great Britain, but we also recognise where our block grant comes from. That is something that the party to my right seems to completely and utterly misunderstand. It comes from Westminster. We do not have the resources in Northern Ireland to maintain an independent welfare system. Therefore, we have to work on the basis of parity with Northern Ireland variances that can be and have been negotiated on top of that. To argue otherwise is to reject political and economic reality.

The place to oppose welfare cuts was at Westminster. That is what we in Alliance and others in the House did. However, there are those who did not go to make the arguments or walk through the Lobbies. I know that members of Sinn Féin will say, "Oh, we have a mandate not to take our seats".

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No.

I argue — I have heard your argument before — that they have a greater duty to show responsibility and leadership by working for the well-being of their constituents, whom they are clearly putting in second place to stubborn ideology. That is what Sinn Féin is doing. Now, to rub salt in the wounds, Sinn Féin's grandstanding is aided by the mini-me SDLP and an abstentionist Ulster Unionist Party. Former Ulster Unionist leaders must have been spinning in their graves when the party announced abstention in this historic Chamber today. They are hurting the poorest and most vulnerable by squeezing essential public services. That is the outcome of the opposition. The penalties are real.

12.15 pm

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. The argument made by the Ulster Unionist spokesman was that the proper place for debating the legislation is on the Floor of the

Assembly. We have had a First Reading, a Second Reading and a Committee Stage, all of which the Member who made the claim took part in. What could be more parliamentary than that? He cannot say that he is against this because it has not gone through the proper parliamentary process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: I agree with Mr Wilson.

The penalties are real. All £87 million of them are real.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: They are already having a negative impact —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: — as Ministers quite rightly prepare for difficult days ahead —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member be seated? I remind Members that, where it is clear that a Member does not wish to give way, other Members should not pursue it.

Mr Dickson: The negative impact is already being seen, as we can see from comments by the Justice Minister in the 'Belfast Telegraph' today, for example. Quite rightly, they are preparing for very difficult days ahead, should the reforms not be agreed. Members need to accept reality along with the fact that there is a finite amount of money available. Members and parties can promise their constituents everything under the sun, but the cake is only a certain size. What is expected of us, in this Chamber, is to solve problems not exacerbate them with meaningless campaigns.

I ask Members who continue to block the reforms this: what are your detailed proposals, and where is your master plan for getting round the huge financial dependency on transfer payments from Westminster? I have seen no evidence from any of the parties that are opposing the motion in the Chamber today. I suspect that that is because there is no plan and that, other than to continue to run away from reality and to wave placards, they have no meaningful plans, no proposals and no way forward.

In contrast, on the table there is a package of concessions that is superior to what is being

implemented in the rest of the UK. If we move forward with those proposals, we can avoid the £87 million of penalties and look at what additional measures we may be able to take to mitigate the most negative elements of welfare reform. That is the challenge that faces us.

I encourage the Minister and the Department not only to bring forward the Bill but to bring forward further proposals for changes to help mitigate the issues that are rightly of concern to all Members. Not addressing the issue further hits the poor and the most vulnerable in society. Cuts of £87 million will surely have a negative impact on the provision of health services, education, child poverty interventions, upskilling, employment schemes and job creation. That is what you are holding back. All those things would help people to escape welfare dependency, improve real-life outcomes and create opportunities. We should not be handing money back to the Treasury in fines, which we could be using to invest further in those areas.

Finally, this is about facing up to reality. Therefore, I challenge those parties in the Executive who continue to block reform to face up to their responsibilities, be prepared to take challenging decisions and let the Bill come forward so that we can begin to retake control of the issue and agree a way forward that works for all of the citizens in Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Dickson will not have to wait to read the Hansard report tomorrow to realise that he misheard our spokesman. We are not abstaining; we will be voting against the motion.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my party for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate. Most of the welfare cuts that the Tories are trying to impose on the North have already been implemented in Britain, with devastating consequences, particularly for the sick, the disabled, single parents, those on low incomes and the working poor. Poverty levels have spiralled out of control along with homelessness levels and suicide rates, with food banks and other charitable help often the only safety net that prevents more people from falling into total destitution and despair.

Given the poor socio-economic demographics of the North, we would suffer an even more severe hit than the worst affected regions of Britain if the intended Tory cuts came into full effect here. A report commissioned by the Council for Voluntary Action spells out the stark consequences of the Tory cuts, with the most

deprived areas suffering the greatest losses. Based on official government data, the report finds that Belfast, Derry and my district of Strabane would be worst hit. Some of the stark figures show that, in the Strabane district alone, 1,400 single parent families will face cuts and 4,700 families will have their tax credits cut. The NICVA report that others have spoken on also shows that there will be a loss of £870 per working age adult in the Strabane district, which results in a loss of £22 million to the local economy each year. In the Omagh district, we will see a loss of £690 per working age adult, resulting in a loss of £23 million to the local economy each year. These are extremely worrying and shocking figures.

Speaking as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on disability, I am horrified that sickness and disability claimants will be hit hardest under these proposed cuts. The 66,000 individuals adversely affected by the incapacity benefit reforms can expect to lose an average of almost £3,500 per year. The 67,000 individuals changing from DLA to personal independence payments (PIP) will lose out on an average of £2,100 per year.

This is a Thatcherite agenda that needs to be fought tooth and nail. Tory policy threatens to destroy the economy through savage cuts to public funding and welfare. The implementation of these measures in England has been a complete disaster and has plunged thousands into poverty and deprivation already.

The North is a society emerging from decades of conflict, and clearly you cannot apply here that which applies in England and Wales. Citizens most directly affected by the conflict are among those suffering the highest levels of deprivation. The percentage of people in receipt of disability benefits is higher in the North than anywhere else in Ireland or Britain. Welfare cuts will merely worsen the situation.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: Not at this time, thank you.

The Tory Government is threatening to impose financial penalties on the Assembly Budget if we do not legislate for their regressive cuts agenda. This is despite the fact that, in Britain itself, this agenda is being increasingly challenged and cracks are now opening between the Tories and their Lib Dem coalition partners, who are now questioning the wisdom, workability and counterproductive nature of many of these cuts measures.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: Not at this time, thank you.

There is a growing realisation, generated in particular from issues being discussed in the Scottish independence debate, that the Tory cuts agenda is designed to serve the interests of the Tory heartlands in the south-east of England and their millionaire buddies. It is clear that the interests and needs of the people of the North do not even factor in their thinking.

Unfortunately, here in the North, we have the party opposite continuing to act as cheerleaders for the Tory cuts agenda. The Tory welfare programme is not about reform; it is about saving money —

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

Ms Boyle: — at the expense of the poor. It is a Thatcherite agenda designed to dismantle —

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

Ms Boyle: — the welfare state and punish the most poor and disadvantaged in society.

Mr Attwood: I was going to talk about Sammy Wilson's comments, but he has left, so I will come back to him.

A Member: He is here.

Mr Attwood: I know he is here, but I am going to respond to Mr Dickson's comments, because he said that the parties who opposed welfare reform were running away from the issue and had no meaningful plans or proposals. The last time I checked, the Alliance Party had a relationship with the Liberal Democrats, and the Liberal Democrats are now resiling from the bedroom tax. They are the people who are saying that there is a better plan than the bedroom tax. Even they are saying there are better proposals than the bedroom tax, yet Mr Dickson pretends to himself that somehow there is no better plan or proposal. He says that we just have to accept reality.

Tell the people who will lose £750 million in benefits. Tell all the small shopkeepers who will lose the business of the people who lose those benefits. Tell those people to accept reality.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

This is the time to stand and fight, because if you roll over now, when the £12 billion of welfare cuts come between now and 2020, you will roll over then again.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. This is the time to stand and fight and not roll over.

I will give way to Mr Wilson in a second. Mr Wilson always gives the game away, and how does he do that? In my view, this was one of his most inadequate speeches. It was a rant, if that is not unparliamentary, that flew in the face of facts and evidence. Let me ask the Minister this: does he agree with what Mr Robinson said in his 'Belfast Telegraph' article of a couple of weeks ago, where he said that the reforms that were being proposed and the mitigations that might be agreed would create in Northern Ireland :

"a more generous welfare system than any other part of the UK"

Does he agree with that? Did he agree with the First Minister when he said that Labour's proposal to dump the bedroom tax was already what had been agreed in Northern Ireland when he added that DUP and Sinn Féin had proposed to remove the bedroom tax for existing tenants and give up to £30 million in hardship funds? Do you agree with that? If you agree with those comments, how do you reconcile that with what has happened in Scotland, where, from this month, no tenant, existing or future, pays the bedroom tax? How can you put it in the paper that we will have the most generous welfare system when even what you proposed on the bedroom tax and what Martin McGuinness agreed to before Gerry Adams pulled the rug from under him is less generous than what is in Scotland?

If there is anything that we should be doing, given that the First Minister now agrees with the SDLP that we need to have negotiations, it is preparing for those negotiations and preparing for the abolition of the bedroom tax. If it is not the abolition of the bedroom tax, it is that the bedroom tax is imposed on no citizen, no tenant, future or present, in Northern Ireland on the far side of that negotiation. That is the position of strength, and the DUP have misled, in my view, the people of Northern Ireland in that statement from Peter Robinson in the 'Belfast Telegraph'.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way to Mr Wilson.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. I hate to stop him when he is on a bit of a roll. Will he accept that, under the tutelage of his Ministers, the Assembly agreed the bedroom tax for the private sector, it agreed that the changes in ESA, which account for about £100 million of the cuts, should go through by accelerated passage and it agreed the disability assessment changes in 2010? All of those are part of the £750 million of cuts that he is now ranting about.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member agree that, when I was Minister for Social Development, in complete breach of the ministerial code, I unilaterally would not table regulations that imposed hardship on our citizens? Not only would I not agree to it, I at least went and told Lord Freud the DWP Minister that I was not going to do it. Do you know what happened, Mr Deputy Speaker? Nothing happened. Even though I unilaterally decided to break parity and to refuse to table regulations, neither Treasury nor DWP ever took one bean from the Northern Ireland Budget, never mind impose any other penalties. In any case, when that welfare reform was going forward — we should all learn from the excesses of that welfare reform — we built into the legislation not these procedural advantages that the Minister has negotiated but hard mitigation for our citizens, especially those in need.

I welcome Sinn Féin to the SDLP position. They would not sign a petition of concern at Second Stage. They went to the Sinn Féin ard comhairle and could not get agreement on the Robinson/McGuinness package. I invite Sinn Féin to support us now in the negotiations that we are about to have with London.

12.30 pm

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time, after which this debate will resume.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will start with listed questions, and I point out that question 2 has been withdrawn.

Rates: Foyle

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on how the revaluation of non-domestic rates will affect the Foyle constituency. (AQO 6652/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I am pleased to say that Land and Property Services (LPS) remains on target to deliver the new values that will be used in non-domestic rates bills from 1 April 2015 onwards. LPS has already completed draft valuations of all 72,500 non-domestic rateable properties in Northern Ireland. Individual values will continue to be refined by LPS valuers over the coming weeks, and a breakdown of the revaluation effects by sector and by council will then be available on the basis of the new 11 district council areas. Figures showing the effects of the revaluation at a constituency level are, therefore, not available at this stage. In many ways, the effects of the revaluation will not be fully understood until the new district and regional rate poundages are known.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response and for responding quickly to my request for a meeting, which is taking place next week with some of the traders.

One of the fundamental concerns of retailers in the walled city is that, literally yards outside the walls, some retailers in accommodation with the same square footage pay much less. What is the justification for retailers within the walled city paying exorbitant rates? Can the Minister give any explanation?

Mr Hamilton: The Member and I will meet, I think, next Monday, and he is bringing along some traders from Londonderry to have a conversation. I hope, on the one hand, to explain why things are the way they are and, on the other hand, perhaps to give a little hope that the revaluation may be the answer for some if not all of those traders.

As the House will appreciate, the purpose of the revaluation is not to increase the overall rates take across Northern Ireland; it is to get a fairer balance. It is about addressing exactly the sort of situation that the Member talks about in which traders in one part of a city or in one town maybe think that they are being disadvantaged compared with traders or businesses in another part of the city or, indeed, another town.

There are no guarantees for Londonderry, as there are no guarantees for Newtownards or any part of Northern Ireland. However, you would expect, where the rent increase on the basis of April 2013 is below the average of what it was back in the early part of the century, rateable values to go down and, where the converse applies, rateable values to go up. There will be some winners, some losers and many who remain the same.

It is too early to say what the situation will be in the Member's constituency or, indeed, in any constituency, but what is developing at this early stage is that the value of the list has increased by somewhere between 5% and 10% and that certain towns will do better than others, as will certain parts of towns. We expect — indeed, we anticipated this with the large retail levy — that edge- and out-of-town shopping centres will have a significant increase in their rateable value and, perhaps to balance that out, the rateable value of some town centres — not all — will go down.

Mr Campbell: On the issue of winners and losers in town centres, will the Minister outline whether there will be any hardship assistance for losers, particularly in urban centres — small traders and shop owners in those locations — that have lost out significantly?

Mr Hamilton: One of the things that I and, indeed, my predecessor — he was the Minister who initiated the revaluation some years ago — have been at pains to stress at all times is that there will be winners, there will be losers and there will be many who remain the same. We have consistently tried to communicate that, but I am not convinced that the message has always got through. I think that there are some in business who believe that the revaluation will be a panacea — to borrow the First Minister's word from yesterday — for all their problems. I am afraid that the news for some is that it will not be a panacea, and some rateable values will go up.

As I said in response to the original question from Mr Ramsey, even if somebody's rateable value goes up, we will not know whether that means an increase in the rates bill on the

previous year until we and the councils strike our elements of the regional and district rate respectively. Some people will see a hit and an increase. That is something for which, in the past, we certainly would have introduced a transitional relief scheme. At this time, a transitional relief scheme would be complicated by the fact that there will be council mergers. The Member's constituency is in an area where four councils will come together. The basis on which you would work out an accurate transitional relief is complicated by the fact that you are merging all those different councils and different rates.

Shortly, I will announce the details of the rates convergence scheme that we will put in place, and that may deal with some of the problems. We are reviewing the small business rate relief scheme as well. I am waiting for the Northern Ireland Centre for Economic Policy (NICEP) to come back with conclusions on that. That will assist some losers as well. It needs to be done on the basis of what valuations actually come forward finally. If necessary, the Department and I are open to looking at a scheme that would deal with the ratepayers who are worst affected on the basis of an analysis of how many there are and to what extent they are worse off.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister may have alluded to this in his last response, but can he review the rate relief scheme so that we can ensure that we maximise the survival rates for businesses, particularly in the light of the ongoing financial difficulties?

Mr Hamilton: The small business rate relief scheme has now been in existence for a number of years and has been extended twice in its lifetime, to the point at which, with it and other support that we offer as an Executive to business ratepayers, over half of the business properties in Northern Ireland get at least 20% off their rates bill. That is something that the House should be immensely proud of. It was right that we stepped in when we did and introduced the support that we did. Many businesses in Northern Ireland are still trading in part because of the help that we have been able to offer them through rates relief.

It was introduced as a recessionary measure. It was there to get businesses through the very difficult years that we have been through and out of which we are now starting to emerge. Although I think that there are clear arguments that we are in economic recovery, I do not think that it is uniform. It is patchy. Certain sectors, including retail, which is one of the main

beneficiaries of small business rate relief, are still struggling and, I think, will need some further support to see them through at least another year, if not longer. That is why, rather than, as the legislation required, bringing the scheme to an end, I initiated the commissioning of a review to be carried out by NICEP. It has been engaging in consultation over the past number of months. I am due to get its report very soon. I will need to bring back the conclusions to the Executive and this place very quickly thereafter so that, if we want to extend the scheme, change it slightly or adapt it, we can have that in place for April next year and help out some more businesses at the end of the recession.

Devolution: Enhanced Measures

3. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has requested a meeting with Treasury officials to be briefed on the pre-referendum proposals for enhanced devolution measures for Scotland. (AQO 6654/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Government have not yet formally set out any proposals for enhanced devolution for Scotland, so I have not requested at this stage a meeting with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Perhaps the Minister will note that the question asked about a briefing on the pre-referendum proposals, but anyway.

Does he accept that it would be helpful to publish an independent comparison of the measures on welfare reform for Scotland with those that are proposed for this region?

Mr Hamilton: I was before the Finance and Personnel Committee last Wednesday. Over the course of the session, one of the issues that came up repeatedly was the plethora of information from a range of sources around welfare reform, whether they be governmental sources here in Northern Ireland or in London or, indeed, charities or other organisations that have produced analyses of the effects of welfare reform on Northern Ireland. The very clear message coming from the Committee was that it would be important that I, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, perhaps commission a piece of work that came up with, I suppose, an authoritative view on what the effects would be. That is something that I had myself been thinking about and, indeed, that the Executive had discussed but had not taken forward

collectively. Therefore, it is something that I am prepared and content to try to do. It would be done and, I hope, it would be received in the spirit of an independent, authoritative view on the best estimate, given the figures and complexities, of what the effects, good and bad, would be, what the costs are and what the costs of an IT system etc might be. That is work that I will do.

Of course, within that, there is scope to look at what is happening elsewhere and what may happen in Scotland. It is important to note that, whilst many things have been promised to the people of Scotland, it is not yet clear what they are going to get. From my perspective, on first analysis of what was on offer to the Scottish people around welfare, it did not strike me as being massively dissimilar to what we have. Scotland would have legislative devolution and authority for welfare, but any changes made or any differentiation from parity would come at a cost to the Scottish people, and they would have to find that money for themselves. That is exactly what we have at the minute. That is what is causing us problems. For us to do anything over and above what the Scots may or may not get, it has to be viewed from the perspective that there is clearly not the maturity in this place to take some very difficult decisions with the powers that we have, never mind getting additional ones.

Mr Kinahan: Yesterday, the First Minister gave us an indication of one or two fiscal measures that he is looking for. Does the Minister have a draft shopping list of enhanced devolution measures that he would like to see in Northern Ireland? Will he elaborate on what they might be?

Mr Hamilton: There are some in the House — we know who they are — who want to take a maximalist approach to the devolution of fiscal powers. My view on the devolution of any fiscal power is that it has to pass two tests. One is affordability. That is incredibly important in a region like ours, which is dependent to the tune of £10 billion a year on a subvention from London. This is an incredibly difficult hurdle to pass in respect of fiscal devolution or tax-varying powers being devolved to the Assembly. Take income tax, for example. Every percentage that you reduced it would cost our spending power as an Executive around £90 million. The same is true for other duties and taxes. If you want to move in a downward direction, there is a cost.

I do have a shopping list. It is one that, I think, all of us in the House have, with a few notable exceptions. At the top of that shopping list is

corporation tax. Whilst a discussion will naturally flow from what happened in Scotland last week — something that will continue to be played out in the weeks and months ahead as the Union as we know it undergoes a degree of change, driven mostly by Scotland — it is important that the House, the Executive and all of Northern Ireland do not lose sight of our number one objective, which is the devolution of corporation tax. It is a sizeable, chunky, costly power to devolve, but it comes with, I believe, considerable benefits. We must continue to focus on corporation tax. I think that we are this close to getting those powers and should not be distracted by chasing moonbeams such as income tax or VAT, which we cannot legally get, or other powers that we might be able to get but that would not have the transformative economic effect that corporation tax would have.

Mr McCarthy: I am glad that the Minister mentioned corporation tax. Does he agree that a lower rate of corporation tax, by itself, will not be effective and that we would need to invest in other drivers, such as skills, to take us into the future?

Mr Hamilton: I wonder why the Member might highlight skills in particular as something that might need future investment.

The Member is right: if we get the power — I believe that we are incredibly close to getting it now that the Scottish referendum is out of the way, and there is no excuse for the Prime Minister to delay in giving us a clear indication that we will get the power — then it is over to us, in many respects, not just to pass legislation in the House but to get ourselves ready for the time when, in a few years, we would have a significantly lower corporation tax rate. It was never about just having a significantly lower rate of corporation tax. Work would need to be done in advance to ensure that we were ready for that moment and could seize the opportunity that a lower rate of corporation tax would present in Northern Ireland. Of course, that would require continued and perhaps even increased investment in certain areas, such as what Invest Northern Ireland does in projecting a positive image of Northern Ireland as a place to invest. You cannot project that image if you do not have substance behind it. One bit of that would be having lower corporation tax, which would attract types of companies to invest in Northern Ireland that have not done so before.

However, we also have to ensure that if somebody comes and invests in Northern Ireland and brings 1,000 high-tech, highly

skilled, high-paid jobs that we have 1,000 people with the skills that are required to do that. So, it will be an incredibly challenging situation in which, on the one hand, we are reducing our public spending because of the cost of corporation tax, which could be in excess of £300 million a year and rising, but, on the other hand, we still need to invest. That is why it is silly for some in this House who want to pursue and are supportive of the devolution of corporation tax to fritter away tens of millions of pounds and, ultimately, hundreds of millions of pounds paying welfare reform penalties when we are already facing budgetary challenges and face the very real prospect of further reductions as the price for getting corporation tax.

2.15 pm

Rates: Landlord Liability

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is aware of any increase in instances of landlords who breach verbal assurances that rates liabilities will be included in rental payments. (AQO 6655/11-15)

7. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has considered changing rating legislation in relation to landlord liability. (AQO 6658/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to group questions 4 and 7, as they both relate to landlord liability. I am aware of a number of cases where the landlord has taken payment from the tenant in respect of rates as part of a tenancy agreement but not passed payment on to the Department. In respect of those disputed cases, I can confirm that there has not been a recent increase in the number of instances.

My Department has already taken legislative steps to clarify the position on landlord liability. Primary legislation was introduced earlier this year to remove complex tenancy criteria from legislation. I will also be taking forward new legislation later in the year to standardise landlord allowances. Both changes arose from public consultation last year. I have also asked my officials to look into the issue next year, with a view to more fundamental reform. It is a difficult area, and we need to be careful that we do not stray too far from the principle that rates are charged for services as well as a local tax. The current arrangements, however, do confuse, hence the need for a radical rethink. In doing so, it is important that other changes affecting landlords, such as direct payment of

housing costs under universal credit, are taken into account.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his reply. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire. I further ask the Minister whether he accepts that the current valuation threshold may be set too high to provide appropriate protection for tenants?

Mr Hamilton: The current threshold of £150,000 of capital value was amended and increased on the basis of the last domestic revaluation, which was around 2006-07. It was set a little higher. It probably should have been a little lower, but it was increased and set at £150,000. The reason why it was set at £150,000 was that it was found, on analysis, that properties with a lower capital value had a much more transient population, therefore, there was difficulty sometimes in finding rating liability, whereas those over the £150,000 threshold tended to be properties that were rented by people who remained in situ for much longer.

You can move that figure up or down, but the essential issue here is that, for a small number of people — and I accept that it is a small number of people — any threshold is, apparently, an incredibly traumatic experience for those who go through it and believe that they have paid their rates, and they then find out that they have not and the liability is still there. I do not deny that. I am not so much focused on what the threshold is; it is whether now, as part of what I outlined in the initial response to the Member, we should have a threshold at all.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. You touched on the issue of bringing in legislation to close the loophole. What advice can you give to those people, although few in number, who have been caught in that situation and to those who, in the future, hope to move into the private rented sector?

Mr Hamilton: The one thing that I will say is that the legislation is clear but perhaps not well understood. Section 20 of the 1977 Order makes it clear that, where the capital value is less than £150,000, responsibility lies with the tenant to pay the rates bill. I know that Land and Property Services has attempted to communicate that in various ways through landlord representatives and Housing Rights Service, but it is clear that perhaps the message is not always getting through to the people who need to get it.

In those rare circumstances where it comes up as an issue — many Members have raised various individual cases with me in the past — Land and Property Services will attempt to be as understanding as it possibly can within the current legal position and will try to work with people to ensure that the rates are paid in as flexible and sensible a way as possible.

That is the current position; there are some changes going through this year, as I have outlined, but I am keen to look at perhaps a more radical approach and a radical rethink to ensure that this type of problem, whether small in volume or not, does not arise in future at all.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that, for a property valued between £55,000 and £150,000, if the rent is paid quarterly the landlord is liable for rates but if it is paid monthly the tenant is liable for rates. Does he intend to change that in legislation or even to make tenants more aware of that anomaly?

Mr Hamilton: It is a subject that has clearly provoked a lot of interest in the House. If the volume of correspondence and queries via the Committee are anything to go by, there is a mood for us to do something in respect of it. In broad sweeping terms, I am keen to look at how we can remove any doubt whatsoever from the situation and that it will always be the case, irrespective of how the rent is paid or the capital value of the property, that it is the landlord who is responsible.

I say that in terms of a general policy direction; there are issues that have to be considered very carefully before we end up, potentially, at that destination. It would be, as I said earlier in response to Mr McElduff, a fundamental change in the underpinning principle of rates, which is that it is a payment for services and not a payment for the property itself. We have to be very careful about breaking that principle. Because of that, and because of the fundamental shift that it would be, we have to consult very carefully, particularly with landlord interests to ensure that whilst they may not be sympathetic or supportive — most landlords do a good job and do what they are meant to do — they understand the reasons why we are thinking about heading in that particular direction.

Welfare Reform: Financial Cost

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the annual financial cost to the Executive of the package of proposed

mitigating measures for welfare reform being proposed by the Minister for Social Development. (AQO 6656/11-15)

14. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm the amount of money the British Government has deducted from the 2014-15 Budget to facilitate the continued standard of welfare provision for vulnerable people as opposed to implementing their proposed reductions through welfare reform. (AQO 6665/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 14 together. The UK Government have confirmed that the Northern Ireland block allocation will be reduced by £87 million in 2014-15 for non-adherence to the welfare reform initiative. Should the stalemate on welfare reform continue, this cost will be £114 million next year and will quickly escalate to over £200 million a year. Of course, this does not include the substantial costs of securing an IT system to deliver welfare payments in Northern Ireland.

The Minister for Social Development has proposed a range of measures that will soften the impact of some of the most controversial aspects of welfare reform. While some of these measures will have a cost attached, it will be ultimately for the Executive to determine the level of funding they set aside for this purpose. The estimates of these costs are small when considered against the costs of not progressing welfare reform.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. I understand the cost of mitigation to be of the order of tens of millions of pounds. Therefore, it would have a significant impact on our overall Budget. Will the Minister explain why he attempts to solely blame the difficulties in the health service on welfare reform rather than on his failure to review the annual Budget and take these very significant changes that have occurred into context in that Budget and do it in a planned fashion rather than in the inefficient, unplanned fashion that is happening with the cuts at present?

Mr Hamilton: It is very clear that the Member who was sitting in the Chair yesterday during the debate on the Budget was not listening to a word that was said in that debate. It was very clear from what I said in that debate — I have been consistent throughout — that welfare reform is a problem. We have already lost £13 million from our ability to spend as a Government. That might be a small amount in the grand scheme of things, but it is £13 million

that could and should have been spent on public services in Northern Ireland. We are preparing to remove a further £87 million, which is the equivalent of 2.3% of reductions to all Departments excluding Health and Education. It is an issue that is growing and growing and growing as a problem. It will be £114 million next year and £200-odd million each year after that. I thought that that was something that the Ulster Unionist Party had some sympathy for; I thought that it was supportive of my party's pressing for welfare reform legislation to be passed. Perhaps, however, there is a new dispensation, again, in the Ulster Unionist Party where it is having a different position on welfare reform — having, of course, been the party that went to the polls in 2010 on a manifesto that called for the welfare reform that is going through.

I have never denied that there are other pressures in the Budget. We have basically "flat cashed" our resource budget from 2010, which, again, were spending plans in the Tory party manifesto which, of course, the Ulster Unionist Party was fully signed up to in 2010. We also have a range of other departmental and Executive pressures that have been building up, and they add up into the difficulties that we are having with our finances. If I had welfare legislation passed and I could get that £87 million and not have to hand it over to Treasury, it would not solve all of the problems, but it would go a hell of a long way to mitigating some of the worst problems that we are dealing with in our Budget in this year.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer to date. Given that his Scottish counterpart and, indeed, their colleagues in the SNP, have negotiated quite extensive additional flexibilities within welfare protection in Scotland — in fact, Ivan Lewis has come out publicly today to say that the people of the North of Ireland deserve a bespoke welfare system — can the Minister outline what he is doing to gain such additional flexibilities for the people of the North who are so reliant on welfare?

Mr Hamilton: I knew that Martin McGuinness had agreed a package on mitigating measures for welfare reform. He told us that he took it to his party and his party did not agree, but it is clear from that comment that not everybody in the party saw what the measures were. A package of mitigating measures — far in excess of what the Scots have got — has been negotiated by Nelson McCausland, the Minister for Social Development. It is a package of measures that includes ensuring that the much-hated bedroom tax does not affect anybody

who is already a tenant in Northern Ireland. It also includes a series of issues and flexibilities around the payments of direct payments to landlords, split payments and more frequent payments, which is not the default position in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a package of measures that contains support and help for some of the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland who may have had difficulties moving from the current welfare situation to where they might be after welfare reform.

Let us not forget this: on DSD's estimation, the majority of people in Northern Ireland will be no worse off or better off as a result of welfare reform. Less than a third of people would be in a difficult position as a result of it all and, therefore, needing not as much help as the rest of the people who would benefit from it all.

The Member talks about a situation in which we should go and ask for what Scotland has. Every time that I have met with the Scottish Finance Secretary, John Swinney, he has been looking to get exactly what we have — exactly what we have. Yet there are some in the House who, when they have got all that they can get, when everybody from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the Secretary of State to the Deputy Prime Minister to the Prime Minister himself tell them that negotiations have ended and that there is no more to come, still dig in and demand more. We have a very attractive package. It will not solve everything in respect of welfare reform, but it will mitigate the worst problems for people in Northern Ireland in a way that people in England, Scotland and Wales will not benefit from.

Mr Allister: The Minister has explained the immense difficulties imposed by not proceeding with welfare reform, particularly with the figures £87 million and another £114 million and £200 million a year, and we have all seen the chaos that that is creating. As an enthusiast for corporation tax, how would he ever hope to cope with a £400 million cut in the block grant if that ambition was achieved?

Mr Hamilton: I have long been an enthusiast for the devolution of corporation tax. That is a position that is supported by almost all of the parties in this place. I have been an enthusiast for what I believe to be the right reasons. There would be a cost; we accept that there would be a cost. Perhaps sometimes it is easy for some in the House to agree to the beneficial side of it, which would be somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 higher-paid jobs coming into Northern Ireland over the next decade, but they do not always think about the downside of it. That is something that I have been incredibly

mindful of and would expect to be mindful of, and you would expect me to be so in the job that I am in.

2.30 pm

I accept the point that the Member and, indeed, other Members made in the debate yesterday about a situation where you cannot deal with it. We hear the yelping and screaming that there has been because of the reductions in-year and the reductions anticipated next year. That does look challenging in dealing with a situation like corporation tax. Whilst I am an enthusiast — I remain an enthusiast because I think that it is ultimately to the benefit of the Northern Ireland economy in creating those 50,000 to 70,000 higher-paid, higher-skilled jobs — it requires a degree of maturity on the part of some in this House that has not been on show up to this point.

It will necessitate sizeable reductions to public spending in Northern Ireland. Sizeable reductions are required because of the position that we find ourselves in with welfare reform. The lack of maturity on welfare reform does not translate well into dealing with a situation like corporation tax, but I still remain personally committed to doing it. We are incredibly close to having those powers devolved to Northern Ireland. It would be a shame if we were not able to do what we in this House all want to do — with a few notable exemptions — and reduce corporation tax because of a lack of political maturity on the part of Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move to topical questions. Before I call Mr Jonathan Craig, I should tell Members that questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

DOJ/PSNI: Budget Cuts

1. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he understands how the DOJ's budget reduction this year of over £40 million to the PSNI tallies with the Chief Constable's public comments that the PSNI's budget cuts for this year amount to over £80 million and to outline to the House the reasons for these cuts to the DOJ budget. (AQT 1481/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has a particular interest in this issue given his membership of the Policing Board. I have listened to at least two media reports where the Chief Constable has outlined the extent of pressures, reductions

and cuts that his budget is facing in-year. I suppose that I took more interest in that because they do not tally precisely with the reductions that the Department of Justice is facing in-year. The Member is right to highlight that the Department of Justice budget is facing in-year reductions of around £30 million to £40 million. The police get the biggest chunk of the Justice budget, but that accounts for, I think, only around 66% of the total Department of Justice budget. So, what the Chief Constable is saying does not, on the face of it, tally with what is happening with reductions in-year.

I am aware that there are other pressures. The Member, given his membership of the Policing Board, will perhaps be better aware of some of the pressures that the police, in particular, are facing. There are issues around working time directives and security. There are also various other issues in the Department of Justice, such as legal aid, that are causing difficulties for the Minister. I presume — and I am only presuming — that the reason why higher cuts are being outlined by the Chief Constable is that it is a reflection of what needs to be done to deal with the overall pressures within the justice family as opposed to specific cuts being levied on the policing budget.

Mr Craig: Minister, thank you for that answer. You are not the only person who gets confused about policing budgets. Would you be prepared to sit down with the Chief Constable to discuss this? Have you any comments to make around the fact that he has also outlined that he is being asked to reduce his budget by one seventh next year? The consequences of that will be horrendous. We are talking about the parking of all historical inquiries and the end of police recruitment. The House needs to face up to the reality that he is also discussing laying off 1,000 civilian staff. That is a direct consequence of what we were discussing earlier around welfare reform.

Mr Hamilton: Perhaps I should start by saying that I would rather that we were not passing on to the Department of Justice, the whole justice family and particularly the police, any reductions in spending capacity above and beyond what is necessary. I think that we all accept that times are tough. As I outlined to Mr Beggs earlier — hopefully he listened this time — we face a range of pressures that will necessitate cuts across the board. I do not want to see any reductions in the police budget above and beyond what is necessary.

I am more than happy to meet the Chief Constable and, indeed, anybody from the policing team. In fact, in January this year, I

met, along with the Justice Minister, the then Chief Constable, Matt Baggott, and the action point from that meeting was that the Department of Finance and Personnel would engage at official level with the Department of Justice and the police. That did not start off as I had hoped; it was not done quickly enough or at the level that I had wanted. It has improved and is improving, and I hope that there will be opportunities for me to meet face to face with the Chief Constable. I am more than happy to meet him, primarily for me to get a better understanding of exactly what is going on, as, if I have a better understanding of what is going on, it helps me in discussions with the Executive and other Ministers about the real pressures that need our attention and ones that, perhaps, the overall justice budget can absorb itself. So, I am more than happy to have the discussion. However, the Member is right to highlight that there are consequences coming, and that will not be helped by the fact that we will have welfare reform penalties to pay, which will have a disastrous impact on justice and policing just as they will on health, education and other public services as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Caitríona Ruane is not in her place.

Budget 2015-16: Preparatory Work

3. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consultation and preparatory work is being done ahead of the 2015-16 Budget. (AQT 1483/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: In December last year — I think it was 10 December — I tabled a paper to the Executive outlining at that stage — obviously things are quite fluid and change all the time — what I believed the challenges were for living within our means for the next financial year. It also set out a fairly extensive pre-consultation process where we could have involved a range of people from the community, business, the voluntary sector and various interest groups and could have had a gradual, slow process of building up towards formal agreement of the Budget. Unfortunately, like so much in this place, that was unable to proceed. It was not taken or examined by the Executive, and it was not discussed. It then got bogged down in the issue of welfare reform, and we quickly moved into the June monitoring situation, where it was pointless for it to come forward until we knew exactly what was going on, or not going on, with welfare reform. The long and short of all that is that we are now in an incredibly challenging position in respect of our 2015-16 Budget.

Sometimes, in this place, there is a focus on getting the October monitoring round dealt with, and I absolutely accept that it is incredibly pressing and that urgent action is required in respect of the October monitoring round, but we should not lose sight of the fact that we do not have a Budget in place for next year yet. I would like ideally to get agreement on a draft Budget by the end of this month or the start of next month, enter into a 12-week consultation with the public and then come back with final Budget proposals by the end of this year. That is an incredibly challenging timetable. It would be challenging in any circumstances, but it is exacerbated by the fact that we have all the pressures that I was talking about before plus £114 million of welfare penalties next year and the potential of investment in IT costs next year as well. So, there is work going on, but it is not moving at a pace that I would like it to, and it is imperative that the Executive very quickly agree a draft Budget to give a degree of certainty across Departments about what next year will look like.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister. Given all the welfare debate that we have had over the last months, would there not be merit in a re-prioritisation in the Programme for Government, particularly around deprived areas, and a focusing on deprivation to help to alleviate some of the deprivation in those areas and maybe take some of the weight off the welfare reform discussion?

Mr Hamilton: As much as we may sometimes wish welfare reform would all go away, we cannot lose focus on the fact that we are arguably past decision point on this. It is now starting to infect our political discourse generally, but, particularly from my perspective, it is infecting our ability to do budgeting and finance properly in the Northern Ireland Executive. We need to do that because the second tranche of reductions in-year is related specifically to welfare reform and there may be other things that we want to fund in October monitoring, but £87 million has to be found to pay for the penalties and then £114 million next year and the IT costs as well. We should not lose sight of the issue or say that it is not an issue and that we can park it. It is absolutely core and central to the problems we face.

Whilst the Programme for Government is not my ministerial responsibility, other than the responsibility that I have for DFP-specific targets in it, the Member might like to know that a midterm review of our Programme for Government targets is ongoing, and the targets are being looked at in the context of having an additional year. Rather than a brand-new, full

Programme for Government, Ministers are looking at extending existing targets and, when appropriate, introducing new ones. Progress is being made in developing a list of additional targets, some of which reflect emerging problems. As the situation has not largely changed, we will want to roll forward many of the issues in the existing Programme for Government. However, some things have developed, and Ministers will want to include them as new targets to try to work on in the final year of our mandate.

Perhaps the lack of a fundamental redrafting of the Programme for Government will not be to everybody's satisfaction, but I think that, in the circumstances we find ourselves in, in which the Budget is challenging and time is pressing, the midterm review, many targets being rolled forward and the insertion of a few additional targets is the right way to go.

Written Questions: Failure/Refusal to Answer

4. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why he is showing such contempt to the House by failing to answer questions for written answer, given that, on 18 November 2013, Mr Allister tabled a question for written answer about a letter from Turkington Holdings to the Minister's Department and, despite the fact that that was a priority question and he has since tabled three reminder questions, the Minister, so far, has failed or refused to answer him. (AQT 1484/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I like to think that I know quite a lot about my brief — in fact, I know most of it — but I am not entirely familiar with the question the Member has asked about. If he wishes to have a word with me afterwards and give me the exact number of the question, I will look into it and see what we can do.

Mr Allister: I do not know how many times one has to ask the Minister, having tabled three reminder questions, but the question is AQW 28360/11-15. Will the Minister publicly commit to answering that question, and will he explain to the House why, despite the reminder questions and the fact that it was a priority written question, he has so far refused to answer the question? What is he trying to hide?

Mr Hamilton: The Member has given me the question number, and I will do what I committed to do in my previous answer. I will look at it and answer it if I am able to.

Budget 2014-15: Adjustment

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why he did not adjust the 2014-15 Budget in advance of the huge pressures on the health service this year and the significant costs from welfare reform clawbacks and mitigation, which he will have known about. (AQT 1487/11-15)

Mr Beggs: The Minister has previously avoided answering my question, so I have had to ask it again.

Mr Hamilton: The Member will be well aware that the Executive agreed a four-year Budget. That included a substantial increase in the allocations for health, above and beyond what other Departments received. As I pointed out yesterday in the debate when the Member was in the Chair — I am not sure whether he was listening at that point — in spite of the warnings of doom from the then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, about what would happen to the health service, those warnings did not come to pass.

I will remind the Member about the things that his party colleague Michael McGimpsey said at that time about what would happen to the health service and what happened in reality, because I do not think that the Member was listening yesterday. Michael McGimpsey told us that there would be around 4,000 job losses in the health service in this Budget period, when, in fact, the number of nurses has gone up by nearly 6%, the number of medical and dental consultants has gone up by 15%, and the number of allied health professionals has gone up by over 12%. So that is another area in which Michael McGimpsey was wrong. He also told us that hospital waiting lists would rise, but, in reality, the number of people spending longer than 12 hours in emergency departments is down by over 73% from May 2011. Of course, he also famously told us that we would be in chapter 11 bankruptcy by 1 April 2011. He is in the House, and perhaps he could explain — I am happy for him to explain to me afterwards — why we would file for bankruptcy in an American court. We did not enter bankruptcy, of course, and the Minister, who is looming behind the Member's shoulder at the minute, found a further half a billion pounds of efficiencies and has committed to finding another £170 million this year.

Despite the doom and gloom predictions, there was an increase in health spending for this year, and the Minister has done an excellent job

in ensuring that the inefficiencies that were there have been extracted from the system.

2.45 pm

Mr Beggs: The Minister has still failed to explain why he adjusted what could easily have been the provisional Budget. Does he acknowledge that many Ministers are saying that they are making cuts but not the cuts that they would have made had they had a choice? Rather, Ministers say that they have very limited choices to make unplanned in-year cuts, which is the most inefficient way to make cuts and savings in any Department.

Mr Hamilton: I will try to address the point. Making adjustments would necessitate new money, but there is no new money and no more money coming from London. I presume that the Member does not want to substantially increase rates, not that that raises a huge amount anyway, and I presume that his party still holds the position of opposing water charges. Therefore, we do not have any new money to play with. Money has to then come from existing budgets, and I do not hear anything from the Member or any of his party colleagues about where we would find the money to move to health or education or, indeed, to any other budget that might be deemed a priority. You can ask about new budgetary processes, as you did yesterday with a terribly worded motion that called for the redrafting of the Budget for three months of the year and showed a complete lack of understanding of the budgetary process in the House. However, the fundamental point is this: even if you redraft the Budget, you need to have money to do something substantially different with it. I hear nothing from the Ulster Unionist Benches or any Benches in the House about where we would find the money to do things radically differently or better with our Budget.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Medical Staff: Local Retention

1. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to retain nurses, midwives and doctors who are training at local universities. (AQO 6666/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): My Department invests approximately £30 million each year in

supporting the training of undergraduate nurses, midwives and doctors at local universities. Beyond graduation, my Department invests significantly in ensuring that health professionals continue to receive the highest quality training and can therefore achieve rewarding careers in Health and Social Care (HSC). The attractiveness of what we offer is reflected in the comparatively high rates of retention of health professional graduates in the system here. The foundation programme for doctors is highly regarded, with 80% of training places filled by graduates from Queen's University Belfast (QUB) medical school. That is a much higher percentage of local medical school graduates than in any other region of the UK.

Similarly, we have a good record of retaining nurses locally after graduation. In 2011-12, for example, 79% of graduates from the School of Nursing and Midwifery at QUB were employed in Northern Ireland. However, we are not complacent and are working on strategies to encourage nursing graduates to remain here. We invest nearly £8 million a year in supporting the post-registration training of nurses. My Department is also scoping the cost of developing a graduate nurse programme for newly qualified nurses and has commissioned the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery to develop career pathways to support all newly qualified nurses.

I also observe that HSC is a good employer, providing flexible conditions of service, including part-time working, term working etc that are attractive to graduates. It is inevitable that the highly qualified and motivated health professionals whom we produce are well regarded by other English-speaking health systems across the world. However, we have considerable success compared with other parts of the UK in retaining our health professionals after qualification.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. How does he intend to encourage new graduates into the specific fields that we require most for our health service?

Mr Poots: I have given the responsibility for the education and training of nurses to the Chief Nursing Officer so that a much greater nurse-led focus will apply to the further training and upskilling of our nurses, and I think that that is wholly appropriate. Various strands of nursing and specialisms can be developed, along with the further upskilling of nurses who do so much more than they would have done 10 or 20 years

ago, and there are still many opportunities. That is work that she will be engaged in.

Mrs Cameron: Will the Minister provide a breakdown of how much he is investing in the training of nurses?

Mr Poots: We invest around £30 million in total in the training of doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers. The nursing provision is an important component of that. The Department provides support by way of the payment of university fees to students taking up commissioned places. For 2013-14, that totalled some £14,629,000. In addition, £12,703,000 was paid by the Department to provide non-loan financial support in the form of bursaries to nursing and midwifery students at local universities. The Department also supported the post-registration training costs of nurses by £7,766,972. So, it is fairly evident that we are very supportive of nurses in general, and we will continue to be.

Recently, I gave greater support to the training of health visitors. In 2011-12, 18 health visitors were trained. That figure moved up to 25 in 2012-13 and to 37 in 2013-14. However, I have approved the commissioning of 61 health visitors for 2014-15 to ensure that there will be sufficient numbers trained to meet the needs of the population. That is a very significant commitment, given the financial pressures that we are under at this time. However, I believe in Transforming Your Care, a key element of which is early intervention. Health visitors are an important, essential and critical component of that. Health visitors are also vital to the work that we are doing in family nurse partnerships and all of that, and that is why I am investing in them.

Mr Eastwood: What assessment is being made of the bank system to ensure that those who are qualified get full-time and permanent jobs?

Mr Poots: Given the nature of nursing, the bank system has been used and used successfully for many years. However, capability studies show that it is important that we have an adequate number of nurses in the first place, and the bank supplements that number at weekends, when someone is not available or takes ill or when nurses take holidays or whatever. The bank is merely to supplement the core workforce. I raised the issue of normative nursing when we were discussing the gap in the budget. Normative nursing is something that we are working towards and keen to bring to a conclusion.

That was under threat and, I suppose, will remain so until, in the October monitoring round, we see where we stand. However, we are committed to ensuring that we can have what is described as normative nursing, which is approximately 1.3 nurses per patient.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, please note that question 11 has been withdrawn.

Mental Health Services: Western Trust

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will decide on the location of acute mental health services in the southern sector of the Western Trust area. (AQO 6667/11-15)

Mr Poots: I cannot be precise about when a decision will be taken on the location of the facility. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) report on the issue, which I received in May, was inconclusive, and I have now asked the Western Trust to develop a full business case to assist in determining the need for and location of the facility. It will take account of financial and value-for-money considerations, together with the findings of the board's report. After that, the timing of the project will be subject to budgetary availability, and the project will have to be considered alongside all other demands on the capital budget as we move to the next budgetary period, which commences in 2015-16.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of my long-standing interest in the issue. Does his recent welcome decision to develop and enhance the addictions treatment unit in Omagh, together with the commencement of the building of the new hospital, provide compelling arguments for the retention and development of acute mental health services there, where they have been professionally delivered for over 100 years?

Mr Poots: That was a good try by the Member to make the case. We will await the report and the recommendations that come from the Western Trust. Strong and cogent arguments are being made both for a facility in Omagh and for one at the South West Acute Hospital. I am not in a position to make a final decision at this point, but I am in a position to listen to all the arguments that are being put forward and consider them. I know that the issue is important at constituency level, but it is also important at a health level, which has to be where we place our priority.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the fact that the Minister has progressed the enhanced hospital in Omagh. Will serious consideration be given to the capacity and expertise on mental health that has been built up in the past in the Omagh area? Will that form part of the consideration process before a final decision is made?

Mr Poots: The fact that expertise exists in that area and that it has provided care for people in the past and currently will be part of the consideration. The problem with the argument being made for Omagh is that every other mental health facility will be beside an acute hospital. Had the decision been taken under the previous Administration to have an acute hospital in Omagh, as opposed to having the South West Acute Hospital, it would be an easier decision to make. We have a complex set of issues to go through before making a final decision, but we will give everything due and fair consideration.

Pay Restraints

3. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will be introducing pay restraint measures. (AQO 6668/11-15)

Mr Poots: In the absence of additional funding being provided for health and social care, it is now necessary to consider the implementation of a range of measures designed to address my Department's current funding gap. One of those is pay restraint. I have asked the Northern Ireland Executive to consider these measures and their potential impact on the citizens of Northern Ireland. The decision on pay will be taken forward following this consideration.

Mr McGimpsey: Bearing in mind the stress that many staff feel in attempting to deliver the service for patients and the fact that one of the key ingredients is having the right number of people in the right place at the right time with the skills necessary to address the needs of patients, is it wise to allow a situation to develop that may cause staff to consider industrial action concerning the proposed 1% pay rise, which is, let us face it, a very small amount?

Mr Poots: The situation is simple: I want to give them more than 1%. I want to give them the 1% plus their incremental pay rise. That is not what has happened in England, where it is either 1% or an incremental rise. I have raised the issue with the Executive twice.

At this moment, my budget falls £140 million short. If I were to introduce pay restraint, which would mean that staff would get a 1% rise or their incremental pay rise but not both, that would save £14.9 million. While the gap of £140 million remains unmet, this is an area that will be considered. It is really for the Executive to decide in the October monitoring round how much money I will receive. I hope that the October monitoring round comes forward sooner rather than later, because I do not think that it is good for staff morale to have uncertainty on any of these issues. At least if we have some certainty, people will know what the situation is.

I am not holding back on giving a pay rise: there will be a rise of some description. Whether it involves pay restraint depends on the envelope delivered to me by my Executive colleagues.

3.00 pm

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister recognise public concern about bonuses — probably better known as clinical excellence awards — paid to consultants, and has he any plans to review them?

Mr Poots: We froze clinical excellence awards for the past two years. In fact, we are paying out less now for clinical excellence awards than was previously the case. I recognise public concern on this issue, and it is a difficult one.

First, these are now recognised as part of people's contracts, so taking clinical excellence awards away from people who have them will almost certainly leave us in the courts to make our case from a very weak base. The second element is that, in many of our hospitals, we are hearing the message that it is difficult to get and to retain consultants. That is particularly evident in the west of the Province, and, indeed, in hospitals such as Causeway. So, on one side, we have people arguing, "Well, you shouldn't be giving these consultants bonuses", and, on the other hand, arguing, "But we want all of the services, and those services can only be provided by having the consultants available to do the job". Sometimes — very often, in fact — people are asking for what is impossible.

If you want to get the consultants there, you are, on occasions, going to have to pay them to be there. We are competing in a global market for consultants. They are very skilled people, very sought after people worldwide, and we have many consultants here in Northern Ireland who could get jobs anywhere in the world. There is a high demand for people with those

skills and capabilities. Maybe, sometimes, we would do well to appreciate just what we have in the work and skills that are provided through our consultants.

Mr McKinney: I think that we all understand that there are pressures. Can the Minister reassure the House that he is taking all measures possible to deal with admitted waste in the health service?

Mr Poots: Well, you see, I would never be one who would try to claim ridiculous things like, "There is no waste in the health service". Can we pinpoint every pound of waste? No, we cannot. Can we reduce waste? Yes, we can. Have we reduced waste? Yes. All of those things are important. We have saved £492 million over the last three years. We are saving a further £170 million this year. If I am asked to live with something less than £140 million, on top of £170 million, we are heading close to saving £0.75 billion over the course of the four years, while bringing down waiting times and waiting lists and increasing the number of nurses and doctors, consultants and allied health professionals. So, yes, I want to continue to drive out waste, because getting rid of it allows me to employ more people to do front line service jobs. The more that I can employ people to do front line service jobs, the more I can ensure a better health service for the people, which is what we all want.

Workforce Planning Action Plan

4. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the workforce planning action plan flowing from the regional workforce planning group. (AQO 6669/11-15)

Mr Poots: The regional workforce planning group was established to take forward the specific proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' relating to workforce planning. The group is completing the development of a framework for workforce planning that will strengthen HSC workforce planning across the region and inform the basis for taking forward a programme of workforce reviews.

Whilst the framework is being finalised, my Department continues to lead on regional workforce planning, and a number of workforce reviews are in progress in relation to nursing, medical specialists and medicine. In addition, workforce planning is an essential element of several other reviews, going forward, such as the review of imaging services. These reviews will provide important evidence to help influence

education-commissioning decisions. My vision for HSC workforce planning is to move towards a more integrated, flexible and responsive system that identifies the workforce numbers, skills, values and behaviours that patients and their families need today and into the future.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Over the years, consultancy work has been conducted into workforce planning. Can you tell me how much that has cost?

Mr Poots: The Member has not been specific, so it is impossible to answer that question. We are spending around £1 million on the TYC consultation support that is being provided. The level of skills relating to very specific issues was not available in the HSCB, the Department or the trusts. That is why that support has been provided. It is being provided in the belief that we will save money — more than the £1 million that is spent — as a result of the work that is carried out on our behalf.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister outline the impact that he has had on the numbers of key staff in the local health service workforce?

Mr Poots: In terms of where we are, in administration and clerical, if we look at the period between March 2011 and 2014, we see that that has changed; it has moved significantly downwards. In terms of qualified nurses and midwives, we have had a 5.7% increase. In terms of nursing and midwifery support, we have had a 3.1% increase. In terms of consultants, we have had a 15% increase. In terms of allied health professionals, we have had a 12.7% increase. In terms of allied health profession support, we have had a 21.7% increase. The whole-time equivalent number of nurses has moved up well. We will continue to seek to ensure that that is the case.

On the other side, administration and clerical has gone down from 12,693 to 11,054. Estate services has dropped from 697 to 694, and support services has dropped from 6,532 to 4,840. We have made changes to a series of things, which is to the good.

DHSSPS: Duty of Care

5. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking to ensure its duty of care is fully exercised for all members of society. (AQO 6670/11-15)

Mr Poots: My commitment, my Department's commitment and the commitment of all those who work in Health and Social Care is to provide high-quality services that are safe, effective and person-centred. To achieve that, my Department develops priorities and objectives, and it sets standards for the provision of health and social care in Northern Ireland. We set targets to monitor performance; we listen to the experience of clients, patients and their families; and we ensure that professionals and services are appropriately regulated.

The Department's statutory duty in relation to health and social care is set out in section 2 of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. The Act places a duty on the Department to promote an integrated system of health care that is designed to secure improvement in the physical and mental health of people in Northern Ireland and in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness; and social care designed to secure improvement in the social well-being of people in Northern Ireland.

The Department does not provide services directly to the public. A total of 17 arm's-length bodies provide or contribute to the provision of health, social care and public safety services. In addition to its responsibilities for setting the policy and legal framework for those services, my Department is responsible for holding those bodies to account for the manner in which they govern themselves and the extent to which they deliver on my priorities.

My Department issues an annual commissioning plan direction to the HSC board and the Public Health Agency. The direction details my priorities and sets standards and targets to be achieved in any given year. In responding to the direction, the HSC board, in consultation with the PHA, produces an annual commissioning plan, which sets out the services to be commissioned.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answer. I speak of a courageous young lady in south Down whom you know of who has spinal muscular atrophy and needs an uninterrupted supply of electricity in order to live. What can you, as Minister, do about the provision of a generator to ensure that she receives the same level of care as the rest of us?

Mr Poots: I know the young lady very well. She is a very brave young person who has done much in raising awareness of the particular condition from which she suffers. Her

fortitude in how she manages that condition is a great encouragement to us all.

The matter has been dealt with quite extensively by the trust that provides the service for her, and I understand that she has particular concerns and worries about the circumstances should there be a long-term power failure. I know about the back-up battery provision that exists should the supply of electricity stop and the plans that have been put in place for a transfer to Thompson House in the event of a very, very long-term electricity cut-off. She has particular concerns and has not been fully reassured by the trust as yet. It is a matter for the trust and Mr Rogers' constituent to work out.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer to the question. In relation to the Department's duty of care, will the Minister give an assessment to the staff and the patients of the Royal Hospital on trolley waits last evening? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: I happen to know a fair bit about what happened in the Royal yesterday because a relative of mine went through the emergency department (ED): they went in at 11.30 am and were admitted to the ward before 3.00 pm. Sometimes, what you hear in the media and press does not accurately reflect what goes on.

There was certainly considerable pressure on the Royal yesterday, with 312 patients attending. It remained constant throughout the day. On average, the Royal sees 256 patients a day, so there was a considerable spike of close to 20% yesterday, and the consequence of that was that it was a very pressurised place. Emergency departments are pressurised places, and that is their nature.

We are doing considerable work, and I trust that, while Ms McLaughlin did not support my efforts to get more money at the Committee, her Executive colleagues in Sinn Féin will be more supportive than her. Some of the things we were looking for were money for domiciliary care to ensure that people can be discharged reasonably, money for the social work teams that carry out the discharge, money for radiology so that people will have the proper imaging at the hospital door, money to ensure that we can continue to invest in emergency departments and money for normative nursing. If Sinn Féin does not think that that is money well spent, it is a matter for Sinn Féin to bring to the public. We can really improve our flows in hospitals and ensure that our emergency

departments operate more efficiently if we get that support.

It was suggested that the October monitoring round could actually be completed for the end of September. I hope that that is the case and that Sinn Féin does not cause any delays in it coming forward earlier rather than later, because it will help us make these very important decisions earlier, which will be to the benefit of the community.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he believe that his Department is showing a duty of care to all those who walk through the doors of Antrim's A&E? The provisional figures for last month, which is meant to be the quietest time of year, showed that only 65% were treated within four hours, even though the target is 95%.

Mr Poots: If the Member's party had not closed the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the Whiteabbey Hospital at the same time and sent all of those people to Antrim ED, there might be less pressure on Antrim ED. However, that is the decision that his party made and supported, and the rest of us have to live and work with the consequences of that.

Subsequent to that, we have made significant investment in Antrim ED. We have built a new emergency department which is capable of dealing with 90,000 patients per year, we took on 40 more full-time nurses, and a considerable number of consultants are available to the department. So we are doing our best to ensure that the emergency department in Antrim Area Hospital is capable of dealing with the numbers that come through its doors, in spite of decisions made by the Member's party.

3.15 pm

Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the allocation from the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme since January 2014. (AQO 6671/11-15)

Mr Poots: A pharmaceutical price regulation scheme (PPRS) has been in place for over 50 years. The latest PPRS started on 1 January 2014. A payment of £2.89 million in respect of the first quarter of the scheme — that is for the period 1 January 2014 to 31 March 2014 —

was received by the Health and Social Care Board in June 2014.

The PPRS is a UK-wide scheme. The quarterly payments under the provisions of the scheme by the pharmaceutical industry are received by the Department of Health in London in the first instance and are then allocated to each of the devolved Administrations. The apportionments are agreed by the devolved Administrations each year. The payment in respect of the period 1 January 2014 to 31 March 2014 was made under the provisions of the apportionment methodology agreed for the 2013-14 financial year. The methodology for apportioning payments for the 2014-15 financial year has not yet been finalised.

It should be noted that the PPRS does not create new funding; rather, moneys will no longer be required to meet an increase in the branded drugs bill and will ensure that the existing budgets are not breached.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. In light of the Minister's answer, how does he propose that that allocation should be used and is it best value for money?

Mr Poots: One thing I noted when my predecessor was in place was that people regularly called for savings to be made through moving from branded drugs to generic drugs. My predecessor started to do that, and I have done a lot more work on that since coming into office. Therefore, we are spending less money on branded drugs. But people did not always say that that always had to be invested back into drugs. There are massive demands out there. Last year, for example, we needed something like an additional £6 million or £7 million for looked-after, vulnerable children because of additional numbers coming through. We also needed additional money for domiciliary care. So, this does not go back into some pot that says "drugs" and that cannot be used for something else. It goes back into the health service budget, and that budget has many stresses and strains, as everybody in this House should well know given the conversation that has been had over the past six or eight weeks.

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

Antrim Area Hospital: Challenges

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following his decision to install a turnaround team to deal with waiting time pressures at Antrim Area Hospital, to outline the challenges facing the hospital's new chief executive, Dr Tony Stevens. (AQT 1491/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are a number of key challenges in the Northern Trust area. I think that all trusts outside the Belfast Trust have particular challenges in having the requisite number of consultants available to them. That is an area where hopefully having someone who has real standing in the medical community will be able to attract people to Antrim Area Hospital. I see terrific work going on in that hospital, including in the labs, cancer units and so forth. Great service is being provided throughout the hospital. It had, for a long time, been the focus of a lot of negative attention relating to the ED. Whilst it is not perfect, it is certainly considerably better than it was two or three years ago. That negativity that existed around Antrim Area Hospital has diminished greatly over the course of the past two or three years, and that is something that we need to continue to work on with people like Dr Stevens to ensure that that remains the case.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the pressures that the Minister outlined in respect of his budget, does he feel that not receiving the £140 million that he believes is required to continue to run the health service will have an impact on the new chief executive's job?

Mr Poots: It almost certainly will. The Northern Trust has always had significant difficulties with historical funding, and it provides for the largest population of any trust. Whilst Belfast is a larger trust and is the centre for a lot of expertise, the Northern Trust has a larger population. So, it faces huge challenges, particularly when you get into areas of how we care for the elderly, vulnerable adults and all of that. There are massive pressures upon that trust, given the population that it serves and the budget that it has. People talk about the £140 million, which is the pressure that is unmet. We have already asked for £170 million of savings before that, which the Northern Trust and others are facilitating for us. I am encouraged that people want to take on the job of chief executive of a trust, because, whilst we can all criticise them and they will not always please us, it is an immensely difficult job to have to carry out, particularly when we are facing more and more demand and less and less resource.

Paediatric Cardiac Care and Surgery

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the international expert group on paediatric cardiac care and surgery. (AQT 1492/11-15)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. We sought specific advice on this issue, and we brought in key people to assist us on that. Professor Mayer came over and led a team from Boston in the United States of America to look into paediatric congenital cardiac care, and that has led to a report being produced, which is now with our Department and, indeed, the Department in the Republic of Ireland. At this stage, the Department in the Republic of Ireland is not ready to release the contents of that report, although I hope that that will change over the next month. I think that it is important that the public are aware of the recommendations at an appropriate time. There is one particular issue of concern to parents, their representatives and the various organisations that provide that support, and that was around surgical care being provided in Belfast. Regrettably, the conclusion that these key experts have come to is that the overall model for delivering children and adults' congenital heart services on the island of Ireland would not allow Belfast to sustain surgery at that site. That would mean that the vast majority of surgery would be carried out in Dublin.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned that the report has been compiled and is ready. When will it be published and made available for everyone to look through? I understand and appreciate that there seems to be some delay in the Republic of Ireland in allowing that to happen.

Mr Poots: One of the issues is that the Republic of Ireland has to develop more intensive care beds in their children's hospital. They are building a new children's hospital, but transferring all the surgery to Dublin at this time would put considerable pressures on them. They have work to do to respond appropriately to this. We are hoping that, over the next month, we will be in a position to make a further announcement on it. This, clearly, is a report, and it has recommendations. It is up to me to hear the views of the Assembly and others in arriving at a decision based on the recommendations. I think that the standing of the people who carried out the report is very important. You have Dr Mayer from the Boston Children's Hospital, Dr Adrian Moran from the Maine Medical Center and Dr John Sinclair

from Yorkhill Children's Hospital. Nursing expertise was provided by Dr Patricia Hickey, also from the Boston Children's Hospital. We brought in people who have real expertise on the issue. They have made their recommendations, and we will have to give them serious consideration.

Rheumatoid Arthritis: Drugs

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made on waiting times for specialist drugs for those who suffer from rheumatoid arthritis. (AQT 1493/11-15)

Mr Poots: I remember doing the door during the 2007 election and listening to someone who had been waiting for specialist drugs. It had been eight months since the individual had been recommended for drugs for rheumatoid arthritis. They could not bear the pain so, after two months, had started to buy the drug themselves on the basis that they would get it after nine months but had had warnings that the drug would be delayed even further.

I am glad to say that there has been a 65% reduction in the number of patients waiting for specialist drug treatment for arthritis, from 393 in June 2011 to 137 in June 2014. The number of patients who were waiting over three months for treatment in June 2011 was 290 compared with zero today. That was something that was reflected to us. Mr Wells brought rheumatologists and individuals who were suffering to see us, and we made a decision that people would not have to wait for the specialist drug. The drug is also used for the treatment of psoriasis, and the number of people waiting has moved from 48 in April 2012 to 18 in June 2014. The number waiting over three months for the treatment fell from 26 in April 2012 to one in June 2014. Considerable progress has been made on what is an expensive drug but one that, nonetheless, makes a dramatic difference to the well-being of individuals who use it.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his response. It is good that progress is being made and to see improvements in that field. How difficult would it be to recover from any slippage in the waiting times for those drugs?

Mr Poots: Obviously, a considerable investment is involved to reduce the waiting times for the individuals concerned. If it becomes an annual issue, we will have to make a considerable investment again to pull back to the position that we are now in. It is important

that we as an Assembly do not allow slippage. The issue should be important to us. People who were not employable are back in employment on the basis of receiving these drugs. They have normality in their life again, which did not exist because they were constantly in quite severe pain.

Consultancy Services: Legal Challenge

4. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that when the framework for consultancy services was issued earlier this year, consultants were informed in early June whether they were on the list, with the process terminated in late June due to a legal challenge, how he can ensure that, if there is a rerun of the system, those who were successfully on the list for the first stage will not be disadvantaged second time round. (AQT 1494/11-15)

Mr Poots: That is a very good question about sustaining a legal challenge the second time round. That will obviously involve a course of work. We will work closely with the representative bodies to arrive at a conclusion whereby we can deliver as much as possible of what would be acceptable to the representative bodies and ensure that we can move forward with it in a very professional way.

Mr Rogers: Bearing in mind the delay for all concerned, is the money that was set aside for improvements across the trusts ring-fenced or is it to be spent during 2014-15?

Mr Poots: All these moneys will be identified at the start of the year for a particular service. If the money is not spent, it will be spent somewhere else because it certainly will not be handed back. In the meantime, we will seek a way forward and an agreement that is in everybody's interest.

A&E: Winter Pressures

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will reconsider the closure of the A&E department at Belfast City Hospital, given that winter pressures will soon be upon us, meaning that it is not good enough to hide behind that excuse, and he will be aware of the pressures over the past couple of evenings in Belfast hospitals, particularly the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQT 1495/11-15)

3.30 pm

Mr Poots: I am not sure why the Member wants me to consider the closure of an emergency department that has not been open for a period.

If the Member had followed the health brief particularly well, she would have heard that it is our intention to open up facilities in Belfast City Hospital to ensure that general practitioners will be able to directly admit mainly older people who have respiratory or renal conditions and to use facilities there for a medical assessment unit. So, many older people will not have to go through an emergency department to be admitted to hospital. All their tests will be run at the City Hospital, after which admittance will be allowed, although, if a different decision is arrived at by the consultants, that will not be the case. That is the plan for this winter, and I am glad to be able to inform the Member of that.

Mrs D Kelly: I assure the Minister that I follow the health brief closely. Minister, you will know that my question was about reviewing the decision to close A&E services. I understand that it was always the case that the closure was to be temporary. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you and others will forgive me for doubting Ministers when they use words and phrases like "shortly" and "in due course", because what they are referring to seldom happens. Is it now the case, Minister, that there is no money for Transforming Your Care and that you are relying on monitoring rounds to plug the gaps?

Mr Poots: Of course, TYC came after the Budget, so it was never part of the original Budget. It has always been reliant on monitoring rounds. I know that the Member does not sit on the Committee, so she may not understand the issues as well as she might otherwise, but that has always been the case, so it is not a breaking story today.

We have managed to invest £40 million in TYC. I would like to have invested more at this point, but we are making a dramatic difference. The Member might not like to hear about it, but ongoing work on atrial fibrillation will ensure that 150 fewer people in Northern Ireland suffer from stroke than is currently the case. That will not make headlines, because the fact that you have not had a stroke is not news, but for the 150 people who do not have a stroke, we will take great pride in delivering that through Transforming Your Care. That is what we mean when we talk about prevention and early intervention to get better medical outcomes.

We now have elderly people who get blood transfusions and IV antibiotics in their own home. We have cancer patients who are

getting treatments in their own home that were not previously available. That is Transforming Your Care in action, and that is where we are progressing to. That is why I am totally committed to Transforming Your Care, despite Members on her Benches questioning, for some considerable time, whether we should be doing it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Before we return to the welfare cuts debate, I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Welfare Cuts

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the disastrous impact of welfare cuts in Britain, particularly on the most vulnerable in society, including families on low income, those with disabilities and those who are unemployed; asserts that a modern, caring society should place the protection of its most vulnerable citizens at the very top of its agenda and calls on the Executive to oppose this Tory cuts agenda. — [Mr Maskey.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"the negative impact of elements of the current welfare reform agenda in Great Britain; welcomes the proposed package developed by the Minister for Social Development in conjunction with the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the summer of 2013, which will mitigate the most negative elements of welfare reform; and calls for the implementation of this revised and improved welfare reform package for Northern Ireland to avoid the unsustainable cost of opting out of welfare reform, which will impact on public services, the most vulnerable in society, including families on low income, people with disabilities, people who are unemployed and the thousands of public servants who will face unemployment." — [Mr Wilson.]

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate today. I support the motion and oppose the amendment.

Saying a fundamental no to Tory cuts has to be the starting point for negotiation. Ultimately, whether the DUP likes it or not, further movement on some of these issues could emerge from talks, and I will touch on those later.

It is worthwhile pointing out that the motion talks about the disastrous impacts that welfare reform would bestow.

Even the DUP, in its amendment, admits that there would be a "negative impact". At least, we have got agreement on something.

I will spell some of that out from a financial and health perspective. We are being asked to deliver over £750 million of cuts as part of our contribution to over £19 billion that the UK Government want to save. We are 3% of the population being asked to deliver 4% of the cuts. It is unfair. If we had a direct read-across of population to cuts, we would be £200 million a year better off. Surely that is worth arguing for.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Is there not a dangerous element of logic in that? If we are saying that we will take 3% of the cuts because that is our population base, the Government could turn around and say that we should get only 3% of the overall welfare budget, which would be an enormous cut in our figure. Surely you cannot have your cake and eat it in that regard.

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

Mr McKinney: At least we are now getting into the space that I will arrive at in my contribution, which is about agreeing in a consensus form what it is that we are saying to the Treasury. At the moment, we are not.

The moneys are huge and will have major implications for all. We have already heard how three of the worst-off districts most affected by the reforms are in the North, not in the Tory heartlands. Although the impact has not fully been felt here yet, it has been in the rest of the UK. For example, in Wales, another in-depth study — this time by Citizens Advice — found that many have been left struggling to maintain a minimum standard of living and are now forced to make a choice between eating and heating. The study also found that those with mental health problems were most adversely affected. At this stage, it should be noted that the coalition Government have come in for huge criticism for not carrying out a cumulative

impact assessment of how welfare reform will affect that vulnerable group of people.

In Scotland, the organisation GPs at the Deep End, a group of over 100 GPs in the most disadvantaged areas of Scotland, has found that the welfare reform package — not elements of it but in its entirety — will be detrimental to the poorest in society. So alarmed are they that they have called on the Government to act to avoid a potential social disaster. Some of our sick and vulnerable people will fall victim to welfare reform. The Macmillan cancer charity has done a specific piece of work that demonstrates the effect that the personal independence payment will have on people with cancer. Its research, which is, once again, in-depth research, shows that PIP is just not responsive to the needs of cancer patients. Macmillan's research shows that people with cancer are waiting up to six months before they receive the support to which they are entitled. That is an absolute disgrace.

We have evidence from elsewhere, concern for here and, as we have heard, a fraying among the coalition over its own plans. What can we do? We can create a strong argument based on political consensus around recognition that we have a legacy issue here: 40 years of violence, long-term mental ill health, deprivation and unemployment. Tory welfare cuts — "reform" as they describe it — were about people getting out of welfare and into jobs. What jobs? In particular, what jobs are there in our most disadvantaged areas? We have no consensus on what is in reality a problem shared across all the constituencies reflected in the House. Instead, we have the DUP behind closed doors at Downing Street saying one thing and Sinn Féin behind closed doors saying another. That is a failure for our people. That experience shows us that there is room for renegotiation based on the consensus that our people are worse off but deserve better. Indeed, if there is not room for negotiation, what is the point of putting welfare reform on the table in the upcoming talks?

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In the SDLP's talks with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor or the Treasury, what wriggle room has the Member seen for renegotiating a greater deal for Northern Ireland?

Mr McKinney: I will put the same point to you as I put to your colleague: it is not about individuals but about us all going to Downing Street with the same message, saying the same thing, not different things. I do not believe your negotiation. I do not know whether

you did a deal with the Tory Government over some of the issues and future strength at Westminster. I do not believe, when you come back and say that you negotiated the best deal possible, that you dealt for all our people —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to address his remarks through the Chair and not across the Chamber.

Mr McKinney: The Scottish experience tells us that if we shout long and hard and with commitment the Government may listen. The DUP says that its negotiation was the best on the table and there could be no more movement. The Scottish experience tells us that it might be a hard negotiation, but there is room. Why is it that the DUP is not up for tough negotiations on behalf of its own people? Here, for me, is the implication of the talks. Everybody has to approach it with equal standing and, in that respect, if the Government are willing to enter into negotiations, the least that we can do is tell the British Government to take the fines off the table. We cannot negotiate with our hands up our back.

Mr Agnew: We have to be honest about what the debate is about. It is not, as it may appear from the motion and the amendment, about whether we oppose Tory cuts or implement them. The reality is that the amendment and the motion propose that we implement cuts. What they disagree on is which cuts we implement.

The DUP's proposal is to implement welfare reform, and we have seen various reports produced on how much that would take out of the benefits coming into Northern Ireland. The one that I find has most basis in fact is NICVA's figure of £250 million on top of the cuts that have already been made to welfare. That is the DUP's proposal, and, to be fair, the party has been pretty upfront about it. As mentioned in the debate, the DUP brought forward a Bill, and we were able to debate it. Had the Bill come back to the House, we would have been able to make amendments. Indeed, prior to that, the DUP tabled a motion welcoming the introduction of universal credit. It is pretty much known that the DUP may be opposed to elements of welfare reform, but, ultimately, there is much of it that that party agrees with.

There are many other elements that, I believe, the Minister could have brought back with changes — for example, the sanctions. For something as simple as a missed appointment, you can lose your benefits for three months. There is no cost implication and no reason why

we would have to breach parity to change that. This is the type of thing that we could have come back with, had the DUP been more enthusiastic about really challenging the welfare cuts.

Sinn Féin's proposal is not a rejection of cuts. We have had the October monitoring round. We are implementing cuts. It has happened. It has been necessary. I do not necessarily criticise Sinn Féin for taking the decision and agreeing the October monitoring round; it was the necessary, pragmatic thing to do. What I maybe do criticise is the pretence that by saying no to the Tory cuts we are somehow protected. That is not the case, given that we will see £87 million come out of our Budget this year. Essentially, it is a choice between two cuts. Do we cut welfare to some of the most vulnerable in our society — the poor, the sick and the unemployed — in an economic downturn, or do we cut public services?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: I am interested in the Member's argument about parity and where we make cuts. How does he feel we should address the issue of super-parity? There are areas where we do better than other areas of the United Kingdom, and, surely, we might have to consider reducing those areas, just to bring us back to parity.

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

Mr Agnew: I am more wedded to us making our own choices for Northern Ireland than I am to parity. We make the choices, and we take the consequences. There are areas, such as air passenger duty, where we chose to break parity and take the financial hit. That was a choice and, again, one that we should be open about, because that was another cut that we voluntarily introduced to our block grant.

Ultimately, whatever way we make these cuts, they will fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable in our society. What is really incredible and what makes the Sinn Féin position in particular a farce is that they are now going to go back to the Treasury to ask, "Can we have more cuts, please? Can we cut corporation tax, which will see up to £700 million come out of public sector spending?". That is a voluntary cut that we are going to beg for. Sinn Féin said in the debate that its priority was to protect the poorest and most vulnerable

in our society. The corporation tax cut clearly shows that its priority is to equalise tax across Ireland to get a step closer to a united Ireland. That has been, is and always will be its priority. If the most vulnerable have to suffer in the short term, Sinn Féin believes that that is worth it in the long term. That is their policy. They go to the electorate and get voted in on that basis. But, at least, be honest about it: you are going to voluntarily impose a cut in public services to give a tax break to those in big businesses. I do not see how anybody from either side of the House can argue that we cannot afford £87 million to protect welfare spending on the most vulnerable, but we can afford anything between £200 million, if we want to take the DUP's figure, and £700 million, if we want to take the Treasury's figure, per year to give a tax break to big businesses.

3.45 pm

There is a debate going on at the minute in Westminster about whether there should be a mansion tax. We have a mansion tax break in that we put a cap on rates. Therefore, the poorest homeowners in our society subsidise those with the largest houses. Instead of having a mansion tax, we have done the reverse and given a mansion tax break.

The issue of making work pay has come up continually, yet, again, the Assembly made its choice and rejected my proposal for a living wage in all public sector contracts. We are not interested in making work pay; this whole agenda is about punishing the poor for being poor. It is not an argument about whether we should have cuts. No one is proposing in the motion or the amendment to do anything that will stop the cuts. It is which way we hit the poorest hardest. I do not think that is acceptable. I do not think that it is good enough. It is time that our two main parties stopped pointing the finger at each other and stopped simply saying no to the Tories and worked out solutions rather than creating problems.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to the debate on the motion and the amendment. Let me say at the outset that I welcome the opportunity that we have had today to debate the policy around welfare reform and the spending priorities as regards that. Sometimes, some of the contributions have contained more heat than light, and I hope to shed a little bit more light on some of the measures as I proceed.

As Minister for Social Development, I believe that tackling disadvantage and building strong communities should be a key priority for the Executive. I want to see a society based on social justice where individuals have access to equality of opportunity and believe that they can maximise their potential but also accept the personal responsibility for themselves and their families and feel able to make a contribution to their community. In essence, my work and that of my Department is about helping people to improve their life for the better.

My Department carries out many functions that directly protect some of the most vulnerable people. Housing for homeless people and providing homes for people with a mental or physical disability are examples of how my Department daily provides services that protect the most vulnerable. The Supporting People programme provides assistance to 17,000 vulnerable people, helping them to live independently. The annual Supporting People budget of £74 million funds a range of services, including those for homeless people.

At the same time, my Department provides funding and support — over £4.5 million in the last year alone — for voluntary and community organisations that provide good generalist advice services to the many hundreds of our most vulnerable people who seek help. We work with disadvantaged communities, helping them to improve the physical environment in which they live and to enhance the services available to the people living there. In doing so, my Department works in partnership with other Departments on key Executive policies such as the neighbourhood renewal strategy. In the past year alone, my Department invested over £8 million in neighbourhood renewal to support the delivery of capital regeneration projects and a further £20 million to support service delivery, all in the most disadvantaged areas. By way of an example, that funding was instrumental in establishing 20 new nurture units and 11 social enterprise hubs. Members will be aware that Delivering Social Change is a key Executive priority, and my officials play a key role in the different elements of that programme.

In terms of direct financial support for the most vulnerable, my Department administers over £5.5 billion paid out in social security benefits. Last year, over £800 million in financial support was paid to the 190,000 disabled people claiming disability living allowance in Northern Ireland. Those payments are made to disabled people regardless of whether they are in work or unemployed. Over £212 million was paid to people who are unemployed as part of the support available to help them back into work,

and £224 million was paid to the families on a low income and not in employment. To add to this, over the past year DSD has provided funding in excess of £800,000 to support the provision of approximately 88,000 two-hour free childcare places for parents in the margins of employment. This funding enables those parents to improve their opportunities to gain employment through participation in training. We also paid over £27 million last year through child maintenance payments, which is money that keeps children warm, fed and clothed.

That is clear evidence of how my Department delivers real and practical support to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. I want to assure Members that those services remain at the top of our agenda, even as we deal with cuts that are being forced on us by the refusal of some parties to pass a suitable Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill.

As Minister for Social Development, I have a responsibility in the Executive to argue that tackling poverty and supporting vulnerable people should be the highest priority for the Executive. However, I also recognise that Executive colleagues have equally valid arguments when they say that the health service, education or justice should be the number one priority for the Executive. Not everyone can be the highest priority, and, at Executive level, Ministers have to decide what the priorities are and make decisions on where resources in Northern Ireland are best spent. Like families have to do every day, at ministerial level there is a fixed budget and we have to make difficult decisions. That is what being in government is all about: assessing need, weighing up the different priorities and making decisions — often difficult, real-life decisions. It is not about dated rhetoric or rants spelled out on billboards or on social media aimed at frightening the most vulnerable rather than supporting and informing them.

When the Assembly votes on the motion, Members need to be clear that, if they support it, they are saying that the Executive should prioritise spending on welfare, which supports the most vulnerable, over the provision of our health care system and the education of our young people, over justice and the protection of people across Northern Ireland. That is the reality.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No, I will not. I have no extra time, and I need all the time I have.

Let me now turn to the second part of the motion and the amendment, which relates to the changes in the welfare system. As I said at the outset, I welcome the debate about the type of society we want and where the protection of the most vulnerable should sit in regard to priorities. Let me be clear: I recognise that there are elements of the Westminster welfare reform package that are cuts and are unpalatable, such as severed disability premiums and the bedroom tax. Indeed, I have stated that in the House before. As a locally elected Minister, I have successfully negotiated a good package of measures in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland, but I cannot deliver such a package for locally inflicted cuts, which are already impacting on public services and vulnerable people. What is disappointing, however, is that the proposers of the motion have sought to hijack the debate about the protection of the most vulnerable, and, refusing to face up to facts and reality, they are pressurised to back up a political mantra in another country with the rehearsal of their catch-all chant about welfare cuts.

Let us look at the real position on spending on welfare over the past five years and through to 2018-19. Spending on social security has risen from over £4.5 billion in 2009-2010 to £5.2 billion in 2013-14, and it is projected to rise, even when we implement welfare reform measures suitable for Northern Ireland, to over £6 billion by 2018-19. These figures represent real and increasing levels of resource being spent on helping those who need help, including the most vulnerable. The only cuts that are happening here and now are those that impact on the people of Northern Ireland as a consequence of parties refusing to pass the Bill, including the Northern Ireland-specific package to deal, where possible, with the unpalatable elements of GB reform.

Once again, the figure of £750 million has been quoted by some people as the cost of implementing the Welfare Reform Bill in Northern Ireland. That figure comes from a NICVA-commissioned report. At the time of its publication, I was heavily critical of the authors — I expressed that directly to NICVA — for the inaccuracies in the report and the negative impact it could have on people claiming benefits. Let me repeat what I said previously: the NICVA report is wrong. The costs of £750 million that have been quoted do not reflect the cost of implementing the Welfare Reform Bill in Northern Ireland. The £750 million figure listed in the report includes costs of nearly £630 million arising from changes that have already taken place in the social security system and that parties in the Assembly supported. They

also include changes to the tax system that relate to HMRC and the Treasury for which the Assembly has no responsibility and over which it has no control. If people actually took the time and trouble to look at the facts and figures, they would discover that, instead of the £750 million that they throw about as being the impact of what is proposed, it is actually around £120 million.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No.

These include changes to the tax system for which the Assembly has no responsibility or control. The report also takes no account of the positive financial impact of universal credit and enhanced childcare provision. I encourage Members to go home, get their calculator out, go through the figures, read what we said and get the real figures rather than those that were concocted at the time by, I think, Goretti Horgan from the SWP, who wrote the report.

Let us get the scare tactics off the table and have a genuine debate. That is the real strength of the amendment, which I am supporting, because it calls for the Chamber to support the implementation of a revised and improved package for Northern Ireland and therefore avoid the financial cuts from not passing the legislation.

The social security system is complex, large and bureaucratic. There is a need to reform, and, every week, the Assembly approves small changes to the system. I want to say this, particularly to the SDLP Members: over the past six years, the Assembly has voted through two pieces of primary legislation — one in 2007 and one in 2010 — that brought about significant change to the social welfare system in Northern Ireland. All the parties in the Assembly have therefore been part of the process of changing the welfare system over the years.

In 2007, the Welfare Reform Bill brought in ESA by accelerated passage, and in 2010 we introduced incapacity benefit reassessments. In fact, the hated Atos was signed off by none other than Alex Attwood. Bear in mind also the 2010 Welfare Reform Bill. Earlier, Alex beat his chest like some Sinn Féiner on steroids or something, as though there was nothing outstanding. The fact is that, when he left the Department, there was not one breach of parity. When he went out the door and I arrived, it had all been done. There was no breach of parity and not one issue outstanding. He can try to

portray it differently, macho man that he is, but the fact is that there was no breach of parity.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: You can go away and check that some other time, Alex, and help your memory.

Let everyone in the Chamber be honest and stop pretending that their opposition to the Welfare Reform Bill — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCausland: — is based on a deep ideological commitment to the existing social security system and that it should never change. The SDLP changed it.

What we are really talking about is how best to change the social security system, rather than refusing to reform it. I understand that parties in the Chamber have concerns, as I have, but to simply say no is nonsensical in this case. Unless we can agree a way forward, we will only see reductions in services for the people in Northern Ireland. There is clear evidence that the current system is not working, that we need changes and that the package of measures that I have negotiated provides the best way forward.

For brevity, let me finish with some points that Members have raised. Alex Maskey talked about figures. I have commissioned and published research that clearly sets out the impacts of such changes. They are readily available on my Department's website and in the Assembly Library. I encourage Members to read them. That is why I referred to the difference between the £630 million and the £750 million. The £120 million is the real figure.

Michael Copeland talked about the limited progress on universal credit IT, but he misses the importance of the policy intent of getting people into work. I thought that he would agree with me that that was a good thing that we want to support.

Alex Attwood made reference to how he authorised breaches of parity and measures he had taken to mitigate the impact of welfare reform in 2010. That, of course, introduced the reassessment of the 83,000 people previously receiving incapacity benefit, which has now been completed with the significant majority — nearly 60,000 — moving on to ESA. It is my understanding from officials that all regulations have been implemented. Whilst conscious of

the code of practice for officials sharing information on previous Ministers, I would be happy if Mr Attwood would like to provide the Assembly with further information. I am sure that he will put that in writing to all of us.

In the last two minutes, I will pick up quickly on what Fearghal McKinney said about the Scottish experience.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: There will be plenty of opportunity for the Member to put it in writing and to circulate it to all of us. There is a bit of a love-in over there between the really green nationalists and the wannabe green nationalists.

Fearghal McKinney talked about the Scottish experience. The fact is that this is not a devolved matter in Scotland.

The fact is that, in Scotland, a decision was taken about the bedroom tax; that is correct. However, the package of measures that we have proposed here in Northern Ireland, and which was agreed with Sinn Féin, far surpasses anything anywhere else in the British Isles. Mrs Kelly will have heard about it in the Committee, and although it goes against her mind and heart to acknowledge it, it is a fact that it is by far the best package anywhere in the British Isles; that needs to be recognised.

4.00 pm

Steven Agnew talked about sanctions. In fact, the package includes that very issue. The package that we have brought forward says that there would be reduced sanctions here in Northern Ireland. It will be done differently from in GB. As regards the overall situation — he was right in this regard and made the point well — the fact is that this is about Sinn Féin sacrificing the people of Northern Ireland for its ambition of a united Ireland. It really is as simple, cold and crass as that.

Let me finish by saying that, over the past year and a half, we have completed our negotiations with Westminster and the negotiations here in Northern Ireland to get the local changes and mitigations that I wanted. The package that was agreed with Sinn Féin a year ago is actually a very good package. People are conning themselves if they think that they are going to do any better. When people from elsewhere in the United Kingdom comment on it, their general view is that we in Northern Ireland have done a really good job and that the

Department for Social Development, in its negotiations, has brought back for Northern Ireland something that people should be pleased with because it is a compassionate package that cares for the vulnerable.

Ms P Bradley: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and to make the winding-up speech on the amendment in the names of me and my party colleagues. I am sure that I am not the only one in the Chamber who recognises just a hint of hypocrisy in the motion's deep concern for the poor, vulnerable British people. That has certainly not been the case over the past years, but the shift is very welcome today.

As we are all aware, welfare reform is a highly emotive issue that has received a lot of media coverage. As a result of the coverage and peddling by individuals and certain parties, a lot of misunderstanding and scaremongering is being fed to the general public, which has heightened fears, especially among those who we have a duty of care to protect.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: No, I will not.

Rather than having this "block everything" reaction, we have not only a financial responsibility but, more importantly, a social responsibility to look at what the facts are and implement a welfare reform system that, as the Minister said, has been tailored specifically to the people of Northern Ireland.

Welfare was designed initially to help the most vulnerable and poor within our society. We know that it was envisaged as being a hand up rather than a handout. Sadly, as time has evolved, we now see families in a second or third generation of non-working. None of us can deny that the circle of poverty is thriving in areas of Northern Ireland where more people are more dependent on welfare than on work and among those who are in work but find themselves part of the working poor culture. These areas tend to be among the most disadvantaged in our society.

By not implementing welfare reform, we are not protecting vulnerable people. In fact, what the House is doing by dragging its heels on the issue is financially impacting on everyone in our society. In his written statement to the Assembly, the Finance Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is much too much noise coming from the Benches. Sorry about that, Ms Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you for that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, because it is rather difficult. During the entire debate, I have shown Members in the Chamber respect by not having conversations. I would like that same respect in return.

In his written statement to the Assembly, the Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton, made the impact of delaying welfare abundantly clear to everyone. The increasing financial penalties imposed from Westminster for us not implementing welfare reform will have far-reaching effects and, as we know, have already started impeding the delivery of public services. By not implementing welfare reform, we will affect everyone right across our society. Rather than defending the poor and vulnerable, all that we are doing by delaying this, and not having a proper debate and facing the reality, is inevitably making things worse for those we want to protect.

I believe that it is time we stopped hiding and looked at the facts about welfare reform. In an article by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it studied the figures and came to the conclusion that, when dealing with child and working-age poverty, universal credit could have a positive effect. It is anticipated that 35.5% of households will be better off, 34.5% will see no change and 30% will be worse off in some way. If we accept the motion and do not accept welfare reform, we will be sacrificing 70% to protect 30%. Instead, I believe that we should work to help that 30%, discover why they are worse off and move to a position where that will not be the case.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: No, I will not; I do not have time.

I have been a member of the Social Development Committee since the inception of the Bill. When it was introduced to us, all members from all parties raised many concerns but never once did I hear anybody say, "Let's scrap this. Let's start our own Bill". We wanted to change it, and I believe that what we have from the Minister brings forward the changes that we wanted.

In conclusion, we have looked at the experiences on the mainland and learnt from their mistakes. We are in the best place now to implement this package, which will clearly bring

us into line with the rest of the UK while also acknowledging the uniqueness of Northern Ireland's position. I oppose the motion and call on those who really want to protect the vulnerable to support the amendment.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Paula Bradley mentioned being on the Social Development Committee since the inception of the Bill. My colleague Fra McCann and I have also been on that Committee since the inception of the Bill, and we, in Sinn Féin, have consistently opposed welfare cuts and will continue to do so. I do not think that anybody can question our record on that, whether it be from the initial stages of Margaret Ritchie trying to rush it through by accelerated passage, to Alex Attwood trying to introduce Atos and all the rest of it and through to our present Minister, who seems hell-bent on destruction as far as vulnerable people in the Six Counties are concerned.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Brady: No, I will not give way. You did not give way this morning.

My colleague Alex Maskey opened the debate. He talked about noting with concern the disastrous impact on the most vulnerable and called on the Executive to oppose the cuts. He talked about a battle with the Tories and not with other parties and said that we should stand resolute. That is the call. Let us stand resolute. It is a battle with the Tories, not a battle with other parties. He talked about how the cuts have affected people in Britain. Paula may talk about our lack of concern for people in Britain. I can assure you that I do not have a lack of concern for anybody who is oppressed by these cuts. I want to make that clear.

I will go on to Sammy. Sammy came out with the usual tired arguments. I know that he likes alliteration, so maybe I could best describe his speech as rambling, repetitive rhetoric. Nothing new whatsoever. He talked about Sinn Féin's dictators in Dublin but did not mention the DUP's dictators in Downing Street and their cosy wee tea parties when making decisions about the people here and how we can best oppress them with welfare cuts.

Dolores Kelly supported the motion, but, interestingly enough, her first statement was attacking Sinn Féin for whatever reason. Then again, that is hardly surprising; she takes every opportunity she gets. She talked about cuts

masquerading as reform, and, in fairness, she did talk about the demonisation of the disabled and unemployed in Britain. That has been a fact.

I do not think that Michael Copeland has made up his mind yet. He tells us one day that he is totally opposed to the cuts; however, obviously the next day Mike talks to him and he is back on board with the party. So, he wants to make up his mind because the Ulster Unionists' lack of support for the people whom they represent is fairly clear and obvious.

Stewart Dickson really showed his true colours in his allegiance to the Tory Government and, indeed, his fellow travellers in the Liberal Democrats, who, as it was pointed out, are now renegeing on things like the bedroom tax.

That is interesting because Naomi Long signed a no-day-named motion in the British Parliament about the effects of transferring from DLA to PIP. That was also signed by Mr Wilson and Gregory Campbell, who is not here at the moment. Maybe that gives us some indication of what is involved.

Talking of Gregory, he spoke about a vote in Limavady Borough Council. A motion was passed by the council that called on the Executive to oppose the cuts. Apparently, an amendment was then tabled, which was passed on a technicality. Eleven people abstained, and it was retabled, not as an amendment but as a separate motion. I want to clarify that.

Mr McCausland: Yes, a mere technicality — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Brady: Just in case you are interested — I am sure that you are not really interested — there were 11 abstentions on that particular vote.

My colleague Michaela Boyle spoke about how the cuts are affecting people in Britain and the devastating consequences on the sick, the disabled and the vulnerable. She also spoke about the rise of food banks. That is not just happening in Britain but is happening here. The number of people in Britain being admitted to hospital with malnutrition has quadrupled since 2008, and the number in Britain who use food banks has gone up from 24,000 to 340,000 in a matter of a few years. Mostly —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, the Member will not.

The reasons that are given by the Trussell Trust for the use of food banks in Coventry and places like that is that people's benefits are being sanctioned.

Alex Atwood talked about the Alliance Party's relationship with the Lib Dems and their renegeing on the bedroom tax. He said that people here will lose £750 million a year and told us to stand up and fight. He also talked about £12 billion being taken out of our Budget by 2020.

Fearghal McKinney talked about the disastrous impact of welfare cuts, the £750 million loss and the fact that we make up 3% of the population.

I am not sure what Steven Agnew was talking about. I was trying to write it down, but I did not really understand it. I think that he was trying either to offend everybody or to please everybody, but then again, there is nothing new about that.

The Minister eulogised about what DSD has done for the poor population in the North. Not once did he mention the effect that these cuts will have on that poor population and how people will be affected. He referred to the NICVA report about the loss of £750 million and said that it was inaccurate. Maybe he is doing his figures on an abacus, because, as far as I am concerned, the report is fairly accurate. In fact, it is probably a conservative — if you will excuse the pun — estimate of what we might lose.

Paula, in her summing-up, spoke about the hint of hypocrisy. I think that I have dealt with that, because we are not being at all hypocritical. She also talked about scaremongering, and I think that the Minister is probably an expert on that. He seems to be playing Monopoly every night because he comes out with different figures every day, as does the Finance Minister, which is quite worrying.

I want to talk about the Bill. The Bill was passed in 2012 in Britain, so the debate is not academic. There is a plethora of hard evidence of the effects of the changes right across the British state.

It is interesting that Jeffrey Donaldson is the only DUP member who has publicly talked about the shortfall in the Budget before welfare cuts. He said that on television in the early hours of Friday morning when talking about the Scottish referendum and then went on to talk about welfare cuts. I think that the Minister of Finance and Personnel also mentioned that today in answer to a question from Roy Beggs.

The evidence against the cuts is there, right across the board.

Not one of the contributors from the DUP mentioned the people they represent. Not one of you mentioned the people you have engaged with about these cuts. I have attended public meetings across the North, including in east Belfast with Paula Bradley, and the message we got, loud and clear, is that these cuts will be a disaster. They will impact working-class loyalist communities and working-class republican and nationalist communities equally badly. What are you doing about it? You are getting up and scaremongering and telling us what we should and should not be doing. What are you doing?

4.15 pm

Michael Copeland, in fairness, mentioned that approximately 67,000 people are unemployed, with 4,000 jobs on offer. Let us start to try to create jobs. Maybe that will be a solution. Nobody disagrees with the underlying principle of so-called welfare reform that people are better off in work than on benefit.

I am wondering whether Mr Humphrey has engaged recently with his constituents on welfare cuts —

Mr Humphrey: All the time.

Mr Brady: I am sure that you do. I was out on Saturday — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Brady: — dealing with my constituents and asking them about —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to address their remarks through the Chair, please.

Mr Brady: When you look at the effects — for instance, the Minister mentioned the severe disability premium — you see that it is already costing some adults in Britain £58 a week. Obviously, for people on limited incomes, that is huge. There is a myth that all people on benefits are well off, and I want to deal with that now. Could any of you live on £72.40 as a single householder on income-based ESA or jobseeker's allowance? Could you feed and clothe yourself, run a household and pay for electricity and all of that? I very, very much doubt it, because it is simply not possible. Benefits are at subsistence level, and any cuts

will take them below that. It is interesting that the Tories — your friends — have already frozen benefit increases at 1% a year from 2013 to 2016. That is without these cuts being imposed. So, you can play with the figures — I see that the Finance Minister has been kind enough to join us; he was probably upstairs working out more figures —

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

Mr Brady: — on his abacus. Who knows?

'The Guardian' has leaked Government papers — British Government papers — in which they admit that at least 100,000 children are being pushed into poverty by the benefit cap alone.

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

Mr Brady: The benefit cap is predicated on the south-east of England, not on the large families here who will suffer most.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 44; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr

McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr Brady

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. I have been advised by party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), there is agreement to suspend the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 36; Noes 54.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Brady

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Main Question accordingly negatived.

Assembly Business

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am aware that a point of order was raised this morning in regard to my use of what, I think, was described as unparliamentary language, when I called the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by her first name. I inform the House that I have spoken to the Minister. She did not take any offence from it. None was meant, none was made and none was received. I hope that the Speaker does not waste any of his time investigating a matter that I apologise to the House for and have apologised to the Minister for.

It is also surprising that the Member who raised the point of order did not see fit to raise one when a Sinn Féin Member called Mervyn Storey "Mervyn", but I will not make a point of order about that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I responded to it this morning; I did not accept it as a point of order. However, you have put your explanation on the record now, so we will call it a draw.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Waste Tyres: NIEA Disposal in East Antrim

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Wilson: I thank those who organise these things for the opportunity to raise the issue today. When I put down the motion of tyres in east Antrim, some people thought that I was speaking about my spare tyre, but it is not that; it is a much more serious issue. It affects the general policy of the Executive in dealing with waste in a sustainable way. The problems that I want to highlight are encapsulated in a story that I will tell about a constituent, who sought to work with the Department of the Environment, only to find himself bankrupt as a result of the way in which he was treated by the Department.

The disposal of tyres is something that is of great concern to the Executive. Indeed, the Department of the Environment's heritage service has already shown its concern in its publication 'Used Tyres - What's All The Fuss About?'. In that, it indicates the extent of the problem with disposing of hundreds of thousands of tyres in Northern Ireland each year.

The Environment Committee has also highlighted the inadequacies of the current system — I want to come to some of those by using the story of a constituent — and the way in which the Department of the Environment and especially the Northern Ireland Environment Agency deal with the issue. Indeed, it made a number of recommendations in its report to the Department, some of which are very pertinent and illustrate the problems that have been experienced.

It seems that one of the most popular ways in east Antrim of disposing of used tyres is to put them on bonfires. I have no doubt that one of the reasons for that is that the regulatory regime that we have in Northern Ireland is totally inadequate and totally contradictory and is left to the arbitrary decisions, which are sometimes very inadequate, made by officers in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. That is one of the reasons why we have a persistent problem with the disposal of tyres in Northern Ireland.

In November 2009, a young man who was clearly eager to start up a business — he was a keen environmentalist and believed he had an idea that could deal with an environmental problem — came to see me and said, "Look, I've a problem. I want to set up a business that will employ people and will enable me to collect tyres across east Antrim from a number of people and recycle them in a way that is sustainable". He had applied to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency for a waste management licence and was told that he would have to have certain qualifications etc. Those qualifications were well above what would have been required to simply bring in tyres and bale them, which is what he wanted to do.

I took him to see the then head of the Environment Agency, Mr John McMillan. He was given advice by Mr McMillan and was told, "Look, you should apply for a waste exemption licence. There shouldn't be any problem, but it will take some time". He had secured premises and was told by the planners that he would not need planning permission for them. He proceeded with the business, only to be told

later that he would require planning permission, because the Northern Ireland Environment Agency had indicated, when it was consulted, that planning permission was required, even though the planning officers and the Department of the Environment's planning division had said that he did not require it.

He obtained other premises, moved to them and was collecting tyres. He applied for the waste exemption licence and expected it to go through with no problem. Within two days, a decision was made that a waste exemption licence would not be granted for the activity that he wished to engage in. The reason given was that, despite the fact that the Environment Agency's own literature at that stage indicated that one of the ways of disposing of tyres was to shred or bale them, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency had not agreed the regulations that had been agreed in Scotland, England and Wales — PAS 107 and PAS 108 — which treated baled tyres as a manufactured product.

4.45 pm

He spent £806 on the advice of the head of the Environment Agency. It was immediately returned to him because, despite what the literature from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency said, there was no mechanism for giving a waste exemption licence for that activity. It was all the more confusing because, when he looked at the Northern Ireland Environment Agency website for the register of firms that had been given waste exemption licences, he saw that firms from Strabane, Kircubbin and Londonderry had been given waste exemption licences for the shredding and baling of waste tyres and rubber chippings. So, he was turned down, even though the literature stated that that was one way of disposing of tyres and other firms had been granted waste exemption licences.

When I asked the Minister why that was the case, he replied to me in a written answer that in Northern Ireland we had not adopted PAS 107 and PAS 108 because there were concerns about chemical leaching from baled tyres. That was on 30 September 2013. You can understand the confusion of my constituent, who had put a lot of money into the activity, bought equipment, got premises and started gathering tyres, only to find that the literature published by the NIEA was incorrect, the advice given by the head of the NIEA was incorrect and the register that the NIEA had about waste exemption licences was contradictory and contradicted the advice from the Minister.

Furthermore, when you look at another branch of the NIEA that deals with landfill regulations, you see that it was telling people that one of the acceptable uses for tyres — tyres that the Minister told me in a written answer could not be given a waste exemption licence for bundling because there was a danger of chemical leaching — was to line landfill sites. One branch of the NIEA did not seem to know what the other branch was saying. How can anyone deal with such contradictory regulations? On the one hand, some people get a waste exemption licence; on the other hand, others do not. On the one hand, we are told that the regulations have not been signed; on the other hand, we are told you can use the bundles of tyres, which are in danger of chemical leaching, for landfill sites. Furthermore, companies got waste management licences to bundle those tyres, provided they sent those contaminating bundles of tyres to other countries. They could send them to England. They could send them to South Korea — think of the carbon footprint in transferring them across half the world — but you could not get a waste exemption licence for them in Northern Ireland. They could also be used, apparently, for some purposes in Northern Ireland.

As it turned out, because he had already acquired tyres because he thought that there was no problem and the advice that he had been given when I had taken him to see the head of the Environment Agency was that there would not be a problem, the next thing was that enforcement came down on him. He was easy pickings because he was not one of these boys who had a huge fence around the place and guard dogs or who threatened officers or anything like that. He was a mild-mannered and meek individual. So, he was easy pickings. He was visited by an officer from the Environment Agency, Neil Adair, who told him that he wanted him to come for interview under caution. He did not tell him that he could bring a solicitor. He went along in all innocence and was questioned and, probably because he did not take a solicitor, disadvantaged himself. He was taken to court, and he was fined. He was left with the tyres. Of course, because of the fine and because he had not been able to operate a business for nearly two years, he had no means of disposing of the tyres, and the tyres were put into storage until he could find the money to get somebody to take them off his hands.

This is where it takes another twist because, at that stage, the Environment Agency officers visited the site where his tyres were being stored. This meek and mild individual was

summoned to the site to find that the enforcement officer was there with 14 policemen. Do not forget that he had never resisted the attentions of the Environment Agency or anything like that. Aleathea Brown was the officer on site with the 14 police officers and she demanded that he be arrested even though he had written to her indicating that he was prepared to volunteer to come in to be interviewed in the offices. When this was pointed out, she still insisted that he be arrested, and he was taken and held in Antrim police station. He was denied medication for some time, which is an issue for the police. Now, he does not know where he stands.

Here is the irony of this all. He could dispose of these tyres to other firms in Northern Ireland. One of those firms is NK Ferguson Tyres in Londonderry, a company that was in December of 2011 exposed in the 'Sunday Life' as operating without a licence, without planning permission and of dumping illegally in Donegal. Subsequently, of course, the Minister informed me in December 2013 that the company, even though it was under investigation, had been granted a licence to dispose of tyres and to bale tyres. I pointed out to him that it was under investigation. I had a letter from him saying that NIEA had no knowledge that this company was disposing of tyres illegally in Donegal. Unfortunately for the Minister, four months earlier on 6 September, his Department had indicated to my constituent that the Environment Agency was preparing a file to be sent to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for this selfsame firm. So, it seems that, even in his own Department, there is confusing evidence given to the Minister.

The questions that I really want answered are these. Why do we have such confusing regulations? When will the regulations be changed? Why does the Environment Agency, when faced with individuals who are prepared to comply, have to come down with a heavy hand in the way that it has done? Why are firms that are already under investigation and which are not operating within the law given waste exemption and waste management licences even though they are under investigation by the Department? Does the Minister believe that NIEA is fit for purpose, and does he not see why there is a problem with waste disposal in Northern Ireland when we have such contradictory behaviour by his Department?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I have given the Member some leeway.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I suppose that the first question people will be asking is: why is somebody from east Derry sitting at an Adjournment debate on tyre disposal in east Antrim? I agree with Mr Wilson that many of the issues that affect his constituency affect all constituencies, so his point is relevant, although, in fairness, I am here representing my colleague Mr McMullan, who is fulfilling his DARD duties at the National Ploughing Championships in Laois.

It was a constituent of Mr Wilson and Mr McMullan who first drew attention to an enforcement issue that he had with tyre storage on his farm. This year and down through the years, there has been a reduction in the use of tyres, particularly for silage pits, because of round baling and new technologies, but this year has been an exceptional year, with three or four cuts of silage being done, and a lot of the old, redundant silage pits are coming into use again. Some farmers have required an increased number of tyres, maybe because they could not afford the new technology. That constituent has fallen foul of storing extra tyres because of that. He has been cautioned and visited, and he is quite concerned about his business.

I agree with much of what Mr Wilson said about the lack of joined-upness in the NIEA, not just in reference to this issue but to a lot of environmental issues. It is in reference to things like hydroelectric schemes and other issues across the board. I refer to a letter dated 13 September from the Department to Oliver McMullan MLA, which indicates that there are no investigations into unauthorised disposal of tyres that involve persons whose full-time occupation is farming. Part of the reason for that is that there is no differentiation between those involved in farming and those involved in other activities.

Mr Wilson referred to baled tyres and the fact that they can be sent to England to be baled, but I believe that they can come back into this part of the world to be used for other purposes. I have a second case — one in my constituency — of a man who has acquired some of those tyres to protect his land from sea erosion, which I think is common practice across the water. That individual has lost some 12 acres to the sea, and, with that, he has lost the single farm payment on that land, which amounts to quite a substantial sum. Indeed, in the area that he talks about, some 60 acres have been lost. That is quite a loss of land, plus the payments that could be gained thereof.

The bonfire issue is ongoing and really needs to be addressed. I passed a bonfire in Finvoy in north Antrim this year that was absolutely spectacular in its stupidity and its height. In its stupidity, it was built beside a petrol station. In height, it was about 80 feet high and made entirely of tyres. There might have been a wee bit of chemical leaching going on there as well. That issue has been left to local councils in the past. Indeed, when I was in council, I risked life and limb on occasion removing tyres from fires and helping our local council officers to deal with that issue. There are issues further and wider than east Antrim to be discussed for dealing with tyre disposal. We also have, of course, the fly-tipping issue.

Another issue is the charges that are taken from people who change their tyres. I know of a certain lady who paid for four tyres on her car to be changed. As she was leaving the premises, she passed four lads going out with the tyres. She recognised the tyres and knew that they were hers because her name was written across the side of one of them, and she had already paid. I do not think that accurate records are being kept of the moneys that are potentially being accrued annually. All the regulations on reports to the NIEA during a year have to be tightened up.

5.00 pm

I welcome the fact that increased technology has led to improvements in the retreading of tyres so that more tyres are being retreaded. However, tyres and how we deal with them are still a problematic issue here. There is inconsistency between what we do here and what others do elsewhere, so there are hard questions for NIEA, and I hope that the Minister will take some of those on board.

Mr Beggs: This is a very interesting subject. A variety of issues has to be addressed, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss some of them.

The Environment Committee carried out an inquiry into waste tyre management in Northern Ireland. In its interim report, it highlighted that waste tyres, if handled illegally, have the potential to generate financial benefit for those involved. We know that, in the world of waste management generally, particularly in the constituency of the Member who spoke previously, sizeable illegal operations have been uncovered, and individuals have profited from the misuse of waste management, which is detrimental to the environment.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Certainly.

Mr Ó hOisín: I think that the Member is perhaps referring to the finds at Mobuoy, which is in the Minister's constituency of Foyle.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for that correction. I knew that it was up there in the north-west.

The Committee has made a start, but this is clearly an area of ongoing work for it and the Department.

One of the other points that the Committee highlighted was that the current rationale for allowing some businesses to operate under an exemption from a waste management licence in relation to used tyres should be revisited because of the risks associated with it and that the NIEA should conduct compliance checks before issuing licences to carry tyres. I noted in a letter that a constituent of mine received from the previous Minister, Alex Attwood, that the Environment Agency in England has been made aware by the waste tyre sector of widespread abuse of waste exemptions. Further to that, the industry has called for a moratorium on tyre exemptions until the growing problem with waste tyres has been reviewed. This has to be handled carefully so that tyres are not misused and profits are not made by those behaving illegally.

Tyres can be recycled into rubber crumb. They can also be used to generate energy, particularly in the cement industry. With a controlled burn, energy can be extracted safely, without carcinogens being emitted that would endanger the public. Of course, this goes back to the bonfire issue mentioned by Mr Wilson. Clearly, when tyres are burnt on bonfires, huge dangers arise, particularly to those in the immediate vicinity, as a result of emissions from the fire, as well as other fire hazards and dangers to the public. This question strikes me: are some people profiting from putting tyres on bonfires? When you go to get a new tyre, you pay for your old tyre to be recycled. Has someone just dumped that tyre on a bonfire and made money? Clearly, there needs to be greater traceability of what happens to our tyres.

I now turn to the farms issue, which was mentioned by the Member who preceded me. I declare an interest in that my dad grows silage and has a silo that uses tyres, which is in a part of the farmyard that I own and live beside. So, this is real, and it affects me as well. I noticed

that a regulatory position statement issued in September 2014 by the NIEA and the Department of the Environment states:

"You may keep waste tyres on your farm for reuse, e.g. a silage clamp. If you are disposing of tyres you must pass them to a registered waste carrier, obtain complete waste transfer notes and retain these for two years."

My question to the Minister — it would be helpful if he could clarify this because I also heard comments on the radio about a farmer required to get an exemption — is this: why do some farmers require exemptions if they are using tyres on their silos? Surely that regulation entitles farmers to retain tyres and use them. I have to say that the amounts of silage that are made by individual farmers vary. Some years, such as this one, are bumper years, where more tyres are required; other years, not as many are needed. Some years, big bales become more suitable than precision-chopped, so it is not as popular. There can be tyres left over from year to year. I would be interested to know why there is a particular issue on farms, given the regulation that is there. It would be helpful to the farming community and the general public to learn more about this.

There has also been a number of illegal tyre stores throughout Northern Ireland. I remember from my time on the Environment Committee that there were some sizeable ones — some with perhaps one million tyres in them went up in smoke. Frankly, that was good business, as someone no longer had to pay to recycle them. They went up in smoke. Many of those stores exceeded their legal capacity and approval. It is clear that there needs to be greater monitoring by the Department of tyres, retailers, where tyres go and the whole product chain to ensure that they are not stored illegally or misused.

I am aware of some aspects of the case that Mr Wilson referred to, but, coming from the other side, as well as waste management, planning permission has to be got in order to set up a business in the countryside. Although the site in question above Glenoe was granted approval for restricted agricultural use a number of years ago, there was a fresh application. Who thinks that storing 32,000 tyres adjacent to residential property is wise? Who thinks that having a processing unit for baling tyres literally across a lane way from a constituent's bedroom is a good place to have industrial processing of that type? Generally, waste processing is encouraged to locate in industrial centres in units where there will be not be the conflict

between industry and residential property. With tyres, aside from the noise issue, there is a very real concern about the danger of fire and the horrendous smoke that comes from the burning of tyres. That could endanger —

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

Mr Beggs: Of course, there were a number of illegal tyres on this particular site. It was not being handled well. I am pleased that planning permission was not granted for the site in that isolated rural community. Mr Wilson may have been wise to have advised his constituent to seek somewhere with an industrial unit. I understand that he was in the Kilroot area originally, where there is an industrial unit and where such a proposal may well have worked.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to have the debate. We have heard from Mr Wilson and Mr Beggs that there may be two sides to the argument that has given rise to the debate. Mr Wilson is absolutely right to bring the debate to us, whatever the rights and wrongs of a particular constituency issue, because there is a serious issue around the enforcement and disposal aspect of dealing with tyres, whether they are in the countryside or urban areas, and around the whole way in which the Environment Agency is being set up to deal with those matters.

As others have mentioned, the Environment Committee, as we know, has tried to untangle the web of how tyres should be disposed of safely and successfully recycled. Very little action seems to have come from that. That is why I am glad to see the Minister here this evening. I hope that he will set out some clear pathways and clear intent on his part for how the issue of the collection and recycling of tyres will now be tackled by the Environment Agency. If there is need for change to regulations, I hope that he will bring those changes forward.

Members have referred to the disposal charge. I recently paid the disposal charge for the replacement of four tyres on my car. However, we are told — at least, as I understand it, the Environment Committee was told in response to its questions to the NIEA and the Minister — that you did not administer the scheme, you did not know where the money went and, if you were asked to administer the scheme, it would be impossible.

The Minister's Department successfully — at least I hope it is successfully — administers a plastic bag tax scheme. If it can do that, why

on earth can it not administer a disposal charge for tyres, which are infinitely more traceable than plastic bags, into landfill sites? There are not that many tyre dealers across Northern Ireland compared to a number of years ago. The businesses have got larger and there is less backstreet exchange of tyres going on. Therefore, it is not beyond the wit of the NIEA or the Department to come up with an appropriate registration scheme that accurately tracks the life of a tyre.

Mr Ó hOisín: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Department estimates that the amount generated could be upwards of £3.6 million annually?

Mr Dickson: I defer to the Member's greater knowledge in relation to the sum. However, we know the damage that tyres can cause when, as others have made reference to, they catch fire in illegal dump sites. We have not even come to the issue of bonfires and how that disposal causes serious problems, but I will come to that aspect.

I think it is important that the Department comes back to us and tells us how it is going to rectify the issues that Mr Wilson raised about somebody who wanted to set up a business, the appropriate advice they were given in respect of that, and whether they had planning permission. Those are all important issues for that particular constituent. To be told one thing and then be prosecuted for another seems to me to be eminently unfair.

The NIEA further compounds its problems. It does not seem to be able to control the disposal of tyres on a large-scale basis. It does not seem to be able to control, or want to control, or have any idea about, how the charge may be levied and who looks after it. I will ask a direct question to the Minister and I hope that he will deal with it: where does the money go?

It seems that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. I have correspondence between the NIEA and me and between the PSNI and me in respect of tyres on bonfires. Other Members have referred to the height of bonfires. Whether we support bonfires is not the subject of this evening's debate. It is about the content of the bonfire. I do not think that you could find anything more polluting, distressing or concerning to my constituents. I have had letters from people who have to live beside bonfires. These are people in communities that support bonfires and who enjoy the spectacle of the fire, but they are living in fear, for themselves and their children, because of the pall of intense black toxic smoke

that rises from those bonfires. It is vital that the NIEA gets a grip on that. However, no, it would rather send me letters saying how difficult it is and that it is not actually the prime body responsible.

The NIEA passes the buck to the council, the council passes the buck to the police, and it goes back round in circles again. We need a clear, round-table meeting — I recently met the police — between NIEA, environmental health staff and the police to thrash out how we will deal with the problems.

I say to the Minister that perhaps we would not have a problem with tyres on bonfires if we had a proper disposal scheme, proper traceability and proper accountability. Therefore, if a tyre ended up on a bonfire, the NIEA would know where it came from. It should not be that NIEA gets into confrontation with communities about trying to remove them. It should be that it prosecutes the person who got it to the bonfire site in the first place; the person who let it out of their store and made it available for the bonfire.

I am pleased that Mr Wilson secured the debate this evening. He raised an important issue, and I am seriously concerned that the Minister now deals with it in a comprehensive way. I hope that he will answer the Member's questions about the constituent in East Antrim and that those matters can be resolved. Perhaps the siting is not the best, and perhaps good advice can be given. It seems to me to be rather heavy-handed to go down an enforcement route when advice and guidance given properly in the first instance could have obviated the problem. I encourage the Minister to look seriously at the charge and why he is not taking control of that charge. If he does not want control of that charge, surely he must have an interest in who is taking that money and what it is that they are actually doing with it.

Finally, I think that we need to sort out the whole issue of the NIEA's responsibility, local councils' responsibility and the police's responsibility when it comes to tyres that end up on bonfires.

5.15 pm

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Wilson for bringing this very important issue to the House this evening. As Mr Ó hOisín outlined in his opening remarks, this is an issue that is not, unfortunately, exclusive to one constituency. I welcome the motion that has been proposed by the former Minister of the

Environment. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be relieved to hear that I am going to avoid any puns today. I know that the tyre jokes got a bit out of hand on the last day that we had "Mitchel-in" the Chair. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: *[Inaudible.]* tyres.

Mr Durkan: Sorry, Mr McLaughlin. *[Laughter.]* Waste or used tyres and their storage can represent a huge risk to the environment, human health and animal welfare. We have seen at first hand that major fire incidents can occur at sites used for the large-scale storage of waste or used tyres. Everyone should be aware that burning tyres generate toxic fumes and by-products which are extremely dangerous to human and animal health. Tyre fires can be extremely difficult to extinguish and have been known to burn for many weeks. In addition, where waste tyres are stockpiled, leaching of chemicals onto land and into rivers may also occur, posing a big risk to animal and human health.

In particular, tyres pose considerable risk to the environment and must be handled and disposed of properly. The potential risks are numerous and include the use of waste or used tyres on bonfires, as Members have alluded to, generating toxic fumes, which are dangerous to health, produce unsightly burnt residues, damage properties, roads and open spaces and impact on Northern Ireland's economy. The leaching of chemicals from stockpiled tyres can have a devastating impact on farmland. Leaching into local rivers kills fish and potentially puts our drinking water at risk. The use of unsafe part-worn tyres can cause road traffic accidents, which result in serious injury or loss of human life.

My Department continues to progress the key actions in its waste tyre action plan in order to try to deal with the many problems. We do that through partnership. The key outcomes of the plan include: understanding the problem; effective regulation and enforcement; exploring alternative uses; examining policy options; and developing effective guidance for the relevant sectors

Examples of the outputs from the plan include the production of key guidance in the form of a regulatory position statement, 'Used Tyres — The Risks and Your Responsibilities'. The guidance clearly highlights the risks and clarifies the responsibilities for those dealing with and handling part-worn and waste tyres. The guidance has been placed on the Environment Agency website.

Under the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 2003, it is the responsibility of anyone who produces, collects, stores, treats, reuses or deposits waste or used tyres to minimise the risk to the environment, human health and animal welfare. To that end, we are also working in partnership involving four local councils through a pilot study set up by my Department, where NIEA staff and council environmental health officers carry out joint inspections of part-worn and waste tyres at tyre retailer premises to regulate the duty of care — in effect, a control on the disposal route for waste tyres. To date, joint inspections of tyre retailers have taken place in Cookstown, Ballymoney and Antrim District Council areas.

I have also asked my officials to work hard to create the conditions that will support the recycling and reuse of significant amounts of used tyres in a series of products. Just recently, NIEA met with a major tyre recycler in north Antrim to help put in place the conditions that will support the potential recycling of up to 5,000 tons of used tyres. I will come on now to the use to which Mr Wilson referred. Those tyres will be recycled into shredded tyre crumb, which can then be used at the bottom of landfill sites as filter material.

I am very aware that farmers may keep —

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Wilson: I am at a loss to understand how, if his concern is that stored tyres can contaminate the land as they deteriorate, the same tyres, for which he will not give a waste exemption licence in the case that I mentioned, can be used to line a landfill site to stop leachate. Surely if the contamination comes from the tyres, they will contaminate the water sources around the landfill site.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I can understand his confusion, which I share, but it is something I will address before I conclude my speech.

I am very aware that farmers may keep waste tyres on the farm to reuse in agricultural activity. An example of this, as Mr Beggs mentioned, would be for use in silage clamps. However, it is important that the quantity of tyres should not exceed the number required for the silage clamps. If a farmer wishes to bring waste tyres onto the farm, the farmer must hold an appropriate waste authorisation. The transport must be undertaken by a registered waste

carrier, complete waste transfer notes must be produced and these must be retained by the farmer. A waste exemption is also required from NIEA that costs £825 and lasts for three years.

Guidance on the use of tyres on farms has been produced and incorporated into the single farm payment form. I am aware that DARD has no statutory role in this legislation but seeks information from farmers via the single application form regarding the number of tyres present on the farm business. This information is then passed to NIEA.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: I would find it very useful if the Minister could clarify what happens in situations where, perhaps, tyres were gathered up 20 years ago, prior to all this legislation, because that is the case on most farms. What is required and how does he justify an additional cost to farmers, if that is what he is talking about? Why is there a need for change if there is no difficulty at present?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. Just because something has been there for a long time does not mean that it should have been there all that time or that it should have been allowed to accumulate over that time and, indeed, into the future. As I said, there are guidelines on how many tyres are required on a farm for the conducting of a farm business. Flexibility exists in those guidelines for the very fluctuations that Mr Beggs outlined in his speech.

I am keen that we approach the issue of regulating waste or used tyres on an all-island basis, as it makes common sense that we cooperate with our neighbours in dealing with the issue. Indeed, Mr Wilson referred to an operator who was convicted of the illegal disposal of tyres in Donegal. Discussions have commenced regarding proposals for a new used tyre scheme in Ireland and the potential for a complementary scheme here in the North. I can advise Members that the main producer responsibility initiative review in the Republic is at an advanced stage, and it is expected that the final report will be published before the end of this year. The report dealing with waste tyres was published in November 2013 and was subject to a period of consultation until the end of January this year to allow for the fullest consideration of the report. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local

Government has been meeting stakeholders to discuss the report, and it is expected that the report will be finalised in the near future. A tyres working group has been established to assist the Department in the drafting of new regulations to underpin the structures recommended in the draft report. The group has met several times and includes a representative from DOE.

I want to be clear that waste tyres not only pose serious risks to health but present considerable risks to the environment. Mr Wilson and others have highlighted considerable flaws, as they see it, in the current system. Let me assure all who have remained in the House until this time of my desire and, indeed, the agency's determination to ensure that we have a system that is easy to understand and easy to comply with. I have commenced a restructuring of the NIEA with the aim of eradicating situations where, as Mr Wilson described it, one branch of the agency does not know what the other is doing or saying and to make the agency more customer-focused, with a single point of contact. He asked if I think the NIEA is fit for purpose: I have asked for a root-and-branch review of the agency. That is under way. It is a structure that I inherited and my predecessor inherited, and it is one that we hope to improve to get the best out of the agency for the environment and for the people of the North.

Mr Wilson recounted his constituent's tale of woe, which, at least, was a bit more accurate than Mr McMullan's musings over the airwaves have been. The full facts of that matter will emerge in due course.

Mr Ó hOisín went on to the issue of bonfires, as did others. I am determined that the agency will work more closely and harder with councils on that issue. Councils have the lead on that, but I am determined that the NIEA will play a full role in addressing the scourge of bonfires as well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That was a very interesting and important topic. Thank you very much for bringing it to the Chamber this afternoon and for the contributions and responses.

Adjourned at 5.26 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.

Environment

PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT 15 — PLANNING & FLOOD RISK

Published at 12.30 pm on Tuesday 23 September 2014

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I am pleased to inform Assembly members that the Executive, at its meeting on 9 September 2014, agreed to the publication of Revised Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15, titled 'Planning and Flood risk', which I am now issuing in final form.

Revised PPS 15 sets out the Department's planning policies to minimise flood risk to people, property and the environment. Its primary aim is "to prevent future development that may be at risk from flooding or that may increase the risk of flooding elsewhere".

In June 2006, when PPS 15 was first issued, a commitment was given to review this important policy document within 5 years of its publication. The purpose of this commitment was to make sure planning policy on flood risk remains relevant and up to date taking into account evolving information on climate change as well as new evidence and experience of implementing flood risk policy.

Since 2006, there have been a number of important changes in the policy context that have underpinned this review of existing planning policy on flood risk. The European Directive on the Assessment and Management of Flood risks (the Floods Directive) came into force in November 2007 and was transposed into local legislation in 2009. This has led to significant improvements in regard to the quantity and quality of flood risk information now available through the ongoing implementation of the EU Floods Directive in Northern Ireland by DARD, as the competent authority.

Other significant developments include ongoing inter-departmental work aimed at promoting the use of sustainable drainage systems within Northern Ireland. Furthermore, a Reservoirs Bill is due to be enacted next year that will set out provisions for the management of this new source of flood risk highlighted by the Floods Directive.

The Review of this PPS is, therefore, well-timed and I am pleased to be issuing it today in final form.

The revised document contains 5 operational policies. Four of these policies, FLD 1 to FLD4 are carried forward from the existing PPS 15. While the overall thrust of the policies remains the same, some amendments have been made to provide greater clarity or to take account of current best practice. There is one new policy, FLD 5, which sets out planning policy for development in proximity to reservoirs. The revised PPS continues the core PPS 15 policy in setting out a presumption against development in flood plains. The revised PPS also enhances public awareness of flood risk and encourages preparedness through referring to the flood risk information now available and providing new and updated guidance. This includes a review of the guidance on sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and new guidance on flood proofing of buildings.

In terms of the more detailed changes to the existing policies some will introduce additional constraint to development in flood risk areas and others will introduce additional flexibility where this is proportionate and the flood risks can be adequately mitigated and managed.

The key changes to the existing policies that will introduce additional constraints to development in flood risk areas, include:

- Within defended areas of the flood plain (ie those areas protected by adequate flood defences), the allowance for development of previously developed land is now expressly curtailed in regard to specific types of development because of the residual flood risk. Thus, there is now a stronger presumption against development which involves essential infrastructure, storage of hazardous substances, bespoke accommodation for vulnerable groups (eg residential / nursing homes) and for any development located close to the flood defences;
- Within undefended areas of the flood plain, the existing 'exception' allowing for the use of land for sport and outdoor recreation or amenity space is now amended so as to exclude playgrounds for children, thereby improving safety for this vulnerable group;
- Within undefended areas of the flood plain, the existing 'exception' allowing for the use of land for seasonal occupation by touring caravans and / or camp sites is now removed as an 'exception'. This takes account of changing weather patterns and the vulnerable nature of this form of development.
- Increased protection of flood defence and drainage infrastructure (including watercourses) against development likely to impede operational effectiveness;
- Strengthening of the presumption against the artificial modification of watercourses, for example through culverting.

In addition, a new policy is now introduced that will carefully manage new or replacement development in proximity to reservoirs. This will apply to the potential flood inundation areas of reservoirs above a threshold size of 10000 cubic metres. The policy will require the developer to provide assurance about reservoir safety before planning permission will be granted. In addition, the policy will preclude certain types of development considered inappropriate in these areas (eg bespoke accommodation for vulnerable groups and essential infrastructure) and also any development in which there is a risk of exposure to deep or fast flowing flood water (eg in areas close to the reservoir impoundment).

Changes that will introduce additional flexibility for development in flood risk areas include:

- In addition to the existing provision for consideration of development proposals in the flood plain which are of overriding regional importance, the revised PPS also makes provision for proposals of overriding sub-regional economic importance to be considered, subject to satisfactory Flood Risk Assessment;
- Some changes in regard to the prescribed 'Exceptions' to the policy allow additional flexibility for development in flood plains, subject to meeting the policy criteria and satisfactory Flood Risk Assessment. These are:
 1. A new 'exception' allowing for new development in settlements in the undefended coastal flood plain (eg in areas such as Titanic Quarter in Belfast), provided that the building(s) is elevated to an appropriate level above the flood plain and subject to a number of other policy caveats to ensure safe and sustainable forms of development;
 2. An amendment to the existing 'exception' for development within the undefended flood plain where such a location is essential for operational reasons; to allow expressly for agricultural development, where the farm unit is located wholly or largely within the flood plain and alternative suitable sites elsewhere are not available.
- A clearer presumption in favour of development in areas outside flood plains that may be susceptible to surface water flooding. The new policy permits development subject to a satisfactory Drainage Assessment (where this is required), and otherwise, where there is no evidence of a history of surface water flooding;

While flooding is a natural phenomenon that cannot be entirely eliminated, we in government need to do all we can to address this recurring problem which can have devastating impacts on the individuals and communities affected. I believe it is important to ensure that the planning system continues to manage new development so as to further reduce the risk of flooding to people and property.

I am delighted that there is much joined-up work in tackling flooding currently being progressed. Revised PPS 15 is one important example of this. I would like to record my thanks to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whose officials from DARD Rivers Agency have made an invaluable contribution to the review of the existing policy and in helping to bring forward this revised policy document.

My Executive colleagues have welcomed Revised PPS 15. I now commend it to you.

Copies of this written statement have been placed in Assembly Member's pigeon holes. A copy of Revised PPS15 is available to view or download from the Departmental website www.planningni.gov.uk/pps15revised



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