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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 November 2014

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Speaker's Ruling: Standards of Debate

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we commence today's business, Members should be aware that they are expected to treat each other with courtesy, good temper and moderation when in the Assembly. The standards of debate are there to try to protect the dignity of the Chamber.

I advise Members that Deputy Speaker Dallat has written to the Member who raised a point of order after the Health Minister's statement last week and we consider the matter closed. However, we are increasingly concerned about the number of remarks being made and conversations taking place from a sedentary position. This is a debating Chamber, and Members are not expected to be heard in complete silence. However, a number of Members are constantly barracking and conducting private conversations, making it difficult for the Chair, and indeed anyone else, to hear the Member who has the Floor.

We will, therefore, be keeping an eye on Members who continually talk disruptively while other Members have the Floor. They may well find that they will not be called to make their own contribution to a particular debate. I ask Members to bear that in mind and ensure that they treat this Chamber and other Members with courtesy and good temper in what they say.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Would it be in order to ask whether the Speaker's Office will be initiating or seeking any investigation into the revelation that Sinn Féin MLAs have been laundering expenses through bogus front organisations?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As the Member will know, that is not an issue for the Speaker's Office. An independent body is

charged with looking after the financial considerations of Members. It will be its duty to further investigate. I believe that that body is consulting, and if it deems it necessary to alter the rules and regulations at some point in the future, that is an entirely independent issue for that body. Members do, of course, have a right to debate any issue, but, ultimately, the decision on such matters has been formally granted to the independent body that governs Assembly Members' expenses.

Public Petition: Putting Patients First

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Ms Maeve McLaughlin has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to present this public petition to the Assembly. The petition 'Putting Patients First' is not only a principled approach to how we should and could deliver health care, it also gives voice to thousands of people across the North in their support for their general practices. Over 16,000 people across the North have signed the petition. In order to shift left, from acute to community or primary care and early intervention, it is important that we acknowledge the increasing pressures on GPs and that we equally support the infrastructure to deliver the very services that we all envisage under Transforming Your Care.

GPs will be a necessary part of the shift from hospitals to care in the community. The petition calls for general practice to receive 11% of the health-care budget. That shift would enable general practice to deliver shorter waiting times for appointments and more flexible opening hours, longer appointments and consultations, better continuity of care and positive benefits for health services as a whole, and reducing

pressures, very clearly, in our hospitals and emergency departments.

Funding for general practice in the North fell by £21.2 million between 2008-09 and 2012-13, which is a decrease of 8.2%. That is alongside a 7% increase in activity at general practices last year alone. GP out-of-hours activity has increased by 18% over the last five years. Therefore, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — Mr Deputy Speaker, gabh mo leithscéal — to deliver care to an ageing population, Transforming Your Care needs to deliver more GPs, practice nurses, district nurses and health visitors, backed up by pharmacy colleagues and members of the allied health professionals in the community.

GPs are indeed encouraged by recent investment in premises and they encourage more investment in the hub-and-spoke model. I am particularly pleased that the city side in Derry has been identified as a priority project. However, GPs feel that they are not engaged with the Transforming Your Care process and they most certainly feel that work on the process to shift the base has not followed.

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I am pleased to present this petition and I look forward to a positive response.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and send a copy of it to the Health Committee.

Executive Committee Business

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport — Roads and Transport

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Deputy Speaker, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector held in Armagh, on Wednesday 5 November 2014. The meeting was chaired by Minister Donohoe and was attended by me and Minister Durkan. My statement will address the agenda items which relate to my Department.

The Council discussed the UK road user levy for HGVs. We agreed to continue to liaise on the issue and its potential impacts. The Council welcomed the continued cooperation between the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for Regional Development on strategic transport priorities throughout the island, including the ongoing engagement on key areas, such as development of the strategic road network, enhancing east-west connections, driving a shift to public and more sustainable modes of transport and exploring the potential for shared cross-border public transport in border areas.

The Council acknowledged the ongoing positive cooperation between relevant Departments on EU-related transport issues and the opportunities that are being explored to pursue EU funding in a mutually beneficial manner, including maximising cross-border Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) transport funding opportunities; utilising INTERREG programmes for a joined-up cross-border transport and tourism infrastructure; and pursuing Horizon 2020 smart, green and integrated transport cooperation opportunities.

We noted the current position on key EU dossiers of mutual interest, including the Europe 2020 mid-term review and the outcome of the informal ministerial meeting; port services; the cross-border exchange of information on road traffic offences; the fourth railway package; and the Single European Sky ATM Research (SESAR).

The Council welcomed an update of the progress of the INTERREG IVa-funded refurbishment works on the Dublin-Belfast Enterprise rail service and the Drogheda railway viaduct.

The Council welcomed the continued investment by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for Regional Development in the promotion and development of sustainable transport options, including cycling.

It also welcomed the strategic joint decision by my Department and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to support the identification and development of possible INTERREG V funding for cross-border greenways. The Council welcomed my Department's work on establishing a greenways working group, initially consisting of key stakeholders from Northern Ireland, to scope a plan for the development of greenways. It noted that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport would welcome any invitation to be included in full or in part on that working group.

On major road projects, the Council noted the ongoing public consultation on the final report informing the appropriate assessment process for the A5, and it was also noted that, when published, the new environmental statement will be subject to a public consultation and may lead to a further public inquiry. We also noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme. The Council welcomed that the A8 project is progressing well and that the road is expected to open by spring 2015.

The Council agreed to hold its next NSMC transport meeting in April 2015.

Mr Clarke (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I thank the Minister for such a brief statement. I note that his statement says that the Council raised the matter of the HGV levies and the perceived impact that they may have on hauliers from the Republic coming to Northern Ireland. However, did the Minister raise the not perceived but very real fact that there are tolls in the Republic of Ireland and that they have an impact on Northern Ireland hauliers travelling down there?

Can the Minister provide the House with details of the greenways working group that he appears to have established but that some of us are maybe not familiar with as yet?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and, indeed, for his compliment that my statement was brief.

The Minister of the Environment will largely deal with HGV levies, and he will do so in some detail — he will thank me for that — in his

statement. However, it is fair to say that the issue that the Member raised about the differences that exist because of the tolls that apply in the Republic of Ireland is worthy of consideration and should therefore not be ignored in the context of that discussion.

I think that there are potential opportunities to get assisted European funding for the cross-border greenways initiative, and the Member will be aware that, in Newry and Mourne and in the Cooley areas of County Louth in the Republic of Ireland in particular, there are greenway projects for the advancement of cycling and walking. Those are the matters that we would pursue on that.

Obviously, the NSMC does not have any role in considering greenway projects, such as the Comber greenway, in Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement that the Government remain committed to the A5 scheme.

Following on from Mr Clarke, I will pick up on the greenways working group. I welcome the fact that it has been established. I note that the consultation on the draft bicycle strategy concluded on Friday. Will information from the greenways working group feed into the bicycle strategy's delivery plan?

I will draw on the experience that the Committee gained from going to County Mayo, where we learned about the Great Western Railway, which has been transformed, with part of it being used as a greenway with great success in the local area. Is the Minister minded to look at the possibility that sections of the Great Northern Railway in Ulster be part of a similar type of greenway project?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Indeed, he will know that my Department's cycling unit has begun work on scoping out a greenway plan for Northern Ireland, although it does not envisage being involved in the delivery or construction of the greenways, because my Department's statutory responsibilities relate to public roads. The majority of the greenways will be located off-road.

Our aim is to bring together the relevant organisations and to support and facilitate greenway projects being developed by local authorities in a coherent way. The Member will

also note the clear distinction about work that is being looked at or brought forward by the North/South Ministerial Council, which is what we are discussing today. There may be schemes or projects that we would be interested in looking at on a cross-border basis. Obviously, greenways in Northern Ireland remain the preserve of local Ministers.

Mr Dallat: I desperately want to bring a bit of good news to the Chamber this afternoon. I inform the Minister that I was on the Belfast to Derry train on Saturday, and it was packed to capacity in both directions. Many of the passengers whom I spoke to were from the Republic. Will the Minister assure the House that, in cooperation with the Republic's Government, everything is being done to source European funding to help to rebuild the infrastructure of the permanent way and the railway stations, particularly the station in Derry?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his good news. It is good news that there are ever-increasing numbers using not only trains in Northern Ireland but the cross-border Enterprise service. We can happily agree that that is indeed good news.

The Member will also be aware of the very good news that, under the INTERREG IVa project, through the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), we are getting additional finance to refurbish the Enterprise service extensively, which will be good news. I also travelled on the Enterprise service recently. Whilst it was a very good experience, I think that there are grounds for further improvements.

The Member will also know that the Department is pursuing opportunities for further European funding projects, including for the old Waterside station. I know that he and the Committee for Regional Development will support that as we seek to move it forward.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also welcome his comments on the old railway station in the Waterside in Londonderry. Will he detail the work that is being carried out by his Department under Horizon 2020?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his positive comments and, indeed, his contribution to the Committee for Regional Development and his commitment to projects in the north-west.

Horizon 2020 is the EU's biggest research and innovation programme, with nearly €80 billion of funding available between 2014 and 2020. The transport objective under the Horizon 2020 programme is entitled 'Smart, Green and Integrated Transport' and has been allocated a budget of €6.4 billion. It aims to support:

"better mobility, less congestion, more safety and security with a substantial reduction of traffic congestion; with a substantial improvement in the mobility of people and freight ... and by reducing accident rates, fatalities and casualties and improving security."

There could be significant opportunities for DRD, other Departments and our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to work in partnership in the identification of projects and the preparation of applications that seek Horizon 2020 funding. With the aim of maximising those opportunities, I recently led a delegation to Brussels to meet the CEO of the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency, which operates Horizon 2020. My Department is open to working together with those of Minister Donohoe and Minister Durkan through the NSMC forum to ensure that those opportunities are realised.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the identification of sustainable transport, including cycling, as a strategic priority for the North/South Ministerial Council. How are the Minister and the Minister of the Environment working to ensure that the introduction of a single-tier taxi scheme does not overload bus lanes or limit his attempts to improve bus and cycle provision in Belfast and Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful to the Member for the very clever way in which he introduced business that is not the business of the North/South Ministerial Council or the report of the meeting into his question. Clearly, he has learned a political skill. The Member will know that there are ongoing discussions between me and Minister Durkan as to how that issue can be properly resolved to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. On strategic transport priorities, you talked about enhancing east-west connections. What are you talking about in terms of enhancing those? Will you expand?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. Clearly, whilst NSMC will deal with cross-border issues, we will always seek to

maximise opportunities through the British-Irish Council (BIC), which is not part of the statement. We clearly reference that work as being important; it is not just North/South but east-west. We look positively at opportunities that there may well be for us in that respect.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo. I thank the Minister for his statement. Under strategic transport priorities, Minister, you talked about:

"exploring the potential for shared cross-border public transport in border areas."

Will you elaborate and expand on that?

Mr Kennedy: Could the Member repeat the latter part of the question? I beg your pardon.

Mr Lynch: You talked about:

"exploring the potential for shared cross-border public transport in border areas."

I would like you to expand on that, Minister. Thank you.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Principally, it is the work around the Enterprise, which is important work, and the rail services. Of course, there are also the Translink and bus services on a cross-border basis that occur. It is to look to see how we can best improve timings, ultimately, of the Enterprise service, hopefully, to put it into more frequent service given its popularity and to ensure that the cross-border bus services are fully efficient and effective.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his statement. In relation to strategic transport priorities and the east-west connections that you mentioned, have you had any continued discussions with the Scottish Government on the A75, given the effect that freight transport has travelling on the A75 from the ports of Larne and Belfast? That is something that was being looked at under European funding possibilities as well.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his interest in and question on the matter. The A75 link route into Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom has to remain an important focus of our cooperation on an ongoing basis. We continue to look at ways of improving it through lobbying the Scottish Government and perhaps bringing forward innovative ideas that

would garner support not only in the Executive but, potentially, with the Scottish Government and which would also have EU involvement. Some of that work is still at a relatively early stage, but I am happy to confirm that we are pursuing it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis sin. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, given that some EU funding has been used in the provision of transport and tourism infrastructure, namely the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, were there any discussions on extending that to make sure of a year-round service of that ferry?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. As he and other Members, particularly Mr Dallat who has raised this issue on an ongoing basis, will know, my Department has had no previous involvement with the funding of that project, and there are no plans to change that at this point. I am aware of the interest of Members, particular Members from that constituency, and of the councils involved. However, primarily, that would be a project for the councils involved to carry forward.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome his mention of the A5 road. In relation to the A5 road, would the Minister support the call locally for the new bridge that would be required across the Finn between Lifford and Strabane to be started as a very positive signal showing a serious commitment to the building of this project?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Of course, the Member has a longstanding interest in seeing the development of the A5. As I have outlined here, and, indeed, at the NSMC, the current situation is that we continue to work through the various reports to inform the appropriate assessments. I am not at liberty to go further than that through the statement or at this time.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's mention of the A5 and confirmation that it remains an Executive and a North/South Ministerial Council priority. Can I ask the Minister to outline the timetable for progressing the A5 project in the remaining weeks of 2014 and in 2015? What level of funding commitment is there from his Department and from the Government in Dublin?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will know about the

appropriate assessments: the three assessments that have been carried out and the one on Tully Bog, consultation on which is due to end later this week on 28 November. We will need to take those into consideration. The next step in progressing the scheme will be the publication of the new environmental statement, draft vesting orders and draft direction orders. Development work on those is at an advanced stage, but a firm date for publication cannot be given until after consideration of any submissions to the ongoing public consultation exercise on impacts on Tully Bog.

Publication of the new environmental statement and draft orders will be followed by a further consultation lasting a minimum of six weeks, when formal representations and/or objections to the scheme can be made. The Member will know that this consultation is likely to lead to the need for a further public inquiry, but a decision on this can be made only following careful consideration of the representations and the level of objection received in response to the consultation exercise. That may lead to a new public inquiry, which would be likely to be held in 2015.

12.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement.

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport — Road Safety

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the seventeenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector, which was held in Armagh on Wednesday 5 November 2014. The meeting was attended by me, the Regional Development Minister, Danny Kennedy, and Minister Paschal Donohoe TD, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. Minister Donohoe chaired the meeting.

I will address those agenda items for which my Department has responsibility: mutual recognition of penalty points; and road user and vehicle safety.

During our opening remarks, we discussed the UK road user levy for HGVs. We agreed to continue to liaise on the issue and its potential impacts.

The Council discussed mutual recognition of penalty points. We noted that a draft EU directive facilitating the cross-border exchange of information on road safety-related traffic is due to come into force in 2017. This will cover the offences being considered by the mutual recognition of penalty points — or MRPP — project. The MRPP steering group will continue to examine the directive and the outcome of a European Commission review of the need to strengthen enforcement with regard to traffic offences, and the implications of these for the MRPP project. The MRPP working group will meet to explore issues relating to the counting down of penalty points in both jurisdictions, and both jurisdictions will continue to carry forward work regarding the prosecution of offences with a view to providing an update on those issues at a future NSMC meeting.

The Council welcomed the continued sharing of knowledge and experience between officials from both jurisdictions on the delivery of road safety measures. We noted the progress and enactment of legislation in both jurisdictions designed to improve road safety, including measures and proposals to address drug- and drink-driving and reform of the learner driver regime.

We welcomed the continuing proactive cooperation to target a wide range of illegal activity in the goods haulage and passenger transport industries, including continuing liaison

on successful cross-border enforcement operations in 2014 in both jurisdictions.

The Council noted the recent meeting of a tripartite enforcement planning forum to maximise the benefits of enforcement efforts and to identify synergies from a coordinated enforcement approach, and it welcomed the continued training exchange for enforcement officers.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): That was short, Minister.

Mr Durkan: I just went faster than usual.

Ms Lo: Obviously, road safety is a big issue for the Committee, and it is always very concerned about fatalities and injuries. There have been joint advertising campaigns between the two jurisdictions and sharing of production costs. Given the financial restraints, North and South, was coordination and sharing in these expensive advertising campaigns discussed?

Mr Durkan: I thank Ms Lo for her question. It is not often that I get accused of being short in any respect.

Road safety advertising is an emotive issue and, as Ms Lo points out, it is expensive. It has also been extremely effective. Ms Lo quite rightly suggests making it more efficient, if possible, through cross-border collaboration.

She quite rightly said that there has been collaboration on several public information campaigns. Between 2000 and 2007, DOE and the Road Safety Authority shared the production costs for campaigns where there were similar road safety issues to be addressed. For example, there were joint campaigns on issues such as drink-driving, seat-belt wearing, pedestrian safety and speeding.

There has also been the purchase of ads from us by the Republic of Ireland Government and vice versa. Given the financial constraints that both Governments are having to operate within, it is certainly worth exploring where further collaboration can be achieved. We have a tremendous opportunity, through the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, to harmonise the drink-driving limit on both sides of the border. That might provide an opportunity for a new shared campaign.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his brief statement to the House this morning. In

relation to road safety, Minister, what actions will you be taking in light of the very tragic death of eight-year-old Adam Gilmore recently? Will you be working with the Education Minister towards ensuring that we have the best road safety measures for our schoolchildren?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her question. Obviously, the tragedy that occurred recently will have — and certainly should have — focused all our minds on how we can work to maximise road safety and minimise the potential for such a tragedy to occur to anyone on our roads. The fact that something like that could happen to children or a family on their way to school beggars belief, particularly in light of concerns that were raised with the local education and library board on the very real dangers — I was going to say "potential dangers" — being faced by children day and daily on their way to get buses in rural areas or, as is the case in many areas, walking the whole way to school on roads with no footpaths because they do not have buses to get. That is a very important issue.

There is a ministerial working group on road safety that generally comprises me, the Minister for Regional Development and the Justice Minister, but I am keen for an invitation to the next meeting to be extended to the Education Minister to see what work can be done with education boards on the matter.

As a Department, we work very closely with schools. We have outreach programmes that are run very successfully with the schools: the schools enjoy participating in them and find them extremely useful. It is important that we build on the work that has been done and do everything we can to ensure that the likes of this tragedy does not occur again.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. In light of the increase in road fatalities — across the island, there have been nearly 250 road deaths this year — will he consider using media outlets like they do in the South — for example, some of the radio stations in the South notify the number of deaths — to try to get the message out again. I do not believe, Minister, that the message that we have is working, given that there have been 20 more deaths this year than there were at this time last year. Will he consider using other media outlets to get the message out? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. I have said in the House before, and I am happy to say again, that I will consider any option to reduce the number of deaths on our roads. To say that what we are doing is not working may be a wee bit unfair given the drastic reductions that we have seen in the number of fatalities on our roads over a number of years. In 2013, there was an increase on the number in 2012, but 2012 had the lowest number of fatalities on our roads on record, with just 52. That is not to say that we should be resting on our laurels and saying that we cannot do better. For me, one death on our roads is one too many, and I aspire to a time when we have zero road deaths. That may seem beyond our ability, but it certainly should not be beyond our ambition.

The Member's suggestion that we keep the public informed about how many fatalities there have been on the roads is worth looking at again. Last week was Road Safety Week, and I attended a couple of events across the North. I know that Members possibly attended — they certainly would have been invited to — events in their own constituency. I remind all Members of their responsibility to use any opportunity that they have to reinforce road safety messages to their constituents.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers thus far. Why has it taken so long to get to the point of mutual recognition of penalty points?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Eastwood for the question. Progress has been made on advancing that work, and some key policy and operational issues have been agreed to date. The mutual recognition of penalty points working group is continuing to explore the issues relating to the counting down of penalty points in both jurisdictions, with a view to providing an update on those issues at the next NSMC meeting in the transport sector.

The issues arise from a number of technical differences between the two penalty-point systems. For instance, on disqualification, all points on a Northern Ireland licence are wiped, whereas those on a licence in Ireland are suspended. Therefore, a driver disqualified for drink-driving who already has three points for a speeding offence on his or her licence will have those points wiped if it is a Northern Ireland licence, but the points will be on his or her new licence if the driver requalifies after the period of disqualification in the South.

Those differences could in certain circumstances lead to issues of double

jeopardy. Given that lawyers are constantly searching for grounds on which to challenge driver disqualification, I am sure that Members will recognise the need to ensure legal certainty on these complicated but important issues. Both jurisdictions will continue to carry forward the work on the prosecution of offences, with a view to providing a report to the next NSMC meeting. The issues include courts' treatment of summonses served outside the jurisdiction, on which Departments are working with their respective courts services to clarify an appropriate, robust way forward.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for the brevity of the report, if nothing else. Mutual recognition is a major benefit, but there is some concern that it seems to have taken a long time. The report obviously makes reference to 2017 as the date of the EU directive coming into force. Following on from the previous Member, are there any plans to bring in legislation to pre-empt that so that we can be moving rather than waiting? Has there also been any discussion about mutual recognition with the authorities across the water so that we can have a system that applies across the entire British Isles?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Weir for his question. The timetable for the implementation of mutual recognition of penalty points will be dependent on the progress made in assessing how parity in the counting down of penalty points across both jurisdictions can be achieved and on the continuing work on the prosecution of offences. I remain extremely keen to implement mutual recognition as soon as possible, but I recognise that we need to do so confident that there is unlikely to be a successful legal challenge to what is groundbreaking work. The issue of mutual recognition between us, the Republic of Ireland, and England, Scotland and Wales, for example, is one that has been raised with me recently and one that I will raise at the next NSMC meeting.

12.45 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of my party's total opposition to the introduction of the levy for HGVs travelling into the North. Is he aware of serious disquiet among hauliers in the South and among businesses in all parts of the island regarding this levy? In his discussions with the Irish Government, has he encountered any appetite on their part for introducing a reciprocal levy, which would be a disaster?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr McElduff for that question. I am well aware of his party's position on the matter, and I am sure that he is well aware of mine and the fight that I fought to resist having to enforce legislation here that was implemented from elsewhere. I am aware of disquiet among hauliers and other businesses in the Republic around this legislation, and that is more around the legislation than the fact that the DOE will be enforcing it as opposed to the DVLA. In fact, over the weekend, I was, I suppose, approached by a couple of different businesses in the Republic and had similar discussions with them.

I do detect from the Minister in the Republic of Ireland Government an appetite to help me to gain the evidence that will be required to show that the levy is detrimental to the economy in Donegal and in other border areas on both sides of the border. The damage to trade could well take place on both sides of the border. There is a review ongoing by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment of the cost of the haulage industry and the cost of doing business in the haulage industry. I very much hope to tie into that and to figure into that hard evidence from hauliers and from other businesses on how this levy is affecting them. It was the sheer lack of this type of evidence that was used as an excuse, if you like, by Robert Goodwill MP not to grant exemptions here.

Mr I McCrea: I agree with the Minister's comments. As I have said before, one road death is too many. I certainly do not think that it is beyond our ambition to try to achieve zero road deaths. The Minister referred to drug- and drink-driving. He will be aware that detecting people who are drug-driving is very difficult. Was there any discussion about or is the Minister aware of any possible technologies that could be used to try to detect drug-driving? It is probably more overlooked because of the lack of technology.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his very pertinent question. Often, it appears that our focus is on drink-driving, and, while drink-driving remains painfully high, when we look at the causation factors for fatal collisions, drug-driving is well up there as well. It is currently an offence here in the North to drive when under the influence of drink or drugs. The prosecution of this offence requires evidence of impairment at the time of driving, and, all too often and all too sadly, we do not have that evidence until after the event. Again, all too often, it is obtained through a post mortem.

While we have significantly more deaths and serious injuries on our roads through drink-driving, as I said, drugs still figure extremely highly. Last year, six people were killed due to driving while impaired by drugs, whether illegal drugs or, indeed, legal prescription drugs. That is a growing concern. I plan to address this issue with the creation of a similar offence to that recently introduced in Britain that will help to better detect and collect evidence from drivers who are suspected of being impaired through drugs. In effect, this move will bring drug-driving detection into line with drink-driving detection. Proposals for change here will be informed by the work ongoing in Britain and Ireland, but, given the complexity of the issues involved, it is unlikely that the Bill could be taken forward before the next Assembly mandate. In the meantime, I welcome the progress in developing a Road Traffic Bill in Ireland, which will include a range of measures, including the roadside testing of drivers for the presence of drugs. I look forward to the harmonisation with that up here. It would pretty ridiculous if someone could be caught for drug-driving in Donegal and be able to avoid detection just a minute or two down the road.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement and look forward to even greater cooperation between North and South on road safety. Minister, your Department will endure very considerable cuts. Will those impact on road safety, North and South?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. Since a Budget for 2015-16 has not yet been agreed, I cannot provide a full assessment of how resource pressures will impact on any area of my Department or on our road safety partners. I can assure you that I remain fully committed to continuing to work with stakeholders to improve road safety and reduce casualties. However, reductions in funding will make a number of activities a lot more challenging, including, as Ms Lo referred to earlier, the creation and airing of road safety advertising. There will also be an impact on road safety grants that are made to community groups and on our road safety education programme that we carry out in conjunction with schools.

I am very conscious that it is not just cuts to my Department's budget that will impact on road safety. Cuts to the Regional Development budget will obviously have an impact on roads maintenance, and where you have street lights that are out and potholes and gullies that cannot be cleaned as regularly as they should be, there will be a detrimental impact on road safety. That is without doubt. Furthermore,

one would imagine that the cuts to the police as a result of cuts to the Department of Justice's budget will lead to fewer police on the road to carry out traffic activities.

There is no doubt that the financial situation will require us to continue — in fact, to start — to work in a more joined-up way across government to do things that make all of us, as road users, improve our behaviour and reduce the likelihood of fatalities and casualties on our roads.

Mr Spratt: I want to go back to the themes of justice and policing that the Minister has just mentioned. The police reduced its road traffic branch long before there were any cuts, and it is now merely a service that deals with motorway policing. Given the detrimental effect that that has on fatal road accidents, has he had any discussions with the police to fully re-establish that branch and make it effective to deal with road safety issues?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. My officials are in constant contact with their counterparts in the PSNI and, indeed, the PSNI is an integral member of our road safety working group. I have had discussions with a succession of acting chief constables on that and on road safety issues.

Last Wednesday night, I was out on the ground, or in a car rather, with PSNI traffic officers in Derry and had a look at the type of work that they do. It is extremely important work, but, while they were not crying about it, it is painfully evident that there is not enough of them to do that work and that they are being spread very thin. We went to a speeding checkpoint, stayed there for 15 minutes and then had to go somewhere else.

One thing that very much impressed me that evening was that we went to Bridgend on the Derry-Donnegal border and met some guards. There is ongoing collaborative cross-border drink-driving project, and that was very good to see. I am aware of the pressures facing the police budget. I have concerns about the impact of budget cuts on how many officers they have to carry out this job, but I have also raised with the PSNI how they spend the reducing budget that they have.

Mr Dallat: The Minister has just alluded to the question I was going to ask. He represents a border area where there have been appalling abuses of the road traffic laws by a small number of people on both sides of the border. Is the Minister satisfied that the level of

cooperation between an Garda Síochána and the PSNI is sufficient to identify the people who have contributed so much to the heartache of families who, at times, have had multiple members wiped out by, largely, speeding offences, but by other traffic offences as well?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Dallat for that question. He is correct. There have been awful abuses of laws, and there have been even more awful losses of lives in that border area, and in others across the North and South. I am sure that collaboration between police services in both jurisdictions is good, but I will never be content that it cannot be better. I will continue to, and constantly, push for increased and improved collaboration on this and many other issues.

Mr Allister: The Minister has often spoken of the connection between speeding and fatalities on our roads. He will be aware of the recent publicity about the shocking scale of the number of drivers from the Irish Republic who are detected speeding in Northern Ireland but not pursued in respect of penalty and penalties outstanding. Did he raise that issue with his Southern counterparts or has he taken any steps with other Ministers to seek to better that situation and to act upon it?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question, and I thank him for highlighting a most unsatisfactory situation, which, no, I regret that I did not raise with the Minister from the Republic of Ireland at the meeting. I think that the publicity surrounding that issue emerged, possibly, the day following our meeting, but it is a matter that gives me great concern and it is one that I will raise at a future North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

In answering an earlier question, I alluded to the technical difficulties that have been presented in our attempt to achieve the mutual recognition of penalty points. It is my understanding that some of the difficulties around courts and summonses would be applicable in this case. However, I do not believe that they are in any way insurmountable. If people are speeding on a road in the North of Ireland, it is extremely likely that they are going to continue speeding when they hit the border, and beyond. A dangerous driver in the North is a dangerous driver in the South, and vice versa. There has to be collaboration; we have to work together to eradicate those dangers from our roads.

Mrs Overend: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Minister for missing the start of his statement, although I was here for the

large part of it. I note that illegal fuel laundering was not discussed at the meeting. It is a longstanding problem here in Northern Ireland and is worth £80 million in lost tax revenue. Is it an issue that the Minister will raise at a future meeting?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her question. I assure her that, in missing the start of my statement, she did not miss much, but she might have missed me saying that this statement is on the transport sector as opposed to the environment sector, where the issue of fuel laundering has been discussed at every North/South Ministerial Council meeting that I have attended. Your party colleague Minister Kennedy is often keen to raise it. The cost of fuel laundering to our economy is huge. In that respect, it is, I suppose, relevant, in a way, to this meeting, given the impact that fuel laundering has on the costs of doing business for legitimate businesses in the haulage industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement.

1.00 pm

Work and Families Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for Employment and Learning, Mr Stephen Farry, to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

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

Child Support Fees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Child Support Fees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

The regulations, which came into operation in June 2014, enable my Department to charge collection and enforcement fees for using the statutory child maintenance scheme introduced in 2012 under powers contained in the Child Maintenance Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The 2012 scheme is delivered by the Child Maintenance Service.

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

The regulations form part of the wider reforms to rebalance child maintenance policy. The aims of the reforms are to support parents to collaborate and work together; and to create a more efficient and fairer child maintenance system that delivers more money to children and a better value-for-money service to taxpayers.

Before addressing the detail of the regulations, I should perhaps state that the programme of reform began in 2006 when Sir David Henshaw delivered an independent report on the future of child maintenance. His report recommended that the Child Support Agency no longer be the default option for parents. The introduction of

fees was also recommended in order to provide both parents with an incentive to collaborate.

Since then, as part of the reform programme, parents on benefits are no longer compelled to apply to the Department to pursue maintenance payments. It is also worth noting that, since 2010, child maintenance has been fully disregarded for the purposes of assessing benefit entitlement. The 2008 Child Maintenance Act provided the powers to introduce the 2012 child maintenance scheme.

The reforms are designed to incentivise parents to take financial responsibility for their children and to encourage them to collaborate in the best interests of their children. Evidence suggests that children do better when their parents work together. A dual approach is being followed to increase the number of parents who work together to agree child maintenance rather than relying on intervention by the Department.

First, parents are supported to work together, not only on child maintenance but through the whole range of issues faced following a separation. Secondly, fees will act as an incentive for parents to consider whether they could set up a more collaborative family-based child arrangement without automatically turning to the statutory scheme. The new 2012 statutory scheme was introduced using a phased approach from December 2012. Following assurances that the processes, procedures and client interfaces were working well, the scheme was opened to all applicants in November 2013. The 2012 scheme operates alongside the two earlier child maintenance schemes, which have been in place since 1993 and 2003.

Initial reports are that the 2012 scheme is a great improvement on previous schemes. Customer satisfaction is at 73% compared with 55% on the older schemes. Anyone making an application to the 2012 statutory scheme must go through the child maintenance choices service. This provides free, impartial information and support on the various ways to set up maintenance arrangements, and it gives parents the information that they need to consider what arrangements are best for them.

The regulations introduce collection fees for any parents using the statutory collect and pay service. Sir David Henshaw's report recommended fees as a balanced incentive to encourage parents to consider whether the statutory service is necessary for them.

The collection fee payable by non-resident parents is 20% of the daily amount of child support maintenance that they are liable to pay. The fee payable by a person with care is 4% of the maintenance collected by the Department. It is only fair that both parents should make a financial contribution towards the cost of the service that both are using.

I must emphasise that fees are charged only on money actually collected by the Department. Non-resident parents face by far the highest charges, reflecting the fact that they have greater control over whether they use the collection service. There is no collection fee for parents who make their own family-based arrangement or who use the direct pay service provided by the child maintenance service. The decision not to introduce application fees in Northern Ireland has ensured that the statutory scheme remains open and accessible to those who cannot make their own family-based arrangements. That is a difference between the scheme that currently operates in the rest of the United Kingdom and here in Northern Ireland.

Direct pay is when the Child Maintenance Service calculates the amount of maintenance payable, and the non-resident parent then makes payments directly to the parent with care. That provides a way for parents to access the statutory service in a way that can help to rebuild trust between them.

Before fees were introduced, 24% of cases on the 2012 scheme used direct pay. Since the introduction of fees, the percentage of cases using direct pay has more than doubled to almost 60%. That shows that collection fees are having the desired effect in encouraging more parents to work together. Staff in the Child Maintenance Service have been working hard to ensure that parents are aware of the introduction of fees as well as how to avoid them.

The regulations also include a safeguard to prevent non-resident parents being forced onto the chargeable collect and pay service by the parent with care and also allows the Department to deduct fees from benefits in the same way that it can deduct maintenance owed. In addition, the regulations make provision for the payment of an enforcement charge by a non-resident parent when the Department makes a deduction from earnings order, a regular deduction order, a lump sum deduction order or an application for a liability order. Before the regulations came into operation, there was no financial incentive for non-resident parents to pay maintenance in full and on time. The introduction of enforcement

fees is intended to act as a deterrent to encourage non-resident parents to comply with their commitments, and I think that it will also help to offset the cost of administrative action to enforce compliance.

The enforcement fees are as follows: deduction from earnings order, £50; regular deduction order, £50; lump sum deduction order, £200; and liability order, £300. It is estimated that the collection and enforcement fees will generate a revenue of about £1 million a year. That will provide a financial contribution towards the cost of the Child Maintenance Service, which will continue to remain heavily subsidised by the taxpayer.

Although the introduction of fees for child maintenance is a significant change, the aim of these reforms is to promote collaboration between separated parents to ensure that their children achieve the best outcomes in life.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposal to make the Child Support Fees Regulations at its meeting on 5 June 2014 and considered the resulting statutory rule at its meeting on 3 July 2014. The Committee was supportive of the regulations.

The Committee took note that, although the primary power for child support fees is set out in the Child Maintenance Act 2008, this subordinate legislation is required to enable the full introduction of fees. The Committee noted that, among other measures, the regulations will introduce fees for collect and pay services in the 2012 statutory child maintenance scheme as an incentive for parents to work together to reach their own family-based arrangement or to pay each other directly via direct pay within the statutory scheme if they cannot reach their own family-based arrangement.

Under the equivalent regulations in Britain, there is a £20 applications fee to access the 2012 child maintenance scheme. The Committee is pleased at the previous Minister's decision that residents in the North will not be charged such a fee. Of course, it may sound like a small saving, but £20 is by no means an insignificant sum, and the removal of any financial burden to claimants of child support fees is very welcome, as it is in any circumstance.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development is supportive of the regulations

and recommends that the statutory rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Wilson: I echo what the Deputy Chairman of the Committee said. The Committee did indeed consider —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could you use the microphone? It helps Hansard staff.

Mr Wilson: Yes, sorry.

The Committee considered the regulations. Anyone who has dealt with people who have had to go through the Child Support Agency or the Child Maintenance Service will know that it was far from satisfactory and was one of the arms of government that had a very poor record, first of all, in collecting money where it was difficult to collect and, secondly, in dealing with changes in circumstances and queries. Sometimes, it was the parent with care who was adversely affected, and it was sometimes the parent who was having to make the payment.

The Committee had two concerns about the scheme. The first is that, where there cannot be cooperation between parents — according to what the Minister said, that is still the case with 40% of people who are receiving child maintenance — the fees, in effect, mean that a quarter of the payment that is received is lost in administration charges imposed by the Child Maintenance Service.

The second is — I hope that the Minister will keep a very close eye on this — that, given the chaotic way in which the Child Support Agency or Child Maintenance Service sometimes administered dealings with parents, I hope that, now that a 24% charge is being imposed, we will see greater diligence so that we see fewer of the kind of mistakes that were made in the past or, indeed, what could sometimes be regarded as lack of forcefulness in pursuing situations where payments were not being kept up to date. The Minister pointed out that that will still not cover the full costs of the service. Nevertheless, now that charges of that level are being levied, there should be an improvement in the service for those who find that, where there is non-cooperation, the agency is not pursuing the matter as quickly as it should.

Those are the only two caveats that I would attach to this. A large number of people will still have to go through the child maintenance arrangements, and they will now be paying in administrative charges a substantial part of the money that would normally have gone to the

child. If that is the case, there should be a proper, effective service for the parents who, because they cannot reach agreement, find themselves in the scheme.

1.15 pm

Mr Storey: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Brady, for his comments and for the work of the Committee in relation to the issue. Turning to the comments of my colleague Mr Wilson, I think that we all need to set it in the context of the concern that we have all had, as public representatives who, in time past, have had to deal with the child maintenance service. In the past we clearly saw a system that was not fit for purpose for either component part of what is always a very difficult situation. It is not a process that is devoid of dealing with realities; we are dealing with families, children and very challenging circumstances.

I am conscious, and have been since taking office, that there was a good-news story about the progress that has been made in the child maintenance service. Look at the satisfaction rate that I referred to earlier. I suppose that you have to take any survey with a degree of caution, but moving from 55% to 73% shows that it is working in the right way. Given what is happening across the water, clearly the introduction of the application fee, which we decided here in Northern Ireland not to do, has encouraged those who, for a variety of reasons, some very complex, have not felt it necessary to become involved in the scheme. I think that we have demonstrated that what is being delivered here in Northern Ireland is immensely better than what is in the rest of the United Kingdom.

There is a lesson for us to learn. I have had this discussion with my officials. It goes right across every part of the Administration and Executive. You can have a policy intent, but if the implementation of that policy intent is haphazard or far from fit for purpose, you lose the focus of the policy intent. I do not think that anybody disagrees that the reasons set in the new scheme need to be achieved and are the right parameters to operate in, but it is how it is implemented and operated. That is why, with the way that the scheme is operating, progress is being made. I hope that, as it rolls out, it will continue to be a success.

In conclusion, just last week a senior official in my Department received national recognition for the work that was carried out in the reorganisation in the Child Maintenance Service. I am very proud that that official from

Northern Ireland was given recognition for the work being done in that organisation.

In conclusion, I am certain that we all want to ensure that all steps possible are taken to assist parents to work together in the best interests of their children. Obviously, the circumstances that face some families are difficult. I know too well just how difficult that can be and the pressures that it can bring to bear on families. I trust that this process will be an advantage to the Child Maintenance Service. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support Fees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Child Support (Ending Liability in Existing Cases and Transition to New Calculation Rules) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Child Support (Ending Liability in Existing Cases and Transition to New Calculation Rules) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

These recommendations, which came into operation on 30 June 2014, allow my Department to close down the 1993 and the 2003 child maintenance schemes. Any parents who choose to use statutory schemes can apply to the Child Maintenance Service's 2012 scheme. The 2012 scheme provides a more efficient and fairer child maintenance system, delivering more money to children, as I said, and a better value-for-money service to the taxpayer.

Currently, there are three statutory child maintenance schemes providing for the collection and payment of child maintenance under differing rules: the 1993 scheme, which was established under the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991; the 2003 scheme, which was set up for all applications received after March 2003, following amendment of that order by the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act (Northern Ireland) 2000; and the 2012 scheme, which was established under the Child Maintenance Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

The 2012 scheme was introduced on a phased basis in December 2012, and later opened to all new applicants from November 2013. The scheme introduced a new way of calculating child support maintenance based on historical income and a number of other important changes in relation to child maintenance. The transition period over which liability in existing cases under the 1993 and 2003 schemes will be brought to an end is expected to run until the end of 2017 and early 2018. Any parents using those schemes will have their case closed. During the case closure process, the Child Maintenance Choices service will provide help and support to separated parents. Parents will be encouraged to consider family-based arrangements, but, where that is not possible, can make an application to the 2012 scheme.

The closure of the 1993 and 2003 schemes will not remove non-resident parents' responsibilities to pay any child maintenance

arrears that have accrued, unless those arrears meet the limited criteria for write-off; for example, where the parent with care no longer wants the arrears collected. The Child Maintenance Service will continue to ensure that parents meet their financial responsibilities for their children.

The regulations specify that the power to close cases will be exercised in stages known as segments. The order in which cases will be closed will be carefully controlled. The first cases on the 1993 and 2003 schemes to be selected for closure are those where the Child Maintenance Service has assessed that the non-resident parent does not have to pay any maintenance. The Child Maintenance Service has started the process of closing 1,129 of those segment 1 cases. Those will be followed by cases where there is a liability but no payment is being made. In both scenarios, there will be no payments to disrupt when the case is closed. The order of case closure has been determined so as to minimise payment disruption as far as possible. Accordingly, the last cases to enter the process will be those where compliance is hard won. The ending liability scheme, which is published on the departmental website, provides more detail for parents on how and when cases on the 1993 and 2003 schemes will be closed.

Having all child maintenance cases together under the 2012 scheme will simplify the process, not only for staff in the Child Maintenance Service but, more importantly, for parents.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposal to make these regulations at its meeting on 5 June 2014 and the resulting statutory rule at its meeting on 3 July 2014. The Committee was supportive of the regulations.

The Committee noted that the regulations will enable the 2012 child maintenance scheme to gradually replace the 1993 and 2003 schemes and ensure a smooth transition to the new scheme. The Committee notes that the regulations will make provision to end liability in cases on the 1993 and 2003 child maintenance schemes. They also ensure that people who wish to remain on the statutory scheme can exercise that choice and are handled by the new 2012 child maintenance scheme. The Department has advised the Committee that the powers will be exercised in such a way to

ensure that payment to existing cases on the 1993 and 2003 schemes is minimised as far as possible.

The regulations specify the powers for cases to be closed. However, it should be noted that arrears will remain due and parents will not be relieved of their liability to pay unless those arrears meet the limited criteria for write-off. That could be, for example, where the parent with care no longer wants the arrears collected. Importantly, the continuity of maintenance payments to the parent with care will be protected.

I am sure that I speak for all members of the Committee when I say that any changes to child support must keep the welfare of the child as a key focus and priority. The regulations are designed to reduce any disruption in maintenance flowing to children and, in that sense, can be seen as a positive and protective measure.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development recommends that the statutory rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Storey: I thank Mr Brady, the Deputy Chair of the Committee, for his comments. I also thank the Committee for its work on this. I concur with Mr Brady's comment, which really follows on from what I said previously, that at the focus and centre of this is the continued welfare of children.

Given the difficulties and challenges that there were in the two previous schemes, I can well imagine the concerns and nervousness that there are in relation to that. That is always the case in any of these processes, when you move, in this case, from two schemes to one. However, I think that progress to date indicates that the central focus of what we are about is to ensure that the welfare of children is paramount. As well as that, the comment that I made earlier in relation to the segments and the way in which this process will be handled will ensure that it is carefully controlled. I will ensure that that is the case within the Child Maintenance Service.

The Child Maintenance Service is the one place that I have not had the opportunity to visit to date. However, plans are afoot for me to do so before Christmas. As Minister, I want to satisfy myself about this. It is very easy to come to the Chamber, read the prepared script and do what you have to do, but another part of our responsibility and duty is to ensure that we see at first hand the work that is being done, take

on board the concerns that are expressed and continue to make progress on the issue. We need to underline and emphasise that the statutory scheme should only be used where family-based arrangements are not possible. For that reason, it is important that all cases are managed on the 2012 scheme which, as we have said, is better for children and parents. Bringing all these cases under the one set of rules will, I trust, simplify the process for all concerned. Therefore I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support (Ending Liability in Existing Cases and Transition to New Calculation Rules) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Committee Business

Public Accounts Committee: Reports and Memoranda of Reply

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have 7 minutes.

Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee Reports:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Members, the details of the motion give some indication of the wide range of work undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in its work of contributing to a better and more efficient delivery of public services. PAC reports have dealt with a number of important issues covering areas such as: contract management, procurement practices, the need for greater focus on efficiency savings, performance management, strengthening fraud investigative skills, valuing whistle-blowers and improving service delivery in the interests of our citizens, including our children.

Although there is not time for me to go into all the items listed in the motion, I will take a minute to remind you of the role of the Public Accounts Committee and the scope of the Committee's work.

1.30 pm

The Committee is a Standing Committee of the Assembly and was set up under the NI Act 1998 to:

"consider accounts, and reports on accounts, laid before the Assembly".

The accounts of all Departments and, indeed, of most public sector bodies are prepared and laid by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), who is the head of the Audit Office here. The Comptroller and Auditor General may also make value-for-money reports and reports on efficiency and effectiveness.

The Audit Office's role is to examine closely public expenditure from a position of independence from government. I commend it for the excellent support that it provides to the Committee.

I have in the past described the Audit Office as a natural scrutiny partner to the Assembly, complementing the system of checks and

balances that are fundamental to a healthy democracy. That scrutiny role will be all the more significant in today's economic climate, as value for money in the public sector becomes even more important in these times of austerity.

The current budgetary pressures facing the Executive make the PAC's role even more critical, as every pound of public expenditure needs to extract maximum value. The PAC plays a key role in maximising value for money in public expenditure. By honing in on instances of public funds being spent unwisely, the PAC can then make recommendations for improvements, which, if implemented, can ensure that better value for money is achieved.

The PAC plays a constructive role in pointing out the lessons that need to be learned to improve performance. Whilst our inquiries tend to be specific to a particular Department or body and the issues pertaining to it, there are lessons to be learned throughout government. PAC reports this year highlighted a number of lessons that can be applied right across the public sector.

I wish to emphasise that the PAC's key role is to apply the lessons that have been learnt from our inquiries. It aims to be constructive in its recommendations and to offer guidance about what needs to change to avoid a repeat of those events.

In my time as Chair of the PAC, I have seen similar issues come up time and time again. That was the case with the report on improving pupil attendance, which highlighted the fact that very little progress had been made since an Audit Office report back in 2004 recommended an attendance strategy. In 2014, its follow-up report highlighted the fact that an attendance strategy was still outstanding. The PAC decided that that was worthy of further investigation, and we have made recommendations. My Committee colleague Mr McQuillan will talk about it in more detail later.

Public financial government is at its most effective when all the participants are thinking about and striving for excellence. That means not just the Committee but the auditors, the accounting officers and the civil servants. There is a shared interest between the PAC and DFP in working in partnership on the stewardship of public money. I see that as an important principle that should underscore the relationship that exists between the two to ensure value for money in the delivery of our public services.

I welcome the recent work undertaken on drafting a protocol on the memoranda of reply (MORs) between the Committee and DFP. The PAC regards MORs as being an integral part of the public accountability cycle and monitors the Department's progress on the implementation of its recommendations. I therefore acknowledge the important role that DFP plays in working with Departments on the production of MORs to ensure that Departments respond to each PAC recommendation as fully and as positively as possible.

I have heard it said that the PAC has created a risk-chill effect in Departments. Some critics would say that that has resulted in Departments avoiding taking risks because of the fear of being called before the Committee, thus dampening innovation.

It is the Committee's job to hold Departments and accounting officers to account for their spending decisions, judging whether they have spent wisely and well. When the C&AG's value-for-money reports are selected by the Committee, the relevant accounting officer will be asked to attend to give evidence in open session on how and why decisions were made. Admittedly, this is an exposed position for a senior official to be in and therefore should be regarded as an incentive to Departments to prevent this arising.

However, it is not to create a risk-chill factor and it is not the PAC's primary focus to increase the capacity of bodies to innovate. The PAC primarily looks at expenditure that has been incurred and tries to ensure that where mistakes have been made, lessons have been learned. It will make recommendations which would support greater joined-up working.

I now wish to address the report that was published this year by the Committee in respect of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). AFBI is the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's largest arm's-length body. AFBI carries out scientific testing for DARD and other public and commercial bodies to satisfy statutory requirements mainly around animal and plant health. The institute also carries out research and development for DARD and other clients. Between 2006-07 and 2011-12, DARD provided AFBI with £253 million in grant aid.

The Committee examined AFBI's performance since its establishment in the key areas of financial management; scientific testing undertaken for DARD; the programme of R&D work delivered for the Department; governance of AFBI; and oversight of the institute by DARD.

Overall, the Committee was disappointed at the extent of shortcomings in AFBI and at the unacceptable delay in introducing improvements. The Committee formed the view that, until recently, DARD had abdicated its responsibility, as parent Department, for proper oversight of the institute.

The Committee found that proper costing systems were not introduced in AFBI until seven years after its establishment, meaning that the institute did not have the proper tools to measure its operational efficiency. Despite this, DARD continued to fund the institute to the tune of £40 million annually, with little assurance that it was receiving good value for money.

AFBI's corporate costs have been alarmingly high. Between 2006-07 and 2010-11, these amounted to almost £100 million, £51 million of which related to the institute's estate. The Committee was very concerned at the lack of action to reduce the high state costs in the 10 years since a project board had been set up to prepare for AFBI's establishment.

The Committee also identified poor management with regard to fees charged by AFBI for commercial work. Until 2011, AFBI calculated fees using a historical overhead rate, which dated back to at least 2003, with the result that at least £3.5 million income was lost. The Committee made recommendations which aim to ensure that AFBI's fees are set on the principle of recovering the full costs incurred in delivering commercial work.

Scientific testing for DARD is AFBI's most significant operational activity in both volume and cost terms. The Committee was therefore disappointed that very few unit costs had been calculated for this work. In the absence of costs, the Committee could not understand how DARD had any notion of whether it was receiving value for money for its significant investment in this area.

The management of the research and development programme delivered by AFBI for DARD can only be described as unacceptably poor. The Committee identified some alarming weaknesses in that area. The forecasting of the costs of individual projects at the outset was so inaccurate that 39 were not subjected to the required full economic appraisal. Projects examined by the Committee had overspent by almost £13 million. For many years, ongoing costs were not monitored, which left AFBI and DARD unaware of significant cost escalations for numerous individual projects. When DARD finally undertook a meaningful review in 2012, it immediately terminated 52 projects, which had

cumulative costs to that date of over £18 million.

A range of enhanced governance measures have been introduced in AFBI, and DARD has strengthened its oversight of the institute. The Committee views the acceptance of its recommendations by DARD and AFBI as evidence that they recognise the need for improvement. However, the Committee considers that it took far too long to put such improvements in place. Indeed, the extent of shortcomings identified led the Committee to conclude that best value for money had not been achieved in the delivery of AFBI's operations. The Committee was particularly disappointed that many weaknesses replicated those identified by a 1995 Westminster PAC review of science service, which was AFBI's predecessor, and that the recommendations from that report were not implemented in the institute. Consequently, we intend to follow up on that area to gain assurance that improvements are being implemented and sustained in practice.

Go raibh míle maith agat. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that the Public Accounts Committee has sometimes come in for a certain amount of flak in relation to the reports that we have produced. One that I want to speak on is to do with a whistle-blower's report associated with the Department for Regional Development and the appointment of a contractor to provide signage.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that some of the flak is justifiable? First of all, picking over the bones of some of the projects with hindsight can sometimes reveal things that were not apparent at the start. Secondly, the detail and the intricacies of some of the recommendations creates extra work for Departments. Thirdly, the sometimes unfair way in which the scrutiny is done introduces a chill factor, and that risks are not taken by Departments where sometimes they should be taken.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute, as well as having seven minutes to make his presentation.

Mr Girvan: Normally, most reports are brought about by whistle-blowers. Sometimes, that can lead to extra work for Departments. I appreciate there are occasions when you have to take risks to move forward and that risk-taking, sometimes, is removed.

The report that I am dealing with today involved a very clear whistle-blower. Some people might have perceived him to be a disgruntled contractor who basically did not get the crack of the work that he had won. It was identified that there were difficulties, but the Department's internal audit identified that no problem whatsoever was associated with the matter. As a consequence, the whistle-blower's concerns were not taken seriously by the Department. Between 2005 and 2010, the contractor was contacted by telephone on only one occasion and was interviewed once.

The Department's internal audit showed up nothing amiss. When a full investigation was conducted, however, it was identified that this contractor had lost out significantly as a result of what had gone on in the Department. The business went bankrupt and is no longer trading, whether as a consequence of what was going on or not. I appreciate that there was a contractor who received numerous orders prior to his contract finishing, which would have covered this gentleman's work over a period of time. That was demonstrated quite clearly in our evidence sessions.

1.45 pm

A recommendation was made to the Department of Finance and Personnel, and, to give it credit, it has already put in place a centralised service to provide expertise. Through the Northern Ireland Civil Service's centralised fraud investigation service, a mechanism has been put in place to ensure that what was identified at that stage will be flagged up early and that information will also be shared among Departments. Unfortunately, the report identified that not all Departments have the internal expertise to investigate potential fraud to the level that would be required by the PSNI to scrutinise investigations and present cases to be brought forward for prosecution, which possibly should have happened on many occasions.

The report also highlighted the difficulties for members of staff in those government bodies. They get used to using a certain contractor and are maybe not totally aware that they are no longer using the services of that contractor. That management issue needs to be identified. It needs to be ensured that, when tenders are won, certain people who used to get orders for that service are taken off the list and that a new contractor gets the orders. That needs to happen and to be disseminated to staff. The whole information-sharing aspect needs to be dealt with.

There was also a report on Northern Ireland Water, which brought out major problems. We will maybe not go into the details of what happened in many other areas, but this was to do with Northern Ireland Water's awarding of contracts for the supply of water meters and how that had been mismanaged. The report identified all sorts of problems whereby the people who were supplying the water meters were told to submit invoices for £20,000 or below.

If it is discovered that invoice slicing is or has been going on without a reasonable explanation, that is identified as being a potential or major fraud investigation. Somebody could be saying, "I need cash flow to keep my business going". That might well be the case, but there were major areas in which Northern Ireland Water was falling down in passing information through to the contractor who was supplying and fitting water meters. They were making numerous calls to areas. The information on when they could go to those locations to fit meters was available, but, unfortunately, that was not making its way back to the supplier of the meters. Sometimes, they were being paid umpteen times for visiting the same location.

The policing of that mechanism was not very good. Problems were identified, and invoice slicing was a big issue. Many recommendations were made. There was a clear weakness in the planned scope and methodology of the investigation. Despite references being made to the Department —

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

Mr Girvan: I will indeed.

Mr Wilson: I do not know the details of the case, but does the Member accept that, very often, the people who criticise Departments for invoice slicing, as he calls it, or cutting down the size of contracts are the very people in the Assembly who call, time and time again, for more work to be given to small local businesses? The way to do that, of course, is to break contracts down in the way that is suggested.

Mr Girvan: That is why I made the point about people getting payments as opposed to waiting on a very long contract and ending up with millions. The overall cost of the contract is what really matters. I do believe that —

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

Mr Girvan: — proper invoicing should be dealt with. I apologise, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for running over. I did not really get into detail on the second part. Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank your colleague.

Mr Hussey: May I remain seated, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr Hussey: I begin by paying tribute to the Clerk and Committee support staff for their assistance throughout the past year. My party colleague Michael Copeland, an active member of the Committee, is absent due to ill health. I am sure you will join me in wishing him a speedy return to good health and thank him for his participation in the Committee in recent years.

I wish to address the report published this year by the Committee on DCAL's management of major capital projects.

In the period 2008-2011, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had an unprecedented target to deliver £229 million capital investment in the Northern Ireland culture, arts and leisure infrastructure. This resulted in the delivery of a number of capital projects, including the Grand Opera House, the Ulster Museum, the Crescent Arts Centre, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Tollymore National Outdoor Centre, the MAC and the Lyric Theatre.

The projects have undoubtedly enhanced culture and arts provision in the local economy. However, this has come at a significant cost to the public purse. The projects cumulatively ended up costing £103.4 million, 32% more than the original estimate of £78.5 million. The projects also encountered significant delays.

The Committee was concerned that despite the availability of extensive guidance, public bodies continue to make the same mistakes around planning, governance, project management and procurement that the Committee has observed and reported on over many years.

Approvals for projects were based upon business cases that were not robust and were overly optimistic about what could be delivered. That resulted in projects being re-scoped, which

contributed to the significant cost increases and time delays. There is a clear lesson here that public bodies must ensure that robust project management arrangements are put in place so that projects can be delivered on time and within budget.

In total, £87.4 million — 84% of the £103.4 million investment — was provided by the public purse. Despite having a lack of experience and expertise in delivering capital projects of this scale, DCAL failed to seek technical advice at the appropriate time and provided grant recipients with too much autonomy in making key decisions. This is clearly unacceptable: public bodies must seek technical advice and use it to inform key decisions. All key decisions on projects of this scale should be authorised by the public body in consultation with technical advisers.

There was something of a furore when the Committee's report was published. Many took exception to the Committee's conclusions. It may be helpful if I emphasise a number of completely unacceptable departures from long-established principles of good practice that were made in awarding the Lyric Theatre rebuild contract.

A number of unexplained adjustments were made to the tender submissions. Despite £413,000 being stripped out from one of the tenders, that cost was later paid in full. The tendering documentation to support the tender decision was destroyed promptly after the tender evaluation meeting. The sponsoring bodies — DCAL and the Arts Council — or their technical advisers — the CPD — had no oversight of the tender evaluation process and were unable to assure the Committee that it had been completed in accordance with good practice. Finally, we discovered that the preferred bidder provided a donation of £150,000 to the Lyric Theatre. In light of this sequence of events, the Committee stated that it was left with a strong impression that the outcome of the tender process had been manipulated, and it remains of that view.

DCAL accepted all the PAC's recommendations and has taken a number of actions. It now requires all capital projects to follow best practice project delivery arrangements as set out in 'Achieving Excellence in Construction'. It has revised and updated a service level agreement with the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel, formally documenting roles and responsibilities. DCAL also intends to develop procedures to ensure that local operating agreements are put in place with the Central

Procurement Directorate for all major capital projects and programmes.

In response to this report, the Department of Finance and Personnel committed to updating its guidance on the use of grant in procurement to ensure that all records of procurement associated with grant awards are retained in line with public procurement policy. Also, Departments and arm's-length bodies will be required to obtain written confirmation from a centre of procurement expertise that procurement guidelines have been met and that a contract represents value for money before a grant recipient is permitted to award that contract.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Anna Lo.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Questions 1, 5, 7 and 13 have been withdrawn.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors: Appointment

2. **Mr Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. (AQO 7101/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): The deputy First Minister and I remain committed to providing the best services possible for victims and survivors. This includes ensuring that they have proper representation and a collective voice through their own commissioner. Unfortunately, the current process has not produced a sizeable pool of appointable candidates. We are looking at options on how to widen the pool of appointable candidates, and we will release further details of this very shortly. However, as this is still a live competition, it would not be appropriate to comment further.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his response. Clearly, there will be victims and survivors across Northern Ireland who are disappointed that we are not progressing this matter. First Minister, we do not want a rerun of the previous appointment that caused a lot of distress and discomfort to the victims. Can you outline to the House any time frame on going forward, taking the point that there have been delays? Is there any time frame in which you can assure the House that that will happen?

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that I can agree with him about there being any concern about the previous commissioner. Kathryn Stone was a first-class commissioner. I think that, perhaps, he may be referring to the appointment of four commissioners on a previous occasion. Some of them were slightly dodgy, I think, as the House will know.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please.

Mr P Robinson: I think there are lessons to be learned from all that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please.

Mr P Robinson: Sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Sorry, I have to ask you to resume your seat. I will not accept any remarks from a sedentary position.

Mr P Robinson: I think that the point that he makes, nonetheless, is important. It is essential that we get this right. There are people relying on the commissioner to speak for them, and it has to be a commissioner they can identify with. That is what the deputy First Minister and I are working on. I think that the timescale is as soon as possible. We have to resolve the issue of whether we widen the pool and, if so, how we do it.

Mr Spratt: What progress has been made on severely disabled pensions, and will it seek to redefine "victim"?

Mr P Robinson: I think that many people have recognised that, when the initial assessments were made for victims at the time of the incident that affected their lives, in some cases, if not most, there was not the expectation that some of these victims would still have been alive today. That is the blunt truth. Therefore, I think that the assessments were less than were necessary for them to have a full life for a prolonged period. In that context, my colleagues and I have been consulting on a Bill that would come before the Assembly that would provide a pension for people who are severely disabled. I think that is important legislation, and I hope that it receives the support of the House. It would augment whatever previous settlement that there had been with them.

Nothing can compensate for the injury that has been caused to them, but we cannot leave people who have gone through that severe pain, anguish and a prolonged period of living with a disability without giving them the assistance that we can because they were not able to be employed and were not able to build up National Insurance and are, therefore, at a disadvantage from the rest of the community. It is an important piece of legislation for the House, and I hope that it will consider it sympathetically and support it.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will he outline which

recommendations of the independent assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) have been implemented and which remain outstanding?

Mr P Robinson: There was a whole series of recommendations. My recollection is that we have implemented about two thirds of them. If the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister wants us to give the Member further details on that, I am quite happy to do that. However, very considerable progress has been made on the implementation of the recommendations.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to acknowledge the First Minister's admission that his party was complicit in appointing what he had described as a dodgy character as a commissioner. I am sure that government is not easy for the First Minister. Is the process that is being run giving a list of deemed appointable candidates? If so, how many people have been deemed to be appointable?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to go into the details of an open competition, but I can assure the Member that the process is being monitored by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and is being held in accordance with its rules, regulations and guidelines. It will bring to us a list of those who are appointable.

There have been occasions — I will leave this issue to the side so that I can speak more frankly on it — when we have been left with very little choice. On one occasion, I recall being offered only one person to choose from. If the deputy First Minister and I are being asked to make choices, we would like a wide field that we can look at and perhaps agree on an outcome.

Corporation Tax

3. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 7102/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Securing powers to lower corporation tax is a key priority for the Executive to promote the growth of our local economy. As part of our economic pact that was signed last year with the Prime Minister, the United Kingdom Government indicated their intention to make a decision on the devolution of corporation tax powers at the time of the autumn statement, which is on 3 December. That has involved discussions with the Secretary of State, and we also wrote to the

Prime Minister to press him to come to a decision quickly and ensure the swift devolution of corporation tax powers.

The reply from the Prime Minister confirmed that the timescale remains the same. Officials have been told that, if a positive decision is made, a Bill could be introduced in the House of Commons very shortly afterwards, but before the election. The Executive's agreement will also be required to approve the devolution of corporation-tax-rate-setting powers and to lay a legislative consent motion before the Assembly. Officials are working to make the necessary arrangements in that respect.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I call Mr Daithí McKay. My apologies, Michelle. Your supplementary question.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to thank the First Minister for his response. Further to that, what does he say to those who oppose corporation tax, on the basis that it breaks up the fiscal union, and do not believe that the Executive has the competence to deal with those increased powers?

Mr P Robinson: Since devolution began in Scotland, we have seen the fiscal responsibilities being divided up between the Treasury and the devolved regions. The Government in Scotland, for instance, has had the power to reduce or increase income tax within certain limits, there are already proposals for various duties such as stamp duty and landfill tax to be devolved to Scotland and Wales, and we ourselves have the power over air passenger duty. That kind of tight fiscal union has already been made more flexible, and I do not think that that argument pertains.

We have very separate and unique circumstances in Northern Ireland. We have a land frontier with a country that has a considerably more attractive — ie, lower — level of corporation tax. We have also come through decades of conflict, and our economy has suffered as a result. Therefore, there is a strong argument that to rebalance the economy in Northern Ireland, which is lagging behind because of our history, we need something that grows the private sector and encourages growth in the economy.

No one has made a better suggestion than that of corporation tax, from which, it is viewed, something like 50,000 additional jobs would come over a period.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I now call Mr McKay.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Along the same lines, First Minister, can you outline what you believe the priorities should be with fiscal levers other than corporation tax? What conversations has your office had with the business community to ensure that it is part of the conversation, too?

Mr P Robinson: I will take those questions in reverse. One thing that you can say about the business community in Northern Ireland is that it is always ready and willing to give advice on those and other matters, and it has been doing so consistently. The overwhelming view of the business community is that devolving corporation tax will be good for business and that it will encourage growth, not just of foreign direct investment but of our indigenous companies, giving them a confidence for the future.

The Member asked about other financial levers. I think that I said at a previous Question Time that the Department of Finance and Personnel had looked at a range of fiscal powers to see which ones might be applicable to Northern Ireland, which ones might give us some ability to direct our social and economic policy, which ones we could afford to do and which ones the economy of scale would make it impossible for us to do. At the end of that exercise, we looked at the stamp duty and landfill tax powers that were being offered to Scotland and Wales. I might even add aggregates tax and corporation tax to that, as well as air passenger duty. Those seem to be the parameters within which we will probably have to work. Any of the others are of such complexity that a small area with a population of 1.8 million would find it very difficult to pay the cost of operating the additional taxes without having to increase the burden on its local community to pay for the cost of their operation.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Minister regret wasting time discussing the cost of devolving corporation tax with Her Majesty's Treasury, when the decision was always going to be a political one that would be made in Number 10?

Mr P Robinson: The Member has an imperfect knowledge of the issues that relate to corporation tax. Very significant discussions — indeed, the bulk of discussions with Treasury — have been undertaken on the basis of what the modus operandi of corporation tax would be. We discussed what arrangements would be made if any secondary benefits were to come

back to Northern Ireland. We also discussed how we would deal with multinational companies with a base in Northern Ireland and their headquarters in GB and what would happen if they were to transfer their headquarters and attempt to get a larger profit base into Northern Ireland. A range of issues had to be resolved before the political decision could be taken, not least because it relates to how much of a reduction to the block grant there would be as a result of our getting the lever to set our own level of corporation tax.

Mr Agnew: Given the furore that his party has made about the £87 million that we have had to cut to fund welfare, how does the First Minister propose that we pay for a potential cut of £400 million a year if corporation tax is reduced to the level that he has proposed?

Mr P Robinson: He refers to a furore. I object to throwing money away. I like to invest money, and that is a distinction to be made between the two scenarios that he points out. Investing money in your economy to build and grow it seems an imminently sensible position to adopt. Of course, the distinction in all of this is that everybody recognises that, given Northern Ireland's very high dependency on the public sector, we need to rebalance our economy. Everybody has been bandying those words about for years. It has been the mantra of almost every political party. I wonder whether they recognised what it actually means. If you are going to rebalance your economy, you streamline the public sector and grow the private sector. The kind of thing that we are going to be forced to do, because of what has been described as austerity, is offer a voluntary exit scheme to reduce our dependency on 212,000 people employed by the public sector for a population of 1.8 million. I think you can recognise that if you can reduce that level of dependency and, at the same time, grow your private sector, it is a better use of the funds that are available. I do not think that it will be as high as the Member is outlining, but even if it were, the amount of money that you would take out of the public sector for a very limited number of people that would be coming out, compared with the 50,000 that would be coming in over the years, on the balance books, shows that it would be good value for money.

2.15 pm

Mr Allister: Last week, one of the First Minister's party colleagues described devolving corporation tax as a gamble. On the same theme as that of Mr Agnew, how then does the First Minister reach the conclusion that it is safe

to gamble with such a substantial, adverse impact on the block grant, particularly as we are now most likely facing further austerity and cuts in a new spending round review?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is not much younger than me, so he has been around in politics for a long time, and he knows that there are very few certainties in politics. To that extent, all that you can ever do is make your best assessment of what the outcomes might be. The fact that every significant commentator, economist and politician who has financial experience has indicated that the provision of corporation tax powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the consequent lowering of the level of corporation tax will bring tens of thousands of jobs to Northern Ireland seems to me to be a fairly firm basis for us to move forward. I have not heard any intelligent commentator indicate that it would not add to the number of people in employment in Northern Ireland. Our own Invest Northern Ireland very strongly supports it. It contains the people who are out on the ground right across the world and, particularly, in Northern Ireland. Therefore, they know best what the business community is looking for in order to increase investment or to bring investment to Northern Ireland. All that we ever do in all these circumstances is take the best advice we can from the experiences of others and the knowledge that we have, and we act upon it.

Gender Equality

4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the actions taken to promote gender equality. (AQO 7103/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The gender equality strategy 2006-2016 sets out an overarching framework for Departments, their agencies and other relevant statutory authorities to promote gender equality. The strategy provides a framework of objectives to direct action by decision-makers and policymakers in government to increase their awareness and understanding; to tackle specific gender inequalities, including the structural inequalities that can perpetuate them; and to ensure the promotion of gender equality across their policy areas.

The strategy and its supporting action plans bring together what government is doing here to promote gender equality and to enable government to demonstrate how it is meeting international commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action and, importantly, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. A review of the strategy was undertaken during 2013, and, in January 2014, Ministers approved the development of the new strategy. Since that date, meetings have taken place with a range of key stakeholders and the gender advisory panel to update them on the progress that has been made and, importantly, to include them in the development of the new strategy. The current strategy will remain in place until the new strategy is developed and operational. The new strategy will require full public consultation and Executive approval.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Has he confidence in junior Minister McCann providing support for the domestic violence strategy, given the Máiría Cahill revelations?

Mr Bell: I think that Máiría Cahill was a particularly brave individual to come forward and tell a story of horrific rape that should never have happened and for which she can never be blamed. Child abuse can never, under any rational explanation, be blamed on the child. The House considered the motion, and I came to the correct decision and voted on it. My record is clear on that.

As somebody who has some experience of dealing with child abuse — I spent over two decades of my life in professional practice — I know that a paedophile will rarely, if ever, abuse only one child. I can give you a legion of research to confirm that. The important thing is that when anybody is aware of child abuse, they must immediately bring that to the attention of the police and social services. They do not have the option not to bring that to the attention of police and social services. It is not something that you should do; it is something that you must do. The reason why the criminal law is very clear in that you must bring that forward is because it allows the police and social services, under the joint protocol procedures, to act in a way that can take the criminal route and also the child protection route to protect any child. Whatever the abuse or the domestic violence, whether it is that of an adult or a minor, it is imperative that that abuse is reported immediately. Failure to do so is simply not an option.

Dr McDonnell: Although I warmly welcome the First Minister and the junior Minister's commitment to equality, how can the First Minister possibly reconcile the Executive's commitment to equality with the disgraceful, hurtful and insulting comments of his colleague Gregory Campbell at the DUP conference regarding the Irish language, and is he not aware that the —

Mr P Robinson: Gender equality?

Dr McDonnell: — Irish language community is much wider and deeper than the membership —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Can we have a question?

Dr McDonnell: — of any one or even two political parties?

Mr P Robinson: I am waiting for a ruling as to whether this is a question on gender equality or not.

Mr Campbell: It did not sound like it.

Mr Bell: My understanding —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Sorry; I seem to be being questioned. I hope not. The Minister knows fine well that he has the ability to answer the question or not.

Mr P Robinson: So, it does not matter whether the supplementary question is related to —

Mr Bell: I think the understanding was that the supplementary question would be based on the original question, and I think that most Members of the House are aware of that. Therefore, I will answer the original question, which was on the gender equality strategy, on which I do not think Mr Campbell said anything at that particular time.

We have a strong track record in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and a strong action plan on the actions that we have taken to promote gender equality. We have sought to find a gender balance on all Government-appointed committees, boards and all other relevant official bodies. The Commissioner for Public Appointments recognised that women, along with some other sections of the population, were under-represented, and it is working closely with Departments to identify and develop measures to address the under-representation among

those holding public appointments in Northern Ireland. That is one thing that we have done.

With regard to Northern Ireland Civil Service actions, we are committed to achieving greater diversity in public appointments, and we have been consistent with the overall principle of selection by merit as a means of ensuring effective public bodies. We recognise that some sections of our society are under-represented and we are working to encourage greater participation. We have put measures in place to raise the awareness of public appointments and made it possible for people, and encouraged them, to apply for those posts. We have taken a number of steps, including an interdepartmental public appointments forum, to share best practice and increase diversity.

We have used the independent advice that will be provided to the public appointments forum by a senior academic with considerable experience in equality and diversity issues. Time does not allow me to go on, but those are the key, concrete actions that OFMDFM has taken on gender equality, which we are proud to stand over.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Before calling Mr Kieran McCarthy, I remind Members that we have dealt with only three questions. Can we have brevity from Members and Ministers?

Mr McCarthy: Does the junior Minister agree that it would be better for Northern Ireland if we had a single equality Act as soon as possible rather than trying to address equality issues piecemeal, bearing in mind that it is almost five years since GB introduced its Equality Act?

Mr Bell: I am not sure that whatever body we have would change the legislation. We have very robust legislation in Northern Ireland, which we are using to drive forward change and to increase gender equality. We are doing that in a range of ways, including by using best practice, advertisement, encouragement and setting an example in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. All those measures are using best practice to address gender equality. I am more interested in the outcome than the process. We have the process and the legislation. Whatever body we have will not change the legislation. The important thing for people who are living with inequality is that we address that gender imbalance, and we are using best practice to do so.

Together: Building a United Community

6. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of Together: Building a United Community. (AQO 7105/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Work is progressing on all seven headline actions that were announced alongside the publication of 'Together: Building a United Community' (T:BUC). On 2 July, the Minister of Education announced the first three successful projects to be taken forward under the shared campuses programme. A second call for projects has now opened.

We have successfully completed the first pilot of the United Youth programme, and a concept design call has attracted a high level of interest. A design team has been established to take forward development of the next stage of the programme. Stakeholder engagement is ongoing, with a view to commencing a further pilot phase in January 2015.

A significant number of summer schools and camps took place during summer 2014, and further schemes were delivered during the Halloween midterm break.

Stakeholder engagement is ongoing regarding the development of the first two locations for urban villages: the Lower Newtownards Road and Colin. Detailed project plans, complete with anticipated budgets, have also been developed for shared neighbourhoods, interface removal and cross-community sports programme headline actions. Work is continuing with the Departments to take forward work on the wide range of other actions and commitments arising from the strategy.

Mr Cree: I thank the First Minister for his response. First Minister, will you detail the actual spend in the current financial year and the projected spend for 2015-16 by Departments on T:BUC?

Mr P Robinson: The Member touches on an important point that is being raised in OFMDFM. These were new projects that were not baselined, and we have had to bid for funds. We have been able to get sufficient funds to carry out the pilots and the preparatory work that was necessary for the schemes. However, we need to identify where the funds will come from to deal with the 2015-16 financial year. We have not identified those funds yet. We will have further conversations with the Minister of Finance and Personnel — I

put him on notice — to identify funds for those projects. I think that they are hugely important. We carried out a pilot on the United Youth project and put young NEET people into that project. We found that 84% of those who went through the project ended up in work, in training or giving support in some form of community or charitable organisation. That is a massive change. If one were to hear some of the transformational stories of the young people who were part of that project, I think they would convince the House, and I hope they will convince the Minister of Finance, that it is a project that is worth funding.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Unfortunately, that ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Gregory Campbell: Threats

T1. **Mr Hussey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the threats made against Mr Gregory Campbell MP MLA and those who are responsible for such irresponsible actions should be condemned. (AQT 1781/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: I do, of course. We have been consistent on the issue, because there are Members from all sides of the House who have been threatened in one way or another. When there is a threat against anyone who represents the local community as a democratically elected representative, it is an attack on democracy itself. I trust that the early knowledge that the police have of the issue will help them to prevent anything arising from it, but I certainly condemn it completely. I thank the Member for his question, and I know that the Member for East Londonderry will not be deterred from doing the good job that he does for his constituents in East Londonderry, both here and in Parliament.

Mr Hussey: Does the First Minister agree that the history of the Irish language is associated very closely with the Presbyterian Church? In fact, the Presbyterian ministers kept that language alive. Does he agree with me that such an attack on Mr Campbell would make the support for the Irish language within the unionist community step back because of what they see as terrorism being associated with the Irish language?

Mr P Robinson: It certainly would be counterproductive. I have to say that I do not point the finger at those who have a real and genuine interest in the Irish language. I suspect that the culprit is someone who perhaps could not care less about the Irish language except for using it for political purposes. Yes, the Irish language does have a history that has roots in Presbyterianism in Ireland, as it then was. It is a perfectly honourable entitlement for anyone to advance the Irish language and speak it. Of course, we respect those who do. We really need to separate and recognise the difference between support for the Irish language and those who want to use the Irish language for political purposes.

Senior Civil Service: Gender Equality and Balance

T2. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, bearing in mind that although 53% of the make-up of the Civil Service is female, 100% of the permanent secretaries are male, even though 70% of Senior Civil Service staff at grade 3 are female, when there will be progress in finding equality and balance. (AQT 1782/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: I very much encourage those within the Civil Service who are female and have the ability to apply for all the jobs that come up at the higher levels of the Civil Service. At the same time, we must always make sure that job appointments are made on the basis of merit. Of course, we have had females in very high positions, including that of permanent secretary, within the Civil Service. I hope that we can get back to that. My experience of the female participation in the higher echelons of the Civil Service has been a positive one. I hope that the Member is not indicating — and I certainly hope that it is not the case — that there is any glass ceiling within the Civil Service. It must be open to all on the basis of their ability to do the job.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the First Minister for that answer, and I find it encouraging, but of course the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. It is a situation that we have been looking at for a number of years, and we appear to be unable to make progress. Therefore, will he, through his position, take a personal interest in this, given that, across 11 Departments, every permanent secretary is male, and the situation is almost as bad at grades 3 and 5, which is wholly unacceptable? All of us should endeavour to ensure that when he says that there is no glass ceiling we can demonstrate and prove that.

Mr P Robinson: I take on board what the Member says. I entirely endorse the thrust of his remarks, but it will be a lot more difficult to end up with the outcomes that he refers to in circumstances where we are downsizing the public sector or, indeed, reducing the number of Departments, which would take out positions at each level in the Civil Service. However, I have no doubt that, as far as OFMDFM is concerned — I am pretty sure that I speak for the deputy First Minister when I say this — we repudiate anything standing in the way of full gender equality in positions at any level in the public service. We are happy to champion that cause, and there will certainly be no distinction on our part on the basis of gender. We look at who is the best person to do a job. I hope that that is a position that the various panels will exercise. We should also remember that these appointments are governed by guidelines and rules that forbid any form of discrimination.

Gregory Campbell: Insulting Remarks

T3. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister would consider asking Gregory Campbell to withdraw the remarks he made at the DUP party conference when he once again insulted the Irish language and Irish speakers, including thousands of children in Irish-medium education. (AQT 1783/11-15)

Ms McCorley: Ag comhdháil do pháirtí thug Gregory Campbell masla don Ghaeilge agus do Ghaeilgeoirí, ina measc, na mílte páiste atá ag gabháil fríd Ghaeloideas. Ar mhaith leat iarriadh ar Gregory Campbell a chuid focal a tharraingt siar?

Mr P Robinson: I think that we really do need to distinguish between lampooning those involved in a political campaign related to the Irish language and those who genuinely speak the Irish language. I have known Gregory Campbell for decades, and I know his dry sense of humour as well. I am pretty sure that he was pointing the finger at those who, in my view, politically abuse the Irish language. Frankly, they set back the prospect of acceptance of the Irish language among many other sections of the community.

I am fully supportive of those who enjoy speaking the Irish language, its richness and the culture surrounding it. They must be protected. However, when it starts to get drawn into the political realm, we start to undermine and dilute the importance of the language. As a matter of interest for those who are speakers,

the more we can do to depoliticise the Irish language, the greater acceptance there will be of that language in the community.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How can you claim to respect other cultures and identities when you defend and echo the comments made at your party conference?

Mr P Robinson: We see evidence here of a supplementary question that was prepared before I gave an answer. I made it clear during my remarks at the party conference that this community will go forward only when there is a higher level of respect, understanding and tolerance. That has to be the way forward, but it has to be the way forward not just for the Irish language but for the unionist and Orange traditions as well. It ill becomes anybody to, on the one hand, feel offence when it is something that relates to the Irish language but, on the other, close their eyes and ignore the fact that there are people on the Benches opposite who have made comments about the royal family, the Orange institutions, parades in Northern Ireland and many other parts of the culture and tradition of the unionist community.

As I said at the party conference, it is essential that this is not a one-way street and that everybody recognises the importance of respecting, understanding and tolerating the other's tradition.

Gregory Campbell: Insulting Remarks

T4. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister, who described Mr Campbell's remarks on Saturday as "a bit of comedy", can tell the House who is laughing. (AQT 1784/11-15)

Mr Dickson: I join with others to clearly condemn the threats made against Mr Campbell today.

Mr P Robinson: When he first made the remarks in the Chamber, a lot of people opposite were laughing.

Mr Dickson: Does describing another party's proposals as toilet paper mean that the DUP has written off any chance of agreement in the current talks?

Mr P Robinson: I think that Mr Campbell was careful to use the term "wish list", as opposed

to the serious agenda items that we are discussing in the talks process. I and the party are fully committed to reaching agreement on the wide range of issues that is being discussed as part of the agenda in the talks process. If we collectively fail in reaching agreement, it says little for the future of the Assembly and Executive, so it is very important that we reach agreement. That is why there has always been reluctance, on our part and, as I understood it, on the part of Mr Dickson's party, to stretch the agenda and deal with the wish list issues or the hobby horses, because all our political parties have them and we know that. There are key central issues that need to be resolved in the process, and that is where our focus and attention have to be.

Barnett Formula: Replacement

T5. Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister has had any discussions with the UK Government on the replacement of the Barnett formula. (AQT 1785/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: It has come up in a number of conversations. There is not a lot of enthusiasm in Northern Ireland for the replacement of the Barnett formula. If the Barnett formula is removed, I suspect that there would be massive political pressure from the north of England and from Wales for a recalculation, which would be to the detriment of Northern Ireland. If we have to cut up the cake differently, it will lead to us getting a smaller portion. That being the case, while it has been discussed, I was pleased that, as an outcome of the Scottish referendum, the Prime Minister indicated that he had no intention of replacing the Barnett formula.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the First Minister thus far. Will he outline the main arguments that he will use to keep Northern Ireland's block grant at the current level in the event of a redistribution of finance following the Scottish referendum?

Mr P Robinson: That comes close to the issues that we were arguing for in relation to corporation tax. We have come from a position where there has been massive division in our community. Our economy needs as much support as possible to be able to stand on its own two feet. For those reasons, the need factor is high in Northern Ireland.

I could easily make an argument for a higher proportion of that formula than we get at present, in terms of the distribution of whatever funds are available, but I can certainly make an argument as to why the amount that we are

receiving in the block grant should be increased. In real terms, over the last four or five years, we have lost the equivalent of £1.5 billion of spending. All the difficulties that we are facing, in relation to the cuts that Ministers are having to contemplate, come as a result of the reduction in our block grant. Whatever the calculation and the formula may be, the overall pot needs to be considered, and there are issues that we have to deal with in Northern Ireland that are unique within the United Kingdom. Therefore, whatever the Barnett formula might be, I think that there is a very good argument for us to have Barnett plus.

Equality Commission: Ashers Bakery

T6. Ms McGahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the First Minister's recent comments about the Equality Commission and its role in the Ashers Bakery case, whether the First Minister can confirm that OFMDFM is fully committed to the work of the Equality Commission in identifying and challenging all forms of discrimination. (AQT 1786/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: OFMDFM has statutory ownership of the Equality Commission but does not have any operational responsibility for it. The Equality Commission itself has a duty and remit that requires it to uphold equality for everyone. That has to include those who are Christian as well as those who are not.

2.45 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

1. Mr Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to open up the Chinese market for dairy-related products from Northern Ireland. (AQO 7115/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to advise not only that the Chinese market is already open for dairy products from the North but that it is thriving. In 2013, 3,613 tons of dairy products such as butter, cheese and milk powder were exported from the North to China. In 2014, 3,918 tons have already been exported, and I am very pleased to see that upward trend. Overall, dairy exports have increased by 30% this year, and my officials

continue to work closely with our industry to facilitate this growing trade.

In addition, significant quantities of raw milk are used in the production of dairy products in the South that may then be exported to China. My officials have established an international trade dairy group with their counterparts in the South to ensure that trade in those types of products is facilitated. At the most recent meeting, officials agreed new processes that ensure that the support that we give to the industry across the island of Ireland is a lot more joined up.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her detailed response, which is most welcome.

Is the Minister aware that the Irish Government's Minister for Agriculture, Simon Coveney, visited China recently, bringing great hope to many food producers in the South? There is a hope and desire that our own Minister will also take the opportunity to visit China to promote the same concept and to increase the quantity and quality of produce that is going to China.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I am aware of the recent visit of Simon Coveney and the delegation. The Member will be aware that I have actually been to China twice to explore the market and to make links with the Chinese Government and trade bodies. I intend to make another trip to China, hopefully very early in the new year, not just for the dairy industry, although that is obviously vital, but to look at some of the challenges that we are having in getting export certificates signed off with Chinese officials. I wrote to our friends in China recently and asked for some movement on that, particularly because the pork industry has been very disappointed by the continual cancellation of inspection visits by the Chinese vets. We are hopeful that we will get that progressed as quickly as possible. As I say, some work is being done to see whether there is scope in my going out in early January to pursue the market further.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us whether any new dairy export markets are being considered?

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to note that a significant number of dairy export markets are already open for products from the North and, indeed, from across the island. That includes access to the new emerging economies of India and China. There is also a planned inspection in December by the Brazilians, who will visit

interested dairy exporters in England, Scotland and Wales. Whilst our industry has indicated that it is not planning to export to Brazil, the inspection will hopefully provide a new, lucrative market for the industry in the future.

Mr Irwin: Given the current depressed markets for dairy produce across Europe, and given the importance of the dairy sector to the Northern Ireland economy, has the Minister met our three MEPs to look at a possible way forward?

Mrs O'Neill: I have not met with the three MEPs to talk about the dairy sector specifically, but my door is always open and I am very keen to engage with them, particularly given the discussions that happen in Europe. I am very aware that one of the MEPs is involved in the new dairy report, and at an official level we have already been inputting to that.

You are absolutely right that the crisis in the dairy sector is very real, as are the issues concerning price, managing cash flow and all the other issues that exist for the sector. My Department is certainly up for playing its role in whatever shape or fashion that may take to support the sector to grow. You will be aware that, under the Going for Growth strategy, there are a number of initiatives that will support the industry in going forward. It is so important that we tackle the underlying issues of profitability and look towards production efficiency. As I said, we in the Department are certainly up for playing our role to take that forward. We have done a lot of work around knowledge transfer, education and training. We will continue to do that over the next wee while.

Incidentally, I am meeting the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) tomorrow to discuss issues that are pertinent to the dairy sector. I look forward to that discussion. I also hope to have a conversation over the next couple of days with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Elizabeth Truss, particularly on the dairy industry. We are coming at trying to support the industry from a number of fronts in what is obviously a very difficult time, given that there was a 30% difference in prices this October from those from last year.

Mrs Dobson: Unfortunately, the Republic has been allowed to get ahead in building routes into the Chinese market. As Agriculture Minister in this Executive, can she give a commitment that, for the Chinese market, she sees the Republic of Ireland as nothing other than a major competitor? Ideology must not get in the way of standing up for our farmers and agriculture sector.

Mrs O'Neill: Those are typical nonsense-politics arguments. The reality is that what we need to do is work together across the island to get into these markets. That is the reality of the situation. The industry wants to see that. There is very strong growth right across the island. As I said in my initial answer, quite a significant amount of trade happens across the island, and that is why my Department works with our counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) to assist the industry, North and South, to grow. Given the quota situation post-2015, there are absolutely opportunities for us to explore. I am certainly up for working with the industry. What we need to see is a dairy-led strategy. As part of that, we will be working right across the island.

I do not think that the Member should get hung up too much on ideological positions. This is, in fact, a trade issue on which we can work together quite successfully across the island.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what private sector industries in, or related to, agriculture or rural development are being sought to complement the move of her departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. (AQO 7116/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can advise the Member that, as a result of the soft market testing exercise on the Shackleton site by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister earlier this year, over 40 expressions of interest were received, principally from the private sector, although there was also some partnership and public sector interest. OFMDFM is giving consideration to uses for the wider Shackleton site as part of the plans to develop it.

Mr Campbell: I know that the Minister was initially somewhat lukewarm about the move to the site, but it is always a welcome development when a politician does the right thing. In doing the right thing, you should always keep doing the right thing, whether there are threats, online abuse or anything else. Keep doing the right thing. That is what I intend to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Can we have a question, please?

Mr Campbell: On the contribution that has had to be made from the public purse to the development of the Ballykelly site, will she now ensure, along with OFMDFM, that swift

progress is made to try to utilise best the rest of the site?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is aware that I am very much committed to the project moving forward and have made headquarters relocation one of my principal priorities, which is why I made it a Programme for Government commitment. Since taking up office, I, like my predecessor Michelle Gildernew, have always been of the view that we need to move our headquarters to a rural location to bring us closer to our service users and to achieve all the knock-on benefits that we have always talked about. This is about a fairer distribution of public sector jobs and giving opportunities to those in the public sector to have promotion opportunities. The benefits speak for themselves. I have always been committed to the project. I have set out my stall to take it forward, and I will do so in the time ahead.

OFMDFM is the principal Department in developing the entire site. It is obvious from the expressions of interest that the move by DARD to the Ballykelly site will attract other people there. I am quite sure that that will happen over the next number of years. It will be a long-awaited investment in the north-west, which people there are entitled to, having been robbed of it for years.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister tell us when the outline business case will be completed and the cost-benefit analysis conducted?

Mrs O'Neill: The outline business case has been cleared by DARD's internal assurance processes. Executive approval to proceed was given on 26 June 2014 by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The business case outlines the options for relocating the headquarters to Ballykelly and was informed by a report by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) on the accommodation options available on the Shackleton Barracks site, an assessment of equality impacts of relocation and the modelling of the required staff transition to the new headquarters, while incorporating opportunities provided by modern ICT as appropriate.

The preferred option points to a phased approach to construction, with 400 workstations being completed in 2017 and a further phase of around 200 workstations being completed in 2020. The total cost of the phased option is £30.8 million capital and £14.3 million resource. The funding gap is £29.7 million capital and £11.3 million resource.

The current programme for the work at Ballykelly indicates that the tender award for construction will happen at the end of 2015. Prior to that, my officials will develop the outline business case into the full business case.

Mr Lyttle: Given the extreme pressure on public finances, not least on our hospitals and schools, will the Minister outline the total estimated cost of the project? Does she accept that it is not appropriate in such austere times?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I do not accept that. The principal point is about a fair distribution of public-sector jobs. It is about better promotional opportunities for the public service. It is about ensuring that there are opportunities right across the North and that we have a better distribution of public-sector jobs. That is key; it is the principle that should guide us when moving forward. I have set out our stall in relation to Ballykelly for the headquarters, fisheries going to south Down, Rivers Agency going to Loughry in Cookstown, and Forest Service going to Fermanagh. I am absolutely committed to taking those projects forward. I have set that out in budget plans.

We absolutely are in austere times; it is a difficult economic climate. You always have to put it in context of what we are dealing with, which is the onslaught on the Budget from the Tory Government. There are difficult decisions to be taken. I am absolutely up for taking the fairest and most balanced approach I can. I assure the Member that I am committed to those relocation projects.

Mrs Hale: Will the Minister tell the House whether the redeployment has taken into consideration the surplus staffing positions in the Department and the impending voluntary exit schemes?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. As part of the plan and in moving forward, we have been working very closely with the trade union side to make sure that staff are fully up to speed with all the moves that are happening and the implications for them. We are working with our staff. We have surveyed staff in headquarters and right across all elements of the Department. There has also been a wider public service survey. That has all fed in. We are very committed to taking forward the phased approach, which allows for any staff changes that may happen.

We still do not have all the details of the voluntary redundancy scheme, but that will become clearer from DFP over the next number of weeks. I am quite sure that a number of

people, right across my Department and others, will want to take up that opportunity. We have to work our way through all that with DFP over the next number of months. It will be towards the middle of next year before we will know the numbers of staff from each Department who will go under the voluntary scheme.

DARD Budget: Savings

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she intends to deliver savings in her Department's budget in 2015-16. (AQO 7117/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My officials will be discussing all of my Department's Budget 2015-16 proposals, including savings, at the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee tomorrow. We aim to publish DARD's draft budget consultation document on our website on Wednesday. Full details can be viewed then.

Delivering savings of almost £30 million will be challenging for my Department. However, I have been engaging with officials regularly over the last number of months to develop the most balanced approach to implementing any savings that have to be found. The approach focuses on the operating costs of the Department, including general running costs and staffing levels in all areas, as well as programme expenditure. I have also set targets to raise additional income to ensure the future sustainability of the key services delivered by my Department.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that there was a commitment from her Department in the previous Programme for Government to cut 15% from administration. Her predecessor managed less than a third of that. How does she justify a further £2.4 million being spent on administration from 2011 to the current year?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, every Department needs an element of administration, not least my Department, given that we administer almost £300 million of single farm payments to farmers. We need to make sure that we have the staff and expertise to be able to deliver that. I am absolutely committed to making sure that we protect the revenue that we receive — not just the £300 million but the rural development programme — for the farming and rural communities. We are looking across the Department at savings that may be found. I am working to try to protect front-line services as best we can to make sure that we look at how we deliver services and at whether we can

improve things. That is constantly under review, as is the constant look at where we are duplicating services, where we can find efficiency and where we can do things better.

Mr Poots: When the Minister reviews all these matters, will she consider taking away from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) the authority for cross-compliance checking? It is carrying out its duties in such a way that it is damaging farmers' health and mental health, and it is driving farmers to attempt suicide. The anger in the farming community towards NIEA is palpable.

3.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the NIEA comes under the remit of the Department of the Environment, but, as I said in my earlier answer, if there are new ways of doing things, if there are ways to double up on inspections, if there are ways to improve efficiency, then I am absolutely up for that and open to it as part of the discussions that we are going to have, particularly in terms of the 2015-16 Budget, in the time ahead. Everything is there, and, as I said, I am very prepared to listen to views on how we can do things more efficiently.

I am also aware of the pressure that the farming community is under, particularly the dairy sector and the prices it is now receiving for its produce, which are 30% down on this time last year. That is very significant for farm income. There are severe cash flow and management issues for farmers, so, absolutely, all those things are putting people under pressure.

I would like to think that it is nobody's intention in any Department to go out and make things difficult for any individual or farmer. So, as I said in answer to your original question, if there are opportunities for us to be leaner and more efficient, and cause the least disruption for farmers, then I am absolutely up for that.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister's programme for tackling rural poverty and social isolation be affected by next year's Budget?

Mrs O'Neill: It is one of my policy priorities. I have said that I am absolutely committed to the Programme for Government commitments that we have made. But, tackling rural poverty and social isolation, is a key policy priority for me. We have to be real. This is the only Department that is serious about tackling isolation and poverty in rural communities. The pot of money that we have dedicated to tackling

poverty and social isolation has levered in so much additional funding for rural communities. For me, this is a priority moving forward, and I intend to roll out the programme over the next year and, indeed, in planning for Budget post 2015-16.

Rural Crime

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the work her Department is doing to increase awareness of rural crime. (AQO 7118/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The responsibility for combating rural crime falls primarily to the Department of Justice and the PSNI. However, I am personally very aware of the concern that farm-related crime causes among the farming community.

The Department works on a number of joint initiatives that aim to raise awareness of actions that farmers can take to reduce incidences of rural crime. DARD works closely with the DOJ, the PSNI and farming organisations on initiatives such as the Farm Watch, the freeze-branding initiative and the Crimestoppers campaign.

In addition, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) students who are on CAFRE programmes learn about appropriate responses to rural crime through input from visiting speakers, information leaflets and participation of the college farms in PSNI-led programmes such as Farm Watch. In addition, CAFRE has facilities available, which can be used by the PSNI for workshops, seminars and meetings aimed at raising awareness of crime prevention measures among the farming community.

I have also ensured that all of the DARD Direct offices currently stock rural crime leaflets at the front desk where members of the public can access necessary information in relation to this issue.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what provision has been made in the white paper for rural communities to be part of the roll-out, the discussion and the consultation, particularly in relation to community safety?

Mrs O'Neill: The rural White Paper action plan contains a commitment by the Department of

Justice to develop a new community safety strategy that will ensure that the needs of rural communities are taken into account. The Department of Justice has confirmed that the community safety strategy has been published, and action plans for each of the eight strands of activity detailed in the strategy have been developed and agreed by the Justice Committee. One of the eight strands is about reducing the opportunities for crime and includes outcomes on supporting safer rural communities and working in partnership with rural groups to prevent and reduce crime.

I hope to publish the second annual progress report on the rural White Paper action plan next month, which will provide an update on progress by all Departments in implementing their commitments in the action plan.

Mr Irwin: My constituency is in the greater Armagh area, which has the highest rural crime in Northern Ireland. Given the new rural development programme coming out next year, does the Minister intend to bring forward any grant aid to help make farms safer?

Mrs O'Neill: I totally understand the Member, in terms of the district he lives in. I think that E district and F district, which hold probably about 59% of all farms across the North, have the highest levels of rural crime. So, there is a particular focus on those districts, and rightly so.

I think that we should be creative about how we look at grant aid and certain items of assistance for farmers. Some of our initiatives for stamping items will make them safer and more traceable if they happen to be stolen. So we are exploring opportunities. I am keen to do that in the roll-out of the new grant programme.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answers. It is quite clear that effort has been put into trying to tackle rural crime. There is a perception out there that rural crime has, in fact, increased. Will the Minister confirm that that is so and why it might be so?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the stats on rural crime, given that that is a responsibility of the Department of Justice. Suffice to say that my Department, particularly through our enforcement and veterinary side, works with other agencies in trying to tackle rural crime. However, we have seen a rise in the crime stats over the last number of years. As I said in a previous answer, we have seen particular rises in the Clogher area, areas of Fermanagh and south Tyrone, and in E district and F district, so

there are concerns. My Department will play its role in working with other agencies, but primary responsibility for tackling rural crime rests with the Department of Justice.

Devolved Administrations: Economies of Scale

5. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, within the UK budgetary framework, to outline the economies of scale she has achieved with other devolved administrations in the UK. (AQO 7119/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are a number of examples in my Department of sharing the costs of research and, therefore, deriving economies of scale. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) collaborates with a number of research organisations to maximise the value of several publicly funded research projects such as a recent project on greenhouse gas emissions that was funded by DEFRA and the devolved Administrations.

Another good example of sharing the costs of research with DEFRA and the other devolved Administrations is the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute economic research project undertaken by AFBI. This project has been very important in providing an evidence base to support the negotiations and decision-making on CAP reform, in particular since 2003. Were it not for this sharing of costs, the Department would probably be unable to carry the full cost of this valuable analytical tool. In addition, AFBI is part of the Farming Futures strategic alliance with several research organisations in Britain, which has the aim of combining their respective resources to maximise value for money for additional research funding applications.

A further example of the Department achieving economies of scale is through its participation in a large multi-provider framework agreement that went live in October. This agreement will facilitate and deliver the provision of services of a veterinary nature to government across England, Scotland and Wales as well as here over the next four years.

The Department's Rivers Agency also has strong links with the devolved Administrations in relation to flood risk management, where economies of scale can be realised in the field of scientific research. The agency, for example, is a funding partner on the coastal monitoring and forecasting service. That allows the

agency to avail itself of research on coastal flood warning.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister very much for her information thus far. Has she considered outsourcing special functions involving the administration of EU funding, for example, to units that could serve Scotland and Wales as well as provide money for three other places?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member can see from the previous answer, we have worked collectively across the board on quite a range of issues. I am very open to working across the board in delivering services when that is achievable. We are looking at everything in the round. Given the difficult economic climate that we are in, we are looking at how we do it. We already work collaboratively as a paying agency that distributes EU funding. If the Member wants to write to me with any specific proposals of how we can take this forward, I am very open to receiving that.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin. Go nuige, chuir sí béim ar chúrsaí bia. I listened to the Minister as she talked about the emphasis being placed on agrifood research and the likes. Last week, I was in Brussels, where we heard of various sources of funding and particularly about where collaborative work can be done between various institutes, AFBI being one. Will the Minister give us some indication of the work that is being done with other regions in Britain, and, given the nature of some funds, it also has to be cross-border or between nation states? What work has been done in her Department to help to draw down those funds, particularly with the development of such projects in the agrifood sector?

Mrs O'Neill: I have tasked AFBI with ensuring that we increase our drawdown. One of the Executive's Programme for Government commitments is about drawing down additional money, particularly from Horizon 2020.

We have in the region of 30 applications with Europe for consideration, quite a number of them in collaboration with other agencies. AFBI came out to Brussels to get to know the people they need to be talking to out there. We have explored with them how they can be creative about how applications are put forward in working with their partners.

I am happy to provide the Member with the detail of all those collaboration projects. There are too many for me to detail here today. The

work that has been done has been fantastic, but there is scope for additional money to be drawn down. That is why I tasked AFBI to increase our EU research funding drawdown.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

6. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current condition of the proposed site of her new departmental headquarters in Ballykelly. (AQO 7120/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The proposed site for the DARD HQ building is approximately 14 acres of the upper part of the Shackleton site. Since being vacated by the British military in 2008, the site has become overgrown with undergrowth and larger vegetation. The site identified for my new headquarters has 17 old military buildings and stores, which are in varying states of disrepair. Each of those buildings has been subject to an asbestos survey, and preparations are in place to ensure their safe and efficient demolition early next year. Although the site has remained secure, a section of the perimeter fence needs maintenance, and arrangements are in place to carry out that work.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. During this process, though, the Minister has thrown out the rule book on proper process. She has shown contempt for ensuring public value for money and over-ruled concerns of accounting officials not only in her Department but in OFMDFM.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Do we have a question?

Mrs Overend: Can the Minister tell us, as we stand today, exactly how much the clean-up of the site, as well as preventing future flooding, will cost?

Mrs O'Neill: I suggest that the Member has got the wrong Department. She should put her question to OFMDFM, given that it is the owner of the site. I will make it very clear: I am committed to taking this project forward. So people can protest all they like. There is an Executive agreement to the project going forward. The Executive have signed off, as the authority of this Assembly, on the project going forward. I have put considerable work, as have officials, into making sure that we put the case together, work with staff and plan it in a phased approach to allow for the transition.

I am surprised at the Member, who is not supportive of taking public sector jobs into rural areas, given the constituency that she represents.

Mr G Robinson: Could the Minister give a rough estimate of how many much-needed jobs will be created when Shackleton Barracks is fully open for business?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give job figures for only my Department. We are talking about 400 in the first phase and up to 600 in the secondary phase. The scope and potential there for public and private sector jobs is absolutely enormous, given the size of the site. The fact that we have had such a significant number of companies enquiring as to the future of the site and registering their interest as a business that may want to come there is fantastic to see. I look forward to that coming to fruition.

It is up to us to lead the way in making sure that DARD headquarters are secure on the site and that that work starts. I think that will then open the floodgates for the other businesses that will come after it. The benefits of that for the north-west are absolutely tremendous in job creation, construction works and ongoing associated benefits.

Mr McCarthy: I hear the Minister's response in relation to this. I hear it in her voice that she is determined to see this through and she has almost reached the stage of arrogance. In view of the horrendous fiscal situation every Department is in, and how they have all had to cut back, why and how is she so determined that this will go ahead, mindful that others have had to cancel or postpone projects?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member, knowing me personally, will know that arrogance is not in my nature, but I am committed to this project. I am committed to taking it forward. This has been worked on for a significant period. This is about the bigger picture. People need to see the bigger picture. For too long, public sector jobs have been centred in the greater Belfast area. That is not a position that we in the Assembly should continue to see.

For me, this is about the fair distribution of jobs. It is about the knock-on economic benefit that there will be for all those who live in the north-west in this case and from all the other relocation projects that I am taking forward. The money has been set aside in the Budget. It has all be budgeted for and taken forward through business case and all the different

procedures. We have Executive sign-off on this project, which is why I am being firm in my position. This is about wider benefits, and people need to look at it in that way. It is not my intention to be arrogant; it is my intention to be forthright, because this is a policy priority for me.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions. Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Fishing Quotas: Ardglass and Kilkeel

T1. Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what fishing quotas are likely to be issued for the south Down ports of Ardglass and Kilkeel. (AQT 1791/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the three main fishing ports are very dependent on the quotas that are decided upon in December. I will be going to Brussels in December to argue the case once again for the fishing community. As part of the lead-up to that, I will engage with the fishermen from the three ports. We had a large stakeholder event over the past month, and I intend to meet fishermen over the next number of weeks to discuss our priorities going into the December negotiations on our quotas for next year.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her answer. At the meeting in the next couple of weeks, will the Minister be bringing forward any additions to the quota allocation that will help to develop the fishing industry in the North?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that decisions on quotas are very much based on a scientific analysis of the state of the stock. We will go to Brussels to argue the case for an increased quota, as we always do. We have to develop our position with the industry, and I will do that based on the science that we have. Obviously, nephrops — the prawn stock — are the mainstay of the fishing industry here and will continue to be our priority as part of the negotiation. I assure the Member that my approach to the negotiations is very much agreed on and discussed with the fishing industry and its stakeholders.

Avian Flu

T3. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she has taken to counteract avian flu. (AQT 1793/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: We are taking immediate and robust action in response to a confirmed case of H5N8 avian flu on a duck-breeding farm in eastern Yorkshire. A detailed investigation is ongoing into the possible sources of the outbreak. The infection has been recovered from one wild duck in Germany. Wild birds are suspected as the source, so it is imperative that the industry and all wild-bird keepers maintain a high level of biosecurity to prevent encouraging the spread of the disease from the wild to the domestic population.

My officials have asked specialist organisations to report and submit unusual occurrences of wild-fowl deaths. As a precautionary measure — and it is precautionary — DARD has, since Monday 17 November, imposed additional controls on the movement of live birds, poultry products and poultry meat coming here from parts of Britain. DARD has also introduced a ban on the movement of live birds coming to the North for bird sales and pigeon races. I have asked poultry keepers to be vigilant for signs of the disease and to report their suspicions early. I have also asked that bird keepers, as a precaution, revisit their contingency arrangements for housing birds, should that be required. We are keeping the situation and the veterinary risk assessment under review.

We in the North have well-tested contingency plans for dealing with avian flu outbreaks, which have kicked in over the past couple of weeks, once the case in eastern Yorkshire was confirmed.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for a very detailed response. Will she outline what communication has taken place with the local industry on contingency plans?

Mrs O'Neill: Given the significance of the poultry industry locally, we have had ongoing discussions with the industry. My officials are making sure that they are kept up to date. We also have a Q&A section on the website, which I encourage people to look at if they have any doubts.

I will be meeting industry individuals over the next couple of days to discuss the situation,

because obviously there is a trade implication for them, given the restrictions that we have introduced as a precautionary measure. My officials are also working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in the South, because the fortress Ireland approach will be key in maintaining our status of being free from the disease.

Single Farm Payments: Remote Sensing Inspections

T4. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development which four areas she has selected for remote sensing inspections and whether the farmers in those areas have been informed. (AQT 1794/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As I told the House last year on the back of the review that looked at the areas that were chosen, all the farmers who have been chosen for remote sensing will be informed in as speedily a manner as possible. I believe that has happened over the past number of weeks and that those people have been informed that they have been subject to inspection, not to remote inspection. I have set very clear targets for the Department, and we are striving to make sure that we will deliver on them. My objective is to have over 500 people, who have been subject to inspection this year, paid in December. That is a significant improvement on last year's situation. The ultimate aim is to have the majority of people paid by the end of the year, and I believe that we will reach our target.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that you are saying that the farmers have been informed, what are you doing to support the four areas so that the scenario of last year does not happen again, considering that you have recognised the increasing pressure that farmers are under?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely recognise the increasing pressure that farmers are under. As I said, the numbers of people who will remain unpaid at the end of the year will be low. However, if you are in that small category of people, you will be under pressure. So, we are working with the Department to make sure that we get these payments. The most significant thing that I can do to support this industry is make sure that all those payments are made ASAP. So my intention is to be as close to 100% as we can get by the end of the year. Remaining cases will be dealt with over January and February, but I believe — and I

know — that we will be in a far better position than we were in last year. There will not be any comparison.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Mr John McCallister is not in his place.

Rivers Agency: Relocation

T6. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what benefits there are for the local community from the Rivers Agency's relocation to the Loughry campus. (AQT 1796/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The issue has been well rehearsed in Question Time today. I am absolutely committed to taking that forward. Moving jobs to any location will bring inevitable benefits to the local community, including through construction and bringing a public service into the heart of rural communities. I am absolutely committed to taking forward the project. The planning application has been submitted for Rivers Agency. In the region of 80 posts will relocate to the Loughry area, so that will bring significant economic benefits to the Cookstown area through, as I said, construction, servicing of a building and the increased footfall that will lead to increased spending in the community. It is something that I know that the Cookstown community in particular is very keen to see, given the stop-start nature of the Desertcreat project. Whilst I am certainly committed to seeing that through, for me, Rivers Agency is a project that is certainly on the move. It is on target for delivery.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answer. What is the exact time frame for this relocation?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the planning application is in, and work is ongoing on the site. We expect that the move will be completed by March 2016.

Rivers Agency: Flooding Resources

T7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that she will be aware of the recent flooding incidents in different areas of the Province, whether she believes that Rivers Agency is adequately resourced to deal with the problem. (AQT 1797/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I think that you have to look at every flooding incident on its merits, considering where the floods are and the contributing factors. In Rivers Agency, after an incident, one of the positive things that we do is take a look at the contributory factors and what can be improved. That happens on an ongoing basis, and we learn lessons and improve things or change practices if that is what is needed.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for the answer. Does the Minister accept — I am sure that she does not — that, sometimes, it seems that Rivers Agency is more reactive than proactive? We are coming into the time of the year when there is a higher likelihood of flooding. Are you minded, Minister, to make it more proactive than reactive?

Mrs O'Neill: There is always room for improvement across every area of service. I absolutely accept that. I think that the Member will be surprised to know the detailed number of inspections, grid inspections, clearing of drains and all the things that the Rivers Agency does. It is very proactive in nature. As I said, there are, of course, always ways to improve things, and I am always open to that. Maybe it would be useful if I sent the Member a bit of background information on the type of work that it does all year round on planning for times when we have prolonged weather situations, such as that which we have seen over the last couple of weeks.

DARD: 2015-16 Budget Priorities

T8. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she has acted to protect her budget priorities for 2015-16. (AQT 1798/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier, the draft Budget position is going to the Committee, which will fully discuss it tomorrow. We have entered a period of consultation, and I look forward to engaging with all stakeholders on their responses to my proposals.

I have clearly set out my policy priorities, particularly on tackling poverty and isolation and supporting those farmers who farm hard-to-farm land, particularly in LFAs and ANCs. I also want to make sure that we have rural development programme spend on the ground next year as soon as it is signed off by Europe and that we move forward with all the Programme for Government commitments. I will make sure that I come at any approach to the budget from a very fair and balanced position and will try, as far as possible, not to

impact front-line services. That is what I resolve to do to deliver DARD's budget in the time ahead.

We are absolutely entering into a period of consultation with stakeholders. I look forward to the discussions with them. It is a difficult economic climate, not least because of the extent of the Tory cuts to our overall block grant.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Minister, what further revenue-raising opportunities are available for consideration by your Department?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that all Departments look at how they can raise funds, as opposed to just looking for savings. You have to have a combination of both. From my Department's point of view, we are looking at how we can increase our EU drawdown on research funding, and we have tasked AFBI to do that. We are also looking at the Forest Service and how we can increase our timber sales receipts. There are opportunities in the Department to realise additional funding. We will also look at whether there is any potential for wind farm development on Forest Service land and at how we can maximise income for communities and the Department.

We are exploring quite a range of things as part of revenue-raising proposals. I am keen to continue to explore those, as I think it is incumbent on Ministers to look at not just savings but revenue-raising opportunities if we have them.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

T9. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she agrees that some Members of the House are frustrated with the Ballykelly proposal simply because, for once, the Northern Ireland Executive are making a significant investment outside greater Belfast. (AQT 1799/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is certainly a lot of resistance to the move. However, as I said earlier, I am absolutely committed to taking it forward, and I see the bigger picture in the wider benefits and the fairer distribution of public-sector jobs.

Ms Sugden: Will the Minister reiterate the long-term benefits for the local economy that the Ballykelly proposal will have for the north-west and Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: Given the size of the site, there is potential not just for my Department to move to Ballykelly but from the private sector investment that will come to the north-west as a result of one Department taking the initiative to move lock, stock and barrel to the Ballykelly site. The benefits of the DARD move are in the fairer distribution of public-sector jobs, the construction jobs that will be created, the footfall in the area and increased spending. So, in the DARD move alone, there are significant benefits, but those benefits are obviously relevant to all the other investment that will come from the private sector on the back of the move. I look forward to being able to take that forward. As I said, I am absolutely committed to taking it forward and have budgeted for it in budget discussions and plans.

EU Commissioner Hogan: Meeting

T10. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she proposes to visit Brussels to meet the new Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Hogan. (AQT 1800/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I believe that Mr Hogan will be here during the next number of months, and I will engage with him then. I have written to him on a few occasions and will work with him in his new position as Commissioner. We obviously have some issues that we want to pursue with him, and I wrote to him recently about greening because the Commission is dragging its feet in giving some clarification that our industry deserves and is seeking.

Mr A Maginness: I am glad that the Minister will meet Mr Hogan very soon. I know that she has written to him to congratulate him on his new position and was very helpful to him in the nomination process. Given the serious problems with the dairy industry, would it not be appropriate to meet him as soon as possible to try to iron out some of the difficulties with that industry?

3.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that I am mature enough to do that. I may have my political views on individuals, but, in my role as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I will work with whomever I need to work with to secure the best outcome and to secure discussions on numerous issues across my Department's area of responsibility. That is a given. I will certainly be working with Commissioner Hogan and others in Europe who are relevant to the challenges that we are

presented with. I will do that with our MEPs, the European Parliament, the Commission, Commissioner Hogan and his officials.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Time for questions is up.

Mr McCallister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to you, the House and the Minister for missing my topical question.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Your apology is noted. Members will take their ease for a moment.

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

Committee Business

Public Accounts Committee: Reports and Memoranda of Reply

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee Reports:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report — [Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I apologise, Members. I was slightly delayed.

Ms Lo: I thank the Public Accounts Committee for bringing forward the many important issues that were examined by the Committee, the reports of which are before us today. Given the time constraints, I will not be commenting on all the reports. However, if there is one lesson to be learned from them, it is the need for greater openness and transparency. It is imperative for us to ensure that information is released to the public on where money is spent and on how well public services are performing. Not only does it let people hold government to account but it can help to improve efficiency, give people choice in using public services and contribute to economic growth.

I welcome the recommendations in the report on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS). Linda Ford's suspension after she alleged financial wrongdoing in the organisation was reprehensible. I agree with the Committee's desire to see the Department, the NIFRS board and senior management work together to move the service to a position in which its main focus can be on improving performance rather than on dealing with the legacy of past mismanagement.

We have talked a lot in the House about the importance of Departments not working in silos but working together to solve problems and share best practice. It is clear that those external to central government must also be included, where appropriate.

The 'Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint' only adds to my initial point. The Committee is to be commended for the reports, which bring further transparency, but it would be much better if transparency had always been there in the first place.

As not only the Alliance Party's spokesperson on culture, arts and leisure but also a passionate supporter of the arts, I was

interested to read the 'Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects'. As the report clearly states, if delivered well, arts and leisure infrastructure can enhance the lives of and services for the public as well as improving productivity for the region. If delivered poorly, potential benefits are not fully realised and the taxpayer has to meet significant additional costs.

In the period 2008-2011, DCAL had an enviable budget to deliver over £200 million capital investment in the Northern Ireland culture, arts and leisure infrastructure. We saw the wonderful renovations of the Grand Opera House, the Ulster Museum and the Crescent Arts Centre and the new buildings for the Public Record Office, Tollymore National Outdoor Centre, the Lyric and the MAC. I am a frequent visitor of all those enhanced or new venues, except PRONI, and I appreciate how the facilities have greatly improved the arts and leisure provision in Northern Ireland. However, the PAC was quite right to criticise the overall project cost overshooting 32% of its original estimated cost of £78.5 million, ending up costing £103.4 million.

The projects also encountered significant delays, one of which was a delay of 31 months in the delivery of the Crescent Arts Centre in my constituency of South Belfast. The building badly needed upgrading for many years, and I am sure that the long delay in getting the work done contributed to its deterioration and the eventual additional costs for renovation. That said, the Crescent is now a very popular venue for performing arts, exhibitions, classes and workshops.

The Committee was also critical of the unrealistic cost estimates in business cases for projects and the Department's failure to seek timely technical advice and giving grant recipients too much autonomy in making major decisions.

A damning criticism of the Department was on the awarding of the Lyric rebuild contract. The Committee found a number of discrepancies regarding adjustments and payments. The report also referred to a substantial donation to the Lyric by the preferred bidder, which gave the Committee the impression that the outcome of the tender process was both "rigged and manipulated". However, the Lyric refutes the claims of the PAC's report, stating that the project was delivered on time, within budget and to specification. It is worth noting that the Lyric has the smallest proportion of public funding amongst all the other arts projects but has produced a world-class, award-winning

building, having been named building of the year by the Royal Society of Ulster Architects.

The follow-up report on improving pupil attendance recommends that the Department of Education develop and implement an attendance strategy and encourage all schools to actively engage with parents and the community. As a governor of Cranmore Integrated Primary School, I am aware of the good work of the school in keeping parents on board using conventional and digital media — texting parents all the time, and I think that parents do not mind that — so that there is instant and effective communication between the school and the home.

It is important that the Public Accounts Committee does not let these reports gather dust but sees that the recommendations are implemented. I believe that there should be follow-up debates to monitor progress on the recommendations in the reports to see whether lessons have been learned to improve practices.

Mr Easton: The Committee examined the cost and extent of the use of temporary agency staff in the PSNI; something upon which the PSNI has spent £106 million since 2004. It was established that nearly 40% of those employed through an employment agency had previously left the PSNI with a severance package. The examination included whether there was a planned approach to controlling and managing the supply and demand of those staff.

The implementation of the Patten report, including the reduction of the overall size of the Police Service by around 8,000 officers, represented an enormous challenge for the PSNI. Like many organisations, it uses temporary staff to cover short-term vacancies and to meet skills and knowledge gaps. The use of temporary staff, if properly managed and controlled, can provide value for money; however, in this case, the PSNI did not appear to have tight enough control or monitoring on the use of agency staff and the numbers of temporary staff engaged at times appeared to be excessive.

At the peak in 2007, 800 temporary staff were engaged. Even the Chief Constable acknowledged that corporate justification for the numbers was not there. A much firmer grip was needed and, in light of that, the Committee could only conclude that the PSNI spent considerably more on temporary staff than it needed to. The Committee emphasised the need to ensure that there are sound operational reasons for the use of temporary staff and

clarity on the skills sets needed, and noted that it is hard to justify temporary staff remaining in post for several years without any review or challenge.

The award and governance of the contract to provide temporary staff was also an area where the Committee raised concerns, with the current supplier being in place since 2002 and competitive tendering being undertaken only once for those services, in 2008. For much of the period, the PSNI had no assurance that the contract was providing value for money, and it needed much better quality management information to monitor and manage the contract effectively. The Committee found that the PSNI's explanation for why a competitive tendering exercise was not carried out was astonishing. The Committee disagreed with the PSNI's contention that procurement guidance in the area was not explicit. The Chief Constable has since given an assurance that future contracts will be assessed differently to include full salary costs and will thus be subject to a competitive tendering process.

The Committee also found that a very significant extension to the PSNI's agency staff contract was signed by a member of staff for an amount far in excess of their delegated authority. The contract extension led to an increase in spending of £44 million over four years; however, the member of staff who signed off on the contract extension in 2004 had a delegated authority of only £100,000. In the Committee's view, that highlighted the lack of control operating at that time and a lack of knowledge of roles and responsibilities by certain staff. The Committee noted, however, that appropriate training has been introduced across the PSNI to ensure that similar mistakes are not repeated.

The Committee found that, even when a competitive process for the award of the agency staff contract was introduced in 2008, there were major failings in the procurement process. The PSNI was found to have not completed a business case for the tender exercise until the process was at an advanced stage. The business case did not include salary costs, despite the fact that those amounted to over 90% of the contract value and that their inclusion was a clear requirement of the Public Contracts Regulations 2006. That means that the full cost of the tender, which was more than £60 million of public money over four years, was never properly assessed. The Committee considered that to be unacceptable.

The Committee found a significant gap in the business case and concluded that the strength

of the PSNI's procurement arrangements at that time was questionable. Before spending public resources, a clear business need must be established, options for meeting that need must be considered properly, and the total amount that the contracting authority expects to pay under the contract must be quantified.

3.45 pm

Mr Beggs: I wish to concentrate on the report published by the Committee on Account NI and, if time permits, also touch on the report on increasing pupil attendance.

Account NI provides a financial processing shared service for Northern Ireland Departments and 18 public bodies. It processes some one million transactions a year, which are worth over £10 billion. This was quite a high-cost project that cost some £213 million. One of the selling points of the shared services project was big efficiency savings. That has not worked out in practice with Account NI, and it is important that the Committee investigates projects such as this to identify lessons for the future.

The Committee recognised that Account NI has made some worthwhile contributions and achievements in improving the accounting process, such as through ensuring that companies providing goods and services to Departments are paid within seven days on average against a 10-day target. That is quite a remarkable target and quite a remarkable performance, but at what cost? Is it justifiable? Normal businesses operate on a 30-day cycle. So, what are we paying for that improved performance? We heard recently of supermarkets going the other way. I am not advocating that, but they are abusing their suppliers by stretching well beyond 30 days. The Committee also recognised that the introduction of a common accounting system across all Departments was a significant advance on the previous outdated system, but there has been a lack of focus on delivering efficiency savings, which was the fundamental purpose of the process.

There is an absence of key performance data, even five years after Account NI was set up. That is unacceptable. I notice that, in the memorandum of understanding, the Department is in the process of establishing proposals on benchmarking categories. Many years later, it is just identifying categories. There is a lack of urgency. In the absence of benchmarking, the Audit Office collated some preliminary benchmarking figures. Some might argue that they are not exact, but, in the

absence of any being provided by the Department, it is good to have an estimate, especially as the Department never attempted to benchmark. It cost £9.73 to process an invoice, and it is estimated that £2.73 was paid to the IT company per transaction. That is a way of printing money.

Shared services centres were developed as a result of the 2004 Gershon review into public administration to achieve those efficiencies, but today some 45 public bodies could have chosen to join and perhaps create even more efficiencies but have not done so. Perhaps they are unconvinced of the savings and benefits, and there has certainly not been any evidence provided to the Committee and none shown in the report to demonstrate that savings are achievable and that there are significant benefits that would warrant buying into it.

As I said, the Committee considered that elements were extraordinarily high, and there really must be a detailed review of Account NI costs to identify potential savings. The total cost of the project will be some £213 million, and, given that huge investment of public funds, one would have expected to have seen clear evidence of the project delivering value for money. Again, that was not the case.

The Department has retained some staff to process payments, when all of the work should have been passed to Account NI. Account NI's staffing levels are higher than planned, though it has to be acknowledged that it has taken on some additional work. The Committee wants DFP to review staffing levels in Account NI and to work with other Departments to reassess their needs for processing staff to eliminate the duplication of work and unnecessary checking.

The Committee found little evidence to support the Department's claims to have achieved improved decision-making, which was among the wider benefits that had been indicated. It is clear that, in future projects, the Department must limit its non-financial objectives to a few key targets that are capable of being measured. Some 21 had been indicated but had not really been measurable, and it had not been demonstrated that they had been clearly achieved.

The Committee was concerned that, in 2012, only 55% of Account NI customers thought that it was a good or very good service. Departmental financial directors wanted better management information. That is after investing hundreds of millions of pounds. Clearly, that is not good enough, and improvement is needed.

The Department has accepted the Committee's recommendations, and the Department's memorandum of response details how these are to be implemented.

I will briefly touch on the report on improving pupil attendance at school. First, I welcome the fact that the report has been published and has highlighted the issue to the Department of Education, but it is astonishing that the Public Accounts Committee and the Northern Ireland Audit Office have had to deal with the subject. I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and Horizon Sure Start. One would have thought, given the hundreds of people employed — senior officials within the Department of Education — that greater priority would be given to attendance at school. I have been asking questions on attendance in school since 2007-08. There are some worrying figures in my constituency, and some wards with 25% of pupils with less than 85% attendance at school, which limits their ability to achieve their full potential and contribute to society in the future. I welcome the report that has been published and the drive to improve school attendance and increase the opportunities that will be available to our young people.

Mr McQuillan: I would like to address the report published this year by the Committee on pupil attendance, but, first of all, I place on record my thanks to the Clerk and the staff for all the help and support they have given us during these reports.

When the Committee looks at value for money in the public sector, it does so in a rounded way and does not just focus on the pounds, shillings and pence spent. On the contrary, we also look at the service delivery and the extent to which our citizens get best value from the public services available to them. One of the most interesting evidence sessions last year examined the issue of pupil attendance in our school system. Pupil attendance and educational achievement are inextricably linked, and it is therefore vital that the education system does all that it can to ensure that children attend school regularly to make the most of their time in compulsory education. Children who do not attend school regularly are effectively forfeiting the value of their education. As a Committee, we therefore found it extremely concerning that unauthorised absence in Northern Ireland schools has increased from 27% in 2007-08 to 33% in 2011-12 and is double that reported in England.

The annual cost lost in education is estimated to be in the region of £22 million. The

Committee was particularly concerned that the absence levels reported for some of the most vulnerable groups of young people, including pupils from socially deprived backgrounds, Traveller children and looked-after children, are much higher than the average. The Committee was not convinced that the Department had got to grips with the most deep-rooted issues, such as social disadvantage and unauthorised absence. We noted that, while the Department has taken steps to improve pupil attendance over the last 10 years, it was disappointing that it had not made more progress in implementing the recommendations in the Audit Office's 2004 report. In particular, the Department has still not developed or implemented an overall attendance strategy. We therefore considered the development of a coherent strategy to be the necessary starting point and recommended that that should be in progress urgently.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McQuillan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that it is astonishing that, in 2014, education welfare officers do not have full access to pupil attendance at school in their own office? We are only now carrying out pilots with a couple of officers to see whether that could be widened. Does he agree that that significantly inhibits their ability to do their work? Given the high levels of absenteeism in certain areas, does he agree that there is a lack of concentration from the Department and perhaps other contributing Departments on addressing the high levels of absenteeism in specific areas — generally socially disadvantaged areas — where action is needed?

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

Mr McQuillan: Certainly I agree with the Member. Those are some of the points that I will touch on later.

It is pleasing to note that the Department, in its memorandum of reply, has agreed that an attendance strategy is required and has undertaken to develop that over the next 12 months. The strategy will also address specified groups of children and young people who require additional support. The Committee is aware that there is already a plethora of good practice in our schools and that some schools have managed to overcome the problems associated with non-attendance, despite challenging circumstances. Indeed, we visited Millburn Primary School in Coleraine, in my

constituency, and found that it has a very proactive approach to non-attendance. We find it very disappointing, however, that such examples are very much driven by individual schools, so we ask that the Department translate the dissemination of good practice into a coherent plan so that all schools can share expertise in a structured way.

The Department has recognised the need for a structured approach and accepted the importance of the Education and Training Inspectorate's role, with the result that the ETI is to undertake a good practice survey. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) is a specialist education support service that seeks to help young people of compulsory school age and their families to get the best out of the education system. The Committee was not convinced that the EWS was on top of the problem of non-attendance, and, as an organisation, it appeared to be more reactive. It lacks the basic management and information necessary to monitor attendance on a real-time basis and take pre-emptive action with vulnerable children. The fact that 16,000 pupils a year miss almost six weeks of school yet are not known to the EWS is extremely concerning. The Committee emphasised that that must be a priority for action and is reassured that the Department has agreed to commission a fundamental review of the EWS.

It is clear that tackling the problem of non-attendance, particularly persistent non-attendance, is highly complex, and, in certain cases, it may be necessary to involve a wide range of stakeholders. We recommend, therefore, that the Department's attendance strategy address non-attendance at primary and post-primary school in a holistic and joined-up manner. The Committee expects to see a collaborative strategy that includes other relevant Departments and agencies, particularly in areas such as social services, social development and youth justice. The Department has accepted that recommendation, acknowledging that, alone, it cannot address the underlying issues of non-attendance. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome this, my second Public Accounts Committee debate as Finance Minister. Before moving to the main business of the debate, I note the work of the Public Accounts Committee and the Northern Ireland Audit Office since last year's debate. Both have been churning out reports at a prodigious rate, which provides plenty of material for us to discuss today.

I would like to start on a positive note and, in doing so, create a context for the debate. I will quote from the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG) most recent annual report, 'Financial Auditing and Reporting'. It deals with the accounts of Departments and their arm's-length bodies. In it, the Comptroller and Auditor General states:

"The prime function of financial audit is to provide independent assurance, information and advice to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the proper accounting for and use of public funds."

He goes on to comment that the standards of financial reporting across central government remain high. The C&AG has made such a statement for at least the last six years, and we should all be proud of the high standards achieved by the vast majority of our central government public bodies, not just during this year but for many years. In the main, public money is being accounted for properly and to a high standard; that is something that we need to remember. It is important that we do not lose sight of that fact, because it is all too easy to note a critical media headline associated with an Audit Office or PAC report and assume that it is representative of what is happening across our public services: it is not.

During the past year, the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have looked at and reported on poor practices and things that have gone wrong in specific areas of the public sector and rightly so. That is an important part of the accountability process and a way of effecting change and improvement for the future. However, many of the issues raised are organisation- or project-specific. They are not representative of the high standards that pertain in the wider public sector, and that is something that, I consider, we all have a duty to promote.

4.00 pm

On the issue of promoting our public services, I continue to have a difficulty with the fact that, on occasion, the publicity surrounding PAC reports is unbalanced and appears to seek to sensationalise certain aspects of the reports for maximum media effect. The Committee's reports on Account NI and DCAL's management of major capital projects are two examples. In relation to Account NI, the Committee sought headlines that focused on excessive costs for transaction processing based on a comparison with other public bodies. However, the comparisons were drawn from what proved to be a flawed Audit Office

cost comparison, as they were not on a like-for-like basis, and, as the Committee is aware, I issued a press release to ensure that the correct figures were placed in the public domain.

On DCAL's management of major capital projects, there was intense media coverage following the PAC's report with regard to the tendering process for the Lyric Theatre and the PAC's conclusion that it was:

"left with a very strong impression that the outcome ... was both rigged and manipulated."

However, both DCAL and the Lyric have provided assurances that there is no evidence to support that and asked the Committee for its evidence to support the allegation. None has been forthcoming. Let us be clear: the PAC suggests that there was fraud and makes these allegations publicly. It slurs organisations and, indeed, individuals, but, when asked to produce that evidence, none is forthcoming. In my view, the press releases that accompanied those particular reports were undoubtedly sensationalist in nature, were not evidence-based and sought to attract media attention to specific issues, rather than provide a fair and balanced view of the Committee's deliberations. The Committee should not seek such headlines or, indeed, allege fraud where there is no evidence for it to do so. If the PAC has evidence of fraud, the organisation it should speak to is the PSNI, not the BBC. I hope that the Committee notes my view on that issue and that it is not something that we will have to return to next year.

A number of issues and concerns that the Committee raised in its reports over the past year have been highlighted by Members today, and I will address them or at least some of them shortly. Again, I need to stress that they must be considered in context, which, at times, I think is an alien concept to some. When you have a public sector that spends in excess of £10 billion annually, it is unfortunately inevitable that things will go wrong, correct processes will not always be followed and things may not always be done as quickly as we would wish. The benefit of hindsight is, indeed, a wonderful thing. However, it is vital to consider the issues within the context of the bigger picture, and I consider the C&AG's comment on the high standards of financial reporting in the public sector to be that bigger picture in the context of this important debate. Maybe that is something that Members would wish to ponder.

Members who were present during last year's debate may recall that I purposely went out of my way to challenge the status quo and provoke what I considered to be a genuine debate about how things are done and why. The theme of my speech was reform and how we needed to do things differently. Shortly after the debate, I met the PAC's Chair and Deputy Chair, and I believe that we had a frank and constructive discussion. Since then, my officials have been working closely with the Public Accounts Committee, its staff and the Audit Office to agree protocols that will improve and streamline the processes that we use. They relate to the clearance of Audit Office reports and the production and consideration of the various memoranda of reply that we are debating. That work has been progressing well, and I want to comment on each of the issues.

In relation to the Committee's consideration of memoranda of reply, I acknowledge the constructive steps that it has taken to improve and streamline the process and commend it for that. The clearance of Audit Office reports is a challenging issue. The bottom line is that we all recognise the importance of a timely, accurate and agreed Audit Office report as the basis of the Committee's evidence sessions. Departments should work constructively with the Audit Office to ensure that such reports are not unreasonably delayed by a protracted clearance process. My officials hope to have guidance on that issue agreed with the Audit Office in the very near future. However, there is one issue within the clearance process that creates real problems for accounting officers, and that is when the Audit Office seeks to force the hand of an accounting officer into agreeing one of its reports on the basis of meeting a printing deadline which, in turn, it appears, is driven by the need to fulfil a date in the Committee's evidence session programme. It seems perverse that the Audit Office can work on a study for a year with the aim of producing a factual, evidence-based report to be agreed with Departments and debated by the Committee but the process then culminates in accounting officers being railroaded into signing off on a report with which they do not fully agree.

I think that everybody would agree that that cannot be right.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that, on occasions, publication of reports has been

excessively delayed as a result of what he is saying, that it appears that there is little probability of agreeing, and that there is still a need to bring such matters into the public domain to have them addressed and openly discussed?

Mr Hamilton: Just before I move on, I will say that I do not think that anybody wants to see excessive delay, and if there is blame at departmental level for that, it needs to be addressed. That is in part why my officials and officials from the PAC and, indeed, the Audit Office are working on a set of protocols to better address the issue. I think that we all agree with and welcome that.

I am raising a concern, which I think it is right to do, about the fact that, in the sort of circumstances that the Member outlined, accounting officers should not feel that they are being forced to sign off on a report that they do not entirely agree with to meet what is, in effect, an artificial deadline. That is not a *carte blanche* to accounting officers to sit on matters and to delay them unnecessarily, but if the Department and the PAC/Audit Office are seeking to hollow out issues on which there is no agreement, I think that it is only right and proper that, in the spirit of getting an agreed report and of trying to get the fullness of the situation outlined in the report, time is taken to do that and that accounting officers do not feel that they are forced to agree to, and sign off on, something that they do not entirely agree with.

I fully appreciate the need for reports to be completed on a timely basis, but as I said, that cannot be at the expense of an agreed report that is the cornerstone of each of the Committee's evidence sessions. Recently my officials have been approached by accounting officers about that, and therefore I have asked the Treasury Officer of Accounts to raise the issue with the C&AG as part of his wider work on agreeing more efficient clearance procedures for Audit Office reports. Maybe the Committee will also wish to consider that.

I will now turn to a few areas that illustrate where we can and do cooperate effectively in the wider interests of the public sector. The first and most important area is fraud. As we all know, fraud robs the public sector of very scarce and valuable resources, so it is important that we all work together to combat it. One of our key tools in the fight against fraud is the National Fraud Initiative (NFI). Northern Ireland Departments, agencies and other sponsored bodies are now in their fourth NFI cycle, with the Audit Office reporting in June 2014 that the first three cycles had cumulatively

identified outcomes of almost £30 million in fraud and error. NFI has become a key tool in Departments' anti-fraud armoury, and we must all continue to work to identify further ways in which it can be utilised to protect the public purse. Public bodies are in continuing discussions with the Audit Office to explore how NFI can be further utilised to detect and prevent fraud and error, and a number of pilot exercises are being considered as part of the fourth National Fraud Initiative cycle.

In that context, I will also take this opportunity to advise Members of progress in establishing a group internal audit and fraud investigation service for Northern Ireland Departments. That was a commitment that was given to the Public Accounts Committee in response to its document, 'Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint'. We have now established a project board to oversee the implementation of the group service model. My officials are developing the governance and reporting arrangements for the new model and working with Departments to assess their level of fraud investigation capacity requirements. It is anticipated that the group service structure will become operational from April 2015 and that it will help to improve consistency and professionalism in internal audit and fraud investigations across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Again, I think that that is something we all can welcome.

Whistle-blowing has come to the fore in a number of the Committee's reports in recent years. The Committee will be aware that we have previously given an undertaking to provide additional guidance on handling concerns raised by whistle-blowers. The UK audit authorities have produced a good practice whistle-blowing guide for employers and employees, which the Northern Ireland Audit Office will launch tomorrow. Having seen and had an opportunity to comment on the draft document, we believe that it is a very useful piece of work. As a result, we intend to issue the guide to Departments and to highlight any further important issues and lessons learned from PAC hearings and reports.

Another example of good working practices that again takes the Committee's work forward is in relation to reducing bureaucracy in the voluntary and community sector. My Department, the Audit Office and DSD are working closely together on this important DSD-led project. That work has led to the development of a draft code of practice for reducing bureaucracy in the grant-funding process, and it is currently out for consultation.

When finalised, it will help address many of the issues raised by the Committee in its report on the subject.

The issues that I have outlined are examples of our working together for the betterment of all citizens. The work should lead to more resources being available to spend on health and education as a result of reduced fraud; whistle-blowers believing that they can come forward in the knowledge that they will be listened to and their concerns taken seriously; and those who work in the third sector being able to focus on the valuable work that they do without engaging in unnecessary bureaucracy. I believe that there is so much more than we can achieve together, and I look forward to doing so in a spirit of cooperation.

Before I address the specific issues that Members raised, I would like to bring you up to date with progress on the reform agenda, which was the main topic of last year's speech.

Over the past year, my officials and I have met and engaged with a number of practitioners in the areas of business improvement and policy development. Over the period, many steps, both large and small, have been taken to progress the vision of reforming the public sector and embedding the reform agenda in our business activities. Reforms have brought positive change in a range of areas, particularly in e-government, asset management, shared services and procurement. I believe that building on our existing achievements in e-government is a key aspect of the public sector reform agenda because it ticks both boxes — saving money and improving services.

I will now turn to some issues that Members raised during the debate. I will begin with those of the Chair, Michaela Boyle. Among many things that she referred to — I hope that I have addressed some of them — was the Committee's report on AFBI. I note that the Committee acknowledged the recent work undertaken to further enhance corporate governance in AFBI and oversight of the institute by DARD. I have been informed that arrangements are underpinned by proactive scrutiny by DARD, and a report to the Committee is expected by May 2015. On financial management, I understand that AFBI is now using its strategic costing model to establish the full cost of its operations and set revised efficiency targets. AFBI is also reviewing its fee-setting procedures to ensure that those comply with relevant DFP guidance. The AFBI accounting officer will provide his assurance on fee-setting to the AFBI board and DARD annually. In addition, I can inform you

that DARD has identified the test categories for which it requires unit costs. AFBI has been asked to provide that information, including benchmarking, by March 2015.

Mr Girvan referred to the Committee's report on DRD's review of an investigation into a whistleblower complaint. DRD has provided an assurance that it has learnt valuable lessons in the case, referred to under the Northern Ireland Water suspected fraud case. It has introduced new policies and procedures for whistle-blowing, wrongdoing and fraud. DRD has further implemented comprehensive arrangements for registering and monitoring the progression of wrongdoing and whistle-blowing cases, and it has developed and introduced an investigation checklist for initial inquiry and fact-finding through the formal investigation. In addition, new guidance has been issued to staff on handling complaints. The Department has also made significant improvements in its procurement and contract-management arrangements.

As I mentioned earlier, my officials will draw to the attention of Departments the Audit Office guide on whistle-blowing once it is published. Although it is written in the context of employees raising concerns, DFP will reinforce the point that the same general principles in handling cases should be applied, regardless of who has raised the concern.

I have also already talked about the new Civil Service group internal audit and fraud investigation service and can confirm that work that it will take forward on reviewing existing guidance will incorporate the key lessons that have been learnt from the cases in DRD and NI Water. My Department has asked departmental accounting officers to ensure that the Committee's concerns about codes of conduct and contractual breaches be adequately addressed in their existing guidance.

I now turn to the case that both Mr Hussey and Ms Lo raised when they referred to the Committee's report on DCAL's management of major capital projects. I welcome the contribution made by Ms Lo in particular. She acknowledged that, although there were issues around the procurement, the infrastructure that was referred to and dealt with in the report is excellent new infrastructure, much of it in her constituency, as she pointed out. It has transformed the tourism offering. In many respects, it has provided fantastic regeneration of parts of the city and, indeed, other parts of Northern Ireland.

DCAL has acknowledged that there were weaknesses in its appraisal and procurement processes in the context of a very ambitious capital programme, which, again, is something that Ms Lo acknowledged. DCAL has confirmed that it has implemented all the recommendations that were made in the Audit Office and PAC reports and is in the process of considering how best to engage relevant professional teams earlier in the process so that cost and time estimates are more robust. DCAL has further drafted its own capital projects guidance, which addresses the issues raised by the Committee. It is being reviewed by my officials and is also being circulated to DCAL's arm's-length bodies. My Department will provide revised guidance by next month that will address all the Committee's concerns on procurement in relation to grant recipients.

4.15 pm

On a wider note, as chair of the procurement board, in November last year, I established a subgroup to examine all stages of the commissioning and delivery of infrastructure projects. The subgroup has prepared an action plan designed to correct the number of significant issues, such as over-design and underestimating cost, that are reducing the likelihood of the successful delivery of infrastructure projects. While several Ministers have supported the plan, I am disappointed that some have reserved their position. I will continue to work with ministerial colleagues to convince them that that is a proper course of action. In the meantime, my Department is implementing the actions in the plan assigned to it.

Mr Easton referred to the Committee's report on the PSNI's use of agency staff. Although the Committee found that excessive numbers of agency staff had been employed for lengthy periods of time, it acknowledged that the introduction of a radical new structure for policing over the last 10 years represented an enormous challenge. The current procurement process for a new contract for temporary workers is on hold as a result of the current budgetary position and will not be progressed at this time. The existing contracts will lapse at the end of this calendar year, and the PSNI has confirmed that it will cease all current temporary worker assignments on or before that date. The Department of Justice has provided the assurance that any future contracts for temporary workers will take the Committee's recommendations into consideration and will be managed rigorously.

Mr Beggs referred to the Committee's report on Account NI. Account NI is a cross-departmental shared service facility that is the envy of many other Governments. We should all be extremely proud of it. I have noticed that it currently pays over 90% of invoices within the allotted targets. It is — I have encountered this on my travels as Minister — the envy of many European states, including Estonia, which have very advanced digital delivery of public services and want to learn from what we have done in shared services. The Government of the Republic of Ireland have visited at ministerial level our shared services to inform their delivery of shared services. From listening to some of Mr Beggs's comments, it is clear that only in Northern Ireland would we be talking down something that is the envy of others.

The Committee praised Account NI in relation to its considerable achievement in paying invoices so promptly. It acknowledged that it is:

"a significant advance on the fragmented and outdated financial systems previously in place."

The fact that it was able to accommodate relatively large organisations with complex requirements was recognised as a "significant achievement".

I will end by thanking all those who contributed to what has been a very lively and, hopefully, thought-provoking debate. I apologise to any Members whose issues I did not address. I hope that, above all else, unlike last year, I have not left Mr Dallat too shell-shocked to wind up the debate on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Dallat (The Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): I assure the Minister that he has not left me shell-shocked, but he has come pretty close to it. I will deal with some of the issues that he raised. I was pleased that he started on a positive note by paying tribute to the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. I believe that the Assembly as a whole and all parties involved can be proud that they have a Public Accounts Committee and an independent Audit Office that can rise above party politics and all the quagmires that we have to deal with. I say that on a personal basis; I have no authority from anyone else. I include all the members of the Committee in that. We have done our best to ensure that the public get value for money. The Finance Minister will know this better than anyone: never has there been a more serious time for ensuring that every penny of public

money is accounted for, both in where it goes and the value for money got from it.

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service was mentioned on a number of occasions, particularly by Anna Lo, who is not a member of the Committee but, obviously, is well-informed. That report touched the hearts of all members, particularly in relation to the disgraceful way in which Linda Ford was treated as a whistle-blower. It aggrieves me that the chairman of the Northern Ireland fire authority who presided over most of that is still in place.

The Committee discovered that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's accounting officer and the chair of the Fire Service were aware that a whistle-blower had been suspended and that they should have been alert to possible victimisation. Instead, both wrongly decided not to intervene. The Committee recommended that when a Department asks one of its arms-length bodies to investigate a whistle-blower's concerns, the Department has to ensure that there is a proper investigation. Where the whistle-blowing allegations relate to senior members of staff in the body concerned, the Department must retain ownership of the investigation. DFP has accepted the Committee's recommendations in this area, and we expect to see improvements in the handling of whistle-blowing right across the public sector. I was pleased that the Minister referred to that.

The Department's oversight of the Fire Service was poor. It failed to intervene to address either the extremely high turnover at senior management level or lengthy absences of key members of staff. The Committee found that proper succession planning had been ignored for too long. We were pleased to note that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety accepted our recommendation that it, the board and senior management work together to identify barriers to recruitment and to ensure that the organisation is well placed to attract quality internal and external candidates for future senior management vacancies.

The Committee found that the board in place at the time that these events occurred was extremely weak and had failed to challenge senior management. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety accepted the Committee's recommendations to strengthen the board; address areas of weakness; and improve its oversight by ensuring that its own team has the necessary skills and seniority to properly challenge senior management in the Fire Service. I hope that that comes as comfort to our very courageous

and brave firefighters who, for many years, have been at the forefront during our difficulties.

The Committee considered a number of cases in which very senior officers in the Fire Service failed to recognise and properly handle significant conflicts of interest in procurement and recruitment. One case that particularly concerned the Committee was the acceptance by a senior officer of a sponsored Land Rover. I hope that I am not advertising one particular company, although I accept that they are very nice vehicles. That certainly did not do anything for the image of the Northern Ireland Fire Service. We accept that there was no evidence of personal gain, but the Committee found it worrying that this individual, who went on to become Chief Fire Officer before his retirement, maintained that accepting the vehicle was the right thing to do. The one thing that surely should be there is the ability to accept when something is wrong.

It was clear to others, including the Chief Fire Officer at the time, that this sponsorship deal would create a perception of wrongdoing that was likely to be extremely damaging to the Fire Service. The Committee considers that the actions of this officer demonstrated a lack of understanding of the responsibilities of an accounting officer and the standard of conduct expected of someone in that role. DFP has not accepted the Committee's recommendation in this area, distinguishing instead between potential and ongoing commercial relationships. The Committee is clear that any recurrence of conflicts of interest of this nature in the Fire Service or elsewhere in the public sector will not be acceptable.

In 2001 — this is important for other Members — the Public Accounts Committee reported on the Fire Service's predecessor body, the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland. This was an extremely critical and hard-hitting report, and it is shocking that many of the recommendations arose again in our most recent investigation of the new body. I doubt that any Member, including Mr Wilson, would be brave enough to defend a situation in which an organisation was reported on and then, several years later, it was found that those recommendations were ignored and that the work of that organisation had been set back.

The Committee was appalled to hear evidence of the toxic working environment in the Fire Service's headquarters. When our report was issued in October 2013, there were 22 outstanding grievance cases, mainly in headquarters. Surely, that should have set the alarm bells ringing all over the place but it did

not. It was clear to us that that situation could not continue. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Finance and Personnel graciously accepted nine of the 11 recommendations — not bad for a Committee that gets so many brickbats.

The Committee wants to see the Department, the board and senior management work together to move the Fire Service to a position where its main focus can be on improving performance rather than dealing with the legacy of mismanagement.

I thank all Members who contributed to what has been an interesting and informative discussion. I hope that we have given the Assembly, and the wider public, a good snapshot of the work of the Public Accounts Committee. This has been another productive year for the Committee, with eight reports published. These included large and complex investigations, which took time to complete, such as the inquiry into the PSNI's use of agency staff, which three of my fellow Committee members spoke on.

Completing these complex inquiries requires a great deal of commitment and cooperation on the part of the members of the Committee. I commend my colleagues on their work this year. Any inquiry into the Police Service could have created problems. Members rose above party positions and, I think, produced a commendable report.

The PAC's key role is to ensure that public money is used efficiently and effectively and that maximum value is extracted from each pound. This role is of even greater importance in the current economic climate given the significant budgetary pressures facing the Executive.

The PAC focuses on high-value cases where significant savings to the public purse can be made. The Committee always seeks to be constructive in its reports — I hope you are listening, Minister. Rather than merely pointing the finger and saying that we do not want to see x, y or z happening again, we make recommendations that offer guidance about what changes need to be made to avoid mistakes being repeated a number of years down the line. Evidence of the success of the Committee's work can be seen in the high levels of acceptance of its recommendations. During the year, 85% of recommendations were accepted, and although slightly down on last year's 87%, is still extremely high.

As Deputy Chair, I was pleased to see greater partnerships developing between Departments and the PAC during the year, in particular between the Committee and the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Minister made reference to that crucial meeting between the Chairman, me and his Department. I can assure the House that while there is a better understanding, there was no compromise.

The work of the PAC is supported greatly by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and I cannot thank enough the people who work there for their help throughout the year. It is interesting that people come from all over the world to the Northern Ireland Audit Office to get advice and training in how to put financial affairs in place. Many travel from parts of the world that had no accountability in the past.

Our Chairperson, Michaela Boyle, began the debate by talking about the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the largest arm's-length body of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. She highlighted the fact that there was poor oversight by the Department and that alarmingly high estate costs had not been tackled. She also spoke of poor management of the charging fees, with £3.5 million in income being lost, which is a tidy little sum if you were looking for it. The report highlights the fact that Departments need to maintain strong oversight of their arm's-length bodies to ensure that value for money is obtained in all cases.

4.30 pm

Mr Wilson, who is not here now, talked about invoice slicing. I want to make it perfectly clear that invoice slicing is not acceptable in any case. He seems to think that we could promote invoice slicing as it helps small and medium-sized enterprises. Invoice slicing can be an indicator of fraud, and I suspect that in many cases it is. So I make no apology for saying that the PAC takes a zero-tolerance policy towards fraud and cannot condone practices that are conducive to fraud. Invoice slicing is also totally at odds with public procurement, and there are strict rules on public procurement that we cannot ignore at national or European Union levels.

Many other people spoke in the debate, and I am sorry that I do not have the same amount of time as the Minister to respond. The Lyric Theatre got a hearing. It is a wonderful building and is an excellent part of the infrastructure of Belfast, and PAC members acknowledge that. However, the highest tender in the process became the successful tender, and accounts

could not be produced. Indeed, when the PAC began to ask questions about that, we had extreme difficulty in finding witnesses, and it took months to get them before the PAC, which was not particularly satisfactory.

I will finish by mentioning attendance at schools. The Public Accounts Committee went out to schools that were good examples. We were all proud to go to schools in socially deprived areas, where the odds were stacked against them. Those schools found ways to improve school attendance and to give children who were from, let us say, difficult backgrounds a chance. Surely that is bound to make some contribution to reducing the 20% rates of illiteracy and innumeracy that we are struggling with.

I am extremely proud to stand here and commend the report, and I rebut any of the criticism that was made of the Public Accounts Committee or the Audit Office. The Assembly should be extremely proud of those from all political parties who are part of the PAC.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee Reports:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the NIFRS: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight and Report on Accounts 2011-2012

Report on DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects

Report on Department of Finance and Personnel – Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand

Report on The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Report on PSNI: Use of Agency Staff

Report on NI Water's Response to a Suspected Fraud & DRD: Review of an Investigation of a Whistleblower Complaint

Report on Account NI: Review of a Public Sector Financial Shared Service Centre

Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

Private Members' Business

Paul Quinn: Anniversary of his Murder

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the seventh anniversary of the murder of Paul Quinn; notes that the Independent Monitoring Commission states that current and former members of the Provisional IRA were responsible for the murder; demands that the leadership of the Provisional movement discloses all information regarding the murder of Paul Quinn to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána; condemns the Sinn Féin leadership for its false accusations against Paul Quinn; and further demands that Sinn Féin apologise to his family for making such accusations.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Iarraím cead an rún seo a mholadh. Tá an ceart agat. Tá sé seacht mbliana ó dúnmharaíodh Paul Quinn I gContae Mhuinicheáin.

It is seven years since Paul Quinn was murdered just inside County Monaghan. Those who murdered him, according to the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC):

"included people who are members or former members, or have associations with members or former members, of the Provisional IRA."

The whole organisation of Paul Quinn's murder smacked of paramilitary planning and forethought to the extent that the scene was forensically cleansed afterwards, similar to what happened after Robert McCartney's murder, only probably better organised. The purpose of that was to ensure that any DNA evidence was destroyed and that detection would be made extremely difficult. Mar is eol dúinn, ní thig a bheith cinnte céad faoin gcéad I gcásanna mar seo. As we are aware, there is no certainty in these matters, and, as science develops, evidence that once yielded no information can tell the tale and lead to prosecutions and convictions. That may yet prove to be the

outcome of this case. I hope that it will be and that those responsible will be brought to justice.

Paul was brutally murdered on Saturday 20 October 2007, as I said, in a shed just inside County Monaghan. I pass that spot several times a year on my way to football matches in Clones. Invariably, my passengers say to me as we pass it, "That's where young Quinn was murdered". I think of the scene that day; a gang of up to ten men dressed in boiler suits, armed with iron bars and nail-studded clubs, beating 21-year-old Paul until his life ebbed away. His mother, Briege, frequently says to me, "Dominic, they broke every bone in his body." The question is this: why? Why would anyone want to do that to a young man of 21? The reason is that those people wanted to show who was boss in the area. They wanted to show who had control of the area. Remember, Paul's death happened nine years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The dirty war was over, but it seemed that a dirty peace was beginning.

I remember going to the hospital in Drogheda that night and meeting his mother, Briege, and his father, Stephen, who were distraught with grief and, with other members of the family, were gathered around his body. All attempts at resuscitation had failed. His family were adamant that the IRA was responsible. They had known that Paul had fallen foul of some them locally. This was the revenge.

As I said, the aim of Paul's murder was to teach others not to cross them, to show that they still controlled the community and to silence him. Although they beat him to death that night, ironically, his voice is still heard. His parents, Briege and Stephen, have continued to speak for him and to fight for justice for him. They are here today in the Public Gallery. I welcome them. They have refused to be cowed. They have refused to be silenced. They have continued to demand justice. They will not go away until they get justice.

It is to help them in their quest that I have tabled the motion before the House today. I spoke to them after the seventh anniversary mass in Cullyhanna chapel some weeks ago, and, afterwards, I gave them an undertaking that I would continue to support their campaign. I have tabled motions and spoken on previous motions about murders that were committed by the IRA and by state forces in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries in south Armagh. That is all part of the history of the area.

Those who murdered Paul Quinn most likely still live in the local area and go about their daily

lives there; the Quinn family believes that they are closely connected to Sinn Féin. After Paul's murder, Conor Murphy was quick to conclude that the IRA was not involved and said that it was the result of a row or fallout between criminal gangs. Previously, he had berated Seamus Mallon for suggesting that there was a criminal gang in south Armagh. However, when it suited him, there was not only one criminal gang but two; not only that, they were capable of murder.

Miss Fearon believes that RTÉ is responsible for sullyng the reputation of south Armagh. The reputation of south Armagh has been sullied down through the years, but not by RTÉ. It has been sullied by those who engaged in murder, whether they were members of state forces, state forces colluding with loyalist paramilitaries, or republican paramilitaries.

I have lived in south Armagh all my life, and I am very proud of the local people; most of them did their best to lead normal lives in the midst of the mayhem around them. south Armagh was not run, as some would say, from a republican kitchen somewhere. It was run from every normal home in which parents attempted to feed their families and send them to school every day, and go to work themselves to earn a living. It was run by those genuine sporting and cultural organisations that attempted to give young people some form of recreation and some alternative to violence.

The accusation that Paul Quinn was a criminal, unsubstantiated as it was, added salt to an already deep wound that had been inflicted on the Quinn family. It was repeated by other leadership figures in Sinn Féin, including Gerry Adams, and was part of the usual whispering campaign that the IRA engaged in to smear their victims and justify their deeds.

The Quinn family has constantly demanded that Sinn Féin withdraw the accusation. However, not only did Mr Murphy fail to withdraw it, he compounded it on the record here in the debate in 2008. The Irish Foreign Minister, the Taoiseach, the British Secretary of State and the Chief Constable of the PSNI all set the record straight, and that has been of some consolation to the family.

Members of Sinn Féin who speak in the debate have the opportunity to withdraw that vile accusation, and I hope that they will do so. It would help the family if Sinn Féin withdrew the criminal slur on Paul's name, and I firmly believe that Sinn Féin can do more than that again: its members need to come forward and tell the PSNI and an Garda Síochána all that

they know about Paul Quinn's murder. There must be no hiding place for murderers, and certainly not in the ranks of a political party. The denial of truth must not prevail.

At the end of the week, a report on the talks will go to David Cameron and Enda Kenny. The message in that report should be that those who seek to protect the state or paramilitary interests should not prevail. Nochtfar an fhírinne, luath nó mall. The truth shall out, sooner or later.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Irwin: The murder of Paul Quinn ranks among the most brutal executions that were carried out by the IRA. Despite the passage of some seven years since the public learned of this cruel act of barbarity, revisiting some of the published facts of the case makes for horrific reading.

We must not forget that there is a grieving family mourning the loss of Paul Quinn. Their pain has certainly not abated with the passage of time as they still firmly pursue justice for those who murdered him.

4.45 pm

The brutality of his death in the way he was lured to the farmyard by his friends, who had been taken hostage by the murder gang, and the manner in which he was beaten with pickaxe handles and iron bars, draws horrific comparisons with what is happening now in Syria and Iraq. When we look at our TV screens daily, we see the horrific brutality carried out by Islamic State fighters. I often wonder and find it impossible to comprehend how men can be so inhumane to their fellow man. We feel a certain sense of relief that such regular brutality does not happen in the Western World. However, the shocking murder of Paul Quinn, when studied in the cold light of day, is exactly the same brutal activity as many terrorists in the Middle East engage in as a matter of routine.

There is no difference in my mind between some fanatical jihadist who will beat a woman to death or chop off a man's arm for stealing a sweet and the ruthless group who lured this young man to the farmyard to exact some twisted form of retribution. There can be no justification in any sense of the word for what happened to Paul Quinn on that fateful day. Furthermore, the attempts by Sinn Féin to in some way blacken the name of the victim by referring to him as a criminal only adds to the

smokescreen that was created by republicans in the area to try to deflect attention from this barbaric act.

The wall of silence that has fallen on this case in the community around Cullyhanna is also of huge concern. There is an immense burden of responsibility on those who know what happened on that day and know who was involved in the crime to come forward and make the information known to the police.

The history of the republican movement, especially in the Newry and Armagh constituency, which I represent, is a sickening catalogue of pain and suffering visited on Northern Ireland. The late Paul Quinn is another name added to the list of callous murders carried out, as confirmed by the Independent Monitoring Commission, by current and former members of the Provisional IRA. The issue of republicans who know who carried out the murder coming forward with information is a key point in the debate. It is only by someone coming forward with the vital information that police on either side of the border can have any hope of bringing a successful prosecution. There may well be people on the Benches opposite who could have a snippet of information that may be useful to the police. I urge them to contact the PSNI or the gardaí without delay. That goes also for those in the community in the area who may have a snippet of information that would provide a vital link in the investigation in this case. I say again that that information must be given to the authorities.

This issue amongst other issues, such as the abuse of Máiría Cahill, the plight of the families of the disappeared and the campaigns under way by the innocent victims of the IRA's terrorist campaign, will remain an issue of great importance in the wider community. It is well beyond time that Sinn Féin and the republican movement revealed the truth and accepted the hurt and pain that their inextricable link has produced. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I would like to say a few words on the motion. First, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I place on record my condolences and extend my sympathy to the family and friends of Paul Quinn. I can only imagine the pain and suffering that they have gone through over the last seven years since the tragic death of their son, brother and friend. I condemn the manner in which that young man lost his life. There is no justification and there never can be for taking a life, certainly not in

that manner. I sincerely hope that the family finds the justice that they deserve. To that end, I add my voice to those of my colleagues before me who have called on anyone with information on the murder of Paul Quinn to present that information to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.

Sinn Féin has always been clear on that point, but unfortunately we have seen a sustained effort to politicise the issue as far as possible. In some quarters, it has been done not in any authentic way to try to assist the family in bringing those responsible to justice but as a means to try to make political capital out of this tragic event for political ends. The motion has been constructed, again, by the SDLP, in a manner that purposely sets out to be as divisive and inflammatory as possible. There is little disguising the fact that the motion has less to do with helping the Quinn family uncover the truth about what happened to their son than with trying to fashion some sort of political point. The pain of the Quinn family deserves better than the current approach being pursued by the motion. What has been diminished here has been an opportunity for everyone to call on those with any information to come forward to the authorities and an opportunity for us all to show sympathy and solidarity with the Quinn family.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I will not give way. You will have plenty of time to speak. I am sure that you have got your name down.

Unfortunately, the people who are responsible for the construction of the motion seemingly prefer to see argument and division in this matter rather than —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way to me?

Mr Boylan: No, I will not give way to anybody. You had 10 minutes to speak.

They prefer to see argument and division in this matter rather than progress and assistance. In spite of such blatant efforts by political opponents of Sinn Féin to draw the party into dispute over the matter and cheaply to pitch the party at odds with the interests of the Quinn family, I think that most people will see those attempts for what they are. As a party, Sinn Féin holds nothing but sympathy and support for the Quinn family. Nothing should be allowed to distract attention from their fight for justice at this time.

Mr Kennedy: It is hard to think that seven years have now passed since the brutal murder of Paul Quinn, yet his family has yet to see any justice. Like many other families who have suffered at the hands of paramilitaries over the decades, they feel no closer to that justice. I truly admire the courage and determination of the friends and family of Paul, who have campaigned and continue to campaign for justice. For some — and some who sit in the Chamber — it is an uncomfortable truth that organised violence, serious crime and murder has occurred since the Belfast Agreement and other agreements.

Make no mistake about it: this was a murder ordered and directed from Northern Ireland and carried out in the Republic of Ireland. Paul was a young man who was lured across the border to his death by the offer of a few hours' work. The grief of those close to Paul was compounded by a very nasty campaign of misinformation by Sinn Féin and some politicians in the Republic. They did not want to focus on the IRA and Sinn Féin so soon after they had publicly accepted policing and justice in Northern Ireland.

When we look back at the comments by the then Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, in response to a question in 2008 from Alistair Carmichael MP in the House of Commons, knowing what we know now about the OTR scheme, amongst other things, the words take on a different meaning. Shaun Woodward said:

"The choice for politicians in Northern Ireland is this: do we allow those who would be involved in crime or the sort of activity that led to the murder of Paul Quinn to determine the future of everyone in Northern Ireland? I do not think that we should."

Although Shaun Woodward went on to say that they should be dealt with by the law, it seems, in one sense, to appeal for people not to make much public comment on the issue and asks them not to rock the boat.

That is exactly what Sinn Féin wanted — limited public comment and no rocking of the boat. My view is clear, and contrary to that approach. I believe that no victim or victim's family should be denied justice for political expediency or to sidestep such an uncomfortable truth. The murder bore all the hallmarks of sophistication and premeditation. It bore all the hallmarks of the Provisional IRA. I, for one, do not believe that its involvement should, in any way, be a barrier to justice for Paul Quinn and his family. All local representatives should make the same

acknowledgement and provide the same commitment to fight for justice for Paul.

We were told in recent days that the IRA has provided details to the gardaí of sex offenders that it relocated over a number of years. When it suits it, or when public pressure is so great, the Provisional IRA suddenly reappears and is able to assist with information. It is time that the same happened with the murder of Paul Quinn. It is time that the IRA acknowledged that its people were involved, in the same way that they were involved in abusing children. It is time that it acknowledged that it has information to provide on its own members, and it is time that it did so, because the murder of Paul Quinn is no less of a crime than the sexual abuse of children, and those responsible are no more entitled to their liberty.

Mr Dickson: From the outset, I wish to express my sympathy and that of the Alliance Party to the family and friends of Paul Quinn and our admiration for the bravery and courage that they have shown in the face of the despicable murder of a son and loved one and everything that has followed. I commend them for calling on anyone with information to give it to the police so that due process may be followed and justice done. Justice is what this family, like many other families in Northern Ireland, seek, and justice is what they deserve.

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

However, sadly, a question hangs over one party's commitment to pursuing justice in this case. Calls to go to the police with information seem petty, hollow and meaningless when the majority of people think that someone in Sinn Féin must know who is responsible. Interestingly, the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) report in May 2008, right before discussing the Paul Quinn murder stated:

"PIRA's commitment to following the political path has been further reinforced in the period under review with a number of people making the transition to positions in Sinn Féin and thereby engagement in democratic politics. Since the time of its announcement nearly three years ago PIRA's strategy has included the movement of members into political life and we view these changes as important further evidence of the move to a peaceful and democratic role."

When the same IMC report stated that Provisional IRA members were involved in the murder, it seems absurd for Sinn Féin seriously

to contend that no one in its organisation knows who is responsible. To make things worse for the family, Sinn Féin representatives, as we know in this debate, have branded Paul Quinn a criminal. Only a court can make such a judgement about a person, not murderers and not thugs, so it would be better for Sinn Féin to channel its energy into ensuring that all its members who have information give that information to the police.

I must say that it appears that Sinn Féin has a track record for trying to blacken the name of anyone who may cause its organisation embarrassment or raise difficult questions in or about that organisation.

As for many families in Northern Ireland, justice is long overdue. In 2007, 'The Guardian' said this of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness's call for the public to cooperate with the police on the matter:

"The unprecedented call marked another shift in the party's support for policing."

That was in 2007, yet, just last month, Paul Quinn's father Stephen said that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness:

"could come to south Armagh and secure justice for us within an hour because it's prominent members of the provisional movement who murdered our son."

5.00 pm

There is clearly a strong feeling in the community that members of Sinn Féin have not disclosed everything that they know about the murder of Paul Quinn. In the interests of justice, that needs to change.

Further lines of enquiry have been opened up by someone coming forward with information in the last month. I hope that more people do the same and that the police services on both sides of the border have success in getting justice for Paul and his family. No mother or father should have to go to hospital and see their son die in horrific and sadistic circumstances. If those who know have an ounce of human compassion or decency, today is the day to come forward. My heart goes out to Paul's mother and father. I met them briefly before this debate. His family circle, his friends, and his mum and dad deserve justice and deserve it soon.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag éirí chun

labhairt in aghaidh an rúin seo. I rise to speak against the motion. I am conscious that Paul Quinn's family are in the Public Gallery, and I do not wish to say anything that may increase their sense of hurt or grief. So, from the outset, let me say that I completely condemn the murder of Paul Quinn. Those responsible should be brought before the courts and held accountable for their actions. Anyone who has information about that terrible deed should bring it to the relevant authorities, either an Garda Síochána or the PSNI. If either of those police forces has sufficient evidence, the culprits should be brought to trial. In any democratic society, that is how affairs of the criminal justice system ought to be conducted.

The Assembly is not a court of law, but, of course, it is right that we, as politicians, should give political leadership, standing together in the Assembly and condemning that brutal murder. It is also right that we should ask those with information to come forward and give it to the proper authorities, but what is not right is political parties using the privilege of the Assembly to try to carry out a witch-hunt against Sinn Féin.

What is happening today is the very antithesis of democracy. It is about some parties capitalising on the brutal death of a young man and using untruths and innuendo to try to score cheap, political points. If the proposer of the motion and those who have jumped on the bandwagon really cared about the victim in this tragedy, they would have brought forward a motion that would have commanded unanimous support. That is the best way to send a clear message to those who think that violence should have any part in a democratic society. But that is not what this debate is about. It is not about the victim. It is about trying to get some sort of political advantage from the terrible murder of Paul Quinn. The contributions thus far have been long on rhetoric and short on fact. So, let me state this fact: Sinn Féin has no information about the murder of Paul Quinn. If it had, we would bring it to the authorities. If anyone else in the Chamber has information, let them do likewise.

Mr Attwood: First of all, I apologise on behalf of Dolores Kelly, who is meant to be speaking now. She is unwell. Even though she is not here, I have some sense of what she might have said. The first thing is to again acknowledge the strength, dignity and resilience of victims and survivors, who regularly speak forth of their search for truth, justice and accountability.

In my view, it is the victims and survivors who, unlike some in the Chamber, are again demonstrating the best standards for people on this island. My colleague said earlier that Paul Quinn, whilst he went to his death that night, has not been silent since. The voices that have been speaking up, in particular those of his mother and his father, are in stark contrast to the voices that we heard from my right earlier today.

Mr Sheehan said that he would not want to do anything to deepen the "sense of hurt" of the family of Paul Quinn, yet his entire speech was littered with further attempts to hurt victims and survivors by portraying what they and those who stand in solidarity with them are doing as other than an effort to get to the truth and have accountability. Mr Sheehan said:

"Sinn Féin has no information about the murder of Paul Quinn."

If Sinn Féin has no information about the murder of Paul Quinn, why did his colleague come into the Chamber and, on the record in Hansard, say that the murder of Paul Quinn was the result of a dispute between criminal gangs? Can Mr Sheehan explain why, if Sinn Féin now claims that it has no information about the murder, Conor Murphy made that comment? Can you explain it to me, to the people in the Public Gallery or to anybody in any county on the island of Ireland? Can you explain that?

If you are not willing now to stand on your feet and explain that comment, will you now stand on your feet and answer the question put to you and your colleagues by Mr Bradley? During this debate in this Chamber, will you correct the public record and the Assembly record and withdraw the allegation about the character of Paul Quinn and the good name of the Quinn family? Are you prepared to stand on your feet, three minutes into my speech, at 5.10 pm, and say that to everybody who is in the Chamber at this time? Otherwise, what you and Mr Boylan have been doing in your speeches is what you did in the Chamber when faced with another victim and survivor who sat up in that Public Gallery: you again denied the truth. You resist justice, fight against accountability and face down the people whom the debate is about — the victims and survivors, wherever they might be in this society.

If I were Gary Hart, the British Government, the Irish Government, or some of the parties in the talks at the moment — I say "some of the parties" because recent words by some of them give me no confidence about where we are

going — I would have little confidence, as we go into this pivotal week in the talks process, in what is said in a document that Sinn Féin put into the talks process. It states:

"combatant organisations should tell the truth"

just as the political parties, MI5, the army, the police and anybody else with information should tell the truth. However, when it comes to those words in the talks process —

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

Mr Attwood: When it comes to the truth of those words, nobody is convinced.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Dúnmharaíodh Paul Quinn seacht mbliana ó shin, agus go dtí an lá seo ní raibh éinne os comhair na cúirte mar gheall ar an dúnmharú sin. Ba mhaith liom ár gcomhbhrón a dhéanamh le tuismitheoirí Paul Quinn agus lena gclann; tá siad inár smaointe fríd díospóireacht an lae inniu.

Paul Quinn was murdered on 20 October 2007, just over seven years ago. To this day, no one has been held responsible for his murder. I am very conscious of the grief and pain that his family endures. As we speak in the debate, I am conscious that they are in the Public Gallery. We have to be mindful that their journey for truth and justice will continue beyond the debate. From the outset, let me say again on behalf of Sinn Féin, echoing the comments made by Pat Sheehan and Cathal Boylan, that anyone with any information on any matter relating to the murder of Paul Quinn should immediately bring it to the proper authorities, be that an Garda Síochána or the PSNI. We will assist the Quinn family in any way we can as they continue in their search for justice.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I am not giving way on this sensitive issue for very obvious reasons.

That has been and remains our position: anyone with any information should bring it forward.

I turn now to the motion tabled by the SDLP. The murder of and search for justice for Paul Quinn has been debated in the Assembly before. Indeed, Alex Attwood referred to a contribution from Conor Murphy that day but

was inaccurate. If he goes back and reads Hansard, he will find that out. At that time, we stated that the motion was selective and divisive: so is this motion. It is selective and is designed to create division on what should be a motion that commands total and absolute support in the Assembly; that is, a universal declaration that anyone with information should bring it forward and those responsible for Paul Quinn's murder should face due judicial process. I ask this: why is that not the objective of the motion? Indeed, to seek anything less, in my opinion, leaves it open to question.

The motion is premised on an assumption that has no basis in fact. It is obvious from the contribution of the proposer of the motion that he cannot offer any substance to the claims made in his motion. That is because neither he nor anyone else can offer a single shred of evidence that somehow, as the motion tries to suggest by coverall but meaningless titles, members of Sinn Féin have evidence in relation to the case that they are deliberately withholding. That is simply not true and is designed to create division. If Dominic Bradley or anyone else has any information that any member of Sinn Féin is withholding information in relation to the case, they should by now have passed it on to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member make his remarks through the Chair?

Mr McCartney: For people to come here and put forward the position outlined by the IMC, rather than that of the PSNI and an Garda Síochána, is also questionable. The IMC had no role or remit as an investigative body. Indeed, it permitted itself, time and again, to be guided by untested and unknown intelligence sources.

Conor Murphy, as MP for Newry and Armagh, is on the record from 20 October 2007 as saying that Paul Quinn was murdered and that anyone with any information should bring it forward. He has offered to meet the Quinn family to assist them in any way that he or Sinn Féin can to ensure that those responsible face the full rigours of the judicial process. This remains his position and that of our party. In the same debate in February 2008, Conor pointed out that there were those using this death for their own narrow interests, be it those who are opposed to the Sinn Féin political strategy or those who are trying to use it for political or electoral advantage. He pointed out that the campaign for justice for Paul Quinn was used by some —

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

Mr McCartney: — to mount attacks, both physical and verbal, on other innocent people and on homes and properties. He cautioned against that, saying that it did not serve the interests of those seeking justice and, indeed, stood in the way of it.

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

Mr McCartney: The interest of justice is not served by half-truths and innuendo.

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

Mr McCartney: Indeed, they serve only to undermine it. Evidence is not the baseless allegations of untested intelligence sources.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up. I call Tom Elliott.

5.15 pm

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for permitting me to take part in the debate. I congratulate and thank Mr Bradley for tabling the motion.

I remember 20 October 2007 quite clearly, but it must surely live in the memories of Briege and Stephen Quinn, their entire family circle and, indeed, their friends and colleagues. It is hugely frustrating to be back here, six and a half years after the last debate, with little progress in the case. The brutality of Paul Quinn's beating and murder is a continuing and chilling reminder of the sickening mindset of those who carried out that murder and assisted in it. This was not a spur of the moment attack but a pre-planned, orchestrated attack and murder, carried out by bloodthirsty people.

Somebody talked about a witch-hunt against a political party: I have no vested interest in this, apart from seeing justice for the late Paul Quinn and his family. That is my only vested interest. I have no witch-hunt to pursue against anybody. What about the witch-hunt against Paul Quinn on that fateful day? This debate is about the victim, Paul Quinn, and his family. It is about attempts to get justice for the family; it is not about any political party, whether it is the SDLP, who tabled the motion, the Ulster Unionists, the DUP, the Alliance Party or, indeed, Sinn Féin.

This is about doing what is right, something that a lot of people have failed to do.

Some of the calls here today from Sinn Féin for people to bring forward evidence and information ring hollow in my ears. They would do much better to withdraw the remarks that they have made previously, but we still fail to hear that, even though there is a plea — it is not even a call any longer, it is a plea — to do justice to the memory of Paul Quinn. No, they cannot even bring themselves to do that.

For almost 40 years, the borders between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have suffered death, harassment, intimidation and fear. That was directed equally at the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, unionists and nationalists — it did not matter. If the IRA wanted to murder you, it murdered you. If it wanted to wreak fear and havoc in those communities, it did so, because that was its mentality and psyche. Unfortunately, it is doing it through a different means now by not providing information.

I hope that people will recognise that those calls ring hollow. I do not know where we can go or whether we will be back here in another six and a half years. I certainly hope and pray that we are not, for the sake of the family of the late Paul Quinn and for the good of society in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. I hope that people are brought to justice, and there are people who can assist with that. Given the numbers that were involved in that brutal murder, surely there are people who have much more information than they are telling us.

I go back to a point that I made in the last debate. A former Member of the House at one stage claimed about the IRA that:

"They haven't gone away, you know".

Unfortunately, Members, that is still right; they have not gone away. Not only did they bring death and destruction to Paul Quinn and his family, but they continue to wreak that havoc now by not giving the information —

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

Mr Elliott: — and by not withdrawing the terrible remarks that they made some time ago and that they have the opportunity to withdraw today.

Mr Allister: The murder by the IRA of Paul Quinn was truly horrific, and it instantly gave rise to totally brazen and disingenuous spinning by Sinn Féin. At the time that that horrific murder occurred, it was, as it still is, politically inconvenient. It is politically inconvenient not only, of course, for Sinn Féin but for the DUP in this House. Immediately it happened, Mr Conor Murphy, who was, if you please, then a Minister, declared that it had nothing to do with republicans and that republicans were not involved in it. He gave that assurance because he said that he had been to see the IRA leadership in south Armagh, which had given him "solid assurances" that republicans were not involved.

I remind the House that Gerry Adams once told us that he was given solid assurances that the IRA was not involved in the murder of Frank Kerr at Newry post office and that he was given solid assurances that the IRA was not involved in the murder of Detective Garda Jerry McCabe. That is mere whitewash and cover-up as far as Sinn Féin is concerned. A Minister of this House proclaimed that he had been to see the IRA leadership. I do not know whether he went in his chauffeur-driven ministerial car. A Minister of this House having the audacity to state that has been excelled today only by Sinn Féin's audacity to talk about the motion as the "antithesis of democracy".

I will tell you what the antithesis of democracy is. It is a gang of those with death and murder in their hearts and minds luring a 21-year-old to a lonely location and beating him cruelly and relentlessly to death. That is what is the antithesis of democracy. Those who sit on the Sinn Féin Benches are those who seek to whitewash with all their weasel words today.

This murder is also politically inconvenient for the DUP, which today could muster not a single Front Bench spokesman but only four minutes of contribution about a murder that, as I will remind them, Jeffrey Donaldson was clear about back in 2007. He said that if it was the IRA, the DUP would not sweep it under the carpet. If the IRA was involved in the murder in those circumstances, the DUP would act and would not run away from it. He went on:

"If the IRA is involved — whether it's individuals or — and there was a gang involved here — if there were a number of IRA members involved in this murder then that's the actions of the IRA. We are not here to dance around this issue".

That party knows that the IRA was involved. What did it do about it? Nothing. That is

because this murder was equally politically inconvenient for those who sustained and who still sustain Sinn Féin in government. This debate is politically inconvenient, hence the dearth of contribution from the DUP on this pivotal matter. That is because it goes to the heart of the con that was wrought on the people of Northern Ireland that meant that, suddenly, the IRA and Sinn Féin had signed up to supporting the rule of law, when here we had, within months of the Executive taking office, the IRA still being in the business of murder. Of course it has been swept under the carpet.

It is quite clear to me that Paul Quinn was sacrificed on the altar of proving that the IRA had supremacy and control in south Armagh. I fear that it is also sadly true that the police investigation and justice —

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

Mr Allister: — have been sacrificed on the altar of the peace process. That is what adds another chilling dimension to this chilling case.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. I just want to add a comment to what Tom Elliott said when he talked about the horrific and bloodthirsty nature of that murder. I emphasise to the House that the reason why it was so brutal and bloodthirsty was to send a very strong message; that is why the brutality was such. The message was: "We are in control. We are in charge. You will not defy our authority — the authority of the Provisional IRA." That was the message that was being put across.

It is disingenuous for anybody in this House to say that, in fact, this murder was not a paramilitary murder; it had all the hallmarks of a paramilitary murder. It was carried out by 10 men in boiler suits who forensically cleansed the scene of the murder. In many ways, it is similar to Robert McCartney's murder in Belfast, when there was a cleansing of the scene of the murder. It is different from the murder in Belfast because this murder was coldly calculated, whereas the McCartney murder was not. This one was preconceived, meticulously carried out and, as I say, forensically cleaned up afterwards. Can you imagine a criminal gang going to those lengths? I cannot. Why would a criminal gang take a young man and beat him mercilessly? Why would they do that?

We still have answers to receive from Sinn Féin. It has been said here by members of that party that, "We are really the victims here

because you are all ganging up on us and there is a witch-hunt against us." It is similar to the Mairia Cahill case when, again, we were all ganging up on Sinn Féin: they are the victims, not the family of Paul Quinn. Those members disingenuously say that they would give information to the gardaí or the PSNI if they had any. Well, they have had plenty of opportunity to do so and they have not; they have signally failed to do so. What has Conor Murphy done with his information that this was, in fact, the result of rivalry between criminal gangs? Has he given that information to the gardaí? Has he given the details of that? If he does not have that information or if it were merely an assumption, why then did he comment? He did not just comment initially, but in this House in 2008. Why has he consistently said that this was the result of some sort of criminal gang fallout?

It is not acceptable in this House, or indeed outside it, for Sinn Féin to pretend that they are victims and also to pretend that they do not have information. If they do not have information, how do they know that it was not the IRA? How have they come to that conclusion? We have heard that Conor Murphy went to the leadership of the IRA. Could he give the gardaí or the PSNI information on the people whom he spoke to so that they could interview them? What would be wrong with that? Why has no one else in Sinn Féin questioned Conor Murphy and said to him that, "If you have this information, why not go to the police?" instead of standing up in this House and disingenuously saying, "Well, you know, people should go to the gardaí and the police." There is obviously information in the Sinn Féin organisation, and that information should be given to the police or the gardaí. There is no other way to behave in a decent fashion.

5.30 pm

This is all about preserving the integrity of Sinn Féin and preserving its political support. It is not about advancing justice here in Northern Ireland. It is about maintaining support and maintaining the lie that the Provisional IRA were decent people. We have heard that recently from none other than the president of Sinn Féin. Do decent people batter to death a young man in pursuit of maintaining their sovereignty in an area of south Armagh? Is that really what this is all about?

We have been told that we, in the SDLP, are wrong in bringing forward the motion today. It was brought forward with the support of Paul Quinn's family, so, if you are criticising the SDLP for bringing forward the motion, you are

implicitly and, indeed, explicitly criticising the Quinn family. They want to find justice, and they believe that this is an appropriate forum in which we can put pressure on Sinn Féin, the republican movement and those who have knowledge so that the assailants of Paul Quinn can be brought to justice. That is the right and proper thing for us, as legislators and public representatives, to do. Indeed, it is the duty of Dominic Bradley to come to the House and place the motion on the record of the House because only in that way can people be influenced outside the House who may have information in relation to that horrendous murder. Thus, it is important for us to have brought forward the motion today and to debate it. There is no witch-hunt here. There is a hunt, but it is a quite proper hunt for justice. It is demanded by the Quinn family and by every civilised standard that should permeate the workings of the House and all political parties in the House.

I support those who have spoken today in favour of the motion. Not once did those in Sinn Féin give an apology for blackening the reputation of Paul Quinn. Not once have they expressed any sorrow whatsoever in relation to defaming the good name of Paul Quinn. Not once has any Member of Sinn Féin said, "Paul Quinn was not a criminal. He was blamed in the wrong by Conor Murphy". Not once have they shown any contrition in relation to the campaign of denigration against Paul Quinn. Of course, that was similar to the campaign that was carried out in relation to Robert McCartney in the aftermath of his murder. It is similar to the campaign carried out against Máiría Cahill in relation to her allegations against Sinn Féin.

We see a repetition of the approach that Sinn Féin has taken in relation to a series of criminal actions; two murders and other criminal actions. That is not good enough. It is right for the House to demand that Sinn Féin comes clean, that they apologise, that they cooperate with the police and the gardaí, and that justice for Paul Quinn is finally achieved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the question to Members, I wish to address the issue of extending the sitting this evening. The business in the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, so in accordance with Standing Order 10(3) I wish to allow the business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business is completed.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 64; Noes 24.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr A Maginness and Mr McKinney

NOES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr Sheehan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the seventh anniversary of the murder of Paul Quinn; notes that the Independent Monitoring Commission states that current and former members of the Provisional IRA were responsible for the murder; demands that the leadership of the Provisional movement discloses all information regarding the murder of Paul Quinn to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána; condemns the Sinn Féin leadership for its false accusations against Paul Quinn; and further demands that Sinn Féin apologises to his family for making such accusations.

Post Office Network

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

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the important contribution made by the post office network to communities and the local economy; recognises the need for increased support from the Executive to ensure the viability of the network in the future; urges the Executive to take action to help sustain these vital services with the availability of more public services through the post office network and establish a post office diversification fund, similar to those which have existed in other regions; and supports the Keep Me Posted campaign, which champions the principle that consumers and businesses have a right to choose how they receive bills and statements without being penalised for requesting such information in paper format.

I propose the motion as a member and former chair of the all-party group on postal issues. I think the group has made a positive contribution to this issue and is now under the chair of Pam Cameron MLA. It has given MLAs the opportunity to listen to Post Office representatives and sub-postmasters and increase our awareness of their excellent work and the vital services that they provide in our community.

I pay tribute to post office workers in Northern Ireland and the support that they give to citizens and businesses across our community.

With approximately 480 branches, the post office network is the largest retail chain in Northern Ireland and offers unrivalled access to a vast range of services, including mail services, pensions and benefits, government services and bill payments. An important aspect of the network's role is the support that post offices offer our rural communities, with 68% of branches in rural areas. The local post office is often the only link to important services for many rural communities and areas of deprivation and for older people and people with a disability, and it is vital that we work to sustain that access.

The post office network is also vital to our local economy and to businesses. Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) studies show that 88% of SMEs in the UK use a post office for mail services: 47% more than once a week and 20% every day. As we experience another round of bank closures, it is clear that the post office is increasingly bridging the gap for local, face-to-face access to banking services for people in our community.

The most recent survey of the satisfaction of Post Office customers in Northern Ireland, which was carried out in 2010, found that 93% thought that it provided a good or very good service and that 78% felt that it played an important part in the local community. That demonstrates just how important the post office network is to Northern Ireland and how seriously the Executive should take the need to help to sustain it. I hope that the all-party motion sends a clear message to the Executive that the Assembly demands support for our post offices, our sub-postmasters and the communities and businesses that they serve.

A 2012 report by the Consumer Focus Post titled, 'A "Front Office" for Government Services', recommended that the Northern Ireland Executive take a lead role in encouraging public sector organisations to deliver services through the Post Office and work with the UK Government to establish a clear role for them to play with the post office network in Northern Ireland. I have submitted questions to all Departments on what services they make available through the post office network, and the responses were underwhelming. Indeed, some of the services listed are delivered by other providers. That indicates that the Executive are failing to deliver on the recommendations made in the report, which is very concerning.

The Executive have also failed to establish a post office development fund, which has been introduced in other regions in the UK and appears to be improving the sustainability of post offices. In Scotland, the post office diversification fund, a £1 million investment overseen by the Enterprise Minister in 2010-11 and 2011-12, has helped post offices to diversify into new business activities and improved their sustainability. In 2009, a diversification fund was established in Wales to help local post offices to expand their business and provide new services for the community. With grants totalling around £6.6 million, the fund has helped around 442 Welsh post offices to strengthen their role in the community. An independent evaluation of the fund found that it had improved the sustainability and commercial

viability of post offices and positively impacted on local economies and communities by improving job opportunities and increasing consumer spend. In 2013, a new scheme for post offices was launched by the Department for Communities and Local Government in England, with additional funding from the Cabinet Office and Post Office Ltd. The community enterprise fund gave grants of up to £10,000 to 25 post offices for innovative schemes to allow them to provide additional support to communities and other small businesses.

Having highlighted the positive impact of government investment in post offices in other regions and the cross-party support for the motion, I find it disappointing that no Executive Ministers are stepping forward to respond to these matters. In March of this year, I raised the issue with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the Assembly and was informed that OFMDFM was taking the lead on cross-cutting issues for the Executive. Despite cross-party support for the motion, we seem no closer to the relevant Executive Ministers standing up for our post offices and post office staff in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I call on the Executive to take a leaf out of the Post Office's book and start delivering on the issue. I hope that they will give serious consideration to a diversification fund to help post offices in Northern Ireland.

I also call on the Executive to address the other key recommendations of the "A Front Office for Government Services" report by actively encouraging our public sector to identify opportunities to deliver services through the Post Office in Northern Ireland and to work more closely with Westminster to support our post office network. This should include working to ensure the future of the Post Office card account further to March 2015. It is a service that is used by 10% of households in Northern Ireland, the highest of any UK region and one of the important income generators for our post offices.

The motion also calls on the Executive to support the Keep Me Posted campaign. The campaign is a partnership of post offices, charities and businesses working together to ensure every consumer's right to choose, without disadvantage, how they are contacted by banks, financial service companies, utility companies, media companies and other service providers. Independent research has demonstrated that 81% of adults want to choose how they receive important information such as bills and statements. It also reveals that the people who often have the greatest

need are the older generation, the disabled and those lacking internet access and digital skills. It is our duty to safeguard the interests of such groups and to ensure that all citizens have the right to choose how they receive bills or statements without being penalised for requesting this in paper format.

The Keep Me Posted campaign calls on the UK Government and regulators to promote consumer choice through clearer regulation. It has a six-point pledge that can be accessed via its website and which I urge all Members to sign if they have not already done so. I also ask that the Executive write to the UK Government to express their support for the Keep Me Posted campaign.

In 2007, the Assembly was required to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on local postal services further to the closure of a number of post offices. This was a reactive response to a serious public concern for our post office network, and there is now, I believe, an urgent need for the Executive to get proactive in their support for our post offices if we are to help to sustain their future viability.

Mrs Cameron: I rise as chair of the all-party group on postal issues to support the motion. I welcome the fact that it has gained cross-party support in recognising the significant role that the post office network plays in Northern Ireland.

In the UK, 93% of adults live within a one-mile radius of a branch, with 92% having visited the branch in the last year. A staggering 20 million people — half of the UK adult population — have visited their local post office in the last week to avail themselves of diverse and wide-ranging services such as passport application checks, vehicle tax services, rates payments and collection of benefits and pensions through the Post Office card account. The post office is so often at the heart of communities and provides an intrinsic social service that the vast majority of us will use in one way or another in the course of our daily life. In order that we retain and build on the postal service that we all rely on, it is vital that we view the services that it provides in a strategic and long-term manner.

The introduction of the post office diversification funds in Scotland and Wales has enabled post offices to establish new business activities and become more sustainable, providing long-term economic return and perpetuating their strong social purpose. Post office diversification funds are designed to ensure that post offices remain a hub of services in communities, with priority given to offices serving deprived or isolated

areas. Following a two-year roll-out in Wales, where 318 grants of between £5,000 and £20,000 were awarded, 65% of businesses reported an increase in non-post office turnover, with 60% reporting an increase in profits. That is a huge 83% of grantees that reported that their business had increased in commercial viability. The Scottish scheme provided similar successes, and the potential for increased economic activity alongside greater post office use cannot be underestimated.

It is worth noting that some Departments — OFMDFM, Regional Development, Employment and Learning, Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Education, Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Justice — do not use the post office network in any way. The remaining Departments that use the network do so in a very limited way, with Social Development the only Department to use services in any real way to administer benefits and pensions.

6.00 pm

Mr G Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: Yes. No problem.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Member agree that local government should make more use of the post office network?

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

Mrs Cameron: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wholeheartedly agree that it is vital that local government uses the post office network in any way it can to support and continue the success of the network and ensure that we have it into the future.

I urge that consideration be given to the introduction of a post office diversification fund for Northern Ireland to grow the post office network and increase its long-term viability as a core part of our community.

As consumers, we are changing the way in which we shop, bank and manage our finances. It is vital that the post office network adapts to those changes to remain relevant. One example of how the system has reflected a change is seen through the ability of post office counters to maintain banking services for customers whose bank branch has closed. In the last few days, another example of that was seen as the Ulster Bank announced the closure of branches across Northern Ireland, including

the branch in Randalstown in my constituency. That is just one small way in which the Post Office has reacted to changes in the community to sustain a service for its customers. Other examples such as handling housing benefit claims, reporting a change of circumstances for benefits and paying fixed penalty notices have all been identified as ways in which the Post Office can provide greater cooperation with local authorities and offer community-based facilities.

Whilst it may be the case that we are largely moving towards greater technological integration, it is important to remember that 5.2 million households in the UK do not have Internet access. The post office is often described as a digital bridge for the elderly and vulnerable, and we must ensure that those people do not lose their access to postal counter services or their right to receive bills and communications from companies through the postal service. The Keep Me Posted campaign seeks to ensure that customers continue to be offered the choice of how to receive their bills, that there are no charges or penalties for receiving paper bills and that paper bills are taken away only with customer consent. With 40% of adults in the UK stating that not receiving a paper bill would seriously affect their ability to manage their finances, it is vital that we continue to press companies on that issue to ensure that that is carried forward.

I put on record my praise for the Northern Ireland postal network and am very much looking forward to visiting delivery offices in my constituency as normal over the coming weeks in the run-up to Christmas. The service that we receive is often taken for granted, yet we would sorely miss it if we did not have it. I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. I will speak in favour of the motion.

I commend the work of the all-party group on postal issues and wish the chair success in her new role. I speak from the point of view of working in the delivery side of the postal service for a number of years. It is a very important service, especially in rural areas, and, but for the likes of post offices, those areas would not be serviced at all. In moving the motion, the former chair said that 68% of post offices were in rural areas; I certainly experienced that when I was on delivery.

People tend to forget the number of services that are available in post offices and that can be

delivered through them. Most post offices are a hive of activity, from the construction worker who comes in in the morning to get a cup of tea or a paper before he goes to work to a little old lady who goes in to get her pension. Post offices deal with pensions, tax credits and loads of other services. We should support the motion.

I express my thanks to all the postmasters who are doing a terrific job in supporting local communities.

I want to pick up on the points in the motion. Like the proposer of the motion, I was a wee bit disappointed with the response that he got back from some of the Departments. More could be done in relation to working with Departments to deliver services through the postal network. I thank the research team for its paper. Having looked through the paper, I saw the number of Departments that responded and their one-line responses. That does not encourage you.

Pam Cameron took an intervention on councils from her colleague. I looked through the services that the councils could support and deliver by supporting post offices. They could certainly do a lot more. I see Belfast and, thankfully, Armagh City and District Council, which is in my area, and Limavady Borough Council. However, I think other council areas could do more. There are a number of services, and I think we should be working and supporting and encouraging Departments and local authorities to use the postal network to deliver those services.

The motion also urges the Executive to establish a diversification fund. I see that Wales and Scotland can certainly make big changes and gains in capital, revenue and resource, for a small amount of money. So, I certainly support the motion's proposal to ask the Executive for a diversification fund. The paper clearly shows the results, how some businesses have grown and how well some have done with support. That is to be supported.

Obviously, I have signed the Keep Me Posted campaign. I know that it will sustain jobs. Having been in the delivery of the postal service, I know that it will certainly sustain jobs. People should have the right to receive paper bills if they so wish. I am certainly in favour of that, but there is one thing that people do not recognise. Once again, I will champion the rural cause here. A big percentage of people cannot access online services. It is as simple as that. There is no broadband coverage. Surprisingly, there are still areas in the rural

North that have dial-up connection. I know that there is funding to try to address that issue. In the absence of all that, I certainly support the Keep Me Posted campaign.

I put on record my thanks to the all-party group, the postmasters and all who are trying to provide services and do their best to support communities, particularly the rural communities. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: Once again, I am delighted to take the opportunity to speak in support of our post office network. In the past, I stood in the Chamber and spoke of my admiration for postal services and its storied history of penny black stamps, dangerous highwaymen and rumbling carriages roaring through the countryside to deliver. I spoke of how crucial it is for the Assembly to recognise our continuing need for a universal postal service, and I called on the Executive to ensure the viability of our local network by protecting it from Tory interference. Today, I reiterate that call.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not draw your attention to the fact that we are not quorate at the moment, but I say this to all 108 Assembly Members: anything that we get in Northern Ireland, we have to fight for. It is a feature of modern democracy that people make their voices heard.

I am not foolish enough to suggest that the Post Office of today is as vital for communication as it was in the 1840s. It would be even more foolish for us not to recognise the importance of its continued contribution to local communities, local business and the local economy.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. In accepting the vital role that post offices have to play, particularly in many of our rural communities, I am glad that the Member touched on communication, because it is vital. The Post Office has a huge range of services, but it does itself a tremendous injustice by underselling the range of products and services that it has. Does the Member accept that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. It has been drawn to my attention that we are not quorate. Therefore, according to Standing Order 9, I ask that the Division Bells be rung.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member now continue?

Mr Dallat: That is what I get for drawing the Deputy Speaker's attention to the fact that we are not quorate, but, to be honest, I am not sorry for doing it.

Other Members referred to the number of banks queuing up to close their branches. The most recent was the Ulster Bank, which closed the last bank in Portstewart, which is one of our premier seaside resorts. A lot of elderly people purposely retired there, and they will now have to bus it to Coleraine, where, I know, the bank will end up as nothing more than a showroom.

We are very lucky in this part of the country. I will give credit to the Assembly because, in the past, we stood up for the post office. In fact, one of the first pluses for this Assembly was to set up a pilot scheme promoting a one-stop shop. That was tested out in Coleraine many years ago. The post office that we have today would not exist had it not been for local people getting the message out loud and clear that we are not going to go down the road of 60% of medium-sized towns and villages in England where there is no post office and no bank. Northern Ireland cannot afford that.

The people of Northern Ireland have been loyal to the post office and have continued to support it; 70% of our population will visit a post office at least once a week. Post offices are a lifeline for many of our communities, and they have adapted: you find them now in pharmacies, supermarkets and other places that remain open at night. I pay tribute to those in charge of the post office network. They have endeavoured to be flexible and innovative to ensure that the service is not eventually flogged off to rich Tories who want to control transport and public utilities, which should remain in public service.

The post office, to me, is the last of the utilities that we can save. I picked up on an intervention from George Robinson that the new local authority should support the post office, but let us start at home. The Assembly has not been particularly good at supporting the post office and has not availed itself of it as a means of distributing its information, leaflets and all the things that the public need to find out about. I appeal to the 11 or 12 Departments today to get serious about this, put your money where your mouth is and start helping to save the post office from annihilation. Please do not

allow the post office to go down the same route as the bank without intervention.

We are largely a rural community, and many of our urban communities are in socially deprived areas where there is a sub-branch of the post office where people can do their business, avail themselves of its benefits and whatever. Can you imagine if there was a further culling of post offices and the cost that there would be to ordinary working-class people to have to go into town centres to do their business? I hope that all Members, including those not in the Chamber this evening — I accept that they probably have very good reasons for not being here — feel that the debate this afternoon stimulates an urgency because we cannot sit on our hands, we cannot daydream, and we cannot sleep if we are going to ignore this issue.

We should learn from experience that we should make our voice known.

6.15 pm

I will finish with this. Recently, I was in Hungary and saw 40,000 people marching, and it scared the wits out of me. What were they marching for? They were campaigning against tax on the Internet: a simple, everyday issue. They appeared on the second day with 50,000 people, and by the next day —

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

Mr Dallat: — the Government acted. The Government gave in. I hope that we do not have to take to the streets to ensure that the post office remains.

I know that I am pushed for time, but since there was not an awful lot —

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

Mr Dallat: — of demand, I have abused my privilege.

Mr Kinahan: I am very pleased to speak on the motion, although, having listened to the Member who spoke previously, at one stage, I thought that we were going to get a rendition of Adam Ant's 'Stand and Deliver'. Then we got the bells — the bells from Quasimodo. To be serious, I am very pleased to be here to support the motion. I congratulate Mr Lyttle for pushing it through.

I remember speaking — I think it was six years ago — on another motion, which was six steps to saving our post office. After that, I then concentrated on asking questions, as Mr Lyttle has, and getting many answers. When I went back with the answers to the organisation that had been pushing us, I found that that campaign had waned and gone. What I am really leading up to saying today is that the onus is on all of us here and our colleagues in our parties to make sure that the same does not happen this time.

I wholeheartedly support the motion and, like others, want to acknowledge the tremendous contribution made by the post office network. If you think about it, you realise it is very much behind our health and our happiness as a nation, both in the past and in the future. If any community knew that their post office was under threat, you would find all of them crowding and supporting it in the future. So, let us make sure that we wind this up nicely so that everybody is supportive and works hard to keep the post offices.

I am the fifth Member to speak, so you have heard most of the arguments and the points that have been made. However, I will say that the post office network has faced significant challenges in recent years, including the decline of the high street and the advent of the Internet. We can all tell our own stories of post offices closing in our constituencies over the past decade, both in rural areas and in towns. Whether planned or simply because retiring sub-postmasters have not been replaced, the story, at one level, seems to be one of terminal decline. However, it does not necessarily have to be so. Let us all here ensure that that does not happen.

I want to highlight a recent report commissioned by the Post Office and produced by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). In 2013-14, the RSA ran a project on post offices as community enterprise hubs. The resulting report, 'Making the Connection', asked how post offices could provide services that support their local communities while also contributing to the bottom line. The report concluded that post offices have great potential to act as community enterprise hubs and that huge opportunities exist for post offices to offer support with everything from universal credit to business advice. The Scottish and Welsh have recognised it, and we should be following their examples. When looking through the research and on the Web, I was intrigued to see that the United

States was also meeting the same difficulties, and I am sure that it is happening worldwide as the Internet and everything changes matters.

The network's future could be transformed by supporting branches to become more entrepreneurial and for branches to experiment with new business models. Let us see that diversification fund there helping them.

In the context of a new trend in the UK towards the local, characterised by growing a microbusiness community and the development of community-based approaches to public service reform, it could be argued that post offices are ideally placed to become community enterprise hubs, which, for instance, could provide business support to make communities and also meet the needs of the UK's ageing population and address the isolation felt by older people. When we look at the wider picture and the challenges faced by our town centres and rural villages, which has already been touched on by many, we see that there have been bank closures, threats to libraries, public houses and Citizens Advice, and police station closures or reductions in opening hours. Therefore, it is now time to take a more strategic view on all of those under-threat services. I feel that the Executive, all Departments and, as the Chair suggested, all councils should work together, not just on post offices but on town and village centres. The post office is just one of the keys.

In the various briefs that we all received for today's debate, numerous Departments responded that they have passed nothing to post offices. Let us keep the pressure on them all. Let us make it work, and let us see them do it. We can all do it through our Committees. Whether it is DVA-related, passports, banking, dog licences, tickets, housing benefits or many of the matters that we have raised already, the post offices could do it if we had a joined-up initiative from the Executive that worked downwards, with someone appointed to drive it from there. Then we probably need someone in every super-council area to do the same.

We could plan the future of our towns around those features. Think about what features will definitely survive. We know that we will always need the key shops such as the grocer's, the butcher's and the newsagent, and we know that we need the schools. We have the pubs and the coffee shops. You have Internet cafes, probably temporarily as fashions change. You have the transport hub in a town or village where the buses stop. If we sit down and look at each town and think how we can work that town better, we can place the post office better

into the middle of it and maybe share its workload and, if you use the diversification fund, help it benefit the town or village.

I, too, will talk about Randalstown, where the bank closed last week. I make it clear beforehand that I do not believe that the post office is under threat.

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

Mr Kinahan: The library has had to be cut back. There is the ideal place to work with: get the post office working with the library. All of us in here should be looking at each town and village, finding the focus and helping it work.

Mr Agnew: The post office has already done a great service today in bringing our politicians together, but, more importantly, on a regular basis, it brings our communities together. Post offices act as community hubs and, historically, have been a key part of our communities. Indeed, they continue to be so.

A number of Members have spoken about bank closures. Recently, Ulster Bank announced that it will close its branch in Donaghadee, leaving my constituents in that town with no local shopfront banking service within six miles. That is regrettable, but at least we have the post office, which will continue to provide banking services. Whilst banks and other profit-making organisations will make such decisions based on numbers, a post office is a public service, and public services should not be based on numbers coming through the door but on the need of those who come through those doors.

It is important that we sustain the post offices. As Danny Kinahan said, many of our post offices are not under threat — many are thriving — but those that are and that provide those important services, often in rural areas and areas that have no walk-in banking services, provide a vital resource to the community.

In my previous role working with the homeless, I witnessed the importance of the Post Office accounts. Many of the residents in the hostel where I worked could not get a bank account. The identification threshold to open a bank account was too high and the security checks were too high, and they could not get a bank account in which to, in many cases, have their benefits lodged. The post office again provided that service, which may not have been commercial. The banks did not see those people as important enough in terms of their

number, but a vulnerable group in society was serviced by the post office, and it played a vital role in those people's life.

The report 'A "front office" for government services' has been mentioned, and I will echo some of what has been said. We need to use what is there. We were responding to budget difficulties by cutting staff, but how can we potentially make genuine efficiency savings? One of the ways in which we can do that is to use the services that are there, use the post office and work with it to help it deliver new public services, whether those be advice services, benefits or housing services. Can we, through DSD, get our social security offices working with our post offices to see how they can bring services together, and likewise with other Departments and their provisions?

Finally, the diversification fund of £1 million in Scotland was referred to. Earlier today, I questioned the First Minister on the proposals to cut the rate of corporation tax, which would take approximately £400 million out of public funds. I was told that that was an investment in companies. Today we call on the Executive to make an investment in our communities, whether that be £1 million or £500,000. That investment in our post offices would be an investment in our people. I commend Mr Lyttle for tabling the Adjournment topic and thank Members for uniting around the issue. I call on the Executive to take notice of the Assembly today and act on the issue.

Mr Lyttle: I thank every Member who has contributed to this important debate. We have had a unanimous call for support for our post office network in Northern Ireland and our post office sub-postmasters. That is an important call to be sent to the Executive today. I welcome the contributions that have been made. Pam Cameron, as chair of the all-party group on postal issues, made a vital contribution, making us aware that 20 million people will have used the post office in the past week. She set out the important services that are available from our post office and gave her support to a diversification fund.

With a helpful intervention from George Robinson, she reminded us of the importance of encouraging local government to participate in the process as well and, although recognising that post offices need to adapt, set out just how many households — 5.2 million — have no Internet access. She said how important our post office is as a digital bridge for those people. She helpfully reminded us to support our post offices at the busy Christmas period, and I am sure that MLAs will be making

Christmas visits to send our support to the workers at this time.

Cathal Boylan stressed the importance of post offices to rural areas, acknowledged the work of sub-postmasters and gave his support to a diversification fund and the Keep Me Posted campaign. John Dallat expressed his admiration for postal services here in Northern Ireland and his support for the universal postal service. He also highlighted the fact that 70% of the population will visit a post office at least once a week. He emphasised the importance of post offices as a lifeline to our communities and acknowledged that many of them have adapted to changes in communication requirements at this time. He also urged, as many other MLAs did, that we understand the urgency of the issue.

Danny Kinahan referenced the six steps to saving our post office network. That is an important campaign that makes a vital contribution to the work that we need to do as an Assembly and Executive. He also recognised the contribution of the post office network to the social fabric and the health and well-being of our community. He put out the call that states clearly, "Let's not wait until we're facing any further closures". Although many post offices are thriving, we know that there are many sub-postmasters who are under significant pressure.

In a positive vein, he said that we should recognise the centrality of post offices in our community and use that to build and create community enterprise hubs, where not only benefit assistance but business advice and other services could be delivered to our communities.

6.30 pm

Steven Agnew emphasised that, whilst banks are profit-making services and have made decisions in that regard in recent weeks, we must continue to support post offices as a public service that addresses need and must be protected. Indeed, he emphasised the importance of the Post Office card account to the vulnerable in our community. He also referenced the report, 'A "front office" for government services', and called on the Executive and the wider public to make sure that we use the services that are available through our post office. He emphasised that a diversification fund, such as that in Scotland, which is in the region of £1 million, would be an investment in our communities, which every MLA today has supported.

In closing, I welcome the clear cross-party support that we have achieved today for our post office network. A very clear message will go to the Executive on some key points. There is support for a diversification fund. We have seen the Enterprise Minister in Scotland deliver that, as well as the Local Government Department in England. We have seen a £6.6 million investment of that nature in Wales. Another clear message is that we want to see government services provided through our post offices, at regional and local level, and clear support for the Keep Me Posted campaign.

As I mentioned, the task is to gain Executive commitment, and we need Ministers to step forward and act on the call that they have received today. We need them to take responsibility on the issue and not pass it from Department to Department but act in a joined-up manner, for once, and stand up for post offices and postal workers in Northern Ireland. As vice-chair of the all-party group on postal issues, I will continue to work with the chairperson, Pam Cameron MLA, and other MLAs to ensure that we keep the issue on the agenda. I hope that we see substantive, tangible action from Ministers to ensure that we are proactive on the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the important contribution made by the post office network to communities and the local economy; recognises the need for increased support from the Executive to ensure the viability of the network in the future; urges the Executive to take action to help sustain these vital services with the availability of more public services through the post office network and establish a post office diversification fund, similar to those which have existed in other regions; and supports the Keep Me Posted campaign, which champions the principle that consumers and businesses have a right to choose how they receive bills and statements without being penalised for requesting such information in paper format.

Adjourned at 6.32 pm.



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