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Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 November 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Ross: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Monday, during the Second Stage of the Human Transplantation Bill, the Member for Upper Bann Mrs Dobson claimed that Ulster Rugby:

*"has been assisting and helping to promote the move to a soft opt-out system." —
[Official Report, Vol 109, No 5, p79, col 1].*

I questioned the accuracy of that statement and asked Mrs Dobson to reflect on it, but she robustly refused to do so. It is my understanding that the chief executive of Ulster Rugby has now written to you, Mr Speaker, to advise that Ulster Rugby does not support her campaign to move to a soft opt-out system and to ask that the record be corrected accordingly. Mr Speaker, how can that best be achieved?

Mr Speaker: The Member has put the matter on the record, and I am entirely satisfied that it has been dealt with appropriately by the Minister. I have indeed received the letter and placed it in the Library. I understand that Mrs Dobson has written or intends to write to every Member to set the record straight. I am therefore satisfied that no further action is required by me.

Ministerial Statement

Culture and Arts Strategy Consultation

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure wishes to make a statement.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Le do chead, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh os comhair an Tionóil faoi lainseáil comhairliúcháin ar dhul chun cinn na straitéise ealaíon agus cultúir.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to the Assembly announcing the launch of a consultation to develop a culture and arts strategy. I have chosen to make the statement to launch the consultation because I believe passionately in our arts and culture. I believe that arts and culture deserve to be enjoyed, supported and funded and to be accessible, equally, by all. That is an important and fundamental right, and I believe that its importance warrants a public statement. I hope that the consultation will lead to a new and forward-looking strategy for arts and culture in the North of Ireland from 2016 to 2026.

In January of this year, I established the Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum (MAAF), under the chairmanship of Mr Bob Collins. The forum included representatives from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Grand Opera House; the MAC, Lyric and Playhouse theatres; Beat Carnival; Community Arts Partnership; Belfast Film Festival, Féile an Phobail; the Arts and Disability Forum; Young at Art; the Arts Council; New Lodge Arts; Audiences NI; the Crescent Arts Centre; and ArtsEkta.

Following a number of meetings, the forum developed a set of proposed aims and themes for a culture and arts strategy. This consultation document develops the input from the ministerial arts advisory forum. I welcome its involvement and contribution to this

important process thus far. I want to put on record my appreciation to the members of the ministerial arts advisory forum.

Arts enrich the lives of individuals, communities and wider society. Culture is all around us and belongs to everyone, and arts are an intrinsic part of our culture. In my time as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have made it a priority that the work across my Department is embedded in the principles of promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion. In my view, arts and culture provide an excellent platform to promote those principles and, more importantly, to see how they can translate into making real difference on the ground in hard-to-reach areas and areas of isolation.

Arts and culture can and should be open and accessible to everyone. They should not be viewed as rightful entertainment for some and beyond the reach of others, whether financially or simply by perception or understanding of what arts and culture means. They should be available to all. I want people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to have the opportunity to participate in and enjoy the arts and cultural experiences of their choice. I acknowledge that there is a balance to be struck between access and quality and a need to ensure that, by widening access and participation in arts and culture, quality is protected. The principle of equality should be fundamental and underscore all those ideals. Very importantly, making arts and culture available to everyone should not be interpreted as a path to diluting the arts. Arts and culture matter to people. Everyone does not make the same cultural or artistic choices.

Access and participation in arts and culture can transcend the internationally renowned performances in our theatres to the weekly rehearsal for a play to be performed at a local community centre. Who knows where or what background our next international star will come from?

In sports, men and women may not make the Olympic teams, but that does not diminish their enjoyment or commitment to their chosen sport. Many thousands who do not participate in sport still achieve great enjoyment and pleasure from participating in events as a spectator. Not all children who play football on a Saturday morning may reach international level, but there is still great enjoyment to be had. Our arts and culture should be accepted and valued in the same manner across all sections of the community.

Carnivals, pantomime, traditional and popular music and pipe band competitions all engage highly successfully with a range of people. The impact of arts on children, people who are ill and those with dementia demonstrate the very personal power of the arts. Those and many more examples resonate with people and within the community.

I am pleased today to reiterate my support for and appreciation of the value of the arts. Today's launch of a consultation on a 10-year strategy, which I believe should be similar to the highly successful Sport Matters strategy, is a sign of my firm commitment to arts and culture. I believe that it is essential that there is a clear, overarching strategy for arts and culture that transcends and cuts across all of government; a strategy that recognises the true benefits of access and participation in arts and culture and makes equality central to its aims; a strategy that is underpinned by appropriate government recognition and support.

I believe that arts and culture should be given a higher priority when it comes to Budget allocations. In my time as a Minister, I successfully argued for in-year funding to support arts and culture and for interventions for marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Arts and culture are an obvious way to build on the principles embedded in Delivering Social Change and Together: Building a United Community. Through strong leadership, innovation and government support, they can help to move us from a community emerging from conflict to a shared community and a more cohesive and peaceful society. Culture and arts are also vital contributors to the economy and to social and economic regeneration. I want to make sure that our arts and culture sector is fit for purpose, promotes and supports equality and social inclusion and meets the needs of a modern, digital society.

Our rural areas are also equally important. Equality of access and participation also means regional and geographical access.

It is not enough that quality arts are centred in towns and cities; it is vital that the outreach extend across the whole of the North.

We already know that arts and culture provide a platform as an economic driver, create job opportunities, support tourism and promote the North of Ireland on the international stage, as well as bring communities together. We have many examples such as Culture Night, Belfast Mela, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, the Walled City Tattoo, City of Culture, the Beckett Festival, and Pride. I could recite many more.

I want arts and culture to be a serious and important career choice for our children, one that is fully recognised through our education, training and employment systems. The creativity and specialism in the creative industries has long supported the wider economy. Those industries are well recognised as key drivers of sustainable economic regeneration and job creation. Ultimately, I want to deliver a strategy that underpins all those benefits and supports us all in moving towards a civically engaged, internationalised, vibrant, progressive and cohesive society. I want to deliver a strategy that provides equality for all. I also want to deliver a strategy that is sustainable and which develops our heritage and our cultural and artistic resources and ensures a lasting legacy for future generations. Therefore, I encourage a wide range of responses to the consultation. Make your views known, particularly if you have something to add to the proposals.

There has been much focus in recent weeks on the arts and culture sector, particularly in light of decisions that I had to take to reprioritise my Department's budget. In that regard, it is worth stating to the House that my Department's opening budget position for 2015-16 was about £10 million — approximately 10% — less than in 2014-15. From that starting position, funding to the arts was undoubtedly going to be impacted. I am pleased to say that, as a result of funding reallocations as part of the November monitoring round, I successfully secured reinstatement of funding for the arts and sports. I was delighted to announce last Thursday that £620,000 has been reinstated to the Arts Council's budget. That funding can now be passed on to the 32 arts organisations that had been impacted by the earlier cuts.

I have listened to many representations made to me over recent days and weeks. I witnessed the passionate protests made in the grounds of the Assembly recently and pledged to do my utmost to secure additional funding so that some or all of the money taken from arts organisations could be reinstated. I made a strong case for its reinstatement, and I am pleased that Minister Foster took account of that in the reallocation of moneys. I thank her again for listening to my arguments.

As I have consistently said, cuts to the block grant by the Tory Government are causing huge difficulties for the Executive and are having a detrimental impact on front-line services. The culture, arts and leisure sector is a highly valuable sector and one that brings a multitude of benefits to those who actively engage and participate in it. I believe that it

deserves to be financed publicly to the requisite standard. That is not to say that culture and arts can be given an endless pot of money. However, I firmly believe that there has, for a long time, been a misunderstanding of the valuable services delivered by our arts and culture organisations, particularly how they can promote equality and tackle poverty and social exclusion. I want arts and culture to be recognised as an equal partner when Ministers discuss the allocation of budgets; I want arts and culture to be recognised for the tremendous benefits that they bring to our community, our economy and, more important, to the lives of the people who participate in them.

I look forward to the consultation in the time ahead and to receiving responses. This is a public conversation on how we, as a society, want to support arts and culture. I know that arts and culture are dear to many people here; the recent attention focused on funding to the arts proves that. I ask that all stakeholders, including politicians in the Chamber, are energised to help me to make a resounding case for appropriate and sustainable funding for arts and culture as we move forward. Access to arts and culture is a right for everyone; it is not merely a privilege. We can all agree on that. Arts and culture deliver a range of benefits to people who participate and engage in them, not least in terms of mental health and well-being. Let us make sure that their many benefits are maximised for everyone.

When finalised, the strategy will be the first overarching, cross-departmental strategy for arts and culture in the North of Ireland.

Tá mé tiomanta don cheart bhunúsach gur chóir go mbeadh deiseanna ag gach duine sult a bhaint as na healaíona agus as an chultúr. I am committed to the fundamental right that the opportunities to enjoy the arts and culture should be available to everyone. I hope that that aspiration can be fulfilled by delivering a successful, engaging consultation to inform future direction. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

12.15 pm

Mr McCausland (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I suppose I welcome the publication of the document insofar as we have been waiting for it for some time.

Two themes strike me on reading it, and it is only an initial reading. There is a strong focus, as it says on the cover, on:

"Improving society and outcomes by promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion."

The other aspect of the development of the arts, which arts organisations feel strongly about, is the inherent value of the arts themselves in addition to the benefits that they bring generally to society.

It strikes me in looking at the document and comparing it with the original project initiation document from September 2014 that we are well behind in timescale. The document of 16 September 2014 said that the document would be going out to consultation in April 2015, and we are now at the end of November. It said that it would go out for 20 weeks' consultation, and I see that that has now been reduced to 12 weeks, because 20 weeks would have taken us through to the election. Even with the reduction in the consultation time to 12 weeks, if that ends in the middle of February, it will take more than four weeks for a consultation process to be properly considered by the Minister. That would take us through to around St Patrick's Day, which would mean that you are almost getting to that point with purdah and so on where any action or decisions around this are almost impossible, and that is disappointing.

In that context, when did the Minister or her Department receive the document from the two groups involved in the process — the ministerial advisory group and the cross-departmental group — and why has it been so late in coming forward? How does she propose to deal with the fact that a proper examination of the consultation responses will take us through almost to the election?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member, the Chair of the Committee, for his statements and, eventually, his questions.

I received the final draft consultation in early summer. Given the work that we needed to do on the consultation, and then given the period that we were in with the Stormont House Agreement talks, in my opinion today was the best opportunity for me to publish the consultation. A 20-week consultation would not have allowed me to provide any comments or even to try to prepare a way forward, particularly for the new Department for Communities. That is why it was reduced to 12 weeks.

I am pleased that the Member agrees that there is a need for an arts and cultural strategy. I know that through his work and other work,

particularly around Ulster-Scots culture and heritage, he will use his influence to talk to that community and communities to ensure feedback to the consultation.

Many artists in the culture and arts sector are probably some of the worst paid. We need to ensure that they are not impoverished as a result of a new strategy. As well as that, we need to ensure that opportunities, particularly in cities and towns, but more importantly in rural communities, are availed of.

It is an opportunity for all the elements included in the statement — it was a lengthy statement — to try to ensure that we have full and robust feedback into the consultation. I believe that I have enough time to ensure that whoever comes behind me finds the new Department in a better place than I found the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure when I came in.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that I will be unable to extend the same leeway as I extended to the Committee Chair. Please come directly to your question.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin. Given the importance of traditional music and the fact that Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann brought some £43 million into Derry and the north-west area, is there an opportunity in the arts and culture strategy for a greater reflection of traditional music?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is yes. The Arts Council recently had a review of the traditional music sector. I know that the Member is aware of it through his work with Comhaltas. As recently as last week, I was talking to a group of young people who wanted to know what support they could avail themselves of and what opportunities there were for support in the future for kids who are trying to use music — pop or rap — as a way of working through crime prevention initiatives on interfaces. I advised them about the consultation and encouraged them, as I encourage the Member and everyone else, to use the opportunity to make their views known. We need to ensure that this is as inclusive as possible of age, gender, political background and where people live.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. A few weeks back, at the start of November, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee met and engaged with a number of

arts groups that were established as part of the Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum, some of which you mentioned. After discussion on how we could go forward with the strategy, they indicated to me that the forum had not actually met. That was only a few weeks ago. Will the Minister outline to the House how many times the forum has met, when it first met and what communication those groups offered as part of the strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I established the ministerial arts advisory forum in January this year. I do not have the details at hand, but I will get a breakdown of when and how often the forum met for the Member. As recently as last month, I was speaking to the Arts Council, which raised the expectation of the strategy coming forward. I told the council that it would happen before the end of November. I was not asked for a meeting of the forum before that, but I am certainly happy to give the Member those details and to bring them forward. Other members who did not appear before the Committee have not indicated to me that there is a problem with meetings or their frequency. I will certainly provide the Member with those details.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for her statement; it is helpful. She mentioned the "balance ... between access and quality" a couple of times. Will she explain exactly what she means by balancing the two and how, in that sense, quality is protected?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have heard an argument voiced by some, albeit a minority, who feel that a particular focus on access and the participation of hard-to-reach communities would somehow dilute or dumb down the quality of the arts because of the funding or support available. A small group of people hold that view, but it is not the case at all. I assure people that we need to concentrate on where the specialities lie. Some people, for example, work particularly well with people in a hospital or healthcare setting. In the same vein and manner that the Sport Matters strategy involves other Departments and bodies, the arts and culture strategy will, hopefully, do the same. That should mean that other Departments and bodies have a role to play in distribution to the arts and culture sector.

We need to ensure that quality is not dumbed down. I do not accept that argument, and I never have. If anything, we will ensure greater outcome and output for the people involved and, hopefully, better sustainability for all in the future.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the consultation. As the Minister is aware, Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of public funding for the arts in the whole of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. What safeguards will there be in the new strategy to ensure that the arts and culture sector is adequately resourced, not just to survive but to grow and thrive?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding in other jurisdictions — particularly in the South, but also in Wales, Scotland and England — is proportionate. That figure does not take into consideration the money given to the arts and culture sector by other bodies and Departments, and I think that it needs to do so. Notwithstanding that, do we need to ensure that there is more money? Absolutely. Do we need to ensure that there is better sustainability? We absolutely do. I believe that other Departments have a role to play in the delivery and sustainability of arts and culture across this island, particularly in the North. There is so much that we can do collectively to get a better outcome for us as a community. This consultation provides us with an opportunity to do just that.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Can the Minister assure us that the strategy includes an equality impact assessment to ensure equality of funding for festivals and events, particularly in unionist areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will ensure that an equality impact assessment is done on all aspects of feedback from the consultation. Ensuring that there is particular funding for unionist areas is the complete opposite of an equality impact assessment. However, if the outcome is found —

Mr Humphrey: You would know all about equality.

Ms Ní Chuilín: However, if the outcome shows that there is a disparity in funding, it will be flagged up in the equality impact assessment. The good thing about equality impact assessments is that they are based on evidence and fact, not on rants from Back-Benchers.

Mr Speaker: When Members ask a question, they should have the manners to listen to the answer. If I hear another remark such as the one that you have just made, Mr Humphrey, I will respond immediately. It was completely out of order, and I think that you are well enough aware that that is the case.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement to announce this consultation. Minister, will you ensure that the strategy is well embedded in the 11 new super-councils?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is yes. The 11 new super-councils played a very proactive role, as did the old councils, in the roll-out of the Sport Matters strategy through the implementation group. I anticipate that the same energy and focus will be brought to our 10-year arts and culture strategy. I know personally that the role Belfast City Council plays locally in the arts and culture sector is valued. I believe that each council has a lot to offer to the sector.

Mr G Robinson: Why were no organisations based in rural areas included on the ministerial advisory forum?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Some of the organisations work right across the North. I know of some of the work that the groups have done, and done very well. They do it to the best of their ability. I want to ensure that there is a focus on rural communities, as the feedback over the last few years has been that there is not enough happening there. They would like to see more, and I think that that is a valid concern to raise. That is no criticism of the groups involved in this forum. The work that they have done, particularly in rural communities, has been valued. It is important that rural communities are as visible as any others in the feedback.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for her statement. An dtig leis an Aire cur síos ar an tacaíocht atá tugtha aici do na healaíona ó tháinig sí i gceannas ar a Roinn? Will she outline the support that she has given to the arts since coming into the Department?

12.30 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Support for the Arts Council is in the region of £75 million. That has also helped towards programmes in places such as the MAC, the Lyric and others. That has been distributed to many arts groups, including some of the bigger of the 32 annually funded groups, for years.

When looking at events, such as the City of Culture, you can see the benefits that we have delivered, particularly in the north-west. That is an example of how funding separate from that provided by the Arts Council can be brought in.

That success shows that there is a need for additionality and for a joined-up approach. The arts and culture sector would value additional support over and above what it already receives.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister. I am sure that arts groups will welcome the consultation and will respond. The Minister might be aware of a new all-party group here to support the arts and creativity. I hope that she will accept our invitation to come along during the period of consultation so that arts groups who are represented can give feedback directly. Will the Minister explain how she will ensure that the arts will have a clear role, position and space in the next Programme for Government in the absence of a dedicated Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I accept the invitation to come to the all-party group. I am using this opportunity to get out and about as much as possible and to talk to people right up until the 18 December or 19 December. I have, from today onwards, arranged to meet a lot of groups on their invitation, and I am happy to meet the all-party group on the arts.

I believe that all the functions of the Arts Council will transfer into the new Department of Communities. It will be the same arm's-length body (ALB), but with a differently named Department. That should ensure that not only are people familiar with the same contacts but there is a security in that arrangement. This is an additional layer that has, in my opinion, been needed for many years. It will ensure that arts and culture are valued not only in the new Department of Communities but right across the Executive. I believe that other Departments have a very strong role to play in the rolling out of this new strategy.

Again, I welcome your invitation and those of many others, and if I can, I will take them up.

Mr Humphrey: I welcome the consultation announced by the Minister this afternoon. The statement refers to the principle of equality and states that it should be fundamental. In the interests of equality, inclusivity and social inclusion, why does the arts advisory forum, which the Minister established, not include representatives from the Ulster-Scots community, the Orange community and the marching bands fraternity?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is simply because we asked the arts sector for representatives who were representative. These people provide services to all members of the community and to all

communities, not just the Orange Order or marching bands or anyone else, for that matter.

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

It is good to see that the Member has an interest in this strategy. I encourage him, through his membership of those organisations, to ensure that not only do they feed into the consultation but those needs that might be fed in for the future are reflective rather than just those of a certain political party.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought a public statement to the Assembly on this important issue. I agree wholeheartedly with her that we have world-class artists in Northern Ireland who are enriching the lives of individuals, our community and our economy, and I welcome her support for East Belfast Arts Festival in particular.

I agree with her statement that the strategy must be underpinned by appropriate government support, but my understanding is that funding is as little as 11p or 13p per head of the population in Northern Ireland. What is the target level of funding that she hopes to secure for our arts community's future?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am taking a needs-based approach rather than a funding-led approach at the beginning. I think that that is important. Some people believe that the arts are getting enough; I am not one of them, to be frank. Some people feel that there are other public services that need to be given greater attention and support.

I support that, insofar as our public purse is obviously going to be stretched, given the context that we are operating in, particularly around Tory austerity.

I believe that, once the feedback from the consultation comes through and the needs are identified, the whole exercise of costing those needs for the future will be done. It is regrettable that Members should start off by saying — I am not suggesting that you are, but I have already heard some of this — "Let's raise it to 15p per person". In my opinion, that is the wrong way to go. That makes it easy for people who do not want to give support to walk away from giving support.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaimse buíochas fosta leis an Aire. Bhí an ráiteas iontach cuimsitheach, agus caithfidh mé a rá go

bhfuil mé ag teacht léi in achan rud atá ráite aici ann. Ceann de na deacrachtaí a bhíonn ag grúpaí ealaíne ná maoiniú gearrthréimhseach, agus ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an gcuideoidh an comhairliúchán seo le heagraíochtaí ealaíne samhail maoinithe inmharthana a chur chun tosaigh? I must say that I find myself in agreement with the majority of the Minister's statement, but one of the difficulties that arts organisations often bring up is the short-term nature of the funding awarded to them. How will the consultation and, indeed, the strategy help ensure that arts groups have a sustainable form of funding rather than short-term funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas agus aontaim leis sin go hiomlán. Thank you very much for that. I completely agree with you. One of the things that has been consistently and constantly raised is the short-term approach to funding and security, particularly when groups are trying to plan for big events one or two, or more, years ahead. The opportunity for that to be fed into a consultation is huge, because it will inform the needs across the sector for at least 10 years. I appreciate that needs and themes change, but, if anything, the consultation has the opportunity and possibility of providing better sustainability for the sector, not just from the Arts Council but across Departments and bodies. I believe that the short-term approach and the lack of sustainable funding are things that the arts sector collectively wants to change.

Mr Allister: The statement contains many fine words, such as:

"Culture is all around us and belongs to everyone".

Does the Minister nonetheless perceive any credibility problem, given her reputation as a serial protester in her constituency at manifestations of Orange culture, or are we going to see a fresh start, with her desisting from such activity?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will know from his legal training, a person's right to protest is a fundamental right. I support my right to protest, and anyone else's right to protest, all day long. Unlike the Member and colleagues of his, I support residents in their call for dialogue to change the way forward for contentious parades. I will do that with them and for them all the time, because I think that it is the way to go.

I do not believe that there is anything cultural about playing the 'Famine Song' outside St Patrick's Church. I do not believe that there is anything cultural about people marching around in the actions of a band playing the 'Famine Song' outside St Patrick's Church. I do not think that there is anything cultural about spitting in the face of protesters outside St Patrick's Church. In fact, people from Cardiff, London and Edinburgh are scratching their head at what part of Britishness that represents, because it does not represent them.

If the Member wishes to ask me a question about the strategy, I will be as helpful to him as I have been on previous occasions on which he has asked questions, but, on this, I really wish that he would wise up.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her very detailed announcement to the Assembly. It is very important that we take note of what you said, particularly that making arts and culture available to everyone should not be interpreted as a path to diluting the arts. Arts and culture matter to people. In implementing a strategy of this sort, how will the Minister ensure that all sectors of the arts receive a fair and balanced distribution of funding? It is a matter of great concern to some that elements of the arts are favoured over others.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that he is speaking to the same arts and cultural groups in our constituency that I have spoken to. They have felt that a lot of the bigger funding awards have gone to the same groups for decades. They are happy that that happens but they are also concerned that smaller groups that do very important work are sometimes overshadowed and overlooked. I want to ensure that, in the feedback to this consultation, there is a plan for the way forward to try to accommodate all the different aspects of culture and arts. That includes some of the bigger theatre companies right through to, for example, groups that do therapeutic work with children at risk.

I believe that there is a place for us all and I welcome the opportunity, when the Member and other Members talk to constituents or groups, for them to use this consultation as a way of having the views of such groups heard. The worst thing would be that people miss this opportunity and do not see some aspect of their work in any future strategy.

Mr B McCrea: I welcome the statement and congratulate the Minister for the way in which she delivered it. I am particularly pleased by

her recognition of the arts voice that has come to the fore. I realise that the Minister is busy but did she, by any chance, catch, on BBC 2 last night, 'Ireland with Simon Reeve', which covered, in Derry/Londonderry, the Playhouse and various other issues such as art in the Bogside. Does she think that there is any connection there, in explaining to Members present, how important the arts are to Delivering Social Change, Together: Building a United Community, and how we might encourage everybody to help the arts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his comments and question. I did not see the programme on BBC 2 but will certainly look for it on the iPlayer. I know the work that is done in that and similar communities, particularly where it is still difficult to try to get peace and reconciliation or even dialogue when communities are under pressure. One of the ways in which they have done it very successfully has been through the arts.

A few Sundays ago, I saw a play at Queen's Film Theatre about the First World War and Easter Rising, where children from both communities came together. It was an amazing piece of theatre, but the message, for me, was even more amazing.

I also agree, if I have not picked you up wrongly, that the arts sector's voice seems to be heard above the heads of some people in the Chamber. Our communities out there are taking more risks than people in here. It is easy to sit on the Back Benches and mouth off, but it is much harder to go out and do the job; the work done by people who are actually embedding and investing in their communities, sometimes with very little or no support.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Executive Committee Business

Health and Personal Services (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to introduce the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 68/11-16], which is a Bill to make provision about the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and other provision about social care workers.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

12.45 pm

Pension Schemes Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development, Mr Mervyn Storey, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Pensions Schemes Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Pension Schemes Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2016, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill [NIA 56/11-16].

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment agreed the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill until 29 January at a time when the Committee was waiting for information from the Department that was needed to complete the Committee Stage of the Bill. I am pleased to inform the House that that information was received and considered by the Committee much earlier than expected. That has enabled the Committee to proceed much faster than originally envisaged. The Committee will consider the report on the Bill at tomorrow's meeting, and that should complete the Committee Stage of the Bill without the need to avail of the extension. The extension is being sought only to cover any unforeseen eventuality at tomorrow's Committee meeting in relation to the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2016, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill [NIA 56/11-16].

European Social Fund

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

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the important role of the European social fund in delivering essential support and services to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; recognises the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sectors in the administration of the current and previous programmes; and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to learn from its mistakes and to ensure that it works in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver, efficiently and effectively, the European social fund programme.

I am sure that every Member is well aware of the excellent work carried out by the community and voluntary sector in their constituencies with the assistance of the European social fund (ESF). The fund is provided by the European Commission with the overall strategic aim of helping to reduce economic inactivity and increase workforce skills. Its aim to contribute to social protection and social inclusion by supporting actions to extend employment opportunities to people at a disadvantage in the labour market and to those who are furthest away from the labour market is a worthy aspiration and is greatly needed in Northern Ireland at this minute.

I am sure that all Members have been contacted by the voluntary and community sector regarding the issues facing them, both in the closure of the 2007-2013 programme and in the opening of the 2014-2020 programme. That has often led to some confusion with the public and, sometimes, with the Department, which has led to possible misdirection, whether intentional or unintentional, in answering questions. The two programmes have been running conjunctively — one closed and the other open at the same time — so problems were often switched and confused.

As Chair of the Committee, 10 minutes is quite a restrictive time to move the motion, but I am reassured by the number of Committee

members and other Members in the Chamber who have spent a lot of time on the issue and who will get to grips with further and more specific details in the programme. There have been many issues with the ending of the 2007-2013 programme and the commencement of the 2014-2020 programme. At best, those have been described as problematic and, at worst, catastrophic for the work of the groups in the voluntary and community sector and the individuals who are affected. The Committee has engaged with the sector extensively on the issue, and it has worked with the Department and held it to account on numerous occasions.

As far back as 13 June 2012, the Committee received a briefing on the end of the 2007-2013 programme and how it was to be managed. The Committee met organisations from the voluntary and community sector on 17 February 2015. At that meeting, nearly 70 people raised their concerns regarding the application process for the 2014-2020 programme and, in particular, the assessment of financial capability, management accounts and value for money.

The Committee was frustrated that nearly a third of all phase 1 applications were rejected because of departmental guidance that the Department eventually admitted was unclear. In addition, the change from a qualitative assessment to a quantitative assessment meant that some organisations were immediately culled for minor infringements or technicalities. Through that, the Committee believed that the inconsistency of the information that was being provided by the Department and a degree of miscommunication had led to such confusion amongst unsuccessful applicants. The Committee also heard that the requirement for 10% of project costs to be available in cash assets up front discriminated against smaller community groups. A number of organisations fell foul of that.

Such was the interest in the briefing of 18 February that the Public Gallery in the Committee room was full with members from the community and voluntary sector and many others could not be seated there. The TVs in the Great Hall and the coffee lounge had to be turned over to the Employment and Learning Committee proceedings so that everybody could watch what was going on.

At a meeting on 18 March, the Department acknowledged that it had rerun the application process to offer those who were immediately rejected due to unclear guidance a second opportunity to apply. It has been recognised by

the voluntary and community sector that that was due to the work that was done by the Employment and Learning Committee and to the Minister listening to the recommendations and concerns that were coming forward.

At its meeting on 1 July 2015, the Minister again briefed the Committee regarding the 2014-2020 programme. The Minister admitted that the responsibility for the faults of the programme lay solely with his Department. He acknowledged that the vouching of the outgoing programme was too slow and that many organisations suffered because of the timescales involved in the process.

The Minister also confirmed that there are challenges with match-funding for the current ESF programme due to the pressures on the voluntary and community sector where other traditional sources of funding have dried up. That was raised on a number of occasions in the Chamber as well, which led to a promise of support for the voluntary and community sector from the Social Development Minister and a combined task force coming from the junior Ministers in OFMDFM. The Committee still awaits the outworkings of that.

The Committee was deeply concerned to hear of the Commission's suspension of funds due to the internal audit failings of the Department. That led to an internal departmental profiling of the European social fund programme, which resulted in funding for the programme coming from the Department and the ESF money being used for other Department projects and processes.

At its meeting on 16 September, the Minister informed the Committee that departmental funds were being used to close off the outgoing ESF programme. A cause of frustration to many voluntary organisations is that they are still being held to the European standards and requirements even though the Department's money is being used to fund the programme.

The Committee met with the Minister again on 23 September 2015 regarding the continued delays in vouching and the struggle that community and voluntary organisations are experiencing due to cash flow. The fact that the Committee has met with the Minister and his departmental officials 14 times in the past two years is a reflection of how importantly the Committee has viewed the issue and, given the impact on communities, rightly so.

In response, the Department seemed overwhelmed by the application process for the ESF and inconsistencies and confusion crept

in. We were continually told that we were at a great advantage from the second programme starting so soon. However, some in the voluntary and community sector think that a little bit more time to get the application process right would have been of greater benefit.

The Committee has held the Department to account by forcing it to reopen phase 1 of the programme to allow organisations to resubmit evidence. There were 66 that were successful in doing that.

To the Minister's credit, he apologised to the Committee for the programme delays and the deficiencies in the Department's management procedures for allocation. Significantly, the Minister confirmed that, had it not been for the work of the Committee, more staff would not have been drafted in to deal with the problem, and any attempt to offer support to more organisations would not have been successful.

That is a very brief outline of the work that the Committee for Employment and Learning has undertaken on the European social fund.

I will now take a couple of minutes to speak as the Ulster Unionist member on the Committee and to highlight the concerns that are still out there, which, as I said, will be elaborated and expanded on by other Members.

The first concern facing our voluntary and community sector with the current programme is the slow process of payments and vouching. Two weeks ago, I met an organisation that had £400,000 outstanding for a programme that started in April. For many voluntary and community organisations, that sort of money and cash flow is simply unsustainable and unworkable. I was informed that, last week, some moneys were forthcoming. The Minister intervened a number of weeks ago and offered a 50% upfront payment for applications that had yet to be vouched. That sticking-plaster approach, which many in the community and voluntary sector are concerned about, needs to be rectified, and a proper vouching and verification system needs to get up and running as soon as possible. Many point out that the European regional development fund (ERDF) process, which is an element of the EU structural funds that is administered by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, has a target of 35 days from claim submitted to payment in bank. That should be the Department for Employment and Learning's process and standard for the ESF process.

The second main concern with the new project is tutor qualifications. There is a requirement

that all tutors delivering voluntary and community sector courses must go through a course at Ulster University. The course can take up to 150 students at one time and is now fully booked for the next two years. The Department's approach to the qualification smacks of inconsistency, and neither college lecturers nor university professors are required to have that level of qualification. When a voluntary or community organisation employs a tutor who is also employed by a college, the tutor still has to have that qualification. If, however, a voluntary or community organisation employs a tutor via a college, he or she does not. I hope that the Minister will look at that inconsistency and iron it out. Those concerns were raised in the ESF stakeholder forum.

A third concern is the level of course that is now available. For many in the sector, the restriction on level 1 courses is becoming a problem. Applicants are simply taking a level 1 course and not moving to a level 2 or 3, because they have to go —

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

Mr Swann: — to a college to progress to that level.

I hope that the Minister will address the judicial reviews and update the House as to exactly where we are with them. Thank you very much for your time, and I am sure that other Members will go into detail on some of the issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Swann, for the sake of the record, will you confirm that you moved the motion?

Mr Swann: I moved the motion.

Mr Anderson: As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I support the motion. The European social fund is a vital source of help to a wide range of community, voluntary and women's groups. In days of stringent cuts, those groups rely more and more on that sort of funding.

We debated this issue in the Chamber some six months ago on 18 May 2015. At that time, there was growing anger, dismay and a sense of injustice at the Department for Employment and Learning's abysmal handling of ESF applications. In short, it was a bureaucratic and administrative mess. Well-respected voluntary and community groups were left high and dry, and they wanted answers. We urged the Minister to admit that he and his officials had

got it badly wrong, but the Minister was reluctant to do that; he seemed to be in denial as he attempted to justify the unjustifiable. The Minister then came to the Committee on 1 July and offered a limited apology for what he said was:

"one very discrete area of poor performance by the Department in relation to the payment of claims".

1.00 pm

I acknowledge that there is a need for good governance and a proper audit of all claims. All things must be done decently and in order. I also acknowledge that officials are working very hard to resolve outstanding issues. However, no matter what sort of spin is put on all of this or what reasons are given for the problems, the Department's handling of the claims has been a disgrace, and lessons must be learned.

Officials came to the Committee on 23 September and said that they wanted to move forward and not repeat the mistakes of recent months. That is indeed encouraging, but what confidence can we have that it will become a reality? What certainty is there that we will move forward without all the hassle endured last time? I welcome the assurances given at the Committee that staff resources have been looked at. This was also mentioned by the Minister in answer to an oral question from my colleague Mr Weir as recently as 9 November, when he said that further staff had been brought:

"into the ESF managing authority on a temporary basis" — [Official Report, Vol 109, No 3, p33, col 1].

When I raised staffing with officials at the Committee in September, I was told that the resources required for the new programme had been identified and that the staff in post would be there permanently. I was also told at Committee that there would be an accredited training programme for staff so that they would have the necessary skills. Perhaps the Minister can clarify the position on staffing. Are staff being deployed permanently or just on a temporary basis?

One of the major concerns in the last tranche of applications was that nothing was paid if there was a problem with missing documentation, and little effort, it seems, was made to follow up on outstanding issues with the groups concerned. I am glad that a process of accelerated payments is now in place for the

2014-2020 period, and I understand that 50% of claims submitted will be paid up front. This, I believe, is a major step in the right direction. As the Minister said, this is a low-risk approach, and it will certainly make life easier for all concerned. We need to take some risks. An undue aversion to risk-taking is one of the weaknesses of our Civil Service at times.

Like many others, I have been very critical of the failures in administration, but, if we can correct the mistakes, we can move forward. I appreciate that officials worked hard to ensure that the programme was ready to run at the start of the 2015-16 financial year. This means that there has been no gap between the closure of the old programme and the start of the new one.

One other area of concern in the voluntary and community sector is that those who provide training under the ESF have to undertake a teaching qualification at Ulster University, or equivalent academic qualifications, or be registered to do so by 2016-17. This is all fine in theory, but it is difficult in practice. It places financial and time demands on tutors for both training and delivery, and they may not be able to meet those demands. Also, will the Ulster University have the capacity to cope with this demand? I question the necessity —

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

Mr Anderson: — and feasibility of such high requirements being placed on the voluntary and community sector.

Ms McGahan: A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, thank you for the opportunity to speak in today's debate on the important role of the European social fund in delivering essential services to the most vulnerable while recognising the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sector in the administration of the past programme and the current programme. In supporting the motion, I call on the Department for Employment and Learning to learn from its mistakes and ensure that it works in partnership with the sector to deliver the programme efficiently and effectively for all those who rely on it.

Today, I will focus on the European social fund in relation to women's centres and the range of services that they offer. From the outset, I want to pay particular tribute to all those involved in the development and work of women's centres across the North. I want to take this opportunity to place on record my deep regard for the high

standard of service delivery provided by First Steps Women's Centre in Dungannon. I have had the pleasure of regularly working closely with the centre.

First Steps Women's Centre is very dependent on the European social fund for the roll-out of its much-needed service provision. To date, under the 2007-2013 programme, First Steps Women's Centre in Dungannon has delivered impressive results for south Tyrone. That is due to the good work of everyone involved in the centre. The figures are a celebration of that good work. Some 290 below NVQ level 1 qualifications were achieved, 293 NVQ level 1 qualifications were achieved and 353 NVQ level 2 qualifications were achieved.

Given the dire worldwide economic downturn, which has not been helped by the British Government-driven austerity, the success of 179 participants from the south Tyrone area gaining employment is not insignificant. The provision of 276 childcare places on-site by the First Steps Women's Centre during the programme has certainly made it possible for many mothers to avail themselves of much-needed opportunities.

We have just come out of a period, during which, just a short while ago, strong representation had to be made to the Minister for Employment and Learning regarding decisions as to whether to allocate much-needed European social fund moneys to community and voluntary organisations and groups. Our women's centres have a strong record of delivering quality training programmes for women and, in turn, boosting confidence and self-esteem and encouraging their return to the labour market.

In many areas, rural and urban, the much good work that has been progressed to tackle social and economic disadvantage, as well as groundbreaking attempts to tackle the social isolation that disadvantaged and marginalised groups face, needs to be continued and further supported. However, a number of problems are currently being encountered with the roll-out of the programme. The cap on aspiration must be lifted for all ESF programmes. At the moment, the level of qualifications that can be offered to ESF participants by the voluntary and community training providers is capped at level 1, which is equivalent to GCSE grade D. That means that, for the most vulnerable and socially excluded participants in the ESF, the floor of qualifications has become the ceiling. Aside from being a harsh cap on the aspirations of ESF participants and the organisations that work with them, the cap is in direct contrast to

the aims of ESF to improve employment and employability. Our Minister for Employment and Learning, Mr Farry, must give that matter his attention and have the cap lifted.

Many organisations are owed considerable amounts of money for work already carried out. NICVA's research paper has informed us that some organisations are owed almost £1 million and others are owed in the region of £300,000. We have a situation in which charities are borrowing from banks or using overdrafts to cover the cost of money owed to them by DEL. That is simply unacceptable. The European regional development fund element of the EU structural funds administered by DETI has a target of 35 days from claim submitted to payment in bank. That should be the standard for ESF payments.

In the round, the European social fund is a fund that is rife with success stories.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Ms McGahan: The fund has allowed vulnerable and hard-to-reach people from all sections of our community to participate in training and learning opportunities to increase their social inclusion and employability. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I rise on behalf of the SDLP to speak on the motion. I am filling in for Mr Pat Ramsey, who, regrettably, cannot attend the debate. They are big shoes to fill, but I will attempt to do that, nonetheless.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on the European social fund. It is clear that there are many pressing issues with the fund and, more precisely, the application process. Community groups have found great difficulty in navigating the process. They have relayed to us that it is an unnecessarily arduous and lengthy application process. I am sure that many of us in our constituency offices are familiar with spending time trying to assist very frustrated community groups to get their projects off the ground.

It is important to say that despite the negative feedback that we all hear about ESF application processes, truly wonderful things are being achieved at grass-roots level thanks to the fund. Those achievements are often underappreciated, occurring as they do amongst those who find themselves furthest away from formal education and indeed the job market. I cannot mention all the groups that are

achieving great things thanks to the fund, but one good example is, in fact, in the north-west.

Derry City and Strabane District Council recently commenced an ESF-funded Kickstart to Work project that addresses barriers to education and training; work experience and employment initiatives; and post-employment support for 350 enrollees — quite a substantial number. It is a great project for an area with pronounced problems, such as the north-west. It has a great partnership approach. However, the process has not been without its issues. Those administering Kickstart to Work have complained about the changing goalposts at the Department for Employment and Learning. The project is still awaiting clarification on new processes by the Department. What is proving particularly difficult is having Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants released to participate in the scheme. The question is clear: why would anyone agree to a back-to-work scheme if it affects their benefits detrimentally? It is a fundamental question.

The lack of communication around this and other issues between the Department for Employment and Learning, the European Union, the Social Security Agency, and jobs and benefits offices' staff has no doubt been detrimental to this innovative and much-needed project.

There can be no doubt that the Department for Employment and Learning's staff are under immense pressure at the level of applications to the fund. It means that the administrative burden is very heavy. However, we must not forget the pressure that is placed on local community groups by funding delays. This year, many groups were forced to place staff on notice — and that really is intolerable — in an attempt to juggle various pots of money. In many instances, they had to avoid debtors and suffer the inordinate pressure of being chased for money, all due to a delay in processing the fund payments. It is important to note that this is often due to delayed payments from the previous funding round, not even the latest one. This type of funding delay actually perpetuates further inability to receive funding for many community groups. Thousands of pounds are still owed by the Department to many groups, preventing further applications. Again, I say that this is intolerable. The Department holds the purse strings and therefore the lifeline of community groups across the North. It is for this reason that it must be more efficient.

Delays affect cash flow, effective administration, claimants, the income that is generated and morale.

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

Mr A Maginness: I will, indeed. Not surprisingly, delays in funding affect community groups' ability to attract and, more importantly, retain valuable members of staff.

Ms Lo: I rise as the Alliance Party member on the Committee for Employment and Learning. To begin with, I declare an interest as a board member of GEMS NI, which is in receipt of funding from the European social fund. The ESF delivers essential support and services to some of the most disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland. There are numerous success stories of vulnerable and hard-to-reach people being able to access learning and training opportunities. This increases their employability, addresses poverty and promotes social inclusion.

I know that DEL officials have worked hard to ensure that the ESF was ready for the start of the new financial year and to avoid gaps in ESF programmes.

It is also important to point out the pressures that the Department faced while dealing with the closure of the old ESF programme and opening the new one at the same time.

1.15 pm

The ESF is a competitive process and, in many ways, it was inevitable that some applicants would be disappointed, as there were, at one point, eight times more applicants than there was money available. I welcome the Minister's commitment to overfund and secure match funding for organisations at a time when budgets were being squeezed extremely hard. I am aware of the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sectors in the administration of ESF, and I acknowledge that this process has seen a number of problems.

GEMS NI is the lead in one project and a partner in two others. It currently has circa £200,000 in moneys owed but not vouched. It has received an interim payment from the ESF managing authority of 50% of the vouch, which did not include the public match element. It has received no match funding because of the delay in the vouching, as its ESF managing authority needs to advise the match funders to pay their proportion, so it is actually 32.5% of the vouch.

Cash-flow problems continue to be a challenge for a number of organisations. That said, the Minister has acknowledged that there are

frustrations with the speed at which this is happening and that, in many cases, the wait has been too long. I also understand that the 10 additional staff who were added to the ESF managing authority had previous vouching experience. Minister Farry acted quickly to address administrative problems and ensure a cash flow to organisations. I have no doubt that the Department for Employment and Learning has learnt from mistakes that were made during this process and will continue to work in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver effective ESF funding. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: The community and voluntary sectors, particularly in the field of education and training, play an invaluable role in Northern Ireland's economy, helping to equip and skill the most hard-to-reach participants. The community and voluntary sector has always been able to reach and work with the most marginalised and bridge the gap for these people, equipping them on their journey towards education and employment in a way that the statutory services have never been able to do. This is most evident in the services that are offered, such as free childcare, smaller class sizes and flexibility in timetables and learning.

The ESF programme has been in existence for a number of years, and the community in Northern Ireland has been able to avail itself of it. It has helped many thousands of men and women into further education, training and employment. The Department's financial remuneration of projects under the 2007-2013 ESF programme has had a horrendous effect on many organisations; none more so than in the women's sector and projects such as the Kilcooley Women's Centre. I am sure that the Minister will join me in praising the good work that the women's centre does to address educational underachievement.

The programme, which ended on 31 March 2015, has left the community and voluntary sector on its knees, with vast sums of money still owed by the Department to groups. These delays by the Department have resulted in organisations such as the Kilcooley Women's Centre not being able to pay tutors or pay for accreditations for their participants, racking up significant levels of overdraft charges and debt. It is unacceptable for the Department to treat the sector like this, not to mention the contempt that many in the sector feel for the Department because of its poor track record of communication over its suspensions and mishandling of community and voluntary sector project claims. These actions will result in

many community and voluntary organisations becoming insolvent or bankrupt through no fault of their own. This will also have an impact on the most marginalised participants, who will be unable to access front-line services designed to address educational underachievement, as their point of contact is the community and voluntary organisations.

The 2014-2020 ESF programme application process has also been a shambles from start to finish, from the Department's unclear guidance on what constitutes management accounts to its unclear and inconsistent assessment of applications —

Mr Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that more could have been done by the Department to communicate with the groups to ensure that the necessary documentation was submitted to help with the easier payment of claims?

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

Mr Easton: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I agree with the Member. I think that communication has been very poor, and, if it had been a clear communication right from the start, many of the problems that we are experiencing might have been ironed out well before now.

In preparation for the new round of ESF funding, DEL held Northern Ireland-wide information roadshows, through which it advocated the delivery of higher-level qualifications and progression for participants. However, when the application process opened, the criteria that were stipulated supported up to level 1 only. That is equivalent to grades D to G at GCSE, or, in crude employability terms, a fail mark in the eyes of many employers. That appears to go against the evidence —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr Swann: Will the Member agree that it also excludes the likes of first-aid courses and construction skills register (CSR) cards, which are not recognised at either level 1 or level 2?

Mr Easton: Yes, I concur with the Member.

That appears to go against the evidence that that is the best way of combating educational underachievement among those most removed from the labour market and educational services.

The Department appears to have manipulated figures to show a much rosier picture of the ESF 2014-2020 application process; for example, in the way in which it has grouped the unemployed/economically inactive and community family strands to justify moneys to women, despite issues around need specifically related to women classified as being unemployed/economically inactive. The community family support strand of the 2014-2020 ESF programme includes men, teenagers and other family members, and thus cannot be defined as being female-specific. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics for the period of the ESF application process show that, of 313,000 economically inactive people aged 16 to 64 in Northern Ireland, 61% are women. Therefore, women are almost twice as likely to be economically inactive as men.

The total allocation of ESF for the next three-year period is £112 million over the three strands of the programme. That equates to a paltry 3.2% awarded to women-specific training. Evidence shows that that is almost 24% less than what is required to address the number of economically inactive women.

I wish to express my concern about how, during a time of financial austerity, the Department is able to award ESF funding contracts that have no competition on price. I am very keen to hear from the Minister in his response about the ESF 2014-2020 application process and how only a benchmark for average cost per participant was used by DEL to determine value for money.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to apologise for the Department's continuing failures. I also urge him finally to put in place firm and decisive plans to rectify the continuing problems so that the reputational damage of the Department in the eyes of the European Commission and the Northern Ireland voluntary and community sector can be repaired.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I thank the researchers and the likes of NICVA and others that sent us information that, along with the experience that we have all gone through in Committee concerning the process, probably informs most of what we are saying today.

The motion speaks of the important role that the European social fund has played in the delivery of essential services and support for the most vulnerable. The European social fund, in delivering essential support and services to vulnerable people in the North, recognises the challenges faced by the voluntary and community sector in the administration of the current and previous programmes. The motion goes on to call on the Department:

"to learn from its mistakes and to ensure that it works in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver, efficiently and effectively, the European social fund programme."

For many in the community and voluntary sector, the process of applying for what was a new programme and meeting the criteria had many hurdles. Many were disappointed.

In a paper supplied to us by NICVA, it commended the Department for working hard to meet the date for the programme to begin at the start of the new financial year, but also spoke of departmental officials being under severe pressure in trying to close the old ESF programme and open a new one simultaneously. It stated that a key issue raised was that many organisations were owed a considerable amount of money for work that they had already carried out. When NICVA spoke to the many groups applying for ESF funding, they all talked of confusion, with little in the way of information coming from the Department. Groups were told that they had to show that they had the financial capacity to deal with the new system of payments, but many could not do so because they were not allowed to hold substantial amounts of money and many were owed considerable amounts of money by the Department. NICVA said that some organisations were owed almost £1 million, and others in the region of £300,000. Many, including charities, were borrowing from banks or using overdrafts to cover the costs of money owed to them from government.

NICVA argued that the Department for Employment and Learning should have adopted the DETI policy of ensuring its payment of the ERDF element of the structural funds, which has a target of 35 days from the claim being submitted to payment in the bank. The argument is that that should be the standard for the ESF also. It beggars belief that two Departments can handle elements of administering payments of European funding so differently. You would have thought that the Department for Employment and Learning would have cast a net to see whether there was

good practice in other Departments. If it had done so, that problem would, hopefully, have been solved.

I am concerned that no one thought of contacting organisations like NICVA or the broad women's sector to ask its advice on the matter. We talk a lot about partnership and working closer together. Had those in the Department asked for advice, assistance or help, they would have no doubt been pointed in the right direction. They would have been informed that the method of payment was on the verge of putting many groups to the wall and that fulfilling the 10% capacity requirement was making life really difficult for groups that were owed money.

It was interesting to read that there are three requirements for the new social fund programme, which, it was said, combine to undermine the capacity of the ESF programme to deliver its stated aims. It was stated that it is important to note that each of the requirements did not come from the EC but from DEL itself. There is a requirement that tutors providing training as part of the ESF have to undertake a teaching qualification at the Ulster University or another equivalent high-level academic qualification or be registered to do so. Again, NICVA stated that, whilst the voluntary and community sector is committed to high-quality training provision, meeting that very specific requirement is difficult because of monetary costs, the time commitment for tutors to attend the training as well as to deliver the programme and the capacity at UU for the course, given the numbers of tutors involved in ESF. The policy also applies to third-party organisations that the voluntary and community sector might bring in to provide certain industry-specific training such as on health and safety. I have spoken to a number of groups —

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

Mr F McCann: A number of groups have informed me that the departure from the way it was done in the past has hit many of them, especially in my constituency.

Mr Weir: I support the motion, but I have a degree of mixed feelings about it. What do I mean by that? I very much welcome the motion that has been brought forward by the Committee. I also commend the Committee's proactive approach to the issue and the extent to which it has pushed it. So, I have no problems with that. My degree of mixed feelings comes from the fact that, in an ideal

world, we should not have to have this motion in the first place. There has been a catalogue of errors that should have been avoided and, therefore, there should have been no need for this motion.

I am perhaps the first Member to speak in the debate who is not a member of the Employment and Learning Committee. Therefore, I cannot bring the same level of expertise or knowledge from the Committee to this motion as others have. I am speaking very much from personal experience. First, it is important to place on record, as others have, the tremendous work that the community and voluntary sector is doing out there. My own experience has been very directly with the women's sector in particular, and, specifically, with the excellent work of the Kilcooley women's education group.

1.30 pm

Perhaps wearing another hat as Chair of the Education Committee, I will say that, at times, we look at education within a very narrow prism, and we assume that this is only what happens in the school classroom between the ages of four and 18. However, there is a vast society out there that needs that level of help, expertise and support. The women's sector, in particular, and Kilcooley, very specifically, has provided that down the years. Countless women have been able to benefit from that, and that is to be commended.

Good work has been delivered on the ground by the women's centres and other organisations, but that has been fatally undermined by a catalogue of errors in the administration of it. There is no time to go over the full list, but it has been mentioned by others. The assessment process, as the Committee Chair indicated, had to be rerun, and mistakes were made by the Department. Mistakes have been made about the position of Europe, and there had to be reprofiling in the Department to be able to cope with that.

In each case, I am glad that, at least, the Department took some action, but, again, it is symptomatic of a problem. If you are constantly having to do a degree of catch-up and trying to cover the basis of the mistakes that have been made and rectify those problems, really the target should be to try to make sure that those problems do not happen in the first place.

My experience has also been that, even when solutions have been suggested by the Department, at times, some of those solutions have not been fit for purpose. They have suggested things that would make it impossible

for some of the organisations that are delivering on the ground and create a situation that could leave them legally vulnerable. What I have seen at times from the Department is a lack of understanding of the constraints on behalf of voluntary and community organisations, a suggestion of things that are not helpful and a lack at times of a degree of blue-sky thinking.

It is also the case that there is a very human side to this. Those of us who have worked with many of the groups affected will see this not just as a form of statistics or even some sort of group of administrative errors, but we see the human dimension of this being delivered on the ground. We see the extent to which organisations have been staring into the mouth of insolvency, and we see the level of stress from those who are delivering the programmes. They are faced with constant worry and, I suspect, many sleepless nights, and members and employees are often stressed because they know that they cannot meet the financial and moral obligations that are in front of them. That is something that I do not believe anybody should be put through.

We are about to be addressed by the Caesar of the Department, Minister Farry. Unlike Mark Antony, I do not come either to bury him nor, indeed, quite clearly, to praise him on this issue. I think that, ultimately, people want to see solutions around the issue of the amount of money that is owed, we want to see solutions around vouching and verification, and, indeed, we want to see a sensible approach taken to qualifications.

In a previous existence 20 years ago, I did nine weeks' lecturing at the University of Ulster. I had no particular teaching qualifications.

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

Mr Weir: It seems remarkable that that burden would not be placed on the University of Ulster but would be placed on those groups. We want to see those solutions, and we want to see an acknowledgement of the mistakes that have been made in the past and something concrete that shows that they are not going to perpetuate into the future.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. We all accept that the European social fund is a fundamental part of how we as an Executive can increase the social inclusion of our people and try to reduce economic inactivity across our citizens.

At the outset, I commend the leadership shown by members of the Employment and Learning Committee in taking the lead and representing organisations in the community and voluntary sector and helping to make sure that the fund is administered correctly. As the Chair of the Committee said in his opening remarks, the administration of the fund has been somewhere in between problematic and chaotic. I note that the Minister is coming in for considerable condemnation from some of his constituency colleagues in North Down. Maybe there is an election coming up that we have not heard about. The Minister, in fairness to him, has shown a great degree of willingness to get involved in this.

Some other Ministers, if they were in a similar situation, might have preferred to leave it to officials to deal with and might have farmed it out to them to resolve; but, in fairness to the Minister, whilst there remain problems with the situation, he has taken a great personal interest in this and has genuinely tried his best to sort it out. I wish him well as he continues to do that.

The ESF, from my point of view, is another one of these departmental funds that are outsourced. That seems to be the way that everything is going now, particularly in DEL, where a growing number of programmes are not delivered directly by the Department but are put out for competitive tenders for independent organisations, private companies or community and voluntary organisations. We might be told that there is a positive aspect to that in that it enables people who are hard to reach, as they call them, to be reached by the provision of a government service. They tell us that government could not access those people directly, so we bring in external organisations like the community and voluntary sector to reach them. That may be fine and well in some urban areas where there is a strong network of community and voluntary organisations to reach people who are deemed to be hard to reach, but it is certainly not the case in rural communities. Given the way the whole bid process works, where everything is a competitive process, it has to be done at the lowest cost possible and there is an afterthought given to value, it seems that there are no economies of scale for those organisations to deliver them in rural communities. My concern is that the Department is allowing those rural communities to be left behind.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, Robin, yes. Go ahead.

Mr Swann: Does the Member not recall the reassurances that we were given in Committee that the Department would look at the organisations to make sure that there is a geographical spread across Northern Ireland before it awards anything?

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

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for the extra minute because I am still on my first page and three minutes are gone.

I certainly do remember those reassurances, but I am not reassured by them. On the list of the successful bidders, many are based either east of the Bann or in Derry city. Very few are based in rural communities where there is a greater understanding of the needs of rural citizens. That is one of the problems with the competitive bidding process. I think that, if the Department was delivering ESF directly, there would be much more emphasis placed on ensuring equality of provision across the North in urban and rural communities.

The competitive bidding process leads to the successful organisations tending to be based in those areas east of the Bann or, if we are lucky, in Derry city, but they are very rarely based in rural areas. As I have said, their understanding of the challenges facing people in rural communities is reinforced. Some of them do not seem to understand the transportation issues that are facing people. They are already struggling to get employment opportunities to access training, but the issues are further compounded by a complete absence of reliable transportation and having to travel a considerable distance to access the services. On top of that, the private companies or community and voluntary organisations become much more effectively organised in urban areas and a gap grows in the provision of training programmes and in growing skills across different areas. The skills of the community and voluntary organisations in some areas are much greater than in others, and they say that that is because it is more economically profitable for these to be delivered in urban areas as opposed to in rural communities. It is not an excuse that I buy. Not all areas, particularly rural communities, have had equal investment in the community and voluntary sector historically, and that imbalance is worsening, with rural communities such as those in Fermanagh and Tyrone missing out. The inequality gap is growing. I

would like the Minister, during his response at the end, to advise on how outsourced

programmes like the ESF have that protection in them to make sure that there is provision in every community, because I do not see that when I look through the list. I see some schemes that were successful in rural areas, but the vast majority seem to be headquartered in urban areas. My concern is that the rural communities are merely an afterthought and that the needs of those people are not reflected as highly as they should be.

Other Members have highlighted issues that are particular to this fund, particularly the cap on a grade D at GCSE for training schemes.

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

Mr Flanagan: For me, that is short-sighted and restricts the potential of the ESF programme. I think that it should be reconsidered, and I call on the Minister to take that on board.

Ms Sugden: I support the motion, first, as a representative of East Londonderry; secondly, as a strong advocate of the community and voluntary sector; and, thirdly, as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

I wish to declare an interest: I sit on the board of Compass Advocacy Network, an organisation that is in receipt of European social fund money. Although my contribution to the debate will reflect my work as an individual MLA, I wish to pay due regard to my Committee colleagues for enabling the debate to reach the Floor. I also appreciate the Committee's endeavours in ensuring that the Minister and his Department have been held to account on the issue in Northern Ireland: it has seemed like a long year.

Two significant strands of the European social fund are causing concern: the old programme and the new programme — essentially, the whole European social fund. In the spirit of the motion, I will focus on the European social fund moving forward. In order to do that, however, it would be remiss of me not to draw attention to the significant amounts of money that are still outstanding from the old programme. We are told that, in some cases, that is up to £1 million, and, in many other cases, it is hundreds of thousands of pounds. That is appalling, and it has forced charities and other organisations to seek debt to remain afloat so that they have some hope of maintaining services for the people whom they work for in the community. The significant amount of money that is outstanding is unacceptable. Organisations that are owed, including those on the new

programme, cannot move forward. Worryingly, they are on the edge of a cliff, and, regrettably, some have been pushed over.

I want the Minister to take responsibility. I want him to give satisfactory answers to the groups that have been torn apart by incompetence in his Department. I appreciate the fact that the Minister has tried to find solutions, but it is not good enough. It is not good enough right now and is not good enough where those groups find themselves because of inefficiencies and mistakes in his Department.

The community and voluntary sector provides services that the public sector cannot and should not provide, particularly, as Mr Flanagan said, in rural areas. They know their communities and have their respect and trust. As an Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive Government, we should certainly support the community and voluntary sector. Indeed, we are told that the new European social fund was changed to enable streamlining, which would make it simpler for the community and voluntary sector. It is not simpler; it is not only a headache but a quite bad migraine. I ask the Minister to look at the new programme.

The goalposts seem to keep changing on the contracts that these groups signed. I question their legality and even encourage community and voluntary groups on the new programme to seek legal advice, because I am not sure that those contracts stand. Some goalposts that have changed — other Members talked about them — are on the teaching qualification. It is not reasonable to expect some of the organisations to be able to provide that teaching qualification, particularly when no spaces are left on the course. Others spoke about the cap on qualifications. We are almost putting a barrier in place for people to reach their potential, because they can reach only the potential that the Department states, which is quite low.

I will focus on presentations to jobs and benefits offices. As I said, I sit on the board of Compass Advocacy Network, which is an organisation for adults with learning disabilities. They have barriers to presenting themselves to jobs and benefits offices, so the ESF, by putting that requirement in place, has created a barrier for them, and that is not really what the —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes. Please go ahead.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If the Member takes the intervention, I do not have the opportunity to give her an additional minute.

Mr Swann: I will be brief. The Member may also be aware that some jobs and benefits offices have not been informed about how to handle ESF queries from organisations.

Ms Sugden: Yes, I am entirely aware. We have put a requirement in place that will not work, even in the last instance.

I am keen to hear what the European Commission has to say about this. I hope that it is paying attention to the debate because I cannot imagine that the fund that it hoped that we would present in the most effective way is being presented as such. I cannot imagine that the Commission is happy with it.

1.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister has up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): In responding, I want to acknowledge the important role that the European social fund plays in supporting skills and employability across society. I recognise the sterling efforts made by my officials in ensuring the overall successful delivery of the 2007-2013 ESF programme and the timely commencement of the 2014-2020 one. That is not to say that there have not been problems with implementation in aspects of the delivery of the 2007-2013 programme and the start of the 2014-2020 one. However, my officials and I have been proactive in addressing all of those issues, and, indeed, I directed changes in approach on a number of occasions. Furthermore, for accountability, my officials and I regularly presented ourselves to the Committee, and we continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders.

The European social fund has been of enormous benefit in supporting our people and economy by giving unemployed and disadvantaged people the training and support that they need to access work. It is a positive reflection on our membership of the European Union and allows us to do things that we might not otherwise be in a position to achieve. By focusing on those most in need of help, ESF assistance is vital in contributing to policies to reduce inequality and build a fairer society. The voluntary and community sector is especially crucial in helping to deliver this provision locally. The sector is often much

better placed than government and its statutory bodies to understand, support and offer meaningful progress to disadvantaged sections of society.

The current ESF round of funding amounts to more than £205 million over the six-year period of the programme. That support is manifested in the fact that we have not made cuts to the new ESF programme. In fact, the programme that we unveiled for 2014-2020 is bigger than the outgoing one, with some £112 million worth of projects being supported during its first three years. The Department is adding a further £5.5 million through its role as a match funder. That is also an increase.

It is also important to recognise that the new European social fund for 2014-2020 is up and running and that we managed that without any break in coverage. This was, nevertheless, a challenging task. Although we had our operational programme agreed by the European Commission early, that still left only a narrow window to commence the programme by 1 April 2015. We are well ahead of many other parts of the European Union, and other UK regions, in having our programme up and running. Only now is the Skills Funding Agency in England, for example, commencing a call for applications to the new programme — for an 18-month period only and starting as late as September 2016 — whereas Northern Ireland projects have been offered a full three years of funding from April 2015. That follows a summer in which providers receiving ESF money in England were forced to lay off staff due to the delays in issuing the 2014-2020 contracts.

The European social fund programme is not a financial vehicle specifically designed to sustain the community and voluntary sector. It is designed to help the individual participants on the programme, in line with the programme's thematic objectives. Voluntary and community organisations are undeniably well placed to assist participants, but there was, I believe, an unrealistic expectation among certain providers that funding would continue into the new programme by virtue of the fact that they had been funded under the old one. The unfortunate reality of any competitive tendering process is that no single organisation has an automatic right to funding.

My officials and I are fully alert to the challenges faced by the voluntary and community sector in adjusting to the new programme. Members have raised a number of issues, and we are aware of and have addressed, or are in the process of addressing, those where possible.

A clear difficulty was the tension created between the documentation required to meet the audit demands of the European Commission and the impact of that on the Department's ability to process and pay claims quickly. ESF projects are understandably anxious to have their claims paid as soon as possible, and I accept that a number had concerns about their cash flow due to the delay in the verification process. However, Members should also recognise that there is an onus on the project to provide the correct documentation, just as there is an onus on the Department to complete the vouching visits and release payments. Likewise, there is a need to recognise that vouching is not a simple process that can be completed overnight. Due to the exacting audit standards required, vouching can be highly involved and often time-consuming. However, as the programme evolves and all parties become more familiar with the new processes, it should be possible to issue payments more promptly.

I can also assure Members that, when organisations raise problems about cash flow, we respond. As a result, I have directed my Department to implement an interim measure whereby 50% of the ESF and DEL contribution in unpaid claims is paid when the claim is received and vouched later. Applying this process has alleviated the initial financial pressures that the projects have experienced, whilst work continues apace to ensure that all claims are fully vouched in line with audit requirements.

Another concern raised by a number of parties is the requirement for ESF participants to present themselves to jobs and benefits offices to confirm that they are in receipt of benefit and therefore eligible for participation. This is not a new requirement. Nevertheless, project promoters have flagged up certain practical difficulties for participants, especially those who have disabilities. My officials are working with the Social Security Agency and the employment service to see whether there are any practical solutions that can be put in place to address what is perceived by some as a barrier to participation.

Concern has also been expressed about my Department's requirement for ESF tutors to hold an appropriate teaching qualification. My Department's objective is to ensure that participants receive the best possible training and education available, to ensure quality and consistency throughout education and training and to provide a guaranteed minimum level of quality in our teaching. Any departmental requirements for qualifications apply to tutors,

not only in delivering ESF projects but in further education college settings, and to providers of the Training for Success programme.

Another concern is the limit on qualifications to be supported under the ESF programme to level 1. This was informed by a range of interconnected reviews of provision and sought to minimise the potential for duplication. This was particularly important in the context of the current budget constraints. It is important to encourage progression. Supporting provision up to level 1 under the ESF programme means that individuals are enabled and encouraged to progress to level 2 and above through other DEL-funded provision.

Members also raised —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I accept that level 2 and 3 courses can be provided at colleges, but does he not accept that such provision will not suit many people? I give the example from when I worked in the Simon Community of a young person coming out of a juvenile justice centre. The colleges do not have the flexibility to take them on then and there, although education may be the thing that keeps them from reoffending.

Dr Farry: This is not an ideal situation. Sadly, it is informed by constraints to our budgets. We are seeking to stretch budgets to cover as many spaces as we can, but it is far from ideal.

I return to the issues connected with the outgoing programme. First of all, we are looking to address proactively the issues relating to the vouching of claims. We have put in place a series of measures as well as accelerated payments for the new programme. We are working to close off the outgoing programme by the end of the year. Of the 95 projects, a total of 57, I think, are now fully paid with no further claims due. We are waiting for only two potential claims to be submitted, one from Royal Mencap and the other from the Training for Women Network (TWN).

This leads me to the point about Kilcooley Women's Centre that was raised by a number of Members. It is important to clarify for the record that my Department does not have any direct relationship with Kilcooley Women's Centre. It is part of the Training for Women Network on the outgoing ESF programme. The issues are thus for TWN, which has yet to produce its final claim. My officials have gone to great lengths to try to facilitate TWN in doing so, sadly to no avail. We await the receipt of documentation, and that is the problem.

Members have commented about the fact that staff were placed on protective notice in some of the programmes. Going on protective notice, as bad as it is, is better than facing redundancy. I find it a little concerning that some people said we should have waited a little longer before starting the new programme.

That would have meant a situation where we did not have continuity of provision and where some organisations would have had to lay staff off in the interim. We have avoided that in Northern Ireland, and that should be acknowledged.

There were also comments about how we somehow moved the goalposts in the process. We have not moved the goalposts in any shape or form. It is important that we stick to what we have said and that we have clear, objective standards to deal with organisations. That is how we protect ourselves against challenge. Frankly, if we were to start changing things midstream, then we would open a Pandora's box of people coming in with all sorts of claims and allegations against the Department. I think we have held the line well in that regard.

When we took a decision to have flexibility in the further submission of management accounts, that was done in the context where we believed that we had an objective standard that would allow it to happen. It was based on our recognition that there was ambiguity in the guidance notes. That was a flaw, and it meant that some groups had a misunderstanding in how they were reading them at that time. I also want to clarify that we have not had a situation whereby the assessment process has been rerun. We simply allowed further time for the submission of management accounts, which is a much more narrow set of events.

Comment has also been made about our relationships with the European Commission, which I believe to be good. While we have had a rocky road through the interruption to our programme, it is important to clarify that an interruption is not the same as a suspension. Those issues with this type of funding are commonplace across the European Union. We have had close neighbours suffer a suspension of their funds, rather than the interruption that we have experienced in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he clarify whether he transferred the funds from priority 1 to priority 2 before the suspension happened? Is it simply a matter of semantics?

Dr Farry: First, there is a difference between an interruption and a suspension, so it is nothing to do with semantics. The transfer of priorities was done in order for us to ensure that we were able to continue engaging with all the organisations that benefited through the outgoing ESF programme. Through the approach that was adopted, we were able to ensure continuity of provision. It was very much in the interests of the community and voluntary sector that we took that action. Over the past months, we have sought to proactively address the issues raised by the European Commission, and the interruption was lifted towards the end of September.

Members have asked, and the motion calls, for lessons to be learned. I appreciate that Members, project providers and other stakeholders have been critical of how the programme has been handled, both the old and new ESF programme. I have also had my concerns, which is why I have intervened on a number of occasions when it was appropriate to do so. I recognise that lessons can be learned from these experiences.

What has become clear to me in the course of moving from the old ESF programme to the new one is the need for sufficient staff resourcing and planning. To that end, my Department has brought additional vouching staff on board to further assist the process and ensure that it is completed as soon as possible. I am confident that this short-term measure has gone a significant way to addressing the backlog of claims, and will soon bring the managing authority to a position whereby it can efficiently vouch for each individual claim as and when it arrives. We are also continually redeploying staff to respond to pressures as they change. As the work on final payments for the old programme winds down, we will redeploy staff to the payments under the new programme.

Another lesson learned is the need to make the process of vouching simpler, compared to the incredibly detailed process under the old ESF programme. We have introduced a simplified costs model, whereby costs are verified on the basis of a percentage of staff costs. While the initial introduction of such a change has inevitably led to a number of teething problems, the streamlining of claims, once fully up and running, should provide a more efficient and effective system. We have also introduced a new ESF claims tracking system, affording significantly improved management information for better monitoring of the progress of individual claims.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

We are also conscious of the need for better communication with project providers. As such, we have established a quarterly forum that will give all project providers the opportunity to come together. We have also established an ESF project group to identify and address a number of control weaknesses associated with the old programme, and to ensure those weaknesses do not affect the 2014-2020 programme. Finally, all relevant staff will go through an accredited training programme as part of their continuous professional development to ensure that projects and participants receive the best possible support from the Department.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: It is now time for questions to the First Minister. I am not sure if this is your last, but you are always very welcome. I inform Members that question 14 has been withdrawn.

UN Special Rapporteur: Discussions

1. **Ms McGahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any discussions they have had with the United Nations special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. (AQO 9128/11-16)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Mrs Emma Pengelly to answer that question.

Mrs Pengelly (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Officials from our Department met Pablo de Greiff, the UN special rapporteur on truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence on 11 November 2015. The purpose of the visit was to offer an objective assessment of the various initiatives undertaken to deal with the legacies of the Troubles. Discussions focused on the holistic approach being taken to improve services for victims and survivors here. Those focused on the victim support and individual needs programmes and our Department's ongoing collaborative design programme, which we have undertaken in conjunction with the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Victims and Survivors Service. The programme aims to ensure a level of service provision that better meets the needs of victims and survivors.

The significant progress made by the programme, and the positive feedback received to date, was discussed, along with key strands of work being taken forward under the Stormont House Agreement in relation to advocacy, a pension for those severely physically injured and the establishment of a mental trauma service. The implementation of the Together: Building a United Community strategy was also discussed. Those discussions included the recently published good relations indicators and the application of an outcome-based approach

to monitoring and evaluation. Mr de Greiff will now prepare a report on his findings from the visit, which will be presented to the Human Rights Council in September 2016. Our Department will give his advice and recommendations due consideration.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. I want to take this opportunity to wish you all the best in your new role. Considering that the special rapporteur acknowledged in his preliminary recommendations that it is easy to use national security as a blanket term, what steps will be taken to establish mechanisms for dealing with the past that deliver the full disclosure of truth that victims and families deserve?

Mrs Pengelly: As the Member will be aware, the issue of national security was the subject of considerable discussion throughout the recent talks process. In all those issues, there is a matter of compromise to be had. On one hand, families want access to truth and information. In particular, many hundreds of families have contacted me and the Office of the First Minister in relation to their quest for justice. However, on the other side of that, there need to be protections in relation to national security. Just this week it has become clear that at least seven attempted attacks across the UK this year alone have been foiled by our security and intelligence services. Therefore, the techniques deployed need to be protected. All citizens across the United Kingdom need to have the protections afforded by the national security protections at a state level, so a compromise does need to be reached, but it has to go both ways.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Edwin Poots. Edwin? We will move on. I call Mr Alec Attwood.

Mr Attwood: I wish the First Minister good health and good times whenever he decides to depart from this place.

On Friday afternoon, the new leader of the SDLP, Colum Eastwood, wrote to the British Government and copied the Irish Government, recommending that the revised draft legacy Bill that, no doubt, the British Government have in their possession should be published, not least to inform victims and survivors in a way that they may not have been informed since Stormont House. Given the comments of the First Minister on Friday evening, do the First Minister and junior Minister endorse the recommendation that the leader of the SDLP put to the Secretary of State?

Mrs Pengelly: The Member will be very much aware of the position of the Office of the First Minister on the matter. The First Minister recently made clear during the talks process that the DUP supported the proposition by the British and Irish Governments that the entire legacy section should be made available to victims and survivors, and, in addition, that the very substantive piece of legislation drafted at Westminster on behalf of the parties here should be published.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I also wish the First Minister every success in the future after he decides to stand down formally.

Does the junior Minister agree that, to ensure that there is no recurrence, not just the state but groups have to be honest about their actions and the consequences of those actions?

Mrs Pengelly: Absolutely. We have made it very clear throughout the process that victims deserve justice and truth. It is very sad that victims have had to wait so long to get that justice and truth. However, throughout the process — in fact, throughout not just this process but the Stormont House negotiations last Christmas and the Haass negotiations — the Office of the First Minister has been absolutely at the forefront of fighting for justice and truth for victims and survivors. Across the House, I think that we support calls for those who have information on any event or act of terrorism in the past to come forward and tell people what information they have and, importantly, tell the PSNI, in order to allow victims and survivors to get the closure and justice that they rightly deserve.

Mr Allister: I join in wishing the First Minister a long and healthy retirement.

The UN rapporteur is very clear, it seems, on the need for the truth. Does the junior Minister think that she and the First Minister are getting the truth from their partner, Sinn Féin, given its continuing denial of even the existence of the IRA and its controlling army council? Does not that situation — if Sinn Féin persists in saying that, as far as the republican movement is concerned, there is nothing to disband — make a nonsense of the suggestion that there is going to be a process to disband paramilitary organisations?

Mrs Pengelly: Again, the First Minister has been very clear that people need to come forward. They need to tell the truth. They need to give that information. Although there is that quest for knowledge by all of us on those

matters, the focus of the question and of my comments today is that the need for truth and justice for victims and survivors in particular is absolutely acute. We know that there are people across Northern Ireland who hold information that could give justice and truth to those victims and survivors. Therefore, today, I would like the focus to be on their cause, and I reiterate that anybody who has information should come forward to the PSNI and give that closure to victims and survivors.

Racial Equality Strategy: Update

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the racial equality strategy 2014-2024. (AQO 9129/11-16)

Mr P Robinson: I thank Members for their kind personal comments.

Our 16-week public consultation instigated much discussion and elicited many opinions from right across society. After the analysis of those contributions was completed, the strategy was revised to take account of the consultation responses, and the revised strategy has been considered and commented on by Executive Ministers. Once the strategy has been agreed by the Executive, we hope to publish it in a matter of weeks. The racial equality strategy establishes a framework for action by Departments and others to tackle racial inequalities and to open up opportunity for all, to eradicate racism and hate crime, and, along with the Together: Building a United Community policy, to promote good relations and social cohesion.

Full and effective implementation of the strategy will be achieved only by Departments working together, in partnership with the voluntary and community sector and other elements of civic society.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for his response. Despite disagreeing with him fundamentally on many issues, I, too, extend sincere good wishes for his departure from the Assembly when he decides to do so.

In the light of recent serious racist attacks — including petrol bombings, cars being torched, homes being attacked and residents being assaulted in Ballykeel, Ballymena and in my constituency of East Belfast, as well as the desire of the majority in our community to see a united community — is the inordinate delay in delivering a racial equality strategy and a refugee integration strategy not an indictment of OFMDFM? Will he agree that urgent work still

has to be done to ensure that our black and minority ethnic members of the community have the same safety, inclusion and opportunity as anyone else in our community?

Mr P Robinson: I think that just leaves out several factors that the Member presumably does not want the House and beyond to be aware of, because, of course, we have a community safety strategy for Northern Ireland that sets out the Executive's commitment to tackle all forms of hate crime. The strategy has associated action plans, including a dedicated hate crime action plan that details the measures that a range of Departments and relevant agencies are taking forward, including officials in OFMDFM, who are represented on the Department of Justice hate crime delivery group, which was established to support the delivery of that strategy.

The Member also seems to think that somehow the delivery of a strategy is, in itself, the answer to these kinds of issues. I hope that the House will join me in absolutely condemning this kind of activity as completely unacceptable. If anybody puts themselves in the place of someone in our community who has come from foreign parts, they will know the degree of isolation that there is and the lack of backup networks that are available to them. I hope that everybody remembers that they should treat others as they would like to be treated themselves. However, let us not get tied down in the process of the strategy. The strategy has been out for public consultation for some considerable time. It has been a very wide consultation and a very considerable response has been received. That has now reached the stage where the revision is before Ministers. As the draft strategy itself talks about being a strategy for 2015 to 2025, I hope that it will be published within a very short period.

Mrs Hale: I thank the First Minister for his earlier answer. If I may, Mr Speaker, like many, I would like to pay tribute to the First Minister on what is likely to be his last Question Time and thank him for his years of selfless service to the people of Northern Ireland, and for his friendship and mentoring to me and my daughters.

Will the First Minister outline the role of the crisis fund in helping minority ethnic individuals to deal with emergency situations?

Mr P Robinson: First, I thank my good friend for her kind comments.

As I indicated in my first response, traditionally, people who come from ethnic minorities have fewer and weaker network supports and, from time to time, that means that they have to rely on the crisis fund for support. The crisis fund is, of course, there to give help to those who are destitute. Last year, I believe that the fund distributed about £36,600 and, this year, has £100,000 available to be used. Some have asked whether the crisis fund will be used for Syrian refugees. The answer is that, while technically it could, I think that the provision of the scheme under which they would be coming is such that they should not be destitute and, therefore, would not need to fall back on that fund.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers and, of course, like everyone else in the House, wish him all the best for the future, particularly in good health.

The Minister will agree with me that those involved in hate crimes are not really bothered about strategies or plans or all the other things that we get involved in, but they might well understand a change in the hate laws that would make it very clear that those who get involved in that kind of criminal activity will spend a long time behind bars, while the wider community, particularly the minority communities, are safe. What is the Minister's view on changing the hate laws?

2.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the Member that those involved in such activity would probably have difficulty even reading a strategy. The strategy is for Departments and others to coordinate their efforts to ensure that we, as a community, unite and speak out against such activity. In that context, a strategy is valuable.

In terms of toughening the laws, there is a wide range of areas in our society where there is a requirement for severe deterrents. I would be happy for a review of the lengths of sentences and punishments and sanctions on race-hate and other types of hate crime.

Anti-poverty Strategy

3. **Mr Hazzard** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the outcome of the legal challenge by the Committee on the Administration of Justice against the Northern Ireland Executive, when they will introduce an anti-poverty strategy. (AQO 9130/11-16)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Mrs Emma Pengelly to answer that question.

Mrs Pengelly: We have accepted the court's judgement on our statutory obligations to provide an anti-poverty strategy, although I was disappointed that the court did not give more weight to the significant range of actions that we have been taking to address poverty, social exclusion and deprivation, particularly the innovative and exciting work on our Delivery Social Change framework and on developing an outcomes focus on addressing poverty and the consequences of poverty.

Through the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme, we have committed over £100 million to reducing poverty and the consequences of living in areas of deprivation. We have spent over £27 million on our Delivering Social Change signature projects, including significant contributions to the projects jointly funded with Atlantic Philanthropies, which in total are worth almost £60 million over this year and the next three years. In all that work, we have focused strategically on improving outcomes across a range of poverty and deprivation measures, including health, education and developing the economy to improve the lives of those in poverty.

I am disappointed that the court took a very narrow view on the definition of what constitutes a strategy, but we are working to address the concerns of the court, and we will bring forward proposals in the coming months, following appropriate consultation and deliberation.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. What effect will the changes to the Child Poverty Act proposed in the British Government's Welfare Reform and Work Bill have on tackling child poverty in the North? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Pengelly: We have had many discussions over the last five years, particularly in the context of Delivering Social Change, on the most appropriate measures. The child poverty legislation kept many of the child poverty measurements. Those measurements are entirely income-based, so they do not measure, for example, poverty in education, opportunity or aspiration; they simply measure how much income a family has.

Neither do they take into account a range of measures from the Executive to keep family household outgoings down. We were always of

the view that there were flaws in how the measurements were carried out. The Conservative Government have indicated very clearly that they are looking at those issues, although the detail is not clear at this stage. However, our outcomes-based approach looks much more widely than those income-based measurements in the legislation. I suspect that we will continue to do that. If you look at our indicators on education, health and a whole range of other issues, it is not just those measurements. So, regardless of whether those measurements change or remain largely the same, the Northern Ireland Executive will continue to look at poverty across the spectrum, not just income poverty.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the junior Minister to her new role and wish her well. I also join with others on these Benches in thanking the First Minister for all his years of service, not only to our party but to our country. We wish him well in his retirement. Will the junior Minister give us her view on the proposition referenced by some that spatial deprivation should be the main way of allocating funding on objective need?

Mrs Pengelly: There has been a great deal of misunderstanding in relation to the court judgement. It did not examine whether the Office of the First and deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Executive were fulfilling their obligations in relation to objective need; rather, it examined whether the work that we carried out constituted a strategy. The judgement was absolutely clear that it would not go into the detail of objective need and a definition of it, so there has been some confusion. I welcome the opportunity to clarify that.

There is a proposition out there that all our programmes should be rolled out in relation to spatial need; so, depending on whether you live in a particular area or another area, you should get a range of services. However, that is not what objective need means. In fact, the Northern Ireland Executive roll out the vast majority of their programmes to address poverty and deprivation in relation to objective need, but that objective need pertains to either the individual or the family. If you have a health need, your personal, objective, medical needs are taken into account. If you are unemployed, it does not matter whether you live in Comber, Richhill or north Belfast, you objectively get support from the Government for that. The vast majority of the services that we roll out through the Northern Ireland Executive are on objective need, but not necessarily on spatial objective need.

That said, targeting programmes in relation to spatial deprivation is also very important. It is clear from our research that, where a range of social deprivation factors come into play — my colleague from the Department for Social Development will be very aware of this — the outcomes can be particularly bad for young people. There are a range of programmes through the Department for Social Development and OFMDFM that we will continue to roll out in relation to spatial deprivation. But there is a lot of misunderstanding in relation to objective need. There needs to be greater clarification about that. Hopefully, we will take the opportunity to develop the strategy and give clarity on that matter.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that detailed answer, but I remind you that there is a two-minute rule.

Mr A Maginness: I wish the junior Minister well in her new role, and I look forward to working with her. I wish the First Minister well in his retirement.

There is a purported commitment to an anti-poverty strategy by the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. Given the fact that they have handed welfare back to Westminster and the prospect of the introduction by the British Government directly here of a benefits freeze and an individual benefits cap of about £20,000, does that not sit uneasily with any purported anti-poverty strategy?

Mrs Pengelly: In our work on social change over the last five years, the Office of the First and deputy First Minister has taken a deliberate change in approach. Prior to that, we collated significant strategies; we asked all the Departments about what they were doing in relation to anti-poverty activities. We produced that and monitored progress against it. At the end of that process, I was not particularly convinced that we had achieved anything, so, around four or five years ago, we changed our approach quite fundamentally to look at, for example, delivery frameworks and targeting specific actions to address poor outcomes. We also engaged with a wide range of academics, experts and stakeholders on these matters. It was very clear from that work that income poverty need not lead to bad outcomes. That is very much at the heart of our Delivering Social Change agenda.

The Northern Ireland Executive have been absolutely keen to keep as much money as possible in families' pockets. We refused to introduce water rates, for example, to try to

keep costs down for average households. In addition, we looked at a range of initiatives to try to address where poverty was influencing poor outcomes.

Rather than just concentrating on the income of the family, for example, we looked at the education project under Delivering Social Change. We introduced the literacy and numeracy scheme, and 16,000 young people across Northern Ireland benefited from that. It did not affect the income of the family, but it was very clear that, after the first year of its operation, there was a 6.3% increase in the number of non-grammar school pupils achieving five GCSEs at grades A to C. That is a direct outcome of an anti-poverty intervention that is not necessarily income-based.

Mr Cree: I also wish the First Minister and the junior Minister well in the future. Does the Minister agree that the Minister is the Department, and, therefore, the fact that a junior OFMDFM Minister welcomed the court ruling against OFMDFM either proves a poor understanding of the workings of government or is a very frank admission of the dysfunctionality of OFMDFM?

Mrs Pengelly: I can speak only for myself. I have been clear that we have accepted the court's judgement, although I have to say that I was very disappointed in it. The court specifically looked at the definition of a strategy. In OFMDFM, we have the child poverty strategy. We had adopted the architecture and key principles of Lifetime Opportunities, which was the anti-poverty strategy, and rolled out the Delivering Social Change delivery framework. Along with that, we had the six signature projects on which, as I mentioned, we spent £27 million. I honestly believe that those projects have made a very fundamental difference to people's lives. I mentioned the 16,000 young people who have had numeracy and literacy support. Some 3,300 families have been supported through the family support hubs, and 650 families have been supported by the supporting parenting signature project.

I honestly believe that significant work has been done. It is valuable work. I think that this is the right approach. Rather than having a strategy that does not necessarily achieve anything, we have a delivery framework that is delivering changes on the ground and producing results in outcomes. I have indicated that I am disappointed in the court's judgement, but we have accepted it. We will now move to bring all that work together and produce a strategy.

International Promotion of NI

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their work to promote Northern Ireland internationally. (AQO 9131/11-16)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, it is not often that the person who is asking a question so early on is not sure whether it will be reached.

The promotion of Northern Ireland internationally is a key strategic aim of the Executive's international relations strategy. We recognise the crucial role that enhancing our international credibility plays in securing the Executive's objectives. Our international priorities are focused on developing working relations in the United States, Europe and the People's Republic of China. The three Executive offices in Washington, Brussels and Beijing continue to play a significant role in this international outreach.

Over the past 10 years, the Washington bureau's nurturing of important relations with senior US Government officials has been integral to Invest Northern Ireland's unprecedented success in attracting US investment into Northern Ireland. The Brussels office continues to influence European policy and legislation on behalf of the Executive. In 2014-15, it hosted seven ministerial visits and some 60 events, with almost 2,500 visitors. To put this in a financial context, the Executive have drawn down £72.7 million of competitive EU funds in the last three years.

Our relationship with China is still in its early stages, but we are already starting to see positive results. We recently welcomed three senior Chinese Government Ministers and four economic delegations to Belfast. A number of Government-to-Government agreements in areas of economic cooperation, education and cultural promotion have been signed. Progress continues to be made in securing market access for our local agricultural products. Over recent months, we have hosted the Australian high commissioner and the ambassadors of Mexico, France and Finland to Northern Ireland. These representational meetings develop important diplomatic relations with other Governments and contribute to our wider international aims.

Mr McCallister: Like colleagues, I wish the First Minister well. He was nothing but courteous in his dealings with me, which I appreciated very much. I wish him and his family well in his retirement.

The First Minister no doubt knows the impact that instability has and the difficulty of promoting Northern Ireland internationally when there is instability. Does he agree that we cannot go through another mandate with an Executive that have such instability and that are at odds with themselves?

2.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: First, I thank the Member for his kind remarks. I agree with his question entirely. Towards the end of last week, I was speaking to a large group of businessmen. While they were full of the issue of the reduction in the level of corporation tax — the date and rate having been set — I told them that by far the most important aspect for business in the agreement that had been reached was the fact that there was to be stability in Northern Ireland. That is key for business decision-making. That is why we are right to call it 'A Fresh Start'. I think that business people know better than most that the environment in which they have to operate is key, so I agree with the Member entirely. I believe that the foundations have been laid in that agreement. There are no issues that should trip up the Executive in taking the positions necessary to have a sustainable Budget and be able to take decisions on behalf of the people whom we represent.

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We move now to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Big Lottery Fund

T1. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that any attempt by George Osborne to use the Big Lottery Fund to supplement proposed cuts in departmental spending should be resisted. (AQT 3161/11-16)

Mr P Robinson: I do. My alarm bells went off when I heard the speculation that the Chancellor may move in that direction. Those of us who were active in politics at the time of the introduction of lottery funding, and, probably, many who were not, whatever their view might have been of having the National Lottery, recognised that the key ingredient was additionality and that it should not be used by government as a method of taxation to fund various necessary projects. I agree entirely with the Member, and I am pretty sure that the deputy First Minister and I would be agreeable to making known our views, and, I hope, the views of the House, to the Department for

Culture, Media and Sport before any announcement is made.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the First Minister for his answer. Does he agree that this could have a hugely negative impact on the community and voluntary sector and damage many projects that are under way?

Mr P Robinson: Unquestionably, it will. Even in the last year, the Big Lottery Fund has, I think, made about 500 awards in Northern Ireland, totalling about £4.5 million. On top of that, it has assisted in granting about 800 organisations in Northern Ireland, ranging from community groups to some of the more strategic partnerships. Most of us will know that there was an intention on the part of the Big Lottery Fund to have a new programme on people in communities at the beginning of next year. If there is a change to the awards that it is permitted to make, it is likely that the people in communities project could be the first victim.

Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan: Financial Package

T2. **Mr Givan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the financial package from the United Kingdom Government that was presented in last week's agreement. (AQT 3162/11-16)

Mr Givan: May I associate myself with the warm tributes that have been paid to the First Minister? Peter Robinson's career has spanned three generations of my family. Like him, my grandfather was a founding member. I thank him for the legacy that he has left us: he has left Northern Ireland more secure than ever before within the Union.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Givan: I thank him, too, personally, for the support and the opportunity that he has given to me. It has been a privilege to serve with him in the Assembly.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for the comments. It has been somewhat of a surreal experience. It is almost as if one was dead and listening to the obituary, but I am, I hope, still very much alive, and will remain so for some time to come.

I suppose that the reference to three generations is another way of saying, "Peter,

you are very old." [Laughter.] On the issue of the finances of the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan, we should, first of all, remember that this is our second bite at this cherry because we did get a significant financial package previously. Some people unkindly and wrongly referred to it as being a bit of smoke and mirrors because of the £2 billion spending plan. It was a substantial amount of money and was not all direct funding; it did have that element of borrowing. What some people — those who probably do not have a great deal of financial knowledge — probably did not realise was that, even though it was borrowing, it was immediately making available to us real cash because of the savings in our spending, particularly as a result of the voluntary exit scheme.

This new package amounts to around £560 million. It ranges particularly across those issues that will help the PSNI on security and paramilitary matters. It also has the invest-to-save element for fraud and error. The modest figure that has been put down for our savings in that is £150 million. I have to say that the earlier assessments that we had from DSD and DFP were considerably more than that, but time alone will tell what that turns out to be.

All in all, this makes a substantial additional element of funding available to the Executive. It allowed us, at our last Executive meeting, to clear the paper that the Finance Minister brought to us on the November monitoring round. It is very clear that, without any difficulty, we will be able to make ends meet this year.

Mr Givan: Thank you, First Minister. In the run-up to the agreement, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party made apocalyptic claims that we were mortgaging our children's future to the tune of some £0.5 billion. In the light of the reality of the financial package around the agreement, would the First Minister like to comment on Mr Nesbitt's economic analysis?

Mr P Robinson: This one is a bit of an open goal to kick at, really. I think that I will resist the temptation.

Some Members: Go on. Go on.

Mr P Robinson: It is sufficient to say that while the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party was absolutely sure that this would be borrowing and that our children and our children's children would have to pay for decades to come, not one penny of this additional funding is borrowing. It is all money that is available to

the Executive and which our children will not have to pay for. What our children would have to pay for is the futility of those who cannot see that the future of Northern Ireland rests on our having a shared future, moving forward together, trying to get stability in Northern Ireland and ensuring that we have an era of peace and prosperity for all those who we represent.

Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

T3. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the commission on flags, identity, culture and tradition should give meaningful consideration to the inclusion of our cultures and identities in public symbols, similar to that being discussed in New Zealand. (AQT 3163/11-16)

Ms McCorley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Agus guím gach rath ar an Chéad-Aire san am atá le teacht. I thank the First Minister for his answers, and I, too, wish him well for the future.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for the Member's remarks. Within the agreement and implementation plan, it is agreed that the commission should be set up before March 2016, I think, but that the advertising for it should occur before the end of December. The purpose of that group is to go around Northern Ireland to speak directly to people, open up debate and have a conversation with the people of Northern Ireland about those issues which have dogged society for so long.

I think that we need to have a better understanding of the position that we each have. There are deep-seated differences in Northern Ireland about identity, culture and other matters. The way to break down those differences is to ensure that we have an understanding. I hope that the meetings and engagements that will take place will do so in a positive spirit, where people are indicating how important their positions are rather than trying to live off bringing down somebody else's tradition and background. Let us try to have the best of our two traditions rather than enmity between them.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The First Minister said that those engagements should be positive. Does he agree that it is also very important that they are inclusive and respectful?

Mr P Robinson: They will be meaningless if they are not inclusive. There is no advantage in

going out to get people's views and to cut off any particular interest simply because it does not accord with the view of someone on the panel that is looking at the issue. The engagements must be inclusive and, if we are to truly benefit from them, we need to respect and understand other people's views. What hope would there be if we wanted to have our own positions respected and understood but were not prepared to give that same degree of respect and understanding to others?

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn. I call Mr David McIlveen.

Fresh Start at Stormont

T5. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that, in his many years of service, the First Minister will have become accustomed to naysayers, even when something very good has been on the table, whether the First Minister agrees that last week's agreement really does represent a fresh start at Stormont. (AQT 3165/11-16)

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, want to pay tribute to the First Minister for the four faithful decades of service he has given to this Province of ours. I have no hesitancy in saying that when books are being written about Mr Robinson, many of his critics will be lucky to get a footnote. I want to pay tribute to him in the strongest possible terms and wish him every blessing for his retirement.

Mr P Robinson: I thank my friend for his remarks. There will always be people who have genuine misgivings about agreements that are reached, and there will be those who decide before an agreement is ever reached that they have misgivings about it. Even before the agreement was written, some references were being made about how unacceptable it was. However, it is worth pointing out to those people that, ultimately, the electorate in Northern Ireland will judge whether it wants to have wreckers deciding the future of Northern Ireland or whether it wants to invest its future in the hands of those who genuinely want to make a fist of the most difficult circumstances to move Northern Ireland forward.

I believe that we have done that in the agreement that has been reached. It has not ducked the very critical issues that were causing the Assembly and the Executive to collapse. It has dealt with welfare reform, paramilitarism and budgetary issues and we have found ways to improve the way in which the Assembly and the Executive function.

There are issues that are still to be resolved and we have not tried to hide that, but even on those, we made progress. I hope that, in the time to come, we can make still further progress.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answer. He touched on the issue of paramilitary activity. Does he agree that the provisions in the Stormont Agreement offer, perhaps, the most comprehensive package of measures ever to deal with paramilitary activity in our Province?

Mr P Robinson: They do, unquestionably, and I do not think that anybody could take away from that fact. What I find most positive about the section on paramilitarism is that we have agreements that everybody in the House can sign up to. It is about standing together against paramilitarism in all its emanations. It is about having principles that we are all agreed on. We have put down a set of principles that are not just for Ministers to take when they go into office — although they will be part of the ministerial code's Pledge of Office — but for every Member of the Assembly to take.

There are key actions. You will have a task force that will take the drive against paramilitary criminality. You will have a strategy being brought forward by a panel for the total disbandment and the end of all of the structures of paramilitary organisations. You will have a monitoring and assessment body that will be able to look at the progress that is being made, and you will have the very considerable resources being made available, which I referred to earlier and which will help it do the task that it has to undertake. That whole range of issues shows that, with the goodwill of all the parties in the House, we can really make progress and, I trust, have the end of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland once and for all.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson. I am afraid that we only have time for your question, not a supplementary.

Organ Donation: Soft Opt-out System

T6. **Mrs Dobson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister still supports the campaign to bring a soft opt-out organ donation system to Northern Ireland. (AQT 3166/11-16)

Mr P Robinson: The Member knows my view on wanting to drive up the number of people who are willing to donate organs in our society. The Minister has already answered for the Department in that matter. There is a letter from clinicians, and I am very much aware that there are dangers when politicians try to tell the medical professionals what is best in their area. The outcome that I want to see is more organ donation. I do not run away from the issues in the Bill. There is some concern that the Bill as it is presently worded may not have the outcomes that are being suggested. Whatever it does, I think that it is incumbent on all of us — I am happy to leave my trust in the Health Minister in this respect — to ensure that we get the very best result for those who do need organs and have them available when they are needed. I trust that, whatever mechanism is used to bring that about, it will have that outcome.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. Time is up. Best wishes, First Minister. Thank you very much.

Some Members: Hear, hear. *[Applause.]*

Social Development

Mr Speaker: We move on to questions to the Minister for Social Development. I cannot promise you a round of applause.

I call Mr John McCallister. *[Interruption.]* I call Mr John McCallister. Let us move on.

Just because we need the extra time, I will give you that amount of grace. Pay attention, please. John McCallister.

Social Housing: Allocation

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the current process for allocating social housing. (AQO 9143/11-16)

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): Thank you, John, for eventually getting to question 1. The current housing selection scheme has been in place since 2000. A consultation published in 2011 by the Housing Executive suggested four changes to the scheme. My predecessor took the view that a more fundamental review of the scheme was required, and this has been taken forward by my Department in close discussion with the Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. It is clear

from this review that there is strong support for many aspects of the current scheme. However, it is also clear that, after 15 years in operation, the scheme may benefit from some changes to make it operationally more effective.

Independent research was commissioned by my Department to consider the operation of the scheme in Northern Ireland, examples of good practice elsewhere and recommendations for change. This research was made available with a number of recommendations that would significantly alter the current scheme. The research was published by my Department for discussion in 2013, and, last year, I published a summary of the responses. I am of the view that changes are needed to the current scheme to ensure that those in the greatest objective need are prioritised and to ensure that the common waiting list operates smoothly and effectively to enable those who are in the greatest housing need to access accommodation.

I am continuing to give my consideration to the proposals for change as they develop and to ensure that any proposals are supported by evidence of the need for, and benefits of, changes to the scheme. My officials are working with the Housing Executive to consider the evidence available. Any proposals will be presented to the Social Development Committee as soon as possible.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Sorry for being momentarily distracted.

I welcome the Minister's reply and the fact that he is looking at the issue. He will know that I have raised with him in private the point about when a family's circumstances change. Should we move to a model more like the one in the rest of the country, whereby housing allocation is reviewed after a set time? I think that, in other parts of the country, it is reviewed after seven years. Should we not look at and give serious consideration to a model that looks at changes in circumstances but does not necessarily seek to remove people from social houses, and consider whether the current model is most appropriate model for housing allocation, given the stresses on it?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his interest in the issue. We, as Members of the House, have to deal with it day and daily in our constituency offices, as people seek to find appropriate accommodation and, in some cases, accommodation.

This question is always asked: will housing need to continue to feature in the allocation

process? That is a fundamental question that we need answered. There are no proposals at this time to move away from prioritising housing need. The research found that there is strong and continued support for the prioritisation of applications and the allocation of accommodation primarily on the basis of housing need. Stakeholders agreed that there was, and needed to be, a continual debate on how well the current system captures objective housing need. The work that we have done to date and the recommendations that we are considering are all part of how we can come to an agreed position. I say that for this reason: I am concerned that this will become another very divisive issue. There is nothing more sensitive, and there is nothing that could be more easily used by others for all the wrong reasons to generate opposition and strife around an issue on which there should be general, broad acceptance, which is ensuring that we meet the needs of people in need of priority housing.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his sincerity in appreciating just how important social housing is. Given that housing associations have been with us now for more than 20 years and are a mixed bag — some of them are good, while some of them have come before the Public Accounts Committee for all the wrong reasons — is the Minister of a mind to consider giving the Housing Executive responsibility for providing some social housing in the future?

Mr Storey: During the journey that I have been on for the past number of months, I have endeavoured to work with all the housing providers that we have. Housing is a very complex issue, and it is not solely down to one organisation. I appreciate the work that has been done, although there are times when we have had our differences with the Housing Executive and the housing associations.

Let us remember, however, that we also need the other providers, be they co-ownership or private sector. I said recently at the Federation of Housing Associations annual conference that I want to work continually and collectively with all the housing providers to give the best outcome. What is the best outcome? It is to continue to provide good-quality homes. Consideration should be given to the Member's point. However, he will also have to appreciate that I am trying to move a number of organisations at different paces and at different times. I have rehearsed the point that the one objective for them collectively is to keep the focus on the delivery of good-quality homes, because that is the one thing that will transform and change our society. We have had many

examples in Northern Ireland of when we have delivered good-quality housing for our communities and our people.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Does the Minister acknowledge that, under the current points system, there is a distinct group, namely our armed forces, who are not getting the necessary priority in housing and, indeed, the support that they deserve when they return to Civvy Street?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Under the current housing selection scheme, priority is awarded on the basis of objective housing need, as we have said. Points will be awarded where the applicant or a member of the applicant's household is returning to civilian life at the end of their service in the armed forces and no suitable alternative accommodation is available or the applicant could not reasonably be expected to seek such accommodation.

Points will also be awarded where the applicant or a member of the applicant's household is the widow or civil partner of a recently deceased serviceman or servicewoman and is no longer eligible for married or other service quarters and no suitable alternative accommodation is available or the applicant could not reasonably be expected to seek such accommodation. I have no plans at this stage to increase the number of points awarded to people who have left the armed forces, but the armed forces covenant proposes that members of the armed forces community should have the same access to benefits and social housing as many other citizens and should not be disadvantaged by the requirement for mobility whilst in service. My Department's policies, I trust, accurately reflect that aspiration.

Mr McNarry: The Minister quite rightly pointed out how this issue can be divisive, and one would hope that all efforts would be made to prevent that. Have we reached a position where, in order to increase understanding regarding housing provision, we might need to redefine what he calls "the need" these days?

Mr Storey: That is what I was trying to say in terms of the consultation that was published back in 2011. At that stage, the Housing Executive had suggested four changes to the scheme, and my predecessor brought forward the fundamental review of the scheme. I do not think that any of these things ever stay static. It is easy to come to this House and to refer to reviews and strategies and all of that, but the reality for us all is how we respond to this and

how the response is given to our constituents and the Member's constituents who come to him on that particular issue. I assure the Member that we are giving serious consideration as to how we can make improvements where they can be made in a way that benefits and is in the best interests of people seeking quality homes.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Peter Weir, I inform Members that question 8 has been withdrawn within the appropriate protocols.

Queen's Parade, Bangor: Update

2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Queen's Parade regeneration scheme in Bangor. (AQO 9144/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. My Department stepped in and is taking forward a major comprehensive development scheme in Bangor town centre. This long-awaited and much-anticipated scheme will transform the town centre, bringing many new jobs, homes, shops and offices, and it will act as a major attraction for visitors. There is widespread support for my Department's actions, and officials regularly meet with statutory bodies, elected members, local business and community representatives to keep them informed about the process.

My officials, in partnership with the council, are on target to appoint a private-sector developer, who will be responsible for constructing the scheme in September 2016. The estimated cost of the scheme is £60 million, and it will be financed by the private sector. In March this year, my Department attained planning approval for a scheme that will provide in excess of 25,000 square metres of floor space. The new development includes residential, retail, commercial and hotel accommodation, restaurants, cafes, a courtyard plaza and public open space on Marine Gardens. The proposals will complement the public realm works, which are nearing completion, and restore the area into an attractive, vibrant, inclusive place for everyone to enjoy, and enhance the reputation of the town as a key tourist and shopping destination in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Weir: I welcome the Minister's response and the work that has been ongoing between his Department and local stakeholders, particularly the local council. What is the anticipated timescale for the start of the project?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member and concur with him on the benefit that this will bring to Bangor, which is a place that we all enjoy visiting. We have many happy memories of being in that seaside town, and I trust that these works will make a huge contribution to that experience for many others. The granting of the planning permission was a key step in the development of this process. I want to pay tribute to the council, not only for its financial contribution but for the work that it has done with my Department. We are working closely with the council and hope to appoint a private-sector development partner in September 2016 to take forward the proposals. It is estimated that ground works will commence about 12 to 18 months after the appointment of the developer.

Mr Cree: Minister, can you confirm to the House whether all the property has been acquired at this stage and whether there will be a development brief, as we used to know it?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. I can inform him that the majority of the property is now in the ownership of my Department. My officials have been negotiating with the three remaining property owners for a number of months to achieve agreement by mutual consent. Negotiations are ongoing. However, it is unlikely that agreement will be reached for all the properties, and the Department has issued intention-to-vest notices to the remaining property owners. My Department also requested a public inquiry into the decision to adopt a development scheme for Queen's Parade and the issue of vesting notices, and that is set for February 2016. A final decision on making and enacting the vesting order will be made following the public inquiry.

Public Realm Improvements: Lagan Valley

3. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Social Development, following the completion of the public realm scheme in Lisburn city centre, to outline any further public realm improvements planned for Lagan Valley. (AQO 9145/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. I attended the launch event for the newly completed Lisburn public realm scheme earlier this month and was impressed with the transformation brought about in the city centre, especially the event space in Market Square. I thank the Member and his colleagues for the hospitality that they showed me when we came to Lisburn city centre bearing good news.

The Lisburn public realm scheme was designed to create a world-class space with unique and interesting features and was introduced to showcase the retail offering in the city and to improve the pedestrian experience by reducing the dominance of the car in the city's streets. The transformed environment will be a great driver for investment, tourism and economic prosperity. The poor-quality environment in a number of streets in the city centre has become even more apparent following the recent public realm improvements, demonstrating that there is need for further intervention. My Department, in conjunction with the council, is exploring this potential in considering a Lisburn linkages project that would see public realm improvement works to the streets that link to the Market Square and Bow Street area. Naturally, the project will be subject to the necessary positive economic appraisal and to the availability of future finance.

Looking beyond Lisburn in the Lagan Valley constituency, I hope shortly to announce the appointment of a consultancy team to deliver a transportation assessment for Dromore town centre. My Department will continue to work with the council and its officers to identify suitable projects that could be taken forward in the main urban towns in the Member's constituency.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. He should know that he is always welcome in Lagan Valley, especially when he brings the departmental chequebook, which we hope is opened again in due course. We, too, in Lagan Valley hope that the public realm scheme will act as a stimulus. There are already new shops opening, and we trust that that will continue to be the case.

The Minister will be familiar with the Laganbank quarter development, a project for which the council has developed a master plan.

Is this a scheme that the Department would be able to come on board with and support?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member and concur with his comments. In the way in which these schemes and projects are delivered, it is vital that we have a working relationship with the local council. We have seen delivery in what has been achieved in this scheme.

He referred to the Laganbank Quarter development scheme, a key development project identified in the Lisburn master plan. My Department considers that scheme to be in the public interest in order to achieve the proper

planning of the area and as an impetus to the revitalisation of Lisburn city centre as a whole. It was on that basis that the notice of intention to adopt a development scheme in the Laganbank Quarter area was published in the local press during the last two weeks of February 2015. The 28-day objection period that followed attracted one representation. My Department, in conjunction with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, intends to appoint a consultancy team to support the bringing forward of a high-quality regeneration scheme on the proposed sites in the Laganbank Quarter area of the city of Lisburn.

Mr Allister: Minister, what lessons were learned from the Lisburn scheme, which was notorious in its delays etc? My reason for asking is that, judging by the volume of complaints that I am now receiving about the scheme in Ballymena, there seems to have been a dearth of lessons learned, in that delays and huge inconvenience seem to be the order of the day.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Like him, I trust, I try to learn lessons. You always learn from revitalisation schemes and public realm works. There was some connectivity between those involved in one scheme and the other. He made reference to Ballymena in our North Antrim constituency. That is an ongoing situation, and, as he will probably know, that work has ceased for the Christmas period, as was agreed, and will recommence on 6 January, I think.

In these schemes, whether in Lisburn, Ballymena or any other part of Northern Ireland, you can always learn lessons. Maybe that is a lesson that the Member should take to heart.

Affordable Warmth Scheme

4. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the delivery of the affordable warmth scheme across each council area. (AQO 9146/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. The affordable warmth scheme is a new and innovative approach to tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. The scheme is delivered in partnership with the 11 local councils and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. All 11 councils have shown full commitment to the scheme and, as well as assessing homes for affordable warmth, they have been able to introduce other council services such as home safety checks.

The affordable warmth scheme's focus is on helping those in the most severe fuel poverty by targeting them directly and installing measures to increase energy efficiency in their homes. This approach has been endorsed by leading fuel poverty experts in academia and lobbying organisations. The targeted nature of the scheme means that there is no need to take any additional measures to maximise take-up as local councils have extensive lists of potentially eligible homes to visit.

Almost £9 million in affordable warmth scheme grants has been approved to improve the energy efficiency of homes in the most severe fuel poverty. Those homes are receiving cavity and loft insulation, new and improved heating systems, and even replacement windows if needed.

My Department has recognised that it is taking longer than anticipated to process applications. The Housing Executive is carrying out an urgent review of the process, aimed at streamlining it, whilst maintaining financial and eligibility assurance levels. Some changes have already been made that will speed up the process. My Department will carry out a comprehensive end-of-year review to examine performance to date and scheme qualifying conditions and to process effectiveness and delivery arrangements, including the potential for easier access to installers.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his response. I understand that the 11 councils are committed to the scheme. Has he any suggestions for the councils that have not taken up the scheme as much as others so that delivery can be improved? It is such a popular scheme, and we should try to get a geographical balance.

Mr Storey: We all have a duty to do that, and I encourage Members to do so in their constituency offices. However, the council should be the first port of call because we have now been able to secure the involvement and inclusion of, and a working relationship with, the 11 councils. When any new scheme is put in place, issues will always be identified. It goes back to an earlier question: can we learn any lessons? We are learning lessons as we go through the new affordable warmth scheme.

Some time ago, I had the opportunity to visit a number of homes, some in very remote areas, that have benefited from the scheme. One issue that was raised is how we address rural areas in particular. I visited some of those particularly rural locations and spoke to people in isolated areas whose homes have benefited

from substantial works, including new heating systems and loft insulation. Rather than doing just one element of work to a property, a more holistic approach has been adopted, and that has been beneficial. I encourage Members to urge those with whom they are in contact in councils to make more information on the scheme available to people.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he confirm when the review of the affordable warmth scheme will be completed and implemented? What are the expected outcomes of the review?

Mr Storey: That goes back to an earlier answer. When you look at any scheme, you can always learn from past experience. I do not want the review to last very long or to be protracted. I trust that, as we go through the review process, we will soon be able to identify where we can make useful and valuable changes so that, as I said to the Member who asked the previous question, we can enhance the scheme so that people will want to become part of it. We can, therefore, increase the number of people who become eligible and take up the scheme, as was intended in the first place.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The scheme has been very successful in my constituency. I commend the council for its work with the public on processing applications. Mr Newton asked the question that I intended to ask, but it is important to keep the scheme under review in order to ensure that those who are most in need get the most effective delivery.

Mr Storey: One question that is asked about the review is whether it will include an eligibility threshold. All regular household income, including DLA, is used to calculate a householder's income for the affordable warmth scheme. The personal independence payment (PIP) is not currently payable in Northern Ireland, but it will be soon with the passage of the welfare Bill. Consideration will have to be given to the treatment of PIP when the decision is reached regarding its introduction. However, my Department will review the affordable warmth scheme after one full year of operation, and we are coming close to that now. The review will include consideration of what is treated as income in order to qualify for the scheme, while maintaining a focus on those in the most severe fuel poverty.

We need to keep those people as our focus so that we get tangible outcomes.

3.15 pm

In the past, some of these schemes were looked upon just as a means of getting something, but it is about what the purpose of getting that something is. The purpose, in this instance, is to reduce fuel poverty and to enhance properties that have very poor insulation and, in some cases, no suitable heating arrangements.

As the Member knows, very rural areas, such as those in her constituency, have not benefited as a result of previous schemes. That is why we endeavoured to give this scheme a wider reach and took a thematic approach to the original information that informed it. All those things will be reconsidered as part of the review.

Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update of his Department's work on the vulnerable persons relocation scheme for Syrian refugees. (AQO 9147/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question on what is a very important issue. I ask that all Members give me and my Department, as well as the Office of the First and deputy First Minister, every assistance in dealing with the issue.

Work on the vulnerable persons relocation scheme is progressing well. My Department participates in the strategic planning group led by OFMDFM. A senior official from my Department leads an operational planning group made up of key stakeholders from central and local government and organisations in the voluntary sector that have expertise in supporting refugees.

Weekly meetings are taking place to draw up detailed plans for the arrival of the first group of refugees in Northern Ireland. All agencies involved are content that Northern Ireland will be ready for their expected arrival in December.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. Have there been any discussions with OFMDFM about potential community relations problems? Is it the intention that the refugees should be clustered, if I may use that word, or dispersed across Northern Ireland?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The operational planning

group, for which my Department is responsible, and OFMDFM are in ongoing discussions with a number of organisations. I am very aware of the challenges. I have to say that I have been disgusted by some comments that I have seen recently, particularly on social media. We are nearing Christmas, and the message of Christmas, of course, is the coming of the one who is the Prince of Peace with goodwill that we are called to extend to others in circumstances that none of us can comprehend. I had further discussions about the issue this morning and take a very personal interest. I believe that it is incumbent on us as an Executive, and as a community, to make our contribution to this national scheme and to keep as our focus the fact that we are dealing with real people who have real needs.

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

Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015

T1. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister for Social Development, further to last Wednesday's legislative consent motion debate, to confirm what provisions in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 have been agreed in principle between Sinn Féin and the DUP or at least to confirm that he will fulfil the commitment that he made to Mr Attwood during the legislative consent motion (LCM) debate to provide him with the details in writing. (AQT 3171/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. She is absolutely correct: her party colleague Mr Attwood, who I have paid tribute to in this House during that debate and in previous debates, wrote to me, and I can confirm that I will respond to him. Indeed, I have a copy of the response in front of me, and I will forward it to Mr Attwood later today.

The Member rightly raises the question of how we move this situation forward. There are some in this House who would have liked us to have failed, who would have liked us to be in a situation where we did not find a resolution to an issue that was causing real concern at the heart of these institutions. What happened last week with a Fresh Start was that it became a way for that new arrangement to be put in place to deal with this particular problem. As we can see from what is happening today in the House of Commons, progress is being made. I look forward to the successful conclusion of the debate on the Bill in the House of Commons and then reaching a point where work on the implementation can begin.

Mrs McKeivitt: The Minister will respect that some Members of this House are concerned by elements of the deal, particularly around welfare. There will be a benefits freeze, and, over the next four years, inflation will also mean that households on benefits will see reduced moneys. Will that reduce significantly in real terms the amount of top-up award recommended by Eileen Evason?

Mr Storey: None of us would seek to underestimate how difficult this has been and how challenging it will be in the future. I accept that that is, in part, one reason why we have had an impasse over past months. I have given assurances to Members who have concerns, including the Member's colleague and party, on numerous occasions.

I believe that one issue missing from the introduction of welfare reform in England in particular was a coordinated implementation. Coordination in policy implementation was missing, but I still believe that the policy intent is right. We must ensure that welfare does not become something that people are just subjected to for the rest of their lives. We must ensure that they are not imprisoned in a welfare system. Unfortunately, there are those who, due to one set of circumstances or another, are highly unlikely to be able to get off benefits, so we have to ensure that the welfare net is there to protect them. However, it should not become a barrier that prevents people from making further advancement.

As to the roll out of the policy over the next months and years, I am determined, as whoever succeeds me must be, that it will be done in a way that keeps those people for whom the system was made at the heart of all that we seek to do. Will that be a challenge? Yes. Will that create difficulties along the way? Yes. However, as we have proved in the past, if we are presented with those difficulties and challenges, we are more than up to addressing them.

Portrush: Redevelopment Update

T2. Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Social Development, after welcoming the announcement at the end of last week of investment of £1.5 million for Portstewart and telling him that he is welcome to come back to East Londonderry with an attitude like that, for an update from the ministerial subgroup on the redevelopment of the harbour, the relocation of the train station and the identification of a site for a new hotel just around the corner in Portrush. (AQT 3172/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. It seems that I am always welcome when I bring money, and I am not so welcome when the coffers are empty. However, I was delighted to be in Portstewart in the Member's constituency last week to announce a £1.5 million regeneration of the promenade there. I know that there are some Members of this House who probably spend more time on the promenade at Portstewart than in their own constituency and who will particularly welcome the enhancement of Portstewart.

When we go to Portrush, I think there are those who will welcome the fact that the announcement in relation to the Open Championship offers a major opportunity to ensure that there is sustainable development of the tourism product in Portrush and the north coast. It is my intention that a paper will be brought to the Executive very soon that will set out the programme of regeneration works for Portrush. The proposal for its delivery has been issued to my colleagues in the Executive. I want to ensure that Portrush is in the right place at the right time for taking advantage of the Open.

I also say to the Member that it is not just about Portrush. It is about the north coast and about Northern Ireland. Let us remember the huge influx of people there will be and the interest there will be in the most prestigious golf tournament that the world knows.

Ms Sugden: The Minister is always welcome to the prom for a Morelli's at any time. There is speculation around the Dunluce Centre site being a possible location for a hotel. Will the Minister confirm if that is an option he is considering?

Mr Storey: There is a piece of work that has been carried out, which I have just taken possession of, which sets out the potential options. The Member will be aware that there were some concerns by other hoteliers that something might come to Portrush that would in some way disadvantage them. I have now received that scoping exercise, which has been concluded. It states that Portrush would be able to accommodate a new four-star hotel and a boutique hotel. What I want to do now is have conversations with the council, local representatives and other hoteliers in the area, because I am equally conscious that competition is welcome in many cases. However, it has to be done in a way that is sensitive.

I greatly appreciate the contribution that many in the hotel and restaurant industry have made to the revitalisation of Portrush in recent times. I remember, going back not that many years ago, that Portrush was a place where you would not have felt very comfortable on a Saturday night because of the activities that went on late at night; but that image and that situation has changed completely, and Portrush has now become a vibrant local economy — a night economy that is growing. A key component of that will be the consideration of a new hotel as set out in the document.

Mr Speaker: Mr Adrian McQuillan is not in his place. I understand that his office was in touch, but was too late for the proper notification, but at least let me acknowledge that the contact was made.

Royal Exchange Project

T4. **Mr Ó Muilleoir** asked the Minister for Social Development, following last week's announcement, to pledge that he will be the Minister to get the Royal Exchange project moving, given that he was in public office in 1995 when it first came on the scene, albeit that the Minister was probably at primary school, and, since then, it has not made the progress that was hoped — in fact, it has been an albatross around Belfast's neck. (AQT 3174/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. The Department did give careful consideration before terminating the Royal Exchange agreement with Leaside Investments Ltd, with our overriding aim to ensure that the north-east quarter of the city, including Royal Exchange, is developed for the maximum economic benefit for everyone. I can give the Member a personal commitment in the House today that I remain committed to transforming that part of the city, which has been in a state of disrepair for many years. I have asked my officials to explore how a statutory development scheme for the area can help establish an appropriate mix of uses. We will continue to work in partnership with stakeholders across the statutory, community, political and business sectors to make sure that we deliver the best scheme possible.

3.30 pm

I also say to the Member that that will include the city council. I have already had discussions with the city council because, as with Royal Exchange and other programmes that the council has — you know that it has set out its own plans for the future — it has to be done in

consultation with the Department, the council and public representatives for the area. That is so that we can continue to build on the success that is our capital city and see progress made in a way that deals with areas that need to be addressed, such as Royal Exchange, as the Member rightly identified.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire. Thanks to the Minister for his answer. I particularly welcome the commitment to work in partnership with Belfast City Council, because I have been heartened by its investment plans to regenerate the city centre. Does the Minister also agree that Royal Exchange does not need to be a retail-led development? Retail will be a part of it, but we should also factor in the Ulster University, which is now in the city centre, and, of course, culture and arts.

Mr Storey: Yes, I agree. This is where both the council and the Department need to be innovative in the way that they sometimes look at situations. We get easily criticised for never doing enough, and questions have been asked in the House about other locations, such as why do we not do this in a certain way. We have to come to a sensible conclusion that sometimes we need to identify what is best for that area and how it ties in with all the other elements of what is going on around it. The Member is absolutely right to refer to the university that is now located in that area. The Cathedral Quarter is not far away. Those are among the various elements that make up a very attractive and what has become a vibrant part of the city. This could add to that, and there is no guarantee that we will say that this should be retail only. It has to be a mix in a way that provides for that area.

Advice Sector: Additional Resources

T5. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Social Development what additional resources he intends to provide to the advice sector for the remainder of this mandate. (AQT 3175/11-16)

Mr Storey: Since coming into office, we have, first of all, endeavoured as best we can to protect the budget that the advice sector has had. I value very much the way in which my Department and I depend on the advice sector to give people advice in an independent way that is apart from government. For example, in relation to mortgage advice, we increased the budget by something like 50% because we felt that, given the particular challenges to families and people struggling with their mortgage, it

was vital that early intervention, information and mortgage advice were made available.

In terms of other advice, the Member will be aware, having been a Minister herself, that at this time of the year we all start to look to our budgets for next year. We have the comprehensive spending review, about which we will undoubtedly be given more detail on Wednesday in the House of Commons. I have to take into consideration all of those challenges. I say to the Member that I value the independent advice sector and the work that it does. We have endeavoured to ensure that that is reflected in the money that we give to it.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry; there is not time for a supplementary. That brings us to the end of Question Time. Thank you very much, Minister.

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the first part of Question Time, when junior Minister Ms Pengelly was answering some questions, she referred to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister just as "Office of First Minister". I think that this House will be aware that no such office exists; it is a joint office and its full title is OFMDFM. I understand that it was Ms Pengelly's first Question Time. That said, she has worked at some level in that office for a significant time. Will the Speaker make sure that this does not happen again?

Mr Speaker: The Member has the matter now well and truly on the record. What we will do is observe this situation.

I believe and hope that we are moving beyond the point of people being petty. The fact is that, if people know the proper title of the office, it should be adhered to. In the particular circumstances, I do not feel that there is any need for me to take the matter any further.

I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Committee Business

European Social Fund

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges the important role of the European social fund in delivering essential support and services to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; recognises the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sectors in the administration of the current and previous programmes; and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to learn from its mistakes and to ensure that it works in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver, efficiently and effectively, the European social fund programme. — [Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning).]

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): In winding on the motion, I thank everyone for their contributions.

It is fair to say that no one in the Chamber is in any doubt about the importance and value of the European social fund (ESF) in providing assistance to communities and organisations as they have sought to provide programmes across all our constituencies aimed at increasing the skills levels in the workforce and reducing economic inactivity. However, as the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Swann, mentioned, the ending of the 2007-2013 programme and the commencement of the 2014-2020 programme has caused many difficulties for the community and voluntary sector. Indeed, many groups found themselves in a dire financial position and uncertain of the way forward owing to the Department's delay in payment of invoices and the lack of clarity, the confusion and the inconsistencies around the incoming programme. That is why, in his opening remarks, the Chairman reflected on the issue's importance to the Committee, in that it met with departmental officials and the Minister on 14 separate occasions in the past two years, and, in turn, the Minister acknowledged the influence that the Committee had on his Department in seeking to address some of the concerns.

At this juncture, I want to thank the Minister. I know that he has got a bit of a bashing in the Chamber today, but, whenever things were difficult, the Minister always came to the Committee, gave us an update on the situation

at that moment and took the hard questions. We have to acknowledge that and give credit where it is due. However, the Department still has to learn from the mistakes and put in place mechanisms that will deal with the situation so that it does not happen again. The community and voluntary sector delivers excellent work, and we cannot have it struggling for cash and for clarity on the way forward simply because of a fault in the Department.

In reflecting on what the Members who contributed to the debate said, I note that the Chair talked about the slow process of vouching for the current programme and urged the Minister to reflect on that. The Chair also spoke about the requirement for tutors under the programme to receive a qualification from the Ulster University (UU) and expressed some concern about that. He also talked about the two judicial reviews and asked where they were at at the moment. When the Minister responded, I noted that he did not give an answer to that. A number of contributors talked about the 50% of funding up front, but, again, there are questions around that: is it short-term funding or is it for the duration of the programme? I would like clarification from the Minister on that.

My colleague Sydney Anderson highlighted the dependence that the community and voluntary sector has on the funding and how it felt a sense of injustice at the Department's handling of the situation. However, he did acknowledge the additional resources being used by the Department to administer the fund and questioned whether accredited training programmes had been delivered for staff.

The Minister mentioned at the Committee that accredited training programmes would be delivered for staff but, again, we are none the wiser on whether that has happened yet.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: Yes.

Dr Farry: I apologise for missing some of the issues. The accelerated payments will be temporary, pending the stabilisation of the situation. We will keep that under review; it is not meant to be the permanent situation and the improvements in processes should lead to efficient payments being the norm in the very near future.

With respect to the judicial reviews, given that they are sub judice, I cannot give a detailed answer, but all will emerge in due course.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for that. He missed the bit about the 50% funding up front and whether that was for the short term or the duration of the programme.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way. That is what I was trying to say. It will be a temporary measure, pending the stabilisation of the payment structures. We will keep it under review but it is not meant to be the permanent situation.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for the clarity on that issue.

Ms McGahan spoke of the role of the women's centres and the important work that they carry out, highlighting their reliance on ESF and the impact that their work has on childcare places in rural areas. She also called on the Department to remove the qualifications gap for participants on the ESF programme.

Mr Maginness quite rightly focused on the difficulties in the application process but he also took time to reflect on the excellent work carried out under the ESF programme. He highlighted the Kickstart to Work programme in the north-west, which is delivered by both councils, and the good partnership approach that it demonstrates. He also drew attention to the slow payment of funds from the closing programme. Almost every Member spoke about the difficulty with the slow process of delivering funds to the community groups.

Ms Lo spoke of the success stories and some of the good work that has been done. She also mentioned the pressures on the Department, noting the competitive nature of the programme, and spoke of her personal knowledge of GEMS NI and the difficulties that it has faced. She noted the Department's willingness to change, acknowledged that the process had seen a number of problems, creating cash-flow problems for organisations, and said that the Minister had acknowledged the frustrations. Acknowledging frustrations is one thing but doing something to address them is another. We need to see action to address the situation that groups find themselves in.

Mr Easton spoke of the range of projects funded under the ESF and reiterated the impact that there has been on communities where groups have failed to gain funding. He highlighted that that impacted on jobs and agreed with Mr Anderson that communication from the Department had failed. He called on the Minister to apologise for that and other failures in the process. He also said that those problems had damaged the Department.

Mr McCann highlighted the many hurdles that groups had to get over to receive the funding. He also highlighted the confusion that surrounded the application process and the failure of the Department to learn from good practice elsewhere. That is a very important point. Why did the Department not look to other Departments for good practice and take a cue from them to try to get over the problem?

Mr Weir spoke of his experience of the community and voluntary sector and highlighted the women's sector for its excellent work. He reiterated the many problems in the application process and spoke of the lack of understanding of the sector in the Department. He drew further attention to the impact on groups and individuals of a failed process. Again, the same message is coming through, and I hope that the Minister and the Department are getting the message that there is a failed process that has caused huge problems across the community and voluntary sector.

Mr Flanagan welcomed the Minister's willingness to rectify the problems in the process but drew attention to the problems in rural communities and said that they were adversely affected by the process. He argued that the delivery of the programmes through a competitive tendering process, rather than directly by DEL, had resulted in a widening of the gap in delivery between urban and rural areas.

Ms Sugden spoke of her concerns about the amount of money owed to groups from the programme. She highlighted changes in the contract arrangements for funders and questioned the legality of that. She requested that the Minister look at the new programme and take responsibility for the shortfalls.

3.45 pm

The Minister acknowledged the administration problems in the process. In mitigation, he spoke of the tight timescales for the process; he also spoke about the competitive nature of the programme and said that it exists for the benefit not of the voluntary and community sector but of the individuals whom it works with. I welcome the Minister's continued engagement in the matter, his continued endeavours to minimise the concerns of Members and the Committee, and his intentions to have the outgoing programme closed by the end of this year. That is very welcome indeed.

I am sure that everyone will agree that this has been a successful and positive debate on a very important issue. Once again, I thank

Members for their contributions and the Minister for his response and clarity during the process. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the important role of the European social fund in delivering essential support and services to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; recognises the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sectors in the administration of the current and previous programmes; and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to learn from its mistakes and to ensure that it works in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver, efficiently and effectively, the European social fund programme.

MLAs: Reduction in Number

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

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the Stormont House Agreement contains a deadline to reduce the number of MLAs from 108 to 90 by 2021 and the number of Executive Departments in time for the 2016 Assembly term; believes that there is an opportunity to reform the size of the Assembly and the number of Executive Departments to the same timescale; and calls on the Executive to ensure any legislation will see that the reduction in the number of MLAs takes places in time for the 2016 elections.

The context of this motion has changed little since the emergence of the so-called Fresh Start deal last week; the fundamental thrust of the motion remains the same. Without doubt, there will be many opportunities to discuss the wider 'Fresh Start' document as a whole and the individual components in it, but the motion that I bring forward today discusses the size of the Assembly. The former Stormont House Agreement committed the Assembly to a reduction in the number of MLAs per constituency from six to five by 2021. Of course, that does not preclude it from happening earlier.

Before and after, some political parties, including mine, advocated that it should occur earlier, particularly taking effect for the May 2016 Assembly elections. However, we now have a situation where the reduction in the number of MLAs is to take effect immediately after the 2016 election. While that might mean at the next scheduled election in 2021, it could also apply to any election called earlier — indeed, to one called as early as the end of June 2016 in the context of the inability to form an Executive after the 2016 election. That strikes me as a case of, "Oh Lord, make me holy, but not just yet".

The principle that the Assembly is too large and needs to be reduced in size has been accepted and is won; there is no debate over that argument any longer. However, what is the reason for delaying its implementation? I can only presume that it is party-political self-interest rather than the public good. There are,

quite simply, no good reasons for delay. It is notable that the Executive are set to proceed with the reduction of Departments with effect from the start of the new mandate. That, of course, is the right thing to do.

However, this process is a significantly more complicated task than a reduction in the number of MLAs. For example, it will involve primary legislation in the Assembly and, in turn, a transfer of functions order. Behind the scenes, a huge amount of work is being conducted by civil servants on the practical issues of finance, human resources, managing the estate and internal restructuring.

By contrast to reducing the number of Departments, reducing the number of MLAs per constituency from six to five only requires passing a simple piece of legislation. Indeed, the Assembly Members (Reduction of Numbers) Bill is annexed to the 'Fresh Start' document. Applying this reduction to the May 2016 election requires only one small change to one clause. While it is important to recognise that anything other than a reduction from six to five Members would involve more complicated legislation at Westminster, including amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, this option for a particular change from six to five per constituency has been given to the Assembly. There is also no practical difficulty in implementation. Reduction in time for the election in May would not cause any difficulty to the Electoral Office or indeed the Electoral Commission. Quite simply, the request is to elect five rather than six Members per constituency. There is no need for any transitional arrangements or phasing arrangements.

Some Members may point to a forthcoming review of parliamentary constituencies and, by extension, Assembly constituencies during the lifetime of this mandate of the Westminster Parliament. There is a suggestion that the number of Northern Ireland constituencies might fall from 18 to 16. However, the legislation on the reduction of MLAs is future-proofed. It will apply in just the same way if there are 18 or 16 parliamentary constituencies. The only difference would be having 90 MLAs or 80 MLAs.

The rationale for this reduction is clear and strong. Northern Ireland is overgoverned. We have substantially more MLAs per head than both Scotland and Wales and overwhelmingly more than the United Kingdom Parliament. Quite simply, the figures speak for themselves. The people of Scotland have one MSP per 40,300 people. The Welsh have one Assembly

Member per 51,000 people. Westminster MPs represent, on average, 98,000 people. By stark comparison, our 108 Assembly Members represent 16,800 constituents each. In addition, we have 460 district councillors in Northern Ireland and 18 MPs. That really does suggest that we are overgoverned. If we were to apply Scotland or Wales's ratios to this Assembly, we would have 44 or 35 MLAs respectively. What is being proposed today is nowhere near that reduction, but it is, in my view and that of the Alliance Party, a step in the right direction.

The experience of both Scotland and Wales shows that somewhat smaller Assemblies do not undermine good governance. They have sufficient Members to provide for effective scrutiny and to people their Committee systems, allowing for proper accountability. Especially in the context of fewer Departments, no one can credibly maintain that we would not have more than enough MLAs to function.

An Assembly of 108 MLAs is also out of context with Northern Ireland's recent past of previous devolved structures. Since the dissolution of the old Stormont House of Commons, we have seen the following bodies with these numbers of Members. Sunningdale set up an Assembly of 78 Members. The Assembly of rolling devolution in the early 1980s contained the same number of seats. The Northern Ireland Forum contained 110, but that was a very different attempt to be inclusive. It seems we have held to this for over 20 years and in the foundations of the agreement that was reached to set up this Assembly.

Six multi-Member constituencies are also an anomaly in terms of the single transferable vote in other jurisdictions. The Republic of Ireland has historically tended to have three-, four- or five-Member constituencies. More locally, we have seen the trend to move away from large multi-member DEAs, and our recent local government elections saw a large number of five-member DEAs. Even within a divided society such as Northern Ireland, six-Member constituencies are more than is required for strong proportionality outcomes. I have read comments on how smaller parties might perform in five-Member constituencies. Based on the last electoral outcome, it would be little different from where they are today. Frankly, PR looks after small parties.

The Alliance Party is concerned about the implications of dropping to below five Members per constituency, but we do not believe that a move to five-Member constituencies would radically alter outcomes. Indeed, we tabled

today's motion as the fifth-largest party in the Assembly. Some might suggest that a reduction would be a bigger risk to us than to any of the four parties that are currently larger than us. However, we are convinced that it is quite simply the right thing to do. Over the next five years, the reduction would also save around £11 million. While that seems relatively modest in the grand scheme of things, every little helps. Like most Members, I could readily produce a list of matters on which we could spend the money.

The wider point is leadership. Many people are already suffering as a consequence of public spending cuts, and we know that many public servants have had their pay and conditions restricted. In that context, I believe that it is critical that the Assembly is seen to show leadership in reducing its own costs. Ultimately, people will simply not understand the political parties that think that it would be a good idea to have this change in place after the next Assembly election but do not think that it is good enough to have it in place in time for the coming Assembly election. The burden of proof lies on those who are arguing for delay, which is why something should happen now.

Mr Weir: In my contribution, I will try to avoid straying into the area of holier than thou, because others in the Chamber may have a certain monopoly on holiness on these issues. While it is perfectly within the rights of any party to select whatever motion they want — I certainly defend their right to do that, irrespective of the subject — I was somewhat bemused to see this motion. Had it not been for complications with the timescale, the debate on the motion could have happened last week or the week before. Why am I bemused? First, the issue was largely settled in the Stormont House Agreement, and, secondly, it was a key subject matter in the current round of talks. It was raised on numerous occasions and was directly on the agenda and raised by the Secretary of State as a topic to which all parties were available. One feels that the right place for a debate and a resolution was in the talks process. It would have been a little bit strange had the issue, which is germane to the talks process, hit the original timetable, been introduced in the middle of the talks process and debated on the Floor.

I take the proposer's moral high ground with a pinch of salt. We are told that the Alliance Party is happy enough with five-Member constituencies. One may come to the conclusion that five Members in the current boundaries may suit the Alliance Party, but it would be a dreadful attack on democracy if we

were to move to a four-seater, even though the proposer indicated that three- and four-seaters were commonplace elsewhere. The cynic in me might suggest that the Alliance Party is grandstanding slightly on the issues that it feels might be numerically to its advantage.

I welcome the fact that there has been some consensus about the size of the Assembly and five-Member constituencies. We have advocated that as a party for a long time. We indicated that the contents of the Stormont House Agreement were a compromise between all parties, as was 'A Fresh Start'. At the time of the Stormont House Agreement, we felt that it should be four-Member constituencies. We believed that what existed was going too far, but we accepted the compromise. From that perspective, as I said, we took what was at Stormont House, and we now have legislation that is being proposed via 'A Fresh Start'. Rather than simply tabling a motion, we committed ourselves directly to legislation.

Unlike some of the Members opposite, we are walking the walk, rather than simply talking the talk.

4.00 pm

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate what the Member is saying and genuinely appreciate his saying that legislation will be brought forward. Therefore, the issue is not the bringing forward of legislation. We are all on common ground on that and, I think, when it comes to the numbers. The question is quite simply this: why not do it now?

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

Mr Weir: The principal reason is probably twofold. Boundary changes have been mentioned. In the spirit in which we adopted the changes to the departmental structures, there was at one stage — I am sure that the recently departed Mr Farry would acknowledge that perhaps we would not have had the same debate had this happened earlier — a midterm proposal to abolish DEL. The feeling was that we needed to come up with a system to which there was no particular emotional attachment or, indeed, party advantage or attachment. The position now is that we will face a review by the Boundary Commission, which is uncertain about the number of seats that there will be.

There is no advantage or disadvantage to any party in the Chamber from facing the Boundary Commission because no one knows whether the outcome will suit any particular party. I suspect that, as tends to be the case in these things, there will be swings and roundabouts: in some areas, it will benefit you; in other areas, it will not.

It strikes us that the appropriate and best time to do that is when we can take what would be two changes — the reduction from six seats to five and the potential change to the number of parliamentary constituencies, which may yet be effected by way of change to the electoral register in England —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No: I have given way once and have only a short time.

It is said that the most dangerous thing is to try to leap a chasm in two leaps. We are committed to our position. Our belief is that it makes sense that, if we are going to make changes, we should make them at the same time, and they would, therefore, take effect from the election after next. By then, the Boundary Commission will have put in place its review, and we will all take our chances with it. Above all, irrespective of the arguments about a particular set of numbers, is the fact that in 'A Fresh Start', we made an agreement — I appreciate that it does not bind the Members who tabled the motion — to try to take things forward for all the people of Northern Ireland, as we did with the Stormont House Agreement that involved compromises for everybody, and we did not necessarily get what we wanted. We will be a party of integrity. We will stick to what we have signed up to in 'A Fresh Start'. The motion runs contrary to what is in that agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: We will, therefore, oppose the motion.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on a reduction in the number of MLAs; a reduction in the number of Departments; and the timescale in which all that takes place. Before dealing with those issues, it is important to caution Members not to major too heavily on quantitative comparisons between the Assembly and the other devolved institutions on these islands. None of those institutions faces

the same difficulties as we do here. None of them was established as a response to 30 years of conflict and the serious fault lines and divisions in society that we have here in the North. That is the context.

Sinn Féin has a relaxed view on the number of Departments. If governance could be enhanced, duplication eradicated, bureaucracy reduced and savings increased by reducing the number of Departments from 12 to nine, it would be difficult to argue against. It is not just the voters who want more streamlined cost-effective government; we also want that. Every Member of the Assembly should welcome any change that brings more efficiency and effectiveness. We also agree that the number of MLAs should be reduced from 108 to 90. That means that there would be five MLAs in each constituency instead of the current six, notwithstanding any Boundary Commission changes.

We depart from the proposers of the motion on when the reduction takes place. The proposers would have it take place before the 2016 Assembly elections. We disagree, and let me explain why. It is important to give context to the current number of MLAs.

One of the criteria that the architects of these institutions were given when they were designing them was that they should be as representative and as inclusive as possible. That is still probably the most important concept for building and sustaining confidence in the institutions. The worry, therefore, is that fewer MLAs would lead to a deficit in representation and inclusiveness.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Yes.

Mr Dickson: I understand what the Member says with regard to confidence in the institutions, but they have been here for some 20 years. Would you not share with me a great deal of disappointment and frustration that you and others have failed to build that confidence?

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

Mr Sheehan: I wonder whether the Member includes himself when he says, "and others".

The fears that I have are assuaged to some extent by the reform of public administration, whereby more powers have been given to councils and d'Hondt is run over a four-year

period rather than over one year, which happened previously. That is welcome, and it enhances the principle of equality. However, there are still some councils in which the concept of equality has yet to be fully implemented.

In the Assembly, the question is whether a reduction in the number of MLAs would have a negative impact on representation or equality. There is, for example, a danger that some constituencies will be left without a nationalist representative in some cases or a unionist representative in others. I suppose that the Alliance Party might not worry about that, but it might also have an impact on that party. More worryingly, research shows that the number and percentage of female representatives will fall if the overall number of MLAs is reduced for the 2016 election. That would be a retrograde result for the Assembly and for inclusiveness and equality. By postponing the overall reduction until 2021, we will give all parties a chance to prepare for that possibility and to ensure equality of opportunity for women in particular in those parties. Sinn Féin, obviously, takes its responsibilities on the issue very seriously; we try to promote women as much as possible in the party. My colleague Caitríona Ruane will deal with that in her contribution to the debate later. It would be the wrong message entirely for the Assembly to send out if, after the 2016 election, there were to be fewer female representatives than there are now. For that reason, I oppose the motion.

Mr Attwood: A number of contributors have already referred to Stormont House. While there remains a dispute about what was or was not agreed there, one matter that was born in Stormont House and was then settled in the discussions afterwards, was how we would manage the issue of the reduction in the number of MLAs. Given that it was a settled matter — you can hear echoes of that in the contributions made by the DUP and Sinn Féin — it should remain a settled matter rather than be revisited on the far side of this motion.

The Assembly institutions and the Executive and their conduct need reform. That is why, light-touch though some of it may be, in March the Executive agreed to mechanisms to ensure that three Ministers would have more authority around the Executive table. That is why some moderate proposals have been made in respect of how to manage a petition of concern and so on and so forth, including the number of Departments. That is all necessary and healthy. Any institution, be it an elected one or any other organisation, that is going to ensure that it lives up to best practice and serves those

whom it seeks to serve needs to keep under constant interrogation and analysis the way in which it conducts its affairs, including its internal operations. That is why we in the SDLP believe that there should be more reform of how the Chamber conducts its affairs.

I will take one moment to give an example. This afternoon, the House of Commons will have a very short number of hours to accelerate through the Welfare Reform Bill that was part and parcel of the legislative consent motion (LCM) last week. That will have an enormous impact on our people, independent of the enormous impact on our people that will arise from London legislating for whatever it is that has or has not been agreed in principle in respect of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill that is currently in Westminster. That is why the SDLP returns to its proposal to have a dedicated welfare reform Committee as part and parcel of the life of these institutions to interrogate how welfare is or is not working in law and practice, not least now, because we have abandoned and surrendered to London our responsibility on those matters up to the end of 2016. The party will write to the authorities in the Chamber and in the Assembly to urge the creation of a welfare reform Committee both as an example of reform and to mitigate what might be coming down the road because of the impact of the LCM. For all those reasons, we welcome the issue of reform, but we think that the motion is overreaching, given that this is a settled matter.

I join Mr Weir and Mr Sheehan in emphasising some of the reasons why, whilst we need to move in the direction of a reduction to five Members per constituency by 2021, this is not the time and place to do so. It seems to me that the proposer gave technical reasons that did not address the points made, especially those made by Mr Sheehan. It is a little-known fact that, when the SDLP had a bigger role in the Assembly through our electoral mandate, it was the SDLP that insisted on the number of Ministers that we will have up until 2016. That was the call made by Seamus Mallon and the SDLP. Why? It was because we wanted to have maximum ownership of and inclusion in the institutions in a situation where exclusion had been part of the culture and practice of some when it came to the conduct of politics and government in Northern Ireland. Therefore, to maintain the principle of inclusion, even though some might have argued that it did not serve the interests of the bigger parties, one of the bigger parties at that stage made that argument, and that argument continues.

Why does that argument continue? It is because last week, as the Alliance Party understands better than anybody, we had a two-party deal that was not respectful of the principle of inclusion. It advertised why we continue to need to have principles of inclusion in the spirit that Mr Sheehan outlined, when it comes to the conduct of politics and government in Northern Ireland. We may have moved a long way from the past. We may be slowly moving, although some would doubt it —

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

Mr Attwood: — towards an even better future than we have had over the last 20 years, but at the heart of it is inclusion. This is not the time to move in the direction of the Alliance motion, because, in our view, not least because of last week, it sits in conflict with that spirit.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion. Like others, I am not sure why Alliance has tabled the motion. Clearly, it has been overtaken by events. In my view, this is a dead parrot. This is not a parrot that is pining for the fjords; this parrot is dead. One of the reasons why it appears to be dead is that, as seemed to be confirmed, even the Stormont House Agreement has been superseded by the Sinn Féin/DUP so-called Fresh Start.

It might be useful for the wider public to have a refresher on the number of Stormont agreements that we have had. Of course, we all started off with the Haass talks, and they were at the Stormont Hotel. We moved from there to Stormont House, and then we had Stormont Castle, and now we are back to Stormont and Fresh Start. It appears to me that perhaps we should have the Stormont Portakabin agreement, because that, at least, will deal with temporary structures.

The post-2016 arrangement on the reduction of MLAs was part of the Stormont House Agreement of Christmas 2014, which the Alliance Party signed up to, unless it knows something more than the rest of us and which we have not yet heard.

4.15 pm

Let me also say that the Ulster Unionist Party supports moves to reduce the costs of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive. We want to see better governance in Northern Ireland, because what has been served up since 2007 could in no way be described as

better governance. This is meant to be a legislative Assembly but, only last week, powers were sent back to London so that this place did not have to take any difficult decisions. It is no wonder that the public may, indeed, look at this House with some disdain, because if there are apparently any difficult decisions to be taken, Sinn Féin and the DUP offload them to somebody else. Sinn Féin sends powers back to London without even blushing now. First, it entered Stormont, a devolved Assembly in the United Kingdom — which, of course, I very much welcome — and now it is sending back powers to London.

Of course, in terms of saving money, only weeks ago, Sinn Féin and the DUP voted against reducing the number of special advisers and capping their pay. The more things change, the more they stay the same. That is despite OFMDFM, or the Executive Office as it will be known, losing 16 areas of responsibility. There are obviously quite a few types of protected species in this House.

We want to see savings made across the board, including a reduction in the number of MLAs, but that should be done as part of a complete package of measures, not in the slapdash manner that has so characterised the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that it has to be part of a detailed package of measures, and whatever one may think of Fresh Start, it will actually deliver a piece of legislation to the House on which Members will have the opportunity to vote — that is legislation. However, the legislation will promote voting for a reduction in the size of the Assembly in 2021. Will the Member not join me in seeking to have that legislation amended to make it 2016? Perhaps he is the biggest dead parrot in this establishment, having been killed off by his party leader.

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

Mr Kennedy: Let me reassure the Member: this party is not afraid of any election. We have already heard the reasons clearly outlined for why your party could not support a reduction to four Members per constituency, because that would effectively cull the Alliance Party, but anyway. We will ignore that.

As I said, we want to see a complete package of reform. I have to say that Alliance is advocating change on an agreement that,

apparently, it does not support and on which the ink is not yet dry. We can see that the ink is not dry even in the response of the leader of Sinn Féin on Belfast City Council, who seems to be concerned about the early implementation of and commitment to corporation tax. Let us see where this latest agreement takes us.

We also need to see what protections will be in place for some of the smaller parties, such as those represented by single MLAs. Of course, at the same time, we cannot ignore the hypocrisy of the Alliance Party because, remember, it takes two Ministries despite having only enough electoral support for one. We will wait to see whether the Alliance Party wants to do anything about that. I have heard senior members of the Alliance Party say that it has two Ministries because of its electoral support; that is not correct. It has been granted, effectively, a second Ministry primarily by Sinn Féin and the DUP, which corrupts what the Alliance Party agreed in the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Kennedy: So, for all those reasons, the Ulster Unionist Party will oppose the motion today.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo. Cuirim fáilte roimh chomhaontú na seachtaine seo caite. Tá sé thar am go mbeidh muid ag déanamh dul chun cinn leis an obair a chaitheadh muid a dhéanamh.

I welcome the debate. Unlike some others in the Chamber, I welcome the agreement that we had last week. All our constituents want to see us moving forward and getting on with the work.

I thank the Alliance Party for tabling the motion. It has received some criticism about the timing. I do not share that criticism, because it brought forward the motion before an agreement was reached. Therefore, to be fair to my colleagues in the Alliance Party, I suppose that they could call it helping set the agenda.

My colleague Pat Sheehan spoke about what was agreed on reducing the number of Departments and on reducing the number of MLAs from six to five. I share the view expressed by him and others, including Alex Attwood, in their comments on the context that we are coming out of here; that is, the context of conflict, lack of representation, and the Civil Service and direct rule Ministers running the

North of Ireland. I and my party believe that it was very important to have the broadest possible representation.

In my constituency, which is seen as a majority nationalist constituency, we have two Sinn Féin Members, two SDLP Members, one UUP Member and one DUP Member. If we had changed the rules, that would not be the case. I think that it is in all my constituents' —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will.

Mr Dickson: I hear what she says about the make-up of her constituency. If we change the number of Members, that is called democracy.

Ms Ruane: Absolutely. There are many different ways of having democracy. Mr Dickson cited Westminster as if it were democratic. If you look at the critique of the first-past-the-post system, it is fundamentally undemocratic. Therefore, it is not useful to use it as an argument against us here.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that she knows her constituency better than I do, and I do not want her to embarrass herself, but there has not been an Ulster Unionist MLA in her constituency for some time.

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

Ms Ruane: Gabh mo leithscéal. We have somebody representing the unionist community — John McCallister — whom I have tremendous respect for in our constituency and who does tremendous work. He began as an Ulster Unionist, and now he is still representing people from the unionist community, despite the fact that Mr Nesbitt might have difficulties with that.

We have an RPA for local councils, policing, health and education. I welcome that. We are at least beginning to change the undemocratic deficit that we had before.

People spoke about gender. Members right across the political spectrum — I see members of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee here — will know about the low number of women that we have in the Assembly. It is absolutely disgraceful. If we do not do something about that in all parties, we are ensuring that we are not representing our constituencies adequately.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I have already taken two interventions, Chris, and one was from your party, so if you do not mind.

What I would like to see is a much more representative House, with many more women in it. In bringing about the changes that we are bringing about, I am aware that reports have shown that there are potential dangers to women. The challenge that I am throwing out here to every single one of us is that we need to say to our parties that they need to put women into winnable seats. Otherwise, we will come back here in 2021 worse than we are now, and where we are now is nothing short of disgraceful. That is why we have an Assembly and Executive Review Committee report, and a very good report it is. However, Sinn Féin is the only party that supports quotas. If we are really to change things, I argue that we need quotas. That is why I am going to argue here that I do not think that 2016 is the time to make the changes, because I do not want to see unrepresentativeness. It will only create even more difficulties down the line.

The other point that I will make is that I have represented my party as part of various delegations and have met delegations that come here from conflict areas. As someone who has worked in deep conflict areas throughout the world, such as Nicaragua, El Salvador and South Africa, during very difficult times, I know that there are people in those areas who would love to see the process that we have.

I argue that we should not take for granted where we are now. Look at our world today. Look at the difficulties that we are encountering. It is important that we put resources into ensuring that we are democratic and representative. For that reason I argue that we should wait for another few years. I welcome the agreement. Let us put it in place now, but let us also make sure that each one of us is proactive in ensuring that we have more women on the ticket.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in aghaidh an rúin. Like my two party colleagues, I am unable to support the motion. Our only issue with the motion is the timeline proposed, which is the election of 2016. When Mr Dickson was introducing it, he said, "Oh Lord, make me holy, but not just yet". In that spirit, I think that it is, "Lord, don't make me holy, but we're maybe a week too late".

We have already seen the settled will coming out of the talks that 2021 is a realistic proposition to change the number of MLAs. That will bring a degree of certainty. From some of the comments today, it is obvious that, whether or not we reduce the number of MLAs, the 2016 election campaign has certainly kicked off. People are up and ready and fighting that election in the Chamber this afternoon. Throughout the discussions at the AERC, we were never opposed in principle to the idea of reducing the number of MLAs. We always argued that it should come at an appropriate time in the history of the Assembly.

There is absolutely no doubt — Stewart Dickson talked about it — that there is an admirable cost-saving aspect to this, and we should always be mindful of that in the current climate. However, for us there is always — Pat Sheehan, in particular, outlined this — the issue of representation and, indeed, under-representation. We have to protect ourselves against that given our recent and, indeed, distant history of under-representation and misrepresentation. Despite the claim of democratic structures and "Let the people decide" etc, under-representation was always a feature. I do not think that anybody would disagree with that nod of the head. There was a degree of misrepresentation. Indeed, Alex Attwood brought a context to that when he spoke.

All you have to do is look at the 2011 election results and see who took the sixth seat. You can never rerun an election by reconfiguring the figures for five Members, but it is a broad enough sheet to have a look at. You can see who was elected sixth and what that would mean in terms of representation. We have now come to an agreement, but we should be very serious about that representation. Pat Sheehan talked about how the RPA had brought in a layer of representation that was never present before. That was hard argued-for and hard won and then delivered by the Assembly. I cannot predict the outcome of the 2016 or 2021 election, but it is fair to say that people who have been good voices in the Assembly will perhaps be missing as a result.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Go ahead, yes.

Mr Dickson: It is a question of simple practicalities. Does the Member agree with me that, even if we pass the legislation that is contained in 'A Fresh Start', which requires the election of five Members per constituency from

2021, if these institutions meet a brick wall the day after the 2016 election and we cannot form an Executive, a further election will be held and that will be to five-Member constituencies?

Mr McCartney: I suppose that, now that you have brought that to people's attention, there may be mitigation. Let us be optimistic and assume that all the parties here will want to represent the people out there, there will be a Programme for Government and we will proceed.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree with me that, if directly after the election in May 2016 we have to have another Assembly within a month, we will have a lot more to worry about than whether there are five seats or six seats?

4.30 pm

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

Mr McCartney: That is a point well made.

I want to make the following point quickly, as I am conscious of time. One of the striking things about the sixth seat — Caitríona Ruane has already said it — is that women will suffer adversely. I have literally only 20 seconds to make that point, and we should not take that step without having some sort of sense. I have an extra minute. My apologies. Thanks, Claire Hanna. I looked up there and she gave me a puzzled look. Thank you very much. It is important that we feel that it is the appropriate time to do what we are doing. We have now signalled that we have five years, but in those five years we have to look at the idea that voices will be missing and, in particular, at the under-representation of women.

The recent inquiry by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee pointed out steps that could be taken. There is no doubt that there is reluctance by some parties in relation to quotas, and I am not making a party political point. Other institutions and democracies thrive when they introduce quotas. Sometimes, people here can have a narrow view of what democracy means. They look for a simple, single example of democracy and think that anything that goes against it is an attack on democratic structures.

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

Mr McCartney: Other thriving democracies have introduced quotas. We must ensure that we do not face 2021 accused of being under-representative.

Mr Agnew: The first question that we each should ask ourselves is what makes good governance. My party's position has consistently been that we can reduce the number of MLAs but it must go alongside a reduction in the number of Departments. I know that has been agreed in principle, but we have yet to see it realised. That is to ensure that we have enough MLAs to do the job. We already have Members sitting on two or three Committees; if we reduced the number of MLAs without concurrently reducing the number of Departments, that would undermine our ability as MLAs to carry out the important function of challenging Departments through the Committees. I support a reduction in the number of MLAs, although I am not so exercised by whether it will be in 2016 or 2021. I have no problem supporting the motion.

The other thing I would say is that we need a diversity of voices. I want to make it clear that I am not intending to be vying for the sixth seat in the next election; I hope to —

Mr Dickson: You would get elected if we moved to five seats.

Mr Agnew: There you go: the Alliance Party has assured me that I will be elected under five seats, regardless. I certainly do not want to discount myself from the next election, regardless how many seats there are per constituency.

If the previous election had been run under five seats per constituency, as Mr McCartney mentioned, we could have had a five-party Government and no Back-Benchers outside the governing parties. That is something that we should be concerned about. There is a balance to be struck. Good government should be efficient and cost-effective; equally, it should be diverse in its voices and representations.

This corner of the House has been referred to as various things, including "the naughty corner". Perhaps we are the naughty corner because we are forever challenging the teachers, which is quite a good thing. Look at the record of me and Mr Allister in asking Assembly questions: Mr Allister has asked 272, and I have asked 207 — more than the whole

of the Alliance Party. That is not an end in itself, but it is challenging and questioning Ministers. In a party of government, you may have less incentive to ask questions when the information may be more readily available. If you look at the private Members' Bills that have come forward from Mr McCallister, Mr Allister and me, again we perform a valuable function in the Assembly.

For those reasons, the Green Party has argued that, if we reduce the number of MLAs, there should not just be a reduction in the number of Departments, but it should be accompanied by a change in the electoral system to have a top-up system, as they do in Scotland and Germany, to ensure that we keep the diversity of voices.

There would be a threshold to be met before any party would get representation in the Assembly. In Germany, for example, that is 5% of the vote. That could be the type of thing that we would look at. We should ensure that we do not end up reducing the diversity of voices and the benefits that are brought, particularly given our system, by having voices from outside Government.

The issue of the representation of women has been raised, and, just to correct Ms Ruane, her party is not the only one that supports quotas. The Green Party is in favour of quotas and implements them in its own party selections for elections, and there will be a minimum of one-third female Green Party candidates for the next Assembly election. It is something that we believe in, practice and would like to see implemented in Assembly elections.

We are very much in support of reform. I suspect that, in practice, the May 2016 elections come too soon for implementation of the type of reforms that we would like to see, but, in principle, we have no objection to it. We have consistently argued that good, efficient government can take place, but a number of things need to happen concurrently.

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

Mr Agnew: Those are the change in the number of Departments, a reduction in the number of MLAs and the change in the electoral system.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to wind up the debate. It has been constructive. A wider range of issues has been raised than was, perhaps, expected; but it is important to state

clearly at core what we are debating. It is the proposal to reduce the number of MLAs from 108 to 90, from six MLAs to five for each of 18 constituencies. It is indeed a fairly modest reduction, by all accounts.

On coming to the Assembly today, I was greeted by a member of the public whom I debate these issues with. The opinion given to me was, "Sure, you have no chance of getting that through the Assembly today, Chris, do you? Turkeys voting for Christmas." Today presents an opportunity for us to surprise the ever-increasing frustration and disillusionment that is ever growing at this Assembly. We have an opportunity to agree on a modest, straightforward proposal, and I hope that there might still be time for people to reconsider their positions on that, but I fear that we may have to return to this issue.

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I just want clarification of "turkeys voting for Christmas". Is it "turkeys voting for Christmas" if we reduce the number by 2016, but not if we are voting post-2016?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will touch on the timing in due course, but I really do not understand. If the principle is agreed, and it is as straightforward an issue as it appears to most of the members of the public who want to see a reduction in costs and more effective government, why can we not show leadership on this issue and move forward now?

The Stormont House Agreement commits to the reduction; it says that it should happen by 2021. However, that does not preclude it from happening earlier. Indeed, the Alliance Party believes that there is no significant impediment to that taking place for the 2016 election.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I give way briefly.

Mr Sheehan: If this was introduced for the 2016 election, how would the Member ensure that there was not an under-representation of women?

Mr Lyttle: I was going to address that issue as well, but I will come to it. I am proud that I have been surrounded by formidable, capable, courageous female elected representatives in my party. A wide range of issues prevents women from coming forward into elected representation. I am not sure that an overgoverned Assembly is necessarily one of

them. Sinn Féin will maybe agree with me on this. Most regrettably, and I do not know why, many female elected representatives have been targeted, mistreated and spoken to in a most inappropriate way at times, and indeed, they have been physically attacked. On some occasions, they have resorted to removing themselves from elected office.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will in a second. There are probably much more important reasons than the size of the Assembly as to why we do not have more female representatives.

Ms Ruane: Does the Member believe that quotas are the way forward, given the lack of representation of women?

Mr Lyttle: I believe that we need serious proactive activity to encourage the many capable women across our society — indeed, those from all under-represented sectors — to become elected representatives. I remain to be convinced that we need specific quotas or how we would deliver such quotas, but maybe that is a debate for another occasion.

People also referred to the task of legislating. Work is ongoing to reduce the number of Departments from 12 to nine, with effect from 2016. It would be a significantly less complicated task to reduce the number of MLAs, so I see no reason why that cannot be taken forward.

The rationale is clear and strong: Northern Ireland is over-governed. We have substantially more MLAs per head than Scotland and Wales. It has been said that we have a unique context as a deeply divided society. Perhaps OFMDFM needs to do more work on building a united community. That would be one way of ensuring that we tackle the issue. Even allowing for that context, Scotland has one MSP per 40,000 people, Wales has one AM per 50,000, but Northern Ireland has one MLA per 16,000 to 17,000, which is a drastically different ratio and is over-governance by any stretch.

I will try to respond to some of the issues that have been raised. I have dealt with under-representation to a certain extent. Mr Danny Kennedy attempted to bring some humour to the debate, although I must make it clear that I doubt very much that the need to reduce costs and for more efficient and effective governance in Northern Ireland is a laughing matter to the public or, indeed, a dead issue to hard-working

taxpayers, many of whom, before he abdicated office, could not even get their grass cut or their streets lit as a result of his approach to government. We need to move beyond that approach to governance in Northern Ireland.

Stevie Agnew raised a number of important issues. He suggested that the reduction take place in line with the reduction in Departments, ensuring that our multiparty coalition has effective opposition. He also mentioned alternative ways of protecting diversity in the Assembly, such as through our electoral system, all of which, I think, merits consideration.

This reduction could save around £11 million over five years. The childcare budget for 2011-15 was around £12 million. Those may seem like modest savings, but the resources could go a very long way for a lot of hard-working families. The Alliance Party is clear that this would be for the common good and in the interests of effective power-sharing government and well-resourced, efficient public services for everyone in our community. We commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

Question put a second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I hear Ayes from only one corner and Noes from all sides of the House. I think the Noes have it. I think the Noes have it. I think the Noes have it. The Noes have it, the Noes have it.

Mr Dickson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask that you review your decision, given the decision made by the Speaker last week on a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): If the Member had listened carefully, he would have heard that I said:

"I think the Noes have it. I think the Noes have it."

Until the Member spoke, no one had challenged that, and I had not made a final decision. I think that the Noes have it. I think that the Noes have it. The Noes have it.

Question accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.

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