



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Contents

Assembly Business	1
Public Petition: Killard House School	1
Ministerial Statements	
Rural Roads Initiative	2
GCSE Qualification Market and Grading.....	5
Executive Committee Business	
Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016.....	10
State Pension (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016.....	10
State Pension (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016	10
Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016.....	10
Committee Business	
Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members.....	13
Opposition Business	
Mental Health Champion	20
Oral Answers to Questions	
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	36
Communities.....	44
Adjournment	
Learning Disability Services: Western Health and Social Care Trust	53

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Aiken, Stephen (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Archibald, Ms Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Farry, Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hanna, Ms Claire (South Belfast)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Little Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)
Lockhart, Ms Carla (Upper Bann)
Logan, Phillip (North Antrim)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Eamonn (Foyle)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuinness, Martin (Foyle)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKee, Harold (South Down)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNulty, Justin (Newry & Armagh)
McPhillips, Richie (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
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Mullan, Gerry (East Londonderry)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
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Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
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Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Seeley, Ms Catherine (Upper Bann)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Smith, Philip (Strangford)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Order Paper makes provision for a ministerial statement on a rural roads initiative from the Minister for Infrastructure. Will you confirm that the House should be the first to know about this statement and that the Minister is wrong and disrespectful to the House to have trumpeted it in the media earlier today?

Mr Speaker: I will return to that matter as we progress through today's agenda.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At Question Time yesterday, Mr Wells tabled a question relating to the Ballynahinch bypass. Just before Ms Armstrong spoke, you warned her that it was a constituency issue, and she correctly pointed out that it was an issue that affected Strangford at least as much as South Down. On a subsequent question of mine relating to rail services in South Antrim and Lagan Valley, Mr Durkan asked a question that was completely outwith that constituency, and yet the Minister answered it. Will you give some thought to providing guidance, perhaps before we resume in September, to ensure that, when you make rulings like that, they are enforced in a way that stops other Members trumpeting specific constituency issues?

Mr Speaker: I have noted your comments, Mr Ford.

Public Petition: Killard House School

Mr Speaker: Ms Kellie Armstrong has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Armstrong: It is a privilege to present this petition with over 1,500 signatures calling for the Minister of Education to install a sixth form for children with medium learning difficulties (MLD) at Killard House School in Donaghadee. I present the petition on behalf of the young

people who are students at Killard House School and their parents, and those future students who very much want to go to a school where they will have provision right through to the age of 19.

I pay tribute to head girl, Erin, and head boy, Joseph, and their parents, and the very many parents in attendance in the Public Gallery, who fight every day for the best possible outcomes for children with learning difficulties. I pay tribute to the passion and patient determination that all have shown throughout this process.

Killard House School is not supported to provide post-16 provision. At the age of 15 or 16, vulnerable children have no choice but to leave their protective school environment at far too young an age. The result is that some are less likely to flourish and are placed under the unnecessary stress of having to deal with the adult world when their peers who do not have a disability can enjoy two more years in a protective and nurturing school environment while completing their A levels.

MLD sixth form is proven to work. The Education Authority already supports post-16 MLD provision at Beechlaw School. There, children are provided with appropriate classes and courses suited to meet their needs, including travel training, skills for employment and life skills. The sixth form is full and achieving real difference in students' lives. Results show that when Beechlaw students leave, they are more able and prepared for life after school.

On 15 April, the Education Authority met the Killard board of governors and head teachers and discussed the possibility of a temporary trial and then permanent sixth form. The Education Authority knows that there are enough students to fill a sixth form and that there would be no capital cost as Killard has classroom space to accommodate them. Since April, parents have been frustrated by the lack of progress. The Education Authority cannot give any assurances because the Minister has yet to complete the draft area plan for special

schools. Parents know that the plan is only one step in a very long bureaucratic process. This petition challenges all that red tape. If the Education Authority is prepared to trial a temporary sixth form anyway, why will it take over a year to implement? Will the Minister meet and explain this to the parents, please?

Parents remind the Minister of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and, in particular, article 2, which deals with non-discrimination, and article 3, which deals with the best interests of the child. Erin, Joseph and all the signatories feel strongly that the Education Authority is failing to meet its statutory section 75 obligations under the Good Friday Agreement. They ask the Minister for an urgent review and to ensure that appropriate 16-plus provision is made available as soon as possible at Killard House School.

Ms Armstrong moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will present a copy of the petition to the Minister and the Committee.

Ministerial Statements

Rural Roads Initiative

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that he wishes to make a statement on the rural roads initiative. I am aware that there has been a lot of coverage of his statement in the press this morning. I am sure that he was keen to highlight the planned investment. I know that the Minister is only recently in post, but I would like to gently remind him of the requirement of Standing Order 18A(3) not to give a statement to the media before it has been made available to Members. I hope that, in future, he and other Ministers will remember to observe this courtesy to the House.

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will certainly bear that in mind. I hope that broadcasting institutions will also bear in mind the importance of embargoes. Perhaps we could all get together in future on these sorts of issues.

As a Minister who represents the rural constituency of South Down, I am only too aware of the issues being raised about the maintenance of our rural roads network: maintenance issues gleaned from talking and listening to people and communities on the ground; the frustrations and annoyances of

rural communities having to tolerate the inconvenience, and even the potential dangers, of the poor condition of many rural roads; the number of potholes, the time taken to repair them and the resultant damage to vehicles; and the general inconvenience caused.

People and communities rely on the rural roads network to do business, go to work, go to school and socialise. Rural roads are the connections that enable people to live their lives and help to reduce isolation. Many rural communities are isolated enough without having to endure the additional difficulties imposed by inadequate road conditions. People living in rural areas are just as important to me and my Executive colleagues as those who live in cities and larger towns. Over this mandate, they will see action that reflects this assurance.

Today, I am taking action to address the concerns of rural communities. I am announcing a rural roads initiative to address maintenance backlogs. Over recent years, resource funding pressures required the former Department for Regional Development to reduce significantly its routine road maintenance activities. Resources, by necessity, were concentrated on urban and rural roads with heavier traffic. This meant that more roads did not receive the same level of maintenance as in previous years.

On 14 June, the Finance Minister announced the outcome of June monitoring. As a result of the capital allocation to my Department, I am pleased to be able to announce to the House today that the £10 million rural roads initiative will be launched. The rural roads initiative will target sections of the network in greatest need of repair, with the £10 million funding targeted at the areas of greatest need right across the four Transport NI divisions. The £10 million will deliver up to 1,000 small-scale resurfacing schemes on short lengths of rural roads with high numbers of potholes. The schemes will start immediately so that the benefits will be realised as early as possible. Improving these roads will make a real difference to the lives of those living in rural communities. I have asked my officials to identify the sections in greatest need and to start work as soon as possible.

Rural constituencies right across the North will soon be able to see the benefits. The initiative will not, of course, solve all the problems on our roads, but I believe that it is a very positive measure to address a clear need.

In addition to resurfacing, the funding will allow for some road drainage enhancements on rural

roads and a reasonable level of pre-surface dressing patching in advance of next year's surface dressing programme.

I hope that the House will welcome this initiative. I want to be a listening Minister, and I want to be prepared to take action where it is needed. I have listened to the concerns about the condition of rural roads, and, today, I am taking action.

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Minister for his statement. Whilst I welcome the announcement of the £10 million being spent on rural roads, it is only a drop in a pothole. That amount alone would need to be spent in my constituency to cover the rural roads. We need a coordinated approach to investment in our roads infrastructure and not the current piecemeal approach. Will the Minister outline his assessment of the impact of a lack of access to European regional infrastructure funds on his budget? Where does he expect to get money to supplement his budget if he cannot access European funding? What will be the impact on Northern Ireland's infrastructure as access to European regional infrastructure funds is curtailed?

In the statement, you say that £10 million on rural roads. Well, really that covers —

Mr Speaker: Can I ask —

Mrs Palmer: Minister, that covers some 7.5 — I am just finishing —

Mr Speaker: We are not here for statements; it is questions on the statement.

Mrs Palmer: I am just questioning now. Is 7.5 kilometres across Northern Ireland the extent of what the budget refers to for potholes?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for her list of questions. I will start by saying that the £5 million that I announced for road maintenance as part of the June monitoring round a couple of weeks ago will deal with the majority of potholes. The investment that we are announcing is more strategic, and the experts have told us to have a more stitch-in-time-saves-nine approach to it. As you said, £10 million is only a start. I would love to be announcing £100 million or £200 million, and I am sure that the Health Minister would rather have £50 billion than £5 billion, but we are dealing with reality. I think that this is a good start. It is something that I hope we can build on, going forward.

Finally, in relation to the impact of the British referendum on the so-called Brexit, the initiative deals with rural roads and, to a large extent, our comprehensive roads network. To a large extent, such roads would not be reliant on European money, so the money to deal with them is strictly from our own budget.

Mr Humphrey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I thank the Minister for the announcement. Any announcement on improvement to infrastructure in Northern Ireland is to be welcomed. Is this additional money to the £5 million that he announced yesterday, which was to enhance road maintenance service? Are there any particular areas in Northern Ireland that he plans to target with the £10 million investment?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Chair for his question. It is £10 million in addition to the £5 million that was previously allocated to deal with road maintenance. The £10 million will be spread across the North and targeted at the areas of greatest need. Depending on the work that needs to be done and the high density of rural roads in some parts compared to others, where there is greatest need, resources will be skewed.

Mr McAleer: I very much welcome the Minister's announcement this morning. He has proved that he is listening, and it follows on from an Adjournment debate that we had on this very subject a number of weeks ago. Whilst many people will welcome the announcement, they will want to know how soon the money will be released and how quickly they will see differences on the ground in rural areas.

Mr Hazzard: I hope that they will see differences as soon as possible. We have given the instruction to start looking at the work immediately. The summer months present the best opportunity to get value for money when it comes to resurfacing projects.

I hope that, as some have said, people will see the tar men out on the roads starting to get into it. I said during the Adjournment debate on West Tyrone that places such as Aghyaran and Edendarriff in our rural communities are as important to me as Derry and Belfast, and I hope that today goes some way to illustrating that that is the case.

10.45 am

Mr McNulty: What proportion of the funding will be available to Newry and Armagh?

Mr Hazzard: Funding will not be broken down into constituencies, as you would expect. Southern division, which covers a lot of that area, will receive a substantial amount of the £10 million, as will the western division. They have a high density of rural roads. I expect that the Newry and Armagh constituency, like my constituency of South Down and those in the west of the Province, which have such a high density of rural roads, will receive a substantial amount of this money.

Ms Armstrong: I am a new breed of politician, so I will start off slightly differently. Thank you: a £10 million investment in rural roads is exactly what I asked you to do in my second question at the Infrastructure Committee. Credit where credit is due. It is a start. Thank you very much.

In line with the Transport Committee in the House of Commons, we know that it costs more to patch over patches. With that in mind, first, when will your Department instigate the strategic plan to deal with the ongoing issue of maintenance of rural and urban roads to ensure that we can maintain efficiencies as well as repair our roads on an ongoing basis? Secondly, if or when you are able to, can you provide us with a list of the areas where the £10 million —

Mr Speaker: Ms Armstrong, I have been very liberal with other Members, but I ask you to come to a question that is relevant to the Minister's statement.

Ms Armstrong: When will the strategic plan be drawn up, and can we have a list of areas where the £10 million will be spent?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for her questions and her kind remarks at the start. After speaking to divisional managers this morning, I have no doubt that they will come under an onslaught of requests from Members about their areas. I make a plea to let them get out and get the work done and for us not to have the onslaught so quickly. That will become apparent in the weeks ahead, through the recess and into September. I will be more than happy to engage with the Committee again if that is the case.

I agree entirely about the need for more strategic investment in our rural roads and in our roads in general. We were in Rotterdam this week looking at various ways in which

Europe can play a role. This is topical given the recent referendum, but we need to find innovative and more strategic ways to invest in our rural roads. Simply spending money on pothole repair is not good in the long term. It is not a good way in which to spend our money. That is why I hope that the likes of this scheme can be more strategic and be more than simply throwing a bit of tar into the odd pothole.

Mr Easton: I welcome the statement from the Minister. Although £10 million is going to the rural network, can he give a guarantee that the urban network will not suffer as a result of the funding going there?

Mr Hazzard: I am happy to give a guarantee to the extent that there is the need to address an imbalance. For so long, our heavier-traffic roads have got priority, so there has been a need to do this, and I think that there will be an ongoing need. These are additional funds, which are not taking away from the level of spend that we will be carrying out anyway. As I say, the high-priority cases are very often heavier-traffic roads in urban areas and our busier rural roads.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I brought up with him 10 minutes after he took up post that one of the biggest issues in rural areas is the state of rural roads, and I am glad that he has acted quickly on that. Will he liaise with his divisional officers and engineers on how the money will be spent?

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat for the question. I will indeed. Our divisional managers and teams are the experts when it comes to this. I want to give them the flexibility and room to be able to spend the money as they see fit. They are the guys on the ground who know where that money is needed, and I am happy to give them that level of autonomy when it comes to that sort of money. In the months ahead, I certainly think that local communities will see a benefit, and that is a positive in the round.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the statement from the Minister and his initiative on roads maintenance in relation to weed spraying and the cutting of grass. Those are very important issues for my constituents in North Down. From working with Transport NI, I understand that there is a real problem in getting contractors, who have been stood down over recent years, ramped up and available to carry out that work. Will it be a challenge to complete the work within this financial year?

Mr Hazzard: No. There is an insatiable appetite for these sort of works throughout the North, and I do not think that it will present any sort of challenge in that way. We are more than happy to look at the contractor issue if it arises, but I do not believe that it will be a problem.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his announcement and welcome it. For someone who represents a rural constituency, it is most welcome to hear this announcement. I want to ask about the connectivity that the Minister's Department will have regarding the roads that were damaged by floods, particularly in the Bannfoot area in Upper Bann, where a number of roads were badly damaged by flooding. Has the Minister given any thought to the link-up with DAERA on that point?

Mr Hazzard: The June monitoring round allowed us to secure a number of resources to deal with some of the roads that had been damaged by flooding. I know that particular works are already under way in Fermanagh, and that may be the case in point that you have raised. If there are roads in need — and I think this should be stressed — it will be the areas that are in greatest need that will receive the money. I am more than happy to meet the Member to discuss that in further detail.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the Minister's statement. I was pleased to hear that:

"Rural constituencies right across the North will soon be able to see the benefits."

I suppose that it would be too much to ask that when the Minister referred to "the North" he was talking about the northern division in particular. That would have been much more pleasing. Will he elaborate on how the criteria for who and which projects will be eligible for the funding will be set out?

Mr Hazzard: I am more than happy to do that. Allocations will be made using a range of weighted indicators that are based on the number of defects, the number of public liability claims and the carriageway area, together with the road condition from various surveys. I go back to the fact that our divisional managers know their areas very well. They are the guys who will take the lead on it and will know where that investment is needed in local areas.

Mr Dickson: Thank you for your statement, Minister. Following on from my colleague, I would certainly welcome any investment that would be made in rural roads in east Antrim, but I am also concerned about urban roads. Will

the Minister explain to us what plans he has to invest in the resurfacing of urban roads, many of which, in housing developments, are in exactly the same state as rural roads?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his question. As I said earlier, I am not suggesting that this will be the only roads maintenance that will take place. There is £54 million set aside for structural maintenance, and that will continue in all other areas.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister on his statement.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In light of the Minister's reference to media embargos and the clear hint that an embargo was broken, it would only be fair to moderate my criticism that the House was not the first to hear of the statement accordingly if the breach was beyond the Minister's control.

Mr Speaker: I have noted your comments, Mr Nesbitt.

GCSE Qualification Market and Grading

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister of the requirement under Standing Order 18 for statements to be made available to Members as early as possible and at least 30 minutes before their delivery.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that admonishment. I thought that the statement had been made available. Was it not? It was supposed to have been.

Mr Speaker: The statement is available now, but it was not available 30 minutes before it was to be delivered.

Mr Weir: OK. The earlier indicative timings had this being slightly later.

I wish to make an announcement on the GCSE qualification market and associated grades awarded in Northern Ireland. GCSEs form a core aspect of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. Not only are they the qualifications to be taken, but they constitute a standard to which the great majority of our learners aspire at the end of compulsory education. We are very successful in Northern Ireland, with a higher percentage of pupils here consistently achieving five GCSEs, or more, including English and maths, than their

counterparts in England and Wales. Obviously, we tend to have better qualifications, albeit of a slightly different nature, than Scotland as well.

It is essential that our young people, schools, parents and employers have confidence in the GCSEs available here. GCSEs must be understood and recognised wherever they are taken, and they must support the attainment and progression of our learners. For those reasons, I have reviewed the existing policies in relation to GCSEs, in line with my desire for a child-centred education system.

Schools need to have access to qualifications designed here in Northern Ireland that meet the needs of our learners and economy. That being the case, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will continue to offer GCSEs with distinctive characteristics that are valued by schools here. We have a statutory curriculum of which we can be proud, and it is important that there is a GCSE offer that reflects the qualities of that curriculum, with its recognition of skills development and employability in the 21st century. It is equally important that teachers and school leaders are free to exercise their professional discretion in choosing exam specifications that can help their pupils to enjoy learning and to achieve and which are relevant to the needs of our economy and society.

Our qualifications system has worked well for the pupils of Northern Ireland down the years, but, in light of the changes in England, concerns have arisen, namely around the comparability and portability of our local GCSE qualifications and the continuation of the open market in qualifications for schools in Northern Ireland. The overriding concern about the former is that no pupil in Northern Ireland should run the risk of being disadvantaged. In particular, that relates to two aspects: the top end of qualifications, which particularly impact on the issue of places on high-demand, high-qualification degree courses; and the mid-range qualifications that could have an impact on future employment in other parts of the United Kingdom. While the numbers potentially impacted by those problems are likely to be low, they are real concerns that need to be addressed.

Similarly, on probably the bigger issue of the impact of the qualifications market in Northern Ireland, was the announcement of the withdrawal from the Northern Ireland GCSE market of exam boards Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) and, latterly, Pearson. That restricts choice for

schools and pupils. It also leaves gaps in the provision of some subjects that would have to be filled very quickly by the local development of new courses, which would be at a cost to the public purse.

While others may have been distracted by side issues, it is those core issues of comparability, portability and the open market that I have concentrated on and sought outcomes to resolve. On comparability and portability, it is necessary to give some clarity on grading. The new grading system in England is to be anchored to the alphabetical grades at two points: the bottom of grade 4 will be anchored to the bottom of grade C, and the bottom of grade 7 will be anchored to the bottom of grade A. Those shall provide the necessary points of reference.

I propose that the alphabetical grading of CCEA's GCSEs will remain consistent with the alphabetical grading in the past, with two exceptions. First, in order to ensure that our highest achievers can demonstrate comparable excellence with their contemporaries in England, CCEA will realign the A* to reflect the level of attainment at grade 9 in the nine to one GCSEs. That will not only restore the distinction of the A* as a mark of outstanding achievement but will restore the value of the grade A as a high-level achievement within the reach of our most able learners.

Secondly, in England, it has been decided that grade 5 shall be the benchmark performance measure for attainment at Key Stage 4. That grade is higher than grade C, which marks the boundary of the level-2 qualification in all GCSEs. That achievement is a core element of the Programme for Government (PFG) framework. Linking in at level-2 qualification as a bottom point is also an internationally recognised comparison. In order not to disadvantage our young people because of the changes at grade 5, CCEA will, additionally, be asked to identify a new reference point on the grading scale to equate to grade 5. This new grade, C*, will provide additional information on the level of attainment.

11.00 am

On the issue of the examination market, this includes choosing alternative specifications to those offered by CCEA in certain subjects as well as having access to a range of specifications that CCEA does not offer. Rather than restrict schools in their choice, they should have a wider range of GCSEs to choose from, including those in England under the recent reforms, which range from grade 9 to grade 1. I

have therefore decided to lift the current restriction on the accreditation of those GCSEs. There are a small number of curriculum-based exceptions to the reopening of the market and they reflect continuity with the statutory curriculum in Northern Ireland and the views of key stakeholders, including educationalists and the business community. Specifically, it shall remain the case that the assessment of speaking and listening, on which the House may sometimes fall short on assessment, must be included and contribute towards the overall grade in the award of GCSE English Language. Also, consistent with the policy at A level, the assessment of practical skills must be included and contribute towards the overall grade in the award of GCSE sciences.

By reopening the market in this way, our learners will be able to access GCSE courses leading to alphabetical and numerical grades. Depending on the decisions of schools, some young people will leave school with a record of attainment that consists of a mixture of letters and numbers. The practice is little different from what happens now with the mixture of qualifications that school-leavers can get at level 2 with GCSEs, BTEC, level-2 certificates and diplomas, which are expressed in different ways. I am pleased to inform Members that, in light of my decision, AQA, OCR and Pearson exam bodies have confirmed to the Department in writing that they will make their GCSE specifications available here again with immediate effect. They have, in effect, reversed their decision.

In conclusion, I am satisfied that this revision of policy preserves the best in our existing qualifications system while opening up the opportunity for our young people to access a wider range of subject specifications. It addresses the challenges of comparability and portability to the overall benefit of our learners and the economy.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I thank you for your statement and welcome the reopening of the market choice for teachers and pupils from the other examining boards. I think that this is very welcome here in our schools. However, in relation to comparability and portability, will the addition of a further grade, C*, not add further confusion to the grades? Would it not have been simpler to have adopted the English numerical system for everybody?

Mr Weir: I think that the Member raised at the Committee that the key issues for individuals are comparability and portability, and she is right. Members have to realise that it is not simply a case of shifting to the numerical grade

9 to grade 1 system. The English changes that were made went well beyond simply grade 9 to grade 1 and created a new system that involves a removal of modularisation. It removed practical classes, and it moved the shift away from skills base in terms of examination results. If you are going to change to the numerical system, a number of years' worth of work will be required. Indeed, even in England, they are phasing the implementation of this in over a three-year period, so it is not something that could be done even if it were desirable. I think that some aspects of the changes in England would not be to the advantage of some of our pupils here.

If you simply shift over to grades 9 to 1, you are still left with the position of people, particularly when it comes to the job market, trying to compare different qualifications at different levels. For example, it would mean that, in the case of somebody who had graduated with grades 9 to 1 and was competing with somebody who had qualified under the old alphabetical system, an employer would be making judgements between letters and numbers. Whatever you do, there will be a level of disjoint. The important thing is the alignment of the C* grade with grade 5, which is what will be recognised across the water as being the benchmark. You then create direct comparability and portability. The case is similar for the A* grade, which will, in particular, impact on high-level results. That is the change that needs to be made, and that is what will bring things into line. I think that, while there is no perfect solution, this is the best solution that can be offered.

Mr McElduff (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement to the House and for meeting me and the Clerk of the Committee earlier to give me a heads-up on this matter, and for taking receipt of two letters that I handed to him from Irish-medium schools regarding the withdrawal of nurture unit funding.

One of the ways in which our education system ensures equality is through our qualifications system. Our GCSEs are rightly recognised as being of very good quality. So, in just setting the context for my main question, I say that the Minister has taken an approach different from the previous Minister. Perhaps he could explain why. Does the Minister think that the qualifications evolution in England has finished its journey or does he believe that we will have to make further changes to our system in order to maintain GCSE comparability and portability? What are the educational arguments, and how is this pupil-centred?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his comments. I know that this is not directly related to the statement, but I assure him that all schools will be treated on an equal basis moving forward. While there are legal issues in relation to the former issue, it is not a case of money being withdrawn. Just to clarify, money was sought that was not there, then money was not given to the Department on that basis, so it was not a case of money that was agreed and then cut.

The Member talks about the evolution of the system. As a good DUP man, I would not be the biggest fan of evolution. Taking the issue seriously, why was there a need for a degree of change? Broadly speaking, the overall qualifications system within Northern Ireland has worked well, so I was not looking for revolution. Keeping the bulk of the system is the right way of doing it.

I was trying to address specific concerns that relate to potential acceptance into universities and acceptance in the wider context of the job market, but also the real pressure that came from schools. They said that they would have to change their specifications and develop new exam courses, so it is about giving that level of choice to people. This is a practical solution to be able to provide that choice while retaining the many good aspects of our curriculum and qualifications system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can the Minister further explain how this proposal improves portability and comparability of qualifications in Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: One of the biggest issues for schools is the open market, but for individual pupils, parents and teachers quite often comparability and portability will be key. Sometimes, this may be more a perception than a frequent reality but there will be a concern that if there is not that comparability and portability, an individual pupil will be adversely affected in entry to the jobs market or in qualification.

The two key changes, plus the affirmation of another situation, will ensure that comparability and portability. First of all, the recalibrated A+ will mean that there is parity with grade 9, which may well mean that in some cases where there is a final decision to be taken at university on a high-specification course that requires high qualifications, that person can be guaranteed not to be disadvantaged. Similarly, national employers may well look in years to come at the issue of a grade 5 as being the minimum qualification required to obtain a job. The

development of the C* allows that direct comparability.

On the issue of portability and comparability, it is also important to note what has been retained. By anchoring the bottom of the C to the grade 4 as the minimum point for level 2 qualification, that is internationally recognised and means that from an international perspective, and indeed a national perspective, pupils in Northern Ireland will not be disadvantaged on that front either.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the announcement from the Minister this morning. Were schools thoroughly consulted regarding these changes, given that one sector — the IME — was outside this morning and felt thoroughly disappointed about not being consulted about changes that impacted it?

Mr Weir: With respect, the IME issue is a separate issue in terms of funding. As I indicated, there has maybe been a little bit of misinformation in relation to that, because it was not a question of money being cut. It was the fact that money had not been provided externally to the Department in connection with that, so the money was never there in the first place.

Communication is always important. Steps will be taken to ensure that schools are notified. The Member will realise that, in trying to sort out this problem, we have had considerable feedback on earlier decisions from schools, many of which want it sorted. I have been trying to give certainty on the issue, and the reason why it has happened as quickly as it has is that I wanted to give schools a level of certainty before the end of the school term. I think that, from that point of view, schools, generally speaking, will be happy with the decision. Clearly, we will inform schools on that basis to ensure that they are brought up to speed. Do not forget that this is ultimately about the position of schools and giving them the flexibility of choice. No one is suggesting that schools have to take the AQA, OCR or Pearson route, although a number of schools use them at present; they represent about a quarter of the market. Schools will make individual choices; it is about giving them flexibility. There is no imposition on schools in that sense — quite the reverse.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement. The mixing of numbers and letters is undoubtedly confusing for students and teachers. Will he assure the House that, after the changes he has made today, employers

and further education establishments will have a thorough understanding of the value of the numbers and letters?

Mr Weir: It is important that there is proper communication with people. Do not forget that, had we simply moved to a 9-to-1 system, there would also have been confusion — different confusion, but confusion nonetheless. The Department has produced a grid — I cannot lay my hands on it — showing everything clearly. It might be described as idiot-proof; I was just about able to grasp it, so it passed the test on that basis.

The key element, particularly for employment, is minimum grades. If we have a situation where, nationally, a grade 5, instead of being the cut-off point in terms of level 2 is regarded as the minimum requirement for a job, aligning a new C* with that will mean that there is no disadvantage and that it is clearly understood by employers over there. The same can apply here, and if, in one year's time or two years' time, employers in other parts of the United Kingdom treat a grade 5 as the minimum qualification for employment, it may well be that quite a few employers in Northern Ireland simply adopt a position. Therefore, we are keeping people in step with developments from the point of view of their employability both inside and outside Northern Ireland.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is certainly encouraging to hear the handle that he has on the issue. Will he further explain what actions he will take to communicate this to schools and teachers?

Mr Weir: It is important that the message gets out. I suspect that it is reasonably well known, but, to be certain, my school — sorry — my Department is writing to all schools today about the decision on grading — there was maybe a slight Freudian slip there — and its impact on availability so that schools are completely informed.

Consultation was mentioned. As for communication, the first to be notified of my final decision — I am sure that the Speaker would admonish me otherwise — has been the House — indeed the Chair — because it is important to give Members priority. I could, at the end of last week, have written to schools to let them know what was happening, but it is important that the first to learn about this is the Chamber. However, that will be done today, and schools will, therefore, know what the position is before the end of term.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for his statement and the opportunity to question him this morning. I am sure that he does not need me to tell him that grading GCSEs alphabetically or numerically does not change how a pupil performs, so I question the educational argument behind his decision. However, given his comment on and commitment to child-centred education, will he give assurances that, as well as taking action to improve GCSE attainment, he will do all he can to extend full-time special school and preschool provision to as many children as possible, including to children whose parents want to send them to Fleming Fulton School?

11.15 am

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that the question should be on the Minister's statement. It is for the Minister to decide whether he wishes to answer.

Mr Weir: I commend the Member for levering in that other subject. This is a bit tangential, but, on a broader level, in the same way as we have taken a child-centred approach to GCSEs, I am keen to support a child-centred approach to education as a whole. I want maximum availability of provision for pupils of whatever age across the board. The very major constraint that all of us face, in the Executive as a whole and in education, is the issue of resources. I simply say that, on the extension of resources, any persuasion that she is able to bring to bear on the honourable Member for South Belfast to provide more money to the Department of Education would be greatly appreciated.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline the impact on year 11 and year 12 pupils?

Mr Weir: As I said, there are no implications for pupils currently in year 12. They are due to receive their grades over the summer. Irrespective of the awarding organisation, they will be graded on the basis of letters. Pupils finishing year 11 have completed their first year of GCSE courses, and, for those studying for English board exams, the two subjects affected are English and maths. My understanding is that a minimal number of pupils will be involved. The position taken by the English boards is that they are phasing this in over three years. An English board offering history, for instance, for 2017, will offer a letter; for maths or English, it will be a number. They will then switch most of their subjects to numerical grading and complete that process in 2019. I understand

that very few pupils in Northern Ireland do English through one of the English boards, and a relatively limited number do the maths course through English boards, so there will be very little impact on year 11 pupils and none on the current year 12.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister. Given the importance of investment in a child's early years for personal and social development, and the fact that that impacts on their attainment at GCSE, will the Minister explain why he has withdrawn funding from two Irish-medium primary schools when he could have funded them from his departmental allocation?

Mr Speaker: Can I —

Mr Weir: With respect, I have tried to deal with that issue already. The statement is on GCSE qualifications. I appreciate the point that the Member has made, but I can answer only those questions that relate to the statement.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will he inform the House whether the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) has offered any opinion on the changes?

Mr Weir: I mentioned that only the Assembly has been directly informed of the detail of the final decision. Obviously, we took soundings to make sure that we would not run into difficulties with Ofqual or other examining bodies. Ofqual has confirmed that it has no particular issues with the proposals and is relaxed about them. CCEA is happy to implement the proposals. The awarding bodies in England have indicated that, on the basis of these proposals, they will remain in, or come back to, the Northern Ireland market. All the regulatory and qualification bodies are content with what is there.

Executive Committee Business

Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

State Pension (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016

State Pension (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016

Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016

Mr Speaker: The four motions are to approve statutory rules relating to pension regulations. The Business Committee has agreed to a single debate, during which the Minister and Members should address all four motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion and call on the Minister to move it. The debate on all four motions will then begin. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. After the Question is put on the second motion, the third motion will be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on the motion. After the Question is put on the third motion, the fourth motion will be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on the motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

As the title indicates, these amendments are essentially technical in nature, rather than implementing substantive policy measures. The Pensions Act 2015 introduced a new state pension for people who reached state pension age after 5 April 2016. People who reached state pension age before 6 April 2016 continue to receive their state pension under the old state pension rules. Therefore, a person who reached pension age before 6 April 2016 and

who is widowed after the introduction of the new scheme will still be able to qualify for a category B pension based on the National Insurance contributions that their late spouse or civil partner had made up until 5 April 2016, when the old scheme closed. For such a person, a survivor's category B pension can consist of both inherited additional state pension and basic pension. Primarily, the amendments relate to the revaluation of the inheritable additional pension. For example, the order ensures that the inheritable additional state pension reflects earnings revaluation in the period before the spouse or civil partner reaches pension age and uprating in line with price inflation in the interval between the spouse or civil partner reaching pension age and their death. This simply replicates the rules that were in place under the old system.

The remaining provisions are mainly consequential amendments that extend various existing arrangements to the new state pension. A person's starting amount under the new state pension scheme is the higher of what they earned under the old system and what they would be entitled to under the new scheme. Where a person's starting amount is higher than the amount of the new state pension, they will be entitled to an additional amount known as a protected payment. Article 2 of the order ensures that, where a person is awarded National Insurance credits after April 2016 in respect of a period of parental or caring responsibility falling before that date, those credits can be included in the calculation of the person's starting amount.

Article 4 of the Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 allows an exception to the general rule that occupational pension schemes must treat men and women equally. The exception relates to what is commonly known as a bridging pension. This arrangement typically means that, where the scheme member retires before state pension age, the tax regime allows their occupational pension to be paid at a higher rate initially and then reduced when their state pension becomes payable. The exception allows a different amount of occupational pension to be paid to a man who has not reached state pension age but would have done so had he been a woman. This is permissible only to the extent that the payment of the different amount is as a result of the difference in male and female state pension ages. Article 3 of the order adds the new state pension to the list of exceptions to the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of gender. It is necessary to include the new state pension in this exception rule as state pension ages for

men and women are not due to equalise until November 2018.

As it is only necessary to award National Insurance credits where a person's National Insurance contribution record is deficient, HMRC is currently able to make decisions on entitlement to National Insurance credits on behalf of the Department. Article 4 of the order makes provision to allow this practice to continue for the purposes of entitlement to the new state pension.

I hope that I have been able to clarify the content of this statutory rule for Members. I invite the House to support the motion and endorse the order.

Ms Gildernew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I thank the Minister for bringing these motions to the House today. The order and regulations were made as a consequence of the Pensions Act (NI) 2015 and, as the Minister said, are mainly technical and consequential amendments.

I inform the House that the order and regulations relating to state pensions were considered by the former Committee for Social Development. For the record, the Committee had no objections to the rules. The Occupational Pension Schemes Regulations were considered by the Committee for Communities, and it also had no objections. Furthermore, the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules scrutinised the statutory rules and did not require them to be drawn to the Committee's attention. The order and regulations are already in operation, from April 2016, and today we are being asked to approve them. The Minister provided the detail of the regulations, so I will speak very briefly on each motion.

On the Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order (NI) 2016, the Pensions Act 2015 introduced a new state pension for people reaching state pension age on or after 6 April 2016. People who reached state pension age before 6 April 2016 will continue to receive their state pension under the old state pension. The order makes non-contentious, mainly technical, consequential amendments to extend various existing arrangements to the new state pension. The order will make a number of amendments linked to the old state pension system, primarily relating to the revaluation of the inheritable additional pension. The remaining provisions made by the order are mainly consequential amendments that extend various existing arrangements to the new state pension; for

example, the calculation of the starting amount, the equal treatment rule and the award of National Insurance credits.

I will move on to the State Pension (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2016. The proposals set out a second tranche of regulations, which are necessary to give effect to Part 1 of the Pensions Act. They amend the State Pension Regulations (NI) 2015 to ensure that all key provisions relating to the structure of the new scheme are contained in one set of regulations. The regulations make provision for the calculation of increments following a period of deferral of state pension where there has been a change in the rate of the new state pension other than uprating; inheritance of graduated retirement benefit by survivors whose deceased spouse or civil partner was in the pre-2016 state pension scheme; and entitlement to the new state pension for people resident overseas. As is the case in the current scheme, people living in certain countries — non-EEA states with which Britain does not have a relevant reciprocal agreement — will be precluded from receiving uprating increases.

On the State Pension (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2016, in his autumn statement, the British Chancellor announced that the full rate of the new state pension will be £155.65 a week. Very generous: you are coming near it yourself, a Cheann Comhairle, so I am sure that you are worried. *[Laughter.]* The regulations accordingly amend the 2015 regulations to set the full rate of the new state pension at £155.65 per week.

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2016 amend the Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) Regulations (NI) 1997 on the governance provisions for multi-employer schemes to ensure that they apply to the relevant schemes. They also make other technical amendments to ensure that the governance provisions work as intended.

On behalf of the Committee for Communities, I recommend that the order and regulations be approved by the Assembly.

Mr Bell: I welcome the fact that the Minister brought these forward in his competent presentation. They are technical and consequential amendments, so my short speech on them will probably be as interesting as most technical and consequential matters.

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

The important thing is the principle on the nature of protected payments, which Minister Givan set out. An interesting point that can be picked up throughout is the non-discrimination on the grounds of gender. The fact that these have been examined, in part, by the previous Committee for Social Development and, as the Deputy Chair elucidated, by our Communities Committee has support from all sides of the House.

Mr Givan: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Ms Gildernew, for speaking on behalf of the Committee and Mr Bell for his contribution. As no further substantive issues have been raised, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

11.30 am

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now move on to the next motion, which has already been debated.

Mr Givan: The Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 introduced a new state pension for all those reaching state pension age on or after 6 April 2016. The detailed provisions of the new state pension scheme are outlined in secondary legislation. These regulations insert additional provisions into the State Pension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The regulations before us today deal with three main issues: the calculation of increments where a person has deferred the new state pension; transitional arrangements —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry; all you were required to do at this point was to move the motion.

Resolved:

That the State Pension (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Resolved:

That the State Pension (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Committee Business

Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Boylan (The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I beg to move

That this Assembly (a) affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members agreed by the Assembly on Tuesday 23 June 2015; (b) agrees that, pursuant to Standing Order 69, amended by the Assembly on 14 March 2016, rules 4 and 5 of the Code of Conduct are amended to read as follows:

"4. You shall register in the Assembly's Register of Members' Interests details of all registrable interests. A registrable interest means any interest specified in chapter 1 of the Guide to the Rules. [The categories of registrable interest are set out in schedule 1.]

5. You shall declare, whether in Assembly proceedings or in any approach to a Minister, public representative, public body or public official, any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought to influence your approach to the matter under consideration. A relevant interest means an interest to which chapter 2 of the Guide to the Rules applies, and may include a registrable interest.

and; (c) notes that it will be necessary for the Committee on Standards and Privileges to update the Guide to the Rules to take account of these and other minor or consequential amendments."

Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo. I speak in favour of this motion. I welcome the

opportunity to open the debate on this motion from the Standards and Privileges Committee. The purposes of the motion are threefold: to affirm the Assembly's commitment to high ethical standards, to the code of conduct and to the guide to the rules relating to the conduct of Members; to seek Assembly approval to amendments to rules 4 and 5 of the code of conduct; and to note the need for minor and consequential amendments to the guide to the rules.

In terms of the first part of the motion, in June 2015 the previous Standards and Privileges Committee reported to the Assembly on the outcome of its major review of the code of conduct and guide to the rules. Drawing on international best practice, this resulted in significant additions and improvements. I shall outline those in a moment, as it is important that all Members familiarise themselves with the rules of conduct, irrespective of how experienced they are in the workings of this place.

First, however, we should consider why it is important to highlight the Assembly's commitment to high ethical standards at this early stage in the new mandate. For that purpose, I will draw on the words of President John F Kennedy. In 1961, when delivering a special message to the US Congress on conflict-of-interest legislation and the problems of ethics in government, President Kennedy argued that:

"No responsibility of government is more fundamental than the responsibility of maintaining the highest standards of ethical behavior by those who conduct the public business."

He went on to point out that:

"the basis of effective government is public confidence, and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or appear to falter."

In terms of public confidence, perhaps we should also reflect on the findings of a 2014 survey on public attitudes towards conduct in public life, which was carried out in Britain by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

That painted a fairly negative picture in comparison with a prior survey two years earlier. It found that, for example, more respondents rated the standards of conduct of people in public life as low than rated them as high; more respondents thought that the

standards of conduct of public office holders had got worse than had improved; and most respondents were not confident that the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life or that wrongdoing would be uncovered or punished by the authorities.

While I am not aware of any recent comparable surveys examining public confidence locally, I have no grounds for assuming that the picture here would be more positive. Clearly, that highlights the importance that the Assembly needs to place on high ethical standards, with a view to boosting public confidence in the political system and institutions of government here.

I believe that the work of the previous Standards and Privileges Committee in improving the code and guide is an important step forward in that regard. In addition, the new Committee recently agreed to undertake scoping work on a range of topics for inquiry, including issues identified in the previous Committee's legacy report and potential reforms recommended in the recent annual report of the Commissioner for Standards. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on those issues today, as that would pre-empt decisions of the Committee, suffice it to say that, once the necessary scoping work is completed, the Committee will be in a position to make informed decisions on which topics to pursue early in the next session. Such work will serve to further bolster the standards regime in the Assembly.

Turning now to the new code and guide that were introduced for the new mandate, let me say that the new code is better structured, clearer and more accessible than the previous code. It includes 11 aspirational principles of conduct and 21 enforceable rules of conduct. In particular, it should be noted that there are several new rules and that some of the previous rules have been recast for clarity and enforceability. The new rules include rule 6, which states that Members shall not:

"accept any gift, benefit or hospitality that might reasonably be thought to influence your actions as a Member."

Rule 12 prohibits Members from disclosing confidential or protectively marked information unless authorised to do so, while rule 13 states that Members shall not:

"act in any way which improperly interferes ... with the performance by the Assembly of its functions".

Rule 14 prohibits a Member from using their position to improperly advantage themselves or another person or disadvantage someone else, and rule 15 states that Members:

"shall not subject anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack."

Rule 19 requires that Members:

"take reasonable care to ensure that your staff, when acting on your behalf, uphold these rules of conduct."

and rule 21 prohibits a Member from urging another Member to contravene any rule of conduct. Of course, a breach of any of the 21 rules may result in an investigation by the commissioner, and breaches of the rules on registering and declaring interests and advocacy could constitute a statutory offence.

There are some key changes to the requirements for registering interests. While I do not have time to go into detail on all of those, I highlight in particular that Members must now adhere to a 28-day deadline for registering interests and providing notification of changes. Moreover, Members must now register any gift, benefit, hospitality or visit received by any third party that is provided because of their membership of the Assembly or their political activities. On the wider requirement to declare relevant interests when they relate to the proceedings of the Assembly, chapter 2 of the new guide makes clearer the types of interests that are declarable.

I shall now turn briefly to the more technical aspects of the motion. The second part of the motion seeks Assembly approval to amend rules 4 and 5 of the code of conduct, which relate to the registration and declaration of interests respectively. Those amendments are needed to ensure alignment with the definitions of terms used in Standing Order 69 as amended by the Assembly on 14 March 2016. There was insufficient time to do that before the end of the last mandate, but it is important that the amendments are made now to remove any risk of confusion or misinterpretation of the rules by Members.

The amendments to rules 4 and 5 will require consequential amendments to the guide to the rules. Other minor and consequential amendments were required to the guide as a result of changes in monetary thresholds following the recent determination of the independent financial review panel to increase the salary of MLAs, and because of some provisions needing to be clarified, as identified

during the recent Members' interest registration process, such as the registration requirements relating to rental income from land and property, including second or other homes.

At its recent meeting, the Standards and Privileges Committee agreed a number of minor and consequential amendments to the guide that address those issues. As part of its deliberations, the Committee has also identified the potential need for further amendments, including to provide definitions of terms such as "third party" and "political activities". Subject to the motion being agreed today, the Committee will circulate copies of the revised code of conduct and guide to the rules to all MLAs for information.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from other Members to the debate.

Mr Lynch: The Chair has dealt with most of the technical points. I do not wish to make any more comments on those; I just want to make a couple of general points. A code is intended to provide a framework and reference point for us when discharging our duties and responsibilities as MLAs. It outlines the minimal ethical standards of behaviour expected of us as public representatives. The code is also to create public trust and confidence in these institutions. That can be only a good thing.

I want to touch more on the additional Assembly principles of conduct. The first one, I think, is number 8. As Sinn Féin spokesperson on equality and human rights, I welcome that addition. It is progressive in its outlook. We all, as Members of the Assembly, should promote equality of opportunity. We should not discriminate against any person. We should treat people with respect, regardless of race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability or political opinion. We should all robustly uphold that principle and show leadership to and set an example for wider society at all times.

Principle 10 is around the issue of respect. Members should show respect and consideration for others at all times. One would think that that stands to sense and would not have to be written down in a code of conduct. Unfortunately, however, it has to be, given our journey to the Assembly. Respect and consideration has not always been shown at all times in the past in the House. However, I hope that things can and will change in this mandate.

Finally, principle 11 states that Members should work responsibly with other Members of the

Assembly for the benefit of the whole community. In the main, Members work responsibly with others across the political divide. That is particularly evident in the Committees on which we sit. That goes for all the Assembly staff. We could not function without their assistance. They should be treated with the same respect.

Mrs Little Pengelly: In my relatively short political life thus far, I have been struck by the genuine compassion and the desire to help people and improve Northern Ireland from Members right across all parties and across the Floor. I honestly believe that most people get involved in politics and do this job because they want to make a genuine difference. I believe that they work hard at that. They help many people. However, we also have to acknowledge that there is an issue with perception out there. Therefore, it is welcome here today that we have these improvements being brought forward in relation to the guide and code for Members to try to rebuild some of that trust and build confidence with the public about the work that the Members of the House carry out.

11.45 am

I do not want to regurgitate what has already been said by the Chairperson of the Committee. I want to talk briefly to two of the amendments that we discussed at the meeting last week. Many of the amendments to the code are relatively minor or consequential. There is a minor amendment to paragraph 31 where the words "or for your political activities" are being included. We discussed this at the meeting on Wednesday, and we understand why the phrase is there and believe it is necessary. We welcome a number of the amendments to the guide. The purpose behind them is to further clarify for Members and for those who may adjudicate on complaints or other issues what the intention is.

The Committee was happy to accept the proposed amendment, but there was some discussion around whether the phrase should be further clarified. I want to put it on record that it was my view that it should be considered further. Perhaps further clarity is required on whether the intention is that the "political activities" referenced in the code and in the guide are to be those connected to the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the work of Members as representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly, as opposed to something wider than that. I am conscious, when I say that, that many charities now have a political

role, from cancer charities and other health charities through to Greenpeace or even the National Trust — most will have a political lobbying role. Therefore, reference simply to registering fundraising "for your political activities" could go well beyond that if, for example, Members are involved in fundraising for charities. I want to put it on record that, at some stage, there should be further consideration of the intention of that amendment and whether we need to clarify it further. Is it the intention that Members have to register if they fundraise over a certain amount for charities as opposed to just for political activities connected to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

I also want to reference and put on record a point about paragraph 45 of the code. This is around the registration of visits and hospitality and makes reference to "any third party". Therefore, it is about registering an interest by you and any third party. There has been an effort to clarify this by putting in a subclause, but the subclause is not exhaustive. It references four categories, but it is not finite. The concern is that, for example, Members could attend international conferences where hospitality is provided to a huge number of third parties attending, possibly from many countries. It could run into hundreds, if not thousands, of people, and I do not think it is practical or realistic that Members could register all the hospitality granted to third parties in those circumstances. I raise the issue because I do not believe that this is the intention, and I want to put on record that, in my view, there should be further consideration or further clarity on that clause, perhaps to specify that you are to register any visits or hospitality as a Member of the House or for "any connected third party", as opposed to "any third party", as is currently contained in the code. The Committee was content to accept the wording at this stage because we believe that the intention is indicated in the subclause, but the drafting could be tightened up.

Those are the only two issues that I wanted to speak on. As I said, the Chairperson has very adequately outlined many of the other amendments, both for clarity and for consequential —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs Little Pengelly: Thank you.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Member for moving the motion. It is clear and self-explanatory to

anyone who reads it. I have lived my whole adult working life by a set of values and standards, and I hold them dear. I now live my life, in private and in public, with a code of conduct and a set of standards and privileges. Those standards set out how I am supposed to behave, and that is really important. The privileges that are given to me are given so that I can go about the job that I do to represent the people of my constituency. It is important that we all understand where those standards — selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership — really lie. Yes, they are all self-regulating, but there must be something here that holds Members to account if they fall below those standards.

One of the standards we have is respect for others. If you had been in the Chamber yesterday afternoon listening to the EU debate, you would have thought that that was not in the code of conduct, given that some Members were getting on like petulant children. I was quite embarrassed by that, and I would say that it was close to bringing the Assembly into disrepute. I say this to Members: be mindful of your behaviour. How will people looking at us from the outside trust us if we get on like that? I would come down heavy on the standards expected of everybody in the Assembly. If I say, "Come down heavy on the standards", I also say, "Come down light on the privileges". We do not need privileges other than those set for us to be able to perform our role in the Assembly and represent the people. The public opinion and perception of us in here are pretty low. I put a marker down now and say this: I will press — this was mentioned earlier, and it is not for debate — for all the commissioner's recommendations to be brought to the House and accepted. They are important.

The motion states:

"this Assembly ... affirms its commitment to high ethical standards".

That is down to individuals. It is important that individuals do not just read the words but action them. It is also important that the Assembly holds Members to account in an open and transparent manner if they slip outside that.

Mr McPhillips: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on the motion, which seeks to affirm the Assembly's support for the Members' code of conduct and proposes amendments to rules 4 and 5 of the code. As a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, I support today's motion.

I will make some general comments on the code of conduct before specifically addressing the amendments. The SDLP believes that the House and its Members should always strive to operate within an established level of conduct that befits elected representatives. A code of conduct should not be a loose guide defining how Members should conduct their business in public life but should be a mechanism for adherence to an established set of principles. In the last mandate, the Chamber and the Committee made massive strides towards providing clarity in creating a set of rules and standards. The code now contains 11 aspirational principles of conduct and 21 enforceable rules, supplemented by a guide to explain how to comply with the code. We now have greater clarity, with more robust definitions.

The proposed aim of today's amendments is to tighten the gaps in the code of conduct rules. It is anticipated that the amendments will remove the risk of confusion or misinterpretation of the rules by Members. I do not intend to give an exhaustive analysis of all the amendments to the rules as most of them are technical. However, I will highlight one key area. The amendments provide further guidance on dealing with lobbyists, as set out in appendix 1 of the rules. It provides a robust definition of what a lobby organisation is. It provides that Members, in dealing with lobbyists, must adhere to the code of conduct guide and declare any interest that arises out of meetings with lobbyists. The guide, as amended, now clearly states that Members must not receive any payment, benefit or gift from lobbyists. Those are progressive steps in ensuring that Members adhere to high standards when acting outside the Chamber, and the amendments to the rules go some way towards addressing concerns raised in the last mandate.

The SDLP supports the motion and the amendments. However, we still believe that there is considerable work to be undertaken to ensure that there is a robust mechanism to hold to account Ministers who may be operating ultra vires to the rules or the Pledge of Office. When a complaint is lodged against a Member, there is proper investigation by the commissioner. There is due process and a determination made on whether to censure, following consideration of the evidence. However, no such mechanism exists for Ministers, which may serve only to undermine the institution. That issue needs to be addressed in the future.

We look forward to the Committee's forward work programme and the issue of using the petition of concern process to block motions of

censure. That totally undermines the independence and effectiveness of the system of protecting the standards and privileges of the House. We have seen it used in the past, especially by the biggest party in the House, and I am sure that we will see it again. It is a blatant abuse of the petition of concern mechanism, and I hope that the issue will be addressed during the mandate.

I would like to commend the work of the Committee staff in the creation of these amendments and for all the support that they have given to the Committee and its members. Finally, I concur with Mr Beattie's sentiments about how Members act in the House.

Ms Bradshaw: I do not intend to speak for long, but I am pleased to see the realignment of the code of conduct and corresponding changes to the guide and rules coming before the House.

Clearly, it is helpful to affirm the importance of ethical standards in the Assembly at a time when public confidence in politicians remains lower than we would wish it to be. Anything that adds clarity to the rules, not just for Members but for the general public, is useful, and that is what the changes to rules 4 and 5 of the code of conduct and consequential revisions to the guide do.

There is one particular issue that I would like to raise. Members may know that, from my time on Belfast City Council, I have a long-standing interest in ensuring the highest standards with regard to the register of interests. Standing Order 69 now provides an exemplar, which, I believe, all elected representatives and public bodies should seek to match. It is clear that the register of interests has to be published and updated and that it must include the interests of new Members within 28 days of their election.

All this is fine until we get to the sanctions section, as my colleague from the Committee mentioned. It remains the case that sanctions, even against a Member who has clearly failed to comply with the rules, can be blocked by a party or combination of parties large enough to sign a petition of concern. This is ludicrous, as it means, in effect, that Members from larger parties do not have to adhere to the rules at all, provided that their colleagues are prepared to sign a piece of paper in their defence. This kind of nonsense leads only to public dissatisfaction with ethical standards. I suggest to Members that, if they want the public to take us seriously, sanctions must be applied equally to all Members. The commissioner's recent annual report states:

"This means the petition of concern should not be used to stop sanctions against a Member clearly in breach of ethical standards."

I, therefore, ask all party leaders to make a statement confirming that they will not use the petition of concern in such a way and to make clear to the public that any Member found in breach of standards will be sanctioned appropriately.

Mr Boylan: As we have heard, in order to maintain and enhance public confidence in this democratically elected institution, it is essential that we ensure that the standards regime for Assembly Members is robust and seen to be robust. The view of renowned political theorist and author Bernard Crick is perhaps applicable in this context. He argued:

"politics is ethics done in public".

Also, an important report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, titled 'Standards Matter', pointed out:

"public life does not take place in a vacuum",

and that the behaviour of public office holders "provides a model" for the populations from which they are elected.

As such, there is an onus on each of us as elected Members of the Assembly to be conscious of our ethical responsibilities and to be prepared to act as ethical leaders. Indeed, this is reflected in the leadership principle in the code of conduct. It is also worth noting the conclusion from the 'Standards Matter' report:

"Society can expect better outcomes when decisions are made fairly and on merit and not influenced by personal or private interests. Organisations in every sector benefit from greater legitimacy when the public has confidence in their integrity."

Indeed, on this latter point, the report also concluded that the wider economy benefits from that confidence.

12.00 noon

Clearly there is an important linkage between public confidence in the political system and elected representatives complying with high ethical standards. I think that it is also apparent both from the debate and recent discussions in the Committee on Standards and Privileges that

there can be complexity around Members' ethical responsibilities. I think that we all therefore need to remain mindful of the need to continue to develop our knowledge and awareness of the responsibilities. Moreover, the rules that apply here are similar to, and have been informed by, the rules that are in place in other applicable legislatures around the world.

As I pointed out earlier, the improvements that were made to the code and guide by the previous Committee should assist in explaining the rules. Further work by the new Committee will aim to build on this. Also, while the focus today is on changes to registering and declaring interests, I anticipate that awareness and training sessions for all MLAs on the wider range of standards issues will be arranged in due course. That was the expectation of the previous Committee. The new Committee has agreed to include this amongst the potential topics for its forward work programme.

I will turn now to Members' comments. I want to thank them for their comments. I will start with my colleague Seán Lynch. He spoke on two key elements: respect and good working relationships on the principles. That is key. We have just started off in the Committee. We have had two meetings, and they have been very positive. There have been good contributions from all Members. I look forward to a good working relationship.

To be fair to Emma Pengelly, she raised the two points of third parties and political activities. We will definitely look at those points as part of our work programme. Those two issues need further clarification. I look forward to working on that when we come back in September and, hopefully, bringing something forward.

Doug Beattie also mentioned respect and holding people to account. I agree with that. Mr McPhillips and Paula Bradshaw mentioned the petition of concern. Members will know that we discussed this in Committee last week and the previous week and that we will go away and do a bit of scoping work on it. We will take a look at it and, as a Committee, come back better informed and with an informed opinion. Hopefully, whatever the Committee decides, we will put forward. I just have to remind Members that, in relation to the Commission and the Committee's work, the ministerial pledge is outside the remit. I respect Mr Beattie's comments about some of the conversations that took place in debates in this Chamber yesterday. It is obviously down to the Speaker to deal with whatever goes on in this Chamber.

It will not go unnoticed in debates and conversations that we will have in Committee.

I will turn briefly to further explain the need for amendments to rules 4 and 5. As I pointed out, they are consequential to Standing Order 69, as amended on 14 March 2016, and will ensure alignment of the definition of terms. This includes the terms "relevant interest", "registrable interest" and "financial interest" as apply in the amended Standing Order 69.

The amendments will remove the risk of any confusion. For example, in light of the amended Standing Order 69(7), which defines "relevant interest" as meaning:

"an interest to which Chapter 2 of the Guide to the Rules applies",

rule 4 as previously drafted could be misinterpreted to mean that all the types of declarable interests covered in chapter 2 are registrable. Also, rule 5 could be misinterpreted to mean that only the interests covered in chapter 2 are declarable, whereas the amended Standing Order 69(5) provides that financial interests specified in categories 1 to 7 of the guide are also declarable. To further clarify this, the Committee has agreed amendments to chapter 2 of the guide to make clear that financial interests specified in categories 1 to 7 are also declarable.

The reasons for the amendments and their technical nature further serve to highlight the complexity of the subject matter.

Finally, arising from our discussion at the Committee's last meeting, I think that it is important to remind Members that the ongoing requirement to declare interests is broader than that for registering interests. The new guide makes clearer the types of interests that are declarable when they relate to matters being considered in Assembly proceedings. They include financial interests that you have registered already; past financial interests, which mean normally those held within the past 12 months; indirect financial interests, such as those benefiting a third party; expected future interests; financial interests of a sort that do not require registration; and any non-financial interests.

To conclude, I hope that today's debate has served to highlight the importance of the standards regime for Assembly Members. I expect that the Committee will continue to lead on the further improvement and refinement of the code and guide. The provision of awareness-raising opportunities for Members

and their staff will also be important, and I encourage Members to take those up when we bring them forward. Pending that, I point out to Members, especially new Members, that the Clerk of Standards is available to provide ongoing advice to Members on registering and declaring interests, especially on the rules on advocacy.

Before I finish, I commend the work of the previous Chair, Alastair Ross. I also commend Paul Gill and his staff for the work that they did with the previous Committee and the new Committee staff who are helping us this time. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly (a) affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members agreed by the Assembly on Tuesday 23 June 2015; (b) agrees that, pursuant to Standing Order 69, amended by the Assembly on 14 March 2016, rules 4 and 5 of the Code of Conduct are amended to read as follows:

"4. You shall register in the Assembly's Register of Members' Interests details of all registrable interests. A registrable interest means any interest specified in chapter 1 of the Guide to the Rules. [The categories of registrable interest are set out in schedule 1.]

5. You shall declare, whether in Assembly proceedings or in any approach to a Minister, public representative, public body or public official, any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought to influence your approach to the matter under consideration. A relevant interest means an interest to which chapter 2 of the Guide to the Rules applies, and may include a registrable interest.

and; (c) notes that it will be necessary for the Committee on Standards and Privileges to update the Guide to the Rules to take account of these and other minor or consequential amendments."

Opposition Business

Mental Health Champion

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that more than one in four of the population is affected by poor mental health and well-being; further notes the significant social and economic implications that this is having on society; expresses deep concern that, per capita, we have one of the worst records of poor mental health and well-being in the world; accepts that our shocking rates have been impacted directly by 30 years of violence and that the issue is now intergenerational; and calls on the Minister of Health to appoint a mental health champion, to be funded from charitable and philanthropic contributions, to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and well-being.

As the Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson on mental health, I welcome the opportunity to bring the motion on mental health to the Chamber. A mental health champion is something that the Assembly and Executive could practically deliver. Having a mental health champion would have measurable targets, and, importantly, it would be more than warm words of comfort. It could deliver tangible benefits for people suffering from poor mental health.

The Chamber has heard many times the shameful statistics that detail the level of poor mental health endured by the people of Northern Ireland. However, it would be remiss of me not to reiterate those figures, not least for the purpose of painting a picture of the real levels of suffering and to recall the hard life issues that are faced day in, day out by those who are affected.

With 28.5% of Northern Ireland's population currently diagnosed with mental health issues,

we are faced with levels that are comparable with the world's worst affected areas. With no pride, I say that we hold the title of having worse levels of mental health than any other part of the UK — by some 25%, in fact. That is just not good enough.

It is reported that one in four adults in this country can expect to suffer with a mental health issue in the course of a calendar year, and it has long been acknowledged that levels of intergenerational problems here are disproportionate to those in other developed western countries. The legacy of the Troubles weighs heavily on the side of cause, with societal effect being transferred from one generation to the next. I grew up in the turbulent years of terrorism, and, for as long as I can remember, Northern Ireland has not enjoyed favourable economic parity with the rest of the UK. Higher than average levels of unemployment, a semi-rural population and fragmented care services leave our community ill-equipped in the face of this problem. I have little doubt that some — in fact, many — of us in the Chamber will have felt the cold hand of mental health. The fact that 28.5% of the population are currently suffering suggests that more than 30 of us elected Members of the Assembly could be part of that statistic. It is beyond argument that every one of us will have been through it or have been affected by someone close to us who is not well.

I have listened intently to the words of sufferers lately, and the reality for those at the sharp end is day-on-day feelings of depression and anxiety and a lack of self-worth and well-being. They are living lives where substance abuse is a viable coping strategy, where eating disorders abound, where self-harm and mutilation is a norm and, sadly, where, for some, suicide is the only way to escape their suffering. Yet another shameful statistic for this country is the totally unacceptable level of suicide — not that there is an acceptable level. Now is the time to address this, and now is the time for action.

The scale of the problem has been reinforced to me since I took the party role of spokesperson. I have had direct contact with many sufferers in recent weeks, and I am determined that I and the Assembly will take the measures to improve our care system. Just last week, I attended the funeral of a friend who decided that suicide was his last option, and, on speaking to the pastor who officiated at that service, I was saddened to hear that he is carrying out funerals on a weekly basis for those who commit suicide. This is a scourge, and sadly we have hot spots in this country that are regularly visited by the cold hand of death, which is far from victimless.

Families are left to pick up the pieces and to try to make sense of what has happened to their loved ones and why more could not have been done.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Member for giving way. Notwithstanding all the facts and figures that you have given, will you agree with me that one of the groups that is badly affected is the armed forces veterans community? Due to the security situation, many of them have to suffer in silence, abandoned by Westminster and neglected by the Executive. Does he agree with me that we should fight to have a veterans and reserves mental health programme set up in Northern Ireland, as they have in England, funded by Westminster?

Mr Butler: I welcome the Member's contribution and, indeed, concur with those thoughts.

No one will dispute the financial burden of the failure to address this grand-scale problem. The costs to Northern Ireland are estimated to be in the region of £3 billion annually, with only 10% of that being actual spend on healthcare. The remainder is made up of sickness absence, non-employment and low productivity. Therefore, it would be right to assume that if we can directly improve the mental health and well-being of the population, we will directly improve the economic balance that currently sees people here suffer living standards that are consistently 75% to 80% lower than those of the people of Great Britain. I would like to pay tribute to the many health staff and professionals, volunteers, community workers and charities that play such a valuable role in providing the high-quality services in our system.

Mr Smith: I thank the Member for giving way again; what he said has stimulated me to ask a question. Does the Member agree that it is unacceptable, with Northern Ireland having the highest rate of suicide on these islands — tragically, 268 in 2014, which is the last year of statistics — and, uniquely, at a higher level than 30 years ago, that mental health counsellors working in the community sector are, due to cuts in funding, having their hourly rates reduced to a level that makes it difficult for them to continue to offer this valuable service?

12.15 pm

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his contribution. I concur with his thoughts and will touch on that point. It was a timely intervention, as we must also listen to health professionals when they tell us that they are at breaking point,

that they are unable to meet demand and that they are themselves at risk.

I have read with real interest the previous debates on the issue and the many contributions by Members from most if not all of the parties represented here today. To that end, I am hopeful that the motion will pass unaltered, as the amendment before us would significantly weaken it. To be honest, I was surprised and disappointed at what is clearly waning support from the Minister's party. In many of the debates that I have heard and read on the topic, I found little variance between the parties' positions.

Last week, acting as the Health Committee's representative, I had the pleasure of attending the final Together For You conference on mental health and well-being. The focus of the conference was to reflect on the performance and results of the three-year Big Lottery Fund project that forged close working relationships between the project lead Action Mental Health, Aware, CAUSE, CRUSE, MindWise, Nexus, PraxisCare, Relate NI and the Rainbow Project. The innovative — I always have problems with that word — actions taken and the cumulative effect of the cross-charity and care function collaboration delivered results that were greater than had been anticipated. Surely, that can be a model that we can seek to learn and grow from.

The Minister of Health stated:

"Championing mental health is one of my main priorities. Anyone can be affected by mental illness, and I am determined that the Health and Social Care system provides top-class, recovery-focused care. The outcome of the Together For You Project demonstrates that the voluntary and community sector also has a crucial role in providing mental health and wellbeing services".

She also said that she looked forward to working with them in her time in office. I welcome that statement, Minister.

Before the 2016 Assembly elections, the Ulster Unionist Party delivered a policy paper on mental health and well-being identifying areas that had to be addressed. The first, which is supported by a number of our charities and areas of research, was the appointment of a mental health champion, a champion who is credible and trustworthy, is not affiliated with any party or grouping, is totally independent and is an impartial professional with the track record and drive to radically alter the mental health and well-being of our people and

communities. There can be no more fitting and appropriate statement of intent for the Assembly than to create that environment and positively promote the appointment of a charitably and philanthropically funded mental health champion. I urge the Chamber to issue no further statements of interest and intent on the matter but to support the motion.

Ms Seeley: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after “directly” and insert

“by decades of conflict, and more recently by austerity and the resulting increased levels of unemployment and homelessness and that the issue is now intergenerational; and calls on the Minister of Health to explore the role and remit of a mental health champion to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and well-being.”

I begin by welcoming the motion and by commending my UUP colleagues for tabling it. It is heartening to note the cross-party consensus on the importance of mental health. That was strengthened further by confirmation from our new Health Minister Michelle O'Neill that mental health is one of her key priorities. I am confident that she will be ambitious, not tokenist, and will push mental health up the agenda and champion it throughout her term, including during the Programme for Government discussions.

I also commend the work of the many charities that offer support and aim to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Cycle Against Suicide came to Drumcree College in Portadown twice this year to spread their message that it is OK not to be OK and to encourage people, particularly young people, to speak openly and to ask for help. I also commend the work of groups such as the Children's Law Centre, Action Mental Health, Niamh, the Public Health Agency, Lifeline and, more specifically, PIPS Upper Bann, which works tirelessly in my constituency to help those who need support, be it individuals with mental ill health or families suffering loss as a result of suicide.

Our amendment seeks merely to strengthen the motion. We believe that it is crucial to note the devastating impact of austerity on mental health across the North. There are growing concerns about fuel poverty, rising personal debt and growing reliance on loan sharks and payday lenders. There is grave concern surrounding the lack of affordable housing, the shortage of

well-paid full-time jobs and the impact of welfare changes that appear to disproportionately affect disabled people and other vulnerable groups. There is no doubt that unemployment and homelessness place a huge strain on many of our constituents. If we work to provide services for them only when they suffer ill health, whilst ignoring the root causes and making no effort to tackle them, we fail in our role.

I am not convinced that it is in the gift of the Health Minister to dictate where the funding from charitable or philanthropic resources should go. Our amendment therefore allows the Minister the space to explore the full range of options. In addition and given the cross-cutting nature of mental health, it is necessary for the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Education to be involved in any discussions around appointing a mental health champion. To be successful, a mental health champion must work in partnership across Departments. Take, for example, the implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act 2016. It provides huge potential to address child and adolescent mental health triggers, while the implementation of the youth justice review recommendations, led by the Department of Justice, must address the alarming rates of child and adolescent mental health need among children who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

The appointment of a cross-departmental mental health champion would be a significant step, but it is certainly not the only action required. We urgently need to audit the implementation of the Bamford review to identify how far we have come and determine what has not yet been implemented. Fifty-four recommendations came out of the review of child and adolescent mental health services in Bamford. Almost 11 years on, only 26 have been met. In addition, those living in rural areas are adversely impacted — forced to travel long distances to get help, when they are brave enough to ask for it. That does not fulfil the commitment made following the Bamford review to treat people in their community, close to friends and family.

A point that will, undoubtedly, be well rehearsed during today's debate is that we in the North have higher rates of mental ill health than any part of Britain or Ireland. Our rates are 20% to 25% higher. It is the largest cause of disability in the North. One in four people is affected, as Robbie Butler mentioned. Someone you know is currently suffering mental ill health. Our young people are significantly affected by the cross-generational mental health needs of a

society emerging from conflict. The areas with the highest rates of mental health need are those most impacted by the conflict, which are also areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

The prevalence of mental ill health among vulnerable groups of children is disproportionately high. Those groups include disabled children, those living in poverty, children in conflict with the law, care-experience children, children with care responsibilities and those in need of safe accommodation, yet the new framework for mental health incapacity excludes under-16s. That was never recommended by Bamford. That was recently noted with concern by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, it was recognised by the Chief Medical Officer as far back as 1999 that approximately 20% of children and young people in the North would suffer significant mental health problems before their eighteenth birthday. Official statistics are out of date, but recent peer research carried out by the Children's Law Centre's youth group suggests that that figure is now closer to 27%.

There is no forensic inpatient paediatric psychiatric provision in the North, and there are limited inpatient adolescent facilities. Children with complex mental health needs are often moved out of this jurisdiction to access specialist child and adolescent mental health services. We continue to admit and treat our children on adult psychiatric wards. That is not in their best interests and must cease immediately. Furthermore, it is estimated that 10% of children between five and 15 years old have a significant mental health issue and that there has been an increase of 70%, in the last 25 years, in the number of teenagers with depression and anxiety.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child earlier voiced its concern that the number of child suicides has been steadily increasing in the North in the past 10 years. In addition, a recent report detailed how one in five of our student population have self-harmed due to feelings of loneliness and anxiety. It is therefore imperative that, as well as addressing gaps in provision and appointing individuals to roles, we tackle the many root causes of mental health issues, including unemployment and homelessness. That has to be a priority for us all.

Eight years ago, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that additional resources and improved capacities be employed to meet the needs of children with mental health problems, with particular attention to those at greater risk, including children

deprived of parental care, children affected by conflict and those living in poverty and in conflict with the law. It said it again this month. It is time that we acted for our most vulnerable.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I also start by commending the proposers of the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. I noted without any great surprise that one in four people in Northern Ireland is living with mental ill health, given what we have been through in Northern Ireland in the past decades. I was born in 1969 and am slightly older than you, Mr Butler, but, like you, I was a child of the Troubles and grew up during that time. We all know what effect that had on many of us and in many of our homes around this country. Indeed, as you said earlier, I do not believe that there is anyone in this House who has not been touched, either directly or indirectly, by mental ill health. We know the effect that that has on our families and on our own employment, and we know about alcoholism, homelessness and, of course, suicide.

It is with that in mind that I want to direct some of my attention towards the issue of PTSD. Many Members will already know that, once upon a time in a previous life, I wore a uniform and was proud to do so. I was proud to wear that cap badge on my head. I worked with so many people over those years who, not only through the Troubles but through other things that they had seen by just doing their normal daily job, ended up with severe PTSD and severe mental health issues. I remember many occasions where there were road traffic accidents or of going to a house fire where a young family had been burnt to death or of attending a sudden death. That affected so many of the men and women who I worked with, and, as a result, they suffered from PTSD.

From my personal circumstances and those of my family and those around me, I know what it is like to hear a song on the radio, to have a smell and to hear a sound. I know what it is like to have a date imprinted in my head that I will never forget, and I know that, when I smell that smell, hear that sound or hear that little snip of a song, that can bring me back to a day that I never want to remember again. I think that we need to recognise in this country that there is a great need for help for PTSD. I thank Mr Beattie for his intervention earlier, because I am proud to say that I am the mother of a serving soldier. We are seeing a whole new generation of young men and women, coming back from theatres of war, who are in such a dreadful state and need so much help and support, yet we are failing them on those levels.

More than that, we have another generation of young people who, as Ms Seeley said earlier, are suffering from poor mental health. In the last mandate, we had various witness sessions, and one that strikes my mind was in the Committee for Social Development rather than in the Health Committee. It was from a group of young people who had been made homeless, and their homelessness was a result of whatever had happened in their family life that left them with mental health problems. There is something that we need to be doing. I believe in the motion, and I think that it is excellent. I think that all of us in our party manifestos talked about wanting to see mental health champions.

12.30 pm

I agree with the amendment put down by Sinn Féin, but I do not want to divide on the issue. It is such an emotive and serious issue that we should not divide on it, but a little more work and scoping is needed to get it exactly right, and I believe that those who tabled the amendment want it exactly right as well. As the Chair and as a Health Committee, we will not let the issue slip off the agenda or let the Minister drop the ball. I think that she and Committee members know that.

I am happy to support the motion as amended, with the caveat that we as a Health Committee continue to keep this in mind as one of our priorities. We know that it is one of the Minister's priorities, and I believe that it is also a priority for the Committee. With that in mind, I again commend those who tabled the motion and the amendment, and I support the motion as amended.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I commend the UUP not just for the motion but for their continued desire and efforts to raise the profile of mental health and increase the urgency with which we deal with this difficult, complex and emotive issue that debilitates individuals, families and whole communities.

I welcome the amendment tabled by Sinn Féin. Like Ms Bradley, I do not think that this is an issue on which we should divide. The motion and the amendment have many merits. The amendment does not propose that any mental health champion should, for example, be funded from charitable contributions. While I see some logic in what the UUP is proposing for the funding model to ensure the independence of the role, existing overworked and effective organisations in the sector might balk at the idea of the position being funded

from their already overstretched budgets, a lot of which comprise European funding, but that is an argument for yesterday and maybe other days in the future. Those organisations do not want to lose out in financing a post that they will have to work closely with. No doubt, they welcome the motion and the initiative behind it.

There are other mechanisms, I am sure, for funding a mental health champion in an arm's-length way, which can ensure its independence and autonomy. We should not have to look too far for those. I welcome that fact that the amendment recognises the impact of austerity on mental health. Some of us made that point repeatedly as we opposed the draconian Welfare Reform Bill and the effect that it will undoubtedly have on some of our most vulnerable people.

That said, we believe that the amendment is maybe not strong enough. We believe that the Minister should appoint, rather than "explore the role and remit" of, a mental health champion, although I take on board what Ms Bradley says in that we will not let the issue slip away and will keep it on the agenda.

Regardless of how a mental health champion is funded, that person will have their work cut out. Here in the North, as Members said, we have higher levels of mental ill health than any other region on these islands. Others have told us that it is estimated that one in four adults here will suffer from a mental health problem at some stage, which equates to some eight people in the Chamber at the moment.

We often hear about and, indeed, talk about in here how mental health is every bit as important as physical health and how mental ill health can be every bit as painful and debilitating as physical illness, but this has never been recognised in budgetary terms. The meagre share of our budget dedicated to mental health is shameful. I noted in the Minister's statement last week that she would be a champion for mental health, which I very much welcome. We must all be champions for mental health.

I hope that the Minister will be the fairy godmother-type figure who finally resources this Cinderella service and enables it to get to the ball.

The appointment of a mental health champion would be a great start. The champion would work with us and the Minister to ensure that sufficient funds were made available to improve mental health services as set out in the Bamford review and that funding was ring-fenced against any future budget cuts.

An early action should be another regional review of mental health services to examine the extent to which services are fragmented — and they are fragmented, especially in rural areas. It is also imperative that we develop better partnership working and collaboration. Not least, the champion should be able to look across and work across other Departments, particularly the Department of Education, as Ms Seeley said.

Much has been made of the direct and indirect costs associated with mental illness, and they are immense. However, any comparison of estimates and costs with those in the Republic of Ireland, for example, shows just how bad the situation is here. Yet, shocking as those figures are, they do not touch on the real human cost. People have their life put on hold or even lose their life as they await diagnosis and treatment.

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

Mr Durkan: Families are at their wits' end, trying to get and to give the best care that they can.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. A champion for mental health was an Alliance Party manifesto commitment, and we are keen to get cross-community support to deliver one. It is hard to measure these things precisely, but there seems little doubt that Northern Ireland experiences the poorest mental health in the UK. We must see this as an opportunity to tackle the issue and deliver improvements that could be referenced globally.

I would like to take the opportunity to outline some of the Alliance Party's commitments on mental health that, I am sure, other parties will support, because this is an absolutely non-partisan issue. First, we want to see the implementation of the Bamford review and the personality disorder strategy. It is possible that, by raising awareness, the motion will increase the pressure for that. Like others, we wish mental health made central to the public health system and to public health promotion, and we welcome the programmes already ongoing to make that a reality.

Secondly, we have to be aware not just of the real challenges faced by people who experience poor mental health and those close to them but of their rights. It is vital that the Mental Capacity Act, a significant achievement of the last Executive, is fully and swiftly implemented. In particular, we need to

increase awareness of issues that arise in the youth justice system.

Thirdly, it is essential that we do not focus solely on the Troubles and the legacy of conflict, although we need to be aware that there are issues still needing to be addressed. That is why the Alliance manifesto proposed a mental trauma service, alongside work on what is frequently termed "dealing with the past". We must remember that, for many, dealing with the past is, in fact, very much dealing with the present.

Finally, an area of particular emphasis: we should reflect that what is referred to as "mental health" is not just a Department of Health issue. Although this is not universal, mental health issues often arise as a result of social isolation and marginalisation. Poor educational attainment, unemployment, poor physical health, personal debt and a raft of other factors can seriously impact on mental well-being. Of course, these have to be tackled at source, thus preventing, as far as we can, poor mental health in the first place.

We see no point in dividing the House on the principle of the motion, as it is so important, and I commend the Member for tabling it. However, I will raise some queries, as others have done today. Clearly, the reference to finance from charitable or philanthropic sources is a fair attempt not to impose a budgetary burden. However, mental well-being is an area where we absolutely should impose a budgetary burden. Funding could, for example, be freed up in the reform, through the expert panel, of existing services and programmes in the health service. That could be used more effectively to invest in comprehensive mental health services and prevention, including but not limited to a champion, a position backed by the Association for Mental Health.

We respectfully ask whether the only role of the champion should be to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health. As I mentioned, problems have a range of sources that, if tackled, would stop people suffering a decline in mental health to begin with. In our view, there should be a fully independent champion whose role would be to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and to raise awareness of the issues that impact on mental well-being and on how people can look after themselves mentally as well as physically. That is important not least because so many of those suffering poor mental health suffer in silence, and we must deal with the stigma of that. We also need to recognise that, if we have a

champion, people will feel that there is somebody backing their corner. It would also be important for such a champion to interconnect services, for example, in Youth Service provision, housing and skills development, in a way that ensures that as few people as possible are impacted by high levels of stress and anxiety.

There is also a case for the champion to be the first point of access and signpost people to key services. Perhaps we should look to set up a working group, as other charities have advocated. In other words, though I do not remotely wish to suggest that every case of poor mental health can be prevented —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Bradshaw: — we think that there is a significant role for the champion in dealing with this.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It is timely and something that the whole House can get behind. I concur with the sentiments expressed by all the Members so far, particularly those of my colleague Paula, the Chair of the Health Committee. As mentioned, each and every one of us in the Chamber will, at some stage, have had experience of poor mental health, whether personally, through family members or, indeed, through constituents in our offices. Many of the issues brought to us as elected Members lead to poor mental health whether it be, as mentioned in the motion, financial stress, unemployment or homelessness. For that reason, I support the motion.

Of course, as has been mentioned, the 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland has also had a direct impact on our mental health. The victims are civilians and, of course, members of our security forces. Research published in March 2015 that was commissioned by the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors estimated that 213,000 adults had mental health difficulties that appeared to be directly related to the Troubles and that, potentially, 60% of those individuals had not received treatment. That, of course, is a worrying figure, and it needs to be addressed. The previous Health Minister initiated work on a new world-leading mental trauma service for Northern Ireland. Prior to leaving office, he allocated an additional £175,000 for early set-up costs. I would welcome the Minister's outlining her commitment to that service. She mentioned at a conference last week that she would take

forward and champion mental health, and I look forward to that and to working with her in Committee.

As outlined by the Health Minister in Committee last week, spending on mental health by our trusts has increased by 17% since 2004-05. Under previous Ministers, mental health spending increased to £250 million per year, a rise of £50 million since the Bamford review. There has also been a positive switch in where that investment goes. Some 57% of mental health expenditure is now in the community, compared with just 46% a decade ago. That is a welcome shift in where the money goes. We know that there are many organisations and charities that do excellent work in our communities, and they need to continue to receive the necessary support and resources. I pay tribute to each and every one of them. Day and daily, they provide care, and they are champions of mental health. That needs to be recognised as well.

I have outlined some of the work that has been done, and indeed there is still much more to be done. Too many in our population suffer in silence and go untreated. We need a mental health champion to take forward, protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and well-being. It should be a champion who focuses not only on the Department of Health but across Departments, as was previously mentioned, and across the education and other sectors. I agree that this needs to be scoped out to ascertain the role and remit of a mental health champion. We need to ensure that any new positions or offices give value for money and will, ultimately, have a positive impact and enable better mental health.

The Department should implement the Mental Capacity Act and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated.

12.45 pm

Individually, we all have a role to play in tackling the stigma around poor mental health. I will continue to support innovative campaigns such as Change Your Mind and focus on destigmatising poor mental health. The House should not divide on the issue. We should support the motion and the amendment.

Ms Gildernew: I am delighted to be able to speak to the motion. I welcome the fact that it was tabled, and I support our amendment. As someone who has been affected by poor mental health and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, I can assure

Members that it is not just combatants who suffer and that many of us were seriously affected by the conflict. The amendment is a very important one.

I want to make a point about charitable and philanthropic — I think that we are all having difficulty saying that word — contributions. Like many others in the House, I have worked with groups and organisations that are doing sterling work. I want to mention Niamh and PIPS in particular. It is hugely important that a mental health champion be properly funded through mainstream funding and that we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul.

I do not want to repeat things that other Members have said, but there are a few areas that I would like to draw the House's attention to. My colleague Catherine Seeley talked about the impact on children and young people. It is hugely important that we get that right. I am very proud of the fact that the Western Trust was the first trust to bring forward an infant mental health strategy, and that has now been adopted by the Department. There is a recognition there that, for a number of reasons, even babies can suffer from poor mental health. It is important that we recognise that poor mental health can affect all of us at one stage or another. I am also very familiar with the hugely important child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Catherine made a point about counselling in schools. Although that is absolutely crucial, I often feel very sorry for young people who have left school and do not have that support. They may have suffered a bereavement or a family breakdown and do not have the same access to counselling services. I want to see counselling made available to all in their own area or community and ensure that people have access to it.

I want to speak too about the difficulties for carers and how their mental health can be impacted on by some of the problems that they face daily. I am speaking at an ADHD event in the Long Gallery later today. I know that young people who do not have a diagnosis of ADHD, autism or other conditions can have a massive impact on the mental health of their parents and carers. It is important that all those strands of health policy be interwoven to ensure that we get the best treatment for all our people. Bamford has not been fully implemented. It is a big ask of our new Minister — I wish her well in her post — but mental health has to be up there as a priority.

It is often very hard for people in rural areas not just to access services but to accept that there is an issue. I will continue to say to people that

they need to seek help from their GP in the first instance, but it is sometimes very hard to get big, stoic farmers to recognise that they are having problems with their mental health. I want to see the Minister talking to the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister for Infrastructure. Social isolation was mentioned earlier. Loneliness is a massive problem in isolated rural communities. The Minister has been very supportive of rural transport in the past. I hope that she will continue to be and can talk to the Infrastructure Minister about extending schemes and ensuring that people have the opportunity to get out and about, not just to health appointments but to visit friends or to go to the hairdresser, because loneliness can impact so badly on your mental health.

A lot of women are diagnosed with poor mental health during pregnancy, and we need to support women in particular. They often share the brunt of the caring responsibilities, and — this is in our amendment — it is women who suffer the worst effects of austerity and who are often trying to raise children in poverty, so —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Gildernew: — it is important that we recognise that. I also ask the Minister to be cognisant of the needs of our prison population and the high issues of mental health within it.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Like so many others in the House, I commend the Member for bringing forward this motion. It is very welcoming that we have such a level of consensus and agreement around these issues. Over the last decade, both in my work as a special adviser in the Office of the First Minister and in my new role as a public representative, I have been hugely humbled to have the opportunity to speak to many people who have either experienced, or are still experiencing, mental health challenges. I think in particular of the many victims and survivors whose incredibly harrowing experiences have had such an impact on their mental health, from low mood and isolation through to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and the more extreme challenges they face.

I am very aware through having spoken to many young people and many young people's organisations that have raised the issue of mental health. This seems to be an increasing problem and represents a challenge for young people. There is a service through schools, but we routinely hear that the need is increasing and cannot be met by what is there at the

moment — we need to address that. I am very aware that, particularly with our young people, it can manifest itself in very self-destructive behaviours such as self-harm and suicide, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, all of which give rise to lifelong challenges for our young people, including in employment and their life outcomes around education and health.

I have also spoken to many young mothers — I welcome the fact that that has been referenced — on issues of postnatal depression and perinatal healthcare, and the acute needs that they present. There has been much speculation and discussion on the causes of the increased high levels of mental health challenges in Northern Ireland. Regardless of that analysis and discussion, we need to acknowledge that it is a problem and take action. That is why I welcome the motion for a champion, but I am also very aware that there are many fantastic champions for mental health out there, such as the victims and survivors groups that have done such an incredible job through the decades of raising awareness of mental health. I am also conscious of the mental health charities, some of which I have met, and I am aware of the various fundraising campaigns, which include MindWise, Aware, Niamh and a great many others that have been mentioned today. There are also individuals like Lindsay Robinson, who is the wife of East Belfast MP Gavin Robinson. She has done a huge amount of work to raise awareness of perinatal care and postnatal depression through the use of social media and other platforms. There are incredible champions out there, but anything that raises awareness of these issues must be welcomed, so I welcome today's motion.

I want to echo the words of Gary Middleton on welcoming not just the concept of a champion but action to address this, and that is why I warmly welcomed the announcement of a mental health service for Northern Ireland by the then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, with the aim of having a world-leading centre of excellence for mental health, based on the previous reviews and an acknowledgment that more must be done to address the issues. The origin of the idea is very interesting in that it came about through discussions with victims and survivors initially, with the universities coming forward with ideas about a mental health service for them. When we discussed this in the negotiations around Fresh Start, working very closely with the Health Department, it became very clear that actually, on mental health issues, the need was much, much wider than just victims and survivors. It is desperately needed. We want to reduce

waiting lists. We need to have that early intervention to prevent people falling into more complex needs, and, when people have complex needs, we need to work with them to prevent self-harm and suicide at every stage and opportunity that we can.

I welcome the comments that have been made, particularly on the security forces and others.

During the Troubles, there was a range of issues. I think, as an example, of the many women who sat at home, waiting for their husbands in the security forces to come home and dreading and fearing that they would not. I have spoken to many wives who did not sleep until their husbands were back safe in the early hours of the morning.

I have spoken to many people, not only those who are impacted by mental health but also to their families.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs Little Pengelly: All of us have spoken to families that have said, "What could I have done better? What more could I have done? Why was I not enough?". Mental health has an impact that is much wider.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the tone of the debate and the breadth and depth of knowledge that has been demonstrated by Members. There is no doubt in my mind that awareness of this issue is on the up in this Chamber, in Westminster, in Dublin, and through society and all its facets.

The last meeting that I had before I came down to the Chamber was with representatives of Business in the Community, who wanted to brief me on three aspects of their work programme, one of which was addressing poor mental health in the workplace. Let us move towards a commitment to joined-up government that works outside silos and in a horizontal way. This is the big test, because mental health pervades every issue that we face as a society, from dealing with the past to having many people trapped on benefits who do not want to be dependent on welfare, through to rebalancing the economy by making more people economically active. I pay tribute to people like Lindsay Robinson.

We have some great champions, and it would be remiss of me to not mention my wife, Lynda Bryans, who, since her episode of poor mental health some 22 years ago, has campaigned tirelessly on the issue. In tackling the stigma by saying, "I have had an episode", she has opened the door and given permission to others to say, "If Lynda had poor mental health, it is OK for me to admit I have poor mental health and seek to address it". I also acknowledge the frankness with which Michelle Gildernew addressed her issues. I have no doubt that that has also opened the door to many people in her community, and that is to be encouraged and commended.

I want to say a few words on the independence of the champion and the idea of funding them through charitable and philanthropic donations, because there is some confusion. First, the call does not come blindly. I have spoken to most of the large mental health charities and have formed the very clear impression that they are more than willing to help to fund the post, either in cash or in kind. So, if there is any confusion about that, we will have to look at it. As I said, I was in no doubt that it was not an issue for the majority of the large mental health charities.

(Mr Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Why did I want it that way? The answer goes back to my experience as a champion for the victims and survivors of the Troubles, as a commissioner in the Commission for Victims and Survivors. We were supposed to be champions and were supposed to be independent. However, I found that we were paid for by the Executive, and we were bound by about three dozen policies and protocols, headed by a management statement and a financial memorandum. When we were in dispute with the Executive, a senior civil servant said to us, "Please remember, you are only independent in terms of the advice that you offer to the Minister. Do remember, the Minister is only obliged to listen; they are not obliged to take your advice". So, the idea is to have a mental health champion who is entirely — entirely — independent of the Government. They should not be bound in by a reliance on finance or by any of the three dozen policies and protocols that would bind in a commissioner, whether for victims, older people, younger people or whatever.

I have difficulty with the amendment, because it commits only to "explore". If the Minister will assure us that this will be a time-bound and timely exploration, I will not divide the House on the issue. I do not want to divide the House, as it would send entirely the wrong message to the

people whom we are trying to assure we are working for. If the Minister can give that assurance —

1.00 pm

Ms Seeley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the amendment seeks simply to allow the Minister complete scope to explore a full range of options, rather than being prescriptive and therefore limiting her in being able to carry out some sort of scrutiny role following the outcome of the debate?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister may wish, and may need, that time to explore. I will say to the Member only that I have explored this over the last three-and-a-bit years, and I am content and convinced that the way to go is to appoint a truly independent mental health champion. I think that is reflected in the views of the mental health charities, the voluntary sector, the practitioners and, indeed, those who suffer from poor mental health and have an opinion on the issue.

As I say, I am not going to divide the House on this. I am just going to repeat that my concern is that the amendment commits only to exploring; it does not commit to any outcome. The outcome I want is a mental health champion, and I say that because it is one of 15 points in our mental health paper that we published earlier this year and that Mr Butler referred to when opening the debate.

I am going to leave it at that because, as I say, I like the tone, the agreement, the depth of knowledge and the commitment that are being demonstrated in the debate, and I would like it to finish with unanimity amongst the parties present today.

Mr Attwood: As with everybody else, I welcome the debate and thank the proposer for tabling the motion. I recognise what people said, in that, whether it is individual politicians, the families of politicians, other people and the organisations in particular, the debate shows how you can shape in a better image this issue to make progress going forward. Of course, the measure of all this — at least, one measure — and, indeed, of all the debates we have had since the election is whether the unanimous view of the House on a manufacturing strategy, a childcare strategy, broadband or, like today, mental health, becomes part and parcel of policy and the Programme for Government going forward. If not, we are a mere debating

chamber. But if these matters that are unanimously agreed by the House are then reflected in the actions of Ministers and in the final Programme for Government, that is one measure of making progress.

Ms Emma Little Pengelly referred to great champions, and she was, of course, right about that. One of the great champions we have at the moment for advocating on behalf of victims and survivors and in supporting victims and survivors who have mental health issues is Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA). Yet it learned last week that the paltry sum of £10,000 it receives every year to run a small resource is being reduced to £8,000. Here we have notional moneys going to an organisation that helps people, including those who have been abused in homes in the past and those who have mental health problems, and that advocates for their needs. Yet when it comes to their immediate needs, that organisation has a derisory budget cut of £2,000. The point I am making is that, if we are going to have hard outcomes in supporting people with mental health difficulties and the organisations, including SAVIA, that support them, we have to get real about the funding needs of those organisations.

I do not intend to rehearse the scale of the issues — that was outlined by Mr Butler, Mr Durkan and others — save to make two immediate points. The first is that, as everybody knows, the number of people on disability-type benefits in the North is one in 10, whereas in Britain it is one in 20. That is a point that Ms Bradshaw, I think, touched upon.

Those people are going to have enhanced needs over the next period of time, not simply because of what is happening with welfare reductions but because of the decision that was made in respect of Europe. It is very likely that, sooner or later, people on welfare in the North will experience a real-time benefit cut because there will be no rate of inflation increases for benefits over the next four years. Arising from last week's decision, people are saying that the rate of inflation is going to be 2% in the next year. People already on reduced benefits are going to have further real-time reductions because there is going to be no benefit uprating. That will reflect on their lives through mental health and other pressures.

My second point is that, as everybody knows, the scale of mental trauma arising from the legacy of conflict is immense. The VSS says that new victims are coming forward, as we speak, in relation to all that. If we are going to deal with the issue of mental health, we have to

deal with the issue of legacy. We have to go back to that issue as soon as we can. In doing that, I put down this marker: let us not have a partial deal. Let us not have an outcome done by the few in politics rather than by the many. If that is the outcome — I fear that it might be —

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

Mr Attwood: — we will not respond to the needs of victims and survivors as we should.

I welcome the fact that the House is not going to divide. I ask the Minister, in her response, to add certainty to her commitments in relation to this very important issue.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate. It addresses one of my priorities. Like others have done, I welcome the tone of the debate. I think that we all understand the challenges and recognise the real face of this. I think that we all understand that we need to chart a way forward where we address the imbalance in how we focus in the Department on mental health and make sure that we address the fact that it needs to be given more attention. We have come a long way, but we certainly have a further way to go.

Many Members referred to the fact that there is no shortage of evidence about the prevalence of mental illness right across the North. We have the challenges of the intergenerational legacy of the conflict, which Members picked up on; the ageing population; deprivation; unemployment; and stress at work. All those things lead to very difficult and challenging times for individuals. We all know only too well about how much suicide continues to tear families apart.

Mental illness can affect anyone in any circumstance. It is estimated that one in four adults in the North will suffer from a mental health problem at some stage in their life. The Public Health Agency's Making Life Better strategy, which was published in 2014, established that the North has a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental illness when compared with England.

In terms of the economic cost of mental illness, people with mental health problems are at a greater risk of unemployment, job insecurity, absenteeism and lower salaries. The HSC Board carried out some research in 2014 to try to quantify the cost of mental illness here. It found that it costs the local economy an

estimated £3.5 billion per annum. That figure includes direct and indirect healthcare costs, and indirect costs such as the loss of output because of the inability to work and the need for the payment of benefits etc. The research also found that around 45% of people who claim illness-related, out-of-work benefits do so because of mental ill health. That is the biggest single group of claimants. Conversely, the report estimates that, within two years of recovery following successful treatment for mental ill health, the employment rate for those with moderate or severe mental health problems is increased by 11.4% and 4.3% for those with mild mental health problems. It is vital from not only a health perspective but an economic perspective that people with mental health problems can access the right treatment at the right time. There is significant evidence of the effectiveness of psychological therapies on creating the right conditions for people to resume or regain employment. The HSC Board found that, for every £1 invested in psychological therapy services, there is a saving of £1.75 to the public sector. It is clear that we need to continue to carry out investment in that area.

Mental health also has implications for policy on housing, education and criminal justice. It is the ultimate cross-cutting issue. I am, therefore, very pleased that improving mental health features very prominently throughout the draft Programme for Government framework, which is out for consultation. That will be a significant policy driver for improvements in mental health services during the life of this Assembly.

Members referred to Bamford and the modernisation of health services. There is a recognition that, in the past 10 years, there has been significant reform and modernisation of mental health services here, propelled by the Bamford review. The vision was that people with a mental illness should be treated in the community, close to their family and friends, unless there is a clinical reason for not doing so. Accordingly, the focus of mental health service development in the last number of years has been on early intervention, home treatment services and the development of psychological therapy services.

Since Bamford reported in 2008, investment in mental health services has increased by nearly £50 million a year to around £250 million a year. The balance of funding has shifted. At the time of the Bamford review, we were spending 60% of the mental health budget on hospital services and 40% on community services. His vision was to reverse those figures, and now we spend nearly 60% on

community services. We can see some major key developments in mental health services, but, as I said, I believe that we have to transform the health service to allow us to put more weight and focus on the services that we deliver for people who find themselves feeling mentally ill.

We have seen improvements, including a regional mental health care pathway, You in Mind, which was launched in October 2014. It commits the HSC to deliver care that is more personalised and improves the experience of people with mental health problems by adopting a more evidence-based and recovery-oriented approach. In line with Bamford, mental health services have moved towards a recovery-based ethos. The principle of recovery is based on people with mental illness regaining control of their life and learning to manage their health so that they can have hope for the future and participate in their community. Staff have been trained in recovery-based practice, and recovery colleges have been established in each trust. Peer support workers are also now employed in each trust. As part of the Bamford evaluation, we have heard some very positive stories from people who are now in recovery and are getting on with their life, but we need to see much more of that.

There have been big steps forward in the development of psychological therapy services, with investment now exceeding £10 million a year. A range of services is now provided, including psychology, psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and trauma therapy. The HSC Board estimates that between 75,000 and 80,000 sessions are provided annually. The HSC Board is into the third year of a five-year plan to establish primary care talking therapy hubs across each trust area. The hubs focus on providing a range of psychological therapies for people experiencing common mental health problems. They are developed around general practice and will improve access to earlier support and care.

In accordance with the Bamford review, children's mental health services are mainly delivered through community-based teams. We also now have a 33-bed children and adolescent mental health inpatient unit at Beechcroft, which opened in 2010. In July 2012, the Department published a stepped care service model for child and adolescent mental health services. That promotes a more consistent, person-centred approach to mental health service delivery for children and young people. Improvements include an increased focus on early intervention, better multidisciplinary working and collaboration with

the community and voluntary, education and youth justice sectors. The HSC Board and trusts have worked hard to implement the service model across the North. Primary mental health teams are now established in all trusts, as well as crisis response and home treatment teams. Investment in CAMHS has increased from £ 9.5 million in 2007 to around £20 million now.

There has been a major programme of resettling people who were long-term patients in psychiatric hospitals into community-based settings, with the aim of affording them a better quality of life and integration into the community. In 2007, there were 472 long-stay patients in psychiatric hospitals here. Of those 472 patients, 18 long-stay patients now remain in mental health hospitals, with plans to resettle 10 this year.

Specialist community-based eating disorder services have been established in all trusts, and practitioners are building their expertise in that complex area. An exercise is ongoing to scope the need for a specialist eating disorder unit here, and I am expecting a final report by the end of this year.

As for future mental health priorities, the Bamford review set in motion some of the most significant changes that have ever been seen in mental health services here. Those changes have transformed how we deliver care for people with a mental illness and have significantly improved the achievable outcomes. An evaluation of Bamford actions is well under way, and I am expecting a draft report over the summer. While I expect the evaluation will demonstrate that good progress is being made in the reform of mental health and learning disability services, it will also provide us with a more sophisticated understanding of the needs and the gaps. The emerging themes include the need to further embed and promote psychological therapies and the concept of recovery; to provide more practical support to carers; to improve access to services in times of mental health crisis; to improve the experience of patients admitted to acute mental health facilities; and to increase the involvement of the voluntary and community sector.

1.15 pm

The evaluation will also form the basis for confirming the priorities for mental health service development in this Assembly mandate. Possibilities already identified include the establishment of a comprehensive mental trauma service, the further development of eating disorder services and the need for

specialist perinatal mental health services — all those issues were, I know, referred to by Members during the debate. Officials are also looking at more overarching concepts, such as funding, oversight and delivery structures, as well as parity of esteem with physical health, which is one of our key challenges.

While our mental health services have come a long way since Bamford, it is clear that we have much more to do. I am committed to their further reform, which will require funding. As an Executive, we face the challenge of deciding how we spend a limited budget. The forthcoming comprehensive spending review presents an opportunity to identify and prioritise bids for the investment required in mental health. In doing so, I do not underestimate the challenges that exist right across Health and Social Care.

Over the last four or five weeks, I have made comments in the House about the transformation of the health and social care system and how we deliver services. We have a real opportunity to transform how we deliver services that will allow us to focus on, place additional priority on and invest more in addressing health inequalities. All these things are linked to poor outcomes, particularly in mental health. I hope to achieve political consensus on how we transform the health service. Doing that will allow us to tackle seriously all the issues that Members have referred to in the debate.

I turn now to the call for me to appoint a mental health champion. The proposal for the appointment of a champion is a popular suggestion in the mental health sector generally. It has been mooted by a number of third-sector mental health organisations. In principle, a mental health champion is a positive suggestion. They could be an authoritative and independent voice for people with mental health issues and for reform. They could lobby the Executive and, where necessary, criticise the system. They could advocate for mental health and be a public face and a media spokesperson.

A number of potential issues with the proposal that I appoint a mental health champion need to be carefully considered. Could, for example, a champion appointed by me be truly independent and be seen to be independent? What selection criteria would I use, and would those criteria need the endorsement of the voluntary and community sector? How would I ensure that proper governance and accountability arrangements were in place?

Options for the development of a formalised approach for the involvement of mental health service users and carers in the improvement and development of mental health policy and services will be considered in our Bamford evaluation report. The appointment of a mental health champion is certainly one of a number of options to be considered, alongside, for example, the possible further development of mental health service user forums, which appear to work very effectively in a number of trusts. The Health and Social Care Board is also developing options for a co-production mental health infrastructure that will consider the active involvement of people with lived experience of mental ill health in the delivery, development and design of mental health services. Proposals are at an early stage and will require detailed development and costing.

An alternative to a champion appointed by the Minister might be that relevant mental health voluntary and community organisations would come together to appoint a champion who would then be truly independent and authoritative. Last week, I had the privilege of addressing the final conference of the Together for You project, which was an excellent example of the voluntary and community sector working in partnership. For me, it was a practical example of how to do things differently. A lot of the charity and voluntary groups had never worked together before, but they really came together. I know that the Member who moved the motion was at the same event. It was clear that there was a willingness in the sector to work together and be more collaborative in how we support people. We need to look at all of those things. I certainly do not have a closed mind to the idea of a champion, but we need to give the proposal a bit more attention and to factor in the fact that we will have the evaluation of the review.

I have made it clear during my tenure that one of my main priorities will be to champion mental health. In that sense, I am honoured to be the Executive's mental health champion. I am open to considering the benefits of the appointment of an independent mental health champion who would defend the rights and interests of people with mental health problems and educate, raise awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. There is a need, however, to explore all the options for fulfilling the role, taking into consideration the existing good practice across the HSC. All of that, as I said, will be considered in line with the Bamford evaluation report. I will receive a draft of that over the summer. Thereafter, my priorities for the future development of mental health

services will be to address the gaps in service with the full involvement of mental health service users and carers.

I thank Members for the tone of the debate. I want to work with them to improve the picture and the services that we provide for people who have mental health problems. We can do an awful lot more. Collectively we have a great opportunity for the transformation of the health and social care system, and the fact that we now have a Programme for Government that is very outcomes-focused means that we can make things better for those who have mental illness.

Mr Sheehan: Like everyone else, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and to make the winding-up speech on the Sinn Féin amendment. I want to commend and congratulate those who tabled the motion for bringing it to the Assembly.

The statistics around mental health problems here have been rehearsed today. We have the highest rates of mental ill health on these islands and the highest rates of suicide. The statistics around suicide, in particular, are alarming and horrendous. I know of one recent incident in a public place when a young girl tried to take her own life. She was rescued by other young people. The result of that was that counsellors had to go into two schools to counsel up to 20 young people who had witnessed what had happened. I know that Robbie Butler mentioned suicide and being at the funeral of a friend. It is not just the person who takes their own life who is affected; it has a negative impact on society in general. We hear of a sort of domino effect of other young people taking their own life, leaving their families distraught and devastated. It is a big problem in our society.

There is no doubt that there has been underprovision of mental health services. I welcome the fact that that has been changing, particularly since the Bamford review, and that there has been a rebalancing of service provision, with more going into community provision and less into the hospitals and inpatient provision. A lot more is still to be done. I welcome the Minister saying that she will be a mental health champion and that there will be more improvements to the provision of services.

We all know that mental health problems can arise for a variety of reasons, some preventable and some less so. Mental ill health, as we know, affects every stratum in society, including young people — I have just talked about them

— and women. I am not sure who it was who talked about postnatal depression — sorry, it was Emma Little — and there are those affected by rural loneliness and isolation and those who have been affected by the conflict. We know that, in the past, a lot of stigma has been attached to mental ill health. I welcome the contributions made today and previously by people who have been affected by mental ill health. Paula Bradley spoke eloquently about post-traumatic stress disorder and how it affects people she knows. Mike's wife, Lynda Bryans, has spoken publicly about her struggles with mental health problems, and my colleague Michelle Gildernew has done the same. It is important that we get rid of the stigma that is attached to mental ill health. The way to do that is to have people speaking out and showing others that they can come and speak to people and that they should come forward if they need help.

I suppose that the only issue of contention today — I do not want to overstate it — is how a mental health champion would be funded. As has been said by practically everyone who has spoken, I hope that we do not divide on the issue.

There are issues around having a mental health champion funded by outside bodies, charities and so on. How would that work? Who would make the appointment? What would be the job description? There would also be accountability and governance issues involved. As I said, I do not want to overstate those issues. It is important that we get an outcome from today's debate and not one a year or two down the road.

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

Mr Sheehan: Hopefully, the result of the debate is that, in the near future, we will have a mental health champion.

Mrs Dobson: I am pleased to make the winding-up speech on the motion and pleased that it has been such a constructive debate on an issue that affects far too many of our constituents. Indeed, as was referred to earlier, the Office for National Statistics estimates, as is stated in the wording of our motion, that one in four adults experiences at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year. Alongside our health service, so many charities and voluntary organisations battle multiple challenges every single day, and Members referred to that earlier. They do life-saving and life-changing work. The intention of

the motion is to bind the services provided in Northern Ireland and move them to the next level. As my colleague Robbie Butler said at the outset, that should be a level at which a champion can become the voice of mental health services in Northern Ireland.

I want to acknowledge briefly all those who spoke during the debate. We heard many emotional stories. All of them tug at our heartstrings, and all of them, in different ways, prove why we need a new approach to dealing with poor mental health in Northern Ireland.

At a constituency level, I know the link that poor mental health has to suicide levels. Back in 2009, my home town of Banbridge was labelled the suicide hotspot, and I know how the town has tried to come to terms with the tragic waste of young lives in the years since. I commend all those whose tireless work has saved many lives since, including charities, which are making a real difference on the ground. They include MindWise, Yellow Ribbon, Praxis and Action Mental Health, but so many others also do a magnificent job.

To those who have a real passion and commitment to fight poor mental health, a mental health champion would make the most difference. Those who, every day, help people, young and old alike, throughout our communities with the treatment and therapy to recover and manage their illness. Those who treat the side effects on other areas of life, including on their family and friends. Those who deal with the financial implications of poor mental health, and those who help people to know how to cope in a crisis. The list is not exhaustive, but, most of all, a mental health champion would be for those who suffer a daily battle not with a physical illness but with an illness inside their head and a seemingly endless battle within themselves, which, sadly, for too many, leads to greater harm, both physical and mental. It is a relentless spiral of depression that affects not only individuals but their friends, family and wider community.

The stigma that so many people have spoken about during their contributions today is also a major challenge, which, although being tackled, still remains in our communities. We can clearly link the long shadow cast by Northern Ireland's conflict and the fact that we have one of the worst records of poor mental health and well-being in the world. That is why it behoves us to move towards treating mental health on a par with physical health. Indeed, the establishment of cross-governmental mental health champions in each community was recommendation 12 of the independent Mental

Health Taskforce to the NHS in England's report published earlier this year.

Increasingly, we also hear how fewer initiatives should come from Departments and how more should come directly from medical professionals. I understand that this is a key priority for Professor Bengoa in his current process of making recommendations. That being the case, the Department of Health and its officials should have nothing to fear and everything to gain from the benefits of a mental health champion.

1.30 pm

I will now make some brief comments regarding the contributions during the debate. My colleague Robbie Butler, in moving the motion, referred to those alarming rates of poor mental health, as did other Members. He pointed out that, in this Chamber, the cold hand of poor mental health would affect around 30 of us. That is a frightening statistic. Robbie went on to point out that now is the time to enforce this. It is time for action. He said that this is a scourge and that families are left to pick up the pieces. He paid tribute to all who provide high-quality roles in the system, but said that the system is at breaking point.

Catherine Seeley spoke on the amendment. She started by saying that it is important to encourage young people to speak out on mental health issues. She said that the amendment would strengthen the motion. Perhaps she would consider it better that this be impartial and independent from government funding. She went on to refer to statistics and children's mental health services, where children are being treated in adult wards.

Paula Bradley, the Chair of the Health Committee, spoke of growing up during the Troubles, and we established that she is older than Robbie Butler. She went on to talk about severe PTSD and mental health issues that she has witnessed at first hand. She said that we need to get help for the young men and women coming back from war and agreed with the intervention by my colleague Doug Beattie that we need to get real support for those with PTSD. I cannot agree more with that. She supports the motion and the amendment, but stressed that we need to get it right and that this should be a priority for the Health Committee. Indeed, it is important that it is.

Mark Durkan spoke of a difficult, complex and innovative issue. He spoke of independence and autonomy in mental health, and, again, I cannot agree more with his comments. He

spoke of the importance of a mental health champion.

Paula Bradshaw said that, for many, dealing with the past is about dealing with it now, in the present. She said that issues need to be tackled at source and that a champion should interconnect between services. She referred to a working group being set up on this issue.

Others made very emotional contributions. Michelle Gildernew spoke passionately about being a sufferer herself and about the loneliness and isolation. She referred to mental health during pregnancy.

In relation to the amendment, I feel that there is a difference between calling on the Minister to appoint, as our motion does, and exploring the role and the remit, as the amendment states. The Minister said that she is a mental health champion at the Executive, and it is good to know that she is already fighting that cause. That is important if we are going to explore this, and I am pleased that we are all in agreement. I think that six months is a reasonable time. We cannot miss the opportunity and let it run indefinitely. I am asking for a personal commitment from the Minister today that we adhere to this time frame because, in the meantime, too many people are dying, so it is important that it is time-bound.

In conclusion, I thank all those who contributed to the debate, including my party leader, who has made mental health and well-being a priority issue for those of us on these Benches, and I commend our mental health spokesperson Robbie's continued work on this important issue. I also commend the Assembly's research service on the comprehensive information pack provided to us all ahead of the motion. In closing, I will quote from our mental health policy document, which we released in March this year:

"There is no stronger, clearer signal to transmit to the thousands who suffer poor mental health and wellbeing that the devolved government is finally serious about tackling the issue."

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that more than one in four of the population is affected by poor mental health and well-being; further notes the significant social and economic implications that this is having on society; expresses deep concern that, per capita, we have one of the worst records of poor mental health and well-being in the world; accepts that our shocking rates have been impacted directly by decades of conflict, and more recently by austerity and the resulting increased levels of unemployment and homelessness and that the issue is now intergenerational; and calls on the Minister of Health to explore the role and remit of a mental health champion to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and well-being.

Mr Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.35 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Going for Growth

1. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following the recent publication of the progress report, for her assessment of the implementation of the Going for Growth strategy. (AQO 148/16-21)

Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Our agrifood industry is a key driver for the Northern Ireland economy, with the farming and food processing industries generating turnover in 2014 of around £5 billion. Agrifood will continue to be one of our most strategically important sectors going forward. I will be working closely with my ministerial colleagues to deliver an economic environment in which the agrifood industry continues to flourish and grow.

Delivering on the actions contained in the 'Northern Ireland Executive Response to the Agri-Food Strategy Board's Going for Growth' is a key priority for both DAERA and the Department for the Economy. Good progress

has been made so far by government, in partnership with the Agri-Food Strategy Board, to implement key actions including the opening of new export markets; the launch of the farm business improvement scheme, with business development groups and farm family key skills; the development of a land management strategy; work to develop a commercially focused marketing body; the opening of a new Agri-Food Quest Competence Centre to drive forward research and development in the sector; the opening of the sustainable use of poultry litter scheme; the implementation of the Food Fortress scheme, which is a world-leading feed assurance programme; and the development of a feed advisory register.

I work closely with the Economy Minister to drive forward further progress on our key priorities to deliver growth for the sector. This includes the support our Departments provide to agrifood companies in looking for new export markets and progressing the development of the agrifood marketing body.

Following last week's vote taken by the people of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, the attentions of the Northern Ireland Executive will turn to supporting both farmers and processors in the future. I have already given a commitment to the industry that I will take a lead in these discussions.

Mr Kearney: Guím gach rath ort, a Aire, i do Aireacht úr. Thank you Minister, and I wish you every best wish in your new post in the time ahead. Does the Minister agree with me that the supply chain forum is an important body? Will she indicate a progress report in relation to its work? How many meetings have taken place in recent times?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his good wishes. The supply chain forum is one of the actions being taken forward by the Agri-Food Strategy Board coming out of the 'Going for Growth' report. Hosted by the Agri-Food Strategy Board, the forum has met twice, bringing together over 75 representatives to each event from across the supply chain. They include primary producers, growers, processors, retailers, bankers and representatives of government, and they have engaged in open and frank discussions on issues affecting the sector, including market volatility, contracts, land management, communication and collaboration across the supply chain.

The price that farmers receive for their produce and other payments at any point in the agrifood supply chain are a commercial matter and are

outside the remit of my Department. Nevertheless, I am supportive of actions that will tackle unfair practices in the supply chain and provide a fair return for all those involved. The supply chain forum offers a useful environment for bringing together representatives from across the supply chain to discuss common challenges, and it offers opportunities for the agrifood sector. It also builds and strengthens relationships. I look forward to discussing the way ahead with regard to the supply chain forum with the Agri-Food Strategy Board, and we would be keen to hear from them what other steps they are taking to strengthen the agrifood supply chain.

Mr McKee: I would also like to congratulate the Minister on her new post, and, as spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I hope to work with her in the near future. Will she detail when the next stage of the farm business improvement scheme will be announced, and will she give a commitment that her announcement will include a detailed list of eligible items?

Miss McIlveen: The farm business improvement scheme is a key action for my Department. The scheme will be delivered through the rural development programme. The scheme consists of a number of measures, including knowledge transfer, cooperation, innovation and capital investment, as the Member will know. It is being rolled out in a phased way. The knowledge transfer schemes have opened. The business development groups and the farm family key skills programme aim to assist farmers in developing their thinking and business plans and to make the right decisions about developing their business.

Roll-out of the next stage of the capital scheme will include grant support linked to the needs in the farmers' business plans, at 40% of eligible costs. The proposed scheme will be designed to deliver the benefits of improved sustainability and productivity for farm businesses. I would like that to be much further on than it is. Obviously, it is a programme that has been worked on for some time. I am hopeful that we will make an announcement on it in the near future.

Mr Irwin: The Minister will be aware that farmers across a number of sectors have experienced serious problems relating to the incomes that they have received for their produce. What can the Minister do in the here and now to help those farmers?

Miss McIlveen: I am concerned about the challenging market conditions that face our agrifood sectors and the particular difficulties in the dairy and pig sectors. I will want to look closely at what action my Department can take to help farmers cope with market volatility. I am keen to press DEFRA and the EU on meaningful action to help address the needs of the local industry in the near future. We will also continue to make the most of measures to build resilience, efficiency and competitiveness through the rural development programme. My officials have been in regular and close contact with representatives of the main banks that operate in Northern Ireland — indeed, I am meeting those representatives next week — to discuss support for the farming sector. As I mentioned in a previous response, the price that farmers receive for their produce and that others pay at any point in the agrifood supply chain is a matter that is outside my Department, but we are working to ensure that farmers get the best price for their produce.

Diesel Spill: Larne Coastline

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the severity of the recent diesel spill detected in the sea off Larne. (AQO 149/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: The release of some 40,000 litres of red diesel into the Irish Sea from the Caterpillar factory at Larne was a high-severity incident. Statutory samples were lifted on Saturday 11 June with a view to prosecution, and thus I am limited in what I can say. Diesel is a light oil, so, when it reached the sea, it spread rapidly. With the warmer temperatures, much of it evaporated in the first few days after the spill. The remainder of the oil has been broken down by natural dispersion and biodegradation, and very little evidence of the spill can now be observed.

I can confirm that the circumstances that led to the release are being fully investigated by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Caterpillar NI will be required to put in place safeguards to ensure that this sort of incident cannot happen in the future. The incident was reported to the water pollution hotline by the Port of Larne at 8.55 am on Saturday 11 June. Officials from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and marine and fisheries division worked closely together and provided regular updates to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, the Food Standards Agency and the Public Health Agency to allow them to assess

the consequences of the incident for their areas of responsibility.

Mr Beggs: I am aware that most of the diesel had not evaporated and that those sailing on the lough or living near it were aware of the stench of it at the time.

I want to ask the Minister about information flow. What is she doing to ensure that there is clarity around who is ultimately responsible for such an investigation? Should people contact the Environment Agency, as the Minister mentioned, or the Maritime and Coastguard Agency? On many occasions, people simply contact the local council, because they are not aware of whom they should contact.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, incidents such as this are quite distressing, and it is important that they are reported as quickly as possible after first sight. There is a hotline which should be used; in the event that people are not able to use it, they should contact their local council.

Mr Lyons: The Minister will be aware that there are very sensitive sites near the spill. Can she outline whether they were impacted?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. A number of sites have been identified, and there has been ongoing work on water quality. Samples were taken at Browns Bay, Ballygalley, Carnlough and Sandy Bay on 22 June, and these are now being tested for the presence of diesel.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Can she tell me what role her Department is playing to ensure that other companies, in addition to Caterpillar, have adequate risk assessments and protocols in place to ensure that this does not happen again? My information is that quite a lot of the drainage from Caterpillar and other sources in the area runs into the sea.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. From January this year, all non-exempt oil storage facilities in Northern Ireland must comply with the Control of Pollution (Oil Storage) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010. It is a matter for companies that store oil to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the regulations, which are designed primarily through the provision of appropriate secondary containment to minimise the risk of oil spillages occurring.

As one of a number of associated pollution prevention initiatives working within existing

resources, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has a risk-based programme of oil storage regulations visits to a limited number of premises each year, to ensure that those premises inspected are compliant with the regulations. They are also working alongside other UK environmental regulators. NIEA widely promotes oil-related pollution prevention guidance, including issues around storage, waste disposal and the use of oil separators. NIEA contributes to this and actively promotes the Oil Care campaign.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your answers thus far, and for the written answer that you have already provided me with on this incident. Do you not agree with me that incidents like this highlight the need for an independent environmental protection agency in Northern Ireland — all the more so now that we are likely to leave the European Union? What guarantee can you give that you will provide the same protection that the EU provides on environmental matters?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, good environmental governance encompasses a great deal more than the creation of an independent agency. While I understand that, in the past, a number of stakeholders believed that an independent agency would raise the standard of environmental protection in Northern Ireland, I do not believe that there is compelling evidence to support that view. I am happy to listen to the views of stakeholders on this, but it is not sufficient to say that because other jurisdictions have one, we should too. Policy needs to be evidence-based, and it is important that we focus on outcomes rather than structures. NIEA has already recognised that there are areas in which improvements can be made. Some of those improvements are already being made and can be seen, so, at this stage, I am not in a position to look at that outside of having further conversations.

Farmers: DAERA/DFE Support

3. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how her Department will work with the Department for the Economy to support farmers to add more value to their primary products. (AQO 150/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: The agrifood sector is of major importance to our economy. It contributes over £1.1 billion in added value and is responsible for 8% of all private sector employment. DAERA is an economic Department, and there

are natural synergies with the Department for the Economy. It is essential that we work together to support the long-term future and profitability of the agrifood industry.

2.15 pm

Adding value to our primary products begins with identifying and securing new markets and the development of new products to meet the needs of those marketplaces. DAERA is working closely with the Department for the Economy and Invest NI to support this right along the supply chain, particularly in the areas of exports and innovation.

Examples of joint working include the ongoing work to identify and facilitate access to key strategic export markets, the use of Invest NI innovation vouchers at College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) facilities, and collaboration on the Year of Food and Drink 2016. My Department is also providing support through the rural development programme to increase the competitiveness of the agrifood sector.

I see significant opportunities for even closer working between my Department and the Department for the Economy on the agrifood industry, and I have instructed my officials to explore areas where a more strategic, joined-up approach could deliver more effective support to the sector.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be well aware of last Saturday's very successful Comber earlies food festival, which I was pleased to initiate when I was on Ards Borough Council. How can her Department further support enterprising producers like the Comber early growers to develop brand awareness and retain more control over their product?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I am very familiar with the Comber earlies project, and I congratulate all those involved and all the organisers as well as the potato growers in the area. I had the privilege of attending, during the open farm weekend, the Orr farm, which is very much a leader in the production of the Comber early.

There are a number of initiatives that can be taken forward to support groups, and I am very keen to look at the marketing board, which Minister Hamilton and I are trying to progress in conjunction with the industry. That was identified as being fundamental to the long-term sustainability of the industry, and strategic

market forces are required to maintain and develop, particularly around exports. So, as I said, I will be working with the Agri-Food Strategy Board on that and on other matters with the Economy Minister.

Ms S Bradley: Can the Minister give an up-to-date synopsis of any conversations that she has had with Executive colleagues or others on safeguarding and developing export markets for the agrifood sector?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. That is very important, and it has been reflected throughout the answers to my questions. I see this Department as being very much an economic driver and working alongside the Department for the Economy. I have had a number of conversations with my colleague and the industry in relation to that.

Mr Dunne: Following last Friday's positive result on Brexit, what discussions has the Minister had with the agriculture sector on doing business in the future?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Yesterday, I met members of the industry to discuss the outworkings of the result last Friday; it was a very useful meeting, and it is something that I intend to continue to do. That was alongside, as I mentioned, the Department for the Economy, with Simon Hamilton also in attendance. Represented there were the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association, the Agri-Food Strategy Board, Dairy UK, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, and the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association.

Mr Ford: In her initial answer, the Minister referred to looking at the strategic opportunities for work between her Department and the Department for the Economy to grow opportunities for processing produce. Whilst that is a welcome statement, is it not a bit disappointing that, three years after the fanfare around Going for Growth, so little appears to have happened?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I think that it was a question, although it was maybe more of a criticism. Obviously, a number of targets were set on that. In my response to the first question, which I gave to Mr Kearney, I said that a number of key actions were to be implemented. Good progress has been made, despite the Member's view, on opening new export markets, the launch of the farm business improvement

scheme and the development of the land management strategy, which is working along. We are developing a commercially focused marketing body, which we should be looking at reasonably quickly, and there is the opening of the Agri-Food Quest competence centre. A number of things can be seen as successful. Obviously, this work is continuing, and we will be looking to work very closely with the sector to progress it.

Rural Development Programme: Payments

4. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether she plans to make staged payments of the rural development programme to farmers in 2016. (AQO 151/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I understand that your question relates to the LEADER element of the rural development programme. I can advise that my Department does not directly fund farmers under the LEADER initiative. However, farmers, as owners of a diversified business, or their rural business can apply to their local action group for LEADER grants. All successful applicants can avail themselves of staged payments by, first, agreeing this approach with their local action group when their letter of offer is being drafted and, secondly, by submitting payment claims at various stages through their project to be reimbursed for the grant element of money they invested.

Mr Maskey: Given the circumstances that we now find ourselves in, is the Minister in any position to confirm whether the rural development programme will run to 2020? Will there be any shortfall in funding made available if there is a reduction from London?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, these are very early days in any negotiated exit so, at this stage, my Department is moving on with the programme.

Mr T Buchanan: Can the Minister update the House on when a capital grant scheme will open for the industry to help those who wish to grow their own business?

Miss McIlveen: I refer the Member to a response that I gave to another Member for a previous question. I am disappointed that we have not been in a position to move this on more quickly. Again, I inherited this legacy, so my officials will be looking to bring something forward very quickly. The full details of the

capital investment element are subject to the outcome of a business case approval process. Once that process has been completed, it is planned to start a preparation stage for the scheme to provide information to potential applicants in advance of the scheme opening to allow farmers time to prepare.

Subject to the business case approval, the farm business improvement scheme capital investment scheme will be managed as two tiers, and we are working through that. Certain items will be ineligible for support as stipulated by the RDP regulation. That includes like-for-like replacement or maintenance; consumables such as feed, fuel or sprays; investments relating to non-agricultural animals; and items to meet existing statutory requirements, such as minimum slurry storage. I reiterate that I am disappointed that the scheme did not open earlier, but I look to it being opened in the near future.

Single Farm Payments 2015

5. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many farmers have not received their 2015 single farm payment. (AQO 152/16-21)

10. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many farmers are yet to receive their 2015 single farm payment. (AQO 157/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: Mr Speaker, with your consent, I will answer questions 5 and 10 together.

So far, 23,753 farm businesses have been paid their 2015 direct payments. That is worth £234.5 million and represents 99.4% of applicants identified as eligible for the scheme. That leaves 88 eligible farm businesses that have yet to receive their direct payments for the 2015 scheme year. There are a number of reasons why eligible applicants may not have been paid for 2015. Those include missing bank details, outstanding probate issues and disputes between business members. Those reasons are largely outside my Department's ability to resolve and will usually depend on customers providing the necessary information. Payment can be made in these cases only when the necessary information is provided.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I take this opportunity to congratulate her on her post and wish her all the best. In relation to the active farmer assessment process and those awaiting a decision on that, are there many in that process? What work is

being undertaken to speed up the decision-making along that line so that those deemed active farmers get their payments?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Applicants for the basic payment scheme must be able to demonstrate that they enjoy the decision-making powers, benefits and financial risks in relation to the agricultural activity on the land for which their entitlements are requested. In 2015, a total of 1,638 applications were assessed and found not to meet that requirement. Eight hundred and fifty five applications for a review of decision regarding active farmer have been received, 28 of which have been completed, with 827 outstanding. It is not possible at this stage to give a date when they will all be assessed. However, I have asked my Department to take action to ensure that applicants have certainty over the eligibility to claim from the basic payment scheme.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that farmers who were subject to remote sensing in previous years suffered delays in their payments. That certainly came in for much criticism. How will the Minister ensure that those whose farms are included in the future are fully informed and that delays are avoided? Does she plan to review the targets?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. It is my priority to get payments out in a timely fashion and to minimise issues with regards to payments so that they are expedited as quickly as possible. My Department works to ensure that all payments are made promptly, and it will continue to do so in the future. Obviously, there has been an increase in online applications this year. We are trying to make the processes as easy as possible.

Mr McNulty: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment. I wish you well in the months and years ahead in your new role. In light of the outcome of last week's EU referendum and the "Leave" campaign that your party supported — your party said that we would all be better off as an outcome of us leaving — what guarantees can you give to our farmers that their single farm payments will continue beyond the two-and-a-half-year period? How much reassurance and comfort can you give them that they will be better off as an outcome of leaving?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, the outworkings of the result last Friday are still being worked through.

It was very clear, during the campaign and the Assembly campaign, that the majority of farmers were keen to leave the EU, primarily because of issues around red tape and bureaucracy. I notice that the Member is shaking his head, but that is certainly the evidence that we received on the doors and in the number of visits that I have made in my time in office.

Single farm payments will continue to be paid while there is negotiation to exit the EU. I and Executive colleagues will work very closely with DEFRA in the coming weeks and months to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the best deal.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): A quick supplementary from Mr Ian Milne.

Mr Milne: I thank the Minister for her answers. When does she expect farmers to receive their payments for 2015?

Miss McIlveen: I have asked my officials to work through the current processes as quickly as possible. I hope to be in a position in the near future to be able to give a further outline of the timescales for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

2.30 pm

European Maritime and Fisheries Fund

T1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after congratulating her on her new role, for an update on progress with the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. (AQT 116/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund will give Northern Ireland the opportunity to invest in all sectors of the fishing industry over the next number of years. We have secured £23.51 million, with £13.7 million available to support applications from fishermen, processors, aquaculture and community-led local development interests. Since coming into office, I have had a number of meetings with my officials about opening the applications for Northern Ireland, and I am fully aware of the need to open the programme as quickly as possible. I represent a constituency with a fishing village, and it is something that Portavogie will look forward to, along with Ardglass and Kilkeel. I have instructed my

officials to prioritise the finalisation of the business case and the submission to the Department of Finance for approval.

Mr Eastwood: Is the Minister concerned, as we are, that this fund and many other funds might go to the wall given the fact that some people in her party and in other parties are rushing to drag us out of the European Union against our will?

Miss McIlveen: The Members has some concerns, and he will be aware that, at this stage, we are unclear on the negotiations for Brexit and how long they will take. In the meantime, I am quite clear that business will continue as usual in pushing forward with this scheme and others.

Farming: Island of Ireland

T2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions, given the referendum result, she has had with her counterparts in the South about the future of the farming sector across the island of Ireland. (AQT 117/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I have not had any formal meetings with the Minister in the South, but I intend to do so on Monday on the periphery of the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). I am conscious of the concerns about the movement of animals and dairy products between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I will seek to have that meeting and report back.

Ms Boyle: Minister, what plans do you have to meet the industry representatives?

Miss McIlveen: I met industry representatives on two occasions yesterday. I met them at the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) event, where they were launching their new advertising campaign for quality farm assurance. Later, they met me in Parliament Buildings, and we had a useful exchange. I hope that that will be the start of many conversations that we have, as we move forward through this process.

Armagh: The "Orchard County"

T3. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what support she intends to give to our apple-growers to ensure that their businesses remain viable and continue to contribute to the economy and tourism in Armagh, given that, in

Armagh, people are proud of their orchards, it is the "Orchard County", with its orchards creating huge employment in the countryside, including the many innovative microbusinesses that are created off the back of them. (AQT 118/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I recently visited the Armagh show and, no doubt, in the coming months, will have the opportunity to visit again and have conversations with the apple-growers. I assure the Chamber today that I plan to assist all sectors of our farming and agrifood community. I will continue to do that through the challenging process that we are about to embark on. There is assistance in place through the farm business improvement scheme, and, hopefully, the capital element of that will be launched shortly. There are also opportunities through the Agri-Food Strategy Board and other programmes that it has been working through. There will continue to be assistance for those whom you represent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Mr McNulty, are you content to move on?

Mr McNulty: Move on.

Environmental Protections: Brexit Impact

T4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what impact leaving the EU will have on existing environmental protections. (AQT 119/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: It is still too early to have a clear picture of the implications of the Brexit vote for that. Existing legislation will remain and will continue to apply until there are conversations about Brexit. How that takes place will very much depend on the form of Brexit. If we remain part of the economic area, as in the Norway model, most of the environmental protections and legislation that we have in place will remain. It will be very dependent on the type of Brexit.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she think that the impact of leaving the EU will be that the Assembly has to develop its own legislation on the environment and climate change?

Miss McIlveen: That is very dependent on the outworkings of the negotiated exit. Officials in my Department are scoping in and around the issue of environmental protections. I want to give an assurance that it is certainly my aim to

enhance our environment moving forward and to ensure that it is protected.

The Member also mentioned climate change. Legislation is in place in the form of the UK Climate Change Act 2008, which sets out the targets that we are working to meet. I will keep the need for local legislation in mind, along with other measures that will help to reduce greenhouse gases. Our continued progress on making reductions without, at this stage, a local climate change Act shows our commitment to tackling greenhouse gases.

Pork: China

T5. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the sale of pork to China, given that the provisional approval of China last year to allow pork imports was a major boost for local companies and pig farmers. (AQT 120/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: My officials have been working closely with the pork sector. Remedial actions were required, and we now await an updated progress report from the Chinese.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for the update. It is obviously positive that pork products previously considered waste have become items for export, thus helping to increase the overall value of a carcass for local farmers. Unfortunately, there is now growing frustration amongst them and the processors about what they see as excessive delays since the initial announcement was made. Can the Minister detail the value of the products that the local industry throws away every week, until final agreement can be reached on this important opportunity?

Miss McIlveen: I do not have the detail, but I know that we are working alongside the industry to assist it through this. My intention is to meet the pork industry and the processors in the very near future to discuss the issues that the Member raises.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Mr George Robinson is not in his place.

Sixmilewater: South Antrim

T7. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after welcoming her to her post, for her assessment of the environmental importance of the Sixmilewater and its watershed to South Antrim and beyond. (AQT 122/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, all our waterways are important. There is a value there for the community and for tourism, and I see value in that particular waterway. Having previously chaired the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I had a close involvement with those who are involved with the waterways, and I was aware of their anxieties around pollution. The responsibility for the waterways and their environmental protection now lies with my Department.

Mr Aiken: Minister, this river can barely flow for a year without experiencing a significant pollution incident and all the devastating consequences that come from it. The ecological damage that these incidents can cause is immeasurable, and you have only to talk to groups such as the Six Mile Water Trust or our many angling clubs and our great local council to understand how these frequent spills are affecting the river and its wider ecosystem. How will she ensure that the ecological and environmental protection of this vital resource is protected going forward? Will she consider giving the river and its ecosystem an improved protected status?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. It was quite lengthy, and there were a number of elements in it, which I will look at. I will give consideration to the comments that he has made. Pollution in rivers is something that I find quite abhorrent. I have had experience of it in my area, where there have been repeat offenders who need to be brought before the courts and prosecuted. I am willing to have a conversation with the Member in relation to special status for the river.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Mr Colin McGrath is not in his place. I call Mr Chris Lyttle.

Hunting with Dogs: NI Ban

T9. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether she would support a ban on hunting with dogs in Northern Ireland. (AQT 124/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Hunting is a matter which I have no power over. On a personal level, yes, I would support a ban.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her response. It is my understanding that her Department has power in relation to this issue. Is she willing to

set out more clearly to the House why it is impossible for her to introduce legislation to ban hunting with dogs in Northern Ireland?

Miss McIlveen: It is my understanding that I have no powers to regulate or ban hunting of foxes and other wild animals with dogs, but I am happy to have a conversation with the Member about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): As Mr McKay is not in his place, we have come to the end of topical questions. The Minister has done particularly well, and I congratulate her. I ask the House to take its ease until 2.45 pm.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I advise the Member that the House is at its ease and no points of order can be taken until after Question Time.

2.45 pm

Communities

Enabling Success

1. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Communities whether he plans to implement the recommendations contained in the Enabling Success economic inactivity strategy published in April 2015. (AQO 162/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): The previous Executive recognised the importance of reducing Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate and launched the Enabling Success strategy in April 2015, which was targeted at those people who are unable to work due to sickness, disability or caring responsibilities. Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of people classed as being economically inactive due to sickness, disability or caring responsibilities than any other part of the United Kingdom.

People in those groups face a range of barriers to work, often resulting from health conditions, a lack of core skills or their personal circumstances. There are also structural barriers, such as access to affordable childcare and the current benefit trap. Enabling Success recognised that those groups required additional assistance from across government and beyond in order to overcome the barriers to employment that they face.

The draft Programme for Government carries that commitment forward by identifying a reduction in economic inactivity as a key indicator of progress towards a number of outcomes. The reduction will require not only the efforts of my Department and those of my Executive colleagues but the involvement of organisations from across every sector in Northern Ireland. As a result, my Department is developing a Programme for Government delivery plan, which will draw on and build on the Enabling Success strategy. The delivery plan will be developed and delivered in collaboration with the Department of Health, the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education, as well as the Public Health Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and other important stakeholders. The focus of the delivery plan will be on bringing forward actions that will address the social and economic issues that need to be tackled to reduce economic inactivity.

Economic inactivity is a complex and challenging issue, but it is a challenge that I am determined to meet. I am committed to providing the opportunities and support that will give people much better choices to access work, stay in work and progress to a job that suits their particular needs.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I am pleased to hear that you are dedicated to tackling some of this economic inactivity. Will you make it a priority for your Department, however, and have you identified a budget for the implementation of your strategy?

Mr Givan: Let me assure the Member that this is a priority, not just for my Department but for the Executive. There is a work stream in the draft Programme for Government on that particular issue, because, as I outlined, it is not just for my Department but for the Executive as a whole and the key Departments to contribute to that. Due to resource implications, funding did not go to the strategy in the way in which I would have liked it to when it was in the Department for Employment and Learning. As we go forward with the Programme for Government, it is an area that I will want to see developed.

Ms Gildernew: Can the Minister give us examples of how the voluntary and community sector has been supported in helping people to find employment?

Mr Givan: I know anecdotally from my constituency about the work of the voluntary and community sector and the key role that social enterprise is playing. I can speak from

first-hand experience, particularly of an organisation called the Resurgam Trust, which is involved in a range of social enterprises right at the heart of communities in which economic inactivity has been a real issue for many years. We are seeing the product from that and the benefits.

It is not just about getting people employment but about creating aspirations in communities. That can then have an impact on education outcomes and their attainment and have consequences that go beyond people just finding a job. There is work being done with the voluntary and community sector. It is a key component of what we will want to do to tackle economic inactivity. That is why the Executive have decided that there will be a social strategy that will align with the economic strategy. The two will need to dovetail so that we can really drill down into particularly hard-to-reach communities in order that people can get the benefits.

Ms Lockhart: Is the Minister encouraged that the economic inactivity rate is now at its lowest since 1995? Can he outline the significance of that?

Mr Givan: The Member makes a very valid point that we are at the lowest level since 1995. We are at a higher level than the rest of the United Kingdom, but the direction of travel is moving the right way. There are indicators to do with the falling claimant count figures that economic recovery has been and is under way in Northern Ireland, but it is important to note that the economic inactivity rate includes students and that the fall in the overall economic inactivity rate over recent quarters is due in large part to a reduction in the number of students who have been classified as economically inactive. That is something that I do not think Members should be particularly concerned about. Students are classed as economically inactive, but they are of course gaining the essential skills that will enable them to contribute to Northern Ireland society and the economy in the years ahead. The Programme for Government recognises this by suggesting that our measure for reducing economic inactivity should exclude students. That will allow us to have a more accurate measurement of people who are economically inactive.

Welfare Reform: Advice Services

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the funding provision for advice services specific to welfare reform, as

recommended by the welfare reform mitigations working group. (AQO 163/16-21)

3. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the progress made on providing the welfare advice support recommended by the welfare reform mitigations working group. (AQO 164/16-21)

14. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities whether he has any plans to set up additional advisory services during the transitional period of welfare reform. (AQO 175/16-21)

Mr Givan: Mr Speaker, I have asked that the three questions around advice services specific to welfare reform are grouped together, with your permission, and that an additional minute, should it be required, be granted.

The welfare reform mitigations working group recommended that additional independent advice services should be put in place to assist and support customers through the welfare changes. The Executive made a commitment to provide £8 million funding over four years to provide the additional services, which is £2 million per annum. The Department is currently finalising arrangements with regional advice organisations. They will work with their front-line advice centres and a wide range of partner organisations to ensure that appropriate help and support is provided to people across Northern Ireland affected by forthcoming changes to the social security system as a result of welfare reform.

It is intended to have a dedicated 0800 Freephone number in place to provide advice and support to anyone affected by welfare reform. In addition to the telephone helpline, it is intended to have face-to-face services in each of the eleven council areas. The service will also ensure that those impacted will have access to specialist support where required. In line with working group recommendations, help will also be offered to assist those impacted in order to improve their digital and financial capability and to enhance their employability.

As well as support for a telephone service and face-to-face advice, my Department is currently developing proposals to support front-line staff, as recommended by the working group. This will include welfare reform training for all front-line advice staff, adequate digital infrastructure and ensuring that advice organisations are in a position to assist clients with digital and financial capability and enhancing employability.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for that very complete answer. He has just about taken away every supplementary question that I might have dreamt of. Just to be clear, only £2 million of the £8 million that he mentioned over four years is in the current Budget period. Is he satisfied that that money will still be available in future years? Also, is he satisfied that the quality of advice given across council areas will be reasonably uniform?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): That sounded like one more question.

Mr Givan: The £8 million has been specifically ring-fenced by the Executive as part of the overall £501 million that the Executive have decided to allocate to mitigate the worst impacts of the welfare change programme. So that £8 million is there. It is ring-fenced for the next four years, and £2 million has been made available this year.

There are key organisations involved in this — Advice NI, Citizens Advice and the Law Centre — and discussions are ongoing for them to come to an agreement on how the service is going to be provided. Obviously, councils outside this also support the agencies. This is to be welcomed. It is additional to what is currently provided, and I hope to be in a position to announce soon that there is an agreement in place that will allow this to be taken forward. Therefore, there is an onus on those organisations involved to come to a conclusion so that we can make this available to the people who are most vulnerable and need to have this support.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Can the Minister advise the House what steps he will take to provide voluntary services, such as the Royal British Legion and other ex-service organisations, with support to provide assistance for people who need it but who will not be approaching the Department or advice centres directly?

Mr Givan: I am happy to engage with any organisation. However, this £2 million is primarily being delivered through citizens advice bureaux and Advice NI and with Law Centre involvement. If there are issues in respect of the Royal British Legion, I will be more than happy to meet that organisation directly.

Mr Kearney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus a Aire. Minister, given that much of the support for welfare advice has been allocated to the larger

voluntary organisations, can you confirm that you will examine how the work of smaller organisations in the community sector that operate in that independent sector can also be supported in the vital work that they provide in disadvantaged rural and urban settings?

Mr Givan: The Executive have decided to support the most vulnerable following welfare reform through the recommendation from Professor Evason's team that this will be additional money to provide support to those independent organisations. It will be done through Advice NI and citizens advice bureaux with Law Centre engagement. For organisations outside that, if support can be provided from councils and so on and they want to do that, councils can feel at liberty to do that. That is how this specific pot of money is being developed.

This Department supports the voluntary sector, and I want to make sure that that continues. This scheme is additional; if it were not available, my Department would still provide support to people through all the jobs and benefits offices that exist across this Province. This is additional to what exists. People can come directly to social security offices to get support and advice, but this £8 million is above and beyond what we put into that, and it is being developed through Advice NI and citizens advice bureaux.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. You have touched on some of the issues that I was hoping to raise with you. In terms of accessibility to advisory services, given the complex nature of the issue that will be dealt with during those advisory services, can you indicate further what detail has really been broken down in terms of people with mental health issues, disability access, or other vulnerable groups that may need more tailored services?

Mr Givan: A support network exists through citizens advice bureau offices across the Province and Advice NI, and they are very much involved at the front line in giving people an independent organisation to support them. I expect that those organisations, as with my own offices, will link into specialist groups, such as disability services and those that are involved in that, to make sure that the right support is tailored to those that need it in the specific manner in which it will address their needs.

Mr Bell: Minister, in recognising that the mitigation measures are one of the successes of devolved government in that they have

helped the most vulnerable people in our society, will you acknowledge that there are many people who live with very specific conditions and needs? Is there room in the programme for specialist support to be given to them?

Mr Givan: Again, I will be happy to look into that in more detail for the Member.

Mr Attwood: Given that the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 freezes benefits up to 2020 and that that applies to Northern Ireland, and given that inflation is now anticipated, because of the EU vote, to be at least 2% in the next year and probably at that level for the next two or three years, can you confirm that, further to the Evason package, there is no mitigation available for people whose benefits are frozen arising from the 2016 legislation?

3.00 pm

Mr Givan: The Member raises an important point. It is important to emphasise that the mitigation measures that we have put in place deal with what came out of the 2012 Westminster legislation. It is worth putting on the record that the Executive are doing far more than is being done any other region in the United Kingdom. Let me put it on the record. The Executive will mitigate as follows: £94 million for the loss of disability living allowance; £27 million for the loss of disability related premiums; £18 million for the loss of carer payments; £25 million for the benefit cap; £24 million for the time-limiting of employment and support allowance; £91 million for the social sector size criteria, or bedroom tax; £105 million for the cost of work allowance; £62 million for discretionary support; £25 million for universal credit payment flexibilities; £7 million for the administration of support for universal credit; £2.7 million for financial capability, and £20 million for the administration of that.

The Executive have taken tough decisions that have impacted on other Departments so that, as best we can within the budgetary constraints that exist, we can support the most vulnerable in our society. It is something that the Executive were right to do and we are supporting those most in need.

The only additional mitigation from the outworkings of the subsequent legislation from the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 deals with the reduced benefit cap level of £20,000. That will be mitigated in full. There will be no mitigation for the other measures associated with that Act. The Executive are putting the

most vulnerable right at the very heart of their efforts and are trying to provide the best support that we can within existing financial constraints.

Benefit Fraud

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities how much money his Department has recovered from people found guilty of benefit fraud. (AQO 165/16-21)

Mr Givan: During the year 2014-15, the most recent year for which audited figures are available, a total of £1.8 million was recovered from people who were found guilty of benefit fraud. That figure includes sums that were recovered by the financial investigation unit by means of confiscation orders, compensation orders and voluntary payments.

Mr Humphrey: First, I congratulate the Minister on facilitating an excellent event at Titanic Belfast last night for the green and white army to round off a fantastic and memorable campaign for the Northern Ireland team. Even the most senior members of the green and white army enjoyed it.

How much money has the Minister's Department recovered from people who are guilty of fraud?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Minister, if you would care to address the question.

Mr Givan: Mr Deputy Speaker, as an avid member of the green and white army, I noticed the latitude that you gave to the Member for North Belfast. I will maybe address it later in Question Time, but I thank the Member for those kind comments about the event that the Department organised.

On the specific question about tackling fraud, the Department invests £7 million per year in 186 staff who tackle claimant fraud and benefit error. Further investment is planned under the Fresh Start Agreement and negotiations are ongoing with the Treasury. Almost 3,000 cases of claimant fraud or error were detected last year. In my initial answer, I said that £1.8 million was recovered as a result of fraud, but £17 million was recovered as a result of error. This is an area that we need to invest in. It is estimated that 1% of benefit entitlement is gained through fraud, which comes to about £50 million of public money. It is at a reduced level from that in previous years and we are moving in the right direction, but more than 900 cases of benefit fraud were received for

sanctions last year and 272 of them saw convictions being secured through the courts. It is an area of work that needs to continue to be tackled. People who receive support are entitled to receive it and need to receive it. However, those who do so fraudulently undermine the entire system, and it is right for us to tackle that problem aggressively.

Mr Butler: I would like to thank the Minister. I am not sure of the procedure, but I no longer have a question for him.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I am happy enough with that. That is OK.

Mr F McCann: I noticed that the Minister mentioned error at the same time as fraud. Does he agree that more is lost through departmental error than through fraud? What is being done to tackle that?

Mr Givan: The Member makes a valid point; more is lost through error. For something to be deemed as fraud, there needs to be an admission. Error may have occurred through a genuine mistake or someone may have received money by being deliberately misleading. When it comes to putting down a figure for fraud, there are criteria to be met through the courts or the official penalty process, if there is an admission. Tackling error is, of course, a major issue. People can unwittingly have benefits paid to them that they should not be in receipt of. When you identify that, it is important that they are repaid, and people cooperate willingly on that.

The Member is right: it is important that we do not stigmatise people who receive benefits in error. That is an issue that we need to work out through the normal processes, and that does happen. We are investing in support so that we can tackle error. That is why we have a team of 186 staff carrying out that work for us.

Mr Dickson: Fresh Start promises up to £25 million of new ring-fenced funding each year for five years to reduce welfare fraud. How does the Minister intend to use that money?

Mr Givan: That money is there to ensure that we have the support in place to continue with the work that we have been engaging in. I indicated that, we believe, around 1% of all benefit claims could be fraud. That equates to £50 million. So even though, last year, fraud and error recovery came to the value of about £17 million, obviously, there is more work to do. It has been recognised by Treasury that, if we invest in this issue, more money will be

recoverable. That is why it is in Fresh Start. That money is to enhance the work that we are doing. Work is taking place with DWP on enhancing IT equipment, improving the targeting of fraud and error, and developing closer relationships with the PSNI and HMRC. All of that will help to make us more effective in addressing the issue.

Mr Agnew: The Minister gave the figure of 1% as an estimate of the number of claims that he and his Department believe are down to fraud. Can he confirm that 99% of those who claim benefits are needing, deserving and entitled?

Mr Givan: Very much so; that is the case. In 2002, the figure was at 3%, which was significant. If you look over that intervening period, you will see that the level of benefit fraud has reduced to 1%. This is something that we are going to continue to work at, because we want to tackle the issue. Sadly, there are still some — of course, an extreme minority — who engage in fraud, and we need to identify and pursue those people.

It is right to say that 99% of people who are in receipt of entitlements are receiving them because they need them due to the situation that they are facing. It is right that we as a society support them.

Regeneration Powers

5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Communities when he plans to transfer regeneration powers to local government. (AQO 166/16-21)

Mr Givan: The extension of regeneration and community development powers to local government did not proceed under the last mandate. The new Department for Communities has been established, with a much wider range of responsibilities, including responsibility for local government. It will be in that context that I will wish to consider the options for going forward. Ultimately, any decision to extend powers to local government is a matter for the Executive. The timing of an extension would be subject to the successful completion of the legislative process, if that is the option that is pursued.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister appreciate that there is frustration amongst councillors because they have not been given the powers that the public thought they would get when they were elected two years ago? What is the timetable

for devolving regeneration powers to the 11 councils?

Mr Givan: I share the Member's concerns around this. Obviously, local government needs to have certainty. It is a decision that, from my perspective, will need to be taken sooner rather than later so that we have a definitive position. If that is to retain the function, that is a decision that we need to take; if it is to devolve it, we need to take that decision. It is important that certainty is brought into this, because there are investment opportunities and so on that require certainty if we are to take them forward. These powers are very important. They have a positive impact in our communities through urban regeneration and the support of neighbourhood renewal areas. So this is an area that we will need to engage on, and the Executive will need to come to a view on, sooner rather than later.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline what total budget was due to transfer if powers had been conferred on councils?

Mr Givan: At that time, the total budget was approximately £56.5 million. That was broken down into particular categories: physical regeneration was £18.6 million; tackling deprivation was £23.8 million; community development was £7 million; Laganside was £2.1 million; and administration was around £5 million.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. The fear, frustration and uncertainty that other Members and the Minister spoke of are not exclusive to local government. Indeed, all that is prevalent among departmental staff. Will he give the House an assurance that he is working with staff to ensure that staff charged with regeneration in the Department are being kept abreast of the situation as it develops?

Mr Givan: Very early on, I have been putting myself around the Department and meeting people. From Marlborough House in Craigavon, I met the staff who are involved with urban regeneration in that regional area. They spoke to me about physical regeneration issues and the community aspect of the function. There is a need for certainty so that people in the Department know the role that they will have and where it will be. I am listening to what Members are saying. I share the view that certainty is needed, and we need to come to a decision, whatever it is, so that certainty is brought into the system.

Ms Dillon: Has the Minister had any meetings with the chief executives, chairpersons or mayors of the councils? Your predecessor in DSD had such meetings when I was on the previous Mid Ulster Council, and I have to say that that did a lot to allay any fears that we had. That would be beneficial and give reassurance to councils. I hope that, when powers are transferred, you will give the councils the resources, unlike previous Ministers who did not do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I think that there is a question there, Minister.

Mr Givan: I have meetings lined up with local government through the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), and I am almost certain that this will be one of the main subjects on the agenda. Local government want to know what is happening, so it is important that we give that certainty to them. The point is well made. Should the decision be that a transfer takes place, of course the resource needs to follow the function. Local government cannot be seen as the area in which central government can pass on problems that we may be facing with resource. I will want to make sure that, if that is the option, the appropriate resources will be made available to councils.

Dromore, County Down: Regeneration

6. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the regeneration of the town centre in Dromore, County Down. (AQO 167/16-21)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question. The Department is working closely with officials from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council to regenerate the town centre of Dromore. A master plan to guide this regeneration was funded by my Department and published in May 2015. The master plan document was widely consulted on and received full support from the then Banbridge District Council elected members. One of the primary master plan recommendations was for the completion of a transportation assessment to review the current traffic arrangements in the town centre, with particular reference to Church Street. This work was funded by my Department and concluded in March 2016, thus enabling a number of the proposals in the master plan to be progressed.

Initial work has recently commenced on the appointment of an integrated consultancy team

to develop public realm proposals for the outer square and Church Street in the town centre. This work will complement the public realm improvements that were completed around the town hall in the main square in 2009. A number of revitalisation initiatives have also been delivered in Dromore town centre, including shop frontage improvements; the introduction of Wi-Fi services; the installation of decorative planters; the creation of a community garden; the promotion and marketing of events; and the purchase of an outdoor stage and seating. A further phase of this work is being planned for later this year.

3.15 pm

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given — pardon the pun — that this historic and ancient market town is in our constituency, Minister, how much does your Department propose to spend on the regeneration of the town centre?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): No pressure. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. I wondered who would be the first to come up with the surname joke. I know that the Member has worked very well in taking forward the Dromore area. As Minister for Communities, is it my responsibility to represent all of Northern Ireland, not just my constituency, so it will be treated fairly, as every other constituency will be treated fairly.

As for how we will take work forward, £100,000 will be allocated to a new revitalisation programme to commence later this year. The council is developing the action plan in conjunction with local traders, and £0.5 million has been identified to deliver a new public realm scheme in the outer area of Market Square and Church Street. The design stage is under way, with work planned to commence in 2017-18.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Unauthorised Monuments: Public Land

T1. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Communities whether he is content that council planning committees have sufficiently robust enforcement powers to deal with unauthorised

monuments that are put up without permission on public land. (AQT 126/16-21)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. Part of my Department's remit is responsibility for local government, insofar as it does not include planning functions, which rest entirely with the Department for Infrastructure and the planning committees. There is a clear line of responsibility. The Department for Infrastructure deals with issues to do with planning applications, approvals, refusals and, indeed, enforcement. The Member should take up the issue with that Department.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for your answer, Minister, but will you consider legislating to clamp down on unauthorised monuments on properties belonging to the Department and, indeed, on other public lands? Do you agree that memorials glorifying terrorist organisations, past and present, are unacceptable?

Mr Givan: Memorials that commemorate any form of terrorism are wrong. I do not support that, but, sadly, it does take place. In the Upper Bann constituency, a recently erected memorial has caused justifiable outrage. It is on Housing Executive property, and that issue needs to be dealt with. However, in all these things, the safety of those involved is paramount, and engagement with communities is needed. As repugnant as these memorials are, the ability of contractors to do the required work — ultimately, they are the ones who would have to go into the area — will always raise security and safety issues. The PSNI will have an advisory role, so it becomes a difficult issue to manage. The issue is not confined to the memorial that I am aware of in Lurgan; it exists in other communities as well.

Northern Ireland Football Team, Manager and Fans: Tribute

T2. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Communities, assuming that he, too, is absolutely delighted by the recent success of the Northern Ireland football team in France, to join with him to pay tribute to the manager, players and fans for the way in which they represented our wee country. (AQT 127/16-21)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. It gives me an opportunity to put on record my real sense of pride in the Northern Ireland football team and how the players conducted themselves on and off the pitch. Of course, our fans have been tremendous ambassadors for this country. Right across Europe, it has been

widely reported that our fans are what football is all about. They have been a tremendous advertisement for the sport and, of course, for our country. I cannot praise enough the way in which the team played. It is true: sport unites our country, and football is very much a cross-community sport that is truly representative of all sections of our society.

The team represents all sections of our society and is supported by all sections of our community, so it is right that we as an Assembly pay tribute to the Northern Ireland football team. That is why I decided that it would be appropriate, when the dream came to an end, to mark it with the homecoming event that took place last night. That is why I approved the organisation of that, and my Department led on it. For those who were able to be there — I know that some people had to be here to vote — it was another truly memorable night.

These are new memories. Some people in the Chamber can remember Gerry Armstrong in 1982. I was one year old when that happened — I have only watched it on television — but now I will be able to remember Gareth McAuley, Niall McGinn and Michael McGovern. Those memories will stay with me for a lifetime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I was there in 1982.

Mr Douglas: At the event last night, Michael O'Neill stated his desire for those born in Northern Ireland to play for Northern Ireland. Can the Minister — a bit like Will Grigg, the Minister is on fire today — outline his commitment to working towards that vision for football and all other sports, including boxing?

Mr Givan: We will not start doing the dance associated with that song. Michael O'Neill made a powerful point when he said that he wanted everyone born in Northern Ireland to play for Northern Ireland. I endorse and give my full support to that. Maybe in times gone by there were some who did not feel able to support Northern Ireland, but that is changing. People from right across our community support the Northern Ireland football team.

The Executive are investing heavily in sport infrastructure, including soccer stadia. That is good for our community. Football truly is a uniting sport, and therefore I want to see it developed and taken forward. That will be a priority for me. Let us look forward to September, when the redevelopment of Windsor Park will be complete and there will be

a full stadium for our first World Cup qualifier. The journey and the dreams will begin again with that campaign. Let us get behind sport. It unifies our community and has huge benefits for health and so on. The different sports in Northern Ireland are a way for people to come together. Let us bottle a little of what has taken place over the last three weeks and apply it to other aspects of our society, and we will go a long way.

Orange Order: Support

T3. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities to commit to engaging with the loyal orders to explore how their positive work can be supported, given that, as we look forward to the Twelfth of July celebrations in just over two weeks' time, it is only right and proper that the Orange Order, in encouraging participation and cultural activity, be acknowledged for the great work that it does. (AQT 128/16-21)

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member's sentiments. In my constituency, there is a vast number of Orange halls. They are used extensively by those in the Orange but, I would say, even more by people in the community who are not in the Orange Order. They provide a hub, particularly for rural communities. The Executive have recognised that, and that is why we have a policy that Orange halls do not pay rates. That is right, and it has ensured that the halls continue to operate and provide vital component in supporting our community.

As we move into the months ahead, I want to give my support to the campaign launched by Orangefest. It is important that, when we commemorate these events, it is about the battle not the bottle. Unfortunately, irrespective of what community event takes place, there can, at times, be people who engage in antisocial behaviour, which can lead to denigration of the organisation involved. I appeal to people to pay heed to what Orangefest is saying. Enjoy the celebrations — communities should respect them — but those who take part should follow the advice from the Orange by commemorating the battle and not taking up the bottle.

Mr T Buchanan: The Minister will know that thousands of people, particularly young people, are involved in marching bands. Will he therefore explore what support can be provided to the sector?

Mr Givan: I have been looking at the issue. A scheme operated for a number of years, and

then my predecessor brought it to an end. I am exploring what we can do about the musical instruments fund. The bands are heavily involved in our communities, providing an outlet, particularly for young people, to be involved in disciplined organisations that engage them in productive activity. If the young people did not have that involvement, I believe that there would be more problems in areas. It is right that we engage them positively. The fund was used for that, and I am exploring options to find a way forward so that it can be reopened.

European Funding: DFC Plans

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Communities whether he has any plans in place or under consideration to replace European money in the coming years, given that he, like Mr Lunn, will have welcomed the large investment recently offered to the housing associations by the European Investment Bank and will recognise that it is unlikely that much more money will come from that source. (AQT 129/16-21)

Mr Givan: Investment in our housing stock, both current and new social housing, is obviously a priority for the Executive. We want to build 1,600 houses this year, and there is a budget for that. Housing associations are heavily involved in taking forward that plan. The contract with the European Investment Bank has been secured. It was made clear at the time that, irrespective of the outcome of the referendum, the contract is there. It will be for the European Investment Bank to decide how it invests its money. It invests heavily beyond the boundaries of the European Union in other continents. The message to me at the time was that Brexit would make things more complicated, but that is something that we will have to navigate.

There are emerging issues with housing. I want to explore them, because it is vital that we provide the housing needed to meet the ongoing demand.

Mr Lunn: The European Investment Bank, in the past eight years, has invested £43 billion in projects within the European Union and £1 billion in projects outside it. I admire the Minister's confidence that there may still be money coming from that source, but I frankly doubt whether that will be the case. Has he anything concrete to offer by way of facilities that may replace that kind of loan?

Mr Givan: There are lending institutions that already lend to our housing associations. This was the first time that the European Investment Bank had got involved in providing support to housing associations. For a number of years, housing associations have had to raise finance on the private markets, long before the European Investment Bank got involved. I hope — indeed, I am confident — that lending institutions will want to be involved, because it has been proven that these are sound investments for financial institutions to make in our social housing sector.

European Funding: Voluntary and Community Groups

T5. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities, given last week's decision to leave the EU, to state how his Department will help those many voluntary and community groups that rely on European funding. (AQT 130/16-21)

Mr Givan: I have already authorised a course of work in the Department so that we can scope out the impact. That will feed directly into the Executive Office, which, obviously, will lead on this. The First Minister outlined on behalf of the Executive the approach that will be taken. It is important that that work take place and that we put forward the best possible case for Northern Ireland. For community groups and for everybody, uncertainty can create anxiety, and we need to make sure that we give them the best support that we can. Just as there are challenges as a result of the decision of the United Kingdom there are opportunities, and I want to explore those opportunities to see how the Department can capitalise on what, I believe, is a positive decision by the people of the United Kingdom.

Let me reassure the Member that this is a very urgent piece of work that will be going to the Executive. The First Minister and deputy First Minister will, with my support, be leading on this collectively.

3.30 pm

Mr Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he said, it is an urgent piece of business. However, on the social fund, the Peace fund and Erasmus, how will you deal with continuity? When will the funding stop? Despite what the Executive and your Department might do, how will all these groups survive and maintain continuity in going from where they are now into whatever the new situation is?

Mr Givan: The Member raises very valid questions. Irrespective of your view on the decision, these are questions that need to be answered. The United Kingdom Government have to lead on the negotiations, and the regions need to feed into that. I have every confidence that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with counterparts in Scotland and Wales — and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, given the nature of the relationship and the impact that the decision will have — will make the case collectively to those who are going to be responsible for negotiating this with the European Union.

This is something that is emerging. The sooner that there is certainty around the politics in London and we know the way in which things will develop, the better. We will then need to make sure that we feed into the process. However, the preparatory work has been taking place and is coming together. I am confident that the Northern Ireland Executive will be able to put forward the strongest possible case to benefit Northern Ireland in the relationships that will exist once the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Time is now up. I ask Members to take their ease while we make some changes at the Table.

Mr McGrath: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I offer apologies for missing a topical question earlier.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Thank you.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Learning Disability Services: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. As an unprecedented number of Members have indicated their desire to speak, I will be able to allow each Member only three minutes, with no additional time for interventions unless some names are removed.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her attendance. The fact that so many Members are still in the Chamber is an indication of how seriously they take this issue. I am going to start by putting a question in the air: when is a parent not a parent? I am going to follow that up with: when is a child not a child? I am going to leave those questions in the air for a few moments.

Any of us from my part of the world or other parts of the world who have attended meetings with the parents of children — I will refer to them as children — with learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities will understand the frustration and pain that these people have suffered over the past few years. In April of this year, I was contacted by a constituent about the underspend in the Western Health and Social Care Trust on adult learning disability services. As we were in purdah, I wrote directly to the chief executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust, following which myself and several other Members from the Western Health and Social Care Trust area were summoned to a meeting in Londonderry; some of those Members are in the Chamber now.

We were given a presentation, which raised more questions than it answered. The figure of £8 million was floated, which might have been underspent in these services. As we left the meeting, one of the worst comments was, "Well, we may have to balance the books, but that money may have to come from the services for the elderly". I see Members here nodding; that is exactly what was said to us, but nobody could identify this particular figure or where it came from.

I am now going to go off script and read a portion of a speech that was given by Gemma Doherty, or Gemma McGorty as she was, from Garrison, County Fermanagh. I started work 40 years ago today, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I know you are about to say that I am far too young to have been working for 40 years, but 40 years ago, I worked with this lady's father. The letter that she wrote concludes with the speech that she gave:

"My final thought today is this: we, the parents and carers of children and adults with disabilities, are soft targets for all those who are supposed to be providing a just and equitable system for us all. They know that we will make ourselves unwell, as we turn ourselves inside out in an attempt to take care of our children; they know that we will never abandon them; they know that in many, many cases, a sibling will take over the role when we are no longer fit; they

know we are too exhausted to have enough energy to make phone calls and write letters; and they know that for years and years, we have not told half the story, because we don't want to appear to let our children down, or make it sound that we don't love them, or say that we can't cope, and that will suit them.

They talk about equal rights for all, yet we all know that even highly intelligent people with physical or mental disabilities find it very difficult to get employment and face discrimination every day. And as for the children and adults who have the additional complication of a learning disability, well, have a look at Western Trust policy to see what they and their carer's chances are."

Most of us know somebody with a learning disability; most of us know the parent of someone with a learning disability. How many of us can say that we could do the job that they do?

My aunt and uncle had a daughter who had Down's syndrome, and my cousin was one of the brightest people that I have ever met. If she met you once, she would know you again 30 years later. My aunt and uncle were well into their 80s when my cousin passed away in her 60s, yet they were still acting as parents to their child. Back to the question: when is a parent a parent? A parent will always be a parent, but when you are dealing with someone with learning difficulties, you are on your own in many cases. In the public meetings that we have attended, we have seen parents in their 80s bringing along their 60-year-old child. That person, to them, is their child, and that child is fully dependent on their parent.

Over the years, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, or the Sperrin Lakeland Trust, or the Foyle Trust, have taken money away from the services that these people should get. When did that start? Well, we know that it started at least in 1994, and, at that time, there was an underspend of £4 million. These are the figures that were uncovered. When we ask the trust for an exact figure, we are not going to be given an exact figure.

If it was £4 million in 1994 and £8 million in 2016, is the figure cumulative? Is it £4 million over 20 years, so that we end up, after we start adding inflation, talking about an underspend that is in excess of £100 million? Is that the figure? The people who look after adults with learning disabilities are convinced that more than £100 million has not been allocated to the parents or to those who suffer from adult-

learning disabilities. If that is the case, shame on us, because for 20 years that was allowed to happen.

What have we been doing to help those people? If I were sitting in the Chamber today as the parent of a child with learning disabilities, I would be thinking, "You've done nothing. You've turned a blind eye to these people". We did not know — quite honestly, we did not know — but shame on us for not knowing.

Since I became a Member in 2011, I have often dealt with the parents of children with learning disabilities, and I have accepted the story from the trust when it was said, "We don't have the money. We do not have sufficient funds", but, if they do not have sufficient funds because they siphon money away from this area, shame on them. If it was allowed to happen under the management of the trust, shame on the trust. If it was allowed to happen under the supervision of a board, shame on the board. If it was allowed to happen under the supervision of the Department, shame on the Department — and shame on this House for allowing it to happen. So, there are answers that we need.

There are also things that we need to know about who was responsible for this. We all know in the House that civil servants are never responsible for anything. Civil servants cannot carry the can because, oh dear, that person just happened to retire last month or will be retiring next month. This is a 20-year scandal — uncovered by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), apparently — so, now is the time for us to uncover the truth. Every single piece of paper that is available must be made available. Every single pound that was taken from the service must be given back. Whenever parents in their 80s cannot get respite care because we did not give the services sufficient money, that is wrong. If this trust did that, and the trust's management board allowed it to happen, then there are quite a few heads that have to be knocked together. When they all head off to their golden retirement with bucket loads of money, what about those they are leaving behind and who still have to deal with this?

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

Gemma is a lady in her 40s and she has looked after three children with learning disabilities. Two of them have degrees; the third one is at home, having been there during childhood and adolescence and now into adulthood. Sometimes, he is very difficult to control. He has wrecked televisions and wrecked rooms. That parent has been looking after that adult for

20 to 25 years. Look at cases in which adults in their late 50s or early 60s have a parent in their 80s who is attempting to look after them. When the parent asks for respite, it cannot be given, because we have closed many of the houses that we used for those services. Why did we close those services? It was because somebody said, "Three people living in one house cannot share a bathroom. All facilities must be en suite. So, we will close it". Or, they say that the service has been withdrawn because, "We don't have the money". That is not the case: the money was there but was redirected.

I and others met with Mencap on Friday morning. Part of our new system in west Tyrone is that we are going to regularly meet with Mencap. I am going to list the key issues that they have asked me to raise here today.

3.45 pm

As we stand, no health and social care trust can identify all those with a learning disability within their area. On average, each trust can identify only those with the most severe learning disability. Across all trusts, that number is 9,600, and in the Western Health and Social Care Trust it is — we do not know. In 2013, the RQIA identified that there was underfunding by 5% per annum in the Western Health and Social Care Trust in learning disability services. We are now in June 2016. Why has it taken so long for this matter to reach the public agenda? Well, it is here today, and it is not going away.

What action has the RQIA taken to hold the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to account for this? The RQIA should, as a matter of public confidence in its role, explain its actions in how it tried to address this situation. The HSCB must, as a matter of urgency, publish the review of expenditure on learning disability services across all trust areas.

The review undertaken in 2013 details the level of underfunding and should be made publicly available. The Western Trust must detail for each year from 1996 how much funding it provided to learning disability services and by what percentage those were underfunded. It is estimated that the underfunding was approximately 5% per annum amounting to some £8 million in any given year. Families in the Western Trust have indicated that there has been an underfunding situation since 1996. That amounts to approximately £80 million in services that families and adults with a learning disability have been denied. I think that figure is in excess of £100 million.

The Western Trust must identify who took the decision to move the funding allocated by the HSCB for learning disabilities to a different programme of care. The trust must identify where that decision originated and who ratified it. Did it go to the trust board for ratification, or was it ratified by senior management?

In real terms, the decision has meant that families are continuing to care when they are at breaking point, putting lives and relationships in danger. Carers are continuing to care into their seventies, eighties and even nineties as they despair for the services they needed. Adults with a learning disability have been denied the services that would enable them to have a better quality of life. There has been a failure to provide services that meant adults could be part of our community and a failure to provide housing and support options that would let adults with learning disabilities live independently.

It is essential, Minister, that there is now a robust and independent inquiry into how this could, and did, happen. We need to know how much was underfunded in the Western Trust area. It does not matter whether you come from Lisnaskea, Londonderry or Limavady. We have four counties, I think, and at least four parliamentary constituencies affected here. We have hundreds of families affected. Why did we let it happen?

I will go back to the question. When is a parent a parent? A parent is always a parent. My mother died last year. She was 87. She was always my mother, she was always the parent and she remained that way her entire life. Parents here are carrying a burden that we, as a state, must help to support.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your time, and Minister, I look forward to your answer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you for that. Just before we move to the next Member, I advise Members that, where interventions are concerned, a large number of Members wish to speak on this issue. I advise Members that anybody who gives way cannot necessarily expect to be given an extra minute. I am just, if you like, marking people's card on that one.

Mr T Buchanan: First of all, I thank the Member for bringing this very important matter to the House today. It lies very close to my heart, as my elderly parents, one in their early eighties and one in their late seventies, are carers for a brother and an uncle. I know the

care and devotion that are given day after day with very little respite care being given to them.

This is something that reads like a children's mystery book entitled 'The Western Trust and the case of the missing millions'. Unfortunately, this is not a work of fiction. For over 20 years, the Western Trust has been removing millions every year from its budget allocation for adult disability services in the western area.

The trust thought that adult disability services in the constituency should not be allocated their funding and removed the money from those vital services. Is it the case that the Western Trust got away with that scheme for so long that it thought that it would continue to go undetected? It is absolutely appalling that, for 20 years, up to £8 million a year has been directed away from adult disability services and used in other areas. That fact is so startling that it adds nothing but questions. No one from the Western Trust appears to be prepared to give answers to the questions being asked. Is it any wonder that parents, carers and people who work in special educational needs facilities are angry today? The realisation that those people and the services that they are entitled to have been shunted by the trust for all these years is an extremely bitter pill to swallow.

Let us stop for a moment today and weigh up the mental and physical cost to carers. Let us add up the cost of the actions by the trust. Struggling parents have been refused respite care to relieve them from their extremely difficult lives. Day centres have restricted schedules and facilities because of a so-called lack of funds; obviously, those funds were directed away somewhere else. Young people have been sidelined and marginalised. Crucial interventions, which could make a difference to the quality of life of those people, have been deemed unnecessary for funding purposes. The most vulnerable in our society have been discriminated against.

Many of those people, who will never be able to speak —

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

Mr T Buchanan: — for themselves or stand up for their rights, have been let down by the trust. As the proposer of the Adjournment topic said today, there must be a robust intervention —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member is past his time. Will you draw your remarks to a close, please?

Mr T Buchanan: — so that the trust is held to account for what has been done.

Ms Boyle: I congratulate the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. I congratulate those involved in the campaign — families, service users, the western adult learning disability action group, Mencap and organisations in my area like Parents and Friends of Glenside Community and many others — for putting the spotlight on the issue and supporting the families and individuals in their quest to get real answers in this debacle since the shock announcement — answers as to why there has been consistent underfunding for quite a number of years in adult learning disability services, amounting to £8 million in the Western Trust.

Families of adults with a learning disability have made repeated representations over many years to the former Western Health and Social Care Board, the Health and Social Care Board and the trust about the lack of services for learning disability in the Western Trust compared with others. On a number of occasions since 2002, carer representatives from the western adult learning disability action Group have presented to the Western Board and the Western Trust their analysis of actual expenditure, which pointed to significant levels of underfunding. It fell on deaf ears. Families believe that they were ignored when they presented the trust with that information. On 20 May, I, like others, met the trust officials for a briefing in relation to how that underspend came about. I will put in context how that came about: we were informed that it was down to a resettlement programme going back a number of years.

A learning disability can affect many people's lives in many ways, as was said, causing difficulties in learning, communication and tasks of everyday life. This is what we are dealing with. The impact of the deficit on adult learning disability services across the trust will need to be fully documented. Families have continued to cope with a caring role with limited assistance and at great cost to family life, health and income.

It has impacted the ability of the trust to recruit appropriate numbers of social workers, community workers, community nurses, day-care staff and other professionals who can identify the needs of those families and deliver for them. The pressure on front-line staff trying to cope with unrealistic caseloads —

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

Ms Boyle: — and maintain some services has an impact on delivery. That needs to be addressed. As the Member said, there are key issues that need to be explored.

Mr Durkan: I agree with everything that everyone has said thus far, apart from one point from the Member who secured the debate, Ross Hussey. Talking about the deficit, he said, "We did not know", and similar shock was expressed by other Members. This issue, however, did not just drop out of the sky. The deficit in spending on learning disability services in the Western Trust had taken on almost mythical proportions over a number of years, so people would have heard about it. It might have reared its ugly head during, for example, the annual furore over day-care places for young adults with a learning disability, but it was never confirmed. I am not the only person here who raised questions about it, only to be bamboozled, in effect, by obfuscation and denial. Now, finally, the huge and historical underspend in the area has been confirmed by the trust.

The feeling of the families on the ground whom I have spoken to — I think that Members from elsewhere across the trust area confirmed this today — is that, had it not been for the RQIA report and its imminent publication, the trust would not have gone public about the underspend. In fairness to the trust, it facilitated meetings with us as MLAs and elected representatives. We have asked a lot of questions. We have, as Mr Hussey said, probably come away with more questions. There are layers and layers — I said "layers".

The deficit, it seems, can be traced back through legacy trusts and the myriad of bureaucracy to as far as 1994. A failure to address that meant that it snowballed from, we think, £4 million in 1994 to the amount that Mr Hussey mentioned — probably in the region of £8 million, which is the figure in the wording for the debate and the figure that we are all using. For those listening to or reading this who might not be aware, that is the figure each year for over 20 years. Tens of millions of pounds — possibly over £100 million — have not been spent on services for some of our most vulnerable, and that is just shocking to say the least. It is my understanding that the RQIA is completing a further study that should establish the full extent of the underspend, but how could anyone calculate its full cost? The physical, emotional and mental cost to service users, the

people who wanted to use a service but were denied —

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

Mr Durkan: — and to families as they fought for services for their loved ones and support for themselves, is immeasurable.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for bringing this very important topic to the Floor today. Several weeks ago, I went to a public meeting in the City Hotel in my constituency. Family members, carers and fellow elected Members were gathered there to discuss this very serious issue. The high emotion was understandable — there was hurt, tears and anger. Of course, as elected Members, we shared in that and voiced our concerns and anger as well.

We met the trust on 20 May, as was mentioned. It was a useful meeting, albeit that we left with more questions than answers. It was made clear to us that it was first identified in 1996 that there was a £4.4 million deficit in the money going to adult learning disability services. It is staggering that that was over 20 years ago and that, still to this day, very little has been done about it. In 2015, the previous Minister allocated an additional £350,000 to learning disability services. That was helpful, but, unfortunately, it was, given the overall scale of the problem, a drop in the ocean.

4.00 pm

Other Members have touched on the fact that, at this stage, we still do not know the extent of the deficit; £8 million has been mentioned, of course. The fact that we do not know is worrying in itself, because it will be more; it is just a question of how much more. We need to see the report from the Health and Social Care Board, which is due out, hopefully, in the next couple of months. We look forward to seeing that, and seeing how the Minister is going to tackle the serious underspend.

Last week at the Health Committee, I mentioned to the Minister that there needs to be a thorough investigation into why and how this happened. There is uncertainty as to how this went under the radar for so long. It is clear that family members had suspicions and concerns about services, but, again, this is not all about finance. It is about the fact that these family members will not get back the time that they have lost with their relatives or the support that they lost out on. I call on the Minister to provide reassurances to the families — I know that she

listened to the Committee last week — and ensure that this situation cannot be allowed to happen again.

Ms Gildernew: Like others, I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter, and I thank the Member for bringing it to the House. I do not disagree with anything that has been said either. These families are genuinely bereft at all that they have gone through and the experiences that they have had. The care and support that they needed was not forthcoming. At the meeting on 20 May, the trust made it very clear to us that it would not be seeking additional resources from the Minister and that the situation would have to be managed from the budget allocation.

There are families out there, however, who are treating this almost as a bereavement. All the things that they have been asking for have not been forthcoming for years because of budgetary issues. They have found out that that money was available and was spent on other things, and it is a massive blow to families who are, as we have heard today, supporting adults. Thankfully, those are adults who are living much longer. I can remember when, probably a generation ago, the life expectancy of adults with conditions such as Down's syndrome was very poor. It is much better now, but, as a result, if we have adults who are living into their 40s and 50s and even, in some cases, into their 60s, their parents are getting older and much less capable of providing care. The parents are also dealing with their own health issues, including their mental health, their ability to care for a child and the uncertainty around who is going to pick up when they are no longer able to do it or no longer here. The fear and worry among parents of children with learning disabilities, when they do not know what kind of care their child is going to get after they pass away, eats them up.

Like others, I ask the Minister to carry out a very thorough investigation into how this happened and see what can be done to support those families, perhaps, by bringing in some creative and innovative ideas to help them to cope with this news and give them some succour for the future that their needs will be met in a more timely fashion. That might mean procuring extra respite beds to give people a break and enable them to continue the fight and ensure that they are giving their child the best support they can now, but also that their child has the best and most dignified care that they need —

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

Ms Gildernew: — when their parent is no longer able to provide it.

Mrs Barton: I have listened intently to what each Member has had to say this afternoon. I want to mention a lady I sat beside at one of the meetings of the western learning disability action group. She spent most of that meeting wiping tears from her eyes and becoming more and more emotional, frustrated and angry as the appalling extent of the underspend became apparent. She explained how it was a continuous battle over the years to have her family member assessed and to fight to find an acceptable school and how, during that time, as her child reached adulthood, she had to move house from the country to the town so that she could avail herself of some the services provided. As a carer, she felt totally isolated, with no one to turn to.

That is only one example. Generations of adults with learning disabilities have been deprived of the opportunity of a better life. That has had a detrimental effect on many families' personal and family lives, which no financial compensation will ever redress. However, I urge the Minister, through the Western Health and Social Care Trust, to start working immediately with all the families of adults with learning disabilities to cut through the red tape and provide immediate support for respite services, day care and social work.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust must come clean and explain fully how this gross underspend happened. It must be transparent and open in its explanation, including about the number of years for which the deficit has existed. Many of the carers whom I have spoken to have, for years, lived on a knife edge financially. Many homes have had to be adapted and renovated to accommodate loved ones, sometimes at the expense of family holidays. Caring is 24/7, 52 weeks a year, with extremely limited opportunities for respite and, indeed, very limited family time. The impact that that money could have had on their families will never now be able to be measured.

What makes the deficit more difficult to accept is that it is the most vulnerable in society who have suffered. I ask that the Minister immediately put in place a programme of support for carers and those with the various adult learning disabilities that there are —

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

Mrs Barton: — so that the high cost financially, socially and to health is lessened forthwith.

Mr McElduff: The western learning disability action group and the parents who are associated with that group, many of them based in the Omagh area, are very familiar to me. I found the engagement with Mencap in the course of the recent election to be very compelling. As Ross said, the group of MLAs in West Tyrone subsequently agreed to meet Mencap in a regular format to discuss issues pertaining to the learning disability debate and to be properly informed to support people.

I want it noted that the RQIA identified in 2013 that there was underfunding by 5% per annum in adult learning disability services in the Western Trust area. That is the key point. It would be good to know what the RQIA has done to hold the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board to account for that. If the Minister can throw any light on whether it was the responsibility of the trust or the board, that will be useful. The Health and Social Care Board should publish the review of expenditure on learning disability services across all trust areas, not least the Western Trust area.

I commend families, parents and those who care for adults and children with learning disabilities. Proper funding would enable them to have a better quality of life. I identify with what Michelle Gildernew said when she described the experience of many of the families on learning about the underfunding over a lengthy period as being like a bereavement. It appeared to me to be like that. I support Michelle Gildernew in that point that she made.

I support the call for much-improved respite services in the future for ageing carers, for adults who care for other adults and for families. Where should the money be taken from? It definitely should not be taken from domiciliary care, as was hinted at in one meeting that I attended. The key point to make is that there is a major disparity in support services across trust areas.

Parents in Omagh, Strabane and other parts of the Western Trust area look enviously across at services enjoyed by families —

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

Mr McElduff: — in other health trust areas. I just want to add my voice to the consensus today.

Mr McCrossan: I thank my constituency colleague Ross Hussey for bringing this debate to the House. Given that we have a limited time frame for the number of people who can speak on this, I will get straight to the point. This was an unprecedented scandal. We are not getting answers. Who is responsible? Is it the health and social care trust? We cannot even get those answers in relation to this unbelievable failure in relation to the most vulnerable people in our society. How on earth are people supposed to have trust in this House if we still do not have those answers? We still do not know if it is £8 million a year or less. How are we supposed to get the answers for the people out there who are suffering day and daily if we cannot answer the most simple of those questions?

People are suffering. Michelle Gildernew is absolutely right: it was like a death. We stood in those public meetings and watched people crying and watched people's lives ripped apart, and, even yet, we cannot get the answers to the questions that we have.

This is the most important debate, in my view, that has come to the Floor of the House at this juncture, and I sincerely hope that, beyond this point, we can get the answers that are necessary. I commend the people who have brought this issue to the public domain. The families have been saying for over 20 years that something is wrong. They knew people in other trust areas who were getting better services than we were. The most disappointing thing about this is that when we ask who is responsible, we are told, "This is not a game of pointing fingers". Well, I am sorry, but someone needs to be held to account for a lost life, because that is what it is. For the many families out there, it is a lost life. Mothers and fathers have given up jobs to look after their loved ones, to look after the most vulnerable in our society and ensure that they have the most fundamental, necessary care that should have been protected by the trust.

Some of those people are in the Gallery. Frances McHugh is listening intently. I commend her, because she is one of those people who has suffered unnecessarily. We can go into the ins and outs, but we have only three minutes. My point is simple. This House, those families, our communities and the Western Trust area wants and deserves answers and must have them. No more of the tail wagging the dog. This has to be sorted out.

Mr McCartney: I commend Ross Hussey for bringing this important issue to the Assembly today. All the issues have been well and truly articulated, but there are just a number of points that I would like to make. I met the families in Derry on 18 May, and one of the things that struck me about the meeting — and there had been a public meeting in the City Hotel previous to that — was that the families had known for a long number of years about this. Despite their best efforts to break through the barriers that were surrounding it, they always knew that there was a sense of underfunding and that other services were being provided.

The other thing that struck me, despite the obvious emotion — people here have spoken about the emotion surrounding the issue — was their positivity and determination. For them, the way forward was to right the wrong that had been brought upon them, their families and the people whom they care for. It is important that we lend our weight to that positivity to ensure that we get a resolution to the problems that, undoubtedly, have been there.

Other Members have mentioned the meeting on 20 May when the trust briefed us on this. The trust accepted that there was underfunding and that the funding had been provided and given to other services. The focus should be on how that was allowed to happen. From my recollection, that was the main thrust of the conversation that morning.

4.15 pm

Speaking to members of the action group and to families, they welcomed the pledge by the trust that it wanted to resolve this in the spirit of partnership, and I think that the families and the action group have welcomed that. There are some genuine concerns that the definition of partnership may be different for the trust than for the families, and I think that we have to create the climate where that sense of partnership is true. They are already saying that, because of the way the trust is approaching this, the families do not want to be put in a position that it looks as if money is being taken from other services to close the gap in their funding. They do not want to be seen to be responsible for raising their voices to get their entitlement and for it to then look as if money has been taken from someone else. There has been a genuine request by the families and the action group that how these decisions will be made —

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

Mr McCartney: — and how the trust is resolving them should be done in true partnership.

Mr Lynch: A lot has been said to date, and I agree with all the Members, who have ventilated everything very well. How can we go forward and give hope to these families? We have all listened to them. We have been at the meetings. I say to the Minister that the trust needs to work with the families and the Department and put in place a plan to rectify this gap in funding. That is what families need. The issue has been very badly handled by the Western Trust; there is no doubt about that. Families were rightly angry when this underspend became apparent. The families need clarity. They should not have to fight tooth and nail. I know a woman who has been looking after her 18-year-old daughter. It did not come as a shock. She has been fighting for years. These families all need our support, Minister. Sin é.

Mr McPhillips: It is great to get the opportunity to contribute to today's debate, and I thank Mr Ross Hussey for tabling it. Members have covered much of the ground, and I just want to make a few points. In May, I had one of the first opportunities to meet families in Enniskillen, and I heard at first hand of the great difficulties that they face. These families are struggling through no fault of their own. The chronic underspend has left many of them trying to cope in a carer role with no hope of assistance, and that comes at great financial cost and great cost to family life, health and well-being.

I reiterate my full support for the families. Many of them are from across my constituency, and I fully support them in their campaign for a proper service to be put back in place immediately and to have this historical underspend dealt with. Like many other Members, I fully support their calls for a proper independent inquiry.

It has become clear that many of the families affected have struggled and fought for years for proper funding, only to be told by the trust, the Department, and the Health and Social Care Board that there is nothing irregular in how resources are allocated to learning disability services. It is a sort of buck-passing exercise and about blaming someone rather than taking responsibility and being held to account for their actions. If this funding shortfall has existed for some 20 years, it is nothing short of a travesty, and the question has to be asked: how has that impacted on other services? Patients and families want answers, and they deserve answers now.

The trust has also stated that it will work with the families affected and will bring them on board, but I have to report that I had a visit to my office in Lisnaskea from one of the parents, and she advised me last week that no contact has been made to date to take them on board. Is this yet another empty promise? The SDLP also met Trevor Millar recently, who assured us that plans will be put in place to address all the very serious concerns. We wrote to Mr Millar and, on that day, we marked his card. We have written to him in the last few days looking for an update on what progress has been made.

In conclusion, I give a commitment to the families that we will continue to seek monthly updates on what is happening. I am glad that the Minister is here today, and I look forward to her response on these very important issues. The families need answers, and she is in the position to provide them.

Ms Archibald: I also commend Mr Hussey for securing the debate. I know that I will repeat some of what has been said, but I feel that it is important to put on record the concerns of my constituents in East Derry.

Like others here, I attended a public meeting organised by the Western Learning Disability Action Group in Benbradagh Resource Centre in Limavady. I also attended the Western Trust briefing on the underspend. The sentiments being expressed by families have already been articulated very well. They have been let down over many years. It is difficult to quantify. When I say "quantify", in this instance, I do not mean numerically or financially; I mean the services or support that could have been provided if the appropriate funding had been available and the difference it might have made to the lives of those living with learning disabilities and their families. At the meeting, we heard from families who had supported loved ones over many years. We heard about the lack of respite care and limited day centre services. We heard about how much of a difference these services can make to families and how many parents feel abandoned as they get older and struggle to cope with adult dependents with very little support. We also heard of their very real worries about what will happen to their loved one if they are unable to care for them. We also heard about the massive difference that real, effective support from organisations like Destined can have on the lives of those living with learning disabilities by allowing them to reach their full potential. Our citizens deserve nothing less than to have those opportunities. It is a travesty that more of those support services are not in place.

It is important that we learn from this. Families have called for an independent inquiry, and we support that call. We need to get a full understanding of the level of the underspend and how it was allowed to continue over the considerable time that it occurred, and we need to address that underspend with a similar level of investment. We need to listen to what the advocacy groups, support groups and individuals tell us about the care and support services that are needed, and we need to work to deliver on those. We need to have different models of support — trust-delivered direct payments or whatever it is — available for individuals to access depending on their circumstances. Families need to know that support is there for them and their loved ones as they get older, and young people who are struggling to cope with learning disabilities need to have hope that they will have support into the future.

I know that we have a receptive Minister of Health who is open to listening to all those suggestions. I am confident that she will ensure that the issue is fully addressed in a way that is acceptable to those who are most affected.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): From the start, like other Members, I want to recognise that I believe that the issue has been badly handled. Families and carers deserve answers, and that will certainly be my job as I look at the information in front of me. All Members have spoken passionately about the real face of the issue and the challenges for those who care for a loved one with a learning disability. It is important that we discuss the issue, and it is right and proper that it has given rise to a great deal of concern across all the political parties, families and communities in the Western Trust area.

Before I address the points made during the debate, I want to assure all the families that I share their concerns and that my priority is to ensure that their voices continue to be heard and listened to, as the trust seeks to resolve the issue. As I said in the Chamber last week in response, I think, to Ross Hussey at Question Time, it was the level of concern expressed by family members in my first week in office that prompted me to seek an urgent briefing from my officials. That confirmed that the problem concerning the funding of adult learning disability services in the Western Trust was historical, and Members have referred to that today.

I am aware that a figure of £8 million has been discussed and quoted widely in recent weeks

as being the amount of underspend that the trust needs to address. Members have referred to other figures today, and it is important to state that we do not have the figure in the information that we have. I have heard some people saying that the issue may go back over 20 years, so we could be looking at an even larger figure. I want to be very clear to the families who may be listening to the debate, and I do not want to cause any more angst for people who are already extremely concerned and angered by what they have seen unfolding over a number of years. I absolutely understand why families are anxious to know the actual figures involved. That is why my focus is on ensuring that they are fully engaged in the development of the plan going forward. The Western Trust is now working urgently, with the support of the HSC Board, to robustly and accurately quantify the spending gap that has occurred. The provision of that information and clarity is important, so that we know the scale of the problem that we are dealing with.

I have also listened to Members refer to the need for real engagement with families and carers. I was disappointed to hear some of the evidence suggesting that the trust has still not learned its lesson and is still not engaging properly with families. I will make sure that I take that on board and relay it to the trust to make sure that there is proper and real engagement.

Going forward, the plan will set out how the trust intends to address the gap. That is, obviously, something that families want to know about and be involved in. Again, that aspect of the plan must be fully communicated to the families, who, I am aware, have raised concerns about the implications of redressing any imbalance for other programmes of care. This is a group of people who feel they have been wronged by the trust, but they are concerned about the implications for other people who may need health and social care services. That is a testimony to the people that they are.

A lot of questions have been asked today around responsibilities and who does what. Whilst, ultimately, spending decisions at a local level are for trusts to make, I will closely monitor the trust's progress to ensure that it is focused on delivering solutions that take account of what families and carers say.

It will come as no surprise to the Assembly when I say that there are obvious and real budgetary constraints facing the health and social care system. They are such that it is incumbent on all parts of the system to ensure

that the resources that we have are prioritised to meet the needs of our communities. That, no doubt, will be a key factor in the work that the trust is doing now, together with the board, to resolve this issue.

I have been in post for four weeks. I want to transform the health and social care system, and I want to get to a point where we adequately address the needs of people with learning disabilities and those who are more vulnerable in society. I want to see a changing picture in which we have real investment to provide real opportunities for people who have learning disabilities and provide real support for those who have caring responsibilities. That is when we will be truly judged on delivery. I want to get us to that point, and I look forward to engaging with Members on how we get there.

Going back to the issue that we are dealing with today, I hope that it is clear from my remarks that I take the issue very seriously. It is the people behind the headlines, the people with learning disabilities and their families whom we need to reassure and support going forward. That is why, as I said last week in the Chamber, I have sought an explanation from the trust of its handling of the issue to date. I am considering the trust's response. It is also why I will meet some of the families later this week. At that meeting, I look forward to hearing at first hand their views and concerns, which will, obviously, help to inform any future action I may take in relation to the issue.

In conclusion, I think that many will agree that, whilst it is absolutely right that the Chamber gives a voice to people with real issues that need to be addressed, like the Western Trust issue that we have just debated, I should put it on the record that we must not forget to recognise the good work that goes on in the health and social care system and acknowledge the staff who work tirelessly to make sure that there are proper opportunities and support for people who are more vulnerable, particularly those with learning disabilities.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I have a very short time. I take the opportunity to thank those working across the five trusts for the high-quality care they provide, because, whilst we have identified a problem and something that needs to be seriously addressed — I recognise that — it is important that we acknowledge that there are excellent healthcare staff who work hard, day and daily, to support people who need services and support. I wanted to put that on record.

The clear message that I want to send to the families and carers is that I take this issue seriously, I am listening to your concerns, I will engage with you in person and I will give due consideration to the report from the trust. Having listened to all the comments around the Chamber today, I think that people still do not understand the problem. People still do not seem to be getting the answers that they need. Obviously, the trust is not communicating properly with people. I look forward to taking that forward, and I assure the House and those who are impacted that I will not be found wanting in my support for people with a learning disability.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we turn to the Adjournment, I realise that this is the last formal session of the Assembly in this term. I wish all Members a somewhat restful recess period, given that we have just come out of an election followed by a referendum. I am sure that people are a wee bit drawn with that. I wish everybody all the best, and I look forward to seeing everyone back in September.

Adjourned at 4.29 pm.

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