



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Assembly Business</b> .....   | 1  |
| <b>Ministerial Statement</b>   |    |
| British-Irish Council: Summit .....  | 1  |
| <b>Executive Committee Business</b>  |    |
| Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 .....             | 7  |
| Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 ..... | 8  |
| <b>Private Members' Business</b>   |    |
| Medical School in the North-west .....   | 9  |
| People Diagnosed with HIV .....  | 24 |
| <b>Oral Answers to Questions</b>   |    |
| The Executive Office .....   | 29 |
| Justice.....   | 38 |
| Northern Ireland Assembly Commission .....   | 48 |
| <b>Private Members' Business</b>   |    |
| People Diagnosed with HIV ( <i>Continued</i> ).....                                      | 55 |
| <b>Adjournment</b>   |    |
| Outdoor Education Centres in South Down .....  | 65 |

# Assembly Members

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 November 2016

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Attwood:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the personal statement that you made to the House last week. The second paragraph stated that your involvement with Charter NI was:

*"no different than it would be with any organisation in my constituency". — [Official Report (Hansard), 21 November 2016, p1, col 1].*

Do you have any intention to review that statement in the light of a report in the media today that details what appears to have happened earlier this year at the Policing Board? A panel of two people brought a proposal to the Policing Board whereby Charter NI would have received money to run a pilot scheme. It is not clear how Charter NI had knowledge of the work of the panel or how it was recommended for that pilot. In the light of what the Policing Board appears to have recorded, do you have any intention to reconsider the content of the second paragraph of your statement?

**Mr Speaker:** I am actively reviewing my constituency interests with the Speaker's Office, in line with the cautious approach that I outlined last week. I made the statement last week in recognition of the fact that I am now in a different role.

## Ministerial Statement

### British-Irish Council: Summit

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-eighth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which took place in the Vale Resort in Wales on Friday 25 November 2016. The deputy First Minister, Minister Weir and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make this statement on their behalf.

The Welsh Government hosted the summit, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister of Wales, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD. The UK Government delegation was led by the Secretary of State for Wales, the Rt Hon Alun Cairns MP. The Scottish Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP.

The Isle of Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, the Hon Howard Quayle MHK. The Government of Jersey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst, and the Government of Guernsey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Deputy Gavin St Pier. A full list of delegates who attended the summit is attached to the copy of the statement provided to Members.

This was the first meeting of the Council since it convened in Cardiff in July 2016 for an extraordinary summit to discuss the outcome of the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union. Ministers used the discussion to reflect on developments since that meeting. Ministers updated the Council on their activity with regard to the UK's exit from the European Union, particularly on relations between member Administrations and arrangements that have been put in place to facilitate and strengthen engagement. They further discussed some of the themes identified in July,

including specific sectors such as the agriculture, agri-food and fisheries industries, economy and trade, free movement of goods and people, the common travel area and relations with the European Union. Ministers noted an update on implications for the Council's work sectors of the UK's exit from the European Union. They mandated officials to keep this under review and to report back to the Council.

In concluding its discussions, the Council reiterated its commitment to facilitating harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the people of these islands, as set out in the 1998 agreement. Ministers agreed that the forthcoming developments underline the importance and value of the Council as a unique forum to share views, enhance cooperation and strengthen relationships.

Ministers with particular responsibility for early years policy met in advance of the summit meeting to consider a paper prepared by the Council's early years work sector. The discussion was subsequently taken forward by heads of Administration, who welcomed the progress made by member Administrations in taking forward the early years agenda since the 2012 summit. The Council agreed that early years play a critical role in creating strong foundations for children and families to thrive. It also recognised the importance of investment in early years to generate better value for money in the public sector by moving from curative to preventative models of service delivery and supporting social mobility.

Responding to the paper prepared by the work sector, Ministers had a detailed discussion about the key challenges and opportunities ahead. All Administrations affirmed the significant benefits gained from their collective participation in this work sector and endorsed proposals for future collaboration, particularly on the following priorities: the workforce; supporting families; parenting; and quality assurance and assessment of developmental progress.

The Council noted progress on a review of its activity, including analysis of emerging and established Programmes for Government across member Administrations. A number of areas and emerging topics, such as public health and raising attainment, are under review, and a further report will be provided to the summit in June 2017.

Ministers also welcomed the implementation by the existing work sectors of the task-and-finish

approach adopted at the Glasgow summit and endorsed the forward work plans proposed by the environment, early years and transport work sectors. Work on the final stages of the review will now be progressed in advance of the next summit, which will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Council noted the BIC secretariat's mid-year report and welcomed the relaunch of the Council's website.

As the final item of business, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2017.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I note that Ministers took the opportunity to reflect on developments on the UK's exit from the European Union since the extraordinary summit in July. In the First Minister's assessment, what are the main developments?

**Mrs Foster:** We were very interested to hear, for example, from the Crown dependencies — the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey — about how their negotiations have been going with the UK Government. Their access to the customs union comes, of course, under protocol 3. They reported that they were having very good discussions with Minister Robin Walker, who is responsible for the Crown dependencies, and hope that those good discussions continue.

At the meeting, the Council agreed that the main issues for the other Administrations were accessing the single market, having minimal disruption to the ongoing discussions, particularly with the UK Government, and having no hard border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Finally, it was noted that the British-Irish Council was a very valuable place for the eight Administrations to come together to discuss matters and hear how the other Administrations were tackling the issues in front of them. It was a very worthwhile engagement.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the First Minister provide the House with an assessment of the level of cooperation that exists between the Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland? Obviously, once we leave the European Union, cooperation to the mutual benefit of the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic should continue.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, this was a subject matter not just between Northern Ireland and the Republic

of Ireland but between the other member Administrations and the Republic of Ireland, recognising that it would be the only Administration of the eight that would be remaining in the European Union. There was a good discussion around that. The Member will be aware that the Scottish First Minister is in Dublin at the moment, obviously strengthening ties between Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

It was telling that, of the four areas that were agreed, in terms of the common areas where all the Administrations could agree, the fact that no hard border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom was one of those issues shows that everyone recognises that we have a very particular set of circumstances here. That has been recognised through the fact that the common travel area was in existence before our membership of the European Union, and that should remain after our exit from the European Union as well.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the First Minister for her statement and her responses thus far. I want to ask her about the updates from the various Ministers. Did the British Government further update Ministers at the Council meeting on the position that they are adopting on matters such as the single European market and open borders etc?

**Mrs Foster:** As I have indicated, all the members, including the UK Government, signed up to those four areas: maximum, best possible access to the single market; with minimal disruption; no hard border; and the fact that the BIC was a valuable arena to have these discussions. They signed up to that as well and that was their position. Obviously, they referenced the fact that we are having ongoing discussions between the different devolved Administrations and the UK Government and, indeed, that those will continue next week at the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting on exiting the European Union. That is the second meeting of that group, and it will take place next week. The discussions and the bilaterals continue, looking at the analysis and gathering information, so that, when article 50 is triggered sometime early in quarter 1 of next year, we are ready and the position of Northern Ireland is well known to the UK Government.

**Mr McPhillips:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. What discussions has she had concerning a British agricultural policy (BAP)? Do the regions share the SDLP's concerns that

article 50 could be triggered in May without contingency planning in place?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not think that article 50 is going to be triggered in May. I think that it will be triggered before that, probably around March. We had a good discussion around the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy and the need to have a framework at a United Kingdom level.

At the moment, the CAP and a lot of agricultural policies come directly from Europe to the devolved Administrations, and there is a need to have a more joined-up approach at the centre on UK agricultural policy. That was reflected in the discussion, as indeed was the fact that it will be important to have more flexibility than our fishermen have had to date under the common fisheries policy. I thought that there was a very good discussion around that. Of course, it is an ongoing discussion, and it will be taken further by our Agriculture Minister as she continues to engage in bilaterals with the UK Government.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, First Minister, for your statement, in which you say that arrangements:

*"have been put in place to facilitate and strengthen engagement."*

Can you tell the House what those arrangements are and how you will be strengthening engagement? Do you agree with my assessment that the reality is that the British-Irish Council is not being used to its full potential and, indeed, that is indicative of the fact that your next meeting will not be until after article 50 is triggered?

**10.45 am**

**Mrs Foster:** In that last point, you referred to the next scheduled meeting. We did have an extraordinary meeting in July of this year, which Cardiff hosted, and then we were back in Wales again just last week. We may well decide to have a British-Irish Council meeting before July, and that was left open. It will probably mean that Northern Ireland will host two British-Irish Council meetings, which is absolutely fine by me. We will welcome all the Administrations to Northern Ireland, and I am very much looking forward to it.

There are two points: first, there are the workstreams, and there is a little conversation about those in this statement, but they have really come into their own. There was a very good discussion from our perspective, which

Minister Weir was involved with, on early years and the recognition that the earlier there is an intervention with young children, the more we can benefit from that not just individually, obviously, or as a family but as a society.

It is generally recognised that, since the vote on 23 June, the British-Irish Council has been revitalised in how members relate to each other and how we are going to relate to each other in the future. It is a very useful east-west institution, and I foresee it will be very useful in the future.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. Will she give her assessment of the contribution Northern Ireland has been able to make on early years?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, the early years discussion was led by Minister Weir, who was with us at the BIC, and there was a meeting before the full plenary session between the respective Ministers to speak about this. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is actually to host the early years work sector meeting on supporting families, and that will include multi-agency support for families, early intervention and prevention programmes, next year. It will be over to us to make sure we drive forward on the early years programme.

Of course, we have a good story to tell about early years. Not only Education but the Executive Office has developed programmes to intervene as early as we can. Certainly, through the Delivering Social Change (DSC) programme in the Executive Office, we have had a very good nurture programme, intervening early on to try and help young people to realise their potential further down the line. We used to talk about the fact that we needed to speak to children at school to alert them to the possibilities for them when they left school. Now, there is a recognition that we need to intervene before children even reach school. I welcome that, and it is something that we can add a lot of value to, and I very much look forward to hearing how that work sector progresses when Minister Weir takes the lead next year.

**Ms Seeley:** I thank the First Minister for her remarks. Will she elaborate on the challenges for early years that were identified during the discussions?

**Mrs Foster:** Of course, the main challenge, as with a lot of the programmes that we want to take forward, is about budget availability and the money to intervene. If we had any amount

of money to do all these things, we could do a lot more, and that is recognised right across the Administrations.

Also, the Administrations are moving at a different pace in relation to early years. Some are doing a lot more than others, and it is good to learn what some of the Administrations are doing about early years. For example, we learned that, in Jersey, they have a 1,001-day programme, which they run from conception onwards. They actually have a programme to support the woman and, later on, her child for 1,001 days, and I thought that was a very innovative way to get involved with families and to help support them.

Yes, there is a good deal of learning, and that is one of the benefits of the British-Irish Council — not just learning from the larger Administrations, such as Scotland and Wales, but, sometimes, because of their size, the Crown dependencies can bring forward some very interesting programmes as well.

**Mr Logan:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. Was it made clear to the other BIC members what the key priorities are for Northern Ireland in the exit negotiations?

**Mrs Foster:** In the plenary discussion, which took up most of the British-Irish Council meeting, each of the Administrations had an opportunity to set out where their priorities lay. The deputy First Minister and I, of course, reflected on the letter of 10 August to our Prime Minister and then talked about continuing opportunities and challenges related to that. We absolutely set out what we see as our common interests but also some of the more unique challenges and opportunities that we have here in Northern Ireland, not least those related to the common travel area. There was a good and open discussion about those issues.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the First Minister for her statement, in which she mentioned the free movement of goods and people and the common travel area. Was there any discussion with the various members of the Council on the attitude that they are picking up from the other 27 members of the European Union to the issue of passport control at the future border with the European Union, which will be between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, and possibly at the Larne to Cairnryan connection with the rest of the United Kingdom? Can she assure me that I will not have to show my passport to visit Scotland?

**Mrs Foster:** First, the UK Government have made it entirely clear, as indeed have I, that there will be no internal borders within the United Kingdom. That is a red line in my negotiations. Of course we had discussions about the common travel area, as I already said. The Welsh Government wanted to be a part of that discussion, because there is a lot of ferry movement between Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

On the attitude of the remaining member states, on the day that we were in Wales, we heard from the Maltese Prime Minister, who is taking over the presidency of the European Union next year. He was very clear that he felt that we needed to sort out the issue of the common travel area and the border at a very early stage, and we welcome that, because we think that it is a recognition of the particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. Once that is settled, we can move on to deal with the other issues. Therefore, as I said, there was a good, open discussion, and I thought that it was very useful.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the First Minister for the leadership that she has given on the issue. Will she outline to the House whether the opportunities that will be provided to the United Kingdom as a result of our exit from the European Union were discussed in Cardiff?

**Mrs Foster:** It will not surprise him to know that I spoke about the opportunities, not least those related to the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. I think that our fishermen have a good future to look forward to. Some of the very inflexible rules that have been visited on our fishermen will be revisited by our Agriculture Minister and, indeed, by the Executive when powers are repatriated to us. Of course, we will also have trade opportunities. As the Member knows, the deputy First Minister and I are going to China at the weekend, and we look forward to having a very good and open discussion about our trading opportunities outside the European Union.

**Mr Attwood:** I agree with the First Minister's comments about nurturing and about the fact that, the more that we grow and escalate that intervention, the better that it will be. On early years and investing for the future, I note her comment about the 1,001-day strategy for Jersey. I note also the publication of a very ambitious programme for universal childcare by Katherine Zappone, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Will the Minister indicate whether any of that learning will be applied to our PFG, in which the ambition for funding for

affordable childcare is, to put it mildly, quite moderate?

**Mrs Foster:** The British-Irish Council, particularly in its workstreams, is very useful. We can hear from some of the smaller Administrations about how they are intervening to make a real difference to people's lives, in this case, our young people. I know that Minister Weir felt that his time spent with other members was very useful, and I am quite sure that he will take that learning into the development of his strategies.

The Member knows that the structure of the Programme for Government is to have our 14 outcomes and indicators of how that is happening. We will use all our strategies — not just the Government's strategies but those of the third sector, the private sector and local government — in how we deliver those outcomes for our young people. In particular, he will know that we have a specific outcome for our young people. He will not be surprised to know that I do not agree with him about not investing in our young people, but I certainly agree with him about our learning from the British-Irish Council and how it can be instructive for us. None of us has all the wisdom — that is very true. Therefore, we need to learn from others.

**Dr Farry:** I want to ask the First Minister about the differences between the Scottish and Welsh Administrations and our Administration on some of the key issues and whether those were discussed. Notably, Scotland and Wales have adopted a position of wanting the UK to remain in the single market, whereas our First Minister is talking about the best possible market access. There is a difference there. Also, was the triggering of article 50 discussed and whether that will require LCMs in the respective jurisdictions?

**Mrs Foster:** The last matter was not discussed. As the Member will know, the Supreme Court is hearing legal arguments on those issues at the moment, so LCMs were not discussed.

It will be instructive for the Member to listen to what I say. When Carwyn Jones went to the press conference, he indicated the four main areas that we agreed on. I do not think that the Member is correct to say that Wales wants to be a member of the single market. That is certainly Scotland's position, but I listened very carefully to what Carwyn Jones had to say, and he talked about maximum access to the single market, not membership of it. I stand to be

corrected on that, but I listened very carefully to what the Welsh First Minister said.

The four issues that were agreed across the eight Administrations were: first, that there be best possible access to the single market; secondly, minimal disruption to the member Administrations; thirdly, that there would be no hard border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom; and, finally, that the British-Irish Council was a valuable place to have those discussions and to talk about ideas. Those were the four main issues that we agreed, so, as I say, the best possible access to the single market was the way in which it was framed for all the Administrations that were there.

**Mr Lyttle:** The First Minister cited welcome progress in early years since 2012, yet the most recent Employers for Childcare cost of childcare survey found that the average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is now £164 per week and is increasing at a rate that is higher than inflation. We had a significant underspend in the childcare budget for 2011-15, and we have been awaiting a childcare strategy from OFMDFM and now the Department of Education since 2012. What precisely are the Executive doing to remove that increasing pressure of the cost of childcare from working families in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Foster:** The Member knows that this is a statement on the British-Irish Council, but I am happy to take his question on the Executive's position on early years. As he knows, in Northern Ireland, we continue to provide at least one year of funded preschool education to every child whose parents want it, and Sure Start provides targeted services for children aged zero to four and their families who live in the most disadvantaged areas. He will also know that, under the DSC intervention through the Executive Office, we had a very successful nurture programme, and we are looking at that again.

Certainly, the early intervention transformation programme, as it was known, which was funded by ourselves and The Atlantic Philanthropies, was a programme that I would like to see brought forward again because it had such an impact on young people. We will, of course, not see its full impact until they reach 16 to 18, but I firmly believe that that is something through which we can make a real difference in Northern Ireland. In the past, we have looked at helping young people when they are at school, but, for me, it is about helping them before they reach school. That is the very important point.

## 11.00 am

**Mr Agnew:** We have heard reassurances from the First Minister, before the referendum vote and since, that there will be no hard border between North and South, but, five months on from the EU referendum, what practical measures have been suggested to ensure that we will not have a hard border between North and South in a scenario where we have a so-called hard Brexit?

**Mrs Foster:** As the Member knows, it is not just about what I say in these circumstances; it is also about what the other Administrations that are directly impacted say. The Taoiseach has made it very clear what he wants to see happening in relation to the common travel area. Our own Prime Minister consistently makes it clear in the House of Commons that Northern Ireland has a very specific set of circumstances, because we are the only part of the United Kingdom that will have a land border. So if he does not believe me, that is fair enough — he does not believe me on a lot of things — but he should believe the other leaders in relation to this matter, because we will take a very strong case to the European Union. I think that the European Union, particularly having listened to what the Prime Minister of Malta had to say recently in relation to this matter, will listen very carefully because they know about Northern Ireland's situation and they know about the history and geography of this place. So I am very positive about this matter. Others in this House, unfortunately, continue to talk up the possibility of a hard border, but having listened to what other colleagues have to say in relation to this matter, I am confident that that will not be the case.

**Mr Allister:** I welcome the First Minister's indication that no internal UK borders is a red-line issue. Amidst all the nonsense that is being talked about special status for Northern Ireland, is it also a red-line issue for the First Minister that Northern Ireland's leaving of the EU must, and must be seen to be, as emphatic and as evident as that of the rest of the kingdom?

**Mrs Foster:** I am sure that he has pored over my conference speech many times, but I said during my —

**Mr Allister:** I hope that you have read mine.

**Mrs Foster:** Absolutely I did. I said that there were five principles in relation to the issue, and one of those issues is this: as a nation state, we voted to leave the European Union, and

therefore, as a nation state, we will be leaving the European Union. That, to me, is very simple and is one of my five principles in relation to this matter. I hope that answers his question.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the First Minister for her statement to the House this morning. Will she give us an update on the BIC review that has been taking place?

**Mrs Foster:** The BIC review is looking to see what other work streams we have adopted since the Glasgow summit and the introduction of a task-and-finish approach. In other words, if a work stream has come to the end of its lifespan, we should finish it and move on to look for a new work stream. As a council, we have been identifying new work streams, and the review has been looking to see where we should go with that. Hopefully, by the time we have our summit here in Northern Ireland, whether that is in June 2017 or, indeed, before that, we will have some clarity in relation to those matters.

## Executive Committee Business

### Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):**  
I beg to move

*That the draft Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.*

I am seeking the Assembly's approval for the draft Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016. The order amends two of the three monetary limits currently in place which allow an individual entry to the debt relief scheme. Debt relief schemes were established in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to provide those with very few assets, little surplus income and relatively small levels of debt with a simple process to obtain debt relief at a much lower cost than in bankruptcy. Strict eligibility criteria must be met for entry to the scheme.

Legislation has been made in England and Wales to increase the limits on the total debts and property that a debtor can have to be eligible for a debt relief order. The limit on total debt was increased from £15,000 to £20,000, and the limit on assets from £300 to £1,000.

The new limits, which came into force on 1 October 2015, take account of inflation and will give more of the most vulnerable people access to debt relief.

It is a sad fact that struggling with unresolvable debt can cause immense stress for families. These changes will increase access to the debt relief scheme for those who need it most. Historically, insolvency law in Northern Ireland has always been maintained in parity with Westminster legislation. In keeping with this policy, the amendments made by the order will increase the ceilings on eligibility for the debt relief scheme in Northern Ireland in line with those in England and Wales. A public consultation took place between September and November 2015. All respondents agreed that both limits could be increased, with two respondents stating that one or both increases should be higher. The order has been agreed with the Committee for the Economy. In conclusion, I believe that the order should be approved by the Assembly.

**Mr Aiken (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I will speak as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy as, unfortunately, the Chairperson is unwell. I will not rehearse the content of the statutory rule, as the Minister has already laid out its purpose. Rather, I will focus on the Committee's scrutiny of it. Members considered the policy proposal for the rule at its meeting on 21 September 2016. The Committee was content for the proposal to proceed. The statutory rule was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 12 October 2016, and, again, members were content with it. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion to approve the order.

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Deputy Chair for his contribution on behalf of the Committee for the Economy. I thank the Committee for its scrutiny of the order, and I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.*

## **Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016**

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):**  
I beg to move

*That the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be affirmed.*

The order amends the current level of debt, known as the bankruptcy level, at which a creditor can petition the High Court to make an individual who owes them money bankrupt. Legislation has been made in England and Wales to increase the bankruptcy level from £750 to £5,000. This was done partly to take account of inflation and also because it was considered that the existing level gave a disproportionate enforcement option over modest levels of debt. The new level came into force in England and Wales on 1 October 2015. Historically, insolvency legislation in Northern Ireland has always been maintained in parity with Westminster legislation. Therefore, the provisions in the order will increase the bankruptcy level in line with that now applying in England and Wales.

A public consultation took place between September and November 2015. Two of the three respondents agreed that the bankruptcy level should be increased to £5,000. The third, Land and Property Services, raised concerns about the impact that an increase to £5,000 could have on rates recovery. After discussions between officials from this Department and the Department of Finance, I have decided to proceed with an increase to £5,000. This will be in keeping with the principle of maintaining parity with insolvency legislation in England and Wales. It will ensure that individuals in Northern Ireland with debts of up to £5,000 will not be at more risk of being made bankrupt than those in England and Wales. The order has been agreed with the Committee for the Economy, and I believe that it should have the support of the Assembly.

**Mr Aiken (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I speak again as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. As I said previously, the Chairperson is unwell. I will not rehearse the content of the statutory rule, as the Minister has already laid out its purpose. Rather, I will focus on the Committee's scrutiny of it. Members considered the policy proposal for the rule at its meeting on 21 September 2016. The Committee was content for the proposal to

proceed. The statutory rule was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 12 October 2016, and, again, members were content with it. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion to affirm the order.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister for the Economy, Mr Hamilton, to wind up the debate.

**Mr Hamilton:** Thank you — such as it was. Once again, I thank the Deputy Chair for his contribution on behalf of the Committee. I thank the Committee for its scrutiny of the order, and I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be affirmed.*

## Private Members' Business

### Medical School in the North-west

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

**Mr Durkan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the support of the Minister for the Economy and Minister of Health for the establishment of a medical school in the north-west; acknowledges the positive impact of a medical school on the delivery of medical and health services in the north-west and that it would be one element in the expansion of student numbers and courses at Ulster University at Magee; calls on the Executive to work with Ulster University, the General Medical Council, the Government of Ireland and other stakeholders for the establishment of a medical school in the north-west; and further calls for a Programme for Government commitment to establish this medical school early in this Assembly mandate.*

Members will have heard me raise the issue of the establishment of a medical school in the north-west before, and, indeed, it has been raised by others. For some longer-serving Members, the north-west medical school will have taken on almost mythical proportions as it has popped up, disappeared and resurfaced a number of times over many years. In proposing the motion, I call on the Executive to ensure that the medical school becomes a reality soon and does not disappear again.

I believe — well, I certainly hope — that I am pushing at an open door. The motion acknowledges the support for the proposals that I recently received from the Minister of Health and the Minister for the Economy respectively. However — please excuse my paranoia — we have been here before, hearing warm words but seeing no action. That is why it is imperative that the Assembly signals its support and the Executive signal their intent with a concrete commitment.

Ulster University is trying to get the project off the ground. The project will not only have a very positive impact on the delivery of health services in the North but be one element in the long overdue and much-needed expansion of

Magee. While it is early days in the process — they are at the first of eight stages with the General Medical Council — Ulster University is showing real ambition to deliver this for Derry, and that is not something that anyone in the Assembly will have heard me say before. It wants to open the doors in September 2019, with the first graduates in 2023. These efforts require and, indeed, deserve the full support of the Assembly.

Why would the Executive not do everything in their power to make this happen? It ticks so many boxes. It is hard to think of an initiative or intervention from the Executive that would be guaranteed to ensure as many positive outcomes for as relatively small a stake.

The vision is the establishment of a graduate-entry medical school that will increase the number of skilled people here who are committed to careers in medicine and healthcare, bolstering an existing workforce that is spread too thinly and worked too hard, particularly in rural areas. Every week, we hear of the struggle to attract people to and retain them in various posts and the inevitable knock-on effect that that is having on patient care, as waiting lists spiral out of control, regardless of how they are computed. Just this morning, we see another report on the A&E department at Altnagelvin and the difficulty that staff shortages are causing it and the patients who attend it.

This is in no way a criticism of our hard-working healthcare staff. They have been failed by poor workforce planning as much as patients have.

#### 11.15 am

Year after year, the Western Trust tops the chart when it comes to money spent on locums and agency staff due to fixed staff shortages. Locums are not low cost. Last year, the trust spent over £11 million on medical locums and is on course, I believe, to exceed even that again this year. This is money that, had we got our workforce planning right, could and would be spent on other services. It would be a welcome boost for someone waiting for a new hip, someone waiting for a mental health diagnosis, someone waiting for a gall bladder operation or a group providing vital services with no funding whatsoever. That figure relates to locums in just the acute sector. It does not include money that is spent trying to plug holes in the great ship of general practice, the captains of which tell us is about to sink.

Dramatically increased workload is one factor that has led to difficulty in recruiting and

retaining GPs, and the demographic of those remaining means that urgent action is needed to ensure that numbers do not fall even further, or we will see even more practices collapse.

Evidence suggests that workers are more likely to be retained close to where they are trained. The creation of this school will end up saving our health trusts millions. It is not just going to benefit the Western Trust. Graduates from this medical school will be available to other trusts. There will be more people qualified to fill essential roles across our health service. I think that, currently, about 20% of newly qualified doctors hop on a plane and end up working elsewhere. The beauty of a graduate entry level school is that that is statistically a lot less likely to happen. People starting and qualifying here are likely to be a wee bit older, more likely to have commitments here and less likely to fly off to find themselves and work elsewhere.

It is envisaged that the school would have an enhanced or particular focus in the areas of primary care, general practice and chronic disease management. Those areas will become increasingly important if we are to finally see our healthcare system transformed into one that copes with current demand and is equipped much better for the future.

The new model for healthcare will require a much more interdisciplinary approach — closer working between doctors, allied health professionals (AHP) and nurses. So, ideally, training in the future should be delivered as such. Therefore, I question the logic of Ulster University, which is currently in the process of moving AHP courses like physiotherapy from its campus in Jordanstown to Coleraine. While there appears to be a genuine desire to get this medical school located and situated in Derry, it would, surely, be a much more sensible decision to shift these courses to Magee.

It is essential that the school will have strong links with the community, even more so given Professor Bengoa's recommendations. Further scope for collaboration exists with the new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin — itself a powerful symbol of what can be achieved when we look beyond Belfast for solutions to our problems.

The radiotherapy centre is also the product of North/South collaboration. Close working with the South can only add to what a new medical school has to offer. I believe that, just today, representatives from Ulster University are meeting counterparts from Galway to discuss potential opportunities for shared placements

and teaching. Cooperation could also open up new opportunities in cross-border healthcare service provision, medical research and economic development.

I referred earlier to Ministers having previously stated their support for this project. Just last week, Derry City and Strabane District Council supported a motion from my party colleague Tina Gardiner on the issue.

There is also clear support from highly respected professional bodies. The BMA recognises the role that a medical school in the region, particularly one that specialises in GP training, will have in helping to address the chronic shortage of GPs in the area. Integral to that equation is the creation of more GP training places, and we welcome the Minister's announcement on that. The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) also indicated, when I asked them recently at the Health Committee, that this proposal is clearly a winner. Looking elsewhere, the establishment of new medical schools creates competition and drives up performance. That is very evident in Wales.

I am conscious that, as my party's health spokesperson, I have spent all this speech so far focussing on the undoubted health-related benefits of the proposal, and it would be remiss of me, as a Foyle MLA, to not touch on the huge economic benefits it would bring. It has long been accepted that the expansion of the university is key to the economic regeneration of the north-west. What needs to be accepted by the Executive is the need to do something about it. Supporting the motion and making this proposal happen will be a clear step in the right direction.

There is research that demonstrates that every £1 spent on a medical school generates £8-50 in the wider economy, and Derry is a city that is in desperate need of a boost like that. The infrastructure windfall from the autumn statement, albeit smaller than we had hoped for, could be used — well, certainly some of it —

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

**Mr Durkan:** — for the infrastructural work at Magee that is essential for its expansion.

**Mr Middleton:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As a Member for Foyle and a constituent who lives in the Western Trust area, I am all too aware of the specific

challenges that face our area, not only from a health perspective but from other perspectives as well.

Specifically on the health challenges, we know from our regular briefings with the Western Trust that there are significant budget challenges and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in the area. In March, my colleague, the then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, had an initial meeting with Professor Patrick Nixon from Ulster University, to discuss the proposal to establish a graduate entry medical school in the north-west. At that time, the Minister said that medical locum costs in the Western Trust had trebled in the past three financial years and were projected to be £12.5 million for 2015-16. As the previous contributor said, the medical locum costs for the incoming year are expected to reach £16 million, which is unsustainable. Those significant locum costs are a direct result of being unable to recruit staff and secure them in the trust. That is having a wider impact on the Western Trust through the deficit that is incurred. Of course, the trust is unable to spend the money that is being spent on locums in other priority areas.

A graduate entry medical school in the north-west would go some way to addressing those challenges. Research shows that the majority of people stay to train and work in the place where they study at university. That is what we want to try to help address the issues in the west. When medical staff and doctors are trained, we want them to stay, because that will help address the shortages.

Whilst the medical school will service a much wider area than my constituency, Londonderry is suitably placed, with the newly opened radiotherapy centre, the innovation work that is ongoing with C-TRIC and the outstanding medical courses that already exist in Ulster University at Magee. There are also very strong partnerships with Altnagelvin Area Hospital, and they bode well for any future medical school.

Through our work on the Health Committee, we have heard from various organisations that fully support the proposal. The General Medical Council (GMC), the BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners have all voiced their support, and there is no doubt that this proposal will help to address the challenges arising from the shortfall in the number of GPs and other issues that face primary care.

The Economy Minister and the Health Minister have already outlined their support for the proposal and its benefits. We have heard from

the SDLP and will no doubt hear the Ulster Unionists' view on the medical school. However, I was — no surprise — slightly disappointed this morning that the tone for the debate was set out in the media. The SDLP press office was extremely busy this morning in saying that it is proposing a new medical school for Magee university. It even created a new hashtag, #ConstructiveOpposition. I am sorry, but this is a case of johnny-come-lately rather than constructive opposition.

**Mr Eastwood:** Johnny-come-lately? I noticed Mr Middleton's Twitter account earlier. Does he not accept that this is an issue that was not decided in the last number of months or weeks? It is an issue that people in Derry have been arguing about and arguing for long before he or I was involved in elected politics.

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

**Mr Middleton:** I completely agree with the Member. We have not said that we proposed the idea. The idea came from the Ulster University. For you to suggest that it was the SDLP that proposed it is deeply unfair and quite sad in reality.

We will support the motion. We strongly believe in a graduate-entry medical school. I look forward to hearing from other Members, but the commitment that the Executive no doubt will give is that they are focused on delivery rather than on cheap political point-scoring and cheap headlines.

**Ms Archibald:** I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the motion, which I will be supporting.

Sinn Féin has been to the fore of consistently promoting the expansion of Ulster University at Magee, and the further and higher education offering in the north-west in general. It is a region with huge potential, which we are seeing through developments at Magee, the North West Regional College and the North West Regional Science Park.

A continued focus on development and investment is required to promote the genuine regional balance of our economy that we all want to see. Education and skills are a part of that, and delivering those locally is necessary. The medical school project would very much add to the offering in the north-west and begin to tackle some of the issues in our health service. I will be rehearsing some of what has already been said.

Week in and week out — in our constituency offices, in our engagements with the trust, in the media, and here through questions to the Minister — we hear about long waiting times, staff shortages and difficulties in recruiting staff to the health service. The Minister has outlined her commitment to the reconfiguration of the health service. That reconfiguration needs to be at all levels right from the start of the cycle, and that begins with training of staff.

As a representative of a constituency partly in the Western Trust, I am all too aware of how difficult it is to recruit staff and of the disproportionate cost of locums in the trust area, as Mr Durkan outlined. Spending on locums in the Western Trust doubled between 2011-12 and 2015-16.

There is evidence that medical students and trainees are more likely to stay in the hospitals in which they train. Having a medical school in Derry would therefore have the knock-on effect of encouraging staff to take up positions in the locality and with the surrounding trusts in the longer term. We do mean the longer term, because we are talking several years by the time that the project would be implemented and the first cohort of students would have gone through.

That is how the Minister's plan for reconfiguration of the health service must be viewed. It must be allowed to have an implementation phase. That will be a process to address issues that have developed over decades, and there are no overnight quick fixes. It is a big-picture view that we need to take.

The Minister's plans regarding specialised centres will also begin to redress the imbalance in recruitment ability to some trusts, and it is likely that certain specialisms will be based in different regional hospitals. Those training in specialisms are therefore likely to be based in those hospitals in the longer term. Hypothetically, that will have the knock-on effect of retaining staff in the appropriate specialisms in those hospitals.

If we look at the Western Trust as an example of where specialisms are already located, there are urology, radiotherapy and orthopaedics in Altnagelvin. In orthopaedics, in which there are specialisms within specialisms, there is a need for targeted recruitment, and the training of students in the location may help alleviate that, alongside other measures. Likewise, there are also recognised issues for GPs, as has been mentioned, and the Minister has begun to tackle this by increasing GP training places for

2016-17. Having a medical school in the north-west would hopefully attract trainees to practices in that locality and we would then have a better spread of trainees across the North.

**11.30 am**

There has been huge investment in Altnagelvin over the past few years, and the new radiotherapy unit as a cross-border service is a major development. That investment makes Altnagelvin a centre of excellence and, therefore, an ideal teaching location. The cross-border nature of the new radiotherapy centre needs to be used as the model for future service delivery, and we should look to attract students from the entire west of the country, and further afield, to a medical school there.

As Mr Durkan said, the medical school has the support of professional bodies and there needs to be collaboration with those to move the project forward. There should be further exploration of the cross-border potential of this project and building on our structural infrastructure on an all-Ireland basis in general as we plan for the future. The health service across the island faces great challenges, and we are too small an island not to be looking at how we can collaborate most effectively to deliver for all our people.

**Mr Aiken:** I support the motion from our fellow Opposition party for the establishment of a graduate medical school in the west of the Province. We believe that building on Northern Ireland's reputation for teaching medical excellence, as identified by Queen's University's position in the top 30 medical schools in the United Kingdom, will be beneficial in providing greater training opportunities for medical students, who will bring in a much-needed boost in student revenues, as well as strength and depth in our hospitals west of the Bann.

It is also appropriate at this stage to ask the Department of Health and the Department for the Economy to conduct a detailed review of how the HSC, the universities and our excellent life sciences sector — it would be remiss of me not to mention South Antrim in this context — can be brought together to maximise the teaching, research and manufacturing opportunities for all of Northern Ireland: for students, for patients and for our companies. However — I must declare an interest here, as the ex-CEO of a university fundraising organisation — medical schools can be very expensive to set up, to establish their

reputations and they need to be properly resourced.

As a party, we welcome the opportunity to improve the provision of university places in the north-west, and, speaking personally, I would be delighted to see Magee expanded. I would also like to see the A6 prioritised to establish communication links there, and for Londonderry to become a global centre of educational excellence. However, we also need the physical and educational infrastructure to make it work.

In supporting the motion, we look forward to having discussions on increasing the opportunity for all medical training, medical teaching, research and manufacturing in Northern Ireland. Maybe, by doing this, we can, at the same time, do something about our shocking waiting lists across the health service.

**Dr Farry:** The Alliance Party supports the motion but not without some reservation. We will highlight some points that the proposers need to consider and some issues that they need to clarify.

In principle, we accept the need for a medical school, and it is in that context that we can support the motion. It is worth stressing that recent talk has been about a graduate-entry school, which is of a different nature from a situation where we are talking about undergraduates, with a particular focus on GP training and primary care. That is a particular pressure point in our health service that we are all very much aware of, and the solution lies in a number of interventions, including how we might shift some of the workload off GPs to other aspects of our health service. There are areas where GPs have taken on additional areas of responsibility almost by default, and there are unintended consequences. For example, free prescriptions are universally available, but that ends up with more prescribing being done, as opposed to people maybe talking with pharmacists. There is a host of other distortions in our health service passing burdens on to GPs.

Equally, we need to look at how attractive certain specialities are versus others in the health service and the number of places available. We welcome what the Minister has been saying about the need for more places, and it is in that context that we look to what we can do about expansion in the north-west.

I was pleased that Mr Aiken raised the issue of cost, because it is important that we have this debate in an air of realism and that people

address the issue of cost. Hopefully, the Minister will give some indication of what her officials estimate the cost of this to be. We need to look at running costs, capital costs and the location. Are we talking about locating this on the current Magee campus, or are we looking to co-locate with Altnagelvin hospital or somewhere else in the wider city of Derry?

We also need to ask whether the proposers want to take this forward on a stand-alone basis, which may potentially be easier to fund, or whether it will be taken forward as part of the wider business case for the expansion of Magee. In that regard, I should stress that, in my final week as Minister for Employment and Learning, I received the final version of the business case — or what will hopefully be the final version of the business case. I am not entirely sure where the processing of that now lies in the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance, never mind any formal decision-making by the Executive and decisions on funding.

The wider context is that we need to look to what is happening in higher education and the potential expansion of the sector. I can clearly state that I want to see the expansion of the university at Magee. I fully understand and appreciate the relevance to the city, the hurt that has been felt over 50 years because of decisions that were taken — quite in error, in my opinion — and the potential now for the transformation of the city for that investment. That is all taken as read.

We also have to appreciate that the expansion of Magee was not a formal commitment in the previous Programme for Government. People think it was: it was not. During the last mandate, we managed to expand Magee by several hundred places — about 650, to be accurate — and we have commenced the construction of the new £10 million teaching block, but this remains a long way short of the 10,000 additional places that people are looking for in the One Plan and, more recently, the strategy group under the city council in partnership with the university.

We have to be realistic before we can talk about expanding our higher education sector. I appreciate that medical school funding may be an issue for the Department of Health in isolation of some of the wider issues, but we have to recognise that we currently have a £55 million deficit in higher education. Before we can talk about expansion, we need to fix the hole first and make sure that the foundations are solid. When we published the Big Conversation paper in March this year, we

talked about not just addressing the funding shortfall but looking to expand the number of places available in Northern Ireland in line with the needs identified in the skills barometer. Obviously, Magee can capture some of that, but more and more capital investment will be required to make this a reality.

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

**Dr Farry:** The costs are significant. There is between £30 million and £40 million per year in running costs, and potentially several hundred million pounds of capital. It is important that Members are aware of that in terms of the full aspirations for expansion of the university in the north-west.

**Mr Clarke:** I rise to support the motion. I find it difficult following on from my colleague, who is from a constituency in the north-west. He covered the points reasonably well.

The motion uses the words "notes the support". The SDLP, in its opening remarks, said that this issue has been about for a number of years. I want to put it on the record that I note that this was not down in an Opposition debate, because it probably would have been an embarrassment for the SDLP and its Opposition partners not bringing this forward when they held the portfolio for Health. I am happy to take an intervention if they want to clarify that that is why it was not tabled on an Opposition day.

That aside, it is right and just that the people in the north-west have the services there. As my colleague outlined, it is well known that, if people are educated in an area, they are more likely to stay. We are all too aware of the issues in Health, and that is not diminishing the difficulties that the Minister faces in the years ahead in addressing that. That is addressing a legacy issue, and it will not be done overnight. The will has been there. My colleague mentioned the Economy Minister and, indeed, previous comments from the current Health Minister about these places in the north-west. We all agree that that would go some way to supporting that. I have nothing more to say, other than that I welcome and support the motion.

**Ms Boyle:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. First, I take the opportunity to congratulate all those involved in the new £50 million radiotherapy centre in the Western Trust as it opens its doors to the public for the first phase of admissions. This unique cross-border centre of excellence, with a complement of over

200 staff across a range of specialisms and expertise, will provide much-needed cancer care to many people from across these islands. It is just one example of what can be achieved when we put our shoulder to the wheel, with both Governments on the island working collaboratively and people not using it as a party political football.

The proposal to establish a graduate entry medical school in the north-west is, as has been said, at a very early stage, but we need to build on existing support for the school to be built west of the Bann. The Magee campus at Ulster University and Altnagelvin Area Hospital are already leading the way as centres of excellence for medical research and education. We need to build on that.

We are very aware of how much the Western Health and Social Care Trust spends on medical locums to cover the north-west. It has the biggest spend on locums, partly given its geographical location and the cost of travel and accommodation, but we continue to be the biggest losers in this regard. There are difficulties in attracting and retaining GPs and consultants in the north-west; there is no denying that. There is a revised induction and refresher scheme for GPs not currently practising in the North of Ireland to return to practising here. I welcome that approach, which goes some way to addressing the gaps here. I am keen to hear from the Minister on how it is progressing.

The establishment of a medical school in Derry will attract many young students from here, across these islands and further afield. Training home-grown young people here on our doorstep can be justified by the statistics and data provided by the BMA. Dr Tom Black, at the Health Committee in October, stated that we have over 1,200 GPs, or 950 whole-time equivalents, delivering the service, which is many fewer GPs per head of population than we had in the 1950s. That, he said, was an "extraordinary assertion", because the demand for GPs is rising as people live longer. We have a successful health service, but success creates more demand, and we feel that more in the Western Trust than in any other trust area. We need to bring forward incentives for GPs and others to live and work here.

I, too, listened to Mr Durkan on the radio earlier, when he stated that this would be a game-changer for the north-west. I agree, but he said it would be for the city. He has to think methodically: this goes beyond the city of Derry. It will work for the people of Coleraine, Limavady and, indeed, my area, Strabane.

Of course, this is not just about GPs. As mentioned earlier, we need more allied health professionals to work alongside our GPs, as not everyone going into a GP practice needs to see a GP. They need a physiotherapist, nurse, chiropodist or podiatrist. All of these people in primary care play an important role in reducing the pressures on GPs.

I welcome the work that has been done by our Minister to date. Significant challenges lie ahead for her and her Department in the transformation of services. The Minister is all too aware of the problems and challenges west of the Bann, and I know that she is committed to tackling them. As I said, proposals for the graduate entry medical school are at an early stage, but I urge the Minister and her Department to bring forward a business case as soon as possible. I support the motion.

**Mr T Buchanan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The concept of a medical school in the north-west based on the University of Ulster campus at Magee College, Londonderry has been in the melting pot for some considerable time. It is not something that the SDLP has dreamed up and put out today as its proposal. Over the past few mandates of the Assembly, the issue has been brought to the fore on numerous occasions —

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

**Mr T Buchanan:** — through questions for written answer, private Members' motions and, indeed, in the respective Committees, where the university has put forward its proposals. I give way.

**11.45 am**

**Mr Eastwood:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with us that the issue has been around for a long time and needs to be resolved, or does he agree with his colleague Mr Middleton that this was a proposal by his party colleague — last March, I think that was it, Mr Middleton?

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

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you. The proposal has been put forward by the University of Ulster and not by any individual or party. For the SDLP to come out this morning and say that it is its proposal is misleading to say the least. To reinforce what my colleague said, on 24 March this year, my colleague Simon Hamilton, the then Health Minister, kick-started the process again when he met the University of Ulster's

vice chancellor, Professor Patrick Nixon, to discuss the proposals for establishing a graduate-entry medical school in the north-west, which, I have no doubt, has the support of all the people in the Chamber today.

Moving forward, however, the development of those proposals and making them a reality is essential for stabilising our health and social care services not only in the north-west but in the entire south-west quarter of Northern Ireland. The Western Health and Social Care Trust is under severe pressure due to its dependence on medical and dental locums to meet demand at an unsustainable cost of £12.9 million, and the development of the proposed new medical school would help to address this ongoing issue while reducing the cost of locums. Although the Western Health and Social Care Trust has faced many difficulties in seeking to recruit medical staff west of the Bann, it has been proven — this has been said today — that medical graduates are more likely to seek employment closest to where they are educated. The development of a medical school would provide the platform that would attract and retain skilled people in the medical profession, especially from the entire north-west and south-west quarter of Northern Ireland. This in turn is good not only for the university and the Western Health and Social Care Trust but for our economy, skills development and the overall health and well-being of our citizens.

Ulster University and the Western Trust have been recognised as centres of excellence, and we must continue to build on this success and turn the west of the Bann into a magnet for medical students, doctors and staff to study, work and live.

Across the entire Western Health and Social Care Trust area — with Altnagelvin and its new cancer centre, the new South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen and the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh — we have the platform and structure of excellence in place to attract highly skilled professionals in the medical field to train and work in this area.

The new South West Acute Hospital is one of the most modern and finest hospitals in Northern Ireland and is the envy of many other areas, but it must be properly staffed with sufficient medical professionals to allow it to deliver to its full potential for all its patients. The medical school will improve the recruitment and retention of medical professionals not only in the north-west but in the entire south-west quarter of Northern Ireland and the entire region, taking in the triangle model for the delivery of health by the Western Trust, which

includes Altnagelvin, the South West Acute Hospital and the new hospital in Omagh. It is something that will deliver not only for the north-west, as we heard today, but for the entire south-west quarter of Northern Ireland, where the trust has the same difficulties in seeking to bring in medical professionals to work in the area.

We look forward to further discussions on making the university's proposals a reality in the area for the development of health professionals in the trust area and for the good of the people, the economy and health delivery in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

**Mrs Dobson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion as the Ulster Unionist Party health spokesperson. It is an important issue. Educating sufficient numbers of doctors is essential in ensuring that enough are entering the profession locally. It is widely recognised that our health service workforce is not in a good or sustainable shape. In fact, there has been a total absence of workforce planning in Northern Ireland. That is now directly contributing to many of the pressures currently being experienced.

I am sure that many Members are acutely aware of the scale of vacancies across the local health and social care trusts. I have said this before, and I will say it again: a long-term vacant post, whether it is for a doctor, a nurse or an allied health professional, is about as much use as no post at all. The Department and successive Ministers have regularly gone to great efforts to boast of the number of nursing posts created, but they are loath to tell us that there are 920 posts currently vacant. Before we even consider today's issue of a new medical school in the north-west, the Department needs to be a bit more transparent in telling us what exactly the workforce needs are, including what demands there would be for recruitment from a large number of medical school graduates through, for example, Magee, if that were the case. I know from talking to my colleague Rosemary Barton MLA that there are chronic medical staff shortages in much of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The pressures are particularly acute in general practice, with a frightening amount of County Fermanagh being on the brink of having no GP cover at all.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the particular situation in Portadown. Minister, you will be aware that we received further contact from a GP this morning. There is a very serious scenario unfolding there with a large number of

doctors leaving in very quick order. That has left some of the practices looking over a precipice. I am aware that people are talking about managed dispersal. That is probably as impersonal and clinically cold in reality as it sounds. Minister, I would be happy to facilitate a meeting between you and local GPs in the town if you agree to meet them.

That is indicative of what happens when we do not properly workforce plan. Today's debate could possibly go some way towards fulfilling a need. However, increasing a number of medical school places, whether through a new school at Magee or anywhere else, would do absolutely nothing to soothe the current pressures unless it is accompanied directly by an increase in the number of medical training places. That is the crux of the issue: it does not matter how many people we educate through the universities; it all comes down to how many fully qualified doctors a new school at Magee could help to deliver. Of course, with Altnagelvin, the school would have a perfectly reasonable training ground on its doorstep. However, I suggest to the two Departments and Ulster University that, in their early assessments of whether a school would be viable, they should be ambitious about how they could deliver those training places. For instance, could the South West Acute Hospital, which is a facility that has some problems with recruiting and retaining a sufficient number of doctors, link formally to ensure that doctors are more proactively being sent to train and, hopefully, settle in areas where real demand exists? That is just one option; I am sure that there are many more.

I wish the Minister well for her future engagement with Ulster University on this issue.

**Mr McCartney:** I support the motion. I think that, right across the Assembly this morning, everybody is in support of the motion, notwithstanding that there are some issues about who was the first to propose this. They say that success has many mothers and fathers; we might need an expansion of the maternity ward in Altnagelvin hospital to cater for everybody who is going to claim success.

That aside, it is fair to say that, over a long number of years, the expansion of the campus at Magee has been very much part of the politics of the north-west; indeed, Stephen Farry, in fairness, talked about it. We all know the need for the expansion not just in the numbers of courses and students but in ways that will add to the strength of the university and wider. Obviously, that is in conjunction with the

development of the A5 and the A6 and all other aspects. For us, it is about trying to address decades of uneven development. I acknowledge the fact that even Steve Aiken acknowledged the need for the development of the A6.

For representatives for Foyle and the north-west it is good to see that people are starting to see this and support it, and, hopefully, we will see some movement forward. It has to be acknowledged that the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Health, who is obviously a party colleague, have also expressed their support for the medical school. You can place the medical school in that wider context, but, as an idea in its own right, it has its strengths. Therefore, on that alone, Ulster University has approached this in the right manner. It sees this as a project that will have to go through the rigour of business cases etc. The approach that it has taken, in particular the appointment of a full-time senior person in the university — Professor Hugh McKenna — to take it forward, is a good signal of its intent. It will not leave any gaps. This is not just some sort of concept. It is, perhaps, easy to say that we need a medical school, but the university will ensure that it has a rigorous case that is well presented. As a party, we met and had the presentation from the university. Last Friday, at the Unity of Purpose meeting, Gary Middleton and Mark H Durkan also got a version of that presentation from Hugh McKenna. The intentions and the desire but also the solidity of the case are being well made.

The innovation around this is the idea that it will be a postgraduate-entry school. The university, in presenting that, gave all the pluses around that and said clearly that one of the things, particularly at postgraduate entry in medical schools and in other courses, from experiences elsewhere, is the idea of what they call the 20:20 rule — people stay within 20 miles of where they were educated for 20 years. That is a big plus. If you add to that — people have already alluded to it — the fact that the Western Trust has a large bill for locums that is predicted to grow and with the focus and the emphasis being put on GPs, we can see how the business case will be improved by the fact that we will have postgraduate entry with a focus on general practice and filling that gap. That is how we should go forward with this.

Another emphasis that has to put on this is that it sends a signal with the right case well presented by the university. We have seen recently a change in the direction and the leadership of the university. The university, for the first time, is starting to realise, that, if it

sends out the right signal when it, along with the rest of us, talks about the expansion of the university and the need and desire for a medical school, it must present it in such a way that the case will be made. Stephen Farry alluded to some of the problems in the past around this. There will be no gaps and no holes, and that is why it is important.

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

**Mr McCartney:** I welcome the tone of the motion and the widespread support, give or take who was the first to say it. I will say it: Sinn Féin was the first.

**Mr Mullan:** I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate. I will say at the outset that the focus of the debate should be on the best outcomes that we can achieve for our long-suffering constituents rather than on getting into party politics with disingenuous remarks towards other Members taking part in the debate.

## 12.00 noon

It would be remiss of me, in the context of the debate, not to express my appreciation for the many health service staff who are doing a tremendous job in some of the most difficult and intolerable situations. It is no easy feat for them, and it is incumbent on the Assembly to do all that it can to alleviate the pressures that they are currently facing.

It is very concerning to read in 'The Irish News' today of a Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) report into Altnagelvin Hospital, which states that staff morale is low and that staff do not feel supported and valued. That cannot continue, nor can the current pressures. The Assembly really needs to act. Training more staff could go some way towards alleviating the pressures that staff are currently facing.

There have been many great developments in the Western Trust over recent years, such as the building of the South West Acute Hospital in Fermanagh, the new Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh and the substantial redevelopment of the Gransha site in Derry. In recent days, as other Members said, the new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital was opened. All those are positive developments and evidence of progress — progress that could and must be supported by the establishment of a dedicated medical school for the north-west. In that context, I welcome the

Ulster University's proposal to establish a medical school in the north-west that would focus on graduates and GP training places.

However, to reduce vacancy rates in the trust area permanently, we need to set our sights higher, as there exists the possibility of training undergraduate medical students in future by utilising the Altnagelvin hospital and South West Acute Hospital sites. It is my belief that, if we are to accommodate future demand for services that are currently struggling not only in the Western Trust but throughout the North, we need to set our ambitions high.

The Western Trust has suffered for many years as a result of not being able to attract enough staff, whether doctors, nurses, midwives or others. That has resulted in significant gaps in the trust's current workforce. Many of our rural GP practices are facing extinction because of a chronic lack of available doctors and an ageing workforce, all of which has had and will continue to have an impact on patient care and outcomes in many communities. Waiting lists for GPs are growing, and we have already witnessed the gradual erosion of rural out-of-hours services in the west. The establishment of a dedicated medical school would go some way to alleviating those pressures and improving patient outcomes.

Those issues remain concerning, and I and the SDLP believe that much more medical staff recruitment can be gained if we have a stand-alone medical school for the north-west and indeed for the whole of the North. In looking at the potential for a new medical school, we need to look at costs. We are facing substantial pressures on the health service because of the failure of various reform initiatives, such as Transforming Your Care. In the last five years, the Western Trust has spent an unprecedented £54 million on locum and agency staff, not to mention current expenditure on bank staff. It is hugely concerning that only Belfast, which has a higher population density, has spent more on temporary staffing than the Western Trust. This question has to be asked: under the current financial arrangements, are trusts happier to employ staff on a temporary basis rather than to commit to full-time staff?

I will welcome the Minister's views on the issue and on whether she believes that the current financial arrangements and block grant funding for the health service are adding to the growing bills for temporary staff. I urge support for the motion.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank the SDLP for bringing forward the motion. As my colleague Stephen

Farry said, we will not be opposing the motion, as we see no harm in investigating the potential for a medical school in the north-west. I put on record that we concur with what has been said here today about the crisis in the GP sector, not least in the west and north-west of the Province. However, we want to put on record some of our concerns about the proposal. It is, of course, very easy to present an idea like this to the Assembly, but once it has been costed and detailed sometimes the case ceases to be as clear-cut. It is, of course, one thing to support the establishment of a medical school in principle, but it is another to support it once the full business case has been explored.

It is unclear what precisely the proposal is. There is a reference in the motion to the expansion of Magee to include a postgraduate school for GPs. There is also a reference to a medical school ie a replication of what already exists at Queens, and that is quite a different thing. There is merit in the proposal for medical training at Magee, but what we want to hear from the parties proposing such motions is not just why the project is on their wish list but exactly how it will be delivered and funded, for an overall medical school would not be feasible.

Of course, funding is not the only issue. There are 34 medical schools in the UK. That means that, on average, there should be precisely one in Northern Ireland, which is exactly what we have. We need to be clear that, even with the proposed rise in the number of GPs to be trained, there is not enough to justify a second general medical school in Northern Ireland. In fact, for a medical school in the north-west to be justified, places would have to be taken from the existing school at Queen's. Maybe representatives in the north-west would support that, but I wonder whether the MP for South Belfast, in which Queen's is situated, would be quite so delighted.

We also have to consider whether the proposal fits with the thrust of the ongoing transformation process to which, I understand, the proposers have pledged support. This process includes regionalisation and thus centralisation of specialised services, and many will see medical training as a specialised service. Thus splitting it would run directly contrary to what is proposed here. The idea is to place all the available expertise at a single accessible site. Are we already beginning to see some parties being tempted to put local interests first? I want to hear some clarity on this if that is not the case.

In fact, this strikes me as a much longer-term project than the proposers indicate.

Interestingly, it is perhaps one with a cross-border dimension. Is there a long-term case for a medical school in the west of Ireland with GP training at Magee but other courses elsewhere? Perhaps such a course sharing expertise and facilities may be much more financially viable, and may, in fact, contribute to expansion at Magee. However, it is a complex project, requiring greater cross-border agreement on regulations and qualifications than is currently in place. However, we cannot deny that that would take some time.

I do not wish to suggest that such a proposal is not possible, and I hope that I have shown that we could and should look at alternative means of achieving it. I am by no means anti-north-west, having lived in Eglinton on the outskirts of Derry for many years, and I understand the difficulties, the prejudice and disadvantage that people in that area have felt for many years. However, we cannot pretend that this is likely in the short term. It is one thing to support something in principle; it is quite another to deliver on it when purse strings are already stretched by the need to invest in reform while funding services in urgent need, such as tackling waiting lists, which are also crying out for intervention. Let us see a detailed business case for a cross-border school as part of the overall transformation process with a focus on the best possible outcomes for both patient and medic.

**Mr E McCann:** There is no shortage of candidates to have been the first person ever to come up with this idea. It was not I who was the first person, for a starter, nor any party associated with me. The first time I ever heard the idea of a medical school at Magee mentioned was by somebody who is not a political associate or friend of mine, but it was by John Hume at least 25 years ago. There may have been somebody before 25 years ago that I am not aware of or others might have followed on, but John Hume of the SDLP was the first person who ever brought it up in my presence, and that was a long time ago, but not as long as I have been on the road about the University issue.

I was 20 when the University for Derry campaign was founded. I was outside this Building, along with a wide range of people from Derry and the wider north-west at that time, looking for a university. Here we are once again; here we go again. I am not saying that we are back at the beginning. I unequivocally welcome the idea which has been pledged of a medical school or a postgraduate medical school at Magee. I want to put that on record, lest anybody say that I am being begrudging

and not welcoming of it. I accept the good intentions of everybody.

On the university's own figures and on the figures that we are talking about here, there would be 500 extra places at Magee if this promised project goes forward. An extra 500 places is absolutely to be welcomed, but it is a long way short of the university of 10,000 students that we were repeatedly promised, both by this place and the university itself. If that is gone and the target has been abandoned — it is not hardly mentioned here as a target at all — let people stand up and tell us, "We can't deliver what we promised". At the moment, those pledges are still on the table for a 10,000-strong student body; we are far from that.

In the last five years, Magee has lost courses in arts, computers and engineering, and life and health sciences have been closed entirely. Most ominous of all, the International Conflict and Research Institute (Incore), which is acknowledged everywhere as a world leader in conflict resolution, has been unceremoniously shifted to Belfast by way of the Maze. It was moved out of Derry, the idea being that it would be relocated as a peace centre on the Maze site. When that did not work out, it was shifted to Belfast. It is as simple as this: we want it back. It should be in Magee. Where better for a conflict resolution institution than in Magee? Where better for an expanding centre of culture generally than in Derry at Magee?

I jotted down a few of the names that came to mind when we look at the cultural richness of Derry, which should surround any university. A university should not be isolated from the cultural life of the community. Derry is the home of Colmcille, Docwra, Amelia Earhart, Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, Jennifer Johnston, Gay McIntyre, Brian Friel, Josef Locke, John O'Neill, SOAK, Joanna Fagan, Dame Cecil Alexander, Dave Duggan, Felicity McCall, Abby Oliveira and the Turner-nominated Willie Doherty. Those are just the ones that came to my mind as I sat here.

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

**Mr E McCann:** Certainly. Go on, Danny.

**Mr Kennedy:** Will the Member accept that most of those illustrious people whom he has named are now dead?

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

**Mr E McCann:** Well, actually, quite a number of them are not dead. How dare you bury them before their time, Mr Kennedy. I hope that that is not to do with the fact that they are associated with my home town, as it is easier to try to get rid of them. Gay McIntyre is not dead. Seamus Deane is not dead. John O'Neill is not dead. SOAK — Bridie Monds-Watson — is not dead. Joanna Fagan is not dead. Dave Duggan is not dead. Abby Oliveira is not dead. Willie Doherty, one of the most acknowledged sculptors on these islands, lives around the corner from me. Willie Doherty is certainly not dead; in fact, he was not dead the night before last, I can tell you. There are all those people.

What I am saying really is that a university of 10,000 students would be very happy in Derry. If those people were to come in, at least 1,000 jobs — good jobs by our standards — would come to Derry as well. They would be very happy in Derry.

I am not being cynical, but once bitten, twice shy. I have been bitten over and over again and am deeply cynical. I recall the fact that we have recently closed the law school at Magee, which we had been promised for years, and which opened eight years ago. It has now gone. So I am wee bit cynical. I will believe it when we see it; I want to see it. I encourage everybody to keep working on it. If this does not work out, we will have to look elsewhere for an expanded third education institution in Derry, whether it is transatlantic, cross-border, social enterprise or whatever. If the University of Ulster does not deliver, that does not mean that the campaign is going to go away.

This, too, is a legacy issue. It is part of the legacy of sectarian discrimination against Derry under the old Stormont Parliament. It is a legacy issue that has to be remedied in the same way as all the others. Let us do it, and, as I say, if this pledge does not work out, the game is not over.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health):** I start by welcoming the debate that we have had today. I thank Members for their contributions throughout the debate, particularly those on the positive impact made day and daily by health and social care staff in the course of their work. All Members realise that our healthcare system must change so that it can meet the challenges that we will face in the future. There is also a desire to engage creatively and positively in addressing those challenges. That is the correct approach. As I explained in 'Health and

Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together', which sets out my vision for the transformation of health and social care, we all have a responsibility to work together to ensure that we develop a system that delivers better health outcomes for people and which is sustainable into the future. Accordingly, I view the comments registered in the Chamber today and, indeed, the proposal for a medical school in the north-west, as positive.

### 12.15 pm

At the outset, I want again to pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of all our front-line staff, who play a vital role in the delivery of high-quality care to our population across all sectors and settings. I cannot stress enough how greatly I value and appreciate the work that our medical staff do in the face of increased demands and the unique contribution that they make to the lives of patients, clients, and families daily.

The underlying issue that the proposal for a medical school seeks to address is the need to ensure a sustainable supply of well-trained doctors to serve in primary care and secondary care, particularly in the north-west of this island. I share the concern expressed by Members about the challenge of medical recruitment to these services and wish to assure the Chamber of my commitment to resolve and address those issues.

I fully recognise the current challenges that we have in attracting junior doctors to fill all the medical training positions that we have available across the North. It is troubling that medical graduates from Queen's University are not taking up all the 267 foundation posts available. Furthermore, and increasingly, foundation doctors are not progressing into speciality training programmes. In 2015, for example, only 150 of our output of 250 foundation doctors entered speciality training. The reasons for that noticeable trend, which is by no means unique to here, are multifactorial and will require persistence if we are to address them. I consider that effective workforce engagement and planning are key enablers to securing the needed transformation of Health and Social Care (HSC).

My Department is working closely with the North's Medical and Dental Training Agency to ensure that all medical trainees across the HSC are valued and supported appropriately and that they are provided with up-to-date, high-quality medical training. I know that that is being reinforced by action by local medical management in the individual employing trusts.

The key will be to make the HSC an employer of choice, and I am committed to ensuring that a workforce strategy to give substance to that objective is developed by May 2017. I also support the work of officials from my Department and the Health and Social Care Board, in close liaison with local GPs, to ensure that people living in south-east Fermanagh continue to have access to high-quality, sustainable and resilient GP services.

The motion raises the specific question of whether an additional medical school in the north-west could help to fill the current vacancies in junior doctor positions and the challenges of recruiting to GP practices in some of our deeper rural localities. I think that a medical school in the north-west has the potential to do that. It is noticeable, if not exceptional, for example, for healthcare systems across these islands, that about 80% of medical students graduating in the North go on to pursue a career in HSC here. That testifies to the value of the medical careers offered. However, it perhaps also demonstrates that there is a desire among many of our young people to serve the communities in which they have grown up and with which they have deep roots and empathy. A north-west medical school has the potential to tap into that.

That said, the next generation is likely to be the most mobile workforce yet, and the highly regarded doctors whom we train here will be much in demand, particularly across the English-speaking world. That requires us to engage purposively with our future medical graduates to ensure that we harness their skills for the benefit of the HSC in the future. Notwithstanding the real potential that a north-west medical college presents, the proposal is at an early stage and will take time to develop.

The strategic outline case submitted by the University of Ulster is a first and early attempt to assess the financial implications for my Department. The proposal explains some, but by no means all, of the investment that a completely new school would require. Initial predictions of capital costs for the Department for the Economy are in the region of £20 million, and the annual revenue pressure for my Department is placed at around £17 million. However, that assessment needs to be reviewed rigorously. Much further work will be required to understand the extent of the future medical workforce need and the likely costs, including additional costs, that would be incurred in any corresponding expansion of postgraduate training, particularly at foundation level. My officials will work with the University

of Ulster to take forward that analysis and make sure that we complete all that work.

Of course, consideration will also have to be given to the challenges associated with establishing a new medical school and placing it on a sustainable footing. We must not shy away from those challenges. The recruitment of suitably trained clinical academic staff will be challenging. The regulatory and accountability challenges of setting up training programmes, which, under the proposal, will stretch across two professional regulatory regimes, should also be recognised and will take time to work through.

I believe, however, that we can overcome such challenges. A lot of potential could be realised for the people of the north-west, and I am committed to working with the university and the Department for the Economy and other Departments to taking it forward.

Mr Speaker —

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I welcome her very positive remarks about the north-west, but I encourage her today to take note of the issues that are unfolding in the Portadown area. I know that I may be stretching this, but I really feel that it is imperative that you as Minister recognise the great need there and that that is addressed within the overall health reform.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her intervention. You may be stretching it, but all politics is local. You and Jo-Anne Dobson have raised the issue, and I assure you that I am acutely aware of the issues that are unfolding in Portadown and have asked for an update this morning on all that is being done. There are locums in place, but we need to get to a stage at which we have a sustainable health service there and people feel confident in it. I assure you that we are doing everything that we can.

I hope that it is evident from my comments that I see considerable potential in a north-west medical school. I would like the issue to be explored further, and, as I outlined, a number of issues need to be considered in the time ahead as a way of advancing the proposals further.

Central to the consideration of this important issue is my transformation agenda. Last month, I launched my vision for the transformation of health and social care. We are about to embark on an ambitious transformation journey that will radically change the way in which we plan and deliver health and

social care. As I have said, under the transformation process, I am committed to investing in the HSC workforce. Our staff are the greatest asset, and I recognise that they are under pressure. Over the last number of months, I have witnessed the outstanding work of all the staff, not least our medical staff and the positive impact that they have on people's lives. The compassion and dedication of our staff continues to astound me. I am, therefore, committed to developing a workforce strategy early in 2017 and a range of other immediate actions to start to address some critical workforce challenges.

There will be a new approach to learning and team working. I want all those working in Health and Social Care to feel able to effect change and improvement in care rather than concentrating power at the top. We need greater collective clinical and professional leadership throughout the HSC, supported by skilled and able managers. That is why I have also asked my officials to develop a system-wide HSC leadership strategy to be produced by next summer. Resources will be invested to support staff and leaders to develop the necessary skills and behaviours that will be crucial as we move forward.

I anticipate that the transformation process will lead to a revision of the structure of services across the North and the development of regional programmes of care, which will deliver better outcomes for individuals. These are significant factors that we will need to consider carefully when assessing future medical workforce needs, the associated medical education requirements and how best we will deliver them.

In conclusion, I welcome the concept of a north-west medical school. I very much welcome this opportunity to focus attention on our undergraduate medical provision. I am committed to exploring the feasibility of the proposal and ensuring that we train the right number of future doctors to meet the needs of a transformed health and social care system that delivers better outcomes for all our population.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Colum Eastwood to wind up the debate on the motion. The Member will have up to 10 minutes.

**Mr Eastwood:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try not to wind it up too much.

I am very grateful for the support from around the Chamber for our motion, which states that we note:

*"the support of the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Health".*

This was not about political point-scoring; this was about putting a very important issue on the agenda. I will say again that I very much welcome the Minister's support today. This is a hugely important issue, and we do not want to play political football — whatever you want to call it — with it. It is unfortunate that a couple of Members decided to drag this down. One minute, the Opposition are being too negative, and then we come up with a very positive motion, and one of the people who called us too negative named his own Minister and singled him out for praise, but that is not good enough either. I am not sure what we have to do, but we will continue to raise the issues that are important to our constituents.

Mr Middleton was at a meeting — unfortunately, I could not make it, but my colleague Mr Durkan was there — last week when the University of Ulster said that it was delighted at the fact that the motion was coming before the House. I think that people are happy that we are addressing these issues. I do not want to get into the issue of who said what first, but Mr McCann is right. It was John Hume who first proposed this. Regardless of all that, that was 25 years ago, and we are still here without a medical school and with a chronic underfunding of our university sector, particularly Magee university.

Mr Durkan well outlined the case for a medical school at Magee. It is absolutely clear that it is not sustainable for the Western Trust to continue to fund locums at the value at which we are doing it. I think that, this year, the amount that the Western Trust will spend on locums will be up to £16 million. It is a fairly simple argument to make, in my view, that we could save an enormous amount of money whilst helping the economy by investing in a graduate medical school at Magee. Mr McCartney made this point, and it is a point that I have made many times.

If someone goes to a university, it is very likely that they will settle down and stay within 20 miles of that university. In fact, 80% of people who leave Derry or Belfast and go to Manchester or Liverpool end up living within 20 miles of that area. Obviously, we can all understand how that works. People settle down, get a job and stay there. We are losing that to our economy. We are losing over 30% of our young people who are going to university at age 18. They head away out of Northern Ireland, and we are losing that to our economy,

to our society and to our families. I do not think that that is a way that we should order our society.

Many parts of our economy need to be turned around, particularly in places in my constituency, and, if we are serious about doing that, we cannot rely on just one fiscal lever. If we think that corporation tax is going to solve all our problems and that continuing to disinvest in our university sector is going to solve all our problems, we are barking up the wrong tree.

I have figures in front of me from the health service in the South. In the Twenty-six Counties, a shortage of GPs of between 493 and 1,380 is predicted. Why can we not address that shortage by training people in Derry? Many people across the Chamber have said that we have a GP shortage here. We know that. We have a huge GP shortage right across this island. This is a fantastic opportunity, and, as Mr Durkan said, the university is already working with people in Galway and in Limerick to try to make this a cross-border entity. Why not meet the need that we have right across this island for GPs? I think that Derry would be the ideal place to do that.

We cannot have a discussion about any kind of investment at Magee without recognising, as Mr McCann has, that this has been a 50-year struggle. We have not been very successful at meeting the promise that was asked for by the people who marched to this place over 50 years ago. That was over 50 years ago, Mr Speaker. This is not about us complaining about something that happened 50 years ago. This is about us being outraged that it has not been resolved.

I note that some people might say that this is about local interest. It is about local interest, but there was nobody in south Belfast jumping up and down when Queen's got places that it did not even ask for. Nobody talked about local interest then. It is about local interest, but, every single day, I will fight for the local interest that has been denied to people in my constituency and people west of the Bann, and others in the Chamber will do the same. It has been a disgrace that we still do not have a decent road to Derry, a decent road from Dublin to Derry or a decent university at the right size, 10,000 places, for Derry. It is a disgrace that that still has not happened, and we welcome any support that we can get around the Chamber for that.

We will not be distracted by people telling us that this is about a little local interest; this is

much, much bigger than that. It is about righting an historic wrong that should have been righted many years ago. We will do anything that we can to support Ulster University and the work that Professor McKenna is doing to bring forward this proposal.

Let me be clear. Mr McCann asked about the commitment to 10,000 places. We are still committed to it, and I hope that other people are as well. This medical school would be a fantastic addition, if we could get it through, but that is all it is. We are not giving up on the campaign to finally and once and for all fund a decent-sized university at Magee in Derry. People in Derry will not accept anything less.

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the support of the Minister for the Economy and Minister of Health for the establishment of a medical school in the north-west; acknowledges the positive impact of a medical school on the delivery of medical and health services in the north-west and that it would be one element in the expansion of student numbers and courses at Ulster University at Magee; calls on the Executive to work with Ulster University, the General Medical Council, the Government of Ireland and other stakeholders for the establishment of a medical school in the north-west; and further calls for a Programme for Government commitment to establish this medical school early in this Assembly mandate.*

**12.30 pm**

## **People Diagnosed with HIV**

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive, so, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

**Mr Middleton:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the increasing number of people diagnosed with HIV in Northern Ireland, year on year; is concerned at the levels of stigma experienced by people living with HIV; acknowledges the need for a new campaign to promote awareness and prevention, specifically tailored to Northern Ireland; commends the work of Positive Life, Northern Ireland's only dedicated charity working to support people diagnosed with HIV; and calls on the Minister of Health to support this organisation in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters.*

I propose the motion, which stands also in the names of Paula Bradley and Trevor Clarke, on behalf of the DUP. We believe that it is an important and timely motion that will go some way, I hope, to raise further awareness, reduce the stigma and recognise the very positive work that is ongoing in the area of HIV. It is also fitting that we do so today, which is World AIDS Day 2016, and that we wear the red ribbon which, in itself, is a powerful symbol to challenge the stigma around AIDS and HIV.

World AIDS Day can be a difficult and emotional time, when people reflect on the damage that the virus has caused and the lives that have been lost as a result. However, it is also an appropriate time to recognise the progress that has been made and, more importantly, focus on the work that is still to be done in preventing the spread of the virus, improving the treatment and health of people infected by it and eradicating the stigma and prejudice that are still too often associated with HIV.

In October of this year, research revealed that there were now over 900 people living with HIV in Northern Ireland. That is an increase of 15% on the 2015 figure. The 103 cases of HIV diagnosed last year is the highest number to be recorded in a single year. Not only is that a worrying trend, it highlights the need for more to be done to address the condition and ensure that there is early diagnosis and treatment of those affected. It is estimated that there are hundreds of others who do not know that they have HIV.

Sadly, there is still a stigma attached to HIV that affects the people living with it. A recent survey indicated that, of those living with HIV in Northern Ireland, 61% felt ashamed of their diagnosis, compared with 49% elsewhere in the UK. That same survey revealed that 68% of people in Northern Ireland diagnosed with HIV had a negative self-image, compared with 56% elsewhere in the UK. It is difficult enough for those suffering with the condition to seek diagnosis and treatment, and it is unacceptable that that is made even more difficult by a lack of understanding around the condition and its effects. To challenge some of the stigma, it is important that we recognise that, of the people currently living with HIV, just over 40% of those cases involved heterosexual contact.

Stigma increases the likelihood of late diagnosis. Late diagnosis can have serious implications and can result in increased risk of other conditions, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia and some cancers. It also limits treatment options and affects the overall prognosis. Given that treatments can now mean that a person who is diagnosed early with HIV can reasonably expect to live a long and healthy life, it is hugely important that people who may be at risk test early. Crucial to that is the need for people who work in our health service to be able to recognise the risk factors and symptoms of early HIV infection. It is essential that those on the front line — our GPs and nurses — be given the necessary support and advice not only to deal with those who have been diagnosed with HIV but to prevent HIV. The fact that, as I mentioned, hundreds of others who have HIV are unaware that they have the virus is deeply worrying. More information on prevention, early diagnosis and treatment would help alleviate the fear, destigmatise the testing and, I hope, promote a more confident approach to those who present for testing.

Through the motion, we commend the work of Positive Life and the role that it plays in supporting those with HIV, advocating on their behalf, working to destigmatise HIV and

ensuring that those affected are treated with respect and dignity and live a healthy life. As a member of the all-party group on sexual health, I have seen at first hand how Positive Life interacts and engages with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that their issues are heard and how it works collectively with those in the sexual health field. We must do all that we can to support it in its work to promote awareness and prevention. There is a clear need for a new campaign to promote such awareness through outreach, counselling, harm reduction and education. We need to challenge the old perception and the old stigmas and ensure that people living in Northern Ireland understand what it means to live with HIV here. We encourage the Minister to support Positive Life and the work that it does and to assist it in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters.

It is also fair that we recognise the work of the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the information that it provides on sexual health issues, including HIV, and the work and awareness training that it carries out throughout our trusts.

We need all the many health and social care organisations and volunteer sector organisations to continue the great work that they do. However, we need to work more closely together, encouraging greater collaboration and ensuring that the Department gives a clear strategic direction in this important area. I commend the motion to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Eamonn McCann is not in the Chamber to move amendment No 1. I therefore call Paula Bradshaw to move amendment No 2.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I beg to move amendment No 2:

*Leave out all after the third "HIV;" and insert*

*"calls on the Minister of Health to support this prevention work by bringing forward proposals to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to vital pre-exposure prophylaxis medication on the same basis as the rest of the United Kingdom; and further calls on the Minister to support Positive Life in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters."*

I thank the DUP for bringing this important motion to the Chamber. We clearly welcome the motion. I visited Positive Life's new centre in my constituency during the summer and

heard in detail about its range of services, programmes and campaigns. I am delighted to see the organisation get the credit and exposure that it deserves today.

We were very cautious about the amendment that was to be proposed by People Before Profit. That is partly because it merely reflects the motion and, in effect, restricts its scope — we must not move away from the fact that HIV can affect anyone, not just people in the LGBT sector — but mainly because it does not include in the equation the vital issue of the pre-exposure prophylaxis medication, commonly known as PrEP. I therefore ask the proposer of the first amendment to consider allowing it to fall to allow the issue to be advanced in order to demonstrate that the Chamber is not just about words but action.

Last year, 103 people were diagnosed with HIV in Northern Ireland. That is 103 people and their families who did not know how their lives — their relationships, friendships, employment prospects and life chances — were to be affected.

We can reduce that number. One way of doing that is through medication designed for people who do not have HIV but who are at a very high risk of getting it. That medication is called pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a daily pill that has a very high efficacy in preventing infection.

We need to be realistic. People who have contact in certain circumstances with people who are HIV positive, not least those who are in relationships with them, are at risk. I strongly support the belt and braces mantra of Brook — a voluntary health and well-being association — that PrEP should not be seen as a replacement for the need for condoms to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, obviously, crisis pregnancies.

I will give a bit of background on, and UK context to, PrEP. It was established in the courts in August this year that NHS England has the power to commission PrEP and that it would cost about £15 million a year. In Northern Ireland terms, that means that the cost would be about £500,000. The average lifetime cost of treating someone with HIV is set at around £300,000, so even if people do not like the thought of this in moral terms, I ask them to look at it in economic terms and the cost to the public purse.

Supporting our amendment does not mean that PrEP will become available immediately. Work has to be carried out into pilot projects in England to assess how it can be commissioned

most effectively and most appropriately. That, essentially, takes away any risk that might incline people to be cautious at this juncture, as there will be time to see how it could be implemented in the overall transformation of health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

I will make two points on how the amendment ties in neatly with that reform. First, PrEP is a classic case of prevention in action and is exactly in line with the Bengoa report and the Minister's road map. We cannot claim to be moving towards prevention being a fundamental part of our health service if we do not stand proactively at the forefront of issues in support of preventative medication such as this.

Secondly, the Minister could be proactive. Indeed, she may even be able to fulfil one of her innovation projects over the next few years by offering to get involved with NHS England's assessment process. I do not know how viable that would be at this stage, but if we wish to take that idea forward I cannot see NHS England not agreeing to it.

With regard to the motion, which we have left intact in our amendment, I re-emphasise that the rise in the number of people being diagnosed might indicate that more people are coming forward. Whatever it indicates, it shows that more people would benefit from a prevention programme that includes appropriate medication. That is a point that our amendment reinforces.

I also warmly welcome the emphasis on the need to remove the stigma, an issue mentioned by my colleague on the DUP Benches. Perhaps we are still victims of the advertising campaign of the 1980s, which had such a significant impact but which no longer reflects the reality of the condition. An awareness campaign, recognising that the stigma can be quite marked in Northern Ireland, would be very helpful.

The amendment serves to reinforce the motion and ties in with the themes highlighted by Professor Bengoa, and I hope that the Assembly gives it its full support.

**Ms Seeley:** I welcome the motion, which we will, of course, support.

World Aids Day takes place this week, so the motion is timely and will, no doubt, be welcomed by those impacted by the disease and organisations such as Positive Life and the Rainbow Project. The number of people living with HIV has reached its highest ever level:

almost 1,000 people in the North know that they are living with HIV. However, what is most concerning is the high number of people who are unaware that they have HIV. We need to tackle the stigma and misunderstanding that surround HIV, such as the belief that HIV is a virus that solely impacts on gay and bisexual men, which, of course, is not true.

Those suffering often do not share the fact that they are living with a life-changing condition that has an ability to impact on their mental well-being and overall quality of life, but we must also increase awareness of the causes, symptoms and living with HIV. That is an obvious area for cross-border cooperation because HIV, as with many issues, does not recognise borders and impacts on men and women North and South equally.

#### 12.45 pm

In response to a question for written answer regarding departmental actions in tackling the stigma, the Minister of Health informed me of a recent workshop to consider key sexual health issues; HIV awareness training in health and social care trusts; and the funding of a number of voluntary organisations that raise awareness and provide information and support to those living with or affected by HIV. All this is positive, and evidence that the Minister is committed to tackling the stigma and supporting those living with HIV. However, as with many issues, this issue spans other Departments. I recently submitted a question to the Minister of Education to ask what provision was made for the teaching of sexual health in schools. Education in schools around sexual health, sexually transmitted infections and the prevention of HIV is key. Through education and increased awareness, we must encourage people to look after their sexual health — in particular, young people.

In the North last year, 9,600 people were diagnosed with STIs — further evidence that we need to educate to ensure that all of us, including young people, make positive choices about our own sexual health. Sexual health information should not depend on the ethos of the school or opinion of individual teachers.

We need to further encourage testing. Whilst I welcome the introduction of home HIV testing kits, they undoubtedly require improvement to ensure ease of use. I recently met Positive Life. I commend its work in not only supporting those living with HIV but increasing awareness and shining a light on the fact that so many people are totally unaware that they have HIV.

I also commend the sterling work of the Rainbow Project.

As a society, we must respond to this and develop services and information to meet the needs of those living with or affected by HIV, as well as those living unaware. Finally, to those suffering from HIV but too afraid to speak out: talk to someone. Support services are available, and people are willing to listen and help.

**Mrs Dobson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I appreciate and agree with the call in the motion:

*"for a new campaign to promote awareness and prevention",*

of HIV. Indeed, a renewed and refreshed campaign has been long lacking.

In supporting that, it is important to look at the work already undertaken, led by the Public Health Agency (PHA), and what can be learned from that. The RQIA has, since 2013, been calling for the development of a regional clinic network to drive improvements in outcomes for patients and service users. No one is denying the need for a clear strategic direction to be set for sexual health services and agreed standards for service delivery. I hope that this motion brings closer that ambition called for in 2013.

In April 2012, the Health Committee received a briefing from the PHA on the sexual health promotion strategy and action plan for 2008-2013. I understand that the strategy was subsequently extended until the end of December last year. The strategy's fifth key priority area was HIV and STI prevention, and I understand that involved important work with high-risk subgroups.

As the motion states, cracking the stigma around seeking help is one of the major challenges, if not the major challenge, for any strategy. I pay tribute to those working in the trusts to deliver HIV awareness training, which contributes greatly to addressing that stigma. Bearing in mind, however, that one of the key objectives of the strategy was to reduce the incidence of STIs, including HIV, in the 10 years since 2004, we have seen a 47% increase in new HIV diagnoses. That is on the back of an overall reduction of 20% across the United Kingdom. That said, the prevalence of HIV diagnoses in Northern Ireland remains lower than the other regions of the UK.

I want to take a few moments to focus on the RQIA's October 2013 review of specialist sexual health services in Northern Ireland.

The report made 16 recommendations in total. It concluded:

*"Recent indicators for sexual health in Northern Ireland show concerning rises in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV."*

Amongst its recommendations were the development of standards for services; the development of a managed clinical network; improvements in what they termed, "fragmented" commissioning arrangements; and workforce planning to address staffing levels that were:

*"impacting on the ability to provide more locally accessible and integrated services."*

These are all issues that warrant consideration in looking to future services to prevent the continued rise in the number of people diagnosed with HIV in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I appreciate that the Minister acknowledges that the PHA, along with stakeholders, undertook a major sexual health workshop last month and that she will consider the outcome of and proposals from it. However, I hope that, in response to today's motion, she will acknowledge the clear need for a renewed and refreshed sexual health promotion strategy that takes on board the recommendations made by the RQIA in 2013 and recognises the need to address the concerning rises in diagnoses in recent years in Northern Ireland. It would also be helpful for us to receive a timeline within which such a refresh and renewal could take place.

**Mr Clarke:** I support the motion. As already noted by one of the Members who spoke today, Thursday is World AIDS Day. I should put on record that we tabled the motion as close to Thursday as possible in order to give the topic the most impact. When I came here in 2007, I would have dismissed the possibility that I would speak about HIV today, because I was one of those who did not understand the stigma attached to it.

I am not trying to get a rise out of Mr McCann when I say this, but I feel that his amendment, had he moved it, would have been unhelpful to people who, like me, were ignorant of the fact that this disease can affect heterosexuals. I have to put on record my thanks to Jacquie

Richardson from Positive Life. Meeting her for the first time was a turning point for me, having been ignorant of the fact that the disease also affects heterosexual people. For that reason, I have no difficulty supporting what the motion calls for. The work that Positive Life did in changing my opinion — not only my opinion but that of many others — helped to remove the stigma.

Mr McCann's amendment would have added to the stigma. Maybe those who are bisexual or gay do have a statistically higher risk, but his amendment brought that into the equation and amplified it. I think that we should talk about all who suffer with this condition; not just those who have the highest risk. For that reason, I support the work that Positive Life does, and I support the call for a centre of excellence. The work that the organisation does helps to dispel the myths. My colleague referred to the 61% of people who feel ashamed — nobody should feel ashamed because they have this condition. They need the support of us and others to try to overcome that so that they can live as long and normal a life as possible.

I do not want to stir things, but there was an interesting TV programme on last week about the end days of Freddie Mercury and his battle with the disease. When it came on, I thought, "I am not going to watch this", because the stigma of what the disease is about was starting to come back, but I watched it to its conclusion. I know that Freddie Mercury died relatively recently, but one of the things that struck me — this came across in what Paula said about drugs — was how what can be done to help people who suffer with HIV has moved on. We should be giving people hope that things can be done to extend their life. Not one of us in the Chamber today knows how many days we have. Not one of us knows what illness we might have as we stand here today. We should look to the future and try to live as long and as healthy a life as possible. For me, whether it be through drugs or other support, we should support people with HIV, give them a better quality of life and remove that stigma because, as I say, no one should be ashamed because they have this condition. Many of us could have life-limiting diseases of other sorts, and we will not feel ashamed about that. We will want to live our life to the fullest. The work that Positive Life has done will make it easier for people who have the condition to live a fuller life, and they will know that they have support mechanisms in that organisation. I support the motion.

**Mr Milne:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this very important

motion. While noting the concerns expressed by those who tabled the motion about the level of stigma experienced by people living with HIV, I put on record my support for any new campaign that promotes awareness and prevention and, more importantly, that is tailored to our local needs. I also commend the good work being carried out in this field by organisations such as Positive Life and Rainbow.

It is important that we place on record our support to show that we care for people living with HIV. Making all efforts towards the development and improvement of the service to help people living with HIV is part of this. How we organise our health service matters, including how we better resource HIV prevention. We also need to support those people in our community who are living with HIV on quality-of-life issues, including social protection and positive mental health.

We must not understate the importance of testing for HIV to ensure an early diagnosis. As stated by the Public Health Agency, people respond better to treatment when they are diagnosed at an early stage of disease. The agency also stated that knowing your HIV status is the key to effective treatment and the prevention of onward transmission. HIV stigma is a key obstacle to HIV treatment, prevention and support. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents from the North of Ireland who contributed to the 2015 HIV stigma index stated that they had a negative self-image, so it is most important that we create an effective public awareness campaign in an effort to tackle the misconceptions around HIV. I support the motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, the Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.*

**2.00 pm**

*On resuming (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair) —*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Tosnoimid le ceisteanna liostáilte. We will start with listed questions. Question 7 has been withdrawn.

### Together: Building a United Community

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the assessment made of the knowledge, skills and strengths in local communities before developing action plans through Together: Building a United Community. (AQO 774/16-21)

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** Together: Building a United Community is an Executive strategy that places responsibilities on all Departments. The development of the summer camp programme and the United Youth programme adopted a co-design approach with key stakeholders and young people. Local engagement with residents, community groups and stakeholders has informed the development of strategic frameworks for each Urban Village area. Young people are receiving training and mentoring to deliver the cross-community youth sports programme. This approach of local community engagement is at the heart of Together: Building a United Community. We will continue to work with communities to identify local needs, address local issues and deliver positive outcomes for all.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Gordon Lyons. Gabh mo leithscéal. Excuse me. I call Roy Beggs for a supplementary.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she acknowledge that having a wide range of bodies for Together: Building a United Community — the social investment fund (SIF), the small pockets of deprivation programme (SPOD), neighbourhood renewal funding, the Housing Executive and councils — means there is a danger of overlapping and duplicating services? Yet there are areas in my constituency, such as Craigy Hill and Antiville, where there is very weak community support and they seem to have missed out. What are

the First Minister and deputy First Minister doing to ensure that areas are not missing out on support and that where there is a need it is addressed?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Many of these schemes are open to applications, and if the applications are put in, they are then assessed. In East Antrim under T:BUC, there have been many good interventions. There have been summer camps at Larne. The Education Authority (EA) has run a Larne rural youth project and engaged with Monkstown Boxing Club under the summer camp programme. Money has been distributed through the district council good relations programme, which will have an impact on East Antrim as well. The Community Relations Council (CRC) through T:BUC has been able to allocate over £10,000 to projects in East Antrim, including the Cairncastle Ulster-Scots cultural group and the Carrickfergus historical re-enactments group. Indeed, there are many other organisations that have been able to avail themselves of CRC's core funding. In many cases, it is about an application process. Applications are then looked at to make sure they meet the required methodology and the governance needed to pay out the money. If he has any particular groups in mind that have not been successful in their applications, we are happy to work with him to see whether there is any way we can build capacity in that area, but it is done mostly by application.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the First Minister for her answer and for all the good work that is being done through the T:BUC programme. She will be aware that the social investment fund is delivering for people in East Antrim through the building to employment through education programme. Does she agree with me that that is an excellent use of resources? It helps people who are in work or out of work to improve their employability through —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Lyons:** — free courses. Does she not agree that that is a fantastic use of the social investment fund?

**Mrs Foster:** Indeed. There are four SIF projects that benefit East Antrim: the community transport project; the mental health project; the fuel poverty project, which had to be re-scoped to make sure it did not overlap with projects already in place; and the building to employment through education project, which

he just mentioned. That project has an investment of £3.2 million. It has two elements focused on increasing employment through education. It is a very good example of the work SIF is doing on the ground through early intervention and making sure people have the appropriate skills, education and employability so that they can then move into the world of work.

Some of the employability schemes that are happening across Northern Ireland have really made an impact and will continue to do so.

**Mr Lynch:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will she provide an overview of the Executive Office funding programmes?

**Mrs Foster:** As I said, we have the T:BUC programmes. Under that, of course, there are seven headlines — it is really a framework, with seven different frames under that. We have the following: the shared and integrated education programme; the United Youth programme; Urban Villages, of which there are five; the shared neighbourhood programme; the interface programme, which is trying to remove barriers and walls, and we have been able to move from 59 down to 50; the cross-community youth sports programme; and, of course, the summer camps, which I have spoken about as well.

Under T:BUC, those seven headline programmes are working very well. Some of them will come to a natural end, and we will then be able to see the outworkings of them through the evaluations.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. How can she provide assurance to the communities that she engages with that that engagement extends beyond the client base of her party, the DUP, and Sinn Féin given the recent issues around Charter and other issues that have raised concern in the community at this time?

**Mrs Foster:** I am not quite sure what "other" things he is talking about. Perhaps he can be more specific in a follow-up. In terms of the SIF programme, all organisations that receive public money are subject to robust checks to ascertain their capability to manage the funding and to make sure that they do it in an appropriate fashion. That is still the case. It is organisations, not individuals, that are subject to checks. The Department would not be aware of which individuals in an organisation would be working on any project. It is the organisations

that we are concerned with. If he is talking about Charter NI, which is quite a segue from East Antrim, I have to say, that organisation has been in existence with a very robust board for 10 years and we have no difficulty in working with it.

## National Holocaust Memorial Day

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any plans they have to mark National Holocaust Memorial Day. (AQO 775/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** I am pleased to say that arrangements for the Northern Ireland commemoration to mark National Holocaust Memorial Day 2017 are well-advanced. The Executive Office has allocated a budget and staffing resources to assist in the organisation of the local commemoration. An advisory group, made up of representatives of those affected by the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, has been established and has already met on three occasions since September to plan the event.

It has been agreed that the Northern Ireland commemoration will take place in the Market Place Theatre in Armagh at 7.00 pm on Thursday 26 January 2017 in order to avoid a clash with the Jewish sabbath on Friday 27 January. We are honoured that Mrs Mindu Hornick, an Auschwitz survivor, has agreed to be the keynote speaker at our commemoration, and it is expected that formal invitations to the event will be issued in the next few weeks and that all MLAs will be invited.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. What engagement has she had with the local Jewish community and, in particular, Walter Kammerling and his connections to north Down?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I have, very recently, visited the local Jewish community in north Belfast at their synagogue. I have to say that it was a very pleasant evening. We shared a meal, and I heard some of their concerns at the moment, which, of course, reflected some of the disgraceful attacks that have been happening, not least the anti-Semitic symbols that have been sprayed on houses and the synagogue and, indeed, the attack on the Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery on 26 August. I wanted to go to the Jewish community in Northern Ireland and stand in solidarity with them against these absolutely

outrageous attacks on them as an ethnic minority and as a religious community here.

Walter Kammerling is a very significant person for you in north Down. He is now 93 years of age, having escaped Nazi persecution when he left Vienna in 1938 at the tender age of 15. He made his way via Kindertransport to Millisle in County Down, where, of course, the Belfast Jewish community had leased a farm. Walter ended up there for three years.

He was one of approximately 300 children who passed through that farm. He has recently been involved in making a film about his experiences in north Down. We very much look forward to seeing that film and looking at the past and the significant role that was played by north Down at that time. I am sure that the Member, as a representative of North Down, is very proud of the way in which the area welcomed people.

**Mrs Palmer:** I thank the Minister for her response thus far. Last month, Rabbi David Singer indicated that he believed that there had been an increase in anti-Semitism in Northern Ireland. The Minister touched on that. How do the Executive intend to collect data during this mandate to monitor the levels of anti-Semitism in our society?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member. Of course, we monitor hate crimes in general, but we do not have a specific monitor for anti-Semitic hate crime. That is something that we need to consider, particularly given its rise. It is a very sad indication, when there is only a very small community of Jewish people living here, that people seek to attack them, their religion and their consecrated graves. It is something that we need to consider. I will give thought to it.

**Mr McGuigan:** Following on from the last response on monitoring hate crime, I ask the First Minister for an update on the current Executive response to hate crime.

**Mrs Foster:** As I indicated, recorded hate crime has not risen as it has, unfortunately, in England and Wales recently, but it is an incomplete metric of how much hate crime is occurring. For example, an increase in confidence to report hate crime and awareness of how to report it will lead to an increase in reported crime even though there has not been an increase; there has just been increased awareness or an increased confidence in reporting. We need to look at hate crime statistics to see whether we can monitor them more effectively. I hope that the racial equality

subgroup that we have set up, which has met twice already and is due to meet again in December, will assist us in our deliberations on these issues.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the First Minister for her answers thus far. Will she outline whether there are plans to extend Holocaust Memorial Day services to include more primary-school children?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not have that detail in front of me. I know that we very much want to educate young people about the horrors of what happened in the past, particularly in relation to the Jewish community. When it comes out, the Walter Kammerling film will be a very appropriate way to engage with young people, given that he travelled here when he was a young person and was very warmly welcomed to Northern Ireland.

I will certainly pass on those comments to officials involved in planning National Holocaust Memorial Day. As I said, they have identified Armagh as the place to host it next year. I very much hope to be in Armagh to mark that very important anniversary.

## **EU: Action Plan for Leaving**

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the memo, published on 15 November 2016 by The Times newspaper, that reveals a lack of an action plan for leaving the European Union. (AQO 776/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** We now know that the memo published in 'The Times' was not an official UK Government document; it was produced by Deloitte. Even they have confirmed that it was not commissioned by the Cabinet Office and was prepared without access to Number 10 or input from any other Department. Clearly, it did not reveal anything of the UK Government's position.

That having been said, it should not be a surprise to anyone that the UK Government have not yet finalised their plans for leaving the European Union; indeed, if they had, I would be concerned, given that they are in detailed discussions with us to help to shape the plan. They are still at the information-gathering and analysis stage, which is a huge task covering many areas of government. We are currently feeding our assessment of the issues into the process through the Joint Ministerial Committee and extensive bilateral engagement between officials. We would neither expect nor want the

UK Government to adopt a position until they had considered all the issues and implications, including those for Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister has made it clear that we will be fully involved and represented in the development of a UK approach. We will continue to take every opportunity to reiterate our agreed priorities and to emphasise the unique nature of our situation.

**2.15 pm**

**Mr McGlone:** Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. I thank the Minister for her answer and for shedding some light on that. Unfortunately, it appears that any journalist with a good camera can get an insight into what the Brexit stance of the UK Government is at the moment. Does the Minister support, like the deputy First Minister, the tabling of a legislative consent motion in the Assembly on the triggering of article 50?

**Mrs Foster:** No, I do not, because I believe that it is a matter for the Westminster Parliament. There are issues now in front of the Supreme Court. Those matters will have to be heard. We as an Executive are not officially party to that, but all the issues that were heard in the Belfast court are now before the Supreme Court. We are an interested party, and our Attorney General will be there as well, so we will have a full understanding of the Supreme Court decision when it comes.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Does the First Minister think that it is practical to adopt a policy of having cake and eating cake?

**Mrs Foster:** If the question is whether we should have ambition for Northern Ireland outside the European Union, the answer is "Yes, we should". That is exactly what we are doing. We want to ensure that we have maximum access to the single market, as we agreed at the British-Irish Council with all our colleagues from the devolved Administrations. We want to make sure that the border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom is not a hard one, as we agreed with all our colleagues. There is growing consensus, not just in the United Kingdom and Ireland but in Europe, in the understanding of the situation of Northern Ireland and its history and geography. If the question is about ambition, we should definitely lead the way and have ambition for this place.

**Mr M Bradley:** Is the Minister satisfied with the level of engagement with the UK Government on Brexit?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, I am, because the Prime Minister has come here. Together, we have gone to the Joint Ministerial Committee plenary session. We were then at the European exit meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee. The deputy First Minister and I are in China next week, so ministerial colleagues will go to the next Joint Ministerial Committee meeting. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has made it clear that, if, at any time, we have any issues that we want to raise with him, we should contact him directly and raise them. I do not think that you can be more open than that.

**Ms Dillon:** Minister, if what you outline is the case, is it not fair for the Ministers to share that information with their Committees?

**Mrs Foster:** As I said in my substantive answer, we are still at the analysis and information-gathering stage. No positions have been taken on what the UK negotiation position will be, because the Government are still trying to understand all the different positions across the United Kingdom. As the Prime Minister very clearly said, we should not engage in a running commentary. People in this place should know that, when one enters into negotiations, positions sometimes have to change and there have to be trade-offs in order to achieve an end agreement. I am sure that this will be no different.

**Dr Farry:** In the light of the deep concerns expressed by many businesses across the UK and the agriculture sector, particularly in Northern Ireland, the warnings from the financial markets and the looming Budget deficit, will the First Minister explain her remark to her party conference that this is the greatest opportunity for Northern Ireland for decades?

**Mrs Foster:** Yet again, I reiterate the position on ambition. Other people might want to talk down what has happened; I see it as a tremendous opportunity for Northern Ireland. It is a chance to be innovative and flexible and for Northern Ireland to be an open and welcoming regional part of the United Kingdom. It is a chance to go across the world and look for new trade deals. It is a chance to give our fishermen more flexibility, and, my goodness, would they not welcome more flexibility after what they have had to put up with from the European Union?

This is an opportunity to be welcomed. There will be short-term challenges, and I have never shied away from that. In the medium to longer

term, however, we will be in a much stronger and better place.

## **EU: UK Decision to Leave**

4. **Ms Hanna** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. (AQO 777/16-21)

**Ms Hanna:** My question has been slightly lost in translation since its submission.

**Mrs Foster:** I am sorry. It is no secret that the deputy First Minister and I were on different sides of the argument leading up to the referendum. However, we are both committed to getting the best possible outcome for the people of Northern Ireland and are working together to achieve that. We are actively engaged with the UK Government to ensure that the issues of particular significance for us are fully understood. The Prime Minister has assured us that we will be involved and represented in the negotiations on the terms of our future relationship with the European Union, and we intend to be.

We are also working closely with the Irish Government to identify and scope issues of mutual interest and exert influence. We had a very positive meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) on 18 November, when we agreed to continue and intensify engagement through the NSMC sectoral meetings and between senior officials. Our joint objectives are set out in the letter that we sent to the Prime Minister in August and we are working to achieve those objectives.

**Ms Hanna:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. She referred to the growing understanding in Europe of our unique circumstances. Is she not worried, at any level, that London will look after the south-east and that she and the deputy First Minister need to seriously agree a detailed strategy and start fighting for Northern Ireland's access to the EU single market?

**Mrs Foster:** I am not quite sure which part of my previous answer the Member missed about maximum access to the single market. That is not just the position of the deputy First Minister and myself; it is the position of all the British-Irish Council delegates who met together last Friday. It was one of the four issues that we put out after that meeting, so it is difficult to see where the lady is coming from.

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the First Minister for her answers thus far. Does she agree that the most important relationship is not with the EU but with the United Kingdom?

**Mrs Foster:** Absolutely. It is, of course, the most important relationship for Northern Ireland, particularly when you look at where the sales of our goods go. Sixty-seven per cent of the goods manufactured in Northern Ireland go to the UK market, including our own domestic market. That is something that, frankly, is missed by a lot of people when they talk about access to the European market. They should be concentrating on how we can increase the amount of goods that we send into the UK market. To go back to Mr Farry's point about agriculture, there is a great opportunity for us to provide more of our agri-products into the United Kingdom because there will be some displacement from European Union products. There are opportunities and we should take them. Instead of dwelling on the past, we should accept that the vote has been taken and move on to the future.

**Ms Gildernew:** What work is taking place to outline the impact of Brexit on border communities such as those that are scattered right across my constituency? I can see no positive impact at all.

**Mrs Foster:** Well, I can see plenty of positives. The Member must not be engaging with the same communities that I am engaging with because they seem to be benefiting greatly at the moment from what happened on 23 June, particularly in Enniskillen. However, we are engaging in relation to the common travel area with the Taoiseach and with our own Prime Minister. Every one of us wants to see the common travel area sustained and maintained to make sure that there is ease of access, not just in relation to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland but between Wales and the Republic of Ireland. We must also not forget that the Crown dependencies are part of the common travel area and we need to be able to satisfy them.

**Mr Smith:** Yesterday, Sinn Féin launched a document called 'Towards a United Ireland'. In a covering letter from Gerry Adams, which we all received, he said that the prospect of Northern Ireland:

*"being dragged out of the European Union ... has put the issue of Irish re-unification ... back onto the ... agenda."*

How can the public have any faith in the Executive's ability to represent Northern Ireland's best interests on this issue when one half of it is so blatantly pursuing —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think the Member has asked —

**Mr Smith:** — its own party political issues?

**Mrs Foster:** We have made it clear that the Executive Office will do all that is right for the best interests of the people whom we represent at the negotiations. I cannot speak for the president of Sinn Féin, and I will never pretend to speak for the president of Sinn Féin.

If he wants to put out a document along those lines, so be it for him, because the reality is — and of course some people cannot accept this — that the vote on 23 June had absolutely nothing to do with a vote on the reunification of Ireland. The two are completely separate. In June, people were asked if they wanted the United Kingdom as a nation state to remain within the European Union or leave the European Union. They gave their decision on that matter, and it has absolutely nothing to do with a return to an all-Ireland state.

## Victims Services

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the design of the new victims service delivery model. (AQO 778/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will ask junior Minister Ross to answer this question.

**Mr Ross (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** Our Department, in conjunction with the Victims and Survivors Service, the Commission for Victims and Survivors and key stakeholders, has been taking forward a collaborative design programme of work to develop a comprehensive and high-quality service which meets the needs of all victims and survivors. The outworkings of the collaborative design programme have clearly outlined the need for a new service delivery model which can address the longer-term sustainability of programmes and eligibility concerns to help provide better outcomes for victims and survivors. We aim to have this new model operational from April 2017 onwards.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Can he give an overview of the

collective design approach that has informed this new delivery model?

**Mr Ross:** The design programme team has been set up, and it comprises personnel from the Executive Office, the Victims and Survivors Service and the Commission for Victims and Survivors to ensure the development of an improved service delivery model capable of meeting the needs of victims and survivors. During the process, there was extensive engagement. A series of workshops were held to identify the key priorities moving forward. The areas identified included: improving the monitoring and evaluation for victims groups, giving greater flexibility for individuals, the piloting of new ways of working, personalised budgets, caseworkers and a better assessment of needs. Hopefully, all this work has put us in a better position for us to move forward into next year.

**Mr Logan:** Last week the Executive announced over £30 million of new funding streams for victims. Can the junior Minister outline what these are and when the applications open?

**Mr Ross:** Yes, last week we were delighted to be able to announce new funding streams worth over £30 million. There were two identified. The first is the victims support programme which is worth £18.7 million, and the second is a Peace IV shared spaces and services programme worth €17.6 million. Both are designed to not only build capacity within groups who are supporting and representing victims, but also improve the health and well-being of victims and survivors right across Northern Ireland.

The application process for both funding streams opened last week on 24 November, and I encourage as many people as possible to come forward and apply for that funding because, as we have said, it is a significant amount of money available and it demonstrates the Executive's commitment to the victims and survivors sector.

**Mr Butler:** A year on from Fresh Start, what progress has been made on delivering a world-class trauma centre?

**Mr Ross:** I missed the last part of that.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member repeat the question?

**Mr Butler:** A year on from Fresh Start, what progress has been made on delivering a world-class trauma centre?

**Mr Ross:** Thank you for repeating the question. Significant progress has been made. Department of Health officials continue to lead on the establishment of a mental trauma service for Northern Ireland, which was announced by the Minister for Health in September 2015. It will meet the psychological needs of victims and survivors, and it is not a purely medical model either; it will be an integrated approach. The partnership agreement is being developed to define referral protocols between statutory, voluntary and community sectors as we speak. Considerable progress has been made, and coupled with the other programmes and services offered by the Executive and the arm's-length bodies, we are helping people right across Northern Ireland deal with the many complex issues facing victims and survivors.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Chris Lyttle for a very brief supplementary.

**Mr Lyttle:** Can the junior Minister update us on the creation of the post of victim advocate to assist victims and survivors to navigate the wide range of justice information and service provision available to them?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** And a very quick answer from the junior Minister.

**Mr Ross:** We continue, through the work of the Executive Office, to help victims and signpost them to the right place for assistance. We are also helping to build capacity within groups, and hopefully we will be in a better position in January to outline how we intend to continue to move forward in this area.

**2.30 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sin deireadh leis na ceisteanna liostaithe. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to topical questions.

### **Papal Visit: August 2018**

**Mr McNulty:** The First Minister will be aware that a papal visit to Ireland in August 2018 was confirmed yesterday. I welcome the First Minister's statement that she will meet the Holy Father. I hope that she can show that she understands how important the visit will be for a lot of people.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member please come to his question?

T1. **Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an assurance that the Executive will be supportive of the Pope's visit, vocally and practically, and that every effort will be made to work with local government to ensure that our towns and cities are looking their very best, just as for every other big event that has been held here. (AQT 556/16-21)

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think that the Member has asked his question.

**Mrs Foster:** And many others besides.

I do, of course, understand the significance of a papal visit, should it happen. I notice that the Vatican has said that it does not confirm a visit until six months before it takes place. There has been a lot of excitement among some people, but we will have to wait to see whether it occurs. If it does occur, and if he, as head of state, comes as a guest of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, of course I, as head of the Northern Ireland Executive, along with the deputy First Minister, will meet him.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the First Minister guarantee that moneys and funds will be available to local government to ensure that our towns and cities look their very best for the visit of our Holy Father?

**Mrs Foster:** We had better get a visit confirmed before we start planning to spend money. I am sure that, if the Finance Minister were here, he would bear this out: we have a very difficult Budget coming towards us in the next while, and we need to look at what our priorities will be over the next couple of years. Of course, if such a visit is to go ahead and is planned, we will make sure that Northern Ireland looks its best, as we try to do for all the visitors who come to Northern Ireland.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Iarraim ar Trevor Lunn. I call Trevor Lunn.

**Mr Lunn:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

## **Pension: Victims of the Troubles**

T2. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister supports the urgent provision of a pension for the people who were seriously injured during the Troubles. (AQT 557/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, I do. The Democratic Unionist Party has a very clear view on a pension for people who were seriously injured, and we must ensure that they are facilitated. We very firmly believe, however, that that should be available only to the innocent victims, and therein lies part of the difficulty. As the Member will well know, the definition of a victim, as it stands, includes those injured when committing some of the most heinous crimes, and I will certainly not stand over giving money or a pension to someone who was the author of his own misfortune.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before calling the Member for a supplementary, I congratulate him on his beautiful Irish.

**Mr Lunn:** I will not repeat it. *[Laughter.]* I thank the First Minister for the points she made and the answer she gave. Some of us met WAVE's injured campaign group today. On their behalf, I wish to ask if and when the Executive Office will introduce seriously injured pension legislation for consideration by the House, given, as we all know, the length of time that people have been waiting?

**Mrs Foster:** I wholeheartedly endorse WAVE's campaign. I am sure that the Member recognises that we should take forward WAVE's campaign for a special pension for those who suffered injuries through no fault of their own during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As he will know, I await the readiness of others to look at the definition of a victim. Members of my party have tried in the past to have that discussion, but, unfortunately, we have not been able to change the definition. However, we live in hope that it can be changed so that people can get what is duly theirs.

## **BBC Sports Personality of the Year Shortlist**

T3. **Mr M Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the First Minister's thoughts on the exclusion of Northern Ireland sporting stars from the BBC Sports Personality of the Year shortlist. (AQT 558/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** Well, how shall I put it? She is not amused. I think that it is absolutely scandalous that someone of Carl Frampton's ability, who is a double world champion, should be excluded from the Sports Personality of the Year.

**A Member:** And Jonathan Rea.

**Mrs Foster:** I hear from my colleague that another man should have been thought of — Jonathan Rea — who is also a double world champion. What about Bethany Firth? What about Michael McGovern, that man from Fermanagh, who did sterling work for the Northern Ireland team during the Euros?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mrs Foster:** There is a huge hole in relation to the Sports Personality of the Year. Despite the fact that the nominations have been increased from 12 to 16, they have managed to leave out some very special sporting stars from Northern Ireland.

**Mr M Bradley:** The First Minister mentioned the wealth of sporting talent in the Province, and we are contributors to the service as licence payers. Are there any plans to challenge the BBC?

**Mrs Foster:** I understand from my colleague the Minister for Communities, who has just joined me, that he will raise that directly with the BBC's head of sport, Barbara Slater. When you look at the judging panel, you see that there is a problem. They are obviously not aware of other sports, and we really need to bring it to their attention. The Member is right: we are all licence fee payers, and that should be considered. As I said, the Minister for Communities intends to raise the matter directly with the BBC.

## C S Lewis Square

T4. **Mr Douglas** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after thanking the First Minister for attending the launch of C S Lewis Square last week, whether the First Minister agrees that that is the sort of successful initiative that the Executive and the Assembly should be supporting. (AQT 559/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** I congratulate east Belfast on a wonderful open space to commemorate one of its most famous sons. It is a tremendous example of partnership working between the community, the Connswater greenway, Belfast City Council, the Big Lottery Fund and, of course, the Department for Communities in the Executive. It is a tremendous way in which we can regenerate urban spaces in a very meaningful way. I have to say to the Member that I was really taken by the number of children who were there and who looked on with great awe and admiration at the huge statues that have been put in place at C S Lewis Square. I

hope that they all get as much enjoyment from the works of C S Lewis as my generation did.

**Mr Douglas:** I thank the First Minister for her answers thus far. Last Sunday, a few days after the opening, there were six C S Lewis tours with 30 people on each one — they were bugged out. Does she believe that tourism is a big driver for those types of initiatives? I also want to thank the Northern Ireland Tourist Board — Tourism Northern Ireland.

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, it is Tourism Northern Ireland, which does tremendous work in marketing those initiatives, as does Tourism Ireland. The wonderful thing about tourism is that it can be a job creation initiative and an economic driver for the whole of Northern Ireland. When you get a local story or hook, you are able to tell the world about your local environment, and I have seen some marvellous examples of that.

The deputy First Minister and I were at Seamus Heaney's HomePlace recently, which is another tremendous example of how you can use culture and someone's birthplace as a way to bring tourists and those who are looking to expand their minds to Bellaghy. A tremendous initiative has gone on there as well. Two great giants — Seamus Heaney and C S Lewis — and it is about time that we started to recognise what they have done for this place.

## China Visit

T5. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their planned visit to China. (AQT 560/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** The deputy First Minister and I will leave for China very early on Sunday. We have a full programme from Monday morning, when we will meet the Northern Ireland Bureau in China; indeed, we will open our bureau there.

That will be a very important staging post for us out in the Far East. We are hoping to meet Madam Liu Yandong, who was here in Northern Ireland some years ago when she met the then First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, all the Executive and took in some of our tourism opportunities.

We are going to meet Bombardier, which has a facility out in China — in Shenyang — and we will meet other very important dignitaries in Shenyang and look at various investment opportunities for here in Northern Ireland. We will return to Northern Ireland on Friday of next week.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Following our successful year of food and drink and given the quality of products available, what opportunities exist for further exports of our quality products into new markets like China?

**Mrs Foster:** We will look for opportunities not least for our agri-sector and, in particular, our pork sector out in China. We will no doubt eat some of the fare from China — the things we do for Ulster — and we will bring them the message that Northern Ireland is very much open for business and wants to do business with China. The agri-food sector will be very much a strong part of what we will talk about when we go to China.

### Vulnerable Persons' Relocation Scheme

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the vulnerable persons' relocation scheme. (AQT 561/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** We have had a very successful integration of the refugees who have come to Northern Ireland. The junior Minister will keep me right, but I think I am right in saying we have had five groups of families, mostly, coming to reside here in Northern Ireland. They have been spread out across Northern Ireland. I have to say that a great deal of praise and commendation should go to the officials right across the piece who have worked very hard to make sure that those who come to Northern Ireland for a new life are given all the support they require.

**Ms Dillon:** What more does the Minister believe can be done to help reassure our migrant and foreign national communities that they are welcome in our communities?

**Mrs Foster:** We have been taking a ministerial lead on these matters through our junior Ministers and, indeed, through ourselves as well. This time last year — I think it was probably later in December — the deputy First Minister and I, as Finance Minister, visited our very first group of refugees that had come to Northern Ireland. We can do that, therefore, by very positive leadership. We set up our racial equality subgroup, and the refugee integration strategy is being drafted at the moment. We hope it will be out for preconsultation very soon with a number of very important stakeholders. So, that is going on as well.

### Rugby World Cup 2023

T7. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the bid for the Rugby World Cup. (AQT 562/16-21)

**Mrs Foster:** Two weeks ago, the Rugby World Cup bid was officially launched between us and the Irish Government. Our main competitors appear to be France and the Republic of South Africa. We are quietly hopeful, if not confident, that we can attain the Rugby World Cup for 2023. We say that not only because we have been doing some lobbying and some very hard work behind the scenes, but because we have not had the Rugby World Cup and the other two jurisdictions have already hosted it in their own countries.

**Mr Frew:** Will the First Minister take this opportunity, as I will, to congratulate Rory Best on his 100 caps for Irish rugby and to acknowledge the great achievement that is for the man himself and the great personality that he is?

**Mrs Foster:** I am very pleased that you have mentioned that because Rory is, of course, one of our greatest sporting ambassadors. We are incredibly proud of what he achieved on Saturday evening, not just because he got a win but because it was his 100th cap. He can take from this place, I hope, the support of the whole House for what he has achieved wearing the green shirt.

2.45 pm

### Justice

#### Reoffending Strategy

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans to bring forward a strategy to prevent reoffending. (AQO 788/16-21)

**Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice):** Reducing reoffending is central to the work of my Department. A wide range of organisations, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Youth Justice Agency and the Probation Board, work collaboratively to provide rehabilitative programmes, supervision and support that focus on addressing the factors that lead to offending behaviour.

In 2013, my Department published the 'Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending'. The framework recognised the need for strong partnership working across government and with the statutory, voluntary and community sector, both to prevent people from becoming involved in crime and to reduce reoffending. We will continue to build on the core principles set out in the strategic framework through my Department's contributions to the draft Programme for Government 2016-2021, which contains a performance indicator focusing on reducing reoffending.

The associated delivery plan is currently out for public consultation, and consideration will be given to how best we can take forward the respective actions therein. The Programme for Government will be the main vehicle through which my Department will work to deliver strategic actions aimed at preventing reoffending. Consequently, I do not have any current plans to bring forward a separate strategy, although I will keep this under review.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. As the Minister will know, the Welsh Government have a strategy to prevent reoffending, which involves police, agencies and government, addressing priority offenders groups —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member come to a question?

**Mr McNulty:** — reducing reoffending across health, education, substance misuse, debt-related crime —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member please come to a question?

**Mr McNulty:** Is this integrated approach and a dedicated strategy not needed in the North?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his supplementary. The answer that I gave him to the original question outlines that that collaborative approach is one that we are taking in Northern Ireland. Indeed, we need to have a collaborative approach when it comes to reducing reoffending and, if we can, enable offenders, once they come out of custody, to go back into a safer community, not just for themselves but for the entire community. That collaborative working is at the heart of my Justice Department's work and, indeed, at the heart of the Programme for Government.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I will expand on the issue of crime. As

you know, the Northern Ireland crime survey is showing a decrease in crime, yet the PSNI crime statistics are showing an increase in crime. Can you give us a view on that and where resources would go to?

**Ms Sugden:** The Member raises a very interesting point on the measurement of crime. Indeed, is that an appropriate measurement for how we tackle some of the issues that we are facing in the criminal justice system? As the Member will be familiar with, one of my key priorities is around domestic violence. Arguably, if that crime is reducing, it suggests that that is because of decreased reporting, so we would like to see an increase in reporting, which suggests an increase in crime. Therefore, we have to take a number of factors into account when we look at crime statistics and see how we can best tackle these issues based on those numbers.

**Mr Douglas:** Will the Minister join me in welcoming the appointment of Cheryl Lamont as chief executive of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, which is the type of organisation that we need to continue to support to prevent reoffending?

**Ms Sugden:** I join the Member entirely in that. I was delighted to hear of Cheryl's appointment. Indeed, I wrote to her very soon after hearing of that outcome. I have worked with Cheryl in her role acting up as chief executive since I became Minister, and I have been deeply impressed by her approach to probation in Northern Ireland. The work that the Probation Board does should not be underestimated, both with people while they are in custody and following custody when people come out into the community. It is an organisation that we need to support. There are two strands of rehabilitation. One is preparing the individual, and the other is preparing the environment into which they come out. We need to ensure that the proper provisions are in place so that they can be in the most stable environment so that they are unlikely to offend again.

**Mr Sheehan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a cuid freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will she give a commitment to bring forward proposals for achievable outcomes and much-needed support for reoffenders before, during and after they leave prison?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. In a response to a previous question from the Member, I outlined my keenness to look at offending at the point of offenders

coming into the criminal justice system, before going into custody, during their time in custody and when they come out of it. Ultimately, our aim is to ensure a safer community and we do that in the hope that no one will reoffend. There are a number of approaches that we can take. We have already outlined the work of the Probation Board and how it can help.

However, we have to take a wider approach than that. Indeed, it has to be a cross-departmental approach. It is not just about reducing the opportunities to commit a particular crime; it is about providing the right social housing, for example, and ensuring that the right benefits are in place so that, when offenders come out of custody, they will not have opportunities to commit crime. There are a number of approaches to this, but I entirely agree that our support in rehabilitation has to be at the point of the criminal justice system. I had a conversation with the Lord Chief Justice on that very aspect. It has to be while offenders are in custody, so that we can build them up and, hopefully, ensure that they will not reoffend. Afterwards, in the community, we must ensure that former offenders are supported and that communities are kept safe.

## **Orange Institution: Hate Crimes**

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any additional measures her Department has taken to address hate crimes against properties owned by the Orange Institution. (AQO 789/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** I want to say at the outset that I find any attack on any symbolic building unacceptable. I am aware that there have been a number of attacks on symbolic premises across Northern Ireland, some of which have been investigated as hate crimes by the PSNI. The operational response to such attacks is a matter for the Chief Constable. I understand that the PSNI has a control strategy to deal with such attacks, and that entails PSNI patrols continuing to pay attention to symbolic buildings and local crime-prevention officers providing security advice.

In response to the recent attacks on Orange halls, the PSNI have refreshed and recirculated their control strategy to all districts. From the perspective of my Department, the underlying societal issues that can culminate in any hate crimes, including attacks on Orange halls, cannot be dealt with by the criminal justice system alone. They require an Executive-wide response if they are to be tackled effectively.

The Executive Office leads on tackling hate and intolerance in society more widely through the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy. My Department supports that work through the delivery of the Executive's community safety strategy, which contains a commitment to tackle all forms of hate through prevention, awareness and education.

I recently met with junior Ministers Fearon and Ross to discuss how my Department could further support the work they are taking forward to tackle hate crime. Engagement between our Departments continues. For example, in the Member's constituency, the North Belfast District Policing and Community Safety Partnership recently launched the No Hate Here initiative, which aims to engage the community in standing up to hate crime and to provide safe places for victims of it.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Orange halls were the first community halls. They are used by hundreds of community organisations every week, and thousands of people attend them. I understand from the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland that 32 halls have been attacked this year. The detection rate is deplorable, if not non-existent

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member come to his question please?

**Mr Humphrey:** What more can be done, and will the Minister commit to meet with me and a Grand Lodge of Ireland delegation to discuss the issue of these appalling and ongoing attacks on the Orange community across Northern Ireland?

**Ms Sugden:** I am more than happy to meet the Member and representatives of the Orange lodge. I am pleased that the Member has a focus on this particular area. During the previous Question Time, we talked about attacks on Jewish targets. Perhaps we could arrange a day when we can meet representatives of a number of communities in north Belfast. I am more than happy to do so.

**Mr McPhillips:** Let me begin by condemning all hate-filled attacks, whether on Orange halls, GAA or other sporting bodies, places of worship or other places. Given that eight hate-motivated incidents are reported to the police daily, does the Minister support a single equality Act as a mechanism to put in law better protection for all our citizens, including ethnic minorities?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. I condemn any form of hate attack in any part of our society and from any background. I very much support the principle of equality. In terms of what we can do within the Assembly, I demonstrated that yesterday with the provision that I made in the Policing and Crime Bill. I deplore any type of such behaviour that happens in our society.

Again, there has to be an Executive-wide approach. I am pleased to say that the Executive Office, under the leadership of the junior Ministers, is having a particular focus on hate crime, and I am quite happy to support it in doing so. I think that the Assembly, to a large extent, needs to support those messages also.

Yes, of course it is the approach that we should be taking, and it is heartening to see that we are making steps forward.

**Ms Gildernew:** Does the Minister agree that a multifaceted approach is required to bring about an end to hate-crime attacks on property owned by all sections of the community and that mutual respect for all cultural traditions is central to that?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes, entirely. We all need to accept the fact that we are different. If anything, that enriches our society. It is something that we should celebrate with one another and respect. It has to be a multifaceted approach. As I said, it cannot be just in my Department that we look at this, which is when it gets to the unfortunate end point of these types of offences and crimes. Yes, we very much need to start celebrating the diversity that exists in Northern Ireland, and I am happy to play my part in doing that.

**Mr Beggs:** First, I declare an interest as an officer in my local lodge and of Larne district. Between 2011 and 2016, there have been 132 attacks on Orange halls. Does the Minister accept that, if there had been 132 attacks on synagogues, GAA halls, mosques, chapels or the buildings of other denominations, there would have been a much stronger, cross-departmental response to address the causes of the sectarian hate attacks? Will she ensure —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think that the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Beggs:** Will she ensure that there is greater recognition for what these are —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has asked his question.

**Mr Beggs:** — which are sectarian hate-crime attacks?

**Ms Sugden:** Any type of attack, whether it is on an Orange hall or a GAA property, is entirely deplorable. I think that the approach taken in this area has been consistent from all Members I, for one, do not underplay the fact that these attacks are happening to Orange halls and that we should take a very serious approach to how we tackle them. Operationally, the response sits with the PSNI. I have had conversations with George about all sorts of hate crimes across Northern Ireland. Yes, every type of attack needs to be deplored, and I certainly would not single one out. It is not acceptable, and that is the message that I put out to the House. We should be completely against anything like this.

**Mr Lunn:** The statistic that Mr Beggs just gave us is absolutely deplorable, but it does not take away from the fact that many institutions are being attacked in this country, and many foreign nationals and EU citizens —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member come to his question?

**Mr Lunn:** I am getting there. Can the Minister give an absolute assurance that she will deal with each incident equally, no matter what the institution is or who the person is, and that all institutions and people will receive whatever measure of protection is available to her?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes, there is no question about that. I am happy to treat all such attacks equally. Every incident, regardless of its nature, is deplorable, as the Member outlined. Therefore, yes, of course — unquestionably.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Minister agree that deterrent sentences are essential to stamp out this sectarian hate crime? Is not the Department's commitment undermined by the fact that, although there have been 132 attacks, the Minister is not interested enough to know how many prosecutions there have been? As Mr Beggs said, if the —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think that the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Allister:** — subject of attack had been of a different colour, I think that the Minister would have made it her business. Is that not correct?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has asked his question.

**Ms Sugden:** The Member is entirely incorrect. As he will know as well as anybody else, prosecution is a matter for the Public Prosecution Service. I am fully aware that the Member for North Antrim has asked a number of questions about Orange halls. I can give my absolute assurance to the House that I take these matters seriously, regardless of whether it is an Orange hall, GAA building or any other type of building in our community. As another Member outlined, these buildings are used by communities from various backgrounds. We should be supporting our community and voluntary sector. I completely dismiss claims that my approach would be any different were it another type of building. I am not even sure where the Member is getting that suggestion from, but I can put on record that that is not the case.

## Stalking

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on legislation on stalking. (AQO 790/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** Stalking and its impact on victims are matters of great concern. Such behaviour has no place in Northern Ireland, and I am clear that any such incidents should be subject to the full rigour of the law.

### 3.00 pm

As I announced on 12 September, my Department is reviewing the law in this area with a view to introducing legislation with specific stalking offences. My officials briefed the Justice Committee last week on our initial work. The Justice Committee has indicated that it will carry out a review to consider the potential benefits of specific stalking legislation and has committed to producing a report by April 2017 to support legislative change. My Department is working closely with the Committee on the issue to ensure that legislation can follow swiftly from the conclusion of this shared approach.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that you agree, Minister, that stalking is one of the worst types of harassment and that the sooner we bring forward legislation to stamp it out and get the people who are carrying it out before the courts the better.

**Ms Sugden:** I agree with the Member's comments on stalking. I have met victims of stalking, facilitated by Members of his party, and in my constituency people have come forward to say how stalking is devastating their lives. I am not convinced that the current legislation is strong enough in this area, and I am mindful to look at that, pending the outcome of the Justice Committee's review. I am pleased to say that the Justice Committee is taking a really proactive approach, and I look forward to seeing its report early next year.

**Mr Mullan:** Will the Minister confirm whether she intends to publish a legislative programme for this mandate? If so, when? In addition to legislation on coercive behaviour, what are your legislative intentions?

**Ms Sugden:** I am still developing my legislative programme. I am keen to have focused pieces of legislation in this mandate. I hope to bring forward three pieces of legislation this year, including the piece of legislation on coercive control that includes the domestic abuse offence that I committed in the House to bring to the statute books within a year. We are also looking at committal reform in terms of the parliamentary action plan. The name of the third piece of legislation escapes me, but I will come back to the Member on that.

**Ms Boyle:** Under the law for harassment, how many people have been convicted for either harassment or stalking offences?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for her question. I do not have the details to hand, but I am happy to write to the Member with them. I can talk generally about people who have come to me with comments on the harassment law. I am not sure that it is fit for purpose, particularly in relation to stalking. Stalking has taken on a very modern guise, particularly with social media, and that is an area that we need to look at. The Member sits on the Justice Committee, and I am keen to see the outcome of its report to see how we can best tailor a Northern Ireland-specific piece of legislation on stalking.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for outlining that her review should be complete by April of next year. Is she aware of a cross-departmental gapping and mapping exercise on Internet safety that was headed by OFMDFM during the last mandate that might feed into her review on stalking? Will the Minister make a point of accessing that study?

**Ms Sugden:** I am not aware of the previous mandate's work, but any work that has been

done would be useful in any study on stalking legislation. I have asked my departmental officials to look to jurisdictions further afield than the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to see whether there are any other innovative approaches that we can take to legislation in this area. The Member makes a good point, and, as I said in my answer to Ms Boyle, we need to look at how the Internet plays a role in stalking, particularly through social media. The issue is something that we are all too familiar with, and we need to look at ways to address it. That will be difficult, particularly with the online aspect and how that crosses jurisdictions, but it is something that my Department will look at as part of a review, and I am sure that the Justice Committee will also look at it as part of its review.

**Ms Bailey:** From her work on stalking legislation, does the Minister feel that the harassment laws are fit for purpose or are they due to be reviewed and updated?

**Ms Sugden:** In developing any piece of legislation, we need to look at the current legislation to see whether it is fit for purpose. On the offence of stalking, you are referenced to current harassment legislation. As I have said to other Members, I am not sure that the current harassment laws are fit for purpose in that area.

I imagine that we will move towards specific stalking legislation, but there is a lot of work to be done alongside the Justice Committee, as I said.

## **Domestic Violence: Foyle**

4. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice what support her Department is providing for victims of domestic violence in Foyle. (AQO 791/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** My Department provides £1.8 million in funding to Victim Support Northern Ireland to ensure that all victims have the support they need within the criminal justice system. On 5 July 2016, I officially opened the Victim Support NI Foyle hub, which seeks to ensure that victims and witnesses of crime, including domestic violence, have access to support services as they engage with the criminal justice system. More specifically, as part of the Derry/Londonderry special court listing arrangements, my Department has been working with statutory and voluntary partners to improve referral arrangements and support services for domestic violence victims. The referral process from PSNI through Victim

Support NI has been reviewed, and work is ongoing to improve the timeliness of data transfer for domestic violence and abuse cases in the Foyle area. The protocol between Victim Support NI and Women's Aid is being revised to ensure that victims are advised of their respective services and can avail themselves of these or be referred, as necessary. PSNI, Men's Action Network and the Men's Advisory Project will also be covered in the revised agreement.

The intended installation of a second remote link at the NSPCC's Londonderry office provides the opportunity to use the link specifically for domestic violence victims and witnesses on special domestic violence listing days. Officers in the local policing team in Derry City and Strabane have been provided with enhanced training around dealing with domestic abuse incidents. The Derry City and Strabane district command unit was the pilot district in the PSNI to obtain body-worn video cameras for use by front-line officers following a £1.5 million investment by the PSNI. The cameras have proven invaluable in the investigation of domestic-related incidents, where many victims have historically been reluctant to provide a statement.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for her detailed response. The Minister mentioned the special court sittings. Can the Minister give her assessment of how successful she feels that scheme is and whether she plans to extend it across the Province?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. I have been very impressed by the court listing arrangements around domestic violence in the Derry court system. We will enhance those arrangements around a perpetrator scheme to see how we can make better use of this focus, hopefully with a mind to rolling it out across Northern Ireland.

**Mrs Palmer:** Can I ask the Minister to give a time frame for introducing legislation that mirrors Clare's Law in England to address the disclosure of domestic violence and sexual offences?

**Ms Sugden:** As part of the work that we are doing around domestic violence, we are looking at a disclosure scheme as well as a domestic abuse offence. The domestic abuse disclosure scheme, from my understanding, does not require specific legislation; it requires special arrangements. I do not have a time line for when we intend to introduce that. Work is

ongoing, but I am happy to update the House when we intend to introduce that.

**Mr McCartney:** Agus mo bhuíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her answers, in particular in response to Gary Middleton, when you said you were impressed about what is called the Derry model. Will you pledge your support for the Women's Aid One Safe Place project if you are contacted by the Minister for Communities or the Department of Finance?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. Whilst in Derry, I visited the One Safe Place that had been proposed by Foyle Women's Aid. I was very impressed by that. I can confirm to the Member that my Department is working with Women's Aid in Foyle to see how it can better progress the business case with a mind to, hopefully, funding the project.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, I know you have already mentioned the specialist domestic violence listings in Londonderry court, but can you give any idea on when progress for similar listings in other courts will take place?

**Ms Sugden:** At this stage, we are looking at enhanced arrangements around a perpetrator programme. The Minister of Health and I visited Women's Aid in Lisburn, and one of the areas we talked about was the need to look at perpetrators in tackling domestic violence. The nature of this abuse is domestic, and, very often, victims are reluctant to come forward because, for example, they do not want to get their partner, the father of their child, into trouble. We are looking at a perpetrator programme that could, perhaps, provide another opportunity to address this type of offence, before we roll it out across Northern Ireland.

The theme of problem-solving in justice will thread through my entire work programme in the Department of Justice. It is, I think, a good, common-sense approach to how we deal with this, and it ensures the best service for the people whom we serve.

## **PSNI: Suspension of Training**

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any discussions she has had with the Chief Constable on addressing the shortfall of 300 officers in the PSNI as a result of the suspension of training at the Northern Ireland Police College. (AQO 792/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** I have regular meetings with the Chief Constable and discuss a broad range of issues. I have not, however, had any discussions with him on this specific issue. I have been advised that work is progressing well to implement the recommendations of the review of the police training college with a view to commencing student officer intakes in January 2017. A number of recommendations have already been implemented, such as the cessation of punitive methods, marching to and from classes and the removal of the compulsory residential requirement of the training. The dedicated implementation team is continuing its work to address the remaining recommendations. The PSNI is due to provide an update on progress in this respect to the Policing Board later this week.

I am aware that the PSNI has, as a provisional measure, taken steps to notify potential candidates of its intention to recommence student intakes to the policing college in January 2017. This is, however, subject to approval by the Policing Board. While I cannot comment definitively on the resumption of student intakes, I fully recognise that the Policing Board is seeking assurance that the necessary arrangements are in place before indicating its support for the commencement. I am confident that the PSNI and the Policing Board are working together with a view to full implementation of the recommendations as soon as possible.

**Mrs Barton:** Will the Minister give a commitment that the shortfall in trained and operational officers will not be used as a reason for further budget cuts to be imposed on the PSNI?

**Ms Sugden:** All of us in the Executive are keen to protect our budgets, but we have to be mindful of the current climate of cuts. The protection of the PSNI from a 2% cut is helping to ensure that front-line policing can be protected as far as possible. I am currently content that the PSNI has sufficient resourcing to meet the demands placed on it.

**Mr Kearney:** I wanted to ask the Minister about the discontinuation of the punitive and militaristic training of PSNI recruits at Garnerville, but she has adequately answered the question already.

**Ms S Bradley:** Will the Minister confirm that she supports the Patten threshold of 7,500 full-time police officers? Has she committed to putting that at the centre of any budgetary

priorities going forward? Within what timescale would she hope to achieve it?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to note that they have one question.

**Ms Sugden:** We need to be very mindful of how appropriate the Patten report on police reform was in Northern Ireland 15 years ago. A lot of the arrangements in Patten are still applicable today, and, indeed, in my answer to Ms Barton, I said that the 2% ring-fence around the police ensures that they have sufficient numbers to meet operational needs.

### **Prison Staff: Assaults**

6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice how many assaults have been committed against on-duty prison staff since 2012. (AQO 793/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** In 2013, there were 94 assaults on prison officers on duty in prison establishments in Northern Ireland; in 2014, there were 105 assaults recorded; in 2015, there were 100 assaults recorded, and, to the end of October this year, there have been 58 assaults on staff. From an operational perspective, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has found that the greatest contributing factor to assaults is crowding.

The use of accommodation is kept under regular review, and the prison population is dynamically managed in this respect. Additionally, the Prison Service is evaluating the effectiveness of body-worn cameras for prison staff to prevent violence and assist in the management of disruptive prisoners. I had asked the Prison Service to explore the feasibility of deploying the cameras more widely to deter violent or disruptive prisoners, and they have recently been deployed in the care and supervision unit to record interactions with particular prisoners held there.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Alex Easton for a very quick supplementary.

**Mr Easton:** OK. I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree with me that any attacks on prison officers are totally unacceptable. What facility or support is on offer to prison officers who have been assaulted?

**3.15 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** And an even quicker answer from the Minister.

**Ms Sugden:** Any attack on any front-line member of staff, particularly in the Prison Service, which falls within my remit, is entirely deplorable. I am keen to ensure that there are support services in place, and, alongside the pay review for the Prison Service, I recently announced that I would extend the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) to serving and retired prison officers. That will be a significant support in helping them to deal with the difficulties of their job.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thanks to everyone for being so brief.

Sin deireadh leis na ceisteanna liostaithe. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to topical questions.

### **Prison Officers: Industrial Action**

T1. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Justice what provisions have been made to prepare for industrial action by prison officers. (AQT 566/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** We have had close conversations with the Prison Officers' Association on the recent pay review. Unfortunately, the POA has not accepted the increase that we negotiated on its behalf, but we continue negotiations. If we should, regrettably, move towards industrial action, I am content that we have the appropriate contingency arrangements in place to mitigate any significant service problem in the prisons. However, as I said, negotiations continue, and I am pleased that Mr Aiken's colleagues have facilitated some of the conversations on that. I appreciate that, but we are still working towards a more positive outcome.

**Mr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for her comments so far. Do you think that the Department and the Prison Service management board have been disingenuous by saying that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has been offered a 2.6% pay rise, when 1.6% of that figure is in relation to risk allowance?

**Ms Sugden:** I was keen to stress to the Finance Minister the inclusion of the supplementary risk allowance for prison officers because it reflects their very challenging job. However, we were constrained by the public-sector pay policy, of which we need to be mindful. I am pleased to say that I negotiated

for prison officers what is probably the best award in the public sector. I appreciate that it is not what the Prison Officers' Association wanted for its members, but I continue to be very mindful of how we can best support them and am content that we got the best deal for them.

## **Prisoners: Costs**

T2. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the average cost of housing a prisoner in a prison in Northern Ireland and to state how that compares with the equivalent cost in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQT 567/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** If the Principal Deputy Speaker will indulge me, I will respond to Mr Wells with a prepared response.

While the costs are not directly comparable, the average annual cost of keeping an offender in prison in Northern Ireland was £57,643. The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) figure in England and Wales was £35,182, and the cost for the Scottish Prison Service was £34,399 in the same year. The Northern Ireland Prison Service cost per prisoner place is higher than that in the rest of the UK as the same services must be provided in a relatively small prison population and, therefore, economies of scale lead to higher costs in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Wells:** Those figures are quite shocking because they indicate that it costs 40% more to house a prisoner in Northern Ireland than in Scotland, where economies of scale must also prevail.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member come his question, please?

**Mr Wells:** Will the Minister outline what plans she has to bring that figure down to the UK average?

**Ms Sugden:** I do not believe that the costs are directly comparable. Northern Ireland is quite different, given the challenges that we face: the extra costs relating to paramilitary prisoners. When we get outline business cases in place for the prison estate, we will start to see more savings and safer prisons in terms of sight lines and the other areas outlined in those outline business cases. Work is ongoing, and, hopefully, we can bring that figure down, but I do not believe that it is a fair comparison with other parts of the United Kingdom.

## **Prison Officers: DOJ Support**

T3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice what work her Department is doing to support the prison officers who have been at the coalface of many of the harrowing deaths in custody, given that there has been much in the media recently about the unfortunate death from suicide of many prisoners. (AQT 568/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** Any death in custody is an absolute tragedy, and I extend my sympathies to the families affected by the two most recent deaths in Maghaberry prison; indeed, the impact is also on prison staff, and we need to be mindful of that. The appropriate supports that are in place have been offered to those prison officers. As mentioned in an earlier answer, I am really mindful of the challenges that prison officers, particularly those in Northern Ireland, face in their role, which is why I was keen to find a way we could better support them. I am pleased to say we have extended the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust to serving and retired prison officers. It provides a fantastic service, and, if you get the opportunity to visit, you should go. It provides a range of services in mental and physical health. I really look forward to seeing how it can better facilitate prison officers, both retired and in service.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she believe the media are balanced in their reporting when these deaths take place? Does it take into consideration the difficulties the prison officers face, the conditions they work in and the mental health of the prison officers themselves —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Clarke:** — given those conditions?

**Ms Sugden:** I am not sure there is balanced reporting of any story that has come out of my prisons. A number of reports in the press have been wildly exaggerated or, to some extent, untrue. I do not think we appropriately estimate the challenges that prison officers face. Northern Ireland is a challenging environment because of our specific issues. I am keen to stress that we need to support prison officers, and that, in turn will lead to better support and care for the prisoners in their custody. The message is that we need to have a balance, and I will try to find ways to do that for prisoners and prison officers.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 4 has been withdrawn.

### **Court Services: Access**

T5. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister of Justice what consideration has been given to rethinking how and when court buildings, staff and facilities are being used to improve the service and to ensure the sustainability of local court and justice services. (AQT 570/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** One aspect of the justice system, as a public service, that we need to be mindful of is access to justice. The Member will be aware that I announced a review of courts across Northern Ireland. Part of the thinking in that is how we can better utilise courthouses. As mentioned in an earlier answer, one of the threads of delivery I intend to take through my programme of work in the Justice Department is problem-solving justice. We are piloting an addiction court in Northern Ireland, and we will look at other areas — perhaps at mental health. We have talked about the domestic violence court arrangement, and perhaps we can look at court services through that. I regularly meet the Lord Chief Justice, and he is keen to see how we can better utilise the courts around Northern Ireland. Ultimately, at the heart of this has to be access to justice, so, ultimately, I would like to see fewer cases going to court, which is why I think a problem-solving justice approach is the right one to take.

**Ms Gildernew:** I welcome the Minister's answer. I agree with her that this is about access to justice, and I welcomed her announcement earlier this year about keeping local access to justice.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to come to her question.

**Ms Gildernew:** Will the Minister give serious consideration to restoring Coroners' Courts, industrial courts and family proceeding courts etc to local courthouses instead of centralising those functions?

**Ms Sugden:** My justice review will take a wide look at how we service access to justice throughout Northern Ireland and within communities. The Member made a particular reference to family courts. Essentially, if there is, perhaps, mediation so that a case does not necessarily go to court, which we all know can be traumatic for families, that will form part of a wider review of courts and the buildings they are held in. We need to take a realistic look at

how we provide court services in a modern 2017.

### **White Ribbon Campaign**

T6. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Justice to outline her role in this year's White Ribbon Campaign. (AQT 571/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for her question; indeed, we are hosting an event in the Long Gallery this evening that I encourage every Member to attend.

The Minister of Health and I were at a Women's Aid refuge centre in Lisburn this morning, and one of the key messages — I see a lot of gentlemen in the Chamber, so I will make the point — was that we really need to take ownership of the domestic abuse and violence happening in our society. It is not a case of paying lip service to it. Domestic violence is a deplorable act of abuse against individual citizens, and it has such wider implications for wider society. We find that people who come into the criminal justice system, for example, have had some incidence of trauma, and, in a lot of cases, that trauma tends to be from domestic violence. If we can tackle domestic violence, we can go a long way towards tackling wider societal problems including mental health issues, addiction issues, the three areas together that seem to be the quite serious implications of domestic violence.

We are currently in the 16 days of action, so, if there is anything that Members can do, whether through social media, having conversations or raising the debate, we need to talk more about the scourge that happens in society and that does not discriminate. If you think that it is not happening in your area, I can assure you that it is. That is the message that we need to get out as much as possible.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Minister for that very thorough answer. She will be well aware that the pledge for the White Ribbon Campaign is to never commit, condone or stay silent about domestic violence against women. Does the Minister agree that it is for each of us here and in wider society to make it socially completely and utterly unacceptable for anyone to commit domestic violence?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes; domestic violence and domestic abuse. Members are aware of my commitment to bring forward legislation within a year around a coercive control and domestic violence offence and add it to the statute book. Again, I reiterate the message that every

person in the Chamber today has the responsibility to ensure that they do not let this happen. We often hear about who is and who is not to blame. This is a case where, if we do not do something about it, then, to an extent, we are guilty too. I encourage every Member, when they leave the Chamber today, to do some act within the 16 days of action to raise the issue of domestic violence in the communities. It is incredible when you think of the lives you might save in doing so. I appeal for that.

## **Policing Board: Lobbying Guidance**

T7. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister of Justice whether members of the Policing Board have been given any guidance on lobbying for funding for arm's-length bodies. (AQT 572/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** I am not aware of what the Member is alluding to. The Policing Board is independent of my Department. I do have an interest in the area, but I am not aware of the comments that the Member is alluding to.

**Mr McKee:** Thank you, Minister. Does the Minister agree that good governance and transparency in all who hold positions of authority on boards is paramount to the trust that the people of Northern Ireland have in them?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes, entirely. Good governance is the essence of good public service. I entirely agree with those comments.

## **Prisons: Drugs**

T8. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice what action is being taken to address the prevalence of drugs in our prisons. (AQT 573/16-21)

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. Drugs, particularly psychoactive substances, are an issue in our prisons. It is difficult to mitigate drugs coming in and out of our prisons. Another area of concern is the prescribed drugs that are coming into prisons and being taken illicitly. We keep a regular review of drugs coming in and out of prison, and there is a sense of the effects that drugs have in prison. It is difficult. It is disproportionate in prisons as well. However, it is something that we are focusing on, and it is something that, generally, we need to focus more widely on in society. It contributes to a lot of localised crime. Some of the work we are

doing through the paramilitary panel report suggests that drugs are quite prevalent in communities and are being pushed through those means.

If there is anything that Members can suggest, I am happy to hear it. Again, there has to be a Northern Ireland Executive-wide approach to this and, indeed, a Northern Ireland Assembly approach.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The recently published report on the announced visit to HMP Maghaberry in September 2016 noted that no significant progress had been made in addressing the concerns on the abuse of drugs raised in May 2015 and restated in January 2016.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member come to his question please?

**Mr Anderson:** Minister, do you agree that the drugs issue is too serious a matter not to be dealt with? What do you propose to do to eradicate the scourge of drugs in our prisons?

**Ms Sugden:** Of course, I agree that it is too serious an issue not to be dealt with, and it is something that I have a keen focus on. I take a lot of reference from that report. Again, as I said, it is concentrated in prisons, which tend to be a reflection of wider society. It is not just about what we can do in prisons; it is also what we need to do in wider society. I have had conversations with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister around this area, and it is something that we need to address more widely. I have a keen focus on it.

3.30 pm

## **Northern Ireland Assembly Commission**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 1 has been withdrawn.

## **Languages Policy**

2. **Mr McMullan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the development of a languages policy. (AQO 803/16-21)

**Mr Dickson:** Mr McMullan, thank you for your question. The Assembly Commission's 'Good Relations Action Plan 2016-2021' was agreed by the Commission in October. It includes an action to agree a languages policy in 2017.

That action was carried forward into the 'Good Relations Action Plan 2016-2021' from the previous action plan, which covered the period 2012-16. In November 2012, following consultation with political parties, the Commission considered a draft languages policy and associated guidance. However, the Commission was unable to reach political consensus on the matter in the last mandate.

At its September meeting, the Commission requested that a paper on the languages policy be presented to it in January 2017. Secretariat officials are currently preparing that paper. Once the Commission has had the opportunity to consider the matter and agree a way forward on languages, the detail will be developed. The development process will include consultation with relevant stakeholders, including Members, political parties and staff.

**Mr McMullan:** I thank the Member for his answer. What is the Commission doing to fulfil its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The Commission is aware of the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and is represented on the interdepartmental charter implementation group. The Commission will consider any guidance that arises from that group.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Naomi Long is not in her place.

## Parliament Buildings: Internet

4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the steps that have been taken to improve Internet speeds in Parliament Buildings during periods of peak use. (AQO 805/16-21)

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for his question. I hope that he does not press me on the technical details. In 2011, the Assembly Commission procured and installed its own dedicated Internet connection to provide better and more consistent access to the Internet for all Parliament Buildings users. The service was originally provisioned at 20 megabits per second. Due to increasing demand, it was increased to 40 megabits per second in February 2013. In September 2014, a further additional line was installed to provide resilience. At that time, the line speed was increased to 80 megabits per second overall.

Since 2011, the service provided has been upgraded three times.

Since the new connection in 2014, the Assembly has benefited from significant additional bandwidth. Information Systems (IS) Office staff proactively monitor the status of the Internet connection. At present, the Assembly Commission and the IS Office are not aware of any major problems with the Internet in the Building, although there are surges in use at various times; there can be about 900 different users on the Internet at one time in the Building, which might cause momentary or transitional difficulties. However, as far as the Commission and the IS Office are aware, there is no major reason for concern.

**Mr T Buchanan:** I thank the Member for his answer. I appreciate what he said, but I think that Members are finding that, at lunchtime, speeds are still very slow. Maybe that could be addressed.

**Mr Attwood:** As I indicated in my initial reply, during peak hours and on sitting days, especially around lunchtime, when people are about the Building more, there can be in excess of 900 devices, ranging from traditional PCs to smartphones and other devices, accessing the Wi-Fi. That surge may lead to a reduction in speed. The Commission will keep that under review. The current contract allows for an increase of a further 20 megabits per second.

If the Commission, informed by Members, determines that there is a need to go in that direction, I am sure that it will not be found wanting.

**Mr Chambers:** Will the commissioner provide an update on the engagement with mobile phone networks on improving phone signals in much of Parliament Buildings?

**Mr Attwood:** In my lifetime on the Commission, which has not been very long, the matter has not been flagged up at Commission level. It may have been flagged up to management. If so, I will get a response to the Member. If it has not been flagged up to management or the Commission, I am sure that both of us will look at it.

**Ms Dillon:** Will the Member update us on what the cost would be to the Assembly to increase the connection capacity?

**Mr Attwood:** I will get back to the Member on what the cost might be. As I indicated in a supplementary answer, there is a provision in

the current contract for further upgrade by 20 megabits to 100 megabits. I am sure that the cost is part of the contract, but I will get back to the Member on the precise amount.

**Ms Armstrong:** Given the fact that we have businesses that have in excess of 1,000 or 1,500 devices being used on the Internet with superfast broadband, what does the Commission consider to be the impact of low Internet connectivity speeds on sitting days on the ability of Members to research for debates?

**Mr Attwood:** I am sure that all members of the Commission will hear what the Member is saying. As I said, there has not been much evidence brought to the Commission that there is a big problem. Yes, we recognise that there are surges in use and that that might slow down connectivity, but, as far as I am aware and as far as I am informed by management in the Building, we are not aware that there is a major concern. However, the fact that four Members have asked questions this afternoon on the matter yet there were no supplementaries asked to the first question, Members must be flagging up the issue to the Commission, and I think that the Commission should look at it.

### **School Visits: Newry and Armagh**

5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the number of visits to Parliament Buildings by schools in Newry and Armagh in the last 12 months. (AQO 806/16-21)

**Mr Dickson:** I thank Mr Irwin for his question. Between 29 November 2015 and 28 November 2016, the Assembly Education Service provided programmes to 17 schools from the Newry and Armagh constituency. There were a total of 661 participants in the programmes. The Education Service delivered programmes to 15,316 young people during the period. The programmes were delivered in Parliament Buildings and in schools.

**Mr Irwin:** What is the promotional aspect involved in encouraging schools to make educational visits to the Assembly?

**Mr Dickson:** The Education Service has a great deal of contact with schools right across Northern Ireland. At the beginning of every school year, it sends out letters to all schools explaining the programme and the resources available. Booking information is also available on the Education Service's website, and it tweets daily, uses social media and takes part in programmes. There is also a new

subscription service available on the Assembly website that will allow teachers more direct contact.

**Mr Kennedy:** What additional measures could be taken to attract even more uptake to the excellent education service that is available in Parliament Buildings. Can he give a breakdown of the Newry and Armagh figures for primary and post-primary school visits?

**Mr Dickson:** As I said previously, there is good contact made between all schools in Northern Ireland and the Education Service. I genuinely believe that schools are fully aware of the programme that is available, but until they avail themselves of it, they will not understand the broad extent of the work that is done.

There are 72 primary schools and 18 post-primary schools in the Newry and Armagh constituency. Of the schools that were visited during this period, three were primary schools, with 95 participants, and 14 were post-primary schools, with 566 participants. I encourage all Members to encourage schools, as and when they visit them, to participate in the Assembly's education programmes.

### **Gender Action Plan**

6. **Mr Kelly** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the current Gender Action Plan. (AQO 807/16-21)

**Mr Wells:** The gender action plan 2016-18 was approved by the Assembly Commission in March 2016 following staff consultation. It sets out actions and measures to promote gender equality in the Assembly secretariat and is broken down into three themes: leadership and development; communication and engagement; and life balance, health and well-being. A gender action plan implementation group, which comprises staff from across the secretariat, has been established to oversee the implementation of the plan. The group reports to the Commission every six months on progress against targets.

An update was presented to the Commission at its November meeting, highlighting progress made since March 2016. This included an update on the Commission's participation in Business in the Community's gender project, which includes areas such as equality, organisational policy and personnel issues and participation by Assembly Commission staff in the Women in Public Life programme. Further actions will be rolled out over the lifetime of the plan. It is worth noting that — I am sure that

the honourable Member for North Belfast is aware of this — two out of the five senior posts in the Assembly secretariat are held by women, including, of course, our chief executive. There were no females at this level of leadership one year ago.

**Mr Kelly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Member for his answers up to now. He gave a pretty comprehensive answer, but I suppose that the question that most people ask, because it is obvious that the gender balance is not a good one, is this: what are the targets, or are there any targets, in the action plan and how will they be monitored?

**Mr Wells:** The ultimate aim of the plan is to ensure that we have gender balance in the Assembly. The fact that two such important senior posts have recently been taken, on merit, by women indicates that we are moving in the right direction. Some of the problems regarding gender in the Assembly are skewed by the fact that most ushers and security staff are male. That, undoubtedly, will skew the overall balance between males and females in the Assembly. However, at many levels in this Building, women are coming forward for senior positions and the balance is a good one. We have decided against any form of quotas. We considered it, but when it comes to recruitment it is unlawful to reserve a quota of jobs for members of a particular under-represented or disadvantaged group. Therefore, we cannot define or have quotas for those positions on the basis of sex, religion, community background, race or sexual orientation.

**Ms Bailey:** On the back of that response — thank you for it — and given that quotas in the Patten report worked very well for the Police Service, could we not reconsider the implementation of gender quotas for the Assembly?

**Mr Wells:** The Assembly is nowhere near the position that the Royal Ulster Constabulary was in at the time that quotas were implemented when it became the PSNI. It has always been the case that a very large proportion of our staff, albeit still a minority, have been female. Quite frankly, I think that many of the female members of staff in this Building would like to think that they had been appointed entirely on merit rather than because of quotas. Equally, if they are promoted, they would like to think that it came about entirely on merit, as it does. I keep emphasising the point that our most senior member of staff and one of our top four staff are females. That is a very welcome

trend, but it has come about entirely because of the ability of the applicants rather than any fixed quotas or set targets.

**Mr Kelly:** On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** There are no points of order during Question Time.

**Ms Armstrong:** What consideration has the plan given to extra sitting days rather than later sittings when business is heavy, given the impact that it has on those of us with childcare issues?

**Mr Wells:** I have only been a member of the Commission since May 2016, but I have not heard that issue being raised. There are Committee days as well as sitting days, which also place a burden on staff. I am certain that the Business Committee, which is the body that makes decisions on when we meet and at what time, would take that issue on board.

That is new to me as a Commission Member and I do not think it actually falls within the remit of the gender action plan, but it is an issue worth considering.

**3.45 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Jonathan Bell.

**Mr Bell:** Question No 8.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Is it No 7 you are asking, Jonathan?

**Mr Bell:** No 7, apologies.

### **Private Members' Bills**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question Nos 7 and 14 are grouped and will be answered by Alex Maskey.

7. **Mr Bell** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the steps it has taken to ensure that sufficient secretariat staff are available to address the increased number of private Members' Bills. (AQO 808/16-21)

14. **Mr Logan** asked the Assembly Commission how many proposals for private Members' Bills have been tabled since May 2016. (AQO 815/16-21)

**Mr Maskey:** With your permission, I will answer question Nos 7 and 14 together, and I thank Members Bell and Logan for their questions. Since May 2016, 21 proposals for private Members' Bills (PMBs) have been tabled. The Bill Office is currently developing 19 of these under the private Member's Bill support service.

An additional senior assistant clerk was added to the Bill Office complement prior to the commencement of the new Assembly mandate in response to the increasing demand for support for private Members' Bills. However, due to the record number of proposals for PMBs received this mandate, a business case has now been put forward for additional staff resource for this important strand of parliamentary work. The Assembly Commission has agreed to make an additional provision of £155,000 in its 2017-18 budget to respond to pressures on the Bill Office and Business Office, including the additional demand for support for PMBs. This amount has already been included in the Commission's budget plans for the next financial year.

**Mr Bell:** Apologies; I was listed to ask topical question No 8. I thank the Commission member for the answer. What workforce planning has been undertaken by the Commission, what were their predictions for the number of private Members' Bills and what did they assess the staff capacity required to fulfil those?

**Mr Maskey:** I thank the Member for the supplementary question. By way of background information, on 19 September 2016, following receipt by the Bill Office of 19 proposals for PMBs in the first few weeks of the new mandate, the Speaker wrote to the Committee on Procedures advising that he saw the increase in PMBs as a very positive sign and that it would be prudent for the Assembly's current procedures relating to PMBs to be reviewed. He also indicated that the Bill Office would be unable to support any more PMBs beyond the 19 proposals which had been tabled at the time.

The Committee on Procedures, as the Member may be aware, has recently agreed the terms of reference for the review, and these include: consider the current procedures and systems governing private Members' Bills in the Assembly; assess the available support and resources for the development of private Members' Bills in the Assembly; and research the procedures governing private Members' Bills and the support and resource available in other jurisdictions. From the response, you can see that the terms of reference do include the

need identified by the Speaker for a complete review and overhaul of the need to support PMBs in the time ahead.

**Mr Logan:** Will the Commission consider moving resources from areas within the Assembly which may be over-resourced to try to deal with private Members' Bills?

**Mr Maskey:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. There is a review under way, and the terms of reference have been agreed by the Committee on Procedures. The Assembly Commission does not want to prejudice or prejudice any of the outcomes or outworkings of the discussions being held by the Committee on Procedures. The Commission is looking forward to a report from the Committee on Procedures and from the Assembly, and then we will take that matter forward.

## Recruitment

8. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on its policy for the recruitment of people with disabilities. (AQO 809/16-21)

**Mr Wells:** The Assembly Commission operates a guaranteed interview scheme for internal and external recruitment competitions which offers a guaranteed interview to applicants with a disability. The scheme covers applicants with disabilities or those with long-term impairments or health conditions that are expected to last at least 12 months. This means that they may not meet all of the shortlisting criteria, but they will get an interview. In these circumstances, if the applicant can demonstrate that he or she has a long-term illness, that statement will ensure an interview.

The application form includes a section on disability, and an applicant can indicate whether they wish to apply under the scheme and the basis on which they qualify.

I should stress that the guaranteed interview scheme can apply only if the shortlisting criteria are met. It cannot guarantee an interview if an applicant does not meet the essential criteria for the post.

The Assembly Commission is also mindful that some groups of applicants, including those with disabilities, may have differing educational experiences, so, where appropriate, the essential criteria for a post will include two options: one will relate to specific qualifications; and the alternative will be a minimum period of

experience in the area of work relevant to the post being advertised. Applicants with a disability can also indicate whether they feel that they require any reasonable adjustments to enable participation in the selection process.

The Member may also be interested to note that the Commission conducts an annual audit of disability for secretariat staff. If a member of staff declares a disability —

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

**Mr Wells:** — during their employment, the Commission will review that and make reasonable adjustments.

**Mr Sheehan:** Mo bhuíochas leis an Chomhalta as a fhreagra ansin. I thank the Member for his answer. Has the Assembly Commission engaged with any external experts, including disability rights groups?

**Mr Wells:** As far as I am aware, we have not done so, but what I can report is that 9% of staff — 29 members — currently employed by the Assembly have declared a disability. I think that that indicates that we are taking this seriously.

Let me go back to my previous answer because I may well have misled the Member. The guaranteed interview applies only if you meet the selection criteria. I may have indicated that there is a special dispensation; there is not.

I think that the Assembly is clearly trying to facilitate those with a genuine disability to get to the table, as it were, for an interview. We will make all reasonable adjustments for someone who is successful in securing employment. The Assembly is making headway. There is more to be done, but I certainly think that the fact that such a large number of our staff have a registered disability indicates that we are taking this very seriously.

## Social Media Policy

9. **Mr Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission, given the recent ruling by an employment tribunal in relation to a case regarding a civil servant's comments on social media, whether it plans to review the recent dismissal of secretariat staff following breaches of the Assembly's social media policy. (AQO 810/16-21)

**Mr Attwood:** The Assembly Commission is certainly aware of the decision in the recent case of McCrossan v the Department for Social Development. As the Member will be aware, and as I am sure Members will wish to respect, it is good and established practice that the Commission does not comment on personnel and human resource matters, so, given the question, it is not appropriate to discuss the particular facts of the cases raised. However, I can say to the Member that the Commission does not consider that the facts in the McCrossan case, which revolved around the use of social media, are comparable with the facts in the cases of the Assembly staff to which the Member refers. Consequently, it does not propose to review the cases.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for that answer. In case there is any confusion, the case that I am referring to is that of the doorkeepers who used social media, so I think that the two cases are very similar. For that reason, I ask again that the Commission look at the case, because many of us believe that it might border on religious discrimination.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think that the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for the supplementary. What is the same in both cases is that they revolve around staff and social media. What is different is the social media policy of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and its application to staff; and the social media policy of the Commission and its application to staff. You cannot compare apples and oranges. There was a different policy in place in respect of the case involving DSD, and the tribunal came to a certain judgement in that regard. We have a different policy, and, therefore, whatever happened in the other case does not necessarily, or at all, have reference back to the decision made by management and the Commission. Therefore, no precedent has been set by the tribunal case in as much as it does not apply to the practice of the Assembly and the decisions made in those cases. I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful, but that, I think, is the proper procedural and legal position.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Nelson McCausland is not in his place.

## Assembly Staff Pay Awards

11. **Mr McNulty** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the negotiations

with the trade unions representing Assembly staff on annual pay awards. (AQO 812/16-21)

**Mr Wells:** Annual pay awards are negotiated with NIPSA, which is the Assembly Commission's recognised trade union. The negotiations are managed through a pay subgroup of the employee relations group, which is a joint industrial relations forum that has been established by the Commission in conjunction with NIPSA.

The pay claim for 2016 comprises a number of parts, including a claim for a consolidated percentage increase on all pay points, the reduction of pay points across all grades of staff and enhanced leave entitlements. Negotiations on the 2016 pay award are at an advanced stage, and the details of the award were considered at the Commission's meetings of 15 and 24 November. As part of that consideration, the Commission took into account a submission on secretariat pay rises from a political party that is represented on the Commission.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for his answers thus far. Will he confirm which party made that submission, what proposals it outlined and whether the Commission has agreed to any of the proposals?

**Mr Wells:** The submission was made on behalf of the SDLP by Mr Alex Attwood MLA, who outlined what had occurred in other devolved institutions, particularly Scotland and Wales. At the Commission meeting, Mr Attwood very eloquently put forward his view that we should follow a similar pattern to the other institutions.

What I would say is that we should remember that, in the wider sphere — in health, education, agriculture etc — we are generally imposing a 1% pay rise. Whilst the Assembly is a totally different entity — the Assembly Commission is not a branch of the Civil Service — the rest of our community will obviously be watching to see what we do with pay rises for our staff. If we stepped out of line and paid our staff a higher increase, people would make the obvious accusation and say, "Oh yes, they are quite happy to look after their own staff, but what about us?" That is the difficulty we face: it would set a precedent for the rest of Northern Ireland.

That is where the negotiations are at the moment. Without betraying any confidence of the Commission, Mr Attwood took a different view — he is perfectly entitled to do so — and that was fed into the overall decision-making

process, which has not yet concluded. Those are the constraints that we are acting under.

## **IFRP Determination 2016: Members' Staff**

12. **Mr Lunn** asked the Assembly Commission, following the Independent Financial Review Panel's 2016 determination, to outline the actions it is taking in relation to the conditions of employment of Members' constituency staff. (AQO 813/16-21)

**Mr Attwood:** I want to make it very clear to Members that the Commission is not detached, in any shape or form, from the concerns of Members arising from the independent review and the multiple consequences on our staff, current and previous, and all the other outworkings of the 2016 determination.

The Assembly established the Independent Financial Review Panel under the relevant legislation. The panel can also establish the criteria that must be met by each Member to recover the costs of employing support staff. This includes the criteria introduced in the 2016 determination that all support staff employed by Members must be engaged on a standard contract of employment.

The independence of the panel was established in the 2011 Act. The Act states explicitly that the panel is not subject to the direction or control of the Commission or the Assembly. In that regard, the panel enjoyed a very high threshold of independence, and we all live with the consequences of its recommendations.

The panel's tenure ended in July 2016, and the Commission is considering the most appropriate model for the future delivery of financial support to Members. All parties have been asked to contribute to what that might look like by, I believe, the end of January. I encourage all parties to make their contributions to what they believe the future review panel should look like.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank Mr Attwood for his comprehensive reply. Does he agree that the situation with the employment of constituency staff is grossly unfair, flies in the face of employment law and would not be tolerated in any other forum? Is he really satisfied that the Assembly Commission has no role to play in that matter and is able to say, "Blame the IFRP", which does not even exist any more?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think that the Member has asked his question.

**Mr Attwood:** The technical and legal answer is that I and the Commission have to keep on the right side of the law and on the right side of the independence of the panel, especially in circumstances where the law says the panel is not subject to the direction or control of the Commission or Assembly. There has been history behind how we came to that place; we do not have to rehearse that history. As I said, though, in my opening remarks, the Commission, being made up of MLAs and representing the views of MLAs, is not detached from much of the sentiment of the Member.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will Members please take their ease while we change the Table?

**4.00 pm**

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

## Private Members' Business

### People Diagnosed with HIV

*Debate resumed on amendment No 2 to motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the increasing number of people diagnosed with HIV in Northern Ireland, year on year; is concerned at the levels of stigma experienced by people living with HIV; acknowledges the need for a new campaign to promote awareness and prevention, specifically tailored to Northern Ireland; commends the work of Positive Life, Northern Ireland's only dedicated charity working to support people diagnosed with HIV; and calls on the Minister of Health to support this organisation in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters. — [Mr Middleton.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after the third "HIV;" and insert*

*"calls on the Minister of Health to support this prevention work by bringing forward proposals to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to vital pre-exposure prophylaxis medication on the same basis as the rest of the United Kingdom; and further calls on the Minister to support Positive Life in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters." — [Ms Bradshaw.]*

**Mr Sheehan:** The context for the debate has been the increase in diagnoses of people with HIV. The figures in 2004 were 64, and by 2014, they had risen to 94. While that is a 47% increase, in the overall scheme of things, the numbers are still quite small in comparison with those in other countries, but that is no reason to be complacent. It is important that we keep on top of this, and it is, of course, true that many advances have been made in the treatment of HIV.

I am sure that many of us remember back to the 1980s when the world was just starting to become aware of HIV and AIDS and that we remember the panic and fear it created in many communities around the world. The belief in those days was that it was a death sentence if you were diagnosed initially with HIV, and then when it developed to full-blown AIDS, your life was, effectively, at an end. The narrative that this was a disease that affected gay men exclusively quickly gained traction, even though it was not true. That is one of the myths about

HIV. Even today, 41% of the new diagnoses of HIV are the result of heterosexual transmission. So, HIV is by no means a disease exclusive to gay men. It can affect everyone in society, and not just through sexual transmission but through contaminated needles and syringes and so on.

Of course, we all know that this condition has attracted a stigma. I am sure that everyone has heard the myths such as that you can catch AIDS from drinking from the same cup as someone who has HIV or AIDS or that the infection is airborne. This led to the marginalisation of and discrimination against people who had been diagnosed with HIV. Last week was the anniversary of the death of Freddie Mercury, and I noted from one of the documentaries on Radio Ulster that, although there was much speculation about his ill health and the illness that he was suffering from, it was only on the day before he died that he made it public that he was suffering from AIDS. I have no doubt that that was because of the stigma that was attached to having that disease.

We have a lot of education and awareness building to do around HIV. Education is at the core of all of it. We need to be promoting safer sex and care around sharing needles and syringes. Anyone who feels that they have put themselves at risk should go as quickly as possible and get an HIV test. Of course, we should advise young people in particular to think about the fact that, when they have taken drugs or alcohol, their decision-making processes will not be what they should be. I want to commend groups such as Positive Life and Rainbow, which are working to prevent the spread of HIV and to provide support to those who have been diagnosed.

We support the motion and the amendment, although I do think that the amendment is slightly inaccurate where it says that pre-exposure prophylaxis medication is available in Britain. My understanding is that it is not, however we support in principle the view that, if the pilots that are being carried out —

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

**Mr Sheehan:** — with that particular type of medication are successful, its use should certainly be looked at by the Minister.

**Ms Hanna:** I am very glad to speak on this motion on behalf of the SDLP just days ahead of World AIDS Day, which is, obviously, the

global opportunity to raise awareness and improve education about HIV and AIDS and to improve the lives of people who are living with the diagnosis. It is also a time for debunking stereotypes and myths that do lead to prejudice and stigmatisation. It is a good opportunity for the Assembly and the Executive to offer support to those people diagnosed in Northern Ireland and reassurance that they will have protection in law, care without discrimination, including for mental health challenges relating to their diagnosis, which I know has been lacking, and adequate sexual health facilities.

I commend the Members who brought the motion, particularly Paula Bradley, who has been a very steadfast supporter of Positive Life. I do hope that it marks a change in approach by all parties. We agree with the need to increase awareness, but this is in part increasingly a challenge because of some of the misinformation and irrationality that had been out there around things like the gay blood ban, which I am sorry continued for so long. Thankfully, with the medical advances that are out there now, a diagnosis of HIV does not have to be a life sentence any more. The prejudice and the stigma that people experience can make their life very much more difficult than it needs to be, and, as such, information about transmission methods in particular need to be raised among the public at large. Organisations like the NHS and the PSNI should have active policies about how they deal with and work with people living with HIV.

While HIV and AIDS are by no means only contracted by men who have sex with men, any awareness work cannot ignore the fact that over half of diagnoses are in this category. As such, we would have supported the People Before Profit amendment, which we think had that focus.

Any campaign that arises from this motion needs to be very well designed, both to address the stigma and to give very clear prevention messages.

Before joining the Assembly, I worked in the field of international development for over a decade, including in Zambia, where there was a prevalence rate of 14% of adults living with HIV. While the figure of 800 or so diagnoses in Northern Ireland is far too high, we can take some reassurance that, with management and access to antiretrovirals (ARVs), the transmission risk is minimised. For example, mother-to-child transmission can be as low as 1%.

The World Health Organization estimates that, globally, around 34 million people live with HIV, of whom 3 million are children. Since the identification of the virus in 1984, more than 35 million people have died, making it probably the most destructive pandemic in history and the major infectious killer, which has reversed progress in poverty alleviation in many other areas. Despite the scientific advantage, we do not have a cure and we do not have a vaccine. Though you have ARVs, in a global context, you are often fighting poor public health and nutrition, and the best antiretrovirals in the world are no good to you if you do not have adequate nutrition.

The good news is that people with access to effective HIV treatment can have a normal life expectancy, and some 80% of those with a diagnosis can expect to live a healthy life with the right antiretrovirals.

World AIDS Day gives us the opportunity to revisit the facts. Despite scaremongering and misinformation, the truth is that there are only three ways to contract HIV: unprotected sex, which accounts for 95% of transmissions; sharing needles; and mother-to-child transmission. Pre-exposure prophylaxis drugs, which inhibit the virus remarkably, can minimise transmission, and we support the Alliance's amendment to extend access. We hope that, in a very short time, that will become a generic and therefore much cheaper drug.

Today is our opportunity to keep HIV and AIDS education, awareness and treatment on the agenda, publicly and politically; and to ensure that fundraising is undertaken for groups like Rainbow and Positive Life that are doing tremendous work by fundraising to support research into treatment — and, hopefully and potentially, vaccination — and also by providing support for people living with the diagnosis.

It is also a time to remember the millions of people who have died —

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

**Ms Hanna:** — throughout the world. We are happy to support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Before I call the next Member to speak, let me remind contributors to the debate that amendment No 1 was not moved, and that contributions to the debate should refer to amendment No 2 and the motion. The Question on amendment No 1 will not be put.

**Mr Carroll:** HIV is certainly, first and foremost, a health issue. However, we cannot detach it from the wider context of the society that we live in. As has been previously mentioned, men who have sex with men are disproportionately affected by the virus in the North. Of all the people currently living with HIV, the probable exposure category for 58% is sex between men; in 38% of cases, it was heterosexual contact; and fewer than 1% are thought to have been infected as a result of injecting drugs.

People do not grow up in a bubble, and we are all shaped, to some extent, by the society in which we are raised. The facts — that we have same-sex couples still unable to marry, men who can only donate blood if they have been celibate for a year and Ministers can propose such archaic ideas as the conscience clause — all feed into maintaining a society where LGBT people are still marginalised and denied even the most basic rights.

This directly relates to the issue that we are discussing. If we lived in a system where people's right to marry and sexuality were not questioned or challenged, those serious health problems would not follow. However, in our health service, major health inequalities exist for the LGBT community. They suffer a disproportionate impact from mental health problems. Young LGBT people are five times more likely to be medicated for depression, two and a half times more likely to self-harm and three times more likely to attempt suicide. Those are absolutely shocking statistics. Further to that, almost 30% of young same-sex attracted men show signs of a mental health problem. That is 20% more than those who are attracted to the opposite sex.

#### 4.15 pm

Our education system needs to be reflective of the reality of sex for people today. The truth is that sex education does not equip people for life as an adult who is sexually active. That needs to be tackled if we are to support safe sex. We also have to tackle and have zero tolerance towards homophobia in our schools and ensure that people will not be bullied because of their sexuality, or what other people perceive their sexuality to be.

New statistics show that 934 people are known to be living with HIV in the North. That is the highest number on record, and the 103 cases of HIV diagnosis last year is the highest number ever to be recorded in a single year here. We therefore have a growing problem that needs to be addressed. It is also estimated that hundreds more people do not know that they

have HIV. There have been calls for a new sexual health strategy, a centre of excellence and targeted, specific sexual health messages. Those are issues that need to be looked at by the relevant Ministers going forward. I hope that the political will to invest in those things exists after the debate ends today.

HIV is still a condition heavily affected by the 1980s: by the misunderstanding of the 1980s, and by the propaganda and blatant homophobia of the 1980s that tried to blame gay men for the disease. The old stigmas and perceptions of the 1980s need to be challenged. We need a new message today that reflects what it means to be living with HIV in the North. The biggest challenge often mentioned by people with HIV is that living with the stigma uniquely affects their life. As a result, a lot of people do not talk about the fact that they are living with this life-changing condition. That has an ongoing impact on their mental health and their ability just to be and to live a fulfilled life. It is important that we have these conversations here and fight against the stigma that prevents them from happening on the ground.

**Ms Bailey:** I support the motion and commend Paula Bradley for bringing it forward. I am pleased that the House is talking today about people living with HIV. On Thursday all over the world, we will mark World AIDS Day. We must think of all those who have gone too early because of an illness that is preventable. HIV is an almost unique health condition, in that it carries with it a significant amount of social stigma. When people are diagnosed with other illnesses, they usually tell friends and family, and they usually receive support. They will disclose their illness to other health professionals as is relevant to their care, and they will never be judged for that illness. That is not often the case with HIV. People living with HIV are often fearful of disclosing their status in case of differential treatment, breach of confidentiality or negative attitudes.

I pay tribute to all those people living with HIV who have publicly told their stories to try to address stigma and prejudice. It is important that those stories be in the public eye.

We have also come a long way in the diagnosis and treatment of people living with HIV, particularly with prenatal screening. Although it remains a life-limiting condition, the advances in treatment and support mean that people can live a happy, healthy and fulfilled life following their diagnosis. In 2014, there were 809 people receiving HIV care in Northern Ireland. I want to reassure all those people that they are

valued and worthy and should not have to experience stigma, prejudice or discrimination.

I am disappointed that the motion did not mention the group most impacted on by this illness — men who have sex with men. They are the people who are most disproportionately affected by HIV. When we talk about suicide, we clearly articulate and understand that it disproportionately affects men and that it is men who mostly die by suicide. We therefore must not shy away from the reality that certain groups are disproportionately affected by HIV. In 2014, 94 new cases of HIV were diagnosed in Northern Ireland, 46 of which came from transmission between men who have sex with men. That is 49%, yet men who have sex with men may represent only up to 5% of the total population.

That is a hugely disproportionate impact. Let us call it as it is: that community is disproportionately affected. The continued disproportionate impact of HIV on that community is largely due to historic and continued discrimination and prejudice. I hope that the House moves on addressing discrimination and prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation with the key lever of a sexual orientation strategy.

While we are broadly supportive of the Alliance amendment and would welcome the introduction of pre-exposure prophylaxis, we believe that that would be best done as part of a comprehensive sexual health strategy, which is something that we do not have. The sexual health sector has reached consensus that we need a sexual health strategy that prioritises relationships and sexuality education. In my unselected amendment, I called on the Minister of Health to bring one forward, and I hope that she will listen to those words and respond positively to the call for a strategy. Care and support for people living with HIV must also form part of that strategy. I urge caution against a piecemeal approach to these issues, with a motion here or a ministerial provision there.

Lifetime treatment for those living with HIV is estimated to be £360,000 per annum. It is a simple health economics argument that investment in prevention will save money in the long run. The Minister of Health is also very vocal on moving to a preventative model, and a sexual health strategy would be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that.

PrEP is not available anywhere in the UK. NHS England lost an appeal against a court ruling that said that the commissioning of PrEP was

its responsibility. Whilst we await the outworkings of that lost appeal and the statement from NHS England on the three actions that it is taking, one of which is giving consideration to funding PrEP, people are accessing PrEP at significant personal cost or are buying it online.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

**Ms Bailey:** I commend the fantastic work of Positive Life, the Rainbow Project and specialist HIV services in the genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics and other statutory sectors. We support the motion.

**Mr E McCann:** I begin by apologising for the fact that, when the amendment in my name was called this morning, I was not in my place. I could give you an account of how that came about, but it is irrelevant.

A lot of the points that I would have made have been made, particularly by Claire Hanna, Gerry Carroll and Clare Bailey, but I want to focus on one thing. There has been a lot of talk about the stigma that attaches to people with HIV. Apparently, in the minds of some in the House, the stigma consists of people who have HIV but are not gay being perceived to be gay. Why should anybody be stigmatised? What is the basis for saying that to suggest that someone who is associated with a group of gay people or a member of the gay community is to stigmatise them? Nonsense. To do that in a speech that says that we must get rid of the stigma makes no sense. It is an illustration of the lengths that we still have to travel before we are in a place where we can discuss these matters rationally. Irrational homophobia is one of the explanations for the fact that HIV and AIDS are still with us in such preponderance.

In the early days, if I can put it like that, back in the 1980s, very little research was done into HIV and AIDS. Major companies would not sponsor it, and Governments would not undertake to search for a new drug or put money into it. The main reason for that was simple. Initially, it was said that only the three Hs were affected by AIDS: Haitians, heroin users and homosexuals. The implication was, "Sure, who cares about the lives of people like that? There is no need to take this disease as seriously as other diseases". That lingers. As Clare Bailey and Gerry Carroll said, that lingers. It is not so long ago that we had political leaders in this country mounting platforms in broad daylight, without any sense of shame, bellowing that they would save Ulster from

sodomy. Who are they to save us? What is wrong with sodomy anyway? And what is wrong with gayness anyway? We all exist on some sort of spectrum in terms of sexual orientation. Personally speaking, Mr Deputy Speaker, I think I would have kissed more men in my time if it was not for the stubble factor. I do not know how other people — *[Interruption.]* It has just been confirmed to me that that is a genuine problem.

The point is that to make an argument that it somehow harms the case to admit and acknowledge the extent to which this affects gay people is in itself — probably unconscious, but nevertheless — a form of homophobia. Therefore, Gerry Carroll is absolutely right: the way to deal with any stigma that exists is to stand up to homophobia. It is to say that it is an outrage that there is not equal marriage in this society. It is to say that young people in classes who are being bullied and harassed should be safe. There should be strict policies that prevent that happening.

Think about this, and I will end on it: when we look at the situation of gay rights and the way our society treats gay people today, an apparent contradiction immediately arises. For example, every year at Gay Pride, you see thousands upon thousands of gay people and their supporters in colourful array marching through Belfast and Derry and being applauded from the pavements — apparently very popular. Lots of smiles, lots of colour and all that. And yet, there are young people in our society — teenagers — who are committing suicide because they have what they feel to be a stigma attached to them because of the way they know they are being regarded by the rest of society. Is there any more grotesque disparity in the way people are perceived in our society?

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

**Mr E McCann:** OK.

**Mr Clarke:** It is very unfortunate that the debate had been measured up until the Member got up to speak. He is now stigmatising the young people in our society who commit suicide. Let me put it on the record that we are not going to make the assumption that every young person who commits suicide is gay, but, if you listen to the Member, there is an automatic assumption that just because they are gay, they commit suicide. Unfortunately, there are too many suicides, but Mr McCann is stigmatising the sections of the community who may not be gay.

**Mr E McCann:** What a ridiculous argument.

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

**Mr E McCann:** What a clear confirmation of the point that I was making. The Member does not seem to understand what he is saying. You are saying — [*Interruption.*] — you are saying that it is stigmatising people to suggest that they are in a category where the majority are gay. That is not to stigmatise people. It is you.

I will say openly that what the Member said — unconsciously, I will accept, but that tells you how deep the problem is — was an unconsciously homophobic intervention from him, and it shows that homophobia is not a thing of the past but still exists and exists in this Chamber.

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health):** We have had a useful debate up to this point. We should not be distracted from the fact that we are discussing a serious issue. For me, it is very much an equality issue, and it is great to see the Assembly discussing it. That has been long overdue.

We should build on the positive: the fact that everybody around the House has spoken in favour of the motion and the amendment. I have some concerns, but with regard to the way that the proposers of the amendment have set it out in relation to PrEP — I will use "PrEP" in case I get the word wrong — whilst we are not saying we can deliver it tomorrow, we can work towards it if the evidence is there to suggest that it is the best thing to do to support individuals with HIV. I support the amendment in that regard, so we can work towards it and build our evidence. There is a lot of homework still to be done on whether it will best serve the population. I am happy to do that.

For me, this is an equality issue, and respect has to be at the heart of how we do our business. We all need to deliver for all our people and communities, so I am grateful for the fact that we are having the debate and are able to raise awareness of HIV and show our support and care for those living with HIV. As many Members have said, HIV treatment has vastly improved, and most HIV-positive people live longer and stay healthy on treatment. However, the needs of those living with HIV are not only for treatment, because they require a range of health and social care services.

It is important to note, as many Members did throughout the debate, that they also need

societal support, so they need people to have a different attitude. We need to allow people affected by HIV to live their daily life free from stigma and discrimination.

#### 4.30 pm

I acknowledge the Members' concerns that the annual number of people diagnosed with HIV is rising. Early diagnosis with appropriate treatment improves health outcomes and helps to prevent onward transmission. HIV testing is, therefore, routinely offered and recommended to all patients attending antenatal clinics and genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics. The latest published figures show that more than 60,000 HIV tests were carried out — an increase of 15% on the previous year — which shows that there is awareness and that people are looking to be tested.

Increasing the uptake of testing for HIV is critical in reducing the number of late diagnoses; that is, after the point at which treatment should have started. Obviously, better uptake will also reduce the number of people with undiagnosed HIV infection. In this regard, it is positive to note that HIV testing undertaken by GPs increased by 23% from the previous year. Although HIV testing continues to increase, and we have a low prevalence of HIV relative to other countries, we cannot be complacent. The consequences of increasing new HIV diagnoses must not be underestimated, and the personal impact, in particular, is considerable.

Many Members referred to the issue of stigma, and stigma is a barrier in the fight against HIV. Many people living with HIV continue to suffer from ill-informed stigma, often causing social exclusion and discrimination. That is unacceptable, and a few Members picked up on examples. During the debate, Trevor Clarke stood up and said that, a number of years ago, he could not have imagined taking part in this debate or speaking positively about the need to address stigma. That shows that we are a society on a journey, and we need to get to the destination quickly because we need to address the inequalities in society. That was significant and a positive moment in the conversation we are having today. A fear of stigma and marginalisation can create barriers to accessing tests and services. It is essential that we address this and help to empower people to access treatment and support.

HIV awareness training for HSC staff is delivered in the trusts with the aims of addressing stigma, providing effective support from front-line services and improving the

accessibility of services. World AIDS Day is Thursday 1 December, and it provides another excellent opportunity to highlight the issue and lessen the stigma experienced by those living with HIV. I know that a number of noteworthy events are being promoted by voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations to mark the day. I am sure that everybody in the House will wish them every success with these events. I am also pleased to publicise the screening by the Belfast Trust's sexual health training team, in conjunction with the Belfast Film Festival, of two topical films on World AIDS Day to support those with HIV and help to put an end to HIV stigma.

Some Members referred to the campaigns in the early years of the HIV epidemic, particularly the AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance TV adverts and the leaflets with tombstones, which brought fear and dread. The stigma and secrecy around HIV has been fuelled by that approach.

There is still no cure or vaccine available for HIV, but it is a condition that is treatable, and accurate information will help to raise awareness, promote openness and prevent transmission. Raising public awareness and HIV prevention are included in wider sexual health campaigns, but, throughout the debate, Members have been calling for a new sexual health strategy and asking when it will be published. I am very aware of the calls, and the Chair of the Committee has raised this with me on a few occasions. Also, Positive Life had a recent petition calling for a new sexual health promotion strategy.

I have asked officials to keep me informed of the recommendations and potential actions coming out of a recent sexual health workshop involving the regional sexual health improvement network. That exercise, involving key stakeholders from the statutory and voluntary sectors, should help to identify areas where we need to intensify our efforts in the future. I will certainly give my careful consideration to the recommendations and to the need for a strategy, should that be the best way to address these issues. I will also use the contributions to today's debate.

The Public Health Agency's current campaign will run until January 2017. The Choose to Protect Yourself: Always Use a Condom campaign aims to promote good sexual health and contribute to reducing sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Aimed at young adults, the campaign is supported by social media activity and a new sexual health website that provides accurate information and advice.

While the vast majority of men who have sex with men do not have HIV, those men continue to be the key population group most affected by HIV infection here. The Choose to Protect Yourself message applies to the whole population, including men who have sex with men. However, for this priority group, there are also targeted interventions such as outreach information and testing sessions. The regional centre for HIV care and management, based at the Belfast Trust, provides excellent services and support to people.

Better survival rates, combined with the growing numbers of new diagnoses, mean that the number of people living with HIV is rising. The latest figures indicate that over 930 people in the North are receiving HIV-related care. HIV therapies are complex and can be extremely demanding, which has major implications for planning and integrating our HIV services in the context of strengthening the wider health and social care system. Treating people living with HIV holistically to support their needs is an important step in this regard.

For that reason, I wish to acknowledge, like every Member, the work of Positive Life and other groups, but particularly Positive Life, which I met earlier today. It provides a range of information and support services, including a helpline, counselling, complementary therapies, one-to-one support and peer support groups. I am looking forward to having an opportunity to visit Positive Life at a future date.

There are concerns about funding going forward. The Department has always awarded core grant funding to Positive Life over the past number of years. However, in recognition that this funding stream has not been open to all voluntary and community organisations, it is being reduced on a three-year phased basis and is due to cease in March 2018. I am considering how funding from the Department can best support the voluntary and community sector to deliver vital services in line with my vision of securing better health and well-being outcomes for patients. It is important that we support groups such as Positive Life, which is unique in the work that it does and in the contribution that it makes to those living with HIV. I made the commitment today that, in relation to what comes next in the innovation fund, we will get the information out there as quickly as possible so that groups can plan for how they can be part of that. I know that Positive Life celebrated its thirtieth anniversary this year, and I am sure that we will all congratulate it on that and wish it many more successful years into the future.

I have probably picked up on all the issues. We will come back to the sexual health strategy, based on the work that has been done and on the recommendations that come forward, but I am certainly open to looking at that. In deciding the direction of travel that we will take in Health and Social Care, and given what I said about how we will deliver, design and produce services together, we absolutely have to listen to the experiences of families and of those living with HIV. We have to listen to service users, families and staff on the ground, and, if we do that and let it shape our sexual health services in the future, we can deliver first-class services, improve what is there now and do more. I look forward to working with Positive Life, organisations such as the Rainbow Project and many others that provide excellent services on how we shape our HSC response to supporting individuals who need our support.

I commend the motion. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to it and look forward to working with Members as we design services to make sure that we deliver better health outcomes. That is what it is all about.

**Mr Lunn:** I support amendment No 2 and the motion. I will say straight away that it is really encouraging to hear two DUP Members — I fancy that we will hear from another one shortly — speak in support of the motion. You maybe do not realise that you are breaking new ground today by tabling a motion like this. That is to be welcomed. I take Mr Middleton's point that HIV is not restricted to a particular group in society, but that group is the main victim of it. I take the point that 40% of cases involve heterosexual contact. I listened particularly carefully to Mr Clarke. I thought that he made a very personal speech, and I will just say, "Well done". We are all Freddie Mercury fans in this place: it is cross-party, believe me. I also saw those documentaries, and, when history is written, Freddie Mercury's contribution in all this will be recognised, if it has not already been.

On the back of yesterday's unanimous, or almost unanimous, acceptance of the need for a pardon for homosexual offences, which the DUP supported, this has been a good week for equality and minority rights.

We have no problem with the motion. Our amendment does not alter it; it supplements it slightly. I do not think Mr Sheehan is here, but I will correct what he said: our amendment does not demand the introduction of prophylaxis straight away. It requests — this is for the Minister, really — that, if the time comes when prophylaxis is accepted in the UK, we should not delay bringing it in here. Sometimes there

is a big delay, but it is not necessary. It is already available in several countries. I think it was Clare Bailey who said it is available on the Internet as well. I know you have to go through the full tests and all the rest of it. It is a treatment that is targeted at at-risk groups, most obviously HIV negative men who are perhaps in a relationship with HIV positive men. It is sometimes referred to, I believe, as a contraceptive pill for HIV. Whatever about that, it is a treatment that has great possibilities, and we should embrace it if we can.

I advise you, Minister, to keep in touch with your colleagues across the water, because NHS England has now been instructed by the courts to consider commissioning PrEP. It is the Clinical Priorities Advisory Group that would essentially determine whether it has sufficient priority. The probability is that it will, not least because, for once with a new drug, the costs appear to be relatively low. The estimate for introducing it in the UK is under £20 million a year. Some of the treatments we hear about from advances in medicine will cost that for 200 patients, so that would probably equate to about — what? — under half a million in our case.

Our amendment specifically focuses on equity of access to medication across the UK so that we can benefit from research and commissioning work. It is entirely consistent with the prevention programme set out in the motion, and, just as relevantly, it is consistent with the stated intent in the Minister's road map to promote and emphasise prevention in general. Therefore, our amendment is about making a clear statement that people with HIV in Northern Ireland will not be disadvantaged compared to those elsewhere in the UK. We mean that to apply to heterosexuals and homosexuals — any group affected by this. We cannot meaningfully talk about removing the stigma if we cannot commit to that. On top of that, it is about putting the requirements in the motion to remove stigma and implement a centre of excellence into action and about making the principles of the road map, which is based on Professor Bengoa's report on early intervention and prevention, real for hundreds of people.

I hope the amendment and the motion will receive full support in the House today. I think they are very worthwhile. This is a good day for the Assembly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call Paula Bradley to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Ms P Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will start by thanking the majority in the Chamber for a very positive and very timely debate, because, as we all know, it is World AIDS Day on Thursday.

For the record, I will state that I have supported this charity for a number of years. For a number of years, my party colleague Sammy Douglas and I have run events in this Building on World AIDS Day. That shows the commitment that I have and that he has to this subject.

I will also state that I brought forward the motion on behalf of everyone, no matter what their gender or sexuality, because I believe stigma has to be reduced when we talk about HIV. I know personally how HIV affects people, because it affects someone I love dearly. I know what it is like to be there on the day they receive their diagnosis. I know what it is like to go to hospital appointments with them. I know what it is like when they try to go on holiday. I know what it is like when they try to get insurance. I know what it is like when they try to tell people just how their life is affected by HIV. I will defend, and I will stand up and fight and do whatever I can to help anybody who is living with HIV or is at risk of contracting it.

**4.45 pm**

I am delighted that people in the Chamber today have come together to support this cause. As I said, it is something that I feel so dearly about, and it is something that I can get quite emotional about as well, because I know how bad the stigma is.

I want to highlight something that Clare Bailey said earlier. I also think of all those people who are not here today because of this horrific disease. The person I love was diagnosed about 10 years ago but had it been 10 years prior to that the person might not be around today to tell their story. So, I am glad that we are where we are today when it comes to the drugs that are available and how people who have been affected by HIV can live a normal life albeit, I know, that they are stuck to a regime of medication that controls their life, almost. However, they are still able to live their life.

Thank you, everyone, for your contributions. I just hope that, tonight, when the media click on to this that it is not the altercation between Mr McCann and what he said about my colleague here. I hope that that is not the case, because I want a positive story coming out of the Chamber today on how we can talk about this issue in this Chamber.

I have to say a big thank you too to Mr Middleton and Mr Clarke. When I brought the motion to them, as my two Health Committee members, there was absolutely no question that they would sign it and speak on it. I thank Trevor Clarke especially for his honesty. Not only is he my party colleague, he is my friend. I know him very well, and I know that, several years ago, it might have been difficult for him to come into the Chamber and talk about HIV. But, that is not so now; he can come and talk about it.

Charities such as Positive Life speak and explain things to us as MLAs. They lay out on the table how this affects people's lives. As I said before, I am talking about everybody's lives regardless of gender or sexuality.

I want to turn to some of the contributions that some people made. First and foremost, several Members brought up the issue of a sexual health strategy. In the last mandate, it was something that I raised several times. I think that Mrs Dobson said that it had been discussed in Committee in 2013. She is absolutely correct. We discussed it then, and we got the addendum up to December last year. However, it has not gone far enough. We need a sexual health strategy that is specific to us here in Northern Ireland. We are not the same as the rest of the UK; we are very different here. So, we need that sexual health strategy in place.

A few Members — I think that Clare Bailey was one of them — mentioned relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in schools and our sex education in schools. That is something else that we need to look at. I had cause to attend Knockevin Special School in Downpatrick a few weeks ago with the Family Planning Association (FPA), which was running specific sex education classes for children with additional needs. These classes were fantastic, because these children are probably the most vulnerable in our society. The classes were so good in that the children were being told — at a level that they required — about the choices they make in life, and this is part of it. As Mr McCann said earlier, our children have to make choices in life and they are not always armed with the right information to do so. I absolutely agree with that, and it is definitely something that we need to bring forward.

I am delighted that Positive Life has been talked of so highly in the Chamber today. As I said earlier, it is a charity that I have supported for a number of years, including its fundraising events. It had me dancing around and doing the waltz last year, and, as far as Members are

concerned, I went round with a sponsor sheet to all the Members' offices earlier this year, and they all gave so generously to Positive Life. When they asked me what it was for, they had no difficulty in giving me the money to support me in my 'Strictly Come Dancing' with Positive Life. I want to thank Members for that. They have already taken part in advancing this charity's role.

I will not go without mentioning the work of Rainbow as well. I have to commend them also because they do sterling work. As Chair of the all-party group on sexual health, which I have been for the past four years, I have had cause to work with numerous charities, and I want to commend them all as they do excellent work. One of the Members — it might have been Ms Bradshaw — mentioned going to visit Brook. Anyone from the Chamber who has been there will know that you are not allowed to leave without a bag of condoms, because that is what Brook believes. It believes that the PrEP drug — I agree, I would love to see the PrEP drug being made available — is not the silver bullet.

We need to look at protection; it has to be at the core.

I think that three Members have used the word "condoms": how good is that? How long ago is it that that type of word would not have been used in the Chamber? I said to the CEO of Positive Life that I would also use it. We are here to promote safer sex. We should advise people that safe sex is the best message. It is all part and parcel of preventing the passing of infections. It is not just about HIV: look at the increasing prevalence of STIs. The Royal Victoria Hospital's GUM clinic is bursting beyond capacity. I commend it on the work that it does. Whether it is the doctors, the nurses, the allied health professionals or the social workers, they work hard with their HIV clients. I also commend the work that is done in the mother-and-baby unit. I have written to the Minister about this — I write to the Health Minister every year about baby formula for children born to HIV-positive mothers. That is another issue.

We need to look across the board. That is why I talked about reducing stigma and not making it just one person or another's disease. The disease affects so many people, whether it is mothers of children, the children themselves or men who have sex with men. Whoever it might be, it affects so many individuals.

I thank everyone here today. We will support Ms Bradshaw's amendment. We are still a long way off when we look at the PrEP drug and how

we can manage that in Northern Ireland. I spoke out in the summer in support of it, and that has not changed. I thank Members for a good and positive debate and for putting HIV and the stigma around it on the agenda here in the Assembly today.

*Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the increasing number of people diagnosed with HIV in Northern Ireland, year on year; is concerned at the levels of stigma experienced by people living with HIV; acknowledges the need for a new campaign to promote awareness and prevention, specifically tailored to Northern Ireland; commends the work of Positive Life, Northern Ireland's only dedicated charity working to support people diagnosed with HIV; calls on the Minister of Health to support this prevention work by bringing forward proposals to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to vital pre-exposure prophylaxis medication on the same basis as the rest of the United Kingdom; and further calls on the Minister to support Positive Life in the development of a centre of excellence at its new headquarters.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Members should take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Outdoor Education Centres in South Down

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Mr Colin McGrath to raise the matter of the proposed closure of outdoor education centres in South Down. The proposer of the topic will have up to 15 minutes.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to lead on this important Adjournment debate, which I approach from an interesting position. I have been an avid user of outdoor education centres over the past 25 years, as a young person, a student youth worker and a full-time youth worker; in fact, I have stayed at two of the four centres that are due to close and have stayed at one of them on many, many occasions. I have brought groups of young people to the centres and can detail to you, Minister, their roles, purpose and benefit and the absolute loss and tragedy that there will be if they are to shut.

At the outset, I seek clarification on something. Minister, two weeks ago in the House, during Question Time, you mentioned that the reason for the rationalisation was financial pressures, yet, at the presentation to the Education Committee on Wednesday a week ago, the Education Authority said that the reason for the cutbacks was to rationalise and provide an enhanced and better service and that all the money that would be saved would be pumped back into the same centres. We need to have that clarified, because, if it is the latter, we can put a good case to you to overturn the consultation process.

Why do we have outdoor centres? They are hubs. They are a space for young people to come together to learn and to do so in an experiential way. Young people learn important life skills, teamwork skills, communication skills and much more. They use the methodology of the outdoors and action activities such as mountaineering, hillwalking, canoeing, sailing, bouldering, abseiling, night lining and other outdoor pursuits to educate. It is exciting for children, thrilling for teenagers and a delight for

the youth worker and teacher to use the medium to educate young people, especially those who do not often excel in the academic setting. It is invaluable for them. Outdoor centres and outdoor education are an essential and integral element of our education system and one that many in the world are jealous of. I can vouch for that, because I have brought groups from Louth, Kerry, Cork, Scotland, France, Hungary and Finland to stay in the centres. They have facilitated our young people to host guests from far and wide, make friends and share cultures, but, more importantly, they have helped our young people to open their mind and stretch their personal horizons far and wide as well. Why, oh why, would we cut back on them and reduce our capacity?

I turn to the consultation. I am disgusted that, once again, we have consultation Northern Ireland-style, which is one in which the proposed outcomes are included in the introductory paperwork. That is a joke. It is a humiliation of the good people of Northern Ireland and makes a farce of the consultation process. I want to highlight a couple of elements of the consultation and the flaws that I see, in order to help the Minister take the decision that we would like taken.

There is concern about the way in which the figures for occupancy rates have been calculated and used in the document. The occupancy rate that all centres are benchmarked against is similar to that for the hotel industry. The hotel industry is a highly competitive industry that achieves big profits when it gets a high occupancy rate of around 75%. At that level, it is doing very well and is able to deliver profits for the owners. There is no such need for profits in the outdoor industry. Covering the costs and breaking even are perfectly acceptable. Therefore, to benchmark the centres against the Savoy or the Europa is unfair and a little bit crass. When benchmarked against all other outdoor education centres in the rest of the UK, the centres that are proposed for closure compare very favourably.

The building status is another fallacy that is trotted out in the document. The building survey that has been completed is not just a list of the essential and urgent work that is required but a list of what could be done to the buildings, which includes some urgent remedial work. Let me compare that to a holiday. I could go to Barbados in the Caribbean for my holiday, but I will probably only be able to afford somewhere in Europe. If I am lucky, I might be able to add a couple of weekends here and there, maybe even in north Down. That is where the

difference is. It is the difference between what we can do, what we would like to do and what we actually do. To use that as a factor is a little unfair, especially when it results in one centre being picked over another for closure.

### 5.00 pm

There is also a glaring inconsistency in the figures in the document used to calculate the rank order of those centres that are to be closed. In the review document supplied to us the order has Shannaghmore listed as third, Killyleagh fourth, Bushmills fifth and Ardnabannon sixth; yet in the evidence document Bushmills is third, Shannaghmore fourth and Killyleagh and Ardnabannon are joint sixth. This decision will see people losing their jobs and having to relocate, villages having the heart ripped out of them, and a lifetime impact on our youth. Are you prepared, Minister, to allow such a consultation to proceed with such schoolboy errors in such an important document? I can hear the judicial reviews being warmed up from here.

I worry too, Minister, about the fact that this decision, with all its enormity and impact, its employment consequences and the emotions that are stirred, is being delivered by an interim head of Youth Service, who will report to an interim chief executive. Is it fair, Minister, that you want these momentous decisions to be taken by people in interim roles? If it all goes wrong, it could maybe even see your position being interim too.

The review is being carried out as a response to the 'Priorities for Youth' document of a few years ago, which stated that:

*"This will include a review of the statutory youth estate and outdoor education centres."*

It said "and outdoor education centres", not "merely" outdoor education centres. One would have thought that the review of the Youth Service estate and outdoor education centres would be undertaken in a complementary manner, not picking one sector and then doing the other. What if the rationalisation in the Youth Service estate in that consultation might save money that could then be pumped into the outdoor education sector? Why is it being done in such a disjointed manner? We have to get answers to those questions.

I conclude by saying to the Minister that he has the power to intervene, that he has the capacity to stop this massacre of our outdoor education

centres. It is too early in the lifetime of the Education Authority (EA) for this decision to be taken. It is being taken for all the wrong reasons.

Our children will have fun in these places; they will learn and gain new skills and make long and lasting friendships; they will break down barriers and help to develop our country; they will be the leaders of tomorrow. We owe them the opportunity to learn the skills that they need. Let us not cut provision and make our outdoor education centres the preserve of the chosen few; let us make them a luxury that we can offer to many. I plead with the Minister: please keep all our outdoor education centres open.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** There is substantial interest in this Adjournment debate, and a number of Members have indicated their intention to speak. I propose, therefore, to give four minutes to Members from the constituency, and they will be called first. Other Members will have three minutes.

**Ms Ruane:** I support outdoor pursuits and education centres. I remember, many moons ago, when I trained as an outdoor education facilitator in an outdoor pursuits centre on Achill Island, which was funded by the education system. I have some of the best memories of those times. That centre is still open and still funded by the education system.

The centres at Killowen and Ardnabannon are vital assets to the South Down community. Killowen has been open since 1982 at its current site, providing outdoor activities on Carlingford lough and the adjacent forest parks. Ardnabannon opened in 1967 and provided a large range of outdoor activities for the youth of South Down and further afield. I met representatives from Killowen last week to discuss the proposed closures and to offer my full support for keeping the centres open. They told me how centres such as Killowen, Ardnabannon and Delamont, as well as other centres throughout the North, not only keep young people active but help with mental health, the obesity crisis, and academic achievement. While I am on the subject, and I hope the Deputy Speaker will indulge me, I note today that our primary-school children are sixth in the world for maths. I pay tribute: that is phenomenal. I pay tribute to the primary schools, their teachers, the staff, parents and, indeed, successive Education Ministers who brought in literacy and numeracy policies, including myself and John O'Dowd. It is to be celebrated.

During difficult budgetary times it is important to focus where money should be focused, and that is why I ask the Minister to really think carefully about cutting money and closing these centres, because they do contribute to academic as well as physical education. I visited both the centres in my own constituency as Minister for Education. I funded both centres, and continued to fund them, during my time as Minister. I saw at first-hand the good work they are doing. I offer my full support for both centres to remain open.

I believe this Minister has an open mind, and I hope that, rather than listen to officials or people who want to cost-cut — and I am not saying all officials want to cost-cut — he takes his own mind about this. The Minister has a substantial budget — and I note he is pointing at the Minister for Finance — and money should be found from within his budget to fund these centres, rather than passing the buck. I am sure the current Minister will not do that, but I do plead with him to continue to fund these centres because they provide such an important facility for people right across the island, as my constituency colleague Colin McGrath has mentioned.

My own family have attended the centres, and their classmates from both sides of the border have really appreciated the facilities they offer. I ask the Minister to please support the centres. It is a small saving of little over £1 million when you consider the money that the centres bring in themselves. It is not fair that we ask them to be self-sufficient.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

**Ms Ruane:** Please keep them open.

**Mr McKee:** As one who resides in a rural community in South Down, I very often take for granted the beauty of the countryside, the Mourne mountains and the coastal waters of Carlingford and Strangford loughs. With this in mind, I am really concerned for the many young people who enjoy going to the outdoor education centres of Ardnabannon, Delamont and Killowen.

The proposal to close down three centres in South Down which cater for young people across Northern Ireland should be justified by reports showing systemic failures to deliver objectives and perhaps health and safety issues and so on. We have seen no such findings in this report, and I seriously question

and, indeed, oppose the proposals being put forward by the Minister in this case.

When I read the findings of this review, I cannot see any justification for the rationalisation of larger statutory centres. In fact, I can only see reasons to preserve, support and promote the services, as I am sure many young people in Northern Ireland do not have the opportunity to visit one of these centres with school or through a youth group. Indeed, as the report shows, there is capacity in both the statutory and voluntary sectors for more young people to experience and benefit from the services of outdoor centres.

In the majority of performance statistics, statutory centres rate as equal or higher than the voluntary sector. The report states:

*"Throughout the review it was apparent that Residential and Outdoor Education is highly valued by all those who use the service, with regard to the quality of provision, the overall outdoor experience, the calibre and experience of staff and its value for money".*

The review also states that Education and Training Inspectorate assessments over the last five years have ranged from satisfactory to outstanding, and that outdoor education brings added value to both the formal and non-formal education spheres. There is not even a mention in the report of the savings to be made, but with a total budget of 0.15% of the Department's budget, I believe the advantages of outdoor education centres far outweigh the costs.

If the centres close, there is a greater cost to the young participants who have availed themselves of them for education on the environment, conservation, adventure and outdoor recreation including climbing, orienteering, abseiling, sailing, canoeing, mountain biking and rock climbing etc. Most importantly, the physical exercise contributes to the child's health and well-being.

I quote from a review paper written in 2000 by Edward Lappin:

*"Outdoor education enables students and teachers to interact in an environment free from the limitations of the classroom."*

The review document states that there is "a cluster" of OECs at the southern coast. Where else would you locate them when you have a natural environment with the Mourne mountains in an area of outstanding natural beauty and the

loughs of Carlingford and Strangford? Ardnabannon, Delamont and Killowen are seen as an invaluable front-line service by geography and science teachers in helping them to cover the requirements of GCSE and A-level specifications. They are also used by students studying a range of vocational courses, and many go on to gain their Duke of Edinburgh's award. If the proposed closures go ahead, with the loss of 191 beds in residential outdoor education centres, there is no way that the voluntary sector will be able to address the shortfall.

I call on the Education Minister to reverse his proposal and allow schoolchildren and community groups to continue in their outdoor activities at Ardnabannon, Delamont and Killowen outdoor education centres.

**Ms S Bradley:** First, I thank my South Down colleague Colin McGrath for securing the Adjournment debate in the Chamber this evening. I also thank the Minister for being in attendance, which is critical to the debate moving forward. No doubt, through many submissions, the Minister will have been made aware of the strong reasons that surround the need to keep the centres open; indeed, in the last week or two, I had the opportunity to visit the purpose-built Killowen centre. I put on record my support for the retention of that centre, along with the other two centres in South Down, which, I believe, offer an equally good service.

The arguments that have been made are largely self-evident in that you will protect jobs and continue to offer enriched educational experiences beyond the classroom. I ask the Minister to take note of the fact that some children who visit those outdoor centres may excel for the very first time in their life. It is an opportunity for them to break away from the confines of the classroom and find that they are particularly good at something that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to be introduced to. Events such as visits to outdoor educational centres build their confidence, and that stays with them for life. How do we measure that, Minister? How can we make a judgement on whether it would sit well on a balance sheet?

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

**Ms S Bradley:** I will give way.

**Mr McNulty:** The Member will note the positive impact that teachers, headmasters and headmistresses say that visiting Killowen has

on the development of their kids. Anna Shields of Anamar Primary School in south Armagh has been going to Killowen every year for the last 20 years and is devastated by its potential closure.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms S Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take the Member's point.

I ask the Minister simply to pause and take note of what is being presented here today. These are very positive, popular centres for good reason. The issues of health, obesity and outdoor pursuits have been raised, and the Programme for Government clearly reflects their importance and makes repeated references to them. The proposals to close the centres contradict everything that the Programme for Government, as it is being built, represents or claims to represent. The contradiction is so wide that it cannot sit comfortably with the Minister. In that vein, I urge him to sit down and set the proposals or the possible proposals against the objectives of the Executive. The information in the public domain to date does not, I have to say, fill me with confidence that that work has even been undertaken, and I urge him to consider that.

I put this to the Minister again: how do we measure the added confidence that young people get from visiting the centres? How do we measure the personal development that takes place when young children stay away from their parents, perhaps for the very first time? I know that some of the leaders at the centres — this was referred to — have the skills and ability to deal with the very delicate issue of homesickness, and the children learn to network with their friends. It is so difficult to put a value on that. How do we measure the spirit — the community spirit — that is engendered by the young people who step up to do courses and volunteer? They take that far beyond the centres through their life and carry that community spirit with them. They really bring such social added value that we cannot measure it.

**5.15 pm**

I truly hope that the Minister has come here with an open mind. If anything comes out of the debate, I ask him to consider facilitating a meeting with representatives of the sector to discuss the review. I refer not to adding to the review but to looking at it and seeing how it was constructed and the faults that lie in it and

whether he is willing to consider at least pushing the pause button. I ask him please to consider the centres and all the social value that you will never see presented to you by officials in the form of a balance sheet. I urge him to take on board that request and thank him very much for being in attendance.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** That completes the contributions from constituency Members. I am prepared to grant an additional minute to the non-constituency Members who have indicated that they wish to speak, who will now each have up to four minutes.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Member for South Down for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for his attendance. As someone who is involved in youth work — I declare an interest as a member of the Scout Association — I have been to many outdoor centres and have seen at first hand the absolute improvement in young people in their personal development when they attend the centres. That is hugely important and cannot be quantified by economists looking at the bottom line in any consultation, review or work that discusses or decides whether the centres should be retained or closed.

I take issue with two things. First, the member for South Down Ms Ruane said that the Minister should retain an open mind. I have spoken to the Minister, and he clearly has an open mind on the issue. Secondly, Mr McKee referred to "the Minister's proposals". I hope that the Ulster Unionist Party was not scoring points. It is important that people remember that they are not the Minister's proposals; they are the Education Authority's proposals. The consultation and review that the proposals came from were the Education Authority's consultation and review. The proposals are the Education Authority's proposals, and people need to be absolutely clear about that.

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

**Mr Humphrey:** I will, surely.

**Mr Storey:** The Member will be aware that there are political representatives on that board, including those from the Ulster Unionist Party.

**Ms Ruane:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Humphrey:** I have just taken one; I want to make some progress. You had your opportunity.

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

**Mr Humphrey:** Having been to Killowen, Ardnabannon and Delamont — I have not been to Bushmills — over the years, I am absolutely aware of the facilities that they provide. In fact, I first visited Killowen way back in 1989 when there was a huge scout camp at Gosford. I was there last year on a visit with the CAL Committee, and the facilities are excellent. I understand absolutely that the centres are in close proximity to the coastline and allow kids to do water activities. They also allow them to go into the Mourne and learn new skills there. That is hugely important.

For the Minister, it is clearly a case of speaking to the Education Authority, which I am sure that he has done and will continue to do. It is about conflicting demands on the budget, which is not infinite.

The reality is that we must always put the young people first, and I say that as a governor of two schools. It is about the development of our young people. When our young people have the opportunity to go away, their leaders — in this case, perhaps, their teachers — have the opportunity to see them in the context of an outdoor centre or an outward bound centre and the activities that they are involved in and observe a monumental change in them.

It is also about sweating the assets, but we need to be realistic. The Department also funds other centres such as the Crawfordsburn Scout Centre, where the Minister recently opened a new cabin and chalet. We have other great centres in north Down like the Lorne Guide centre and the Boys' Brigade centre at Ganaway.

I have to stress again to the House that we need to get the facts absolutely clear. I know the Minister and have known him a long time.

The Minister is absolutely committed to delivering for young people in our community, but this was a piece of work initiated out of a review that came from the Education Authority; the consultation was the Education Authority's consultation; and these proposals are the Education Authority's proposals. I have no doubt the Minister will be sympathetic — it is up to the Minister to respond to the debate in a way that, I have no doubt, he will — but, equally, Members need to be fair and not place undue criticism on the Minister that is not and should not be directed to his office.

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member clarify that, in the interests of having that detail correct, the Education Authority's review suggested this was not a monetary decision; it was about a review of service?

**Mr Humphrey:** Mr Storey made a contribution in an intervention and made it very clear that political representatives sit on the Education Authority. I am not one of those people. I have not had the opportunity to be privy to the report and the review. I am sure the Member has party colleagues who have; perhaps she could ask them.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, but I will simply say that the Member should bear in mind the facts of this issue and not deal with fantasy.

**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the valuable contribution made by outdoor education centres and their staff to the development of our children and young people across Northern Ireland and, specifically, those in South Down.

When we think of education, understandably, we think of schools, given the central role they play. However, we must also acknowledge that education ought to take many forms and include the vital contribution the Youth Service and outdoor education make. Outdoor education provision accounts for only a small portion of the overall education budget, but it provides unique learning opportunities and skills development for around 150,000 children and young people every year, which is approximately as many pupils as attend all our post-primary schools put together.

Residential and outdoor education centres across Northern Ireland provide a wide range of positive education experiences and opportunities to develop interpersonal and practical skills, teamwork and communication skills and social and emotional resilience through a wide range of physical activities that all aid our children and young people's ability to achieve a positive future for themselves and contribute to their community.

That has been supported by the correspondence I have received from primary and post-primary schools in my constituency of East Belfast regarding just how valuable the outdoor education centres at Delamont, Ardnabannon and Killowen in South Down are to them. The Education Minister and the Education Authority must, therefore, ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to participate in all forms of

education, including youth services and outdoor education.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee, I was glad to support our decision to invite the Education Authority to update us on its approach to this matter. The Education Authority cited over-provision, duplication, economic viability and failure to meet delivery models as reasons for the proposed closures. However, I must say that serious questions were raised by all parties about the reasons the Education Authority gave for the proposed closures of the outdoor education centres. There is clear concern that this exercise is more about cost-cutting than about improving education provision for children and young people in our community.

I have consulted South Down Alliance elected representative councillor Patrick Brown from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, who also questions the approach taken by the Education Authority on the proposed rationalisation of the centres, and, indeed, he opposed the closure of the three centres in South Down.

There is shock that some of the busiest, largest and most popular centres are being proposed for closure. They are centres that are consistently busy throughout the year during and out of term time. They are centres that accommodate school and youth groups from across Northern Ireland and bring children and young people from across our community to exciting, outdoor, shared spaces that are vital to the aim of building a united community in Northern Ireland.

Given its natural resources, it should be no surprise that the south Down/Mourne area has a concentration of outdoor residential centres, however the proposed cuts will reduce the number of bed spaces and opportunities available for children and young people to experience outdoor residential activities throughout Northern Ireland.

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Member for bringing this debate to the Floor of the Chamber. I commend the large number of people who have turned out in force, obviously demonstrating to us the depth of feeling that there is amongst the community on this very important issue. I also thank the Minister for taking time to come and listen to the debate. Obviously, he will make his comments in due course.

At the outset, I want to talk about the invaluable service that these outdoor centres have given to our society, our constituents and our young

people. I can think back to my time at school when I attended some of the centres, and that is not that terribly long ago, although it maybe feels a little bit longer than what it is. They are fantastic facilities, and they do give a real added benefit to a child's overall growth and social skills. There is no doubt that they have a positive impact on their communication skills, their leadership skills, their teamworking skills and their ability to experience the real outdoors. For many who are from a town setting, it often is potentially the only time that they will have access to that real outdoor experience. I commend the many workers who, throughout the years, have had that impact on children and young people who have used this service.

When we received the briefing from the EA at the Education Committee, I was somewhat shocked at some of the revelations that the EA came forward with. As my colleague William Humphrey pointed out, this is an EA consultation, and it is an EA recommendation. I think that we have to be aware that the EA has arrived at this consultation stage.

**Ms Ruane:** I thank the Member very much for taking my intervention, and I absolutely accept that the Education Authority made this decision. Will the Member agree that it is the Minister who will make the final decision?

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

**Ms Lockhart:** I will certainly not take any lectures from the Member across the way, because, when she was Minister, the unfortunate thing is that the education and library boards did not tackle the problem and the under usage. I will not take any lectures from her.

Our Minister is compassionate about our young people, and I have no doubt that he will do everything in his power to ensure that young people get the very best education and outdoor experience during his term in office. I do go back to the fact that we are in changing times. There is not a bottomless pit of money, and it would be wrong of us as a party of government to say that things will not have to change. I understand that things will have to change and that there does have to be a rationalisation and a looking at the entire estate. That does not mean that I am an advocate of them closing. It means that I am an advocate of the EA actually sitting down and telling us the facts and the truths around whether, if centres are to close, there is the capacity in the ones that remain open to deal with the numbers of young people

that will be going to them. I also think that the EA has been slightly disingenuous with its comments —

**Ms S Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Lockhart:** I am conscious of my time.

I think that the EA has been disingenuous around the figure of £1.3 million, because it has said that that will be reinvested into peripatetics. I question that, and I think that the EA has a lot of questions to answer. We all have representatives on the EA board, and it is vital that the political representatives on the EA board question the EA on its rationale for bringing this consultation forward. I ask everyone in the House to make their comments known to the Minister and make them known to the EA, because it is the EA that, I believe, has serious questions to answer in all of this.

**5.30 pm**

**Mr Agnew:** After two North Down Adjournment debates, I joked with the Minister for Infrastructure, who is from South Down, that he had done more than anyone else to dissolve the border between North and South Down. I fear that, if the EA proposals are implemented by the Minister, he will have done more than anyone else to reinstate it. I know that he is paying attention to the debate and that he is not a man who wants to see a hard border, so, hopefully, he will not go down that line.

Adjournment debates are often constituency-based and, at a cursory glance, this looks like a South Down debate. However, we can see from the fact that we have representatives of three of the Belfast constituencies, North Antrim, Lagan Valley, Strangford — I will not list them all — as well as our North Down constituency —

**Mr McNulty:** Newry.

**Mr Agnew:** There is also Newry and Armagh, of course. The centres serve a wide catchment area, and when we come to the question of why there is an overprovision, as it is deemed by the EA, in South Down, it is clear from the number of people here today that many from across Northern Ireland access the centres and come from well beyond the borders of South Down. The point has been made by others that South Down has a lot to offer in terms of natural environment and access to outdoor facilities. It is right that the provision should be there.

Minister, there is talk throughout the EA document about voluntary provision. I suppose that, if we were to go down that road and rely on the voluntary sector — I am hopeful that, given the number of representations from your party, you are minded to take a different route — the question that I would put is this: what guarantee is there of sustainability for those centres? What will your Department do to ensure that sustainability, so that those alternatives are there? There is a real sense of connection, as well, to these places. There is a history that goes with them. That, in itself, is not sufficient reason to keep them open, but it is sufficient reason to look twice at the proposals. As was put to me by one teacher, this will impact on my children, because Bangor Central school uses Ardnabannon every year. I put it to the Minister that this will affect many of our constituents directly. There will be annoyance, for there is an attachment to the centres, if they are to close without good reason.

My final point is around the consultation. Much has been made of it, and there is a real feeling that it has not been a genuine consultation. I do not know whether the EA was trying to be innovative by using SurveyMonkey, saying, "Look how modern we are. We are using new technology and new ways of engagement". The EA should not be knocked, if that is what it was trying to do, but there is certainly a feeling that the SurveyMonkey questionnaire that was produced very much directed people towards giving the answers it wanted to receive rather than remaining sufficiently open to the answers that people wanted to give.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Apologies, we were in Budget discussions. That was very timely, given the subject matter, I suppose, but it is why I missed the earlier contributions. The number of people here today is testimony to the feeling about the issue we are discussing. I have been here for five years, and I do not think that I have seen an Adjournment debate with so many people at it, so fair play to Colin and to everybody else for being here.

When we look at the small sum of money that is being talked about here and the money that Ministers, such as the Education Minister and I, have to look towards saving, something that should be borne in mind is the outcome that the centres give not just to our children but to the local economy. Take Killowen, Ardnabannon and Delamont: those centres are vital, and, no doubt, that has been touched on. The centres and their staff are very much part of the local community. They are also part of the learning process. Many of our young people, including

kids who come out from Belfast, benefit from the environmental learning and heritage in the likes of the Mourne, Kilbroney and Carlingford lough in South Down. We see it all the time. That is their bed of learning when it comes to outdoor living and outdoor learning. It would be a travesty if we somehow could not re-engage with the consultation, speak to the centres and find an appropriate way forward that matches the needs and outcomes of the Department.

It is for the Department and the Minister to take the decision on this. Last year, when there was an issue regarding special educational needs in the Education Authority, John O'Dowd, the previous Minister, stepped in. It is maybe time to do that on this issue.

I know I am time-bound, so, finally, as the Member who spoke previously said, it is important that we look at different ways to consult, but it is also important that we do not take away from the consultation process. I fear that, as with the social security offices, which are also going under review, we have maybe taken away something from the consultation processes. I therefore ask the Minister to re-engage on that.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. As the Member who has just spoken indicated, Adjournment debates are undoubtedly specifically constituency-focused. It is clear, however, that this is an issue that goes well beyond a single constituency. It is also clear that there is a level of interest in and passion for the subject; indeed, it is commendable that so many people are in the Public Gallery to see the outcome.

I say at the outset that I do not think that anybody would demur from the idea that general youth provision is a tremendous asset in young people's lives. It should be noted — Chris Lyttle referred to it — that the natural inclination is for all of us to think purely of schools when we think of education, but youth provision is an important aspect of it. Some £34 million has been spent on revenue from the youth budget this year, while there has been about £9 million of capital expenditure, much of it to improve youth facilities. The provision that is made by a range of youth centres is a major advantage to children's lives. No one doubts that, but this is where we run into some difficulties that I will highlight.

The situation arose from an overall assessment of what youth services were needed and what could be maintained. From that point of view, significant as what we are hearing today is, we

need to recognise and put it in context that we originally had five boards making their own outdoor education centre provision. One board now has that focus. If you were starting from scratch, you would not have the layout and provision that you have at present. At the moment, there are 11 statutory outdoor education centres and four voluntary. On the long-term future of those, I can say that a number, such as Lorne and Ganaway, which Mr Humphrey mentioned, are facilities that have been there for decades, so they will not be under particular pressure or threat. There is an issue about trying to ensure that we have a match between what is provided and what is needed. Undoubtedly, there will be major implications if the proposals go through on that basis. Again, I indicate that this is a proposal — indeed, a draft consultation — by the Education Authority. The people who will make the decision are on the Education Authority board. It is not the officials. The officials may have a particular view, but the board, on which at least four parties in the Assembly, as well as different sectors, are directly represented, will make the decision.

I do not want to mislead people. I believe that there is a funding issue, as there is with almost anything in education at the moment. Mr Hazzard talked about the previous Education Minister intervening on an issue. That was very welcome.

I will not pretend that there is not a financial aspect to this. The Minister made the intervention last year, but I am in a different position with this year's budget. I am not talking about a reduction in real terms, which is sometimes bandied about: in actual terms, it is £52 million down. The pressures in this year's budget are probably somewhere in the region of £100 million. Some of that is down to circumstances that have been imposed on Northern Ireland — not just in terms of the block grant —, such as the changes by the Chancellor on national insurance and superannuation, which are hitting everybody and are making a fortune of a difference. So, the room for manoeuvre that I have or which the Education Authority has is not as wide as it was. There is no doubt about that.

**Ms Ruane:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way in a moment.

While we do not know the budget for 2017-18, there is no doubt that we will be in very trying circumstances, where, unless there is a radical shift in the Budget across the Executive, there

will be major problems for education. I give way to the Member.

**Ms Ruane:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I understand the difficulty with budgets, as we all do, but does he agree with me that at a time of austerity, at a time when we have a serious obesity crisis, at a time when the Executive are working together to try to bring about changes, and at a time when we want to deal with underachievement, it is especially important that we find £1.3 million, particularly given the huge budget that the Minister has. I was in your position; I know the amount of money that is in the education budget.

**Mr Weir:** That is a matter of public record. If I start off down by the equivalent of £150 million, the only way I can do that is through cuts.

**Ms S Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I have only 10 minutes. Mr McGrath made an important contribution, and I want to deal with the issue.

There will undoubtedly be major pressures in 2017-18, which will particularly bear on the Education Authority because we want to try to protect as much of the front-line schools budget as possible. Unless there is a radical change, I think other cuts will have to be made that will be more painful and more politically difficult for the House than the one to outdoor education centres.

**Ms S Bradley:** Will the Minister please give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way briefly, then.

**Ms S Bradley:** I am concerned because the debate has completely turned and we are now talking about finance. The terms of reference of the Education Authority never made any reference to finance. We had serious questions about the review, but now we are questioning whether the terms of reference of the review are changing before our very eyes.

**Mr Weir:** I am being absolutely honest with the House: finance is critical to education, and it will be critical to this debate. There will have to be cuts by the Education Authority. I have no alternative other than to stay within budget nor has the Education Authority, and I am not going to pretend that there is not a pressure with finance where money will have to be found.  
*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order.

**Mr Weir:** With respect, I am trying to answer and I am being honest.

While there is work that will be done by the Education Authority to try to ensure that it has the best possible facilities for people, I will not pretend that finance is not an important aspect of that. It would be misleading to the House to pretend otherwise.

I reiterate that unless there is a radical change to the budget — to be fair to the Finance Minister, he does not have a great deal of room for manoeuvre either with the block grant — I suspect that in 2017-18 the House will face more painful decisions. I do not want to mislead anybody in relation to that.

Members have asked, "Is this the right choice?", and, "Have things been got right in the consultation?". Having spoken to members of the Education Authority, I believe they are not taking a doctrinaire position and saying that this is some sort of panacea or that it should be a plan set in stone. We are talking about proposals that will ultimately be decided on by the Education Authority board. In tackling that, and this is where I urge people in the House and in the consultation — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. I ask Members to show respect to the Minister when he is addressing the House.

**Mr Weir:** If Members are looking for an alternative route, it is incumbent on them to put forward a strong alternative that is commensurate with where we are with finance. People are not hung up on a particular solution. What they are hung up on is trying to ensure that the budget of the Education Authority is used in the best possible fashion. There may well be other things that the Education Authority will have to do that will be more difficult than even this.

If Members are looking at what the provision is, for instance, for outdoor education centres, I urge them to look at what the overall proposals should be, look at alternatives and provide those alternatives. I think they will find that if they produce alternatives that are able to provide a strong level of support in terms of outdoor centres but can match it much more within the budgets that will be available to the Education Authority, nobody is going to be objecting to that. However, people will not make the best use of a consultation if they

simply say, "No, we oppose all cuts". That is where there has to be maturity in the debate.

The decision will ultimately be taken by the Education Authority board. I think it is open to hear what is being said by others. I urge people to take part in the consultation, whatever doubts they have about it, and put forward their proposals directly, if indeed it is not to be confined by a SurveyMonkey or anything of that nature. Speak directly to Education Authority board members, and come up with an alternative that is workable and can be financed.

*Adjourned at 5.46 pm.*

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[857]