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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Dickson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday afternoon there was a debate at which I proposed a motion on behalf of my party. Considerable dissent was expressed when the vote on the motion was put to the Chamber, but, equally, considerable support was voiced by my party Members. I do not think this is the first occasion when concern has been raised about whether an appropriate Division should be called. I am concerned that a Division was not called yesterday on that debate. May I ask you to review the process of calling a Division by your Deputy Speakers? Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: In fact, I am aware of the situation. Indeed, I was faced with a similar dilemma last week. I have actually asked the officials to work with me in providing updated guidance, which I think would help the House, as well as the Speakers. At times, it can be quite obvious to the Speaker where the balance of a vote may fall, but I think it is also equally important — there is a right, which I want to protect — to ensure that opposition is recorded in an appropriate way. Sometimes it is a judgement call, and sometimes there is confusion about where the threshold is, so I think we should update the guidance and put us all on the same pitch.

Executive Committee Business

Pension Schemes Bill: Final Stage

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

That the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA 54/11-16] do now pass.

As I am sure Members are aware, we are in the midst of a period of almost unprecedented change in the field of pensions. The phased introduction of automatic enrolment into workplace pensions is well under way to ensure that most employees have access to a simple, low-cost pension scheme that will provide an additional source of income in retirement. More recently, the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 introduced a new state pension system for all those who reach state pension age from 6 April 2016. The aim is to ensure that we have a pension system that is fit for the 21st century as we face up to the challenges posed by ever-increasing life expectancy.

The Pension Schemes Bill forms part of this ongoing process. It introduces a new legislative framework for private pensions and defines three new categories of pension schemes based on the different types of promise offered to members during the accumulation phase about their pension savings when they come to access them.

The categories are a defined benefits scheme, in which members have a full pensions promise about the rate of the retirement income that they will receive for life from a fixed normal pension age; a shared risk scheme, which is also known as defined ambition, whereby there is a promise about some of the retirement benefits, whether income or lump sum; and a defined contributions scheme, whereby there is no promise about the benefit outcome. For the first time, legislation will set out clear statutory definitions of various scheme types.

The Bill seeks to reinvigorate the pensions industry by allowing for greater innovation in pension scheme design. The new shared risk definition creates a middle ground between the more polarised defined contribution and defined benefit definitions. Shared risk schemes should provide employees with greater certainty about the final value of their pension than they would have under a defined contribution scheme but with less cost volatility for employers than a defined benefit scheme. Enabling legislation that allows for longevity, investment and inflation risks associated with pension provision to be shared between employers and employees rather than borne by one party should result in improved pension outcomes for many.

The Bill also defines the concept of collective benefits and makes provision for regulation-making powers for them. Those powers cover matters such as the setting of targets for benefits, valuation, reporting requirements, transfer values, winding up and governance. Collective benefits are provided on the basis of allowing the scheme's assets to be used in a way that pools risks across the membership. Gains or losses arising as a result of the scheme's investments are shared among all members. The intention is that schemes offering collective benefits will be required to set targets in relation to the rate or amount of those benefits. The target level of benefit should provide members with a reasonable estimate of what they can expect to receive from the scheme.

An actuary will be required to certify that the initial target is set at an appropriate level and that the probability of the target being met falls within a specified range. That will help to ensure that schemes providing collective benefits operate in as transparent a manner as possible.

The Bill makes amendments to current legislation as a consequence of the new scheme definitions and the collective benefits provisions. In particular, the amendments will ensure that current legislative requirements relating to governance and administration apply in the appropriate way to the new scheme categories.

The Bill also contains powers to make regulations — for example, for indexation and the revaluation of benefits and in setting out conditions to be met for a pensions promise to be obtained from a third party and imposing a duty on managers to act in the best interests of members when making specified decisions on collective benefits or shared risk schemes. It

also enables the Department to issue statutory guidance on the disclosure of information about schemes and includes a provision dealing with pension sharing and normal benefit age.

In conclusion, the key objective is to ensure the financial stability of future pensioners by ensuring that they can save into good private pensions during their working lives. I think that we all agree that that is highly desirable. The Bill will also create space for market innovation while ensuring that there is proportionate regulation for different scheme types.

I trust that Members are content with the broad thrust of the Bill. I know that pensions legislation can be somewhat complex and detailed.

Therefore, I want, in particular, to thank the Chair and members of the Social Development Committee for their help and the positive manner in which they considered this important Bill. I also want to place on record my appreciation to my own staff, who work relentlessly in this area; their expertise and dedication is an invaluable assistance to me in trying to manoeuvre what is a very challenging and technical issue. I am sure that they, like me, will be looking forward to the Chancellor's autumn statement tomorrow, which, no doubt, may have some further changes to the system that will give them further work in the future.

Mr A Maginness: I do not intend to rehearse what the Minister and others have said. I will keep my comments as brief as possible.

The SDLP supports the Bill. Although it has gone through with accelerated passage, the Assembly and the Committee for Social Development have had the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill and, indeed, to scrutinise the Minister on this important issue. As mentioned by the Minister during the Second Stage debate, increasing life expectancy should be celebrated — we all celebrate that, collectively and personally — although it brings with it its own issues and challenges, including the issue of pensions. Therefore, the issue of pensions is becoming more and more important for more and more people. Pension reform has been ongoing, and I believe that there will be further changes over the coming years, in the public sector and the private sector — perhaps even as soon as tomorrow, as the Minister said.

I will quickly mention some of the main aspects of the Bill. The main thrust of the Bill is to provide people with more flexibility and choice, and that should be seen as a good thing. Of course, we all welcome that. As the Minister

said, and I take his words very seriously, there should be proportionate regulation. I welcome that, and I hope that that will be the outcome of the Bill and that the regulation will be proportionate.

Part 1 relates to the categories of pension schemes and contains provisions for a new framework in relation to categories of pension schemes. It aims to establish three mutually exclusive definitions for scheme types defined as a pension promise. Those can be defined benefit schemes, shared risk schemes or defined contribution schemes. Part 2 defines the concept of collective benefits and makes provision for regulation-making powers in relation to them. Part 3 mainly deals with amendments to existing legislation, mostly as a consequence of the change to scheme definitions.

The SDLP had some concerns about the Bill, which we mentioned during the Second Stage debate. Those included ensuring that we adequately safeguard the members' interests, ensuring that there is sound independent financial advice and ensuring a proper regulatory framework. We welcome the Minister's previous comments on the issues that I have just outlined. I also welcome the fact that the Minister has maintained parity by bringing the Bill through the Assembly by way of accelerated passage. The SDLP supports the Bill.

In conclusion, the Bill seeks to introduce new flexibilities to the way in which savers can access their defined contribution pots, with the stated aim of giving people more choice about how they fund their retirement. We believe that to be a right and proper opportunity for people to deal with money that they have invested for themselves, and they should be given more autonomy on that. With that, I conclude and reiterate that we support the Bill.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. My apologies, Fra, for the slight confusion at the top Table.

Mr F McCann (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the House for its Final Stage.

While the issue of pensions is a devolved matter, as Members know, the Bill was granted

accelerated passage. However, in supporting accelerated passage, the Committee noted that, in the case of this Bill, which relates to private pensions, there is a single regulatory regime that operates here and in Britain. The successful passage of the Bill will ensure that the Pensions Regulator, the Pensions Ombudsman and the Pension Protection Fund continue to facilitate compliance and enforcement in the pensions industry here.

Many, if not all, of the private pension schemes that operate here are based in Britain, and the Committee was cognisant of the potential limitations in effecting change to the Bill. The Committee, therefore, took the view that it was necessary to ensure that people here with private pensions could avail themselves of the changes as soon as possible and seek advice as early as possible in order to plan for their retirement.

The Committee appreciates the importance of the Bill to ensuring that any new products that the pensions industry develops are also available here and are subject to appropriate regulation. The new regime will require regulations to be in place before April 2016 to ensure that adequate safeguards and protections are in place.

The Bill will facilitate the development of new types of pension provision that can provide greater certainty about what people can expect from their occupational pension. The Bill will also allow greater risk sharing: the risk may be shared among members so that schemes providing collective benefits may provide more stable outcomes than the individual defined contribution schemes currently available. That should allow greater protection for pensions from fluctuations in markets.

It is fair to say that we all know that pension provision is something that we should plan for. Actuaries inform us that we are living longer, that pension funds are under strain and that people have to start saving earlier, hence the raft of pension legislation over the last few years. It is also probably fair to say that pensions are something of a mystery to most people. In order to make the right decision about pension plans, people must get meaningful and understandable advice. It may be an attractive proposition, for example, to be able to access one's pension pot from the age of 55, which the Bill, along with the Taxation of Pensions Act 2014, facilitates, but that must be done only after considering the appropriate guidance and taking proper advice. It is, therefore, welcome that people can avail themselves of the free guidance from Pension

Wise throughout the network of 19 citizens advice bureaux here. However, it is possible that some people will not realise that there is a difference between guidance and advice, and that advice, particularly in a financial context, means regulated financial advice, whereas guidance refers to more general information about terms or investment products.

Free guidance is merely the starting point. People need to have the right advice that is tailored to their particular circumstances. They need to understand that their decisions and actions have consequences. It will, therefore, be important to monitor the outworkings of the Bill, although it may take a number of years to understand fully whether it has produced greater stability in pension outcomes for the consumer.

The Committee for Social Development supports the Pension Schemes Bill.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the Bill. The pension process, like that of welfare, is extremely complex, and we need to take great care with any suggested changes.

It is clear from the Bill that we had very limited opportunity to change things. Indeed, during the evidence that we were given, it became apparent that the schemes available in Northern Ireland are GB based and that any proposal to amend the guidance on them might eliminate the choice currently available to Northern Ireland consumers. It is vital that there is a wide choice and a degree of healthy competition, so I am pleased that the Committee and, to date, the Assembly, have supported maintaining parity on this important issue.

It is a sensible piece of legislation; it is modernising to reflect changes. As others said, it will give greater flexibility, which perhaps reflects more how individuals may move on and not necessarily be with one employer their entire working career. It creates increased flexibility with pension schemes and yet provides protections. As others said, there is a single regulatory regime for pension schemes throughout the United Kingdom, with a single ombudsman, and it makes sense to continue in that fashion. I support the Bill.

Mr Storey: I reiterate my appreciation of, and thanks to, those who contributed. I say to them, particularly the members of the Social Development Committee, that it is appreciated. I thank the Deputy Chair for his support. While accelerated passage meant that there was no

formal Committee process, the Committee carried out a thorough scrutiny of the issues. I say a word of thanks for that.

I will pick up on a few of the points raised. The Deputy Chair, Mr McCann, raised the issue of the difference between advice and guidance. His point was well made. It is vital that people have as much information as possible to enable them to make sound decisions. One of the concerns raised during the process was about opening up the door to those who want to be mischievous and to those who have become known as scammers. It is an unfortunate fact of modern life that there will be people who will seek to scam others.

As part of the pensions flexibilities announced in the 2014 Budget, the Government proposed that all consumers with defined-contribution pensions should be entitled to access free, impartial guidance at retirement about their options when assessing their pension savings. That was launched under the branding Pension Wise by the Financial Conduct Authority, and the Deputy Chair made reference to it. It published standards for guidance and the delivery of Pension Wise. The Pension Wise website includes guidance on how to avoid a pension scam. The NI Direct website signposts people to the Pension Wise website and further advice on pension scams. The Financial Conduct Authority recently launched its ScamSmart campaign. Those are all to be welcomed, along with other independent advice that is available.

I now turn to the comments of Mr Maginness. I appreciate the work and effort that he and his colleagues make on these issues. He touched on a point that I mentioned earlier: proportionate regulation. I assure the Member that our aim is to provide appropriate regulation that will safeguard members' rights but which will not be so burdensome as to discourage employers from running schemes. I concur with him about the necessity of having good-quality advice and guidance. That is vital. Much as been achieved over the period of the Bill in giving assurance and confidence not only to Members but to those who, ultimately, are the beneficiaries of a good pension scheme.

The Member raised the point about life expectancy. We all want to live for as long as we possibly can, although that, of course, is ultimately in the hands of someone else. We want to ensure that everything is being done in pension provision to reflect the change in our society. Pensions are always a movable feast because of the many challenges that are brought to bear.

On Members' comments again, I appreciate the work of Mr Beggs on these issues and his help in scrutinising what is an important piece of legislation, not least because some of us are getting nearer to that date. Maybe we should all have started by declaring an interest, but I will do it on our behalf. As I look around, I see that there are some who are further away from pension age, but I say that for those to whom it applies. I also want to say a word of appreciation and thanks to my staff. Thanks to the House for its help. This has been a successful piece of legislation that we have been able to do ourselves. We have been able to do it in a way that is a good reflection on how we can deal with an issue of such importance.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA 54/11-16] do now pass.

Committee Business

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr F McCann (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 January 2016, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 58/11-16].

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill began on 10 November 2015 and is due to conclude on 11 January 2016. A Cheann Comhairle, I stated at the Second Stage that, during the recent period of uncertainty, the Committee was prudent and prioritised the Department's legislative programme within its work programme. With the assistance of the Department and, in particular, our stakeholders, we embarked on a call for evidence in advance of Committee Stage to ensure that there would be sufficient time for the Bill to proceed through the entire legislative process. For that reason, a Cheann Comhairle, the Committee aims to complete its consideration of the Bill before Christmas recess. It agreed, however, that it would be prudent to bring a motion to the Assembly to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill by four days to Friday 15 January 2016. This would allow an additional meeting after recess for the Committee to deal with unforeseen circumstances.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 January 2016, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 58/11-16].

Private Members' Business

Licensing Bill: First Stage

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to introduce the Licensing Bill [NIA 69/11-16], which is a Bill to make provision for the granting of licences to authorise the sale of intoxicating liquor at outdoor stadia.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Trident Nuclear Weapons Programme

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Murphy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the analysis by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in Westminster that suggests that the cost to replace the Trident nuclear weapons programme has risen to £167 billion; believes that it is indefensible for the British Government to commit billions of pounds of public money to nuclear weapons, particularly when individuals and families, locally and across Britain, are experiencing the consequences of austerity measures; and calls on the British Government to cancel their plans for the renewal of Trident.

This is not intended to be a debate about British defence policy. It is simply a debate about the spending plans of the British Government over the next number of years and the very obvious folly in those spending plans. There are other areas of British spending plans and taxation that you could rise to criticise, but there is a very particular and obvious folly in relation to the huge amount of money intended to be spent on a Trident nuclear system. The spending of that amount of money will directly affect every man, woman and child in this jurisdiction in a negative way. Part of the contribution to that spend is taxpayers' money from this jurisdiction. So it is something that is of interest to the Assembly. As I said, our focus is on the spending plans. Of course, the British Government are entitled to have their own defence policy and follow their own defence strategies, as supported or proposed in the British House of Commons. However, such spending plans have a direct impact across Britain and, indeed, here in Ireland where people will be affected by the subsequent lack of money available to Departments and the systems of public spending here.

11.00 am

Any of us who had the dubious pleasure of being at Stormont House, at the regular round-table sessions, will know that we are living with the mantra of no more money available to the British Government, the British Government's priority of reducing the deficit, and there being

no more spending money, so every section and Department will have to face —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: I will finish this point, and then I will give way. We were told that every section would have to face what were termed "eye-watering cuts", when, clearly, there is a significant amount of money for spending on this project, and others — albeit, today, we are focused on this project — that do not stand up to scrutiny and do not benefit ordinary people.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that, in an ideal world, Governments would not spend any money on defence and, indeed, that every Government would be neutral? Given the week that is in it, every Government have the duty to defend their people; that is their first duty and responsibility. It would be anything other than wise for Her Majesty's Government not to invest in armaments to protect the people on this island and on the mainland, and, indeed, to protect us from world terrorism. Does the Member agree?

Mr Murphy: As I said, I had not intended this to be a debate about British defence policy. There is a huge debate about the merits of this aspect of British defence policy, not just on these Benches but across society in Britain. I note that significant spending was outlined yesterday by the British Prime Minister in relation to other defence policy spend. Certainly, this issue is contested by quite a few people, including people in the military in Britain, who question the wisdom of spending on this area of defence.

I believe that this issue is being debated today in Westminster, and Members here might well think that that is the place for it to be debated. I do not doubt that MPs from here will contribute, but, of course, my party colleagues honour the mandate that they have been given by the electorate and do not attend such debates in Westminster.

Today is an opportunity for the devolved institutions to have their say. Scotland already has had the debate and expressed a very clear view; the Scottish Parliament has expressed a very clear view on it. I have no doubt that Wales will have its say as well. I commend our Finance Minister for joining the Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales in going to the Treasury and the leadership in the British Government with a united voice on their approach to public-sector spending and the damage that it is doing to the people whom they

represent as Ministers for Finance in the devolved institutions. The Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly speaking with one voice on an issue like this strengthens the hand of those whom we ask to speak to the British Government about the impact of their austerity policies and spending plans on the people whom we represent.

Tomorrow, there will be an announcement in Westminster from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I do not doubt that the Finance Minister will wait with a certain dread as to what that announcement will mean, as will all of us. Will George Osborne revisit the tax credit issues that he promised to take over £4 billion from; or will he try to find the money in cuts elsewhere and have even deeper and harsher cuts on departmental spending? Or will there be additional cuts to welfare, perhaps? That is something that we will face tomorrow.

Aside from that, the British Government are committed to spending at least £100 billion. That is the view of the Westminster all-party Trident commission. That was at 2012 prices. We have since had an assessment from the Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which suggests that the figure may well be £167 billion. This is at a time when the British Government are lecturing us about their need for austerity measures and their desire to tackle the deficit as their number one priority; the cuts that we have had to welfare; the potential cuts to tax credits; the cuts to departmental spend of £1.5 billion over the last number of years and the potential cuts of £1.4 billion going ahead. The question is how they justify that level of cuts not just here but to some Departments in Britain, which face 30% cuts to the public services that they are able to provide. The justification for that is a project that senior military people have been quoted as saying is strategically completely useless. That spend, if it were allocated across Britain, for instance across work and pensions, education and transport — three areas that are under very significant pressure — the ensuing Barnett consequential that we would get would be £5 billion. Surely that could be put to better use to support people, create employment opportunities and educate young people to take their place in the workforce and contribute to a growing economy.

I do not accept the mantra that we are faced with, week on week, about there being no more money. I do not think that anyone here really accepted it. Even presenters on radio and TV programmes now accept that there is more money within the British system. The question is about the political choices that are being

made on where that money is spent. Whether or not people have a desire to see strong defences as part of the British Government system, there are certainly very significant question marks over this particular project.

There is a growing sense that there is an opportunity among the devolved institutions and a commonality of views between them, as we had here in the Stormont House talks and in the recent talks to implement the Stormont House plans. People agreed that our budgets were suffering as a consequence of British Government policy and that we needed more money for health, education and growing the economy in the particular difficult circumstances that we face here. All that was agreed by all the parties. We might have had other differences, but we certainly agreed on that and asked and tasked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to go directly to the British Prime Minister and put the issues to him about the particular difficulties that the British Government's public spending approach is causing for our institution.

There is an opportunity for common ground between this institution and those of Scotland and Wales on these issues. There is certainly agreement in Scotland with the position that we are articulating here on the Trident project. There is an opportunity for the Assembly to speak with one voice and to actually contribute to strengthening the hand of the Ministers who we send across to Britain with Ministers from other devolved institutions to have these debates and discussions with Treasury and other senior figures in the British Government. This is about trying to ensure that public spending is targeted at those who need it most and makes a contribution to society. Clearly, in the case of this project, it does neither. I urge Members to support the motion. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Frew: Jesus said:

"You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come."

Plato said:

"Only the dead have seen the end of war".

I believe them. It is one of the great truths of our age and the one before it that the Cold War, for all of us, felt like a phoney war because it was fought at a level of spooks, spies and special forces. I believe that the reason for that

was the nuclear capabilities of both sides. That sharpened and focused the minds of world leaders. It sharpened and focused the minds of populations. They would have been against the escalation of what we know now as the Cold War. That is an undeniable truth that we should take cognisance of as we debate a nuclear deterrent. It is OK for Sinn Féin to say, "Well, we do not want to talk about defence; we want to talk about welfare." You cannot not talk about defence when you are talking about a nuclear deterrent.

That is what it has been for so many years. You cannot put a price on a deterrent that has stopped war and stopped people suffering throughout the ages.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No. I have much to get through; I have so much to say and so little time. I apologise, because I usually would give way. I will see what I am like for time.

It is also a great shame on any nation that it would spend billions on missiles but neglect the soldiers, sailors, air crews and all the staff associated with that defence and not spend money on those personnel. It is vital that our servicemen and women, who go to fight wars on our behalf, receive the proper training, equipment and kit on their feet, on their backs and around their necks to do the job that we send them to do and which they have ably done over the last number of years and, in fact, centuries.

It is a truth that in the Falklands War — this is just one anecdote — when the British forces took, trench by trench and position by position, Argentinian conscripts, they even had to take the boots off the Argentinian dead because their feet were struggling to keep up with the war effort and the Argentinians' boots were better than those that our own service personnel wore. That is a great shame, and it is something that we should all be mindful of in this day and age when we talk about defence spending. It is shameful that the UK has not spent enough on defence over the last number of years.

I see the people who have tabled the motion and I want to ask them — and I will give way — what concern did Sinn Féin have for people's welfare when it defended the actions of the IRA when it exploded bombs — yes, bombs — in the trade and commerce centres of Ballymena and Coleraine? What concern did Sinn Féin have for people's welfare when it looked over

Enniskillen's dead? I will give way on that matter.

Mr Speaker: I will just intervene and remind Members of the motion that we are discussing. I am afraid that those latter remarks departed from the discussion. If the Member is picking up on a different point I do not mind, but I do not want to go any further down that particular road.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will return to the motion, and I thank the Member for giving way. The Member made the point that Trident has averted war. Has he not been watching TV throughout his life? Has he not seen countries pillaged by wars and hundreds of millions of people killed during wars? Trident has not prevented war. In fact, one of the top US nuclear officials, Robert McNamara, said that this Earth had been very lucky not to have experienced a nuclear catastrophe.

Mr Frew: Of course, the Member is talking about a different type of war, which is the terrorist campaign. He is certainly an expert on that. I am glad that the closest that Sinn Féin will ever come to having a say in the defence of our great country is when it is passing information over to its handlers.

Mr Speaker: You do have an extra minute.

Mr Frew: No, I am fine.

Mr Speaker: I would not want to constrain your contribution.

Ms Hanna: The SDLP supports the motion and will oppose Trident here and particularly at Westminster, where that opposition will actually be recorded. There is some irony that in the same week that we are repatriating welfare powers, we are seeking to devolve the UK's military defence policy to this House.

I learned from our information pack that, at present, a Trident sub remains on patrol at all times and has up to 40 warheads, each with an explosive power of up to 100 kilotons — eight times the power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, which killed an estimated 240,000 people. These figures are almost too large for us to grasp, but it is quite clear that they fall far outside Thomas Aquinas's theory of a just war in any scenario.

Somebody outlined to me recently the concept of the Overton window, which is that there are a certain range of policies that the public will

accept as reasonable. For reasons beyond my grasp, scrapping Trident has not been in that. It has been discussed in quite a theoretical fashion, but I think that, as the detail is discussed and the numbers and the funding commitment become more of a reality, that will change. I believe that, in the last vote at Westminster, about 360 MPs voted to keep Trident. They are probably the same few hundred MPs who voted for things like the Iraq War, the consequences of which we see playing out in Syria and further afield, so I am not inclined to take foreign policy advice from those MPs. I am also not inclined to take it from Jeremy Corbyn, but the fact that a potential UK Prime Minister who is not keen to blow the world to bits by having his finger on the nuclear button is seen as such a dreadful thing is a very sad reflection on our politics.

11.15 am

Members outlined the cost of Trident renewal, and I will not go over those sums except to say that they are eye-watering, not least in the context of the austerity that is being applied to almost every other aspect of the UK's Budget. I have noticed that recent discussions on Trident seem to focus on the protection of the 10,000 jobs involved and the skills, as if Trident is some massive Keynesian policy. It goes without saying that, if it is about the jobs, the £167 billion that is under discussion could be far better spent on skills and investment, infrastructure, telecommunications, energy efficiency and any number of things that are not just a big military status symbol for Britain.

I would love to stand here and give you a pacifist argument against Trident, but you do not have to be a pacifist to be against spending on nuclear in such a substantial way. In fact, all the experts are saying that Trident drains money away from the UK's traditional defence and military capacity. I am not saying that we do not need to spend on defence. Clearly, we do, but let us look at the global threats to the UK in the last 10 or 15 years. Did the US's substantial nuclear capacity deter Osama bin Laden in 9/11? Did Trident deter the 7/7 bombers? Did France's substantial nuclear capacity deter the horrific attacks in Paris last week? They did not.

The fact is that none of the headbangers whom we need to protect ourselves from are deterred in the slightest from this sort of spending. We know from our own experience that those who think that their ideology is so important that they can shoot, maim and bomb clearly have very little regard for civilian lives. The very people whom the UK and people around the world

need to be protected from will not be deterred by this in any way. As we can see from Brussels in the last couple of days, when there is a clear, articulated threat, defence is now intelligence-led and followed up by boots on the street.

On nuclear proliferation, the UK has —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: Is the Member saying that this world would be a safer place if we were to leave nuclear weapons to the likes of North Korea, and the rest of us were to give up the nuclear deterrent? Does she really think that that would make this world a safer place?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Ms Hanna: The Member is clearly referring to the fact that, since 1968, the UK has signed a range of non-proliferation treaties, but the nuclear deterrent is a relic of Cold War politics and does not reflect the actual threat to people in the UK and civilians and citizens around the world. I am not saying that we do not have any defence spend — clearly, we do. All the experts say that you are, in fact, draining money away from things that are needed. Max Hastings, a British military affairs specialist, said that Trident is:

"less relevant to Britain's security needs than is the Great Pyramid".

Crispin Blunt MP, the Tory Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, commented:

"How much is too much? ... I believe that this level of spending ... is excessive as it will mean forgoing an effective conventional capability in order to maintain one weapons system that is unlikely ever to be used."

He referred to the fact that, by 2050, it is likely that most nations will have sonar capacity, which will be able to detect Trident.

Major General Patrick Cordingley, the former commander of the Desert Rats, points out that, due to the funding pressures in the navy, it lacks 600 specialists. Those are exactly the sorts of people who would be required to maintain the Trident fleet, and he suggests that the proposed spend should instead probably be weighed up against ships and tanks. I have not heard a coherent plan for what it would achieve,

but I suspect that the people who are arguing so passionately for the renewal of Trident are probably the same people who are arguing to bomb Syria. If that were to take place, it would take place with 30-year-old planes, because the RAF has not invested in the weapons that it believes that it needs.

I do not agree that it necessarily does, but those are its arguments and not mine.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Hanna: Trident, we are told, is an insurance policy in an uncertain world. I think that, at a cost of £167 billion, we need to be a little bit more certain. We could use that to —

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Mr Mike Nesbitt

Ms Hanna: — tackle poverty and drain the reservoirs before fundamentalism takes hold.

Mr Nesbitt: Last week, the party of the proposers of the motion took its role as a legislator so very seriously that it voted to transfer responsibility for a devolved matter to the House of Commons, where its Members do not take their seats and, therefore, do not even vote. I know that it would be an oxymoron to accuse republicans of abdicating, but that is what they did: they abdicated power to Her Majesty's Government. Now, to complete the exercise of turning the world on its head, they want to debate a matter that is not, never has been and never will be devolved: defence.

If I heard correctly, there was no mention of timescales and no acknowledgement of the fact that the first Trident would not be due until 2028 — about a decade after austerity is due to end. So, the motion fails spectacularly to understand the timescales. There was also no mention of the likely annual spend in this austerity mandate. It is likely to be a very small percentage of the costs that the proposers suggest will attach to Trident renewal — costs that I do not accept as accurate. So, there is the first problem.

The motion also fundamentally misrepresents the costs of our security as part of our overall expenditure. It does not identify the reality of growing international uncertainty from nation states rather than from "headbangers", as the previous Member who spoke referred to them. We have the resurgence of Russia, with its interference in the Ukraine, Georgia and other regions, the development of nuclear weapons by Iran, the continued uncertainty over the security of nuclear weapons in Pakistan, the

proliferation of nuclear technology from North Korea and the remnants of the A Q Khan network. We argue that the retention and modernisation of our strategic nuclear deterrent is not only desirable but is, in fact, essential.

The costs for the replacement of the current Trident nuclear programme have been estimated, at 2014 prices, at around £20 billion. Through-life costs for the operation of the four ships is estimated to be around £100 billion by the Royal United Services Institute. So, with a lifespan of 35 years, that is around £2.85 billion per annum, which equates to 9% of the defence budget or 0.45% of UK Government annual spend. Even with the alarmist figures mentioned in the motion, as a percentage of UK overall spending, it is still less than 0.8% of annual expenditure. Rather than the figures mentioned in the motion, the fact that only 0.45% of our annual spend goes towards our ultimate insurance policy should be seen, I suggest, as very good value for money. I doubt whether that is much out of sync with what an MLA pays for annual insurance of one form or another. The cost of not maintaining our national security is, frankly, incalculable. Again, we welcome the Government commitment to spend 2% of gross domestic product on our defence.

Our country is one of only five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and will remain so. We have the fifth largest economy in the world, and we will continue to be one of the top 10 global economies this century. We are a founding member of NATO, and we have a proud and distinguished reputation for standing up for and supporting the international system. Our nation is and will remain a major global power because it effectively defends itself from and deters aggression. We are able to be a force for good precisely because we invest in systems such as Trident and its successor. Our nation has maintained an independent sea-based nuclear deterrent since 1968, and the Assembly should thank the men and women of our armed forces, the scientists, the naval architects and shipbuilders who have supported our security on these islands. In particular, we should thank the significant number of Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland personnel who serve and have served in the Royal Navy.

We believe, along with the majority of our forward-thinking and informed citizens, that we must support investment in our future and security. While we sincerely hope that the world will be a much more peaceful place over the lifetime of this Trident replacement programme, we as a party do not believe that

we can take the unjustifiable risk of unilateral disarmament. Rather than being "indefensible", the renewal of our strategic insurance policy, at a premium of 0.45% of national expenditure, is the only rational choice —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — in an increasingly unstable and unsettled world. Those who disagree should take the debate to the only Chamber that matters in this case: the House of Commons. We oppose the motion.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. I also seek to reference a proposed Alliance amendment, which was not selected but which I believe would have provided for a more rounded and perhaps more realistic motion by calling for adequate investment in our conventional defence forces. Refocusing on our conventional forces is where I believe we should be heading in this debate.

I am sure no one wants to live in a world where nuclear weapons exist, but unfortunately they do. We certainly live in interesting times. For that reason, I am not calling for the unilateral disarmament of the United Kingdom, lest anyone should think that. Nonetheless, spending of up to the likes of £167 billion on renewing or maintaining the current level of the Trident deterrent seems to me to be a rather foolhardy endeavour, whether in times of austerity or beyond, especially when you consider that its use is equally a pointless gesture that taxpayers are unlikely to see.

Furthermore, we must consider that the Trident system is perhaps one that has long outlived its relevance. It was born from the 1950 and 1960's defence review following the disasters of Suez and the ominous threats of a thermonuclear-armed Soviet Union. I am old enough to remember my parents' and, indeed, my grandparents' views of the Second World War and the use of nuclear weapons on Japan, as well as a determination of many that they would never be used again. Fortunately, the Cold War never turned hot because, if it had, I doubt that we would be standing here today. As we know, nuclear weapons have been used only once in anger, some 70 years ago in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the legacy of which had an impact on Japan and the world and something that we all have to think about today.

We are told of the benefits to the UK of holding on to a renewed Trident. However, it is impossible to assess the claims that the Government will never disclose the situation in

which nuclear weapons would ultimately be used. The current talk of fully renewing Trident also ignores the aspirations of the non-proliferation treaty, which seeks to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament.

Despite what others may think, the United Kingdom is no longer a world superpower and has not been since the 1950s. Its place in the world is not defined by its possession of nuclear weapons but is based on its conventional capability and relationship with other countries in the world. Currently, the United Kingdom has no aircraft carriers in service, severely undermining our ability to respond to the world's events. Fortunately, soon, Her Majesty's ship, the Queen Elizabeth, will be launched, as well as Her Majesty's ship, the Prince of Wales. However, in typical UK Government fashion, we do not have aircraft to fly off them. I happily saw that yesterday the Chancellor sought to finally resolve that anomaly, but that will take more time.

Nonetheless, despite our defence and cooperation treaty with France, French jets will not be able to use our carriers because of a Government attempt to do it on the cheap. Further to that, the numbers in our conventional standing army are dwindling to levels that have not been seen since the Boer Wars. Granted, the United Kingdom no longer has a vast empire, but we are crossing a milestone that could leave us unable to defend our country and our interests in the future, whether it is defence or, for me more importantly and more proudly, what the United Kingdom does when it comes to the use of our armed services in humanitarian aid in disasters and other theatres around the world.

Trident, for me, is an albatross around the neck of our security forces, as others said, tying down the Royal Navy's expertise and resources. Meanwhile the rest of our conventional services that we use every day are done on the cheap. That was proved by further announcements yesterday.

Further to that, aid and diplomacy are the preventative measures that the United Kingdom must strengthen and fund to stifle conflict and to encourage dialogue and economic and social development in the world's troubled regions.

11.30 am

As a nation, we need to move away from our nuclear status. I do not believe that it makes the UK superior to other nations, as some may think, but I do understand that, since the future

is uncertain, it makes sense to retain a nuclear deterrent into the future until the United Kingdom Government make a decision about Trident. Ultimately, the resources saved can be reinvested in public services, in our infrastructure and in properly strengthening our economy as well as our conventional forces.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: A full renewal of Trident would be a costly vanity project for the United Kingdom. Instead, a less costly option —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Dickson: — would be to consider our conventional forces.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion today. It is a very important matter for everyone in the United Kingdom.

The core issue of having a nuclear deterrent programme in place is to deter an attack on the UK, its vital interests and its allies. Nuclear weapons would only ever be used in extreme circumstances of self-defence. Having a nuclear programme in place deters the re-emergence of a major direct nuclear threat and the use of weapons of mass destruction by a rogue state. It also acts as a deterrent to state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism and as insurance against emerging threats to the UK's vital interests.

Sadly, we were all reminded of the devastation that terrorism can cause as recently as just over a week ago with the events in Paris. We in Northern Ireland continue to live with the price of the terrorist campaign that this country endured for over 30 years. That reinforces the need to be prepared in all possible ways to ensure that terrorism of any form cannot threaten the relative peace and stability that we all enjoy across the United Kingdom today. Having a Trident system in place that is fully operationally and independent of the US or any other state is crucial to our national security, and, indeed, it acts as an insurance policy in what is a dangerous, uncertain and ever-changing world. I welcome the strategic defence and security review announced yesterday in the House of Commons by the Prime Minister. He outlined how the UK will be equipped to tackle terrorism and how £178 billion is to be set aside for military equipment over the next 10 years. We must make sure that we are prepared to tackle the ever-

changing threats in the most effective and efficient way possible.

There remains some variance in estimated costs associated with the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons programme, with a number of different figures being put forward. However, we must not put a price on our national security. Many jobs are linked directly and indirectly to the Trident programme, and they must be protected and secured as we move forward, with jobs to peak at 6,000 during the build phase from 2016 to the late 2020s through the £40 billion replacement scheme. The defence industry sustains thousands of jobs across the United Kingdom, including jobs in Northern Ireland. Firms such as Thales, which leads on defence research and development, and Caterpillar, among others, are major local employers that are involved in the defence supply chain. Indeed, the Prime Minister, as recently as yesterday, responded in the Chamber to a question from my colleague Sammy Wilson MP about how local firms, as well as sustaining and promoting jobs, can engage through the Defence Growth Partnership and ensure that we continue to play a pivotal role in the sector. The DUP has consistently pressed for the Government to spend 2% of GDP on the defence budget. It is without doubt money well spent. I urge the House to vote against the motion and ensure that our United Kingdom is safe and secure for many years to come. The way to maintain peace is to prepare for war.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will speak in favour of the motion.

To go back to what the motion states, I want to say that this is about government spend. It is not so much about defence. We must remember and put in context the fact that we are living in the sharpest period of austerity in living memory. Only those alive in the late 1920s and the 1930s will be able to connect with or will have seen similar levels of austerity, especially in Britain. No area of government spend has been spared. Health, education, housing and welfare have been targeted. The one area that has not been targeted is, of course, Trident. It is the exception. Trident has been spared the austerity, and one has to ask why.

The previous contributor talked about the need to tackle the gross, barbaric terrorism that is spreading throughout much of the Middle East. I wholeheartedly accept that point, but he failed to explain how in the name of God Trident will bring peace to the Middle East. Absolutely not. The only time that any such system was used, it

brought nothing but death and terror to 200,000 people in the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

We must remember that this is about government spend. This is about austerity and political choices. If we take education in Britain, fees have trebled, the education maintenance allowance has been scrapped, teachers have been sacked and courses have been scrapped. The British Government are now proposing to sell off the student loan book to private companies, and that will see student debt spiral out of control for decades. Ironically, scrapping Trident and restoring education spend to that of the days at the height of the Cold War would bring education back to a free and world-class level.

The economy was half the size during the Cold War, yet the national security threat was probably double. However, that was at a time that education was free and safe from austerity. In that era, Britain signed up to the non-proliferation treaty. Why sign up to the non-proliferation treaty and then demand that we restore nuclear weapons? The economy is twice as big nowadays. This is about political choices.

The NHS is under severe threat from underspend and privatisation. It is the perfect neo-liberal storm, with the Tories in the driving seat. Health spend in Britain is the lowest of the G8 countries, yet military spend is the fourth largest in the world. Somebody try to tally that.

We keep hearing about an insurance policy. The best insurance policy is to give someone a good education, a good home and a good hospital nearby. Which scenario makes us safer: hospitals or missiles, doctors or nuclear warheads? Ask the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki what they would prefer.

Our A&Es are under threat. Our nursing homes are closing. What could we not do with the money that would come to us as a result of it being spent better on public services? I heard today repeatedly that this is an insurance policy somehow. Absolute nonsense. The risk trebles when we look at the restoration of nuclear services. As I say, build people a home. In fact, the money used for Trident would build more than a million homes.

Mr Lunn: The Member is concentrating on the cost, and that is fair enough, but there is an awful disparity between the figures in the motion, the figures that were on the news yesterday and, for instance, Mr Nesbitt's figure of 0.45% of our gross spend. Which is the right

figure? What does the £167 billion represent and over what timescale?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for that. That figure came from the all-party group that looked at Trident. We also have to bear in mind that the Ministry of Defence typically works off a 40% overspend on its projects. A figure of £167 billion is being quoted. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party pointed out that this is going to take decades. I suggest that £167 billion is a conservative estimate when we consider the amount that will be spent.

The crux of the argument is that this is about political choices. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party shakes his head, but this is a political choice. The argument was made that this has to do with national security, as if somehow, if someone were to launch a nuclear strike on a British city, launching a nuclear strike back would save the people in the British city. That is an absolute fallacy.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: No, I am running out of time and want to get finished. As I said, the best insurance policy that we can have is to build people a home — in fact, a million homes — provide suitable health facilities nearby and give them a world-class education.

Just to remind people out there who maybe do not know what Trident is, it is four nuclear subs, one of which is constantly circulating around the seas, with 40 nuclear warheads that are eight times more powerful than those used in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some 200,000 people were killed in '45. That gives a total death capacity of 300 million. That number of people could be wiped out as a result of this policy.

Why is there a need for this? Replacing those submarines and warheads is a huge vanity project. Tony Blair said it: this is about status and sitting at the top table. I do not often agree with much of what Tony Blair says, especially when it comes to defence and foreign policy, but he is right. This is a vanity project, and it is about status and sitting at the top table. It does nothing for the ordinary people who live in Britain or, indeed, the North of Ireland.

What could we not do with the £5 billion? How many A&E departments could we not restore?

How many schools could we not build? How many of those people on welfare who need our help and who turn to food banks and suffer from fuel poverty could we not help? How many older people, who have to choose between heating their home or eating, could we save? How many of those people, some of whom might perish during the winter, could we save?

This is a vanity project and nothing short of it.

Mr Lyons: Like others, I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. Obviously, Trident will be a decision for the Government at Westminster and for Parliament, and rightly so. However, I think that it is still good that we have an opportunity to talk about and discuss it. Ultimately, it will be a decision for Parliament, and I say to the Members of Sinn Féin that, if they want to talk about this issue, they can talk about it here, but if they want to be part of the decision-making process, they should take their seats at Westminster and do the job there.

I do not intend to repeat some of the arguments that have been made; I think that they have been well set out. However, there are just a few points that I want to make on the motion. The first one is this: the motion clearly does not understand the word "replacement". This follows from the comment that Mr Lunn made. It does not cost £167 billion to replace Trident. The costs of replacement were set out very clearly yesterday by the Prime Minister. The costs of replacement are £30 billion. I know that that is still an awful lot of money, but what we are talking about here is not £167 billion that will be coming out of the Budget this year — that will happen over a long period. In fact, the Secretary of State for Defence said last year that that would be spent over the course of 50 years. This is not an immediate cost to us, but, yes, it is a cost that is spread out over time.

The Member opposite raises all the things that he would like the money to be spent on instead of Trident. Of course, we want more money for public services and various different projects and things within the public services, but this is about defence. Other Members raised points very well about —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. It also maybe shows a little bit of economic illiteracy on the part of those who proposed the motion. We are talking about £30 billion, which is essentially capital spend over a 50-year period, yet this seems to be just simply directly applied in some sort of mishmash of capital and resource schemes as though you can simply apply capital money in the same way to

resource issues. They are all very worthy causes, but they are not just a direct read-across, as the Members opposite seem to believe.

Mr Lyons: I thank Mr Weir for his point. He makes it very well. All too often, whenever we discuss finance, we think, "Here is a pot of money; we want to spend it here instead", as though it can all be moved about so easily. If there were savings to be made from Trident, I think they should be put into the things that Mr Dickson and Mr Frew spoke about, ensuring that our defence is capable of serving us in the way that we need to be served.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. I recognise what he says about the deployment of some resources at least into conventional weapons. Does he share the view of his party colleague Mr Donaldson that Trident should be relocated to Northern Ireland if the Scottish Government decide that they do not wish to have it on their shores any longer?

Mr Lyons: I hope that it stays in Scotland, where it is at the minute. But if it were to come here, I would welcome the jobs that would bring, very much so, as well as the different investment that would be here. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and it will remain that way.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I am being very generous but I will give way.

11.45 am

Mr Frew: The Member makes the point that he wants a nuclear deterrent, but not in his backyard. What nonsense is that?

Mr Lyons: I say to Mr Dickson that I would welcome the jobs and investment. It seems clear from recent polls compared with the result of the referendum that this part of the United Kingdom will remain part of the United Kingdom for much longer than Scotland.

Mr Hazzard raised all the things that we could spend the money on. We need to look at the long term. We cannot just look at the short-term situation and say, "We are in a bit of financial difficulty here, so we will scrap a part of our defence that we have had for 50 years and that we will need over the years ahead. Let's get rid of Trident to help out with our short-term problems." That is not the right way to go.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: No, I have given way far too much. The Member will realise that I have been very generous.

We need to look at this issue and where we are in the world. There are still threats from rogue states and people who want to gather around themselves nuclear weapons. We should be prepared and have a proper defence for ourselves. That is the situation that we find ourselves in currently, but we do not know what will happen over the next 10 or 50 years, which we are making decisions on today. Indeed, the Prime Minister said yesterday that Islamic State was trying to get chemical and nuclear weapons capability.

I will make one final point. This is not about us having the ability to fire those weapons at will. We have the weapons as a deterrent; that is what we want them to be. We want them to be a deterrent against other people who would use the threat of nuclear weapons against us so that we can say, "We have this capability as well."

Mr Attwood: I will try to take forward some of the arguments made by Mr Dickson and Claire Hanna. Both referred to the need for interventions that revolve around aid and diplomacy to tackle poverty and the reservoirs from which extremism prospers. For us, unlike the last Member to speak, this motion is about defence, is about spend and is also about other matters, because you cannot deal with the issues of defence and spend on other matters in isolation from each other. To demonstrate that point, as we speak, 2.5 billion people around the world lack access to proper sanitation, one billion children are deprived of one or more services essential to survival and development, and 148 million under-fives in developing regions are underweight for their age. Yet we still want to spend £170 billion on a nuclear deterrent. Around the world, 101 million children are not in primary school and 22 million are not routinely protected by inoculation, and still we want to spend £170 billion on a nuclear deterrent.

The point is that our support for this motion is not just about opposition to the replacement of Trident. It is also about a paradigm shift in the conduct of the London Government and Governments elsewhere to respond to the scale and character of those figures and to recognise that addressing them addresses the issues of international security and stability. That is why we believe that this motion is not just about defence and spend; it is about a paradigm shift

to a world order and world ethics that are informed by and respond to the scale of all of that.

I agree with Mr Hazzard that, even if it were a matter of mere cost, we need to be very vigilant.

There are reports in the media, which have not been contradicted, of a battle of wills between the Ministry of Defence and the Chancellor of the Exchequer as to who will carry out procurement when it comes to the replacement for Trident. Apparently, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is arguing that he wants to build his empire and control the spend in order to ensure that the MoD experience, when costs escalated way beyond the initial budget, is not reproduced. On the simple issue of cost, I advise Members to be very vigilant that it will be £170 billion, because even the Chancellor of the Exchequer is advertising the fact that, in addition to building his political empire, which is now rampant across the British Government, he wants to control this spend because he knows the risks.

The third point, which has been touched on by a number of Members, is that I can understand that, on the far side of the Second World War, the intuition of the political establishment in London was to go for nuclear weapons. It might well have seen itself as the last nation standing in the face of the tyranny of Hitler. It was concerned that it could end up being the last nation standing in the face of tyranny from other parts of the globe. However, that intuition, which was understandable in one way, has now become the prevailing orthodoxy in London, and, to some degree, nuclear weapons have become a surrogate for a lost empire. They are a symbol of power and authority in a situation in which defence needs are of a different character from those that are ill-served by a replacement for Trident.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: There is no issue more important than that of national security, yet I feel that today's motion is a travesty, for several reasons. Of course there is a debate to be had about the UK's independent nuclear deterrent and the replacement of Trident — it is a massively important and serious issue — but this is not the place to have the debate or pass motions. I remind the Members who tabled the motion that we are part of the United Kingdom: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. National defence is a reserved matter, and Westminster will take this decision. It really is the height of hypocrisy to bring this take-note debating society motion to the Floor of the Assembly. It is a non-devolved issue, yet last week, Sinn Féin and the DUP

could not wait to repatriate social security issues. Now, they want to legislate for Trident. Let us make up our minds.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cochrane-Watson: The Member will give way.

Mr Hazzard: The Member may be keen to know that we, the Welsh and the Scottish devolved Parliaments are all having this debate. We are all showing the democratic will of the people of these regions who are opposed to Trident.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I remind those who tabled the motion that, at Westminster, the debate has taken place, and votes have been taken on whether we should replace Trident with a new nuclear deterrent. Votes were taken on 14 May 2007, 20 January 2015 and, lately, on 4 June 2015. How did Sinn Féin vote? How did Sinn Féin debate the motion in Westminster? We all know the answer: silence. There was silence representing their constituencies at Westminster.

I assume that the Members who tabled the motion now wish to follow the line of the SNP and comrade Jeremy Corbyn in wanting unilateral nuclear disarmament. Yet the Scottish nationalists want to remain a vital part of NATO, whose main principle is that of nuclear deterrent. There is a logical and defensible argument that should be heard, but this is not the place for that. That scenario has already been outlined by eminent military leaders such as Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General the Lord Ramsbotham and General Sir Hugh Beach. There is an argument against Trident, but they all want to make it to protect our army, our navy and our Royal Air Force.

I welcome the message of reinvestment that came from Westminster yesterday. That is vital, and the Ulster Unionist Party believes that we must rebuild our conventional armed forces and continue to commit 2% of our gross domestic product to enhancing the NATO alliance. I have not heard that argument being put forward by the proposers of the motion. The reason for that is simple: they do not care about and have no concern for the defence of the United Kingdom. As for decommissioning Trident, I suggest a tip to the proposers of the motion. Why not decommission the arms of the Provisional IRA? Why not deactivate the army council? That was supposed to happen 10

years ago, and it has been proven not to have taken place. That might be a more practical step to world peace and harmony than proposing motions such as this that cannot be implemented in any way and that are outside the remit of the Assembly.

I reject the motion. I call on everyone, no matter what they think of the ethics of nuclear weapons or of the retention of an independent nuclear deterrent for the UK, to vote this silly, time-wasting motion down.

Mr Allister: It is a commentary in itself that, in this new era of a fresh start, the only business that the House can find to debate today is something we can do absolutely nothing about, either now or, happily, at any time in the future. Quite properly, it is an issue for the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom. The irony has not gone unnoticed by many that the proposer of the motion had the opportunity for I do not know how many years — it was 10 years and more — to articulate the case that he brought to the House in a place where it would actually count. Of course, he opted not to do so.

This debate is a fictional nonsense. It is being held in this House to cover up the fact that those who abstain from real debate where the matter really matters want to create the aura and impression that they are concerned about the matter and are doing something about it. They want to pass, as someone described it, something akin to a school debating society motion. It has no more weight or credibility than that.

It is a serious issue about the defence of our nation. It is not just that the United Kingdom has independent nuclear deterrents. It holds those deterrents as part of the NATO defence of the western world. Our contribution to NATO — a very significant part of it — is our nuclear contribution. We do not hold those things in isolation. We hold them because NATO is the bulwark that has preserved peace in western Europe and the western world since the Second World War. We hold them as a deterrent with a proven record of doing that.

I was thinking of Ukraine. When it was part of the USSR, it had nuclear weapons. When it became independent, it declared itself nuclear-free. In fact, it returned its nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation.

It did so in return for a solemn pledge that its territorial integrity would be respected. What happened to Ukraine? It was invaded, partially annexed and is now partitioned by the very

power that took unto itself Ukraine's nuclear weapons. Ukraine, being outside of NATO, was powerless.

12.00 noon

That is a small object lesson in the deterrent effect of holding nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are not nice weapons but they are essential in a world where there are rogue states like North Korea and the Russian Federation with malevolent intent towards others. They have been a bulwark in maintaining the peace of western Europe. Therefore, it is absolute folly for some in the House to don their unilateralist cap, seek to join the comrade who leads the Labour Party and line up and parade themselves as those opposed to these evil weapons, with no regard to the fact that they are safe today because of those evil weapons. It is those evil weapons that keep the United Kingdom and western Europe safe. All of us, I am sure, hope that they will never have to be used, but it is by having them that we maintain the peace. Therefore, I think that the motion deserves only the rejection that I hope it will receive.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is pribhléid é críoch a chur leis an díospóireacht seo ar an cheist tromchúiseach seo. It is a privilege to wind on this very temperate debate today on the issue of Trident, expenditure and our influence over decisions on expenditure that affect our people. It is my belief that the suggestion that spending billions of pounds on Trident is the best use of public funds is an example of perverse priorities. Those priorities are not the priorities that we see on the streets, roads and byways of the North of Ireland. Those priorities may make sense in London but they certainly do not make sense here.

When money is particularly scarce — we have just gone through a period of negotiation when the catch cry at every turn was that there is no money available and that austerity will reign — I have to agree with Alex Salmond, who said that Trident is as useless as it is wasteful in terms of public finances. I know that my colleague Mr Weir has left, but the rub is that our block grant will be used to finance that folly as well. That is capital and resource spending over many, many years.

My contention is that, rather than just rail against the expenditure on nuclear weapons, which, in my view — I do not like using the word "moral" in a Chamber of legislators — is immoral, we should set out our priorities and

drive those home to the London Government, as long as they have the fiscal levers and the economic power, to insist that they set other priorities and that our expenditure goes on other areas that make a real difference and improvement to people's lives.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Of course.

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much. The Member has just said that it will come out of our block grant, so I would like to ask him how much money will come out of our block grant each year over the next 30 years.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Thank you, Mr Lyons. If we use Mr Nesbitt's figures — I am happy to use his modest figures, because last night they went up another £5 billion, with £10 billion contingency — which add up to £41 billion, we make up 2% to 3% of that. If you use Mr Nesbitt's figure of £2.8 billion, between £50 million and £75 million per annum would come out of our finances unless there was a Barnett consequential.

Mr Frew started by quoting the Bible, which is often a cause for concern, unless he is going to quote, "Love thy neighbour as thyself." We may want to take our political direction from many areas, but let us not take it from any call to war, regardless of how we may wish to defend all our people.

Claire Hanna referred to this eye-watering expenditure, and eye-watering it is, no matter which figures you use, whether it is £167 billion or £41 billion. It is eye-watering, as Ms Hanna said. The funding commitment will become clear and will peak between 2019 and 2030. Of course, 2019 is during the mandate of the next Government.

Mr Nesbitt has left us, and I owe him an intervention but he will not get it today. He argued, again, that Trident is a priority. I do not see that and I do not think it stacks up. Mr Nesbitt mentioned the countries that we should fear are Russia, Iran, Pakistan and North Korea. Russia is an ally in Syria; Iran is involved in a rapprochement with the USA; Pakistan is an ally of Britain; and North Korea is probably one of the few countries with a higher military and defence spend than the British.

I very much take on board the points made by Mr Attwood and Mr Dickson that this is about a broader question than just public finances. It is about how we see the world, where we see our

place and that of our neighbours in it, and whether we should focus our expenditure on nuclear deterrents and weapons. In those terms, Mr Attwood's reference to a "paradigm shift" is essential, as we move forward. I think that people in this part of the world have already made that paradigm shift and have spending priorities other than nuclear weapons.

Chris Hazzard said that the debate is as much about economic choices as it is about Trident. Of course, I endorse that.

Our friend Mr Lyons intervened but declined to say whether Carnlough or Ballycastle will be the location for Trident, which he would like to see come here. I think, though, that one thing that he would accept — and this goes to Mr Cochrane-Watson as well — is that, when they say that the debate in the devolved Administrations will have no effect on the discussion around Trident, the Scots may entirely upend the entire Trident project by voting for independence, voting against Trident, or voting to expel it. So, I think that our voice is important and matters.

On that paradigm shift, and having heard Members quoting the Bible in a Chamber where we may occasionally have heard the words, "No Pope here", an alternative view on how we should set our priorities for the time ahead came from Pope Francis in July this year, when he called for a new economic order, focused on the poor, declaring:

"Let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change".

He decried a system that:

"has imposed the mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature".

That has to inform how we move forward in serving the people of the North of Ireland.

To conclude, I think that the debate actually does indicate the fresh start that Mr Cochrane-Watson talked about, because it has been a lot more temperate and polite than one might have expected.

Moving into the future, I hope that we manage to convince the British Government — as we did on welfare, tax credits and extra money for services here — that our priority is to improve the quality of life of those we serve. In that regard, I believe that part of the fresh start will be all parties in the Chamber, but certainly on

these two sides, uniting around the need to defend our people and front-line services. Earlier this week, I was in Forestside shopping centre and met a young man whom I will call Conall to save his blushes. He had left school after finishing his A levels and was working in a cafe but seeking a career. He was making up his mind about whether to return to university or try to get full-time employment. I think that our job is to make sure that we create work for young people like Conall. Our priorities have to be in serving all the people of this jurisdiction, rather than endorsing or standing idly by and silent while money is wasted on ventures such as Trident.

Mr Allister also mentioned a fresh start. I think that, in the time ahead, we will see other motions brought to the Chamber that will allow us to unite around a fresh start and unite around priorities that will be the best for all our people. We may not make common cause today on Trident, but I believe that we will make common cause in the time ahead around jobs, growth and investment.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 44; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hazzard and Ms Ruane

NOES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lyons, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen,

Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mrs Pengelly, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Cochrane-Watson and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: That sounds like mutual deterrence, does it not?

The Business Committee has agreed to meet over the lunchtime period. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2, 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Agriculture and Rural Development

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the proposed second entrance for the new departmental headquarters at Ballykelly. (AQO 9158/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The initial configuration and design of the proposed access to the new DARD HQ was submitted in April 2015 as part of the planning application. In response to concerns from local residents, the configuration and position of the road has been amended and resubmitted. The detailed design drawings for the new configuration are being developed for submission to Transport NI by the end of this month.

The new access road will cross private land, and DFP's Land and Property Services (LPS) has been commissioned to negotiate with the landowner on behalf of my Department. Our plan is to appoint a contractor at the end of January 2016, and we expect the negotiations for the required access to be completed in advance of that.

Consultations with the Environment Agency as part of the planning process have ensured that the new access has been designed sensitively, taking into account the listed structures that are close to the site, such as the church and graveyard, in order to maintain the character of the area.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for her response. Will the Minister give the House an update on the relocation process and the rebuild situation of DARD headquarters?

Mrs O'Neill: Plans are under way, and I am very pleased with the progress. We are keen to deliver on the timescale that we have set out,

and we are working closely with staff to plan the transition. As the Member knows, we are doing that through a transitional phase to allow people time to adjust and make a comprehensive transition to the new site.

Everything is going according to schedule, and I am very pleased with the work that is ongoing. It is full steam ahead. Other locations have been delivered on as part of the wider relocation programme: the Fisheries office opened in south Down, work started on the Rivers Agency headquarters at the Loughry site in Cookstown, and I intend to officially open the Forest Service headquarters in Fermanagh over the next number of weeks. All the ongoing work is very positive, and we are hopeful that we will deliver on the timescale that I have set out.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she would agree with me that, while a second entrance to the former army camp is of critical importance, far more important is what will happen on the remainder of the 900-acre site and whether there is the infrastructure to attract inward investment and, in the words of locals, attract hundreds, if not thousands, of new jobs. That is really what east Derry wants.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Sandra Overend.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister provide an update on what action —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: My apologies. Sorry, I call the Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I concur with everything that has been said about the potential of the site and the potential wider benefits for Ballykelly and the entire north-west. The fact that DARD has moved onto the site and has become the anchor tenant creates the potential for other investors to want to move to the site. Obviously, there has been significant interest shown to OFMDFM, which owns the rest of the site.

There are tremendous benefits to be had for the entire north-west, particularly in employment opportunities, construction opportunities and all the other things that go along with developing the entire site.

Mrs Overend: I thought that the Principal Deputy Speaker was giving the Minister the new challenge of grouping the supplementary

questions together. Will the Minister provide an update on what action her Department has taken to decontaminate the land at Ballykelly, especially to remove the lead? Overall, how much will it cost to clean the site up and remove the likelihood of flooding?

Mrs O'Neill: All those things were factored into the original costs, which were set out in, and were part of, the original plan. We looked at the existing onsite buildings, which were relatively new compared with the other buildings that might have contamination issues. That is an issue that OFMDFM is taking forward through the central advisory unit of LPS through DFP. That is their work.

We are interested in one specific part of the site, and I am confident that we have taken all the actions necessary to address any potential contamination issues. That has all been built into the programme timescale. The Member referred to flooding on the site. We are very aware of the flooding that happens at the bottom end of the site and the significant cost associated with taking that water away and ensuring that flooding on the site is stopped. Those are all considerations for any future investment and for anybody coming on to that site, but, certainly, for my Department's part and for the future of the headquarters going there, we are content that we have taken account of all the potential challenges.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Cathal Ó hOisín. I remind the Member that this is constituency-focused.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. The Minister has outlined the obvious benefits of the relocation of the DARD headquarters. As the anchor tenant on the Ballykelly and Shackleton site, will she outline what other benefits may accrue to the Ballykelly and wider east Derry and north-west area?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his contributions. I absolutely agree about the wider benefits. As I have always said, the relocation of the headquarters will obviously help to stimulate the local economy in a number of ways, particularly in relation to increased spending power in the local area and the provision of high-quality, high-value public-sector jobs moving to the site. Obviously, in advance of all that there is all the ongoing construction works, such as the clearing of the site. We will need ongoing servicing of the building. The benefits to the north-west as a

whole speak for themselves. Very much at the core of the entire relocation project and all the relocations that we have been successful in delivering to date has been sharing the wealth right across the economy and making sure that we have a fairer distribution of public-sector jobs. That is only right and proper. I am glad that my Department is leading the way in terms of delivering for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Beggs is not in his place.

Horse Racing Fund

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the horse racing fund. (AQO 9163/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department administers the horse racing fund to support the two local racecourses. In 2015, charges on bookmakers have brought in just under £369,000 to the fund. Following representations from the local racecourses and from bookmakers, I commissioned my officials to review the horse racing fund charges, and a public consultation was launched on 2 July 2015. We have now received consultation responses, and officials are currently considering them. I will make a decision on the way forward in due course.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for the information supplied. The work of those who manage the facilities at Down Royal and Downpatrick is to be acknowledged and congratulated. Does the Minister value that as part of the rural economy? Can she help to progress and support those venues as a matter of urgency?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I absolutely value what they do in terms of the employment created and all the other benefits. With the consultation, we are trying to make sure that the horse racing levy is sufficient to allow us to continue to invest and attract additional support for the horse racing industry. The reason behind the consultation is to try to see where we can improve things, if we can. I was pleased to see the number of people who responded to the consultation. It shows a significant industry interest in the subject. I look forward to being able to make a decision on the way forward as soon as possible, given that the consultation has just closed.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister state whether she is considering giving any grant aid to those racecourses? They provide a very important

service to Northern Ireland, particularly to the horse breeders.

Mrs O'Neill: No, I am not currently giving consideration to that. I am currently looking at where I can help the industry. If I am minded to look towards raising the levy, there will be an advantage for the racecourses because they will have additional funding to reinvest. That is the priority area for me at the moment. I have spoken with Horse Sport Ireland and horse industry representatives in relation to support for the industry. I am certainly willing to do all I can to support the industry.

Woodland Cover

7. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action her Department has taken to increase woodland cover. (AQO 9164/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Recently, I launched three new forestry grant schemes and allocated up to £17.4 million to support private woodland expansion and the sustainable management of existing woodland under the rural development programme for 2014-2020. The schemes are the forest expansion scheme, the forest protection scheme and the woodland investment grant. The funding is sufficient to create 1,800 hectares of new woodland and sustain approximately 4,000 hectares of woodland created under previous programmes. It will make a small but positive contribution towards my aim of achieving 12% woodland cover by the middle of this century.

Our woodlands are a vital community resource. There is a clear consensus about the need to increase woodland area to counter the impact of climate change and to provide a habitat for wildlife and places for people to relax and unwind from stress and to take part in physical exercise.

The forestry grant schemes which I have just launched will help deliver these needs. I urge farmers and landowners not to miss out on this funding opportunity, which could help to diversify their farming activity, and to remember that applications for planting this winter under the forestry expansion scheme must be submitted to Forest Service by 3.00 pm on Monday 4 January.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she give us any indication of whether these grants will be available to hill

farmers, in particular, given the role that trees and woodland in high areas can play in soaking up water and rainfall and stopping it going down into valleys and causing knock-on flooding in other areas?

Mrs O'Neill: Current EU rules allow land that is eligible for the basic payment scheme and that is planted with trees under the forest expansion scheme to remain eligible for the basic payment scheme during the 20-year period of commitment. That is a potentially significant benefit for farmers who are thinking about diversification into forestry. That is farmers right across the board, whether they are hill farmers or not. The scheme is there for all to avail themselves of. There is potentially quite significant investment, both for the environment and for individuals to look towards diversification, if that is what they want their future direction of travel to be.

Mr Cree: Minister, as you know, in the 2007-2011 Programme for Government there was an ambitious plan, which was achievable but which, in fact, your predecessor never got near to achieving. In the current year, there is no target at all. Do you believe that there should be an afforestation programme in the next Programme for Government? If so, can you give some indication of the size that it should be?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I do not have that view at this moment in time. Obviously, we have a very strong forestry programme, which aims to meet the long-term aim of 12% woodland cover by 2050. We are working our way through that, and we will also have a review of it midway through to see if we are, in fact, living up to being able to deliver on those targets. We will obviously consult on the Programme for Government. I am open to all ideas on what should be our key asks in the new Programme for Government, and I look forward to your support in delivering some of those.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Minister, for your answers thus far. Minister, is there any particular grant to encourage willow production? I am thinking particularly of wood pellets as an alternative heat source.

Mrs O'Neill: There is not a forestry grant scheme for that type of production. However, that is something that could be looked at under the rural business investment scheme, the new rural development programme and the local action group (LAG) funding. I encourage anybody who has an idea on that to consult their local LAG on the opportunities for that

area of work. We hope to have that scheme opened up at the start of next year, as soon as we sign off on the new rural strategies with the LAGs, which I hope to do by the end of December. There is potential scope for that type of business under the new rural development programme.

Agricultural Community: Standard of Living

8. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of how the EU has delivered the promise of article 39 of the Lisbon treaty to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community, in particular by increasing the individual earnings of persons engaged in agriculture. (AQO 9165/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The variability of farm incomes is a problem all over the world. The complex factors affecting farm incomes are many and varied. Bumper harvests reduce prices, while poor weather reduces yields and can result in higher prices. Economic recession, wars or political unrest can all curb demand for food, particularly more expensive food items. Exchange rate movements can affect the competitiveness of food exporters over a short period. In other industries, manufacturers can more precisely match supply with demand, and hence income variability is much less of a problem.

Agriculture is a special case, and that is why the EU supports farming to the extent that it does. How successful is EU support for farmers? As we all know, the agriculture sector is struggling, and I want the EU to do more to help. However, taking a longer-term view, the EU has been good for the farming community in the North. In the last 15 years, the underlying trend in real income is upwards. Of course, there is variation around that trend, with 2014 being an example of negative variation. As I have already outlined, volatility in farm incomes is inescapable because it is due to factors beyond our control.

In 2014, our farmers received around £295 million under the CAP. Farmers in the North would have been much worse off without this EU funding, which, of course, would disappear in a Brexit situation. Outside the EU, funding for agriculture would fall, unless the Treasury provided additional funds. We all know that the British Government have long wanted to reduce the funding going to farmers. This would be to the detriment of all our farmers.

Mr Allister: Leaving aside the propaganda, is the fact not that current falling incomes are a devastating testimony to the abject failure of the EU to live up to its own promise in its own treaty — the Lisbon Treaty — to increase the income of those depending on agriculture? It has lamentably failed and its recent attitude to the milk crisis showed that it could not care less. Is that not so?

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my original answer, there is room for reform. I said that I do not agree with the position that Europe has taken in response to the dairy crisis. I have made that statement to the House on a number of occasions; I have made that very clear. I am continuing to lobby the Commission on what more it can do in relation to intervention prices. I do not think that the approach that it took was the correct one. However, the fact remains that the CAP ensures that almost £300 million a year goes into the pockets of farmers. If we were to find ourselves in a scenario where we were no longer part of a CAP, where would that money come from? Who is going to assist farmers to be able to continue to produce food?

Mr Allister: Our own Government.

Mrs O'Neill: Agriculture is different. I tell you what, I would not want to be dependent on the Tories being able to replace the CAP. I would not want to be dependent on the Tories replacing almost £300 million a year of subsidies to farmers, because they are opposed to subsidies; that is not their ideology. You can have your opinion on Brexit, but I strongly do not share your view. Whilst the CAP creates plenty of challenges, red tape and regulations — all things that we have to work our way through — the benefit to farmers is almost £300 million a year. Almost £500 million was provided for the rural development programme. That is money that was invested in rural communities and rural businesses. All those things make a difference to the lives of rural dwellers and farmers. Whilst there are plenty of challenges with the EU, I think that the benefits for the farmers speak for themselves.

Mr Poots: How is the Minister and her Department helping to increase the earnings of individuals who are involved in agriculture through reducing red tape, on her side, and in providing practical support to farmers in a time of food price crises?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member knows that we are continually looking at how we can improve

things and trying to reduce red tape. I think that we will have another opportunity to improve things further with the change in the make-up of the Departments. I think that we will have an opportunity to look at our inspection regime in particular. We can point to a number of examples of where things have been improved.

The Member also asked about practical support. My advisers are on the ground. College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) advisers are working with farmers, particularly in relation to benchmarking. We are currently recruiting for business development groups. Again, that will be advisers working with farmers on how best they can meet the needs of their business into the future. So, there is plenty of practical work going on within CAFRE and across our three campuses in terms of the education opportunity. It is great to see that so many farmers are availing themselves of that and wanting to learn more. They want to benchmark; they want to look at knowledge transfer; they want to look at how they can improve efficiency.

The new rural development programme is going to be a vital tool in supporting the industry into the future. As we work our way through the development of the farm business improvement scheme, there are certainly going to be benefits around looking at production efficiencies for all farmers across all sectors. I have worked very hard to secure that. We have the largest rural development programme that the North of Ireland has ever seen. The sooner we can get these programmes opened up at the start of the year, the better it will be for the industry in its entirety.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the recent case where a local vegetable grower received 8p for a turnip, while, at the same time, the same turnips were being sold in the supermarket for 80p. Does the Minister agree that that is a shocking state of affairs? What is the Minister doing to ensure that suppliers get a fair and reasonable return for their produce?

Mrs O'Neill: I totally agree with the Member. It is a disgrace; it is shocking. The Member will know that, since I have taken up office, I have been committed to bringing forward a strategy for the industry as a whole going forward, the Going for Growth strategy. Central to that strategy in going forward is a recognition that there is one supply chain. In order to have one supply chain, there needs to be respect right along it. Farmers need to be paid a fair price for what they produce. Obviously, nobody could be accused of using the example that you

have highlighted merely to startle. Somebody getting that kind of price for what they are producing is absolutely disgusting and it should not be acceptable.

Recently, I convened a supply chain forum, which is an attempt to bring primary producers, processors and retailers together to look at how we can move forward together, how we can create more respect within the supply chain and how we can communicate that better.

We are involved in that work alongside challenging the major retailers, as I am always happy to do, on what they are paying for what they buy from local farmers.

Mr Swann: Going back to the thrust of the main story, the European Milk Board has actually just called for Commissioner Hogan to stand down because of his failure to redress the ongoing milk crisis. I know that the Minister and her party have been critical of Commissioner Hogan in the past. Will she join in that call for him to resign?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have said consistently, I do not agree with the approach that Europe has taken. I do not agree with the approach that the commissioner has taken. I have been critical of him and to him in person. I have been critical to him when I have written to him. I will challenge him continually on the role that he is playing to support the industry. Yes; I think that if the dairy industry continues with the low prices and the glut that it has, there will come a time when his position of burying his head in the sand and saying that there is no crisis will no longer be sustainable. I will continue to challenge the commissioner while he is in position on what he is doing to deliver for the dairy sector. I have not been shy about it in the past, and I will certainly not be shy about it in the future.

Mr Irwin: Given that £4 billion a year of exports were going to Russia, the ban has left farmers in a dilemma. Does the Minister believe that Europe could have done much more to help the situation given that this was totally outside farmers' control?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, because when we point to the situation in the dairy industry in particular, we know that one of the contributory factors is the fact that Russia stopped buying. Whilst we were not sending many dairy products into that market, we were sending cheeses, so that created a problem for the industry and has helped to sustain the low price. Yes, I believe that Europe could have done more. That is the point that I am making. I will continue to

challenge Europe and Commissioner Hogan around what he is doing, because I believe that the approach that they took in Europe, whilst I accept that there is some funding and money going into farmers' bank accounts as we speak — it has been paid out from last week, so they will have received it last week and this week — and that is, in a sense, as a one-off, slightly helpful, I do not think that it is the longer-term approach that we need. I believe that we need to see a review of intervention prices that would allow the market to correct itself.

Brexit: Agricultural Implications

9. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the work her Department has undertaken on the implications for agriculture and rural development locally of an exit from the European Union. (AQO 9166/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Given the importance of this issue, I have asked my Department to begin assessing the impact of a possible British exit from the EU on agriculture and rural life in the North. Clearly, an exit from the EU would mean that direct payments to farmers and rural development funding from the EU would stop. However, the many uncertainties surrounding a potential exit makes a quantitative assessment of impacts very difficult.

There are significant uncertainties around the type of trade arrangements with the EU and the rest of the world that could be negotiated following a withdrawal of EU membership. Of particular significance is whether there would be tariff-free access to EU markets for agricultural products and vice versa. If direct payments from the EU stopped, it would not be feasible for the Executive to fund these payments at current levels from the block grant unless additional money were forthcoming from the British Treasury.

It has been clear that the British Government have long wanted to reduce the level of support going to farmers and rural development under the CAP. They do not regard this type of support as value for money. I believe that the Treasury would be unsympathetic to calls for some of the money that is saved from withdrawing from the EU to be used to maintain direct support to farmers and rural communities at current levels.

A significant reduction in direct support would leave many of our farmers in real long-term financial difficulty. A faster rate of structural change in the industry would be inevitable.

Small farms would be likely to suffer the most. It is very likely that a reduction of funding for farmers and rural communities would have knock-on effects for the wider environment.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that, when left to their own devices, the British Government at this time poorly represent — fail to represent — farmers and fishermen here?

Mrs O'Neill: One thing that we have been successful in, particularly with regard to the dairy crisis, is that we were able to get DEFRA onto our page with regard to the needs of the local industry, although it took a long time. We worked very hard to secure that. We made sure that we have a very strong voice in Europe, raising awareness of the significant and unique circumstances of the local dairy industry. That is why it is so important that we have decisions made by locally elected Ministers who understand the local situation, whether it is in farming, manufacturing or any other sector. It is so important that we have locally elected Ministers who can take decisions that are in the best interests. I certainly always take my case directly to Europe because I think that it is important to do that. Do they always listen? Absolutely not, but it certainly does not stop us going out and making as much noise as we possibly can when fighting our corner for local industry.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister has stated that she believes that we are better off in Europe than out of it. Given the fact that approximately £8.2 billion is paid into Europe by the British Government, what is she doing — if the will of the people is to pull out of Europe — to ensure that the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland gets the maximum benefit for farmers out of that £8.2 billion?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that you are jumping a lock of skips. We have to look at the reality, which is that the Tories' policy will never be one of subsidising farmers; they will never want to replace like with like. I would never be confident — I do not think that anybody could be — that the Tories would replace that money if there was a Brexit and they pulled out of the EU. It is highly unlikely, given Tory ideology, that they would ever replace £300 million for farmers. There was up to £500 million in the previous programme for the ongoing rural development work, which was about business investment and working with communities on community services and basic services. I would not be confident that the Tories would

want to replace that. However long they remain in power, none of us can be sure of that. We are best placed to look towards fighting the challenges and to look for reform, but the interests of our farmers are better served within the EU.

Farming: Business Development Groups

10. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department will ensure maximum enrolment and representation of all farming sectors in the recently launched business development groups. (AQO 9167/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The business development groups programme was launched in early November, and applications will be accepted up to 4.00 pm on Monday 14 December 2015. CAFRE has the lead role in developing, delivering and promoting this scheme, which is funded under the rural development programme.

To encourage uptake of the programme and maximise enrolments, CAFRE engaged with industry stakeholders prior to the launch and continues to do so during the application period. CAFRE is using a variety of media to promote the programme to all sectors of the industry, including press releases, information leaflets, radio interviews and the DARD and CAFRE websites. Information has been provided about the benefits of taking part, eligibility to apply, the funding available and the application process.

It is anticipated that CAFRE will allocate up to 1,500 farmers into groups in the 2015-16 year. A further 1,500 farmers will be allocated to the business development groups in subsequent tranches. To ensure that the programme has a positive impact across all sectors of the industry, sectoral limits will be applied to applications. In the event of oversubscription to one or more sectors, we will have to apply some criteria. The aim is to ensure that business development groups provide support for progressive farm businesses across all sectors of the industry in proportions that are representative of the size and sectoral constitution of the industry as a whole.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. What funding is available for farmers who are keen to participate in these groups?

Mrs O'Neill: The benefits of the groups are the benefits to the farmers themselves. Working together with their peers, the business

development groups will bring many benefits to farmers that will help them to develop their businesses, learn about new technology and improve farm profitability. They will be supported by a CAFRE development adviser and they will have the option to gain a level 3 qualification. Farmers who attend all eight training events will qualify for a payment of up to £490 a year. This payment is planned for the first two years of the programme and then it will be reviewed. An allowance of up to £600 per training event hosted will also be payable to farmers throughout the lifetime of the scheme. So, there is an opportunity for them to take part in the ongoing training and development work, while being assisted financially to be able, perhaps, to have someone help on the farm while they are at the courses. It also encourages them to host training events and share with other farmers their best practice and the good work that they do.

Dairy Production

11. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to assist farmers to move to lower-cost dairy production. (AQO 9168/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department plans to assist dairy farmers to move towards lower-cost production methods through the ongoing delivery of education and training programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise. CAFRE will also continue to demonstrate knowledge and technology transfer projects, which aim to improve business efficiency for dairy farm businesses.

From April 2015 to 16 November 2015, CAFRE delivered 57 training events aimed at improving production performance to 1,166 dairy farmers, and it is currently demonstrating five technology projects to the dairy industry. My Department will continue to work with AFBI to ensure that knowledge and technology transfer projects reflect the outcomes of research into low-cost dairy production systems.

My CAFRE advisers are assisting farmers by offering workshops entitled 'Feed and Finance' to look at the cost of milk production. In addition, my staff are assisting farmers to complete business plans and cash flows.

Participating in CAFRE's business development groups will also provide dairy farmers with the opportunity to work collaboratively, improve technical efficiency, improve business management skills and learn about new technologies and innovative ways of working. I

encourage all farmers, including dairy farmers, to apply to business development groups before the closing date of 14 December.

2.30 pm

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

Pig Farmers: DARD Support

T1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to support local pig farmers. (AQT 3181/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I met pig producers just yesterday in relation to some of the challenges, which include, as the Member will be aware, the price differential that they receive. That is an ongoing challenge for local farmers. The other area that we discussed and which is ongoing is, obviously, opening up new markets and new potential export opportunities for pig product. That is particularly focused on China, but there are obviously other opportunities that we are looking towards.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the recent figures published by the National Pig Association that indicate that, typically, only 30% of the gammons consumed in the United Kingdom at Christmas are of British origin, do you feel that your Department could do more to help to exploit this area?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is certainly doing all that we can to open up new export opportunities, and, as I said, China is a key market. However, we are also looking towards Australia, America and the Philippines. There are quite a number of other areas that we are targeting, and that is in conjunction with the industry. We are also looking towards a new marketing body, on which I have recently worked with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to establish. Obviously, that will create opportunities for all sectors, not just the pig sector. It is about trying to get us the ability to market our product and to get into more opportunities, whether across England, Scotland or Wales or Europe or even further afield. I think that all the work that we are doing with the Agri-Food Strategy Board will lead to benefits in the medium and longer term for all sectors, including the pig sector.

TB Eradication: Update

T2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her strategy to tackle the TB issue. (AQT 3182/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will know that, particularly in relation to TB, we established an industry partnership that was to take forward a body of work. It has recently published its interim report and will produce a further report in the early part of next year, which, I believe, will look towards a sea change on attitudes right across the industry and farmers on how we can tackle TB. We have our TB eradication plan, which is worth £4 million from the EU. That is ongoing, and I think that we are all working very hard from every possible angle to drive down levels of TB. That will enable us to look towards more export opportunities if we get to the stage where we can eradicate the disease.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I think that it is not much comfort for the farming community, especially those who have farms that have been closed for many months and are suffering great financial constraints. We are still wrestling with this issue and nothing positive has come to the fore to deal with the matter. Does the Minister agree that it is a serious failing under her watch and that of her predecessor that, to date, after many years, little has been done to tackle this particular issue?

Mrs O'Neill: This is a favourite question of the Member at Question Time. My answer remains the same in that TB is a complicated disease. There is no simple solution or quick fix. If there were, we would just use best practice from any other country and apply it here. Unfortunately, that is not the case. There is not any good practice or any good example to look to. We have our test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) programme. We have had our TB eradication programme approved by the EU, which is a programme worth £4 million. We have the TB strategic partnership group, which is ongoing and has produced quite a number of recommendations. I do not think that we can come at it from any more angles than that. It is a very complicated disease and we want to be able to eradicate it. We have been very successful in relation to brucellosis and, hopefully, we will get there as well with TB.

Land Mobility Service: Young Farmers

T3. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she supports the Land Mobility Service initiative between Macra Na Feirme and the Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster, which tries to match retiring farmers with young people who are trying to get into the industry. (AQT 3183/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I have worked in the past with the Young Farmers and Macra Na Feirme around the Know Your Neighbour campaign, and I am very open to looking towards any of the campaigns that they bring forward. It is certainly my experience from areas where they have worked in partnership that they have been very successful, so I am very open to looking at supporting them again if they come forward with a proposal. To date, they have not actually come forward with anything specific. Obviously, we have an ongoing programme of work with young farmers, which I am very pleased with. I enjoy speaking to them regularly and talking about the programmes that they have been involved with.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. She will know that one of the big blockages in succession planning on farms is the conacre system, which causes problems with land mobility as well as succession planning. How does she see her Department addressing that issue? How would she drive forward any change in culture or in the way that system works?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, the Member will be aware, hopefully, that we have a succession planning programme in the rural development programme. It involves working with farm families on how to plan for the future, how their farm business will look in the future, and how to deal with any changes when they happen. Certainly, farm family planning will be another key part of the new rural development programme. Whether it be the conacre situation or any of the other factors that contribute to when, how or why changes happen on family farms, we will certainly play our role.

Alongside that, we have recently announced the young farmers' payment, which is just over €81 per hectare. That is a good incentive for a young person to be the head of holding and take over the family farm. The fact that all those young people have taken part in a level 2 qualification in agriculture and are looking at further education opportunities bodes very well for the future of farming.

Rural Development Programme: Sporting Organisations

T4. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to acknowledge the concerns and perceptions of many in rural and farming communities that funding from the last rural development programme was heavily slanted towards sporting organisations, including large amounts to already cash-rich groups; and, given the farming crisis, to give an assurance that farmers will be prioritised in the 2014-2020 programme. (AQT 3184/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: No, I do not agree with you. I think that the previous rural development programme, which is coming to an end — and we are about to open up our new programme — has been extremely successful in rural communities and in funding projects. I always say that the beauty of the rural development programme is that it is not about somebody sitting in the Department telling you what you need: it is about home-grown ideas; it comes from the community and is grassroots-up. So, I hope that the Member is not suggesting for one minute that some of the projects — that I know she visits and thinks are very valuable — are not valuable after all. When you go out on the ground and take a look at how the rural development programme has assisted communities to deliver for themselves, quite often working in partnership with other funders, you see that, in my opinion, it has been money well spent.

I have continued to do everything I can to address the farming crisis and, in particular, the dairy crisis. I am happy to champion the local industry's needs, and I have done so over the last year, or year and a half, particularly for the dairy sector. What I have delivered for the rural community and farmers is the largest ever rural development programme that the North has ever seen. That is my commitment to agriculture and rural communities: to make sure that we have the vehicle to be able to deliver for rural communities and farmers. I am keen to open all the schemes as quickly as I possibly can. Some have already opened, and the rest will open in the new year. It is not helpful, and it is disingenuous, to play farming communities against rural communities, because they are all same.

Mrs Dobson: I am disappointed by the Minister's response. As important as sport is, we have heard loud and clear in this Building about the real need that exists amongst our farming families. Will the Minister agree to

meet farmers and rural representatives to ensure that the focus in the programme reflects the real needs of our farming community? Is she confident that the make-up of the local action groups will enable them to address that need?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I am very comfortable with the make-up of the local action groups. I am also very comfortable with all the applications that have been processed and received funding. You referred to sporting organisations and cash-rich groups. I remind you that your councillors and party colleagues also sit on the LAGs that distribute the funding. Applications are received from community groups and organisations, no matter where they come from, and the LAGs, which include local community representatives and councillors from different political parties, make a decision based on the criteria. I hope that the Member is not referring to there being anything untoward in the delivery by LAGs because that is not the case. All applications are assessed based on the criteria.

To continue to play farming off against rural communities is not helpful, because farmers live in rural communities. Farmers are entitled to basic services, and they have the same challenges about access to transport, to broadband and to education for their families. I do not think that we need to play one against the other. Farmers are rural people who live in rural communities, and rural communities and people are entitled to the same support and attention from my Department. I am certainly not apologetic about that.

Regional Reserve Refusals: Young Farmers

T5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, having asked her a number of times before, whether she has confirmed with her officials the refusals that young farmer applicants to the regional reserve have been experiencing owing to the qualifications of their accountant. (AQT 3185/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I have. We have been working our way through the issue. About 80 young farmers found themselves in that scenario. We are encouraging them all to respond to the Department, and they will be told how to deal with the issue.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for that answer. That is the same response that she gave to a question for written answer. Will she explain

why a departmental official told a constituent of mine last week that the reason why he had been turned down was that his accountant did not have the proper qualification, but he would not put that in writing because he had been told not to do so? It still seems that the Minister's officials are applying that rule, although they are not prepared to tell constituents that that is why they are doing it.

Mrs O'Neill: Instead of raising the issue at Question Time, it would have been more advisable for you to have called to my office to talk about any official who is not doing something that is proper practice. I have clearly said to you that I believe that there is a way to resolve the issue. In those 80 cases that I referred to, if an accountant did not have the recognised qualification — that is, was not part of a registered accountancy body — there was a challenge to be addressed, but I believe that we have found a way to address it. If you wish to discuss a particular case, call up to my office after Question Time.

Rivers: Responsibility Confusion

T6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that she has responsibility for rivers, as does, in certain circumstances, Northern Ireland Water, whether she recognises the considerable confusion in the public's mind and the fact that there is an opportunity between NI Water and the Rivers Agency to dispute a great deal of rivers matters across Northern Ireland. (AQT 3186/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: A lot of cross-departmental work is ongoing on quite a number of projects. There is often confusion, which is why it is helpful that the Executive established the flooding incident line, which means that, if you are experiencing flooding, you have one point of contact. With the new departmental structure, there will be opportunities to address that challenge once and for all, in that all those issues will be dealt with by one Department.

Mr Dickson: I welcome your recognition that there is confusion. Despite there being a flooding incident line, confusion continues to reign. The recent flooding incident at Greenisland railway station in east Antrim, for example, is a classic case of both Departments trying to palm one off onto the other. At this point in time today, neither the Rivers Agency nor NI Water is prepared to take responsibility for a very dangerous situation because it forces pedestrians onto the roadway.

Mrs O'Neill: I am not aware of the ins and outs or the details of the case that you refer to, but, if you want, you can drop an email or talk to the private office about trying to establish the facts. I can answer only for the work of the Rivers Agency, not for the work of DRD or NI Water, but I am very happy to explore whether there are any shortcomings in my Department's role.

Foot-in-mouth Disease

T8. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that she will be well aware of foot-and-mouth disease within the agricultural sector, whether she is also aware of the recent outbreak of foot-in-mouth disease suffered by her colleague Mr Flanagan who, in one moment, does not think ISIS are terrorists and, in the next moment, thinks that they are; is he suffering from foot-in-mouth disease. (AQT 3188/11-16)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member knows that that is not an appropriate question to the Department of Agriculture. Bronwyn McGahan is not in her place.

Fishing: December Quotas

T10. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what prospects there are of her going to Brussels and bringing us back some good news about the December quotas for the fishing industry, albeit that she has been on her feet for three quarters of an hour and only once has the word "fishing" been mentioned. (AQT 3190/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member knows that I can answer only the questions that are put before me, but I am very happy to talk about fishing. I recently met the industry in relation to preparations for the Fisheries Council in Brussels over the next number of weeks, where we will have an opportunity to go out and argue our quota situation. It will be an uphill challenge, but we have been used to that for the past five or six years. In conjunction with our local industry, I have identified its priority asks, and I will go out with the industry to fight our corner to get the best possible result that we can. We will use our scientists and all the evidence that we have to argue for additional quota.

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I must inform the House that questions 6, 7, 12 and 13 have been withdrawn.

Arts Council: Budget Cuts

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measurable criteria were used to determine the redeployment of the funding that was cut from the Arts Council's budget. (AQO 9172/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for her question. She will now be aware that I have been able to reinstate the Arts Council's budget because of a successful bid for additional funds in the November monitoring round. That will enable the Arts Council to reinstate £620,000 that was to be lost through cuts that it planned to make to 32 arts organisations. For the same reason, I have also been able to reverse cuts to Sport NI, and that will also allow some support and flexibility and will help to preserve its grant.

While I am pleased with that — I am sure that the Member is too — we should, however, bear in mind the wider context. The cuts imposed by the Westminster Government have reduced the Executive's budget significantly. For me, DCAL started with almost 10% less than I had last year. The budget redeployment exercise was required to address a number of pressures that had arisen in my Department, and I firmly place that at the feet of the Westminster Government.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response and welcome the reinstatement of money to the arts sector. Féile has been given £550,000 from DCAL through a cultural programme funding stream over the last two years, but it seems that there was not a lot of transparency on how the money was distributed. What was the application process? Was there an application panel? Was there any evaluation of the output and a proper postcode breakdown of the beneficiaries to establish that, as she claimed, the money is definitely reaching those in disadvantaged areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I take exception to the Member accusing me of a lack of transparency. That is regrettable. It is also regrettable that the Member has chosen to single out Féile an Phobail when other organisations in the provision of arts and culture receive tens of millions of pounds more. The process was that Féile an Phobail lobbied the Tourist Board,

Belfast City Council, my Department, and the World Police and Fire Games in 2013 to be cultural partners. With a bigger pot of money, Féile has year-on-year since then brought in more cultural partners with less money. It is open and transparent about what they all do, including in the Member's constituency. To try to clear some of the confusion, it would be good if the Member met Féile and some of the other partners in that partnership to talk about their work. They do indeed reach the most deprived, disadvantaged and marginalised in this community.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. I welcome the funding to the arts sector. The money that was withdrawn from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland did not come from Tory cuts; it came from Sinn Féin cuts in that £900,000 was transferred to the Minister's pet project, Líoфа. What is the Minister doing to reinstate the £100,000 that was taken away from marching bands? She promised to bring that back in a monitoring round.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is regrettable that the Member still chooses to be offensive towards the Irish language, but I have come to expect nothing else from him and some of his party colleagues. It is ridiculous that the Member is also in denial about Tory cuts, even in his constituency, which is one of the most deprived. He is in denial about the impact of Tory cuts on people who are really deprived. It would be more in keeping if the Member asked a question that would benefit his constituents. I agree that it is his prerogative to ask whatever question he likes, and it is my prerogative to answer the question in whatever fashion I like.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister outline what support the arts has received since she took the DCAL portfolio?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the region of £75 million has been given to the arts. I have supported major capital projects. As I mentioned at the launch of the consultation on the new arts and cultural strategy yesterday, I have given capital moneys to the Lyric and the MAC, as well as funding very good and specialised work for the WheelWorks ArtCart, which goes out and about in a van and delivers arts and digital artistic services to communities. In even Mr Humphrey's constituency, £400,000 was given for the Beat Carnival premises in the lower Shankill.

Mr Humphrey: That is in West Belfast.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Well, it is west when it suits and north when it does not. *[Laughter.]* Talk about being confused. I am glad that the Member clarified that the Shankill is now in West Belfast. OK, thank you for that.

In Cathal Ó hOisín's constituency, the Member will be aware of the money that we invested in the City of Culture and its legacy programme.

Boxing Clubs: DCAL Support

2. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department supports established boxing clubs. (AQO 9173/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. DCAL and Sport NI have been able to provide practical and financial support to established boxing clubs across the North, including clubs outside Belfast. That has been achieved through Sport NI's boxing investment programme, which will see lottery funding of over £3.2 million invested across the sport. In addition, under the City of Culture legacy programme, my Department is investing a further £1 million for boxing in Derry.

The aims of the boxing investment programme are to help the sport to address the needs of boxing clubs around club development and sustainability and the provision of suitable facilities and boxing equipment. A club development manager has worked with a large number of clubs to enable them to meet governance standards. Ninety-four clubs have received a range of boxing equipment valued at £170,000, and £2.5 million has been allocated to take forward capital works on the premises of 40 boxing clubs, 20 of which are outside Belfast.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is good to see that Londonderry is getting £30 million. With regard to small boxing clubs — there are a couple of them in my constituency — ongoing running costs are always an issue. Would the Minister support proposals, hopefully coming forward from the Finance Minister, to make them rates-free? The running costs of a lot of the clubs are where the problems lie for them.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Just to clarify, it was £1 million given to Derry, not £30 million. I am sure that a lot of people in Derry were getting excited, so I am sorry to quash that rumour.

It is important that small sporting clubs receive support, and it is regrettable that the Member's party could not support the Bill of that nature. However, it is important that areas that do a lot of outreach work with children and young people, keeping them safe and healthy, get support from government. I admire the work that a lot of sporting clubs do, particularly boxing clubs. I believe that the sport is trying to attract more women and children of all abilities. It is right and proper that, in turn, government gives support to the clubs.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. How can DCAL help the boxing clubs that will not receive boxing investment programme funding at this stage?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I recognise that the lottery funding, albeit over £3 million, will not be enough to address the need out there. I have visited many boxing clubs across the North. Some of the conditions in the clubs are not fit for purpose despite the excellent work that they do, so the £3.2 million from Sport NI's lottery fund is not enough.

That said, Sport NI is working with a number of organisations, with my Department and other Departments, including DSD, for example, and with some district councils. We are trying to work with the clubs to ensure that there are opportunities. Some clubs need small amounts of money; others much more. There is potential for the clubs that need small amounts to lose out when Departments, councils and other bodies come together. That is the difference between some clubs having a viable project and others that are simply stuck between one Department giving funding and another unable to give match funding.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. In the middle of November — I think that it was around 12 November — the Ulster Elite Championships were held in Newry, and I got an opportunity to see the boxing. Probably for the first time, I saw a couple of women boxers, other than seeing Katie Taylor box for Ireland on TV. Will the Minister outline to the House what Sport NI and her Department will do to ensure that boxing clubs are female-friendly zones and offer opportunities for females to develop their boxing skills?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member that it is good to see children of all backgrounds and genders involved in sport, particularly boxing, which has been predominantly male for decades. It is now very open and is trying to be

as inclusive as possible. Through the Sport Matters strategy, we encourage the inclusion of women in a few sports — boxing is one of them — but we need to do much more. I believe that the Ulster Boxing Council and some, but not all, of the county boards have gone out of their way to include more women. I also believe that proper facilities will help to encourage young women in the sport. Most importantly, attitudes have changed: Katie Taylor and others have been great role models and will help to bring more women into the sport as well.

Mr McGimpsey: In view of the Minister's answers this afternoon, how much of the millions available through her boxing strategy has Sandy Row Boxing Club, acknowledged as one of the best established clubs in Belfast, received?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has asked me that question a lot, and he will get the same answer. This money and investment is for clubs affiliated to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) and in receipt of a letter of offer. I understand that Sandy Row Boxing Club will receive money from Belfast City Council and other bodies, but it understands full well the rules of the funding and application process. Rather than sectarianising and politicising the issue, the Member should encourage the club to get that much-needed investment.

Mr Allister: Why does the Minister continue to punish clubs that, for very good reason, refuse to reaffiliate to an IABA in which they have suffered sectarian abuse?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not punish anyone. The rules are very clear, and people clearly understand them. It would be more fitting for politicians like you and Mr McGimpsey to support the clubs. It is the clubs that work with the children all the time. Rather than piggybacking on those clubs, you should help them to get the much-needed funding.

Mr Allister: You are not helping them.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am absolutely open to helping those clubs. I have asked to go out and see them, and I have written to them. I have been to clubs across the North, including ones in predominantly working-class loyalist areas. However, I believe that the actions of some unionist politicians on the issue have been nothing short of pathetic.

Euro 2016: Fans' Embassies

3. **Mr Cochrane-Watson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions have been held with the Irish Football Association and Northern Ireland football supporters' representatives on support for the establishment of football fans' embassies to provide information, assistance and support for Northern Ireland fans at the 2016 European Championships in France. (AQO 9174/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I can advise that my Department has had no discussions to date on this matter. The establishment of fans' embassies is something that the Irish Football Association, in association with the Northern Ireland supporters' representatives, might consider necessary at suitable venues in France for the 2016 European Championship. I would support the establishment of fans' embassies to provide travel advice, local information and assistance for fans. Any measures that can be taken to help to ensure that fans have a safe and enjoyable experience at the championships are worthy of consideration.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I am disappointed by your response, Minister. In view of the terrible events in Paris 10 days ago, DCAL should step up to the mark financially and operationally to give true assistance to the many thousands of British football tourists who will visit France.

3.00 pm

I also hope that you can maybe outline today how DCAL plans to celebrate the success of our national football team on reaching these championships. The silence from you to date has been quite deafening.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that the Member is new to the House, but it is customary for the Minister to wait for the Member to finish his question before answering.

Given that this is primarily a matter for the Irish Football Association, I have been very open in trying to assist where possible. I have provided the Irish Football Association with money in addition to capital moneys.

Sport NI is helping the Irish Football Association and the Northern Ireland team, as well as many other teams competing in championships. If the Member has a suggestion or thinks that I should do something specific, I am more than happy to receive representation from him or from anyone else for that matter.

Mr Campbell: I appreciate that it is some time until the championships next summer and that diaries are not yet filling up. Is it the Minister's intention, diaries permitting, to be in attendance in France at the football championships and to maybe change the habit of a lifetime and actually support Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think the Member's question is disappointing but certainly not surprising. He has been consistently negative. I will not be the Minister in 2016, but I am certainly happy to support the team. I am happy to support all the teams on this island. I think it would be much better if the Member stopped politicising this issue. I have been to Northern Ireland games on several occasions and have given my support. I did not see the Member there.

Mr McKinney: I too am concerned, following the recent atrocities in Paris, that enough should be done on working with the IFA to ensure that fans get the proper advice on travelling. Rather than getting to the stadium in France, would the Minister consider inviting both teams here for a special event to acknowledge their qualifying for the tournament?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Every year there is an annual event that DCAL sponsors, and all the teams are invited to that, including the big national teams, as well as some of the small clubs that have achieved success. The Member will not be surprised that I get hundreds of requests to host receptions here. Early in March next year not only will the Northern Ireland team be invited but all the teams in Ireland, because most of them are part of national governing bodies.

On the first point that he made about the events of the thirteenth of this month in Paris, I know that UEFA has been contacted by many national teams about arrangements for the championships next year. When I get an update, I am happy to share it with all Members, because I appreciate that they are concerned.

Mr Lyttle: The success and achievements of the Northern Irish football team have inspired and united this community, I am glad to say, and I thank the Minister for acknowledging that and for agreeing that fans' embassies should be an important source of advice for fans in France. Is the Minister willing to meet with a delegation from the IFA and the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs to review how she might help the success of the fans' embassies?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his comments. I meet the IFA on a regular basis, and I am certainly happy to meet with the Member and a delegation from the supporters' clubs, along with the IFA. I am happy to bring in Sport NI and anyone else to ensure that this is the start of a process and, more importantly, to ensure that everything that we can do as a collective is done.

Fish Disposal

4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 8993/11-16, what her Department does with the dead fish collected following a pollution incident that results in a fish kill. (AQO 9175/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. My Department's fisheries protection officers assist the Northern Ireland Environment Agency with the investigation of pollution incidents involving fish kills by collecting, counting and recording the species and sizes of fish that have been killed. This data may be used as evidence in prosecution cases should the offender be identified, and, as a consequence, all or some of the dead fish may be retained as physical evidence. In some instances, a sample of a number of dead fish may be sent to the veterinary sciences division of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in an attempt to identify the cause. Where there is suspicion that fish disease may be a factor, DARD's fish health division is notified as the competent authority for aquatic animal health, and a sample of fish may be submitted for testing on the instruction of DARD.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am sure that she will be as surprised as I was that samples are taken from those fish, or tests are done, only in some cases. Can the Minister give us an assurance that, given the number of incidents, particularly in the Sixmilewater and the Three Mile Water in my constituency, or indeed anywhere in Northern Ireland, the work that her Department does is instrumental in trying to find the source? One way would obviously be to test all the fish to actually see what killed them and whether we can identify those polluters and bring them before the courts.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In cases of fish kills, particularly in the Member's constituency in recent times, my understanding is that all samples have been taken, particularly when there are recurrent fish kills in an area. I will certainly query this, but my understanding is that samples are taken

from different parts of a river when there has been a fish kill to ensure that, if there is one cause, that cause can be identified. Maybe the answer did not reflect what is done, but I will certainly get the information for the Member because I know through representations from him through meetings and correspondence that this is an issue that he and my colleagues in that area, particularly the angling clubs, are very keen to get to the bottom of.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Minister, for your answer. Does your Department comply with all EU regulations in the protection of fish?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To the best of my knowledge, the answer is as short as yes.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister's Department have any formal agreement with other agencies and Departments for dealing with polluting incidents?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As outlined, we have a formal agreement with the Environment Agency, which is the lead agency with responsibility for investigation of water pollution. The Department has also agreed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Environment Agency on the responses to pollution incidents where fish are killed. We are looking at a framework with the agency to outline cooperation and implementation of our respective statutory duties. Under the Fisheries Act 1966, DCAL has powers to prosecute those causing pollution in fishing waters, but in most cases that is taken forward by the Environment Agency. The MOU and the framework that are being taken forward will try to ensure that as much as can be done when incidences such as this occur will be done.

Limavady Library: Opening Hours

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that the review of library opening hours consultation stated that no libraries in areas of high social deprivation should have their opening hours reduced by more than 10%, whether she will review the decision to reduce the opening hours of Limavady library. (AQO 9176/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The decision to reduce the opening hours of Limavady library was taken in accordance with Libraries NI's new opening hours policy, which comes into effect this month. It is regrettable that library opening

hours have been reduced across the North. However, the new policy will help to ensure that all libraries, including Limavady, will remain open and will not need to close. While I appreciate that social deprivation affects many areas across the North, including Limavady, Libraries NI made clear in its review of opening hours consultation that libraries serving areas experiencing substantial levels of deprivation would be guaranteed protection from a greater than 10% reduction in their opening hours. Deprivation is determined using the published NI multiple deprivation measure 2010. On the basis of that measure, the opening hours policy has prioritised libraries serving three or more super-output areas.

Mr G Robinson: The Limavady area has three areas of high social deprivation and a large rural hinterland. Surely that should warrant a reconsideration of Limavady library's opening hours.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI has information that it does not serve three or more super output areas. In comparison with Dungiven, Limavady's library is open for 40 hours whereas Dungiven library is open for 25 hours. In that situation, I think that the consideration of the library in the Member's constituency by Libraries NI was completely appropriate.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. How many and which libraries currently meet the Libraries NI criteria of serving areas of substantial social deprivation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. She will be aware of most of the constituencies that fall within the top 10% most deprived areas. There are 12 libraries. Those are the libraries in Ardoyne, Chichester, Colin Glen, Creggan in Derry, the Falls Road in west Belfast, the Hollywood Arches, the Shankill, Shantallow in Derry, Suffolk, the Waterside, Whiterock and Woodstock.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will, of course, be aware that libraries in Ireland have a very rich tradition. Following the famine, they were instrumental in giving people an opportunity to learn to read and write. She will also be aware that, today, a quarter of a million people in Northern Ireland cannot read or write. Given that there are additional resources, will the Minister review her approach to libraries and give them the sustainability that they need to address the needs of our people, whether they are having problems with literacy and numeracy or are simply reading for enjoyment?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He will also know that, of all the DCAL arm's-length bodies (ALBs), I have given the most protection to Libraries NI. I know that it is disappointing when library opening hours are reduced, but I have done my best to ensure that no library has closed as a result of the block grant being cut.

In the Member's constituency, there has been a groundswell of support for local libraries and membership of those libraries has increased. I think that that will help with the viability and sustainability of libraries. As the Member and other Members will know, libraries are more than just about borrowing books. As he has outlined, they offer support with literacy and numeracy. They also offer support with mental health, support to children and families with homework and much more besides. I am glad that we at least enjoy cross-party support for our libraries.

Mrs Overend: I would just like to tease this out. Will the Minister advise how she will deploy further libraries moneys that were granted in last week's monitoring round?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Money was given back to libraries, particularly to help them with stock because that is part of their acute service and need, and that has been brought back. I appeal for cross-party support for our libraries. They provide a valuable service and, once they have gone, particularly in rural communities, it will be very difficult to bring them back.

DCAL Budget Position

8. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her current budget position. (AQO 9179/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As a result of Tory Party cuts, my Department began this year with 10% less in its resource budget. In addition, the capital allocation for the stadia programme was reduced to nil. In managing the resource budget cut, I offered libraries some protection, as I have just outlined, because of the central role they play in local communities, both urban and rural. That inevitably meant greater pressures elsewhere of over 11% in the budgets of DCAL and the ALBs.

I insisted that all business areas minimised the effects of those cuts on services, reducing overheads in the first instance. That was helped by the establishment of the voluntary exit scheme, which around 60 people from

within my Department and the ALBs will take up this year. It is, of course, impossible to shield the wider community from Tory cuts and, indeed, cuts to front-line services. DCAL has been affected and impacted, and that has been manifested in reduced opening times at museums and libraries, as well as bigger reductions to arts and sports.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Leslie Cree for a supplementary question and I ask the Member to be quick.

Mr Cree: Thank you. I certainly will. I thank the Minister for that.

Minister, you will remember that you recently advised the Committee that £610,000 would be included in your bids for the June monitoring round for depreciation. The Finance Minister told us here last week that £24.4 million, which was ring-fenced, or resource DEL, could not be reallocated because it was for depreciation and impairments. Did you get that £610,000? If not, why not?

3.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Finance Minister, in fairness to her, did try to reverse some of the impacts on my budget. Unfortunately, not all of the bids that I made could be met in this monitoring round, but we are working with officials in DFP to try to have those met in future monitoring rounds.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions. Mr David McNarry is not in his place.

Outburst Queer Arts Festival 2015

T2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ask the Arts Council to review future funding for the Outburst Queer Arts Festival, following the screening of 'The Gospel According to Jesus Queen of Heaven', in light of the criticism from the mainstream Christian denominations and a protest that was held by the Catholic constituency when the play was shown and bearing in mind her responsibility to promote good relations and the fact that religious belief is a section 75 group. (AQT 3192/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not be writing to the Arts Council to ask it to review its decision. I do not believe in any form of censorship. I do think it is regrettable that people have been offended,

but it is not my job to intervene in the Arts Council to have it reverse its decision.

Mr Givan: In light of the decision to have the Lord's prayer banned because it is deemed to be offensive to people who are not Christians, can the Minister not recognise why Christians in this part of Northern Ireland believe that they are subject to unwarranted attack for their genuinely and sincerely held beliefs? Is it necessary for the LGBT community, in promoting its own identity, to be offensive to people of faith?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not believe that anyone should be offensive to anyone of faith, but I also believe that people of faith do not have a veto over other people's rights and beliefs. I do not support the Member's position regarding persecution of Christians in this country. I believe that responsibility comes with religious and civil liberties. I would not support anyone criticising or abusing anyone's belief, regardless of whether that is political or religious. I could not support that at all.

Sport NI: Application Feedback

T3. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how a club that was unsuccessful in its application for funding from Sport NI can get feedback and whether there is an established process for such feedback. (AQT 3193/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have received that request on many occasions recently, because some clubs that were not successful in some of the rounds of capital funding from Sport NI have asked that question. The short answer is yes, there are processes. Some clubs want very detailed feedback, and they are entitled to that. I suggest that if that is the case with the Member, or even if people just want some feedback to help with future applications, then, in the first instance, clubs should contact Sport NI. If they want it done person to person, they should state that. I know that some clubs are happy to have feedback over the phone and others demand a much more rigorous process; but there is a process in Sport NI nonetheless.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response and look forward to any clarification she can bring to ensure that unsuccessful groups get feedback from Sport NI, as it is important that they can correct and amend their work in going forward.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I totally agree with the Member, particularly for some of the smaller clubs or those that do not have as much financial flexibility to buy in consultants. It is important for those clubs, many of which are managed on a voluntary basis, to get as much detailed feedback as possible, particularly when they are going forward, because I am sure that the needs and rationale for putting in the applications have not changed. So, it is important that they get as much feedback as possible.

Public Appointments: Gender Balance and Representation

T4. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what she has done to ensure gender balance and representation for disability groups on boards, given that she shares her concern about the lack of women in public bodies through the public appointments process, which will be discussed this Thursday and Friday at the North/South Inter-parliamentary Association. (AQT 3194/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the Member's concern and have done so for some time. When I went into the Department in 2011, less than 30% of those in the public appointments process were women. It has gone up to 36%, which, in my opinion, is still not good enough. I have met previous Commissioners for Public Appointments and asked them how to make the process more open and attractive, particularly to women and to people with disabilities. I continue to seek advice from the Commissioner for Public Appointments and others. If the Member or anyone else has any additional information, suggestions or advice as to how I can take that forward, I am open to hearing from them.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome the increase but note that we still need to do more. The Minister will be pleased to hear that the new Commissioner for Public Appointments will speak at the North/South Inter-parliamentary Association meeting. She is travelling to Dublin. We will be working with her, but will the Minister continue her efforts to ensure that we continue representation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely will continue my efforts. Part of those efforts in the past, which I did not mention initially, was to change the way in which the application process happens and to encourage people to seek advice before they put in an application. I am working with the

Commissioner for Public Appointments and other bodies to make that easy. I look forward to a report from that meeting and to receiving any advice that I can take to ensure that there is more openness and transparency and better representation on our public bodies.

Junior and Amateur Football: Capital Support

T5. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her proposals for capital support for junior and amateur football. (AQT 3195/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware of the application process that Sport NI has started for capital funding from lottery funds. I will shortly announce a consultation process on subregional funding. Some of the bigger clubs that are in junior leagues and have junior clubs attached to them will be keen to participate in that. The IFA has also received money from DCAL not only to ensure the inclusion of junior football, for which it has also received money from Sport NI, but to ensure that young girls are included.

Mr Poots: You have been saying that for some time, Minister, so we would like to see it move forward. Given that my constituency has a series of football clubs at junior level, will the Minister give an assurance that they will have the opportunity to apply for facilities such as changing rooms, stands, pitch improvements and so on?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot give the Member that assurance because, as he will know — maybe he is not aware that it was agreed at the Executive — the second phase of soccer money at subregional level is for bigger soccer clubs. The Member should direct junior clubs to Sport NI, which is the perfect place for those clubs to apply for funding. If he feels that they are not getting enough information from Sport NI or the local council, I am happy to hear the details.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Trevor Lunn is not in his place.

C S Lewis Festival 2015

T7. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she agrees that events such as those that were held very successfully in east Belfast last week as part of the C S Lewis Festival are the sorts of initiatives that we should be supporting at local level, in

that they involve children, young people and a lot of elderly people. (AQT 3197/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely agree. The festival, along with EastSide Arts, has grown from strength to strength, particularly in recent years. The Member has been very supportive and, in fairness to him, very fair and genuine in his approach to ensure that east Belfast receives support. One of the best stories that it has — apart from Van Morrison, whom I am sure the Member will mention — is the whole C S Lewis narrative and its association with that part of the city. I have supported it and will continue to do so.

Mr Douglas: The Minister today attended the unveiling of the C S Lewis and Seamus Heaney portraits. Does she agree that that is the sort of positive image that we need to project from Stormont? Does she have any ideas about expanding that to bring in the likes of the late George Best, the tenth anniversary of whose untimely death is tomorrow?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will know, I am open to suggestions that provide a space and a legacy for citizens right across the North. I picked up on the Member's point that those are the first two portraits here of non-parliamentarians, and I think that that sends out a good message. It is also good because Seamus Heaney and C S Lewis's books and the story around them have provided inspiration for others engaged in the arts who are coming behind them. The more people who come to the Building — there are many, and that is good — and see ordinary people who have done extraordinary things for us acknowledged in these halls, the better.

Culture and Arts Strategy: Consultation Delay

T8. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why there was such a delay in the publication of her consultation on the strategy for culture and arts. (AQT 3198/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I make no apology for the fact that I brought it forward yesterday; I think that it is good thing. I want to make sure that the consultation is done right. I wanted to make sure that the document, in conjunction with the great work done by the ministerial advisory forum on arts, along with DCAL and the Arts Council, was given the attention that it needed. I believe that the way in which the consultation was brought forward yesterday — by the way, it

closes on 12 February — will give many people an opportunity. I encourage the Member, indeed, all Members across the House to get people from his constituency to feed into the consultation for the future.

Mr Buchanan: I hear what the Minister says, but does she not accept that, with the closing date of 12 February and some six to eight weeks to consider the responses, there is the potential for it to run out of time? There will be no strategy in place, and that will be another failing by the Minister and her Department.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If the Member feels that I have failed in my Department, it is the first time that I have heard it, although I accept that he is reading from a question that was put into his hand, probably, by his colleagues. He is probably not aware of what I do in my Department; I do not receive a lot of correspondence from him. Nonetheless, I do not accept the Member's assertion. The consultation is an opportunity for people in his constituency, if he is interested in feeding into a robust and strong arts and cultural strategy for 10 years.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period of questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. As the next period of questions does not begin until 3.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then.

3.30 pm

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. (AQO 9187/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. Initially, a budget of £100,000 was allocated to develop a Youth Assembly in 2014-15. However, because of financial constraints, the project was put on hold and consideration was given to other ways of engaging with young people.

The Education Service continues to work with schools and the youth sector to increase young people's understanding of the work of the Assembly and encourage their engagement with that work. Significantly, the Education

Service has been working with Assembly Committees to consult young people about a range of legislation and inquiries, such as shared and integrated education, the Together: Building a United Community strategy, the Road Traffic Bills and proposals for a new law on bullying in schools.

The Education Service is further engaging young people in the work of the Assembly through its Connections project, which aims to promote dialogue between decision-makers and young people. Financed by the European funding stream, Erasmus+, the project is running between February 2015 and January 2016 and involves 36 participants aged between 16 and 18. The group will have the opportunity to deliver primary research findings to Assembly Committees in early 2016. Plans are under way to apply for further funding for similar projects involving other legislatures.

The Education Service's series of Let's Talk events around Northern Ireland brings together young people and their MLAs. In 2014-15, five such events were held, each of which involved about 100 young people from different schools and neighbouring constituencies.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for her update and welcome the much positive work the Commission has been doing to ensure youth participation and inclusion in the Assembly process, particularly the inaugural Youth Congress that is scheduled to take place in this Assembly Chamber tomorrow. Does the Member accept that the priority for children and young people remains the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly? Would the Commission be willing to re-engage with the youth sector — the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, for example — to re-examine and refresh costings and proposals in relation to the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I wholeheartedly agree, as does the Commission, that we need to be engaging our young people with the Assembly and how we operate within it as much as possible. I am glad he mentioned the inaugural sitting of the Northern Ireland Youth Congress tomorrow, at which I, like other Members, will be present. We should be doing everything within our power to keep that engagement with our young people.

Parliament Buildings: Visitors

2. **Mr Lyons** asked the Assembly Commission how many people have visited Parliament

Buildings in each of the last five years. (AQO 9188/11-16)

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gComhalta as an cheist. I thank the Member for his question. Ó Eanáir 2011 go mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2015, thug 346,156 duine cuairt ar Fhoirgnimh na Parlaiminte. From January 2011 to October 2015, the total number of people on record as having visited Parliament Buildings is 346,156.

That number represents the total number of visitors attending a diverse range of events, functions, guided tours and schools' education programmes. The Assembly does not, however, keep a record of the number of public visitors who attend plenary sessions or Committee meetings or who use the public dining facilities during recesses. The Assembly Commission will be able to provide the Member with the yearly totals for the numbers of visitors in writing, broken down into functions, functions with tours, tours with hospitality and education programmes. Indeed, if they are interested, we can provide that information to all Members.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Commission member for her answer. Perhaps, she will also be able to give me the totals for each year. I am sure that other Members will want to join me in commending the work that the Education Service does with young people. Most weeks since I have come to this place, I seem to be in answering questions from young people. To have the opportunity to do that is very welcome. Will the Commission join me in commending the work of the Education Service and consider what other ways we can engage with young people who come here?

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree with you on the work of the Education Service. I can give you a breakdown of visitor numbers and education groups now. In 2011, there were 71,556 visitors. In 2012, there were 81,710. In 2013, there were 73,645. In 2014, there were 70,830. In 2015, which obviously has not completed yet, there have been 48,415 visitors.

For the education programmes, we had 576 groups in 2011, with 18,185 visitors. In 2012, there were 587 groups. In 2013, there were 520 groups. In 2014, there were 476 groups. In 2015 so far, there have been 393 groups. You can see the significant number of groups that have visited.

The work that the Education Service does is second to none. It provides young people from a very early age and schools right across the

North with an opportunity to engage with politicians from all the different political parties. That is invaluable.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the recent event that was organised for the Israeli Government, students, press and various parties here, will a similar event now be organised by the Commission for the Palestinian Government to give outreach to people who are unrepresented?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for his question.

Recently, an event was organised with 60 students from Belfast Metropolitan College and Ulster University studying communications, journalism and politics. Representatives from the Israeli embassy in London were present, as were representatives of local political parties and local media organisations. Bhíothas i dteagmháil leis an Mhisean Pailistíneach i Londain leis an dara céim den imeacht seo a reachtáil sa bhformáid chéanna. I am pleased to say that contact has been made with the Palestinian Mission in London to arrange the second leg of that event in the same format.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Given the high volume of visitors to Parliament Buildings, will the Commission outline what advances have been made on the car parking situation in the past 12 months? What is proposed to ease that situation, particularly on Mondays and Tuesdays, when many people are parking down the mile in all forms of weather?

Ms Ruane: We have made some extra spaces available here at the Building. I will ask officials to forward the Member full details on the number of car parking spaces, including the extra ones, here and in some of the outlying car parks.

Mr Rogers: I think that everybody in the House agrees that the Assembly Education Service does invaluable work. How have budget cuts affected it? How is it affecting the Assembly's outreach services in particular?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his question. We have just brought forward a new outreach and engagement strategy, the meetings on which I chaired. We are doing everything that we can to increase the number of visitors and schools coming here. All the Commission members, from every single political party, did everything in their power to

protect the outreach and education budget. We will continue to try to do that.

Parliament Buildings: Tour Content

3. **Mr McCausland** asked the Assembly Commission what reference is made during regular guided tours of Parliament Buildings to the memorials to former Members murdered by illegal paramilitary organisations. (AQO 9189/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. In the official tour script provided by the Northern Ireland Assembly tour guides, reference is made to a range of architectural features, including the statue and tomb of Lord Craigavon. Currently, no reference is made during regular public or private guided tours to the memorials to former Members murdered by paramilitary organisations. However, during public and private tours, visitors are encouraged by guides to ask questions, and they may, on occasion, ask about the wall memorials in the Senate and Assembly Chamber Rotundas.

Mr McCausland: In Northern Ireland, lives were taken in the course of the democratic process and people were murdered by illegal paramilitary organisations. It is part of the story of this place and part of our history. Would it not be possible to include in the tour a reference to those who died in that way?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The official tour script provided by the Northern Ireland Assembly tour guides was approved by the Assembly Commission in 2001. I suggest to the Member that he speak to his Commission member about other issues that he might have.

Mr Cree: I am disappointed to hear that memorials are not explained unless someone asks. As we move into a pivotal year for centenaries, not least of Northern Ireland's sacrifice at the battle of the Somme, will the Commission seek to integrate the war memorial inside the main doors as part of the tour in future?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. Again, you need to speak to your Assembly Commission member, as that would have to be dealt with and decided on by the Commission. I understand his sentiments entirely, and I can say that I probably would support that.

Parliament Buildings: Defibrillators

4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Assembly Commission how many defibrillators there are in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 9190/11-16)

Mr Gardiner: I thank Mr Robinson for his question. There are five defibrillators in Parliament Buildings located in the following areas: the front reception, the control room, the Blue Flax, the Long Gallery and the fourth floor, south corridor. Information on the location of defibrillators is provided on AsslSt.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks for the answer. Can you outline the number of people trained to use defibrillators and how often their skills are updated?

Mr Gardiner: The Assembly Commission is committed to ensuring that there is a positive health and safety culture throughout the organisation, and there are 18 staff trained in the use of defibrillators.

Mrs Dobson: I commend the Member on his comprehensive answers so far. Given their importance, are there any plans to train additional staff in the use of defibrillators?

Mr Gardiner: I thank Mrs Dobson for her question. There are no plans to train any additional secretariat staff in the use of defibrillators, as the number of fully trained operatives is considered sufficient for the number of defibrillators in the Building.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his answers thus far. Given the importance of defibrillators and the statistics on their use, has the Commission any plans to introduce training for Members of the Assembly in their use, as nobody knows the day and hour that one of us could use that life-saving skill?

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for her question. To date, there has been no request to use defibrillators in Parliament Buildings. They are, however, tested weekly to ensure that they are fully operational.

Act of Remembrance 2015

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Assembly Commission what role it had in and what knowledge it had of the format and content of the Assembly remembrance event in Parliament Buildings on 11 November 2015. (AQO 9191/11-16)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission had no role in or knowledge of the format of the act of remembrance held in the Great Hall on 11 November. As in other parliamentary institutions, the Speaker, in his representational role, determines the arrangements for keynote events that the Speaker hosts on behalf of the Assembly. As was the case under previous Speakers, the Assembly Commission is not involved in either these or in other events that the Speaker organises through his office. I am aware that the Speaker issued a very considered letter to all Members, and I refer the Member to it.

Mr Allister: If the Speaker cannot be trusted to retain the national anthem as an integral part of the remembrance service, as evidenced by his disgraceful but, happily, failed attempt to obliterate the national anthem on 11 November, is it not time that the Assembly Commission considered taking over this event or exercising the necessary control to ensure that such attempts to obliterate the national anthem will not occur again?

3.45 pm

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It would not be appropriate for the Commission to seek to take on an event that has previously been organised by the Speaker without the Speaker's request that it do so. The Member may or may not be aware that the Royal British Legion has not said that the national anthem needs to be an integral part of such an event. I understand, though, that the Speaker engaged with the Royal British Legion and, as a result, ensured that the Armistice Day event was held on 11 November and that it was in the Great Hall in order to allow more people to attend than in previous years. I think that it will be for the next Speaker, in the next Assembly, to take the arrangements forward, but Members should take up the offer of the current Speaker to engage on the issue to ensure that future events are as open and inclusive as possible.

Mrs Overend: Does the commissioner appreciate that the Speaker's decision to remove the national anthem had, ultimately, the opposite effect of his supposed effort to make it less delicate?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for her question. I think that it is true that the Commission's focus, through its engagement strategy, is to encourage people into the Building and to participate in events. There are

no definitive records, but we believe that this year's remembrance event had a record attendance. The Commission very much welcomes that outcome and the inclusive approach that the Speaker has outlined.

Mr Dallat: As a mere Deputy Speaker in this august body, may I ask Mrs Cochrane if she agrees that it is always rewarding when you manage to get all political parties involved and leave an event open so that all members of staff can attend?

Mrs Cochrane: Yes, I agree with the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Member for her answers. Can the Member explain why the service was changed from a service to an act of remembrance, contrary to what happens across the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, the Commission was not involved in the arrangements, so all that I can go by is the Speaker's letter, which made it very clear that he was not continuing with the previous event or service, as you might refer to it, which had stemmed from when the Civil Service was the main occupant of the Building. The Speaker indicated that he was instead building on the format of the event that he had led in the Great Hall in 2014 when he was Principal Deputy Speaker. Like that event, this year's event had no music.

Gender Action Plan: Update

6. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the gender action plan. (AQO 9192/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for her question. A draft gender action plan for secretariat staff has been developed by the gender action plan working group, which comprises senior staff from across the Assembly. The draft action plan sets out a range of actions and measures to promote gender equality in the Assembly secretariat. It is a cross-directorate plan that covers the entire organisation for the two-year period 2016-18. The action plan also supports the Assembly in complying with its section 75 duties.

The Assembly Commission considered the draft plan at its meeting on 4 November 2015 and has approved it for staff consultation. The action plan was issued for consultation on 12 November 2015. The consultation will close on

Friday 8 January 2016. A copy of the draft action plan has been sent to the Equality Commission for comment. The draft action plan is available on the Assembly intranet.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for that answer. Will the findings of the AERC's review of women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly link into the secretariat gender action plan?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for her supplementary. The secretariat gender action plan working group has considered the findings and research of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's review of women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly to identify any overlapping issues, specifically where such issues may affect secretariat staff. The gender action implementation group will continue to follow progress on the AERC review, and the action plan contains a specific action to bring AERC recommendations to the women in politics working group and advise the gender action plan implementation group of any potential impact on secretariat staff.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Basil McCrea is not in his place.

Outsourced Services

8. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to outsource services. (AQO 9194/11-16)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. At the meeting of 24 June 2015, the Assembly Commission noted the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement to seek to extend the use of Northern Ireland Civil Service shared services across the wider public sector.

Naturally, the Assembly Commission is not part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), nor was it a party to the Stormont House Agreement, but it agreed that it would consider whether any of its present business activities could be better delivered through a shared services approach.

Over the summer months, a series of meetings took place with shared services providers in the Civil Service, most notably in the fields of IT, human resources and finance. Assembly secretariat officials will bring fully worked business cases on options for the future delivery of services to the Commission through the current in-house arrangements or through an NICS shared services approach.

The Commission has no plans at present for the further outsourcing of services to the private sector.

Mr Hilditch: I thank Mrs Cochrane for her detailed answer. Can she tell me what is currently outsourced?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The Commission uses private sector providers for catering and support services, broadcasting, some aspects of building maintenance and printing. The Commission also receives a wide range of services from the public sector, including policing, Central Procurement Directorate services, waste management services, stationery and office supplies, welfare and occupational health services and certain software supplies services.

Parliament Buildings: Good Cause Lighting

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Assembly Commission what progress has been made in allocating dates for the lighting up of Parliament Buildings in support of good causes. (AQO 9195/11-16)

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for his question. At the meeting on 11 November 2014, the Assembly Commission agreed the policy for the external lighting of Parliament Buildings in order to manage the lighting of the Building on designated occasions whilst preserving the dignity of Parliament Buildings.

In line with the policy, the Commission scheduled up to four days during the calendar year for events of its choice. The four days chosen by the Assembly Commission for 2015 were Monday 9 March, International Women's Day, when the Building was purple; on Tuesday 17 March, St Patrick's Day, it was green; on Sunday 12 July, it was orange; and, on Wednesday 11 November, Remembrance Day, it was red. In line with the policy, the Assembly Commission also allows its charity of the year up to five days during its 12-month term, as well as granting up to a further eight days for other events during the calendar year.

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for his response. Can he outline the process by which the Assembly decides between the various applications and how it communicates those decisions to groups?

Mr Gardiner: In line with the policy, only events organised at Parliament Buildings or DFP-approved events within the Stormont Estate have access to the lighting system. Only charitable community or non-profit organisations that are based in or have a significant connection to Northern Ireland and are celebrating a significant anniversary, such as their first, fifth, tenth, twenty-fifth or fiftieth, may, on occasions, be permitted to have Parliament Buildings illuminated in a special colour.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Commission member for his answer. Further to the communication of the dates on which the Building is lit up, other Members may have been approached, as I was, about it being lit up in the colours of the French tricolour after the appalling massacre in Paris recently. It is important that the message gets out to the public that there was no response because the system currently does not allow for the Building to be lit up in three colours. Will the new system allow that to happen?

Mr Gardiner: That will be a matter for the Commission to look at. Hopefully, it will meet with your requirements.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Member assure the House that all requests are considered equally, including events such as Pride?

Mr Gardiner: The answer is quick and short; yes.

Parliament Buildings: Flag Security Breach

10. **Mr Dunne** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the investigation into the security breach in June 2015 that resulted in the unauthorised flying of a flag on Parliament Buildings. (AQO 9196/11-16)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gComhalta as an cheist. I thank the Member for his question. I ndiaidh ardú na mbratacha ar 3ú Meitheamh 2015, chríochnaigh Seirbhís Póilíneachta Thuaisceart Éireann a n-imscrúdú thart faoi 15ú de mhí Meán Fómhair 2015. Ach, ainneoin fiosrúcháin a dhéanamh, ní dhearnadh duine ar bith freagrach as. Following the unauthorised flying of the Irish national flag on 3 June 2015, the PSNI concluded its investigation in or around 15 September 2015. However, despite

enquiries, no persons have been made responsible. Dúirt siad freisin nach féidir leo an t-ábhar seo a thabhairt níos faide ag an am seo. The PSNI has indicated that it can take the matter no further at this time.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Member for her answer. Considering that the breach occurred in May this year, as I understand it, does the Member agree that it is important that we get to find out how such a breach occurred and that measures are put in place to stop a recurrence? I am sure that she will agree that it is important that we keep the proper flag flying here.

Ms Ruane: I can certainly agree with the Member that we should keep the proper flags flying. *[Laughter.]* As a member of the Assembly Commission and a representative of a significant number of MLAs, I certainly would like to see my national flag flying — the national flag that our party adheres to. Having said that, I think that, in the interests of moving forward, as an Assembly we should have either equality or neutrality. The Member will be aware that there are currently issues around flags and that there is no consensus in relation to the matter. The best way forward is that we reflect everyone's traditions or nobody's traditions.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as na freagraí sin. I thank the Member for those answers. Does the Assembly Commission believe that Irish citizens should be treated with equality? The Member has just said that; will she confirm it? Would the flying of the Irish national flag better reflect the Assembly and society?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gComhalta as an cheist sin agus aontaím léithi. Speaking as a member of the Assembly Commission, I should say that it has failed to reach consensus on flags. As a member of the Assembly Commission, I would like to see that all our traditions and nationalities are respected. As an Irish republican, I would like to see my flag represented, or we should have a neutral position. It is unfair to have one tradition reflected and others not. An equality impact assessment is currently being carried out, and I hope that, in future, we will be able to ensure that all traditions are reflected. It is a question of equality or neutrality.

Communicating in a Political World

11. **Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission whether the communicating in a

political world event on 10 November 2015 was carried out as part of its agreed external relations strategy. (AQO 9197/11-16)

13. **Mr McElduff** asked the Assembly Commission who organised the communicating in a political world event in Parliament Buildings on 10 November 2015. (AQO 9199/11-16)

Ms Ruane: Le do chead, a Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ceisteanna 11 agus 13 a fhreagairt le chéile. With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I would like to answer questions 11 and 13 together.

D'eagraigh feidhmeannaigh ón Stiúrthóireacht Eolais agus For-rochtana an t-imeacht cumarsáid i nDomhan polaitiúil' ar 12ú de mhí na Samhna 2015. Officials from the information and outreach directorate organised the communicating in a political world event on 10 November 2015.

As I said in an earlier answer, the event was attended by 60 students from Belfast Metropolitan College and Ulster University. The speakers at the event included the spokesperson of the embassy of Israel in London, representatives of the various political parties and representatives of local media organisations. The Member will be aware from my previous answer that contact has been made with the Palestinian Mission in London to arrange the second leg of this event in the same format.

4.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise for my absence during Question Time. Questions proceeded faster than I had anticipated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Speaker will note that.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat).]

Adjournment

Care of Older People: Mid Ulster

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mrs Overend: I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this Adjournment debate to the House, especially on this important issue: care of older people in Mid Ulster. Indeed, I want to thank colleagues for their grace in allowing me to move the debate to today following the passing of my grandmother a fortnight ago. While the topic was not raised with my grandmother in mind, the care that she received both at home from her family members and from a great team of domiciliary carers, who called at her home regularly, certainly informed me of many issues and concerns on this matter.

Our older people are some of the most vulnerable people, both in Mid Ulster and throughout Northern Ireland. Some are cared for in residential homes, some by carers and some by family members. We have all been made aware of the problems faced by older people, especially through the stories of those who have come into our constituency offices. The patients for whom Westlands care home in Cookstown is their home, like so many others in so many other statutory care homes across Northern Ireland, know all too well about the impending closures and what that will mean for them. I presented a petition to one of the Minister's predecessors in July 2013, signed by almost 5,000 people from Mid Ulster who called on him not to close Westlands care home. The following consultation on care home provision in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has closed for responses, but I wonder if those responses will make any difference to the outcome for residents who call places like Westlands home.

I was disappointed that the Minister refused to meet me on this issue. It would have been an opportunity to discuss the concerns of people in the area and the reality on the ground. We know that he was consulting to make Westlands care home into a community hub,

despite much protest against that. I wonder whether that idea is going ahead following this consultation. If so, what exactly will that entail? How will that continue to help the older people in Mid Ulster? Those are questions that remain unanswered.

The problems are not confined to residential care homes under the control of the Minister. No, care homes in the private sector are also crying out for help due to a lack of nursing staff being trained, which is causing them great difficulties. Indeed, in the news this afternoon, we heard of seven care homes closing across Northern Ireland.

As the managing director of one private care home in Mid Ulster who contacted me said:

"There are critical shortfalls [in nursing staff] and unless this is made a priority by the Assembly in terms of future planning and funding, it will undoubtedly result in a much greater crisis."

One would imagine that, with the crisis threatening to develop further, the Minister would seek to address the problem by working with Executive colleagues to find a solution. When I asked the Minister in a question for written answer to detail discussions that he had with the Employment Minister regarding the number of nursing places at universities and colleges, he stated:

"Responsibility for the commissioning of student nursing places in Northern Ireland is entirely a matter for my Department therefore no discussions have taken place with the Minister for Employment and Learning."

The Health Minister, therefore, admits sole responsibility for the lack of numbers and student nurses coming through.

The problem is also being felt in the domiciliary care sector, where there is a severe lack of care staff to fulfil the needs of older people throughout Mid Ulster. The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland recently published a report on 'Domiciliary Care in Northern Ireland'. In the report, she noted:

"there are high levels of inconsistency in the planning and delivery of services across Northern Ireland."

She also noted that receiving good quality domiciliary care in Northern Ireland has become a "postcode lottery".

I have been contacted by many people whose families are being stretched to the absolute limit in their care for elderly and vulnerable family members. The Minister and his predecessors have continued with the policy of closing care homes across Northern Ireland, stating that older people staying in their own homes will ensure that they can retain their independence of living and receive care in a familiar and comfortable environment. I can certainly feel for that idea. In the report, the commissioner describes it as the "lynchpin of Transforming Your Care", noting:

"it is imperative that adequate support and resources are allocated and protected to plan, design, commission and provide high quality care in the home for older people."

However, as the Minister closes care homes in Mid Ulster, and as more and more people will now need specialist care in their own homes, he has failed to ensure that proper domiciliary care provision has been put in place.

One case that I have been dealing with through my constituency office concerns a lady who has been fighting to secure a care package for her uncle, who suffers from Alzheimer's and who requires multiple care visits per day. She has been fighting for that care package for over a year — that is 12 months in which she and her family have been stretched to their limits because the trust and the Department have been unable to find a suitable care package for her uncle. This state of affairs is simply not good enough.

Where carers and care packages are put in place, the carers are being stretched thin on the ground. However, that is hardly surprising when there are not enough care staff employed to cover the needs of older people in need in Mid Ulster. I have had discussions with district nurses and carers who have concerns over the levels of mileage paid for the journeys to and from patients and the difficulties faced by those who travel from one edge of the constituency to the other. The rural nature of Mid Ulster only exacerbates the problems felt by those carers and puts more pressure on the industry.

In the report, the Commissioner for Older People pointed out:

"The work they do is physically and emotionally demanding ... If high quality care is to be available at home for older people who need it, work must begin to address workforce issues to pay, support and enable people to provide this care."

I know from personal experience that these carers provide an excellent and necessary service to many people in Mid Ulster, and they must be given the resources and support to carry out their important work. The Minister is closing care homes under his control, leaving many older people with an uncertain future. He is not training enough nurses to staff private care homes and to provide domiciliary care packages, leaving older people without the care that they will need, now and in the future.

It certainly seems that the Health Minister's policies are not effective and he is failing older people in Mid Ulster and across Northern Ireland. Those are the people who need care and stability the most. I feel that it is not good enough. I appreciate the Minister's presence here this afternoon and I am keen to hear how he plans to rectify those problems and ensure that the older people of Mid Ulster are given the care that they so desperately need.

Mr I McCrea: First, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank Mrs Overend for returning to the debate after the sudden passing of her grandmother. At the wake, I expressed my deepest sympathy to you and your family circle, and I do so again. I know that it was a shock. You spoke of the care that your grandmother got at home. Many older people and their families feel the benefit of getting that care and being able to spend those last moments at home with their loved ones. Many people would prefer that, rather than being in a home. I know that that was appreciated and, having spoken to some of your family members, I know the importance that they felt of having your grandmother at home.

When we look at the wider care of elderly people in the Mid Ulster constituency, it is important to put on record that excellent work is done by many staff who work in residential care or nursing homes across the constituency and across Northern Ireland in caring for our older people. Having spoken to many families who have loved ones and having worked alongside them to ensure that they got into the right care home, I know that they greatly appreciate the work and help that their loved ones received.

I suppose that a lot of this debate will be around the Westlands residential home. I join Mrs Overend in speaking positively about the excellent job that those staff do in looking after the residents. It is disappointing that the debate has got to the point where we are lambasting a DUP Health Minister for decisions and policies with no reference whatsoever to the fact that it was a DUP Minister, Edwin Poots, who stopped

the decision to close the Westlands home as well as the other homes across Northern Ireland, and it was a DUP Minister, Simon Hamilton, who ensured that that decision did not continue.

I apologise for using my mobile phone, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is just for the sake of today's BBC news. It is not often that I give the BBC a plug. I welcome today's announcement by the Health Minister that a number of statutory care homes that may have been facing closure have been given a reprieve due to the problems faced by a private care home firm. The Minister has, once again, stepped in and given further assurance to those care homes that have been under threat that he is stopping that, reviewing it and ensuring that no one is put in any difficult circumstances.

Having spoken to the Minister about previous decisions and since he made this one today, I know that it is not the case, as others would try to say, that this is just putting off a decision. There is a genuine desire to ensure that no one is put out of their home. As Mrs Overend rightly said, for Westlands, many of those who are left feel that it is their home. I commend the Minister for that recent decision. When he responds, maybe he will put some meat on the bones regarding his decision. I welcome the steps that DUP Ministers have taken. I believe that that sends out a positive message to the residents and staff in Westlands and, I hope, cements that for — I cannot say how long — the short to medium term if not into the long term.

4.15 pm

I believe that the Minister is genuine when he says that no current resident of Westlands will be asked to leave. That was a very positive announcement in the past and is a very positive decision that the Minister has now taken. Different things always come down the road at us, but in respect of the decision by —

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

Mr I McCrea: I will give way.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the Member saying that the Minister is giving a reprieve to some of those care homes, and I look forward to the detail on that. However, does the Member agree that the Minister should lift the non-admissions policy for the statutory care homes that are still here?

Mr I McCrea: I was just about to come to that. The Minister and previous Ministers will know that I do not always agree with every decision that is taken. I welcome this decision and believe that it gives us an opportunity. On the back of the unfortunate circumstances for the private care home, the Minister has now announced that he is reviewing the decision that he might have taken. I do not know where he is on that point, but he now has an opportunity to look at admissions, whether full admissions or from a respite perspective. I have no difficulty joining the Member in encouraging, if not asking, the Minister to look again at that policy, specifically for the Westlands home.

I look forward to hearing what other contributors have to say, but I hope that the Minister can put some more meat on the bones, certainly for what it means for Mid Ulster and for Westlands.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mrs Overend for securing the Adjournment debate. I also extend my sincere condolences to you and your family on the recent death of your grandmother.

We live with an ageing population. That is great news for all of us, but it also presents a number of challenges for older people and society as a whole if we are to make the process of growing older as positive and inclusive as possible. According to the 2011 census, almost 18,500 people in Mid Ulster were over the age of 65, and that figure is, thankfully, predicted to rise.

The key barriers for older people are well documented and include poverty, loneliness, fear of crime, ageism, poor health and access to services. Those factors are no different for older people in Mid Ulster, but the largely rural demographic of the constituency can intensify many of those issues. Older people in rural areas can feel very isolated. Limited access to public transport can prevent those who want or need to do so from accessing recreational, medical or other essential services, and severe weather conditions can leave them feeling extremely vulnerable. The impact of social isolation and loneliness on an individual's mental and physical well-being cannot be overestimated, and lack of contact can make it more difficult to identify and assist those in need.

I want to use this opportunity to commend our Minister Michelle O'Neill and her Department for the ongoing work in the tackling rural poverty and social inclusion (TRPSI) framework. That is implementing a package of measures to help

to address a range of issues for vulnerable rural groups, including older people, right across the North. Successful initiatives that have benefited our older population in Mid Ulster include the connecting elderly rural isolated (CERI) programme, which aims to address social isolation and support independent living, the assisted rural travel scheme, and the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project, which seeks to maximise benefit uptake and access to services.

There is plenty still to be done, but the recent review showed that a significant impact has been made. I acknowledge the contributions of the Rural Community Network and the Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network to that review.

Not all difficulties faced by older people in Mid Ulster are related to rural locations and can be addressed by this programme. Over the last number of years, the ability to access full entitlement to care packages has diminished, with options such as direct payments being offered on a more regular basis.

The focus on care in the community and increased demand on the service has led to shorter time slots, domiciliary care workers under increased pressure and many families feeling unsupported by the trust when an elderly relative leaves hospital. That needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, and I met the health trust again recently to raise that issue. The option of nursing care leads to the worry of losing the family home, which is another issue that needs wider discussion.

The proposal to close residential homes has impacted on Mid Ulster and caused a lot of anxiety and worry for residents and families. The campaign to save Westlands care home continues, and I offer the residents and union organisers my full support.

On a personal note, I had several meetings with the Housing Executive to highlight the need for increased provision of sheltered housing for those who wish to avail themselves of that option. I have campaigned for a companionship service for carers of dementia patients using public transport.

I want to use this opportunity to acknowledge the many groups working to address these concerns and enhance the experience of our older population.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that the Member is, like others, aware that an event was held last week by Fold Housing Association in respect of the

58 homes that it is developing in Cookstown. Will the Member join me in welcoming that, given his point in respect of that type of accommodation? Will he join me in welcoming those much-needed homes? Hopefully, we will be able to accommodate some of our elderly population in them. Will he join me in welcoming that?

Mr Milne: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I do welcome that. Anything that assists our elderly population there has to be welcome.

I acknowledge the community and voluntary sector, which runs a number of successful projects in local areas. I recently met Agewell, based in Magherafelt, which provides an invaluable "good morning" service that reassures people that they will be contacted daily, as well as providing a home maintenance and advice service, and I am aware of other local groups, such as Opportunities for Older People and the Mid Ulster Senior Network, to name a few that also do excellent work in this sector.

As an Assembly, we need to continue to break down barriers, listen to the needs and expectations of people advancing in years, and provide the necessary support to the community and voluntary sector, which provides a large portion of the on-the-ground service delivery. Again, I thank the Member for bringing this Adjournment debate.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thanks very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Mrs Overend for bringing the motion, and I extend my personal and sincere sympathy to her and her extended family on the passing of her grandmother. Grandparents in particular can be a close and integral part of any family, so I am very sorry about that, Sandra.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, although it is a difficult subject to speak on. It is a debate that is not only worrying but disheartening at times. Today, I hope I can give voice to not only the elderly people of Mid Ulster but their families.

In Mid Ulster, as was said, we have felt the ongoing reduction of our health services and further closure of several residential care homes. Some of that has been abated. I have to say that the previous Minister did stand by his word and did that. However, there are pressures on local health provision, and that has created uncertainty amongst older people and their families. However, I pay particular

tribute to the carers who look after them, often in very difficult and trying circumstances.

Just today, we heard the news that seven residential care homes are being closed by Four Seasons, right across the North. Indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker, one of them is in your constituency. I realise that the Minister has delayed the consultation on residential care home provision, but I ask him to give clear, unequivocal assurances that places will be found ASAP for people in those homes and that they and their families are not left high and dry. That would really put pressures on people.

Yes, we have the outlook of cutbacks on domiciliary care packages, but I have to say that I have encountered an increasing problem that does not involve cutbacks. In many cases that I have encountered where difficulties arise, resources and finance are there, but the carers — usually for private care — cannot be found. They cannot find people or employees, and that is becoming an intractable problem. People who are ready for discharge from hospital and taking up a hospital bed cannot return home because carers are not there to provide the care package to support them in their own home. That is becoming an intractable problem. You have only to do the maths. I am sure that the Minister, with both his financial accounting hat on and the facts that he has at his fingertips, will be able to outline how much a hospital bed and a care package costs health and social services per day. It is a no-brainer. The sooner we get people out of hospitals, the cheaper it is and the more applicable it is to others who deserve care in hospital.

We have significant reservations about the continual closure of residential care homes across the North when we do not have sufficient funding for home care services. A key aspect of Transforming Your Care was aimed at seeing our home care services properly funded and resourced. Funding and provision for that manpower and womanpower in home care settings is very important if we are to transform your care at all.

In September, the people of Cookstown stood alongside the staff of Westlands Residential Home to demonstrate against the closure of that institution. Westlands, which many MLAs have already said, has faced tremendous adversity over the years, yet staff and residents have remained firm in their support of the home and the people cared for in it.

At Stormont, a similar protest occurred, with about 200 care-home residents, relatives and trades unionists protesting on the steps outside

Parliament Buildings. I, like others, stood alongside them and heard stories of how valuable residential care remains; how it factors into the lives of so many people; how the staff show support and dedication; and how they help to rebuild and support the lives of residents and their families.

When it comes to health concerns, my constituency office primarily deals with fears about the provision, or lack of provision, of home care packages, as I have outlined. Home care for the people of Cookstown, Magherafelt, south Derry, east Tyrone and, indeed, all the rural areas surrounding, remains definitely the preferred option. Care packages allow older people to live as independently as possible, for as long as possible, in the setting that they prefer: their own home. Put simply, home-care domiciliary packages allow for the provision of healthcare to the housebound and disabled; it takes away, or helps to alleviate, some of the strain and stress of travelling for many people. The SDLP believes that older people deserve a high-quality, well-funded service from care workers who are properly trained, committed and rewarded for the complex care that they provide to patients at home.

I recognise that the Health Minister must make difficult decisions in an uncertain economic climate, but, in the light of figures that suggest that there will be a 69% growth in the population aged over 75, it is only natural to be concerned about any major change to the delivery of domiciliary care in Mid Ulster or, indeed, across the North.

Northern Ireland's ageing population requires new approaches that accommodate older people and do not invalidate them as citizens. Financial responsibility is crucial, but to focus entirely on strict financial controls and cuts is to lose sight of the reality of patient and community needs.

4.30 pm

I go back to my point: the longer someone who is fit for discharge is in a hospital bed, the greater the backlog of people who require those hospital beds and the smaller the chance of that person being looked after properly, and adequately cared for, in their home environment as a citizen. We need to bolster care in the community to reduce pressures, and strategies for the wider health service must be based fundamentally on patient needs and not exclusively on the financial bottom line. People in Mid Ulster and, arguably, all of Northern Ireland need clarity. If the Health Department

remains committed to the ideals of Transforming Your Care, we must see continued support for domiciliary care packages. If, however, the ideals of the health service have shifted, local residential care must be supported.

The people of Mid Ulster — indeed, the people of the North — do not deserve half measures. I support the motion and, again, thank Mrs Overend for introducing it.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I begin by joining others in passing on my condolences to Mrs Overend and her family on the recent loss of her grandmother.

I thank her for proposing the Adjournment debate. I have listened to the range of views expressed by Members — the hardy few who are in the Chamber at this time — and I will do my best to respond to most of the issues raised. I would also like to take the opportunity to outline and highlight some of the work being undertaken by my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the trusts to provide care for older people across Northern Ireland.

The continuing growth in demand for services for our older people should not be and is not underestimated by my Department, and I believe that we are taking steps through Transforming Your Care and other initiatives to provide and improve those services. The growth in demand was also one of the main reasons why I recently outlined the need to significantly reform our health and social care system

It is widely recognised that Northern Ireland, like many other countries, has an ageing population, something that is very good. Projections from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) indicate that the population aged 65 and over will increase by 26% — 71,000 people — by 2022. While, of course, it is a significant achievement that people live longer than ever before, it is essential that government in Northern Ireland faces up to the challenges presented by an ageing population.

The process of reform to meet the challenges confronting the provision of health and social care in Northern Ireland did not start with Transforming Your Care. However, TYC identified in a single comprehensive document the serious pressures facing the health and social care system going forward. The review set out a very strong case for change, recognising that no change was simply not an

option, and made proposals on where service changes would have most impact on those challenges.

TYC made the case that preventative approaches can deliver better outcomes and set proposals on supporting older people, including home as the hub of care for older people, with more services being provided at home and in the community; a major reduction in statutory residential accommodation for older people as a result of a focus on promoting healthy ageing, individual resilience and independence; and a diverse choice of provision to meet the needs of older people, with appropriate regulation and safeguards to ensure quality and protect the vulnerable.

Despite the financial pressures that have slowed the transition to the model of care envisaged in TYC, steady progress has been made in transforming health and social care service delivery. Projects directly addressing the need for services designed to meet the needs of older people include the adoption of a regional approach to the delivery of reablement services that help people to remain independent at home for longer; reviewing domiciliary care provision, linked to the work on reablement, with the aim of providing a consistent service across Northern Ireland; and the promotion of self-directed support, which empowers service users and carers to exercise more control over their social care services by giving service users as much control as they want over their personal budget, the amount of money identified and allocated by the health and social care trust to meet their assessed needs. That enables service users to make informed choices about how and when services are provided.

We have also established 17 integrated care partnerships (ICPs), which all have agreed action plans in place as well as funding for a range of service change initiatives. The initial focus of ICPs is on frail older people and those, regardless of age, with certain long-term conditions such as stroke, diabetes and respiratory conditions. Alongside the review of care pathways, they are engaged in risk stratification work to identify patients in the priority areas — stroke, diabetes, respiratory conditions and frail elderly — who are at significant risk of poor outcomes because of their condition. That work will enable GPs to identify patients who are at risk and therefore require proactive case management to help them to manage their condition effectively and to avoid unnecessary acute admissions.

I am aware that Members have in the past and this evening raised concerns about the proposed closure of statutory residential care homes in their constituencies, including the proposed closure of the Westlands nursing home in Cookstown. Trusts have been engaging in consultations, with three already complete and two still outstanding. When concluded, those proposals are to be forwarded to the board for consideration before they come to me for a final decision. To date, none of them has made it as far as the Department. In spite of what Mrs Overend said, I have not closed any homes.

I have been increasingly concerned about a range of pressures facing the independent sector and particular problems facing one of the largest independent providers of residential care in Northern Ireland. I have been keeping developments under constant review, and, as a consequence of those growing concerns and further negative developments today regarding plans by Four Seasons Health Care to close seven homes across Northern Ireland, I am asking the Health and Social Care Board to halt and review the proposed closures of statutory residential care homes. Given that many of the proposals are predicated on spare local capacity in the independent sector, it is only right and proper to pause, reflect and give careful consideration to issues arising in the independent sector.

Mr McGlone raised issues around the 250 or so people who would be affected, never mind the 300 or more staff who would be affected. However, he raised particular concern about what would happen to the residents in the seven homes that are proposed for closure. The board is working closely with my colleagues in the Department, the RQIA and the health and social care trusts. They are working together and will continue to work closely with Four Seasons to ensure that there is regional and local coordination in managing the process of moving people away from the homes that are earmarked for closure.

I also want to put it on the record that the continued well-being of residents will be the priority in dealing with any future transition to alternative care arrangements. The intention is to ensure that any relocation will be managed with minimal disruption to them, that they are able to remain as close to the original location as possible and that there will be no additional financial implications created by the move. All the organisations that I mentioned, including the owner of the homes involved, are committed to ensuring that there is clear, regular communication with residents and their

representatives to address any concerns that may arise. I assure the Member and the House that, as Minister, I will, as far as I can in respect of a decision made by a private company, ensure that that is done as well as is possible.

Recently, the outgoing Commissioner for Older People highlighted her concerns about the domiciliary care sector at the Health Committee and in her report 'Domiciliary Care in Northern Ireland'. First, I assure Members that my Department is committed to providing a high-quality domiciliary care service to support our older people to remain in their homes. Although I was disappointed by the way in which the report was published, it is, as we have discussed today, clearly a crucial area. The Department recognises that the domiciliary care sector faces significant challenges, as so many sectors do. To address those issues, the Health and Social Care Board has published its report entitled 'A Managed Change: An Agenda for Creating a Sustainable Basis for Domiciliary Care in Northern Ireland'. It is intended that the review will shape the future of domiciliary care provision, taking into account the financial and other challenges facing the sector. My officials, in conjunction with colleagues in the board, are reviewing both reports, and I look forward to receiving their recommendations on the way forward.

My Department is aware that the independent sector providers are experiencing recruitment and retention difficulties as their need for registered nurses increases to meet the needs of a growing complexity of care in the sector. The Department recently completed a nursing and midwifery workforce review that included the independent, voluntary and private sectors, and officials are considering its implementation. It highlights evidence of a global shortage of nurses at present and emphasises the need to retain newly qualified nurses to work in Northern Ireland. One of the recommendations of the workforce review is that all employers review their recruitment processes and work to make their organisations employers of choice to encourage the retention and recruitment of nurses. A number of initiatives outlined in the workforce review are being considered to support the independent sector. A career pathway for nursing and midwifery in Northern Ireland has been developed and is intended to encourage nurses to see Northern Ireland as a place of opportunity. It has a section devoted to the independent sector.

In conclusion, I thank everyone for their contribution. I hope that Members can see from what I have said that, as Minister, I am aware of the concerns not just of those who are present

today but of our older people and the people who care for them, whether they are family or friends or professional health and social care staff. I am also aware of the pressures, financial and other, on our statutory bodies and the independent sector, which provide important, valuable and professional services to our older people. Finally, I put on record my appreciation to everyone who provides support and assistance to our older community, as, without their dedication, a lot of our older people would be worse off.

Adjourned at 4.41 pm.

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