



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 28 September 2015  
Volume 107, No 7

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# Assembly Members

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Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)  
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)  
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)  
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)  
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)  
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)  
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)  
Cochrane-Watson, Adrian (South Antrim)  
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)  
Cree, Leslie (North Down)  
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
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)  
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ford, David (South Antrim)  
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)  
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)  
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)  
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)  
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)  
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McCallister, John (South Down)  
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)  
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)  
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)  
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)  
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)  
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McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)  
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)  
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)  
McGahan, Ms Bronwyn (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)  
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)  
McKevitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)  
McKinney, Fearghal (South Belfast)  
McLaughlin, Ms Maeve (Foyle)  
McLaughlin, Mitchel (Speaker)  
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)  
McNarry, David (Strangford)  
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)  
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)  
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)  
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)  
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)  
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)  
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)  
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)  
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)  
Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)  
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)  
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)  
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)  
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)  
Rogers, Seán (South Down)  
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)  
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Somerville, Neil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (North Down)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 September 2015

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Before we proceed to today's business, I have some announcements to make.

### Resignation: Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the House that I have received a letter from Mr Jimmy Spratt giving me notice of his intention to resign as a Member for the South Belfast constituency with effect from 10.00 am today. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

### New Assembly Member: Emma Pengelly

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the House that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mrs Emma Pengelly has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the South Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from Mr Spratt's resignation. Mrs Pengelly signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in my presence and that of the Clerk/Chief Executive on 28 September 2015. The Member has now taken her seat, and I very much welcome her to the House and wish her every success.

### Ministerial Appointments: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Storey

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Mr Simon Hamilton MLA as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Miss Michelle McIlveen MLA as Minister for Regional Development; and Mr Mervyn Storey MLA as Minister for Social Development. Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey each accepted the nomination and affirmed the

Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Director of Clerking and Reporting on Wednesday 23 September 2015.

### Ministerial Resignations: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Storey

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the House that those four Ministers subsequently resigned their offices on Thursday 24 September 2015. Standing Order 44(3) provides for a seven-day period during which the party that held these offices can nominate Members of its party to replace them and take up office. That period expires at the end of Wednesday 30 September 2015.

### Ministerial Appointment: Mr Bell

**Mr Speaker:** I further advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Bell accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on Monday 28 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

### Public Petition: Withdrawal of Day Release for Individuals Convicted of Terrorism-related Offences Before 1998

**Mr Speaker:** Mrs Sandra Overend has sought to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

**Mrs Overend:** It gives me no pleasure that circumstances necessitate my presenting to you, this afternoon, a public petition on behalf of Mrs June McMullin and over 3,500 signatories.

However, I am honoured that June and members of the mid-Ulster victim empowerment group who are supporting her through these difficult times asked me to do so. They are here this afternoon in the Public Gallery.

On 14 September 1981, June gave birth to her second son in the Mid Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt. It was following a visit to see June and their newborn baby that her husband, RUC Reserve Constable John Proctor, was brutally murdered in the car park of the hospital. Tensions had been high at that time due to the hunger strikes and the IRA having carried out a number of murders in the south Londonderry and east Tyrone areas over the recent days. In fact, earlier that day, John had attended the funeral of a UDR colleague.

The murder took the hearts of John's family. Not only was a life lost, a husband, brother, son and great friend was taken much too soon. It took 32 years, but, indeed, 32 years later, there was a conviction for the murder, and Seamus Kearney was sentenced to at least 20 years in prison, but, under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, was to spend two years in prison. The Belfast Agreement was by no means perfect, but neither was it an amnesty. When Seamus Kearney was sentenced to two years, there was a legitimate expectation that he would serve the full two years.

Day release schemes are designed to help long-term prisoners reintegrate into society towards the end of a long sentence, such as 20 years. For a man serving only a two-year sentence, such frequent day releases certainly seem unnecessary and inappropriate. Day releases are primarily given to enable long-term prisoners to reintegrate into society. There seems to be some confusion in policy that provides day release for those who should have served a long-term sentence to have similar day release conditions in their short-term sentence. Surely, the same reintegration day releases are unnecessary and unjustified.

Being subjected to media reports that Mr Kearney had applied for a series of day releases, including one for a St Patrick's Day GAA match, has been particularly painful for the family. It certainly seems that a convicted murderer was being awarded days off his sentence as and when he chose for social events and such like. When Seamus Kearney was convicted, surely he lost the right to choose freely any day off a prison sentence. Rather, the Prison Service should work in tandem with the prisoner to assess his personal circumstances, his remorse, the risk and

whether there is any need for reintegration days.

Today, my thoughts are with June and the wider family who have had to put themselves in the public eye, once again, due to the selfish actions of a cowardly murderer. I call on the Justice Minister to support innocent victims and end the hurtful practice of those who are convicted of terrorist-related offences committed before 1998 being granted day release.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Ms Bronwyn McGahan.

*Mrs Overend moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.*

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. I will forward the petition to the Minister of Justice and send a copy to the Committee.

Apologies for the confusion, Bronwyn. You are down to speak on the next item of business, so you have plenty of notice.

## Assembly Business

### Committee Membership

**Mr Speaker:** As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Andrew Allen be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Mr Swann.]*

## Ministerial Statement

### Supporting Change — A Strategic Approach to Desistance

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the launch of Supporting Change, a strategic approach to desistance. This strategy will support my Department's objective to build safer communities and reduce reoffending, and emphasises the need for a flexible, person-centred approach, which supports individuals to live their lives free from further offending.

Desistance theory is an area of criminological research that is primarily interested in the reasons why a person decides to stop offending. Work on desistance recognises the capacity of individuals to change their behaviour. It also provides insight into some of the factors that can support that change.

My Department's work on desistance links directly to a recommendation from the prison reform team and a commitment in the Programme for Government, building on the foundation laid by the strategic framework for reducing offending. The strategic framework sets out how the Executive can build a safer Northern Ireland through a long-term reduction in offending behaviour by preventing people from becoming involved in offending behaviour and reducing reoffending among those who do.

Today's launch of Supporting Change continues that work, setting out an agreed understanding of desistance across statutory and non-statutory organisations and restating my Department's commitment to provide a flexible, person-centred approach, which reduces reoffending and improves outcomes for those who are in contact with the criminal justice system.

The development of the desistance strategy benefited from engagement across the justice system and with our partners in the voluntary and community sector. Our work on desistance has also been informed by a resettlement study conducted on our behalf by Professor Shadd Maruna at Queen's University and by an examination of some of the factors that influence the decision to recall a person to custody.

My Department also hosted an engagement event with stakeholders that demonstrated support for desistance principles and a strong commitment to work in partnership. During the consultation on the strategic framework for reducing offending, which was published in May 2013, stakeholders rightly asked what the Department meant by desistance and what factors could contribute to the process. As research shows, factors that are associated with desistance include things like getting older and maturing, having families and forming relationships, maintaining sobriety and obtaining employment. Desistance theory also recognises the vital role that hope and motivation can play in encouraging a person to move away from offending behaviour. Having something to give others, having a place in a social group, not being viewed as a criminal and being believed in are also important factors in a person's desistance journey.

Each of us can relate to the importance of these factors in our own daily lives: having a feeling of self-worth, a purpose or a loving relationship. Perhaps our lives have been fortunate in that many of these factors have come naturally to us or with little effort. For many of those who have been in contact with the criminal justice system, their life paths have meant that their experiences are very different and they need help and support if they are to make a lasting change in their lives. That is the purpose of Supporting Change.

Having understood the factors that influence those who have previously offended to become productive members of society, it is incumbent on us to ensure that our system plays an active part in helping individuals to change. The first step is to turn the theory of Supporting Change into concrete actions, so an action plan is being published along with the strategy. The initial action plan seeks to use to deliver a desistance-based approach that puts the individual at the heart of the rehabilitative process and promotes a coherent, joined-up approach across our justice system. The action plan seeks to address four key areas. First, improving our evidence base and response to offending behaviour. Secondly, developing the capacity of our staff and organisations to support desistance. Thirdly, delivering targeted, joined-up support and interventions, and, finally, engaging and communicating with our stakeholders.

Taking a desistance-based approach is very much about working with the individual to reduce their likelihood of reoffending and to prevent any future risk to the public. The desistance action plan is a solid base from which we can work to address the root causes of offending behaviour, challenge individuals to change that behaviour and support them to live their lives free from further offending.

### **12.15 pm**

While we must all accept that the current fiscal environment is challenging, it must not be allowed to restrict our thinking in improving how we work with people who have offended and support their rehabilitative journey.

The current environment provides us with the incentive to think more creatively, to enhance partnership working and to reduce any potential duplication at the various stages of a person's journey through our justice system. Any action that we can take to support someone to desist from offending reduces the future cost to society and, significantly, prevents the creation

of future victims. To that end, there is a strong commitment from the Prison Service, the Probation Board, the Police Service, the Youth Justice Agency and partners in the voluntary and community sector to enhance how we protect the public and reintegrate people who have offended into our society.

The desistance action plan provides a sound platform for greater partnership working, not just in the justice system but across many other Departments. We all have key roles to play in addressing barriers to desistance. For example, homelessness, mental ill health and difficulties in obtaining employment are areas on which we must work together to help reintegrate people into our society and to build safer communities. Those areas do not fall within the responsibilities of my Department, and it is imperative that Government recognise that we are working to provide services and support for the same people at different, often pivotal, stages of their lives.

The strategy that I am publishing today reinforces my Department's commitment to working with those who have offended in a flexible, person-centred manner, which, research shows, has the best chance of supporting individuals to live their lives free from further offending. Each individual who is successfully supported in desisting from offending contributes towards reducing the overall level of reoffending in Northern Ireland, which ultimately builds a safer community for us all. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. With apologies for the false start, I call Ms Bronwyn McGahan.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the statement, in particular the emphasis on the need for change in the culture of how we address crime prevention and the need to move to a multi-agency approach that requires a collaborative, strategic response.

Minister, you quite rightly identified that housing and employment factors do not fall within your remit. Therefore, as Minister, have you given any consideration to, for example, the crime and disorder reduction partnerships in England and Wales, which have been established on a statutory footing and involve joint-working arrangements through collaborative partnerships between public-sector partners and other bodies?

**Mr Ford:** We have not specifically looked at the recreation of those partnerships, as I believe, to a considerable extent, that our existing policing

and community safety partnerships have the capacity to do that. The important issue is that we see joined-up working around the Executive. Whatever difficulties there may be around the Executive working as a whole, I believe that my Department has done some very good partnership working with one or two individual Departments. Perhaps it is easier to get on with one or two other Ministers at a time than the entire tableful. On that basis, I think that we have seen progress being made, but it is certainly an issue that we need to look at to see how we can maximise the response and get all the Departments working together in the way that we need to see.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. In principle, this seems like a good idea, and the practice seems to show that it is beneficial. I note that you have a variety of consultees, Minister. What about victims and victim support groups in the voluntary and community sector? For confirmation, have they, too, bought into this concept?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr McGlone for that point. Clearly, there is a variety of views amongst victims' groups on some of these issues. Victim Support has worked very closely with the Department on a range of initiatives. For example, some Members may have heard the references in the media to the introduction this week of the enhanced combination order. Victim Support has been very much involved in looking at that aspect of work in the Probation Board's more intensive management of offenders in the community. So whilst it is probably the case that not all victims' groups accept the premise of the way in which we are working, we certainly have had good relationships with a number of them in establishing this policy.

I think that there is a general recognition, when one looks at the academic study, that the best way of supporting victims and not creating future victims is ensuring that we work better and more intensively with offenders so that we can see that change happen. I am sure that the work that my Department will do as we work through the action plan for Supporting Change will ensure that we see a deepening of contact with a range of victims' groups.

**Mr Somerville:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I support the general principle to reduce future crime and reoffending. How will the strategy involve families in this process?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Somerville for his welcome. The answer to that is, to some extent, the same as the one I have just given to Mr McGlone about the issue of victims' groups in general. There is joined-up working to be done between a range of Departments and agencies, and there is work to be done involving some of our voluntary sector partners, many of which will be in contact with the families of victims or even the families of offenders.

The important thing is that we see that the work is done in the most effective way. Often, families can be the people who particularly aid the rehabilitation work if they are providing a stable background for somebody who has offended — if they have been in custody — to return to. There is also the issue of the families of victims who may well wish to have a say as we look at some of the other aspects of restorative practice. These are methods that bring home to offenders the effect that what they have done may have had on people, and the work that needs to be done to assist the offenders is sometimes easier if they have been fully aware of what they have done. The families of victims and perpetrators may well have a very significant role.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister for his statement. It is sometimes said that you are soft on crime, but today's announcement is surely an indication that you are smart on crime, offering a different pathway to people when it comes to how they are dealt with in the justice system. In your statement, Minister, you have made it very clear that it is not just about your Department but about other Departments, particularly the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has to deal with many people with mental health and other issues. Do you agree that it is disgraceful that there is no Minister in place to deal with this important matter in conjunction with your Department?

**Mr Ford:** I congratulate my colleague on his alliteration. I would dispute that the DOJ is soft on offending but I certainly hope that some of the work that we have been doing, in the very significant reforms carried through in the five and half years since devolution, shows that the justice system as a whole is being smart. Whether that applies to the Minister personally, it can be said to be the case for the system.

Mr Dickson rightly highlights the issue of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but, when we also look at issues such as housing and related matters, there is a very significant role for the Department for Social Development. If I may digress slightly,

Mr Speaker, it is extremely regrettable that some issues of joint working, which I would have hoped to be doing, for example on the joint strategy on domestic and sexual violence, cannot currently be carried through because of the absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am committed to ensuring that the justice elements of that strategy are carried through as best we can, but it would be far better if we could see a joint strategy being carried through by two Departments with Ministers working in them.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, which very clearly sets out appropriately what the Department is trying to achieve, particularly the action plan with its four key areas. That is very important and is to be welcomed, particularly if we are going to have an effect on tackling the root causes and then on how we take people away from that in future. Does he envisage that, in future, there will be an implementation plan that will allow the effect of the strategy to be measured in an appropriate way?

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice for his support and, through him, I thank the Committee for the work it has done with my officials on this area. He rightly highlights the importance of the action plan rather than just the strategy. I am not quite sure how many different shades of plan we need to work through as we look at an implementation plan. One of the key things that we have is the research that was done specifically for this work by Professor Maruna and other academic research.

The test will be to ensure that we get appropriate validation of the work being done. I am not in a position to say exactly how that will be done at this stage but I have no doubt that my officials will present me with advice as to how we should ensure that we not only do best practice but are seen to be doing best practice. I am delighted when, at times, Ministers have been known to come from Whitehall to see good work being done in Northern Ireland, particularly in areas such as youth justice, which shows that we can teach others a lesson even if we are a small jurisdiction.

I will do my best to ensure that that continues to be the case in this area.

**Mr Allister:** Is it not enlightening that, on a day when a petition is presented opposing the constant pandering to convicted criminals, which the Minister upholds and which tramples

on the rights of innocent victims, the Minister chooses to come to the House to make a statement that has no mention of victims but is prisoner-centred? Is it not time the Minister realised that he is the Minister of Justice, not a social worker?

**Mr Ford:** Thankfully, I was never a barrister anyway. I am quite happy to say that my professional background is as a social worker, and I am not the only one in the Chamber who can say that. I notice another Minister nodding sagely from the Front Bench.

If Mr Allister thinks that this statement does not mention victims, I suggest he looks at an electronic version and runs a word search on it, because it talks about reducing —

**Mr Allister:** Future victims.

**Mr Ford:** It talks about reducing future victims —

**Mr Allister:** Future —

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Ford:** — and the way we reduce future victims is by stopping people from committing crime. The most effective way of stopping people from committing crime is by dealing with the issues that lead them into criminal activity, like poor relationships, substance misuse, alcoholism, poor housing, lack of work — a whole range of factors that have been shown by those who, rather than making pontificating statements on it, have studied the issue and found those to be the real issues by which we address it.

Of course, there are concerns about the specific matter that Mrs Overend presented a few minutes ago, and there are real issues of concern about what happened in this society in the past. As Minister of Justice, I cannot cure the past, but I can do my best to stop victims in the future.

**Mr B McCrea:** As the previous question illustrates, there is still work to be done in convincing people that desistance is the right way forward. In fact, I think that it is a shame that we have not had a bigger debate on it.

The Minister mentioned, in response to the previous question and in his statement, that a number of factors help with desistance, such as getting older, maturing, having families and suchlike. However, one issue is becoming involved with the criminal justice system at a

very early age. What steps would he consider taking to make sure that, once you get involved in the criminal justice system, you are not ultimately on a treadmill that will take you to incarceration?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr McCrea for returning the questions to a slightly more balanced approach. I have no doubt that, if he speaks to others and wishes to promote an Assembly debate, we might have an interesting discussion if it went to slightly more than a ministerial statement.

When he talks about the dangers of those involved with the criminal justice system at an early age, let me say that we have a good record, as I said a few minutes ago, in the work done by the Youth Justice Agency in preventing reoffending. That is largely built around restorative practice and the work that is done in youth conferencing. That is a key example of how we have been able to change factors to make Northern Ireland an exemplar of good practice in these islands.

We know that, sadly, the children of those in custody are more likely to end up in custody themselves. That is why there is good work being done in Maghaberry prison on the families matter landing to encourage those in custody to have a relationship with their children, to bring children in for an extended visit and to have the opportunity to act like fathers even though they are in jail. I think that is the kind of good example that we can show and that is entirely in line with the development of a wider desistance strategy. However, it does, of course, mean intensive work and resources, and we all know the circumstances we are in regarding finances.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement.

## Executive Committee Business

### Pension Schemes Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** This item may not proceed as Consideration Stage of the Bill has not been completed.

### Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

**Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** I beg to move

*That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.*

This statutory rule is being made under powers in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the order must be laid in draft form for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

Renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland is incentivised through the Northern Ireland renewables obligation, or NIRO, as it has come to be known. Since its introduction in 2005, the NIRO has been instrumental in increasing renewable deployment in Northern Ireland from 3% renewable electricity consumption in 2005 to just over 20% now. That achieves the Executive's ambitious Programme for Government target of having a fifth of our electricity generated from renewables by 2015. I commend the efforts of the renewables industry and infrastructure providers in helping to achieve that target.

### 12.30 pm

As part of UK-wide electricity market reform, the NIRO, along with the other two renewables obligations in Great Britain, is scheduled to close to new generation in March 2017. A consultation on NIRO closure in 2017 was undertaken in 2012. The majority of respondents at that time agreed that it would not be viable to keep the NIRO open after 2017 if the other two renewables obligations in Great Britain were to close. In March 2015, DETI issued a consultation on NIRO transition and closure grace periods. However, prior to the publication of a DETI response in June 2015, the new Secretary of State for Energy, Amber Rudd MP, announced the closure of the renewables obligations in Great Britain to onshore wind from 1 April 2016. Since that time, discussions have been ongoing with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) regarding Northern Ireland's policy position on onshore wind. Due to those protracted negotiations with the Department of Energy and Climate Change and in the interests of providing legislative clarity to all non-wind technologies, I took the decision to take forward the legislation in two stages: first, non-wind, to be followed by onshore wind as soon as possible. A Government response specifically on non-wind closure grace periods was issued in August 2015.

Having covered what is not in the order, I will now turn to what it does cover. The proposed Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 will close the NIRO to

all non-wind technologies on 31 March 2017. The order will also introduce 12-month closure grace periods for non-wind projects that meet specified criteria. Those criteria will be that a project that was scheduled to connect by 31 March 2017 will have an extra year to connect if it suffered grid or radar delays through no fault of its own. There are particular arrangements for advanced conversion technology projects, which are, I understand, basically a form of energy from waste, to reflect their lengthy development timescales in Great Britain. Those arrangements reflect the position in the rest of the United Kingdom, and the costs will be socialised across all United Kingdom consumers. Policy on that issue has not changed since our consultation proposals of March 2015. Some developers sought longer grace periods, but, as set out in my Department's response, which was published in August 2015, that was not feasible in the context of overall United Kingdom policy.

In conclusion, the proposed rule will close the Northern Ireland renewables obligation to new non-wind generation on 31 March 2017 and will also introduce defined closure grace periods.

**Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas. I thank the Minister for introducing the legislation.

The Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 being debated today is a markedly different piece of legislation to that initially proposed and first considered by the Committee back in June. The original closure order covered both wind and non-wind renewable energy. The order being debated today makes provision for the closure of the NIRO to non-wind sources only, as the Minister outlined.

Back in June, the Department informed the Committee that a change in policy at the Westminster Department of Energy and Climate Change has meant that the Northern Ireland renewables obligation will close in 2016, one year earlier than originally planned. This was considered by many to be a very unreasonable change in policy, as wind energy developers have already invested considerable amounts of money in ongoing projects, which the change in DECC policy could put in jeopardy. The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change has stated that, should DETI decide to extend the grace period and provide support to wind developers for an additional year, she would expect any additional costs to be funded

exclusively by Northern Ireland consumers. That, in turn, presented the Department here with a difficult dilemma: to support wind generation with an extended grace period at a cost to consumers or to follow the DECC policy and create difficulties for wind developers.

In the original proposal brought to the Committee on 30 June, the Department planned to support onshore wind generation for an additional year over and above that proposed in the DECC policy so as to allow developers to complete projects that had already been planned. This could add up to £16 a year to an average domestic consumer electricity bill, with the top electricity-consuming companies in the North paying around an additional £30,000 per annum for their electricity. The Committee considered this policy proposal and concluded that, considering the additional costs that consumers would be expected to pay, there was not sufficient or detailed enough information on which to base a decision. No information was provided to the Committee on any long-term benefits to consumers of adopting the proposals for onshore wind. It was unclear if the Committee was being asked to support a policy that would result in consumers being asked to pay more for their electricity with no net long-term benefits merely to subsidise wind developers who might otherwise find themselves in difficulties.

The Department placed considerable emphasis on the urgency with which the Committee's agreement to the legislation was required because one particular project being brought by Full Circle Power/Bombardier required certainty on the closure order to secure the required funding in time to commence its £100 million non-wind project to ensure the project's completion by the closure date.

No substantive concerns were raised by the Committee regarding the non-wind aspect of the closure order. However, the Committee was not content to agree to legislation that added considerably to costs for consumers in the absence of any consideration by the Department of the potential benefits that the legislation would bring, especially when the sole reason for urgency was to provide certainty to a project that was entirely unrelated to the issues with which the Committee had major concerns. The Committee did everything in its power to assist the Department in providing the certainty that Full Circle/Bombardier needed but could not proceed with the legislation in the proposed format when there was so much uncertainty and so little clarity about other aspects of the order.

Whilst the Committee has every sympathy with wind developers, many of whom have invested considerable sums of money into ongoing projects, the Committee believes that the needs of developers must be appropriately balanced with the cost to consumers of adopting the proposed policy. A Committee decision must be based on full and accurate information.

For this reason, the Committee explored with the Department the option of decoupling the wind and non-wind aspects of the legislation. This would have provided the certainty that Full Circle/Bombardier required and would have given the Committee sufficient time to adequately scrutinise the more contentious aspects of the legislation. Members asked officials whether it would help solve the immediate problem if the legislation was decoupled to allow the non-wind aspects of the legislation to pass and thus enable those projects that were time-critical to move on.

During a meeting with the Minister on the matter on 2 July, I repeated the Committee's suggestion that decoupling the two aspects of the legislation should enable the non-wind aspects of the closure order to pass through the Committee without undue delay. However, the Department seemed determined, for whatever reason, to retain the legislation as it was. During the meeting with the Minister, I was informed that a number of onshore wind projects were in the pipeline that required similar assurances and that solving one problem could result in the creation of another.

The Minister also informed me that the timelines for the Full Circle/Bombardier project were very strict for triggering funding. He stated that the cut-off date for a decision by funders to prevent the project falling was Thursday 9 July and that the Committee's agreement of the SL1 would provide the necessary assurances that investors needed for the project to proceed. It was on this basis and with assurances from the Minister that full clarity would be provided on costs and benefits that I decided to seek the Committee's agreement to convene an additional meeting on 9 July.

At the meeting on 9 July, the Department reiterated its assertion that the two aspects of the legislation could not be decoupled. Officials informed the Committee that the Department had given very extensive consideration to the issue since the previous Committee meeting and had taken legal advice on the matter. The Department put forward three reasons as to why the legislation could not be decoupled. First, the Department said that decoupling

would give rise to uncertainty for other projects and that the time required would be well beyond the critical period for the Full Circle/Bombardier project. Secondly, decoupling would give rise to uncertainty for other projects, causing some to fall with a loss of future investment, a loss of future generating capacity and a loss of substantial economic benefit. Thirdly, according to the Department, differentiating between different types of projects, as proposed by decoupling, may be challenged on the grounds that it could constitute unlawful state aid.

Officials went on to update the Committee confidently on a developing situation that they believed rendered the whole issue of decoupling academic, as there had been a fundamental change in DECC's position, which had been confirmed in writing only that morning. Although the renewables obligation would still close to onshore wind in 2016, projects that were already in the system would be allowed to connect until March 2018, effectively providing a two-year grace period for projects already in the system, which the majority of onshore wind projects in the pipeline would be able to meet.

Officials told the Committee "with confidence and with certainty" that the cost to consumers would be significantly reduced from the figures provided the previous week. The Committee was told that the average increase in domestic bills could be as little as £3 a year and that the increase for high energy users could be almost 70% less than originally estimated. The Committee was put under considerable pressure to accept the SL1 and approve it without having been given access to the correspondence concerned, which, according to the Department, represented a fundamental change in DECC policy and provided a high level of clarity and certainty.

Given this seemingly exceptionally positive development, the Committee asked to see the correspondence concerned so that members could assure themselves that this high level of clarity and certainty had indeed been provided. After some time, the correspondence was brought to the Committee meeting for consideration. There was nothing in that correspondence from DECC to DETI that could in any conceivable way add even a crumb of clarity or certainty, or provide any assurances to the Committee that electricity consumers would not be charged for the additional onshore wind put onto the system as a result of an extended grace period. There was nothing in the papers or in the briefing from officials that could in any way provide a sensible, sound basis for the

Committee to make a decision on such an important matter. I emphasise: nothing.

When questioned further, officials went on to state that those assurances had been received from DECC informally during conversations and may not be as clear to anyone who had not been party to them. However, bearing in mind the importance of the matter at hand, the Committee could not make a decision affecting the pockets of so many over such a long period merely on the basis of hearsay. That is not a way to bring forward legislation.

There was nothing in writing that provided the clarity and certainty that the Committee required.

### 12.45 pm

At that stage, officials agreed that the Minister would write to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to outline his understanding of what had been agreed and to seek the appropriate assurances from the Secretary of State that his understanding of DECC's position was accurate. The Committee agreed to convene a meeting as a matter of urgency as soon as the Department was in a position to provide full clarity on the specific issues of concern. I held the Committee in a position that we would convene with the urgency required as and when we got that clarity from the Department. That was on 9 July this year, just for clarity.

Given the urgency with which we were told that this had to progress, the Committee agreed to meet again as soon as the Department got back to it. Yet, here we are, almost 12 weeks later, considering the statutory rule (SR) for the closure of the renewables obligation to non-wind technologies only. The two aspects of the legislation have been decoupled, as the Committee suggested to the Department on 30 June. As for the clarity and certainty promised on the aspects of the closure order relating to wind projects, the Committee is still waiting.

The Department brought the current proposals to the Committee on 8 September. The SR is for closure of the NI renewables obligation to all non-wind technologies, including anaerobic digestion, hydro, solar PV, biomass and advanced conversion technologies, otherwise known as ACT. ACT includes the proposed project at Full Circle/Bombardier.

The Committee, having given the proposed policy due consideration, had no concerns about the proposals, but major concerns remain

about the Department's handling of the matter and the manner in which it engaged with the Committee. When officials briefed the Committee on 8 September, for example, they were questioned on the reasons why they were able to change position in spite of the prior legal advice received. Officials responded that the original legal advice was based on taking forward legislation for ACT only, whereas the current proposal is to deal with a class of projects, namely, non-wind. At no time did the Committee suggest or even consider the possibility of taking forward legislation for ACT only — at no time. It was always the Committee's view that wind and non-wind could and should be decoupled, given the circumstances that we were in. Where the Department got the idea that it should take legal advice on taking forward legislation for ACT only remains a mystery.

At our Committee meeting on 22 September, we asked the Department for clarification on the nature of the legal advice sought, and we received that confirmation. It turns out that what the Department had emphasised to the Committee was legal advice sought previously in June, and the stuff that we were supposed to make a decision on the SL1 about was, in fact, in its words, "based on an informal request for quick advice" — I could interpret that to be a one-minute or two-minute phone call, but that is my interpretation, by the way — rather than official, formal legal advice to the Department. We were expected to make decisions at a Committee on a poorly prepared SL1 on the basis of an "informal request for quick advice".

The way in which this matter has been handled by the Department leaves much to be desired and many unanswered questions, such as: why was the Department so adamant that the wind and non-wind aspects could not be decoupled when, clearly, as we see today, they could?; and why did the Department not try harder and earlier to negotiate with DECC? It was only when departmental officials were questioned at the Committee about renewables and the contribution by DECC that the Department was positioned to reopen negotiations with DECC, which, I hope, will be beneficial and productive, but that question remains: why did the Department not try harder and earlier to negotiate with DECC? Why did it rely on the intervention of the Committee before taking action to protect consumer interests? Why did the Department try so hard to push the original legislation through the Committee for the benefit of developers without having given any consideration to the relative costs and benefits to consumers? If the 9 July deadline was so critical, why did the Department wait

until 8 September before coming back to the Committee? Why did the Department try to convince the Committee in July that a solution had been agreed with DECC when, clearly, no such solution, with even the craziest of imaginations, could have been interpreted as having been negotiated? The matter still has not been resolved. What was actually said in those conversations between DECC and DETI officials that resulted in DETI being able to brief the Committee with confidence that the issue had been resolved, when it clearly had not and still apparently is not? Why did the Department robustly defend its original proposal by telling the Committee that it was based on legal advice when, in reality, it was based on nothing more than an informal request for advice?

The Committee will want to get answers to all those questions. If need be, officials and the Minister will be called to the Committee to provide answers and clarity on this matter. We are there for one interest, which is to defend the public interest and the interests of consumers. That is our job. If necessary, the Committee will seek the attendance of appropriate representatives from DECC to ensure that members are provided with satisfactory and clear explanations.

Having given the policy proposals full consideration, the Committee was content and acted efficiently when it got the Department's decision to adopt our suggestion and decouple two aspects of the legislation. The Committee considered the statutory rule in respect of non-wind projects at our meeting on 22 September 2015. The Committee is content that the legislation is appropriate and recommends that SR2015/325, the Renewables Obligation Closure Order (NI) 2015, be affirmed by the Assembly.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an tAire a fheiceail ar ais anseo inniu agus ba mhaith liom tréaslú agus aontú le cuid mhaith dá ndúirt an Cathaoirleach ar an Choiste. I welcome the newly appointed economy Minister back to the Chamber. I also want to echo many of the sentiments expressed by the Chair of our Committee. Minister, we have missed you; I know that you have missed us as well. When I was at primary school, we had an attendance inspector who was very efficient. She used to go to your home and speak to your parents. I am not citing any particular experience of that, but she would say, "It's not good enough just to go back for one day." I want to repeat that advice today. I really do hope that you will be around for longer than a few hours because this, as you know and understand, Minister, is

crucial to the economy, the public interest and consumers. We must try to stick at this and stay focused on this issue of renewables until we sort it out.

I thank the Minister for introducing the order. The Chair of the Committee has explained the yellow brick road that we have been down over the summer. It is a matter of some regret that, even today, we do not have certainty on whether, during a grace period, costs will be carried only by the consumers here or will be socialised across Britain and here, which, of course, would not really place any burden on consumers; it would only be a matter of pennies. As we push forward, the Chair of the Committee issued a number of what I think were invites. They were in very firm language, but we hope to see the permanent secretary and the Minister as well so that we can continue this discussion.

As we wade through these difficult questions about renewables, I think that there is one crucial issue. It is a question for the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Amber Rudd, as well as for us. Where do we go, post-2017, after the grace periods? What will our strategy be for renewable energy? How do we continue to maintain the momentum we have, in particular on wind energy onshore, which we know brings great benefits in green energy and consumer costs? That is a question that I hope that we can tackle even in this mandate to decide where our policy will bring us. Although Mr Cameron and Amber Rudd have turned their face against renewables, that is not what we want to do. We want to continue to build our green energy commitment. I hope that is a discussion that we will have with the Minister and the Department when he returns full time.

**Mr Dickson:** First, like others, I welcome the Minister to the House. It is just a shame that it is effectively a piece of legislation that this House needs to deal with that has brought him to the House. I would like to ask him about something when he goes back to his ministerial colleagues. This is a serious point.

I appreciate the importance of the legislation, but, Minister, there is a great deal of other important legislation that needs to be dealt with in the House. There are also very important matters that need to be dealt with in the House. I am strongly in support of good-quality environment measures and of the renewables and alternatives to carbon energy in Northern Ireland, but I am equally passionate about those patients who are caught in long queues for cancer treatment; I am equally passionate about street lighting and roads; and I am

equally passionate about a whole range of issues that I, as an elected representative sent to the House by the people of East Antrim, cannot do because of your party and its silly stunt antics. That is what you are doing; you are making a farce of this place. You are here today because you know that the legislation has to pass.

**Mr Speaker:** You should stick to the motion, if you do no not mind.

**Mr Dickson:** Yes; thank you, Mr Speaker, for directing us back to the motion. You are absolutely right. This is an important piece of legislation that needs to be dealt with. On the one hand, we have heard the serious concerns raised by the Committee in respect of the path and the roadway to where you are in respect of this very important debate. Listening to the Chair of the Committee, it clearly seems that you and your Department, Minister, have failed to take on board much of the debate and conversation because you spent the summer doing other things rather than the job that you were elected to do in the House.

I share the concerns that the Chair of the Committee highlighted about the legislation, but, equally, I respect his comment that, at the end of the day, it is essential that the order be passed in order to ensure that Northern Ireland is kept in the appropriate place in the processes that we need to go through.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** I will.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Member supported the Chair of the Committee talking about the increased burden on the consumer. Would he care to comment on the fact that Northern Ireland has the most expensive electricity in the United Kingdom and that 42% of our consumers are living in fuel poverty?

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Member for his intervention and wholeheartedly agree with him. On a daily basis, I see the effect that two power stations in my constituency have in contributing to those costs, at Ballylumford and at Kilroot, the history of which comes back to former direct rule Ministers and where we were in respect of the cost of energy, but the Assembly, the Minister and his predecessors have had ample opportunity to resolve many of the mistakes that were made in the past. I sincerely hope that we are not heading down a route where we see those direct rule Ministers in place again,

making the same stupid, irrelevant and costly decisions for the people of Northern Ireland.

Fuel poverty is real; it is in your face. It is where people have to scrape together — I have been there and have seen it — the change out of their purse or their pocket to buy a power card to top up. That is the real face of fuel poverty. That is why it is important that we get our whole energy pricing and production in the right place in Northern Ireland.

We are ideally suited in this part of the world to benefit from wind power, but we have to have a strategic approach to that. There are those who say, "Not in my back yard". That is a matter for the Environment Minister and for quality planning decisions. That is for strategic decisions, but those decisions need to be made in conjunction with the Minister who is here today to ensure that we get best value for money in the delivery of all of that.

The current UK Government seem to have gone off the rails when it comes to renewable energies. They are cosy up to their Russian friends to buy gas rather than ensure that we have a renewable energy source that is fit for purpose and which will deliver for people. Driving through my constituency, when I see windmills and speak to people about them, some people like them and some people consider them an eyesore, but everybody says, "Am I getting value for money when I see that on the landscape?". The reality is that, unless this Minister digs in and does the job he was elected to do, nobody will get value for money when it comes to paying for their electricity or the other energy sources available to them.

**1.00 pm**

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Member have any concerns about reports about the activity of lobbyists in respect of some major renewable energy companies that are active in Northern Ireland and about whether such lobbyists are having undue influence on departmental policy?

**Mr Dickson:** I think it would be abhorrent to hear that lobbyists have undue influence. I have no problem with those who wish to set out their stall in respect of whatever arguments they are making to Departments, but it is quite clear that the buck stops with the Minister. It is his role to ensure that those who lobby do so fairly and in a straight manner and ensure that he is

free and unshackled when it comes to making appropriate decisions.

At the end of the day —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** Yes.

**Mr B McCrea:** I want to pick up on the point made by Mr Allister. I was struck by the contributions from Members who spoke earlier in that an awful lot of them seemed to be about the needs of individual projects and companies. Does the Member agree that what is required is a long-term strategic approach and not one that is rushed into on the fly? We have some concerns about this. Perhaps the Member would dwell on how best to make sure that we are not in the pockets of lobbyists and that we make a proper decision.

**Mr Dickson:** I wholeheartedly agree. Every day, we hear people saying that we need joined-up government. When it comes to renewable energy, it is vitally important that we see a clear road map set in front of us. It is vitally important that we see that it is not about lobbying for individual projects; instead, that it is about a comprehensive strategy. It is the Minister's responsibility, along with others in the Executive, to deliver that comprehensive strategy. Too often, we see the not-in-my-back-yard mindset. One windmill will pop up here and one project will pop up there, but if people were able to see that that constituted part of an overall plan for the delivery of renewable energy in Northern Ireland, it would get a great deal more buy-in from the general public.

As I said, I am passionate about the delivery of renewable energy in Northern Ireland. It is the way forward and it is vitally important.

However, I stand here today in frustration at a Minister who is in and out of office, along with his colleagues. That Minister is not delivering for people; he is failing the people of Northern Ireland today, and he is pushing through a piece of legislation because he knows that he has to, otherwise we will be even further out of step.

Equally, I share the concerns of the Chair of the Committee. He said that we do not have that strategy and that we need it. He told us that the Committee has sought information again and again, and that that information has either had to be dragged out of departmental officials or that they or the Minister failed to turn up to explain. That Committee is made up of members who are willing to share their

expertise and knowledge and want to gain expertise and knowledge from people who come to the Committee; but when it cannot operate due to the shenanigans that are going on in this establishment, it makes a mockery of what the Minister is trying to do here today.

I support what the Minister is doing. I support this tiny piece of legislation that he is attempting to put through the House today, but, in all honesty, I think that this Minister and his colleagues are making a total and utter mockery of this devolved Assembly. The sooner they stop it, the better. I encourage them to come back and do the jobs that they have been given.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** I will.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am interested in the line of argument that Mr Dickson is developing. Can he examine why there is such urgency for the Department to push this through? Why was it necessary for a Minister who, up to now, had been taking post and resigning to stay on? What is so important about this particular bit of legislation that it has required a change of policy? There must be some reason for this.

**Mr Dickson:** I am pleased at the question, but I think it needs to be directed to the Minister. I will speculate and suggest that would clearly be to the detriment of Northern Ireland if this legislation is not passed. Clearly, some funding has to come along with it, and there is a danger that we will be out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom if we do not pass this today. It seems to be rather selfish that the Minister and his Executive colleagues, rather than the total Executive, have debated the matter and decided that this is important to them, but what is not important to them is the queue of people waiting for cancer treatment and the people waiting for other decisions that various other Departments should and could be making on a day and daily basis. Those are the concerns that I have in all this.

I am tempted to suggest that, if other Members could make speeches, we could effectively filibuster and keep the Minister here for hours on end, but that would be us acting in a silly way. It is worthwhile stressing the importance of the legislation in front of us. It is important because it forms part of a wider strategy on renewable energy, it highlights and points out the failures of this Minister, the Department and the Executive to deliver a road map for renewables in Northern Ireland and, finally, it

highlights the ridiculous situation — the very serious ridiculous situation — of revolving-door Ministers coming in and out of the Executive and their failure to do the job they are paid to do by the citizens who elected them here.

**Mr B McCrea:** This is an interesting debate, if a little surprising. It is very nice to have a Minister here, particularly a renewable Minister, because we seem to renew him every single week. Maybe there will be some merit in that in the future. I hate to take credit for other people's work— Mr Allister can own up to that particular little joke.

There is something strange going on here. I am interested in energy. I have been to Ballylumford and various other power stations to see what is going on, and I am happy to engage with the industry. But this comes against a background. When you look at this originally, you see that we have to do something, because the Westminster Government have changed their position on renewables. I think that there has been a knee-jerk reaction to renewables and their cost, and that has precipitated a crisis of investment not just in this part of the world but throughout the United Kingdom. As someone who firmly believes in climate change, I will say that it is happening —

**Mr Flanagan:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has rightly pointed out that the whole rationale for the debate is that the policy decisions in Westminster have changed. Given that electricity here trades on an all-island basis, does the Member agree that we should be incentivising renewable electricity generators in the future through an all-island system, where those costs could be socialised across electricity customers in all of Ireland, instead of piggybacking on to a system that can be changed at the whim of a British Minister who has absolutely no control, influence or understanding of our unique set of circumstances here?

**Mr Speaker:** Just before you resume, let me say that the speaker is well aware of the dress code and of how rigorous I am in ensuring that it applies to all Members. You are well aware that it applies to you. I regard your intervention and your speaking as contravening a ruling on this that I gave previously, and I will return to the matter.

Mr McCrea, please continue.

**Mr B McCrea:** To deal with the substance of the point that was raised about whether we

should be looking at an all-Ireland energy policy or how that would affect the legislation in front of us, I will say that, from what I know of energy policy, it takes place in a European framework. There is an issue about how we manage to deal with what, I think, are the worst excesses of a Northern Ireland energy policy that puts 42% of our people in fuel poverty. That is an intolerable burden, to which we now are apparently going to add.

The Chair of the Committee, in his submission, ran up to the brink three or four times; in fact, maybe even a dozen times. He said, "This is not acceptable; this is not right. We were not informed; we do not know." At the end of it, perhaps for pragmatic, legislative reasons, he said, "But in the end, we are going to support this." I am not sure that that is the right approach. I have not had the opportunity to understand what is motivating this legislation. It is strange, Mr Speaker, that, in comparison with all other bits of legislation, when you have read out repeatedly over the last number of weeks, "The Minister is not available, so the motion cannot be moved" — really significant bits of legislation that I wanted to make a contribution on — the only bit of legislation that has thus far provoked a change in policy is this one: the seemingly obscure Renewables Obligation Closure Order. It does not exactly roll off the tongue; nor is it immediately apparent what exactly it is about. As someone whose job it is, along with my colleagues in this Chamber, to scrutinise orders, particularly those passed by affirmative resolution, I need to know more and to have a better, convincing story about why this legislation must go through. What is so important about it that it ranks above all other issues, including the health service, the economy in general and the Department of Social Development?

When I heard about the individual, specific projects, which the Chair of the Committee very clearly set out, it started to ring alarm bells with me. It appears to be that we have to pass this legislation or a specific project or a specific company will not invest. Do not get me wrong: I am not saying that we should not get investment. Investment is good; renewable energy is good; all these things are good. But when you start to bring in legislation specifically for the benefit of a particular project, it raises the spectre of undue influence from lobbyists and lobbying. That is a question that we need to address. Energy policy is one of those things that is so big and so expensive that it is hard to describe and to talk about it sensibly.

It is relevant to this debate that, as we have established, our legislation — this order —

takes place against a UK legislative background. I am aware that Drax, the big power station that was talking about investing in CO2 capture, has pulled out of that investment, citing the fact that they have no confidence in the Government's long-term renewable energy policy. Now, if that is happening in that project, it will happen in all projects.

We talk about the exemption of onshore wind power in this order. I have sat in this Chamber and listened to Members saying time and time again that we have too many wind turbines. A Member of this Assembly, who is now in another place, talked about triffids marching over our landscape and argued that we do not need them anymore. I have heard MLAs bemoan the fact that we do not have the infrastructure to bring back the wind power from our most profitable areas in the west of the Province; I have heard MLAs talk about the dangers of wind turbines collapsing. Against that background, I am slightly curious about why we should exempt onshore wind specifically.

I would have thought, if we were going to take a strategic position, that we would be looking at things in the round. My understanding — I think the Minister said this at the start — is that we have met our targets, so why are we not talking about our future targets? I want to know whether we are going to put public investment into the infrastructure that brings energy back from the wind turbines and who will pay for that.

#### 1.15 pm

It was asked whether we should be in an all-Ireland energy market. The question is, why are we stopping the interconnector? Why are people here saying that they do not want an interconnector because of environmental issues or whatever? We have to make sure that we get an all-Ireland energy market, because that will be good for the people of Northern Ireland. All of that should be dealt with in this debate.

Mr Dickson suggested that, because this is the only bit of legislation that we have to debate, we could talk for some time on this, if we were so minded. We should talk for some time on this; we should be asking the questions; and we should be able to address the specific issues. I have never heard in the Chamber — I have been here for almost eight years — such a list of concerns from the Chair of a Statutory Committee left unanswered by a Department. There is a particular issue around why you would change your mind so quickly. How, from one week to the next, could you suddenly

change and say, "Do you know what? We've solved it"? This is energy policy on the fly. This is a knee-jerk reaction, and it does not seem to be the right way to go about things.

Even though I am totally committed to the notion that climate change is a reality, we have to do something about it and we must invest in renewables, the renewables industry has lost the battle with the consumer. The consumer does not understand why prices are going to go up. Hard-pressed consumers are trying to find ways to put food on the table, keep their home heated and look after their family, and, if they hear that they will suddenly have to pay more — it is 42% of the population I am talking about — they will say, "Are you really sure that we have to make that investment? Are you really sure that it is the consumer who has to pick up the bill?". Those are legitimate questions, particularly for people in the west of the Province, where fuel poverty is concentrated, for citizens of Northern Ireland who are not on the gas main and for citizens of Northern Ireland who must take oil or other fossil fuels. They have a serious living standards crisis, and that is something that the Assembly ought to deal with.

I will conclude by saying that there needs to be a clear analysis of why specific projects are included in the discussion. I am not heartened by the fact that that is what this debate is all about. There should be some consideration of individual issues, but if we are going to let lobbyists manage this country, we might as well do away with the democratic institutions. All you will hear is, "You need to talk to the right people to see if you can get the right decision made. And, do you know what? Even if you are taking a huge political stance, we can turn it over just to make sure that we get an order through". That is not right; that is not democracy; and people ought to take a stand on it.

**Mr Bell:** This is a difficult subject. Energy faces something of a trilemma. My only interest and the only interest I will ever have is in trying to resolve in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland the trilemma that energy faces: how to deal with cost for domestic and commercial customers — we know how hard pressed many of our households are; I certainly do in Strangford; how we deal with sustainability; and how we deal with security of supply. Those are three of the most difficult and challenging issues that we have to face and try to get a resolution on that fits now and in the future.

It has been a lengthy process to get to this point. Throughout, it has been my aim to bring

the NIRO to an orderly conclusion in a way that maximises renewable deployment in Northern Ireland at least cost to the consumer. The order achieves that balance for non-wind technologies. Today, I have signed off on proposals that will do the same for onshore wind. Those will be with the Committee today.

I want to respond to some of the issues that were raised. Mr McGlone raised issues of confusion, disorientation and a lack of leadership: I have no intention of getting into the SDLP's leadership debate. On this serious issue, the position on the non-wind closure has remained consistent throughout: closure in 2017, with a grace period to 2018 and the costs being socialised. Because of the cost implications, we have had to take account of the UK Government's changing policy regarding onshore wind. I wanted to give certainty to all developers, and I recognise — I had to recognise — that that would take longer for onshore wind. There is always more risk in taking different approaches, but you must make a judgement that is based on the balance of risks. If the decisions were entirely black and white and I could see the future, it would be simple, but that is not the reality. It was and has been raised —

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** No, I think that I have heard enough from you, Mr Allister. Your contribution was spectacularly poor, and it failed to detail any of the real issues that affect jobs and investment in Northern Ireland. It was my intention to —

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to mislead the House by suggesting that I have spoken in the debate and made an inadequate contribution when I have not spoken in the debate at all? He is the one running away from a simple intervention.

**Mr Speaker:** I am more inclined to interpret that as a mistake than as a deliberate intention to mislead the House.

**Mr Bell:** For the purposes of clarity, Mr Allister's contribution was inadequate to the matter here today. I have spoken to people who run businesses and to domestic consumers. We have spent hours looking at the trilemma that we face in energy policy, and anybody who looks at the serious issues, as opposed to the immature grandstanding of Mr Allister, will realise how inadequate his intervention was. Let me return to the serious issues. I want to provide —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** I will come to you in a second, Mr McCrea.

I want to provide all developers with the certainty that they need. Unfortunately, as I said, the changes in the UK Government's policy position on the early closure of the renewables obligation in Great Britain to onshore wind created unavoidable delays due to the lengthy discussions that were held regarding the socialisation of costs. I want the least costs across the United Kingdom, both for —

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** I will deal with a range of things. Bear with me: I want to make some progress.

I want to deal with costs to householders who are struggling, but I want to do that in a balanced way that leads not to jobs leaving Northern Ireland but to sustaining the jobs that are already here and puts us in a position to take new jobs in the future.

In the Member's contribution, he said that I was not working over the summer, but, to the best of my knowledge, I announced 700-plus new jobs. The Member should consult his ministerial colleague Mr Farry about some of the work that we did on the financial services industry and listen to the speech that he gave that day. That seems to be at variance with what the Member has attempted to suggest to the House.

In August, in the absence of having that final policy position on onshore wind, I took the decision to close the NIRO in two stages. The rationale for that was to give clarity to non-wind developers, as we could not, then, set out a final policy on onshore wind. The proposed Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 gives non-wind developers the legislative certainty that they require. A further NIRO closure, as I said, will be introduced to address onshore wind, and that will come to the Committee.

I will turn to the Member who spoke next, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir. Let me say clearly, which I did at the start, that the costs of non-wind will be fully socialised right across the United Kingdom. For me, that is a win for the domestic consumer and for business. It is me acting in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

In relation to Mr Ó Muilleoir's comments about posts, most reasonable people will understand that the murder of Kevin McGuigan was not something that we could just ignore and continue to do business as usual. We said at the time that it was not the case that we would not do business at all but that we could not do business as usual, given the seriousness, which has not been mentioned yet by those who would like to make their points, of the murder of Kevin McGuigan on our streets and the PSNI response to that. Everyone in the House should have taken that seriously and should have mentioned it, had they wanted to open that debate.

In further response to Mr Ó Muilleoir —

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Although I sympathise with the statements being made, you have been, correctly, trying to keep our attention on the legislation in front of us. I wonder whether that applies to the Minister as well.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that you are not challenging the authority of the Chair. I consciously paid very close attention to the Minister's response to a number of contributions from Members. I felt that at least there was balance in the discussion. I would have brought the Minister back to the focus of the debate had he continued in that vein. He put on record his position in response to comments made by Members earlier, and I think that that was satisfactory enough.

**Mr Bell:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My response to a point raised by Mr Ó Muilleoir is that the existing support for renewable generation will continue post-2017 until 2037. It is anticipated that that will increase renewable electricity deployment in Northern Ireland to somewhere in the region of 30%. I think that that is a considerable achievement for a region of this size.

A decision on whether Northern Ireland should become part of the UK-wide contract for difference is a matter for the Executive. My predecessor consulted on this in March 2015, highlighting the key balance to be struck between further support for new development and the cost to consumers. Given the Conservative manifesto commitment to stop any future subsidies for onshore wind, it is sensible to take account of the UK Government's expected announcements in the autumn. That is because it could be disproportionately expensive to try to run a Northern Ireland-only scheme.

The issue of electricity prices was raised in the debate, and I am acutely conscious of it. The regulator and my Department have a responsibility to protect the interests of all consumers. We have tried to do so by promoting competition, supporting innovation and contributing to investment. I know that the cost of electricity, particularly to business, is as close to many Members' hearts and those of businesses in their constituencies as it is to mine and to those who raise such issues with me in Strangford.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** I wish to make progress.

We have to be careful when talking about cost. My information is that the vast majority of Northern Ireland consumers have electricity bills that are around the European Union average, following falls in tariffs that were announced in April. Recent industry reports show that energy prices are at their lowest level for six years and that Northern Ireland gas bills are below the European Union average. I accept that a small number of very large consumers have electricity bills that are above that average but I also understand that, currently, they are lower than those in the rest of the United Kingdom as a whole.

**1.30 pm**

Again, in terms of adding costs to people in fuel poverty, I put on record that the order for non-wind technologies results in costs being socialised. The renewable obligation levels —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** Yes, go ahead.

**Mr B McCrea:** Minister, I am wondering about your assertion on the progress on energy in Northern Ireland. Figures just released from the Department of Energy and Climate Change say that, last year, Northern Ireland bills rose by an average of £49, making them more expensive than anywhere in Great Britain. New figures from the Department show that, in 2014, average bills in Northern Ireland were £661, compared with a UK average of £592. That is for consumers. I think that there is a strange chasm between the figures that the Minister is relying upon and the figures produced by the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

**Mr Bell:** That is why I think, Mr McCrea, we have to deal with what we are dealing with

today. It is why I say to you that the order for non-wind technologies results in costs being socialised across the United Kingdom, which, therefore, means that there is no additional burden to Northern Ireland. That is why I have spent hours trying to ensure that we have got a way forward for Northern Ireland that does not lead to additional costs.

The renewable obligation level is a good deal for Northern Ireland. It is estimated to be in the region of 50% of the GB level. Let me repeat this again: it will not mean additional costs to Northern Ireland. That is why I have worked through, intensely, line by line, the sometimes changing position that has come from DECC. I can understand that Members have struggled as positions have changed and we have had to adapt to those positions. The urgency of today will, I think, be well understood out there in the business community, certainly the people I am speaking to, some of the major employers in Northern Ireland.

To conclude, this proposed rule will close the NIRO to new non-wind generation on 31 March 2017 and introduce closure grace periods. A further closure order will be brought forward to address the closure of the NIRO to onshore wind. That will also be subject to debate in the Assembly. I thank everyone who has contributed to today's debate. I commend the motion to the House.

**Mr Allister:** Resign.

**Some Members:** He did.

**Mr B McCrea:** Resign again. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.*

## Committee Business

### Environmental Better Regulation Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

**Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment):** I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2)*

*be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill [NIA 55/11-16].*

On Tuesday 1 July 2015, the Assembly referred the Environmental Better Regulation Bill to the Committee for the Environment for scrutiny.

The Bill is essentially an enabling Bill and will provide for a more streamlined environmental permitting system; rationalise and simplify the powers of entry for environmental inspection and investigation; and amend existing environmental legislation regarding fuels and fireplaces, air quality assessment and drinking water regulation.

The Committee has already concluded its call for evidence and has received 14 written submissions from interested organisations. These were either in response to the signposting notices in the local press or a result of direct contact by the Committee. The Committee firmly believes that it is essential that all stakeholders be given the opportunity to comment on the Bill. To that end, it has already held three evidence sessions, and a stakeholder event has been arranged for 1 October to allow other organisations that submitted a response an opportunity to voice their views on the Bill.

The Bill is a key element of the Department's regulatory transformation programme. There has been much criticism that environmental regulation is too complex, inflexible, incoherent and time-consuming. Indeed, small and medium-sized businesses cited that the lack of integration between environmental permits and the resource-intensive nature of complying with multiple uncoordinated inspections have hindered them in doing business.

The Committee recognises that this is important and significant legislation, and it is therefore essential that it be afforded the time to fully exercise its scrutiny powers. It seeks to ensure that the Assembly is provided with the right controls and safeguards for any future regulations that will be made under the Bill. It is already aware of some concerns about the Bill and wishes to be afforded adequate time to address those with the Department.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I ask that the House support the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill to 27 November 2015.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill [NIA 55/11-16].*

## **Inquiry into Building a United Community: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Report**

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the report on its inquiry into building a united community. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.*

As Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I find it a pleasure to open the debate on the Committee's report on its inquiry into Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). May I begin by commending my colleagues on the Committee for their work in recent months in bringing this important report to the Floor of the House?

During its inquiry, the Committee received representations from 70 individuals, academics and community, voluntary and statutory organisations. We held two stakeholder events and invited a range of stakeholders to give formal evidence. Some of those who spoke to the Committee told us that it was the first time that they had been heard from in a forum of that kind. In bringing forward this debate and presenting the Committee's report formally to the Assembly, we have an opportunity to give a voice to those who engaged with us. I want to place on record the Committee's thanks to all

those who contributed to the inquiry in writing, through formal oral evidence and by participating in the stakeholder events.

The Committee's inquiry has resulted in over 30 key conclusions and recommendations for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as their Executive colleagues, covering a range of issues from consultation and engagement with stakeholders to the financial resources required to adequately resource T:BUC, from involving communities in decision-making to acknowledging the complex issues that need to be addressed before interface barriers can be removed and from considering the challenges of contested space faced by rural communities to issues relating to mental health and intergenerational trauma. I do not wish, nor do I have time, to go through each of those recommendations individually. Members, of course, have an opportunity to read through the report themselves, and I commend that course of action to them. However, I wish to provide some background to the Committee's approach to the inquiry and to highlight some of the themes that emerged.

Many of you will recall that Together: Building a United Community was launched by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in May 2013 as the Executive's strategy to achieve:

*"a united community, based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation — one which is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, freed from prejudice, hate and intolerance."*

What began as a strategic priority for the Committee in terms of scrutiny of the T:BUC strategy developed into an inquiry. The Committee agreed its terms of reference for an inquiry into T:BUC in July 2014 and, in doing so, committed to two measures: first, to explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations, looking at theory and practice; and, secondly, to seek views on what "good relations" means and how sectarianism and division can be addressed. That included looking at the role of communities in decision-making; rural and urban interfaces and the issues that need to be addressed for barriers to be removed; and the effectiveness of the good relations indicators in monitoring and measuring government interventions. The inquiry was intended not as a review of the T:BUC strategy but as an opportunity for Members to hear from government, statutory agencies, the community and voluntary sector and interested individuals

and to make recommendations to support and enhance policy in uniting communities.

Led by the themes emerging through written and oral evidence, the Committee has considered a wide variety of issues and challenges. While tensions between communities, particularly at urban interfaces, often attract negative press, there are many positive stories of efforts to build a united and shared community. There are good news stories like the plan to transform a waste area of ground at an interface into cross-community garden plots — a plan supported by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Big Lottery — or the shared community space developed in a County Antrim village that now incorporates a community pharmacy, a Sure Start programme and mother-and-toddler groups. Members may already be familiar with the Game of 3 Halves initiative promoted by the GAA, the Irish Football Association and the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union. Those are not the only examples, but I mention them to remind Members that, while the task of building a united community may, at times, seem like a jigsaw that will never be completed, small pieces of the puzzle are quietly being put in place in communities across this land already.

Over the course of its inquiry, the Committee heard from many committed individuals who have invested much of their time, energy and, sometimes, even their own resources in building a united community. We heard, for example, from three representatives working with groups in Derry/Londonderry who told us that, between them, they had 100 years' experience in the field. The importance of developing good working relationships and building trust also cannot be overstated. I quote one witness:

*"You do not build relationships with organisations; you build relationships with people and individuals within organisations."*

**1.45 pm**

In its report, the Committee expressed its concern regarding the high level of burnout affecting those working in the sector, including a heavy reliance on specific individuals, albeit individuals with enthusiasm and passion for the task in hand. It is for that reason that the Committee recommended that Departments, arm's-length bodies and statutory agencies have in place an appropriate support mechanism for the organisations in receipt of their funding and that they strongly encourage

their funded organisations to consider suitable succession planning.

What also became evident through members' engagement with practitioners was the burden placed on organisations and individuals by short-term funding cycles. The Committee acknowledges the financial pressures, due to the uncertain economic climate, faced by all those reliant on public funds, but it also recognises the importance of placing funding mechanisms targeted at building a united community on a more stable footing to achieve the objectives outlined by Together: Building a United Community.

The Committee also noted renewed energy in the involvement of local communities in decision-making and policy development, particularly in relation to the introduction of community planning as a key power of the new councils. Members welcomed the inclusion of the district council good relations programme within the broader T:BUC framework. While there are areas that require attention, such as the timing of letters of offer, we noted the positive working relationship between good relations officers and departmental officials.

The Committee recognises the importance of respecting the pace at which people are willing to travel in building a united community and that that will differ depending on local circumstances. In light of this, the Committee recommended that single identity groups are provided with the tools to build confidence and capacity but, at the same time, are helped to understand the value of moving beyond a single identity approach and are provided with opportunities for that to happen.

A theme that emerged consistently throughout the Committee's evidence gathering but that was not part of the terms of reference was mental health and intergenerational trauma. Whilst acknowledging those very real concerns, members felt that it would be impossible to deal with this subject fairly in the context of what was already a very wide-ranging inquiry. Efforts to build a united and shared community require a holistic approach, and the Committee has therefore recommended that the Executive undertake closer cross-departmental consideration of issues relating to mental health and intergenerational trauma.

This is just a small reflection of the breadth of the issues considered by the Committee during this inquiry. The report represents the first time that a Committee of the Assembly has undertaken extensive scrutiny of these matters. In so doing, the Committee notes the words of

the First Minister of the time who, in launching Together: Building a United Community, said:

*"It would be idealistic to think that any initiative, no matter how significant, can heal all of society's divisions and problems". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 85, p55, col 2]*

Similarly, this report and our debate today is not the end of the conversation, but having considered the evidence presented, the Committee proposed a number of recommendations that it hopes will contribute to the ongoing discussions and development of policy aimed at building a truly united community for all our people. On that basis, I look forward to the contributions of other Members today.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on an important issue, particularly in the week that is in it, which is Community Relations Week. What better time to discuss ways to unite our community? I have to say at the outset that it is a shame that there is no Minister here to respond to the debate. It is important, and we are not going to solve these issues if we do not have political leadership. There seems to be a vacuum in certain parts of the Chamber.

I will start by thanking the Committee staff. I know that a serious amount of work has been involved in the inquiry and the report. I also thank the stakeholders. We heard from a wide-ranging group of stakeholders, as the Chair said. The inquiry and its recommendations are intended to support and enhance the development of T:BUC. It was not necessarily a critique, but it is an important strategy for our community, so the Committee wanted to play a role in that. There are quite a lot of areas to cover throughout the report, so hopefully I will cover a few of them.

One of the strengths of T:BUC is its cross-cutting nature, much like Delivering Social Change, which has proven to be a successful model for joint working and cooperation. T:BUC has the potential to deliver and make a real difference to people on the ground. It is essential that it is given priority by Departments and also by the relevant scrutiny Committees. It cannot just be left to the OFMDFM Committee to cover, because it cuts across all those Departments. We all want to see the best outcomes for each designated project but also for it to have the maximum impact on the ground.

We recommended that it be reported on annually and discussed in the Assembly as a way of measuring progress and of making contributions to that progress. It is important that the sector and stakeholders are included and consulted regularly as people who are often but not always at the coalface of good relations work.

There is a consensus that there is a lack of focus on rural communities at times when it comes to tackling sectarianism and good relations. It is not that problems do not exist. It is just that in rural communities often those issues and problems will manifest themselves in a different way. It is important that the good work being done in rural communities is given the recognition it deserves and that rural models are shared for good practice. It is important that the seven headline actions are rural-proofed. Rural proofing is something that Michelle O'Neill is working on.

Councils will be playing a major role with their community planning powers. I am glad to see that the district council good relations programme has been included in the T:BUC strategy. It is often the small-scale projects with the smallest budgets that will make the most significant impact in communities. That is something that we heard in our evidence.

We have a narrative that there are two communities in the North of Ireland. While that is largely the case, our community has become more diverse than ever and our society has changed and been enhanced. That is sometimes forgotten in this Chamber. That diversity is something we should be proud of and is one of our greatest strengths. This strategy should recognise the valuable contributions that the LGBT community, as well as ethnic minority and disability groups, make to our society. They should be included in a meaningful way. While sectarianism is a major problem, so, too, is racism, homophobia, transphobia and discrimination in general. Those issues must be tackled equally if we are to build a truly shared and united community, as the strategy states.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the failure of strategies to address women. The Good Friday Agreement commitment to advance women in public life is unfulfilled. Agreements and strategies produced to tackle the so-called big issues of our society have been gender-blind and have essentially failed women. How do we expect to build a shared community when we are practically ignoring 50% of it? T:BUC has to address the lack of women in politics and peace-building.

I commend the recent work on the gender principles for dealing with the past. I hope that they will be taken seriously, because the different post-conflict needs that women have compared with men have not been given significant thought.

We talk about developing shared and safe spaces. The reality is that there is no such thing as a safe space for women; there is just no such thing. All we have to do is look at the statistics for crimes against women. That has to be taken into context.

We all want to achieve what T:BUC set out to do and build a society that we can all be proud of, but that has always required political leadership. It is important that whatever we do, it is done in a progressive and inclusive manner. Unfortunately, I do not think that everyone in the Chamber has bought into that yet.

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

**Mr Speaker:** As I announced earlier, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety resigned his position on Thursday 24 September. As the position remains vacant, in accordance with Assembly convention, questions listed for oral answer will fall. I also advise Members that until another Minister is appointed, questions for written answer will not be accepted. Unanswered questions submitted before the Minister's resignation will be answered when the vacancy has been filled.

Questions to Justice will commence at 2.45 pm. To allow us to continue this debate in the meantime requires the suspension of Standing Orders.

**Mr Swann:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 28 September 2015.*

**Mr Speaker:** Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 28 September 2015.*

**Mr Speaker:** As the motion has been agreed, we will now return to the debate.

## Committee Business

### **Inquiry into Building a United Community: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Report**

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr Nesbitt.]*

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is an important piece of work that the Committee has undertaken, and I speak on behalf of my party colleague Alex Attwood, who is a member of the Committee. As you know, Mr Speaker, it is called the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Some listeners might have been a bit confused about whose responsibility the implementation of the strategy is. It is not just the First Minister's; it falls to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

It is clear that we have a number of problems in trying to resolve the many issues that continue to divide the community in the North of Ireland. There is still a very long way to travel, and the evidence that the Committee heard about urban interfaces and the malevolent forces that operate in some of them here is a testament to that. I would go further and say that it is not just the physical barriers. There are a number of invisible barriers right across our community that hold back the community. We all look to political leadership and leadership at community level to try to help move society forward.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Member for giving way. I was going to bring this point up in my contribution. She is the first Member, to my knowledge, to mention paragraph 24, which states:

*"recognises that malevolent forces continue to have influence in some communities".*

Do you not think that it is strange that such a perverse finding was not mentioned earlier in the debate?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think that the unusual circumstances in which we find the Assembly and Executive not working is testament to the prevalence and influence of malevolent forces in many of our communities. That is an important point for Mr McCrea to have made.

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

I will return to my script. Our party fully agrees with the Committee's call for an interim evaluation of the strategy on how to heal society's divisions and problems. It is a worry that, on page 9 of the report, the Committee identified that it was not possible to obtain a budget breakdown for the lifetime of T:BUC. It could not get even a budget outline; that is how bad it is. I recall the former junior Minister Mr Bell in the Chamber, promising over 100 places to our young people. Those have not yet materialised, to the best of my knowledge. In fact, I believe that pressure was put on the Minister for Employment and Learning to commit to and deliver on that promise under T:BUC without any additional funding. That, in itself, is a major concern. Our young people in particular have lost out on employment and training opportunities because of the failure of politics over the last number of years, and they are being switched off from politics because of the failure to deal with the sectarianism and division that still prevails in our community. The priorities of T:BUC remain crucially important, and the Committee should continue to pursue a budget breakdown for the strategy as evidence that it is being measured and carefully considered.

It is also a worry that money is allocated to specific non-related projects, and the subsequent "ad hoc-ery" does little to advance reconciliation or help to improve the lives of those living in turbulent communities in Northern Ireland. Some of those communities are some of the most deprived communities, where people are living in absolute poverty. It is startling that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was found guilty in a court over its failure to deliver an anti-poverty strategy. It seems as if some parties are quite happy that some communities are kept down and kept divided. Maybe that is what helps to ensure that their vote continues to rise, but, as

the old saying goes, "You can fool some of the people some of the time but not all of the people all of the time".

**2.00 pm**

I will go back to the strategy and the uncertainty created about funding. In particular, short-term funding cycles can cause significant delay in the advancement of important projects, and OFMDFM needs to take stock of the difficulty that is caused to groups that are bidding for funding and attempting to keep projects afloat when they are dependent on short-term, indefinite amounts of funding from the Department. We will not be able to make sure that T:BUC continues to progress reconciliation and shared activity in Northern Ireland if we cannot maintain a consistent, fervent approach on project outcomes and finance.

Another interesting aspect of the report is the level and quality of academic work that has been produced on issues such as sectarianism, the effect of the past and coexistent and shared communities. Whilst all this valuable information and research is available to us, there is no point in having a wide array of information and academic analysis if nobody is looking at it. As the Committee has noted, T:BUC needs to be aware constantly of the significant differences between each individual community in Northern Ireland.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** One method or approach in a particular area may not work at all in another area. I would like to think that we have moved on from single-identity work and are engaging in real cross-community work.

**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. The ambition to contribute towards tackling division and building a united community is one of the main reasons why I stepped forward to get involved in politics in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party firmly believes that building a shared society in Northern Ireland is the single biggest challenge facing us. Indeed, it should be the central overarching priority for the Executive. I echo Megan Fearon's comments, therefore, that it is disappointing that we do not have a ministerial response to this crucial issue. Indeed, I think that it is a disgrace and is a real missed opportunity for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to tell us what positive contribution and development it thinks has been achieved by the strategy to date.

The Alliance Party strongly supported the shared future strategy in 2005 and the triennial action plans that went with the strategy. We worked tirelessly to ensure that the parties in the Executive brought forward a devolved good relations strategy for Northern Ireland and supported the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy consultation in 2010. That initial draft strategy was robustly criticised — rightly — by the community in Northern Ireland and led to the CSI working group, to which I contributed for many months before withdrawing on behalf of the Alliance Party, having identified a wholly inadequate lack of ambition in the draft strategy, not least with a lack of targets for integrated education and shared neighbourhoods and a wholly inadequate response to dealing with flags, parades and the past and, indeed, the lack of an action plan on budgets.

Dealing with this issue will not be achieved by tinkering around the edges. We need the Together: Building a United Community strategy to tackle underlying patterns of segregation, exclusion, discrimination and threat if we are to see a truly shared society in Northern Ireland. I welcome the work that is being done by 'The Detail' and the Community Relations Council with their poster project, which is being rolled out as part of Community Relations Week. It shows in stark detail how Northern Ireland is now a community of minorities and that, to chart a way forward, we need compromise and a recognition of our inter-reliance and interdependence.

On that note, I welcome a number of the recommendations in the Committee inquiry's report into Together: Building a United Community, not least the recognition that is given to the passion, energy and enthusiasm that many individuals in our community and voluntary sector bring to developing a united community in Northern Ireland. I thank those contributors to the inquiry for their work on the ground. I also welcome the recognition of the burden that is placed on the efforts of those people in our community through the short-term funding cycles that are provided to them and the often late funding offer that they receive.

I proposed that the report on this inquiry recommend the creation of a Together: Building a United Community forum. That was on the basis of my understanding of the positive contribution of the NEETs forum created by the Department for Employment and Learning. It has been a useful model in which to include the community and voluntary sector and other bodies in the design and delivery of this important strategy. I welcome that the

recommendation has been made, and I look forward to hearing the ministerial response to it.

I also welcome the reference in the report to the level of academic expertise here in Northern Ireland with regard to the work of Together: Building a United Community. However, I express on record my disappointment that some members of the Committee voted to exclude some of our noteworthy academic experts from giving evidence to this important inquiry.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyttle:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr B McCrea:** I think that there was a vote on whether Duncan Morrow would be allowed to make a contribution. Will the Member tell me and the Assembly a little more about that?

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

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for his intervention. As he has raised the issue, I will confirm that his understanding is accurate. It is extremely disappointing, not least given that the person whom he mentions was deemed worthy enough by the Scottish Government to appoint as chair of a working group into tackling sectarianism in Scotland. Thankfully, there were many positive contributions made to the inquiry. We have a robust report to work from, and I am sure that Duncan and many of the other academic experts in Northern Ireland will add their support and ongoing efforts.

The Committee report also recognises the merit of bringing groups together on common issues. Groups such as Community Relations in Schools are to be commended and recognised for the work that they have done on a nursery buddy scheme, but we need —

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

**Mr Lyttle:** — much more action from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to support this important work on the ground, if we are to build a truly shared society in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Maskey:** I would like to say just a few words this afternoon on the inquiry report. I join colleagues in thanking all staff members who worked tirelessly to facilitate this. I also thank all those who participated in the inquiry,

including all the Committee members, and particularly the stakeholder organisations and representatives who came and gave of their valuable time and even more valuable experience to allow the Committee to consider T:BUC in the context of work already under way in quite a number of communities.

We often talk about the two communities, and, yes, we do have two core aspects of our community, which is divided along key national identity and constitutional lines. However, thankfully, in another way, we are becoming an increasingly multicultural society, which will be to the benefit of all of us. That does not mean for one second that we seek to diminish or downplay our national identity; it simply gives us a greater opportunity to learn from others. We have to share whatever our identity is with others and learn from them.

Having been an elected representative for quite a number of years, I, for one, have had many, many opportunities to work with people from different community and ethnic minority backgrounds, people of different nationalities and people who have come here more recently. Tremendous opportunities have been afforded to people like me and many other local elected representatives to work with others, learn directly from their experiences and share the best aspects of their cultures. Yes, we have to stand by and protect all our rights and identities, but we have to do so in the context that there are many other worthy and worthwhile communities and identities here, all of which need to be respected on the same equal basis.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Maskey:** I will.

**Mr Lyttle:** I wholeheartedly support the Member's comments. Does he share my disappointment and concern that a key aspect of the Together: Building a United Community strategy was the delivery of the racial equality strategy by the end of 2013?

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

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for that. Our party is in total agreement that we need to make sure that we protect all our communities. If that means we have to develop different and additional strategies, that has to be the case. I support the concept that we make sure that we develop all these strategies in the interests of

all people who now live in this society and many whom we around this Chamber represent.

In conducting the inquiry, there were no surprises because we spoke to a lot of people who have been working at these issues for some time. As the Chair said, some organisations have had a collective 100-year span of experience. I know people around the community who have been working at what we often call the coalface. I would like to pay tribute to many of those people because they have been working very often quietly and in the background to try to sustain their own communities as they see them and are part of, but also work with others.

I want to put on record that, going back to the early 1990s when we had European Peace money coming here, we devised strategies that were very important and there were great lessons around that because there were partnership arrangements in play, and it was probably the first time that we had actual organic partnerships organised and working. That gave a lot of people an opportunity. There was significant funding made available from 1994 for at least another couple of years. A lot of people were doing single-identity work. I listened to the argument around single-identity work, and I think that it is an important part of it, but, in a way, some communities and organisations have chosen to stay within a single-identity framework. I do not think that is at all healthy. It is important that we give each community and all sectors in our community, be it young people, women or whoever, the tools. That is what the inquiry report recommends.

We need to give people the tools to build their capacity to work from within, if that is what makes them comfortable and if they want to learn about and share their own identity and where they see challenges to that. But it is essential that we signpost those people into making sure that they work with the rest of the communities that are around them because none of us live in an island. Too many people live in homogeneous communities, but that is the nature of our society. There are a number of what might be described as shared neighbourhoods, but despite the great work that has been going on for years, an awful lot more work needs to be done.

When we have disputes around flags, parades and so on, very often communities that have been working at the coalface to build good relations tend to take a step back when they see big controversial issues coming. In other words, when they see the parties taking a lead on those matters, I have found that, over the

years, many of the people who have been working at the coalface tend to take a step back. I think that is unfortunate and regrettable. I urge all those out there who have great experience working at cross-community activity, building good relations —

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

**Mr Maskey:** — and doing single-identity work to make sure that they work with the politicians, not against the politicians because neither can the politicians do all the work themselves. These matters are societal, and people across society have to work together. I commend the report on that basis.

**Mr Allen:** As the new boy in the OFMDFM Committee, it is my privilege to speak in this debate regarding the details of the Committee's inquiry into the T:BUC project. Let me say at the outset that I fully support efforts to move Northern Ireland away from the decades of conflict and division and build a genuinely united community and a shared future. I commend all groups, organisations and individuals working towards that goal. We owe it to our children and to future generations to play our part in ensuring that our future is played out in a country where there is genuine tolerance of people from different community backgrounds and where diversity is not just accepted but embraced.

The Committee report contains a number of points, and I will focus on a few of them here. First, with regard to financial and budgetary matters, it is noted that it has not been possible to obtain a budget profile for the lifetime of Together: Building a United Community or against each of the seven headline actions.

There is also a feeling that T:BUC may be too narrowly focused on the division between the two main communities in Northern Ireland and that that approach risks sending a message that the only cultures and diversity to be protected are those of the two majority communities in Northern Ireland. There were also concerns that, despite the good work that already exists, there was a lack of consultation in preparation for the publication of the Together: Building a United Community project and a lack of recognition of the current work undertaken across the voluntary, community and statutory sectors in this area.

**2.15 pm**

We also need to consider definitions and terminology. In addition to the need to define "sectarianism" and "good relations", terms such as "shared housing", "shared neighbourhoods" and "shared space" require more clarity. As is all too common, concerns were expressed with regard to the resourcing of the Together: Building a United Community project, the funding available for local community and voluntary sector organisations and the impact of uncertainty around funding on the sustainability of provision. There was a feeling that existing best practice was being challenged because of uncertainty regarding funding, including delays in hearing the outcome of funding applications and very short funding cycles. I fully agree with the suggestion that communities must be considered as key players rather than as supporting actors and that, when it comes to addressing sectarianism and division, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Factors relating to location, demography, capacity and confidence must all be taken into account.

There is no question that relationship-building and trust are key to improving relations between communities. Building such relationships takes time, and that process is not helped when organisations go through a high turnover of staff and have to face a constant chase for financial resources. With regard to interfaces, so-called peace walls can and should come down only after full consultation and with the agreement of those living on either side of them.

I would like to make a final point with regard to mixed communities. It was stated that there was much attention paid to establishing new shared neighbourhoods and urban villages but none to learning from existing practice and the networks that have been built over time. From my experience of dealing with the Felden housing development in north Belfast, many people are clearly a long way from being prepared to consider being part of a united community. A shared housing scheme was proposed right between two strongly republican districts. Unionist representatives had fears, right from the start, that this was the right development but in the wrong place and that anyone from a Protestant or unionist background would not be welcomed in a mixed development at the Felden site. I regret to say that their fears have been confirmed even before homes have been allocated.

If we are really serious about building a united community and a truly shared future for our children, we have to remove the poison of sectarianism from this society. As I said, we owe it to our children and to future generations

to play our part in ensuring that their future is played out in a country where there is genuine tolerance of people from different community backgrounds —

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

**Mr Allen:** — where diversity is not just accepted but embraced. That is the vision of a truly united community —

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

**Mr Allen:** — to which we must all aspire.

**Mr B McCrea:** This is an important subject but a disappointing debate. I listened, as usual, with interest to Dolores Kelly who, I think, had the bravery to say some things that had to be said, in particular about "ad hoc-ery", the funding of these issues and the talk of "single identity". "Single identity" means that you give money to paramilitaries. The thing that is not being confronted in the Chamber, even though we are talking about it down the hill, is that paramilitaries are the bane of our existence. The crisis that has been brought on is allegedly about the IRA and Sinn Féin, but let me tell you that they are not unique: there are too many political parties that people presume are too close to the UDA, the UVF and all the others.

What is disappointing about this approach is that people talk about a shared space, but there is not a word about flags or intimidation. There is nothing, referring to T:BUC, which states:

*"Work to build a culture where people feel comfortable to report when they have been the victim of intimidation or harassment".*

The biggest issue I see here is that MLAs are the victims of intimidation and harassment. They will not stand up to the paramilitaries. They are afraid of what will happen to them. When you see communities that are trying to build cross-community projects, when they come along and find out that their bonfires have been burnt early by people who say, "Those are our bonfires. That's our money. You do not have the right to have a cross-community association", then that is the challenge to this society.

You get the issue about people who are burnt out. People are burnt out because political parties pay lip service to community relations and trying to tackle that issue. They come out with dulcet tones. They try to sound senatorial,

but they will not deal with the elephant in the room. Paramilitaries are bad for our society and bad for our people, and they scare the hell out of everybody.

**Mr Maskey:** I thank the Member for giving way. While I do not necessarily disagree with some of his remarks, I ask him this: given his obvious — or apparent — passion on the issue, did he not consider at any point when the inquiry was held by the Committee, when a lot of stakeholders made suggestions and recommendations and tried to be constructive, that he could also have made some positive, constructive suggestions, rather than just getting up in the Assembly and slabbering, which he is doing this afternoon?

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I would just like a point of order before you start, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Is the word "slabber" parliamentary language?

**Mr Maskey:** I withdraw that remark.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I note Mr Maskey's apology.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am glad Mr Maskey has apologised, but he should not have said it in the first place. That is the sort of language that gets this place into the turmoil it is in. He and his party have their part to play, and that sort of language is not useful. I will speak with passion.

**Mr Maskey:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** You have had your chance. If you want to speak, you ask —

**Mr Maskey:** Have you any part to play?

**Mr B McCrea:** Mr Speaker, I am trying to hold the Floor here. If Mr Maskey wishes to intervene he should ask. I want to make a point in the time that is remaining to me.

When we talked about rural communities, referred to in this great report, the Committee went inordinate before you could even get to hear what they had to say. That is how much you care about rural communities and their issues. Did we talk about integrated education or shared education? No, we could not talk about that. That had to go to the Department of Education. There are so many issues that are not tackled in this place.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for giving way. Would he be in any way surprised to learn that many of the young people who gave evidence to the Committee inquiry showed strong support for integrated education and children being educated together?

**Mr B McCrea:** I certainly think that there is an issue that has to be addressed. Many people have moved on; our political classes have not. People want to make Northern Ireland work. Whether you call it Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland or anything else, the people of our community have had enough. They are bored, frustrated and fed up with the lack of political leadership.

When you come back to the key issues about how we deal with our young people outside education — the ones who are in our community groups; the ones who are worried about the walls and those issues — what they really want is to be able to express themselves as young people without fear of intimidation.

Here is the key issue about flags. This is taken from T:BUC, which we are supposed to be looking at. When you look at flags, you can see that it says that 81% of people do not support the flying of flags in their neighbourhood. Why was that not tackled? In addition, 21% of respondents report being annoyed by republican emblems and 25% are annoyed by loyalist emblems, but the key bit is that 13% were intimidated by republican emblems and 14% were intimidated by loyalist emblems. You will also get the issue that people will not go shopping where flags are put up as some sort of testimony of strength — "This is our patch" or "This is our area". Talk about trying to build a shared, united community: all you have to do is walk down the street and see flags everywhere that say, "This is our patch. We are in charge. We don't care who you are, you have to listen to us".

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member conclude his remarks?

**Mr B McCrea:** That is not the right way forward, and we should tackle it as one.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Let me begin by sharing the disappointment at the lack of a ministerial response, as mentioned by Megan Fearon, Chris Lyttle and others. I listened carefully and with interest to Members' contributions today, but, before I turn to those, I will mention a particular group of people the Committee met during the inquiry. I accept that it is sometimes dangerous to single out a particular individual or

group, but this organisation came to me informally in conjunction with the Bytes Project. It gave members the opportunity to hear at first hand the views of so-called at risk young people on good relations and building a united and shared community. A summary of the event is available in the appendices of the Committee report, and I recommend that everyone in the Chamber, even if they read nothing else of the report, reads what those young people had to say.

On engagement, they suggested better use of social media and online platforms, as well as better engagement with groups and organisations that are working with young people. They commented on the perceived lack of shared space in the city of Belfast and the consequent lack of opportunities to meet people from other communities. The young people also had some innovative ideas on how to approach the process of removing physical interface barriers on an incremental basis. One suggestion was for a clear wall, with those living on either side having the opportunity to see people going about their daily lives through the wall and to recognise that many of the social and economic challenges faced are the same on both sides. Another proposal was to open a gate in a physical interface barrier for a couple of days, with an event organised to encourage people to come and walk through the wall. The young people recognised the risks involved in those approaches and that some people may feel insecure once the walls are gone, but they felt that maybe now was the time to take the chance.

Turning to some of the remarks from today's contributors, I join Megan Fearon in thanking the Committee staff for the very hard work that they put in to make this report possible at a time when the Committee has a lot on its plate, not least bringing forward its own legislation — the first single Committee to bring legislation to the House. Ms Fearon highlighted a lack of focus on rural areas, where the absence of peace walls should not be confused with the absence of issues and challenges on building a united community. She pointed out that we are no longer simply a binary society but a diverse one and said that we need to take on board our minority communities. She also highlighted the failure to address the under-representation of women in public life — an issue that we need to address on a serious basis. Finally, she mentioned the need for an annual review of the implementation of T:BUC.

Mrs Kelly for the SDLP, again, talked about invisible barriers and the need for political leadership. She highlighted and lamented the

lack of solid budgets, a point that my colleague Andy Allen also brought up. She may recall that, in a television programme shown at the beginning of T:BUC, the then junior Minister talked about reviewing budgets on the scale of half a billion pounds. However, as far as we were able to establish during the inquiry, the actual spend to date on T:BUC is under £10 million. Indeed, the majority of that money would have been spent on individual programmes anyway. Dolores Kelly also highlighted the quantity and, indeed, the quality of academic research, which chimes with stakeholders who warned us that T:BUC should not try to reinvent the wheel and that there is plenty of hard evidence out there to pick up.

The Deputy Chair, Chris Lyttle, detailed how a shared future for Northern Ireland is his political passion, and he gave us his interpretation of how we came through various iterations to T:BUC. He reminded us that we are now a society of minorities and that compromise will be required. He also highlighted how late funding awards impact so negatively on the ability of community and voluntary groups to deliver for their people.

Alex Maskey talked about the importance of sharing identities and the challenge we all face in explaining the importance of our own identity and our culture to others. He also highlighted some of the very good work previously undertaken in the community, not least work funded by the European Union. He spoke of the importance of empowering communities and giving them the tools to move forward and to share, particularly single-identity groups, and the requirement for them to move on and embrace the other.

### **2.30 pm**

Andy Allen reassured the House that, as a new boy to the Committee, he fully supports efforts to build a shared future and the need not just to tolerate each other but to embrace our differences. He highlighted the report's finding about the lack of consultation. Having chaired some of the sessions in the stakeholder events, I was struck very hard and it was very surprising to hear that some people with very solid experience and connections in the community and voluntary sector, which were totally applicable to T:BUC, felt that they had not been contacted or consulted by the Department. There was also the pitfall of the high rate of self-turnover, which is often a product of the failure to deliver timely financial support. Finally, he talked about the Felden housing scheme in north Belfast as an example

of areas where there are those who do not support shared housing or a shared future.

Mr Basil McCrea, our final Member to speak, told us that it was a disappointing debate and that paramilitaries are bad.

As I indicated earlier, today's debate has provided us with an opportunity to provide a voice for those who engaged with the Committee during its inquiry. It has been evident throughout that building a united community is not the preserve of one Department, one Committee or one small group of committed individuals; it is a task for which each of us has a responsibility and a part to play. I draw my fellow Committee Chairpersons' attention to one of the recommendations in the report, which is:

*"that all NI Assembly statutory committees make it core business to include good relations as part of their regular scrutiny of departmental activity, including the monitoring of T:BUC headline actions where Departments have responsibility for delivery."*

I recognise that we are coming towards the end of a mandate and that Committee work programmes may already be full. However, looking to the future, we anticipate that Departments will be configured slightly differently as will, of course, Committees. I encourage those putting together work programmes for Committees in the next mandate to put the scrutiny of good relations firmly on their agenda. In the meantime, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to monitor the implementation of its recommendations throughout its regular scrutiny of the work of the Department.

In closing, I thank all the Members who participated in the debate. In commending the motion and the report to the House, I finish with a personal plea that some Members have already recognised in the debate, which is that we can sit up here on the hill and define a vision and turn it into a policy like T:BUC, but how it is delivered on the ground will differ depending on the environment on the ground — urban, rural and subdivided beyond that. It would be mature politics of us to recognise that delivery on the ground by the people on the ground is the way to go.

I commend the motion and the report to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.*

## **Commonwealth Youth Games 2021: Bid**

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made.*

I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee believes that it is vital that the House sends out a clear endorsement of the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council's bid for the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games.

The Committee discussed the need to encourage more young people to engage in sport a number of times. It is very supportive of DCAL policies that encourage this. Members realise, however, that it often takes more than a strategy to achieve this kind of outcome. Nothing is more inspiring than seeing top-class athletes on your doorstep and it gives you the impetus to get out and try new sports. Equally,

the sight of young local people winning medals in a range of sports is extremely powerful.

The reason for this debate is to show the unanimous support of this House for the bid for the games. Another potential bidder, Jersey, has already withdrawn because it could not compete with our facilities, and it looks as if the only other bidder will be Botswana. This means that there has never been a better opportunity for us to bring these prestigious games to Northern Ireland. Not only would the games be a huge boost for our tourism industry, but, as I have already highlighted, they would provide a brilliant platform on which our young athletes could compete and excel on home ground. The games would also act as a catalyst to inspire other young people to become involved in sport, something that is vital if we are to improve our people's fitness and general well-being. I know that is something that we all aspire to do in our communities.

The age range for youth games competitors is 14 to 18. This is a key period in young people's lives for instilling an interest in, and love for, sport. If they can be inspired to participate in sport at this age, it is more likely that they will retain the interest into adulthood.

The youth games have been shown to be a key springboard for future sporting success, and having the games in Northern Ireland would allow us to enter more competitors, so enhancing our chances of fostering a wider range of exceptional sporting talent.

Success breeds success. We have already shown our commitment to the Commonwealth Youth Games through our performance in this year's games in Samoa. Northern Ireland won 12 medals: four gold, four silver and four bronze. This put us ahead of Scotland's two golds and Wales's single gold.

Of course, hosting the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games would provide a golden opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland as a venue for international sporting events. We already have a successful record in hosting high-level sporting events following the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia last year and the Irish Open. No one could deny the positive impact on London of hosting the Olympic Games or the benefits that accrued to Glasgow from hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2014.

The Committee is also concerned about low levels of female participation in sport. Having the Commonwealth Youth Games here in 2021 would provide a range of positive female

sporting role models for young women and an opportunity to present sport as exciting and fun.

The reality of the bid is that a modest investment on the part of the Executive of only £3 million to £4 million would produce all the benefits that I have highlighted. Surely this is too good an opportunity to miss. The Committee's motion provides an opportunity for this House to unite in support of something that will not only be positive for Northern Ireland plc but will inspire our young people to become involved in, and be inspired by, sport and encourage those young people already involved in sport to strive for success in a home games.

On behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I commend this motion to the House.

I will now make a few modest comments in a personal capacity, if you can allow me the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Mr McMullan, as he was walking past, told me not to take too long, and I will take his advice.

This is genuinely meant to be a cross-community opportunity. I pay tribute to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. When I raised the matter with her, she was very generous in her response. I am very supportive of her taking the initiative and saying, "It doesn't matter what you call it or where you're from, if you're from this part of the world, we support you". That was a really good thing to say.

Arlene Foster made a point of speaking to me and said that, in a period when she was able to do so, she had sent off a letter to the council to say that the Executive would fund the games.

The purpose of the motion is to remove the absence of doubt and make sure that we do not lose the opportunity to bring these wonderful games to Northern Ireland in 2021. This is a chance for parties and Members to put their support on the record, which will hopefully secure the games for Northern Ireland. It is meant in a very genuine way, and it is a good thing.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As Question Time to the Minister of Justice begins at 2.45 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Karen McKeivitt.

*The debate stood suspended.*

**2.45 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Justice

#### Coroners Service: Resources

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps his Department has taken to ensure that the Coroners Service has the resources necessary to efficiently and effectively fulfil its statutory obligations. (AQO 8728/11-16)

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** Northern Ireland has three full-time coroners, one of whom, John Leckey, is due to retire on 31 October. A competition to appoint a successor to Mr Leckey was launched on 10 September. The Lord Chief Justice has assigned a County Court judge to the Coroners Service to provide additional capacity, and a High Court judge has been assigned to deal with the new inquest that is to be held into the death of Pearse Jordan. I have also asked the Lord Chief Justice to exercise his statutory powers under section 6(2) of the Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 1959 to appoint temporary additional coroners to cover vacancies caused by the absence of a coroner due to illness. In addition, the Courts and Tribunals Service has appointed a senior business manager to support the coroners.

Arrangements are also being progressed to recruit two investigating officers for the Coroners Service and to strengthen the panel of counsel available to support coroners in the discharge of their functions. However, as I have said before, progress in dealing with the past, including the legacy inquest process, can be made only in the context of the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and the associated funding for which it provides.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. He outlined that a number of recruitment processes are in place. I seek this reassurance: is he satisfied that there will be no gaps in the system, as we go forward, as a result of those recruiting processes?

**Mr Ford:** I am not sure that I can give an assurance of there being no gaps. The process under section 6(2) to appoint temporary coroners, in particular, is relatively straightforward. It is under way, and my understanding is that there is the potential for

people to be in post within a very short time. The job of the Judicial Appointments Commission in making the permanent appointment will take slightly longer. The fact that a County Court judge and a High Court judge have been assigned strengthens the Coroners Service considerably.

**Mr Allister:** Since the retirement of the chief coroner was well known in advance and flagged for some time, why did it take until September for the recruitment process to begin? Why were several months lost in that process?

**Mr Ford:** I am afraid that I have no answer to give to Mr Allister. I am not responsible for the appointment of coroners, and I am therefore not sure why that particular timescale is happening. What I know is that the process is under way, and I trust that the post will be filled permanently as soon as possible.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I inform the House that question 2 has been withdrawn.

#### Compensation: Unspent Convictions

3. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the plans he has to address the current process in the criminal injuries compensation scheme whereby victims of crime can be denied compensation if they have unspent convictions that are unrelated to the claim. (AQO 8730/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** The extent to which unspent criminal convictions should be taken into account when considering a claim for criminal injuries compensation is being addressed as part of the overall review of the compensation scheme. A public consultation exercise was undertaken earlier this year, and responses are being considered with the intention of bringing forward a post-consultation report and proposals for a new scheme by the end of the year.

**Mr Eastwood:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What specific criteria will he use to withhold or reduce a compensation reward on the basis of an applicant's character?

**Mr Ford:** I am afraid that it is a bit difficult to say what I will do when the consultation responses are being analysed and proposals developed. However, it is clear that even some of the proposals for reducing the effective unspent convictions did not attract universal support in that consultation process, and it will be necessary to look in detail at how that will be handled.

I expect that, when we produce firm proposals for the new scheme, there is likely to be a lot of interest in the Chamber. Some Members may consider tabling a debate at that point, if they believe that issues need to be teased out. There is a difficult balance to be struck, in particular on historical convictions. That is not easily resolved in the current political difficulties.

## Rural Crime Unit: Role and Composition

4. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Justice, given that recent figures in South Tyrone show that over £140,000 of livestock and farm machinery were stolen in the first three months of 2015, to outline the role and composition of the rural crime unit. (AQO 8731/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** The PSNI's rural crime unit was a central resource for identifying trends and patterns in rural crime. Information from the unit was used by police commanders to enhance the effectiveness of their operational tactics in preventing and detecting rural and agricultural crime. The work of the unit was supported by a dedicated data analyst, who was part-funded by my Department. Information provided by the analyst informed the work of the Rural Crime Partnership, a collaborative arrangement between my Department, the PSNI, NFU Mutual and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I understand that, as part of the PSNI's termination of contracts for associate workers, the contract for this post was not renewed beyond 31 December 2014. While there is no longer a dedicated rural crime data analyst, I understand that the PSNI's statistics branch continues to produce detailed quarterly updates on agricultural and rural crime in Northern Ireland. This allows key stakeholders to continue to monitor trends in crime committed in rural settlements and agricultural crime and to allocate resources accordingly.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Given the prevalence of rural crime and just after a week that saw another 13 cattle stolen in an area between Aghnacloy and Caledon, which, yet again, had a devastating impact on a farming family, and given that it appears that the contract for the data analyst post in the rural crime unit has not been renewed, will the Minister give serious consideration to renewing that important role?

**Mr Ford:** I accept that the data analyst performed an important role. The reality is that that work has been embedded within the PSNI

statistics unit in a way that was not previously the case. When I became Minister a mere five and a half years ago, the definitions of "urban" and "rural" in PSNI terms appeared to depend whether one was in the Belfast subregion or beyond it. As a result, large rural areas in places like Antrim, Lisburn and Ards were classified as urban, and major urban settlements in the rest of it — all but the city of Derry — were classified as rural. We have a much better analysis now. That is being embedded through the individual districts.

Given the budget cuts that were being made and, frankly, the political will of some people to see the ending of those contracts, the reality is that it was not possible to retain that post. I do not see, in the financial difficulties, how it would be possible to reinstate it. The important issue is to see that the work is being done otherwise.

**Mr Somerville:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Newry, Armagh and Dungannon DARD veterinary offices all consistently report the highest number of stolen or missing cattle. The proximity of the border to each area is not a coincidence. Will the Minister support a National Crime Agency (NCA) investigation of these organised crime gangs?

**Mr Ford:** The Minister always supports the operational decisions of the NCA that best address its responsibilities, because he does not direct the NCA any more than he directs the PSNI what to do. However, a perfectly valid point has just been made: there is no doubt that the prevalence of cattle thefts is greatest in border areas of Northern Ireland and in border areas of the Republic. There is clearly an issue to be addressed there.

I certainly believe that, as part of the ongoing work to address crime on a cross-border basis, good work is being done in a number of areas. I will happily draw the issue of cattle rustling to the attention of the police and the Garda Síochána when I next speak to them and, indeed, when I speak this week to the Irish Justice Minister at the organised crime cross-border seminar. But there are real issues, given the resources that are available, and other initiatives, including some run by PCSPs and so on to assist people with things like Farmwatch. It is not simply a matter of waiting for the formal agencies; there is also the issue of what can be done in partnership to fight those who engage in this crime.

**Mr Byrne:** Does the Minister recognise that this is a serious issue for the farming community? Many farmers who have suffered the rustling of

cattle cannot get compensation, and there is no such thing as an adequate insurance policy for them. In his discussions with the Minister for Justice in the Republic, can he accentuate a sense of urgency? There is a fear that this is being allowed to slip.

**Mr Ford:** I certainly agree with Mr Byrne that this is an issue of significant concern to the families who suffer. Thefts of machinery and plant, particularly tractors, can also cause difficulties.

A year or so ago, there was a slight upswing in my constituency in that kind of theft. I have been assured that the treatment of rural crime such as that is a priority in the border areas of Armagh and Tyrone that were highlighted earlier. However, there is also an issue of individual citizens doing what they can to protect their stock and of people being the eyes and ears of the community, contacting police if they have concerns and joining the likes of Farmwatch to help to keep tabs on what is happening. It is not an area in which we can simply depend on the two police services; it requires a joined-up community effort.

### **Criminal Justice System: Female Representation**

5. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the measures his Department is taking to address female representation in leading roles in the criminal justice system. (AQO 8732/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** The appointment of most of the key personnel in the justice system is outwith my Department. However, many leading roles in the criminal justice system are held by women. On 31 March, female representation on public bodies in the criminal justice system was sitting at 39%. The chair and the director of the Probation Board are women, and the chair of the Policing Board is held by a woman, one of the six whom I appointed to the board earlier this year alongside only three men. In my top team, two of the five roles, including the director general of the Prison Service, are held by women.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Perhaps many of the roles are held by women, but maybe not enough. Is the Minister aware of research carried out by the Judicial Appointments Commission that found that a culture exists in the criminal, legal and justice system that discriminates against

women and which may act as a barrier to women achieving senior appointments?

**Mr Ford:** Yes, I can certainly assure Ms Fearon that I am aware of that research, which was carried out with specific reference to the judiciary. However, as far as appointments are concerned, I need to leave those with the Judicial Appointments Commission, under the chairmanship of the Lord Chief Justice — one person on whose turf I do not like to tread.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** What more can be done to assist females in achieving higher levels in the judiciary?

**Mr Ford:** If Mrs McKeivitt is talking about the judiciary specifically, I need to be very careful in saying what can be done, because that is a responsibility that sits firmly with the Judicial Appointments Commission. If she were to discuss the wider issues of encouraging females to take up appointments across the higher reaches of the justice system, I could only say what I quoted. I believe that those areas where I have a degree of responsibility have shown some positive movements, particularly this year, but it is a matter of encouraging women to play their full part in public life across a range of areas. Frankly, the justice system is not much different from others. I have no doubt that some Members will look across the border at a female Justice Minister, a female Attorney General, a female Lord Chief Justice and a female Garda Commissioner, but I am not responsible for the appointment of any of them or of their equivalents in Northern Ireland.

### **HMP Magilligan: Capital Funding**

6. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the availability of capital funding for the redevelopment of HMP Magilligan. (AQO 8733/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** An outline business case for the redevelopment of Magilligan prison was approved by DFP on 9 January 2015. I met the then Minister of Finance and Personnel on 28 April to discuss capital funding for the delivery of the Prison Service estate strategy. It is difficult to make commitments to deliver an eight-year construction programme without the assurance of funding across a number of spending review periods. Securing the necessary capital will determine the timeline for the development of the new prison at Magilligan.

My officials will complete the necessary bid to secure capital funding for the project when it is launched by DFP.

**Ms Sugden:** At what point does the Department need to re-evaluate the outline business case, which is nearly a year into approval by DFP?

**Mr Ford:** I am happy to say that the outline business case is a sound case that was done a year ago, and there is no likelihood of it needing to be renewed in the near future. The question is much more this: at what point will the Executive agree the finances for Northern Ireland for the future so that we know what the opportunities are for capital spending on not just Magilligan prison but on the much needed women's facility and the upgrading of accommodation at Maghaberry?

**Mr Dallat:** I thank the Minister for his response. I am doing my best to interpret it as positive. Given that the Minister gave the Assembly an assurance that he was committed to Magilligan prison staying on its present site, will he tell the House what preparatory work has been done to give confidence to the 300 people who work there and the families of people who prefer their family members to be there rather than in that other place called Maghaberry?

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Ford:** We should not suggest that preparing the outline business case was not a great deal of preparatory work. That business case has involved all aspects of the running of the prison, including looking at future arrangements for training, job skills, healthcare and staffing. It is not simply a matter of looking at buildings as being major in the business case but at what the needs will be into the future. I believe that that is a firm statement of commitment, which follows through on the commitment I gave the Assembly when I reported back on that particular aspect of the prison reform programme. The fundamental issue is not whether the DOJ is committed to the developments needed at Magilligan and the other prisons, but whether the capital is available. That requires a joined-up Executive decision. It is not even just a matter for the Justice and Finance Departments, but will require the Executive, as a whole, to prepare a capital programme.

**Mrs Overend:** Is the Minister aware that, following the delays and prevarications over the community safety college in Desertcreat, there is a great deal of suspicion that Magilligan's

location west of the Bann is not helping it when it comes to seeking finance and urgency from his Department and the Executive?

**Mr Ford:** I cannot accept the thesis that there is prevarication around Desertcreat, which is the responsibility of the DOJ, and which is, apart from anything else, an Executive project that is led jointly by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, when we have one, and me. I also think that it is fairly clear that the commitment I made to Magilligan, in defiance of a recommendation from the prison reform team that all adult male prisoners should be housed at Maghaberry, is an indication that there is genuine commitment. I do remember, around that time, meeting a group of councillors from some of the councils in the north-west, one of whom somewhat grumpily told me that he thought that some people believed that the world ended at Sandyknowes. I told him that I agreed with that, but pointed out that, as a MLA for South Antrim, I believe that it starts halfway across the Toome bridge. It is certainly not a case of matters being centralised in Belfast: it is a matter of using the opportunities with business and local councils for the constructive activity that was promised. Those promises are still there. That is part of the plan for the redevelopment of Magilligan.

## Courthouse Closures

7. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his proposals to close local courthouses. (AQO 8734/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** As I stated at the last questions for oral answer, the consultation on the rationalisation of the court estate closed on 18 May 2015. The responses to the consultation have been analysed and advice will be submitted to me next month.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give an undertaking that his officials will come to the Committee before any final decision is taken on court closures?

**Mr Ford:** I am happy to give Ms Boyle, as I give many Members of the House on a variety of occasions, a firm promise that the Department does not do anything without consulting the Committee, because, given our structures and the fact that, on a good day, I have the support of 10 or 11 people in the House, I know that we would not get very far if we did not have the support of the Committee. The Committee will be taken into account fully as we look at the options. That does not mean that the

Committee will be able, any more than the Department is, to ignore the blunt financial realities of the world we live in; the decreasing amount of business going through our courts and the decreasing amount of money that is available to run our courts.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire. With regard to the implication of access to justice and for justice, especially for people who may have disabilities and those who are on lower incomes, for whom additional travel costs may mean exactly that — if you have little, limited or no income, having to attend a court case or hearing may, in actual fact, cause you additional burden — can the Minister give us some sort of idea as to how or what evaluation was made of that particular issue for people on lower incomes?

**Mr Ford:** As part of the examination and the report that was put out for consultation, there was examination of issues like travel time and arrangements between, potentially, closing courts and, potentially, remaining open courts.

I am not sure that the Department has the capacity to do a full analysis of the economic impact on individuals, but I repeat the point I made that, whilst accepting that Mr McGlone has a point about those who have difficulty in funding travel, there is the significant issue that access to justice does not simply mean having a courtroom close at hand if that courtroom is not fit for purpose and does not operate in an efficient way that meets people's needs. There are many advantages for vulnerable victims and witnesses if they are attending some of our more modern courthouses with facilities for segregation, better arrangements for video links and whatever. Access to justice is, therefore, a matter not simply of physical proximity but of how the justice system treats those who need to use the courts when they are in them. That has had to be taken into account as well.

## **Prison Service Review: Recommendations**

8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice how many of the recommendations arising from the review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service have been implemented. (AQO 8735/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** Of the 40 recommendations made by the prison review team, only two remain outstanding, with 33 having been signed off and three remaining under assessment by the

oversight group. An additional two recommendations have been referred by the oversight group to the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) for independent assessment.

The oversight group accepts that delivery of recommendation 3, on effective community sentences, and recommendation 13, on the joint health and justice strategy, will fall outside the lifespan of the reform programme. However, it is important to say that good progress continues to be made on those two complex recommendations. Regarding recommendation 3, work is ongoing with the Lord Chief Justice to consider alternatives to custody without the need for legislative change. On recommendation 13, significant progress has been made on developing the strategy, and my Department will continue to work with DHSSPS colleagues on that.

Four key strategic themes have emerged on which the prison system will continue to focus to ensure that it plays its part in building a safer Northern Ireland. The four themes are leadership; purposeful activity; partnership with healthcare; and a fit-for-purpose prison estate. While the official structures around the reform programme will come to a close in the coming months, that will not mean the end of change. The Northern Ireland Prison Service will continue to embed the reforms implemented throughout the programme.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I thank the Minister for his answer and for the leadership that he has shown in delivering such an enormous programme of reform. Is it his assessment that the reforms are being seen to take effect across all prison establishments, or are there areas where more intensive efforts are still required to deliver change?

**Mr Ford:** I thank my colleague for the supplementary question.

She is absolutely right when she makes it clear that there is a need to embed those reforms right across the prison system, which means all three institutions and the way the system as a whole functions, along with issues like, for example, the prisoner escort and custody services (PECS). There is no doubt that the reforms have perhaps made greater progress in some places than others.

We just highlighted the capital build at Magilligan. Although some extremely good work is being done in Magilligan, there is no doubt that the inadequate accommodation in

which much of the training and employment opportunities are provided does not help.

We have seen some extremely good work being done amongst young offenders and women in Hydebank. We will shortly see the opening of a step-down facility for women on the Hydebank site but outside the wall, which is a major step forward in promoting rehabilitation. We, of course, now have Hydebank Wood operating as a college with the full partnership of the Department for Employment and Learning alongside the Belfast Metropolitan College.

All those are very positive signs, but there is no doubt that the reform programme has been more difficult at Maghaberry, which is probably the most complex prison in the United Kingdom and where there have been a number of significant problems in the recent past. However, I am glad to say that the new director of operations, working in his capacity as governor of Maghaberry at this stage, is starting to make major changes there for the good.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give an update on the oversight group's engagement with stakeholders, particularly those in healthcare?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Lynch for that question. There is no doubt that there have been some difficulties in healthcare across all the prisons. There is no doubt that the transfer of healthcare responsibilities to the South Eastern Trust a few years ago was done to ensure that a body that has experience of healthcare was responsible for it, but there is also no doubt that the Prison Service knows more about running prisons than the South Eastern Trust does.

What we have seen, albeit on a slightly slower timeline than some other aspects of the prison reform programme, is good work now being done. When the oversight group meets, it is attended by the permanent secretary or another senior DHSSPS representative and representatives from the trust. There is no doubt that we have seen good responses from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in the assessments that it is doing on the work being carried out on the healthcare side, just as we have seen some positive responses from CJINI on the Prison Service side. It is fair to say that whilst it has not always been easy to manage the healthcare aspects, a lot of good work has been done in recent time, which, I hope, will see significant progress across all three prisons in the near future.

**Mr Beggs:** Any drugs addiction that was either developed or fed whilst a prisoner was in jail increases the likelihood of them committing a criminal act on their release and their return to prison. What progress has been made with regard to those recommendations relating to reducing the misuse of drugs in the prison population?

**Mr Ford:** Mr Beggs certainly puts his finger on an issue where there is a very significant problem in terms of running prisons. Given that drugs are a problem in society generally, it is perhaps no surprise that they are also a problem in prisons. Last year, I had the opportunity to visit one particular landing in Maghaberry, where a group of predominantly young male prisoners were seeking to overcome addiction problems and were engaging in a very intensive programme run partly by the Prison Service and partly by one of our NGO partners. The programme showed very good results in terms of the positive options that people were taking.

It is an ongoing issue to ensure that, as far as possible, the security of prisons is managed by stopping drugs coming in. That is not always easy, given that, at times, we seek to allow prisoners home leave, and people come and go to courts and hospital appointments or whatever. We also want to ensure that those who want to get away from a drug problem are assisted in doing it. There is no doubt that a very large number of those who are admitted to custody have a pre-existing drug addiction problem and there is significant work to be done to assist them to get away from it.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for his answers. As a strong supporter of his prisons reform programme, I congratulate him on the progress that has been made. However, what impact have cuts to the Budget had on the implementation of the reform programme?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Maginness not only for his question but for his ongoing support for the reform programme, which is not always common amongst barristers in the Chamber. He refers to cuts having an effect on the programme, and there is no doubt that, overall, the reform programme has succeeded extremely well despite the problems, but the day-to-day running of prisons has been affected by significant reductions in budgets, unfortunately, particularly at times when there are problems with excessive numbers of prison staff being sick. There has been a recent increase in the number of early lockdowns, and there is no doubt that that does not benefit

rehabilitation. We need to continue to address those bits of work, at the same time as we set the wider, overarching proposals.

By and large, I think, when one compares the work of the prison reform programme with that which happened with the formation of the PSNI and looks at the amount of resources that were given to prisons compared with that which was given to the Police Service, one sees that there has been very considerable success, although undoubtedly, particularly on the point of capital, which I mentioned earlier, progress has not been quite as rapid as we would have hoped.

### **Parole Hearings: Barristers**

9. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Justice why his Department is no longer instructing barristers for parole hearings. (AQO 8736/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** Parole commissioner hearings are intended to be inquisitorial and the nature of these hearings as informal as possible. The Department of Justice submits a dossier to the panel, covering all aspects of the prisoner's time in custody, including reports on the index offence, details of programmes undertaken while in prison, psychological reports and an assessment of the risk of reoffending following release. Parole commissioners are responsible for coming to a view on the potential for release once they have taken account of all the information presented. The prisoner may apply for legal aid so that he or she can appoint legal representation for support at the hearing.

The Department had previously sought to mirror this representation, and a custom and practice emerged that saw a solicitor and, perhaps, counsel supporting the Department.

However, following consultation with the Parole Commissioners, the Department came to the view that that practice was unnecessary in the majority of cases and risked changing the tenor of hearings to one that was adversarial in nature. This over-reliance on legal support was simply not financially sustainable.

### **3.15 pm**

In the majority of cases, the Department now relies on the written evidence that it makes available to the commissioners in a dossier. However, in circumstances where the panel or departmental officials feel the need to have additional support, legal representation will still be employed.

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

### **Burglaries: North Down and East Belfast**

T1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice to advise what, if any, extra measures are being taken to combat the existing and increasing number of burglaries in north Down and east Belfast. (AQT 2891/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** I am sorry, but that is an operational issue for the PSNI, and I cannot, as Minister, give account for operational responses by the Chief Constable.

**Mr Cree:** It is a pity that that is the case. I thought that, even out of general interest, the Minister would be talking to his colleagues. Reading the 'Belfast Telegraph' today will give an example. I will ask the Minister — although I probably know what the answer is going to be — is he satisfied that enough has been done to apply sentences that deter offenders engaged in those crimes, which have such a traumatic effect on the victims?

**Mr Ford:** I am sorry, but having said that I cannot answer for the Chief Constable, I must say that I cannot answer for members of the judiciary on individual sentencing policy. The House will know that I may have a role in general guidelines. We have examples where that matter is being looked at in work being done by the Lord Chief Justice.

I keep potential penalties under review across a range of offences, including those that are the responsibility of other Ministers, where my Department has responsibility for seeing that offences and penalties are consistent, but I cannot possibly comment on individual cases.

### **Desertcreat Project: Update**

T2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Desertcreat policing and justice project in Cookstown. (AQT 2892/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** The answer to the current issue is that the matter remains under consideration. There has been a preliminary report to the two Ministers looking at the revision of the business case, which is due to be made available from the programme board by the end of November. At that point, the two Ministers will have to consider the options with the three services and report to the Executive on the way forward,

since the community safety college is an Executive commitment. The timetable for the next significant progress is towards the end of November.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is it the Minister's preferred option that the project stays in Cookstown, as that is consistent with the Programme for Government commitment?

**Mr Ford:** The Programme for Government commitment is to integrated training, and that is my commitment. It is also the case that since the original proposals for an integrated community safety college were made, the training requirements of all three services have been reduced significantly — in fact, by 48%. That calls into question some of the original proposals.

There are also issues in particular for policing. The modern trend, in not just the UK but wider afield, is that people may enter the Police Service having a number of basic qualifications, so there is significantly less training to be done. The issue is to see the best way to provide appropriate training for the three services, acknowledging that the needs of each have changed. I also need to be careful that I do not suggest that, until after next May, the Minister of Justice can speak specifically for the Fire and Rescue Service.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

## Maghaberry: CJI Report

T4. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has been briefed on the pending Criminal Justice Inspection report on Maghaberry. (AQT 2894/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** No, I have not been briefed on that, although I have been given a general indication of the indication that was given to officers of the Prison Service.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he now share the increasing concerns that Maghaberry is not fit for purpose?

**Mr Ford:** No, I do not accept that Maghaberry is not fit for purpose. I accept that it appears likely that the Criminal Justice Inspection report, which is a snapshot report from an unannounced inspection some time ago, will

show that there were significant concerns at the time.

Many Members will be aware of very significant work that has been done, even since that inspection, to enhance the service that is provided at Maghaberry. In particular, the new director of operations is acting as governor of Maghaberry, and most of the senior team has been refreshed in order to strengthen that team and to deal with the difficult issues that surround Maghaberry, which is the most complex prison anywhere in the United Kingdom. Phil Wragg, who is currently acting as governor, has previously governed Belmarsh, which is one of the other most complex prisons in the UK though not as complex as Maghaberry, and that is an indication of his understanding of dealing with those issues. Good work is already being done, including, for example, on addressing sickness rates amongst prison officers, as I mentioned earlier.

## Rural Crime

T5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the impact that measures to combat rural crime are having across Northern Ireland. (AQT 2895/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** I think that Mrs Dobson missed the comments that I made earlier about rural crime, but there is no doubt that there have been significant hotspots for rural crime in some areas, particularly border areas of Armagh and Tyrone. Although the most recent statistics that I saw pointed to a reduction in rural crime in most of Northern Ireland, there are clearly operational issues for the police at one level, but also issues that require joined-up work in partnership to fight those who engage in that kind of crime rather than merely to deal with crime when it happens. In many cases, that good work is being done by PCSPs and others as they look to different ways of addressing rural crime.

**Mrs Dobson:** No, I did not hear your comments earlier, and, as an MLA from a rural constituency, I am interested to hear your opinion. It is widely known that local intelligence can lead to criminals being caught. What is the Minister's message to farm families, who often feel let down by the follow-up service after a theft on their farm? What more does he feel needs to be done to improve outcomes for the victims of rural crime?

**Mr Ford:** The justice system has ways of supporting those who have been victims of

crime, whether it is urban or rural and whether it is specifically agricultural or not. Clearly, issues of particular concern tend to bubble up in one area or another at different times, but the key issue for me is not simply saying what is being done for the victims after the crime but saying what is being done to fight the crime. We have seen activities such as a number of rural PCSPs promoting the agenda on matters like Farmwatch, running trailer-marking schemes and the subsidy that we are able to give to people who put tracker machines on heavy machinery such as tractors. Those are all ways in which the fight against rural crime has been supported. It will continue to be supported, but a lot of it depends on local initiative and local partnership working, which the Department can support but cannot initiate.

### **Maghaberry: Staff Sickness**

T6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is satisfied that the new governor and management team at Maghaberry, whom he had the privilege to meet last week with other members of the Justice Committee and whose work he supports, are working to deal with the high level of sickness amongst prison staff. (AQT 2896/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Dickson for that question. I am glad that a number of members of the Justice Committee — though perhaps fewer than there might have been — were able to do that visit last week. It was important that they had the opportunity to see Maghaberry and to speak directly to staff there, whether at management or operational level.

Mr Dickson highlights specifically the issue of sickness, and there is no doubt that there was an issue. In the context of sickness rates across the Civil Service, the Department of Justice scores badly, largely because of high sickness rates in the Prison Service. Those rates are understandable to a certain level in that a prison officer who works on a landing may well not be fit to go to work when somebody with basically a desk job might be, but there were issues that needed be addressed and that I believe are being addressed.

My information is that, in the couple of months since the beginning of August, there has been a 35% reduction in sickness absence levels at Maghaberry, which is, I think, a good indication of the work that is being done by Phil Wragg as governor and by his senior team.

**Mr Dickson:** Indeed, Minister, Mr Wragg indicated that to us. I commend him and the new senior management team on that reduction.

Will the Minister acknowledge that being a prison officer, or working in the Prison Service, is a difficult and demanding job, and one to which the community should give a great deal of consideration, even though the issue of sickness does need to be tackled?

**Mr Ford:** Yes, that point is well made. I have had the opportunity on two or three occasions recently to meet staff working in some of the more difficult areas — with some of the category A and separated prisoners — in Maghaberry, and I have done my best as Minister to convey my support for the work that they do in protecting the community in quite difficult circumstances inside the prison. Frankly, it is one of the more difficult areas in which people have to work anywhere in the public service in Northern Ireland. I certainly join Mr Dickson in making positive comments about that work, and I trust that other Members, while they may have concerns about the way in which prisons operate, will recognise the extremely good work that is being done by many of our officers under quite difficult conditions.

### **Refugees: Support**

T7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice whether he supports his counterpart in the South, Frances Fitzgerald, who said that Ireland would welcome 4,000 refugees, would put all necessary support in place to help those refugees integrate and would provide them with help to overcome the trauma that they have experienced in fleeing their homeland. (AQT 2897/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** I am honestly not sure what the Minister of Justice can say in response to that question, which did not quite touch on any justice responsibilities. If Mr Sheehan wants me to apologise for the fact that I was not here last week because I was in Stormont House when the debate on welcoming refugees was put forward by my party colleagues, I am happy to say that I am fully in line with what my party colleagues said that day.

**Mr Sheehan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. He has lost me with that response.

Does the Minister agree that we could take in an equivalent number of refugees here as are being taken in in the South; that we could put in

place the necessary support to help those refugees integrate; and that we could provide support to help them overcome any trauma that they experienced in fleeing their homeland?

**Mr Ford:** I am sure that Mr Sheehan will want the Minister of Justice to refer to good activity that the Minister sees being done on integrating members of a diverse community in different ways into the way in which our system of government operates. Whether I as Minister of Justice have the power to set officially a number for those whom we should be admitting from Syria, Eritrea or wherever, I am not sure, but I think that he makes a very valid point that people from this island have left and gone to many other parts of the world when we had difficulties here. It is only but reasonable that we should recognise that we now have the ability to help people going through utterly traumatic circumstances in the Middle East and elsewhere.

## CBI Comments

T8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice, as one of the Ministers who continues to do his duties as opposed to playing games, whether he agrees with the comments made by the chairperson of the CBI in Northern Ireland, who said that its members want a "restructured, properly functioning executive, with new mechanisms and procedures that deliver results and bring an end to the recent never ending series of standoffs, logjams and showdowns". (AQT 2898/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** I am certainly happy to agree with my colleague on that one. I was not aware that the current chair of the CBI was a spokesperson for the Alliance Party, but it did seem that what he said was entirely sound, in that there is an impetus on all of us to see that the Stormont House Agreement delivers.

Standing here as the only Minister who is here because he had the confidence of the Assembly to be elected Justice Minister, I do think that there are significant positives in looking at slightly different ways of doing things that promote a more joined-up way of providing government for the people of Northern Ireland. We all would do well to listen to not just the voice of the chair of the CBI but the voices of the Church leaders last week and those of a number of community and voluntary sector groups, reflected through the chair of the Community Relations Council on radio this morning.

3.30 pm

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mrs Cochrane for a supplementary.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I do not really have much more to say at this point.

## Heroin Problem: South Belfast

T9. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Justice where he sees his role in the increasing heroin drug trade that, from the increasing number of needle finds in public and open spaces, is evident in south Belfast. (AQT 2899/11-16)

**Mr Ford:** Mr McGimpsey highlights a serious problem. The role of the Minister of Justice is to do the best that he can to supply the resources to the justice agencies that are concerned with fighting that criminal activity. At the same time, other Ministers — most notably, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, a post in which Mr McGimpsey has considerable experience — are doing their best to educate people and assist those who wish to move away from heroin addiction.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That concludes Question Time. I invite the House to take its ease while we change at the top Table.

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

## Committee Business

### Commonwealth Youth Games 2021: Bid

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made. — [Mr B McCrea.]*

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am sure that we will see overwhelming support for the motion in the Chamber. I am positive that the motion, if acted on, will have a positive impact on the North of Ireland's sporting tradition, its economy and the lives of our young people.

Over the past week, we have had an opportunity to see our sporting abilities on an international stage. I make particular reference to the Ireland rugby team. People right across the world witnessed how we behave in a sporting ground. I take this opportunity to wish that team all the best in the games ahead. The crowds of supporters standing shoulder to shoulder with the team set a fine example to all. Without diluting anything, I also want to make reference to our boxers' success on an international stage. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you agree that boxing continues to be one of our greatest sporting traditions. Successes such as these will ensure that the tradition continues for some time to come.

Last year, I stood in the Chamber to extend my warm and sincere congratulations to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth team on its successes in Glasgow and called for the Assembly to support fully the efforts to replicate that success in the future. The estimated £3.75 million cost to host the games may be daunting, but I believe that, with proper planning and a positive joint approach to development, it represents an investment worth making. It is essential that the North has in place the facilities and infrastructure not only to host the Commonwealth Youth Games but to ensure that we can avail ourselves of other sporting events in the future and that our natural talent is nurtured in a suitable environment. If we are to see any success in the future, all our sports need to be funded adequately and enjoy full support from the Department and the whole Assembly.

I support Northern Ireland's excellent young athletes. Regardless of the politics of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Youth Games is a prestigious and international event that allows Northern Ireland's athletes to shine. Our athletes and competitors should be given every opportunity to compete in international sporting events. They should also be given the opportunity to participate in these world-recognised games at home. The unifying power of sport will allow all traditions and communities to come together to cheer and celebrate our athletes, as we have done in the past.

It is difficult to overstate the sheer success that this region has had in hosting events in the past couple of years. In the face of continued political instability and strife, Northern Ireland's ability to present its world-class hospitality has persevered. Events such as the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the recent Irish Open at Royal County Down prove that Northern Ireland has the will and the want to host international sporting events.

As I have often said to colleagues and constituents, the economic benefits of sports tourism do not end with each event. Tourists return to visit, and the reputation of the North is enhanced by each event. Sports tourism remains a booming industry, and the region will continue to benefit greatly from the economic and social benefits that events such as the Commonwealth Youth Games bring.

In the spirit of the unifying power that I spoke of, I ask that the Assembly come together once again to voice its support for Northern Ireland's bid for the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021. I believe that, regardless of our current dire political circumstances, sport remains a positive force for Northern Ireland and reflects it at its best. I hope that, in 2021, in the Chamber, we will welcome even greater successes for our young athletes.

**Mr Cree:** I am pleased to stand before the House as a Committee member and spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party to discuss this important issue today. It is with great annoyance that we have to bring the debate to the Assembly under such negative circumstances, considering that, in November 2014 — only nine months ago — Northern Ireland's potential involvement in hosting the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games was being hailed as one of the good news stories for sport.

My, my, what a difference several months can make, and guess what the problem is yet again? The dysfunctional Stormont Executive and the trailing indecision of the DUP and Sinn Féin to agree a Budget mean that the in principle Stormont backing indicated to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council last year is becoming less certain.

Hosting the games would, as other Members said, cost around £3.75 million. I notice that it is £3.861 million in the Minister's letter of last week. As recently as August this year, the Executive had not met to discuss the event, even though the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had met Northern Ireland

Commonwealth Games Council officials. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure stated last year that her Department:

*"through Sport NI, will continue to develop facilities subject to the availability of budgets."*

I hope that that remains the case and that the Minister will find funding for it. To date, the Executive have not called a meeting to discuss the issue, which is required to free up funding to enable the planning of the event to move forward.

Last year, at the Commonwealth Youth Games in Glasgow, Northern Ireland athletes proved their competitiveness and succeeded in bringing home some 12 medals, which was mentioned by others, ranking Northern Ireland fifteenth of 71 on the medals table.

In light of Northern Ireland's recent successes in attracting major sporting events, such as the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the Carl Frampton boxing tournament, it would be a great shame if the Executive could not muster £3.861 million to fund the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021, given the potential return in investment that it would produce for the Northern Ireland economy and right across the financial spectrum.

Locally, the youth games attract around 1,000 young athletes, whose ages range between 14 and 18, and they compete against 70 other nations. In the bigger scheme of things, the potential footfall means that £3.8 million seems a very small price to pay over a five-year spending plan.

I urge all Members to think outside the box in this case. Sport is a global language that embraces all socio-economic backgrounds, ages, genders, colours and creeds. Hosting the event in 2021 would certainly put Northern Ireland on the world map. In this time of unease and uncertainty, it would bring back some faith in this place if the youth games organisers were given positive funding news from Stormont to proceed with their plans. With only one of the bidders — Botswana — remaining, the Executive need urgently to prioritise their decision to enable Northern Ireland to be in with a fair chance of winning the bid to host the games in 2021.

Finally, I refer to the Culture Minister's letter to the Acting First Minister/Minister of Finance and Personnel, dated 25 September, just last week. It states:

*"The Commonwealth Games Federation have agreed to extend the closing date for bid submissions until the 30 September 2015".*

So, there are only two days, which is not a lot of time. We need something to happen with the Executive to get this matter moving. I support the motion.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo inniu. I support the motion. Several weeks ago, young athletes from the North of Ireland gave an outstanding account of themselves when they went to Samoa to take part in the Commonwealth Youth Games. Agus faoi dheireadh na gcluichí bhí stór maith bonn curtha le chéile acu ina spóirt. By the end of the games, they had notched up an exemplary array of medals in their sports.

Agus mar aitheantas air seo thug an tAire spóirt Carál Ní Chuilín teachtaireacht dheas dóibh mar chomhghairdeas dóibh. In recognition of this, the sports Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, sent them a very warm message of congratulations. Sixteen local athletes from the North competed in the games and events, including boxing, swimming, athletics, squash and lawn bowls. An amazing total of 12 medals have been brought home for various sports.

Once again, Irish boxers showed that they can punch above their weight, with James McGivern, Stephen McKenna and Aidan Walsh all winning gold in their events. Tiernan Bradley and Brett McGinty took silver medals. In the swimming events, Conor Ferguson achieved a massive feat when he won four medals in the 200 metres, 100 metres and 50 metres backstroke, as well as the relay. James Brown, Danielle Hill and Emma Reid were the other winners in the relay team. Competing in track events, Ben Fisher took bronze in the 110 metres hurdles and the long jump. Completing the medals, Stephen Kirkwood won bronze in lawn bowls. So, with four gold, four silver and four bronze medals, the team from the North finished in eighth place overall, a huge achievement and one that we are all incredibly proud of.

Rud iontach a bhaint amach, agus tá muid an-bhródúil as. The sports Minister went on to pay tribute to the support team, including coaching and medical staff, who accompanied the competitors. It is very important also that we applaud everyone who took part in the games and not just the medal winners. For those who

missed out this time, we wish you better luck next time.

It is next time that is the subject of the motion. In November 2014, the Assembly unanimously endorsed supporting a bid to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games. The deadline to bid for those games is the day after tomorrow. We know that responsibility for events lies with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The previous Minister, along with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, met the Commonwealth Games Council last June on this issue. It was agreed at that meeting that Sport NI would continue to support the Commonwealth Games Council on the preparation of the business case. Prior to Minister Bell's resignation, he issued a letter saying that he and the Finance Minister were formally advising the games council of their support for the bid to host the youth games and that officials would work with them on the development and submission of the bid.

It is disappointing to see that the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is not even here to listen, never mind take part in, this important debate, which will bring this great event to the North of Ireland and will create a huge opportunity for our young local athletes to take part on their home turf. It is a matter of real disappointment that only one DUP Committee member thinks that that is a good reason to be here today. However, it is good news to learn that steps have been taken by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Finance Ministers to ensure that the bid will proceed. It is good that some common sense has prevailed at the last minute. I welcome that move. In conclusion, is maith an scéal sin — that is good news. Tacaím leis an rún. I support the motion.

**Ms Lo:** In November 2014, I spoke on behalf of the Alliance Party in support of a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games. Our position remains unchanged. However, during the previous debate, it was mentioned that conversations had already started and that discussions were under way between the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council, Sport NI and officials in DCAL.

### 3.45 pm

We called on the Executive to develop a bid, the deadline for which is the end of September 2015. Today is 28 September. Given the Assembly's unanimous support last year, I am hugely disappointed that no bid has been made

so far. I am not on the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, so I am unaware of how much work has actually been put into the bid, but surely it is far too late now to attempt to submit one. It is perhaps another indication of the lack of joined-up working of Departments and the lack of delivery in the Assembly.

We celebrated the success of our athletes who competed in the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow last summer, we were proud of how well we handled the first stage of the Giro d'Italia, and we saw how positive the World Police and Fire Games were. After each of those events we stood here and said how important it is for us to build on those successes. I agree that hosting the Commonwealth Youth Games would be an appropriate step to encourage more international events to be held in Northern Ireland, but action speaks louder than words. What action has been taken in the last year to facilitate that? Hearing from other Members who spoke, it seems that there are a lot of issues with the Executive, with budget and with DETI. We just do not seem to be able to agree on anything.

With the huge successes of the Giro d'Italia, the World Police and Fire Games, the MTV music awards and the Irish Open, we know that we are more than capable of hosting world-class international events. We have so much to offer, and it is important to take every opportunity to show the world the positive Northern Ireland that all too often gets overshadowed by our negative politics. This is clearly another missed opportunity.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé breá sásta labhairt ar an ábhar seo inniu. Níl mé cinnte go mbeidh mórán le rá agam, ach ar aghaidh linn. I am very pleased to wind up on the motion as a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and as our party's culture, arts and leisure spokesperson.

When I first saw the motion I was a bit perplexed about it, because we had discussed a very similar motion in November last year, and there was a degree of unanimity on that subject. I was not convinced that it was not perhaps Mr McCrea's attempt to get a 10-minute slot on 'Stormont Today', but I am very happy to discuss it today. It is timely that it has come forward. The developments that we have heard of in the last 24 hours have to be welcomed in that at least a letter of comfort is in place in regard to the bid. Given the fact that the only other serious bid is from Botswana, I

am hopeful that the North can possibly secure that.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate. It is an issue on which the Committee has been united. My colleague Rosie McCorley touched on the disappointment that the Chair and other members have not turned up, but there has been a far degree of unanimity. The games, like all sports, of course, have a lot of positives, not least the participation of women and the inspiration that the games give to many young athletes, as well as raising the profile of sport and encouraging general participation in it, and subsequently, of course, health and well-being. It also shows that there is a capacity here to hold major sporting events. There are those of us who are looking forward to some of those events coming up, like the Open in 2019, or, indeed, the Rugby World Cup in 2023.

Mr McCrea highlighted the cross-community aspect. He had to commend the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's positive response to a question on the Commonwealth Youth Games. He also mentioned Minister Arlene Foster's support for that, and this debate gives us the opportunity to put Members' support for the bid on record.

Karen McKevitt welcomed the debate and outlined the positive benefits of it. She said that this would provide an international stage for this part of Ireland. She also wished the Ireland rugby team well. I think that we all celebrated yesterday: I came back from the Ulster hurling final to sit down and watch the rugby and it was absolutely brilliant. It was a great performance against Romania, as it was against Canada previously. I hope that they go very far this time around.

These games would seek to replicate the success of the Glasgow games, which were a great success in terms of medals. I think that the cost of the bid is relatively modest, although it is a significant amount — £3.8 million. Last week, we were forensically going through the legacy moneys for the City of Culture. That cost only slightly more than this sum and I was very much in support of it. I hope that people will also support this bid. Its success would allow us to bid for further support for other events in the future. This is irrespective of the politics of the Commonwealth in itself. Of particular note is boxing: many of our great boxers who went on to box for Ireland cut their teeth on the Commonwealth Games. That has to be welcomed, regardless of the politics.

We had great success in the World Police and Fire Games. I outlined that the last time, when

we looked at a rather modest fishing competition in my constituency, which has now brought forward huge proposals for the development of the entire Foyle basin for tourism and other sporting events. We have had, of course, the Giro d'Italia and the Irish Open, which show that we have the ability to host those types of events here. They showed the benefit of sports tourism. It is a unifying power: I have seen that myself at places like the Kingspan Stadium and elsewhere where we see people who go to games and events that, perhaps a few short years ago, they might not have considered. All of that is to be welcomed.

Leslie Cree outlined the cost of £3.75 million. He was disappointed that the Executive had not signed off on it and he commended the performance of the North's athletes at Glasgow. The Youth Games attract about 1,000 athletes and, as he pointed out, the cost of the games is relatively small over a five-year CSR period. There is positive diversity in race, religion and nationality and all the rest of it in the games, and he asked the Executive to respond positively.

I am pleased that we are joined in the Public Gallery today by Conal Heatley, the NI Commonwealth Games Council's executive officer: he has just come in.

Rosie McCorley reflected on the success of the North's athletes in the Youth Games in Samoa and on the Minister's support. Of the four gold medals, four silver medals and four bronze medals, one gold went to James McGivern, the cousin of Rosie's partner. I offer my congratulations particularly to him and to Rosie and her family. She also highlighted the closeness of the deadline of the bid and referenced the Finance and Personnel and Enterprise, Trade and Investment Ministers' letter of support, which is positive. She also referenced the Chair's absence, which I touched on earlier.

Anna Lo reflected on last year's debate on the bid and said that everything seemed to be on track, but she also expressed her disappointment that we are so close to the deadline for the bid. She also highlighted our sporting successes in the World Police and Fire Games and the Giro d'Italia.

All in all, I think that the motion and cause has united Members. I hope that it is successful and that we see a very successful Commonwealth Youth Games coming here to the North in 2021. It would benefit the whole island, because I think that there is a wider

sporting interest there. I commend the motion and hope that everyone votes in favour.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made.*

*Adjourned at 3.54 pm.*

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