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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 6 November 2007

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** Before we begin proceedings this morning, I want to deal with a matter relating to the debate that took place on 15 October 2007 on the Bill of Rights Forum. During the debate, Mr Attwood raised a point of order about a Member placing people's names on the record. The Deputy Speaker ruled that that was in order and that the comments made were part and parcel of the cut and thrust of debate. I concur with the Deputy Speaker's ruling on the issue.

I note that Mr Attwood also raised the matter as a point of order yesterday and asked for a further ruling on the subject. The Deputy Speaker advised that I had already planned to make a statement to Members on the issue. I want to do that because the debate prompted letters from organisations outside the Assembly. I have replied to each of those letters, and I have placed copies of the original letters and my replies in the Assembly Library. I have also referred some of the procedural issues raised in the correspondence to the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Let me make it clear: I am satisfied that there was no breach of procedures during the debate. Members will know that, for the purposes of the law of defamation, absolute privilege attaches to the making of statements in proceedings of the Assembly. However, I think that with such protection comes responsibility. I encourage Members to remember their responsibilities when speaking in the Chamber. I will take no further points of order on the issue.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Sixth Meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the inland waterways sectoral format.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots):** The North/South Ministerial Council met in the inland waterways sectoral format in Ballyconnell, County Cavan, on Wednesday 17 October 2007. That was the first such meeting since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, who also chaired the meeting. Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development, and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. Minister Ó Cuív and I began the day by meeting at the site of the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen. Later in the day, following that meeting, we visited Clones Canal Store and met with local community representatives.

The meeting opened with a progress report from the chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, Mr John Martin. His report focused on accommodation; restoration of the Royal Canal; a sponsorship programme and joint activities; moorings and boat registrations; and the Ulster Canal. We were satisfied to hear that, in general, the body has continued to discharge its remit of managing, maintaining, restoring and developing the navigations that are in its care, mainly for recreational use. Maintenance and capital-work programmes have been advanced significantly in the past five years. All corporate governance requirements have been met, day-to-day administration matters have been attended to, and a wide range of enquiries has been addressed. The Council noted the content of the 2002-07 progress report, the main points of which I will now summarise.

Where accommodation is concerned, work has commenced on a new headquarters for Waterways Ireland in Enniskillen. The western regional office in Scariff, County Clare, opened in August 2006. Significant progress has been made on the restoration of the Royal Canal, and it will be opened fully to navigation from Dublin to the Shannon in 2009. Major international sporting events, such as the Waterways Ireland Classic Fishing Festival at Lough Erne, the Waterways Ireland World Water Ski Championship in Enniskillen, and the Triathlon Ireland in Athlone — the Tri-Athlone — were the joint activities that were supported by sponsorship programmes.

Where moorings and boat registrations are concerned, 8,500 additional metres of mooring have been provided across the waterways, and boat registrations have more than doubled, increasing from 5,544 at the start of 2000 to 11,468 in 2007. The Council welcomed the decision that was made at the NSMC plenary meeting in July to proceed with the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal. The Council also agreed on how to proceed with that major infrastructural project. We agreed that Waterways Ireland should appoint a single entity consortium to design and construct the restoration of that section of the Ulster Canal. We noted that the Irish Exchequer will meet the full capital cost of the project, which is estimated at €35 million, or £23.8 million. On completion of the project, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government will meet the annual maintenance costs, which are in the order of €300,000, or £201,000 a year. Waterways Ireland will establish a project team for the day-to-day management of the undertaking. That team will report monthly to a monitoring committee that will be chaired jointly by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

We stressed that good local liaison will be crucial to the smooth running of the project. We also noted that Waterways Ireland will engage with all key stakeholders in implementing the project. We welcomed Waterways Ireland's intention to establish a targeted marketing programme during construction in order to highlight the attractions and uniqueness of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal.

Waterways Ireland presented its future plans to the Council for consideration. The main priorities for 2008 are to ensure that the navigations are open and that all existing facilities are operational during the main boating season, which lasts from April to October; to complete the major bridge-building programme and works to reconnect the Royal Canal to the Shannon; to commence design and land acquisition processes on the section of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones; to promote the waterways and to extend and expand recreational use of the waterways in all their forms; and to apply the highest standards of operational management and business practice so that the use of the waterways is maintained and expanded in a sustainable manner.

We discussed plans for Waterways Ireland for 2008 to 2010. We also approved its business plan for 2008 and its 2008-10 corporate plan, subject to budgetary considerations by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. The Council also noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2005, which were presented prior to their submission for laying before the Assembly and the Oireachtas. When the accounts have been printed, copies will be forwarded to

both sponsoring Departments for them to arrange laying. The Council agreed to proposals for a compulsory purchase order and a number of disposals, all of which are in the South. The Council agreed to meet again in the inland waterways sectoral format in March 2008.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo agus guím rath agus bláth ar an dá rialtas agus ar na hAirí uile ar an ábhar seo. I welcome the statement and am delighted that the meeting of the Council in the inland waterways sectoral format on Wednesday 17 October took place. That timely meeting was the Council's first in that format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly.

The Minister referred extensively to the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. What was missing from his statement, however, was a timeline for the successful completion of the project. I appreciate that it is an exciting and ambitious project, to which both Governments are contributing financially, but can the Minister indicate a date for its completion?

What is not contained in a statement is sometimes as interesting as what is contained in it. My colleague Mr Willie Clarke has pressed the Minister on a number of occasions in questions for written answer to provide details on pay disparity between Waterways Ireland employees in the North and those in the South. I, too, ask the Minister to advise the Assembly on the pay awards, applied and consolidated, North and South, for administrative and professional technical staff in Waterways Ireland since the body's inception. What is being done to resolve that issue?

**Mr Poots:** The answer to the Member's first question is fairly simple: 2014. We are looking at four years to complete the planning process and two years for development. It takes more time to complete planning and land acquisition, and so on, than it does construction. However, we are looking to have the canal fully operational by 2014.

Pay disparity is a significant problem, but it relates not just to Waterways Ireland but to every cross-border body. I sought clarification on the matter. Waterways Ireland is one of the larger cross-border bodies. Its being based in County Fermanagh makes it a bigger issue, because more people from Northern Ireland are affected. At the outset, pay scales were broadly similar, but differentials in pay rises between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have led to a pay disparity between people who are doing the same job.

I recognise that individuals feel that they are being unfairly treated as a result of that disparity, and we have asked the Department of Finance and Personnel

to consult with the Department of Finance in the Republic of Ireland on the issue. I sound a note of caution, however, because, should we rectify that pay disparity, we then create a pay disparity between employees of North/South bodies and the rest of the Civil Service. Therefore, it is a very difficult and complicated issue to resolve. Nonetheless, I understand the anxieties of the individuals involved.

**Mr McCausland:** I welcome the Minister's statement. Waterways are important to the development of tourism in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is, therefore, important that we set out a good programme for the future and that Waterways Ireland be fit for purpose.

10.45 am

In that context, I will mention the recent case in which a former director of corporate services in Waterways Ireland was awarded €75,000 after having been sacked from that organisation — I understand that he has now returned to the Department. He was sacked after he had made allegations and complaints about the organisation's recruitment practices. Was the matter raised during discussions, and what action will be taken to address the issue? It is clear that there are problems in the organisation.

I notice that no border is being shown on the map of the island that appears on the cross-border body's website. The map shows waterways but no border between the countries. I ask that Waterways Ireland reinstate the border.

**Mr Poots:** I will look into the matter. The Member's first point related to an individual, and I understand that there is an ongoing case involved. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to comment on the matter in the House until the case is finalised.

**Mr K Robinson:** I welcome the statement and thank the Minister for bringing it to the House today. There are a couple of issues. First, Mr McCausland has mentioned one aspect of Southern aggression in which the border has disappeared: I am worried about a more active type of Southern aggression, which takes the form of the zebra mussel. Was that problem discussed with Southern representatives during the deliberations? What steps are being taken to halt that form of aggression, which has now spread into the Lough Neagh system?

I would like to see Waterways Ireland pushing for more recognition of the significant canal system that already exists in the east of the Province: I am thinking about the Newry Canal, the Lagan navigation system, and improvements to the River Bann as far as Coleraine. I hope that the Minister will use his influence to ensure that there is balance in the Waterways Ireland forward programme so that those areas are covered. One can clearly see the potential for tourism there, and that must be examined.

I can help the Minister with another difficulty by saying that the Lagan Canal used to run close to the proposed Maze development site. Perhaps the introduction of a spur into the proposed national stadium site would reduce the cost of the road and rail network links.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Does the Member have a question?

**Mr K Robinson:** Yes. I have already asked a question about the River Bann and the eastern waterways. I ask the Minister to look seriously at the zebra mussel problem because it is affecting the boating fraternity and the infrastructure around Lough Neagh.

**Mr Poots:** The invasion of zebra mussels was not discussed during the meeting. However, there has been a publicity campaign on the issue. Boats are the main factor in the spread of zebra mussels, and the Department has been advising boat owners on how to reduce the problem through good boat management. I trust that they will act responsibly and that they will ensure that the problem is minimised as far as possible.

Waterways Ireland will be happy to service all new canals. Responsibility for the development of canals rests with the Governments, whether it is that of the Republic of Ireland in the case of the Royal Canal, or this Administration as regards canals in our jurisdiction. I would love to be in a position to develop our canal infrastructure because it would provide great opportunities for tourism and economic development. Agreeing to open the new 12 km stretch of the Ulster Canal from Enniskillen to Clones, 60% of which is in Northern Ireland and 100% of which is being paid for by the Republic of Ireland Government, is good news for us.

I trust that the Republic of Ireland will take it that step further and bring it from Clones up to Caledon, and that we can then take it from Caledon right down to Lough Neagh, and open it up onwards from Lough Neagh to Belfast, Coleraine and Newry, and reinstate the canal infrastructure. This is going to be a very long-term project; it will involve central Government, local government and the private sector, along with the Heritage Lottery Fund. We have to look at creating a cocktail of funders to make it happen, and I am very keen to see it happen.

On a side note, Mr Speaker, I see that we have a lot of members of the Indian community with us today. As Culture Minister, I should like to make them very welcome. This is a very special week, with the celebration of Diwali, the festival of lights.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's statement and the clear intent of Waterways Ireland to continue on in full co-operation. Obviously, the Minister is intent on that as well.



I note that Nelson has just left the Chamber. I wonder whether, given his call for the border to be reintroduced, he would also call for the Republic of Ireland's money to be kept at the border. That is another story.

Can the Minister outline the capital investment by the Irish Government and our own Government since 1998, and the serious economic, social and environmental impact that those investments have had on Waterways Ireland? Also, the Minister will be aware that we had a good, healthy discussion yesterday about fishing and the Fisheries Conservancy Board. I note that there is an intention to promote the waterways of Ireland as a key tourism product. What type of activity, outside of fishing, does the Minister intend to promote to bring greater use and activity to the rivers and waterways?

**Mr Poots:** There has been limited investment by the Northern Ireland Government since 1998. However, a lot of work has been done in opening up access to the waterways. There have been major improvements to towpaths in a whole range of areas — between Portadown and Newry, for example. The towpath between Belfast and Lisburn, among others, has seen considerable improvement. There has also been maintenance work on the Bann navigation and other navigations across Northern Ireland. There have been a range of capital investments, but nothing to compare with what the Republic of Ireland has invested in the Royal Canal, for example. That Administration has carried out major investments.

Opportunities on the waterways other than angling mainly relate to boating — barges, powerboats and canoeing. A lot of the water activities relate to boating and those types of occupations. Boating is hugely popular. There are around 13,000 registrations across Ireland, and over 4,000 in Northern Ireland, so there are a very significant number of boats using our waterways. This is a huge opportunity for tourism and to bring people in. Anyone who has tried to hire a boat will know all about the costs that are involved, but it is something that people enjoy participating in, and there are a lot of opportunities there.

**Mr McCarthy:** I welcome the statement. It is partnership working across the island, and that has to be welcomed. As the Minister said, it should contribute enormously to tourism. It is a start on a shared future across this island; perhaps they are making more progress on the inland waterways than we are in Northern Ireland in rolling out our shared future. However, that may come in the near future, and let us hope that it does.

I also pay tribute to the Southern Irish taxpayers, who are contributing around £23 million to the project, and who will contribute half of the maintenance costs in the coming years. The Minister's statement shows

that we have a very good deal. I have really no question to ask, other than to support what has been said —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have said continually to all sides of the House that when a Minister makes a statement, we certainly do not need statements from Members — I expect questions.

**Lord Browne:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the decision to proceed with the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal, as that will help the economic development of that area.

However, I am sure that the Minister is aware that Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council came together over two years ago to initiate plans for the reopening of the Lagan Canal to link Belfast to Lough Neagh. This, like the Clones and Upper Lough Erne scheme, would bring many economic advantages, including tourism and sport, to the area. Has the Minister any plans to advance that worthwhile project in conjunction with those three councils?

**Mr Poots:** I can add Craigavon Borough Council to that list of councils. It will kick in around the Lough Neagh and Aghagallon area. Dungannon and South Tyrone does not quite stretch to the Lagan navigation just yet, Lord Morrow, but we look after the Ulster Canal there.

The Lagan Canal Restoration Trust has been established. It is funded by the four local authorities and the Environment and Heritage Service, and it will explore the scope for delivering the 26-mile project. As successor in title to the former Lagan Navigation Company, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure owns the residual property rights remaining in Government ownership — primarily the locks and towpath on the lower Lagan. The new body will have the task of identifying the cost and the potential sources of income for the delivery of such navigation.

Belfast City Council can receive around £1 million from Ulster Garden Villages for the opening of the first lock at Stranmillis, and I trust that that will proceed. It is another important step in the reopening of our canal navigation. When the Island Centre in Lisburn was opened by Lisburn City Council, one of the locks was reopened. There is the opportunity for further openings with engagement from the private sector through developer gain and funding from other sources — as I indicated earlier — such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, local authorities and my Department.

I trust that the Lagan navigation can continue once Belfast City Council commences its work at Stranmillis, and that that navigation can be opened up to the wider public.

**Mr McHugh:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. The headquarters of Waterways Ireland is currently being built in Enniskillen, and it will be vital to the economy of Enniskillen and the wider area. I welcome that, and I urge the Minister to press for its completion as soon as possible, as it has been quite a long time in the making.

I have a question about the jetties and moorings, which have already been mentioned. Farmers who have land along Lough Erne, and others, are asking questions about a new cost for jetties. Is Waterways Ireland creating a new annual cost for mooring boats or establishing jetties, as compared to those who controlled the lakes previously?

I assure the Member opposite that there are gates on Lough Erne, but it is very difficult to define where the border is.

11.00 am

**Mr Poots:** Obviously, we want to establish more jetties and moorings in order to give boat users greater land accessibility. If the Member was attempting to ascertain whether the building of such facilities would mean an additional cost to farmers, I can tell him that they would be funded by the public sector, not the private sector.

**Lord Morrow:** I was interested to hear the Minister speak about Waterways Ireland. As he considers his reply to Mr McCausland's request to have the border shown on the map on the Waterways Ireland website — although I suspect that that will not stop water flowing either north or south of the border — will he also consider the political connotations? The name of that body is off-putting and threatening to many unionists. Therefore, will the Minister consider renaming the whole project in order to make it more user-friendly to unionists?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Lord Morrow:** The Minister referred to the fishing festival on Lough Erne, which is a major international event that is supported across Europe and further afield. How does the Minister envisage Waterways Ireland's enhancing the annual Classic Fishing Festival?

**Mr Poots:** We will consider all those matters. In the past, we have supported the Classic Fishing Festival. There is a budget — albeit relatively small in real terms — to support such events, and grant aid is based on those events' quality. To date, that fishing festival has been of sufficient quality, and I expect it to grow in stature rather than diminish.

**Mr Dallat:** Without political connotations, such as those to which Lord Morrow referred, I welcome the reopening of part of the Ulster Canal and the Minister's prediction that it will be fully opened by 2014. That is excellent news and sends out a strong signal to long-term

investors to begin to create the required infrastructure. Will the Minister assure Members that, as far as he can, he will cut red tape in order to ensure that that infrastructure is put in place — particularly on the Lower Bann route, comprising Coleraine, Portglenone, Antrim and Kilrea — and that the canal will be ready and up and running in 2014?

**Mr Poots:** The 2014 target date for opening that section of the Ulster Canal is realistic. Thereafter, I hope that further work will be carried out on canals, that this is the beginning of a process and not the end, and that we will be able to commit more resources to the reopening of canals.

There are substantial tourism and economic-development benefits to be derived from such projects. The Member knows well that, in East Londonderry, the Lower Bann navigation is a superb stretch of water that, even now, is heavily used for sporting and recreational purposes. That should be encouraged, and we will seek to do so. I am happy to work with all Members in order to deliver that.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Following on from Mr Morrow's question, what progress has been made in attracting flagship angling events to the canal infrastructure? Does the Minister agree that angling forms an important part of the tourism package?

**Mr Poots:** I have little to add to the response that I gave to Lord Morrow's question. Good water quality is essential for angling and is the responsibility of the Environment and Heritage Service. Investigating fish kills is the responsibility of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. Water quality has been improving and will continue to improve.

We must examine ways to reintroduce the levels of fish stocks in our great rivers that we had in the past. For example, the River Lagan was extremely rich in salmon before the industrial revolution drove them from the river. Now, salmon are returning to the River Lagan, but that is only one stretch of water. We must improve water quality and spawning beds to increase the population of salmon and other species, and we must enhance the quality of rivers for angling.

People do not recognise the opportunities that angling creates or how tourism can benefit. Lough Erne, in particular, used to be popular with German anglers, but its popularity has diminished greatly in recent years. Such opportunities must be recreated, and new ones must be sought.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

#### Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** Members should note that as no amendments have been tabled to the Bill, there will be no opportunity for debate this morning, although a further opportunity for debate will occur during the Final Stage of the Bill.

As no amendments have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the two clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the long title.

*Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Independent Water Review Panel's Strand-One Report

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain):** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Independent Water Review Panel's Strand One Report.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the review team, headed by Paddy Hillyard, for its hard work in introducing strand one of the review in a very tight time frame. The Committee looks forward to receiving the completed report in December. It would be remiss of me, as Chairperson of the Committee, not to acknowledge the Committee's appreciation of the long hours worked and help provided by its staff, and I give special thanks to the Committee Clerk.

The Committee for Regional Development has brought the motion to the Assembly because the review of water and sewerage services is probably one of the most significant challenges facing the Assembly. What we, as elected representatives, decide over the coming months will have long-term consequences for every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland.

The previous Administration were criticised for — among other things — lack of transparency, failure to consider the full costs and alternative policy options, and undue haste in developing and implementing water reforms. The danger is that, with the best of intentions, but because of budgetary and other pressures, we may make the same mistakes.

Today's debate is an opportunity to consider and explore the wide-ranging findings and recommendations in the review panel's strand-one report. It is an opportunity to open up to wider debate some of the important issues touched on in that report.

I want to make it clear from the outset that the Committee for Regional Development has had many constructive engagements with the Minister for Regional Development regarding strand one of the review, and we look forward to more engagement as strand two progresses.

I appeal to all Members to remember that the people of Northern Ireland will not thank us for using today's debate simply as an opportunity to score points. The issue is too important and should be treated as such.

It is important to clarify some misunderstandings of the Committee's initial response to the report. As a Committee, we have not, at any time, endorsed the report. We have welcomed it in the most general terms as an important early first step in finding a solution to this complex and challenging question. The Committee believes that that solution must both protect the most vulnerable in society from poverty and hardship, and ensure that all households and enterprises in Northern Ireland have clean, safe and reliable drinking water and sewerage services. Those services must be provided in an efficient, sustainable, fair and transparent manner. That is a tall order by anyone's reckoning.

I want to address a number of assumptions that were made in the report. First, the Committee agreed that a figure reflecting the historical cost contributions paid by customers and contained in the regional rates should be taken out and ring-fenced, and, if technically possible, allocated to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). The figure of £109 million per annum was a conservative estimate. There are other, less conservative ways to calculate the historical cost contributions made by the ratepayer to the costs of water and sewerage. For example, taking the proportion of the regional rate identified as a contribution to the cost of water and sewerage services in 1998, and uplifting that proportion to today's prices, yields a figure higher than the £109 million identified in the report.

The Committee recognises that ring-fencing a higher proportion of the regional rate for water and sewerage services would have consequences for the level of expenditure available for other public services. However, let us have that debate. It remains an issue worthy of discussion as strand two of the review progresses.

The method of assessment for charging — capital values — is an area in which the Committee has concerns. This relates to the issue of asset-rich but cash-poor individuals. In particular, the Committee has concerns about the ability of many pensioners living on fixed incomes in family homes to pay this tax.

There are many views on the use of capital values as a proxy for the ability to pay. I suspect that many Members will have points to make regarding that. Those views were reflected in the Committee's discussions regarding the recommendation. However, the Committee will reserve its opinion on the use of capital values as a charging base until December, when the work on the affordability tariffs is complete. It is worth pointing out that the Minister for Regional Development, in his statement to the House on 22 October, stated that the Executive also reserved their final decision on the way in which payments for service should be made until the panel completed its strand-two report.

Much has been made of the issue of billing and the importance of having a single entity collecting both rates and water tax. The review panel recommends, in paragraph 2.36 of its report, that:

“householders' payments should be clearly and separately identified on their rates bill ... from 2009/10 householders' payments should be collected through the same billing and collection system as the rates: there should not be a separate system”.

Paragraph 7.1 of the report states that those recommendations, among others:

“will make it possible to release further substantial savings in relation to billing, collection and customer service.”

That is fine in theory, but herein lies one of the many problems. The report contains no financial modelling of the full costs of varying, or opting out of, if necessary, the Crystal Alliance contract, or, indeed, any costs in relation to the feasibility of whether Land and Property Services could actually perform that task.

The Committee is clearly of the view that more evidence is required. That evidence should include whether Land and Property Services could provide the billing and collection service for water and sewerage services more efficiently than, and at least as effectively as, the existing Crystal Alliance arrangements. Failure to provide that assurance will clearly increase costs to the consumer.

The Committee has also been considering the recommendations on how billing will impact on the approximately 100,000 households with septic tanks, who are not connected to the sewerage system, and on those people currently billed on a non-domestic basis but with a domestic water allowance.

In that respect, the report lacks clarity. One of the main observations of the review panel in its efforts to identify lessons for the future was a failure to fully consider and evaluate potential costs and policy alternatives in advance.

*11.15 am*

I was pleased to hear, in the Minister's statement to the House on 22 October, that the Committee is not alone in its concerns about the cost of billing and collection recommendations. The Minister indicated that the Executive also considered necessary further analysis by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel to determine how single billing, which identifies water and sewerage charges separately, might be arranged and to assess the implications for existing billing arrangements and contracts.

One of the most important issues in respect of future costs to the consumer is Northern Ireland Water's ability to reach its efficiency targets. The strand-one report recommends that Northern Ireland Water's operational efficiency targets should be raised from



22% to 40% by the end of 2009-10, and the report leaves the capital expenditure efficiency target for the regulator to review. The Committee supports the principle that the interests of water and sewerage customers will be best served by making Northern Ireland Water as efficient as possible, as quickly as possible. However, the Committee heard a variety of views on the achievability of increased efficiency targets within the 2009-10 time frame.

The Committee hopes that the 40% efficiency target is achievable. However, a clear understanding of the implications for customers of achieving that target is required, particularly with respect to service level; planned investment; water and waste water quality; the implications of failure to achieve the target for charges to customers; and the cost to the departmental budget. In the first instance, the Committee wants to see consideration of those issues in the context of a range of efficiency targets, from the current 22% to the recommended 40%, and it has decided that it is more appropriate to await relevant information.

Another recommendation is that the cost of road drainage, borne at present by Northern Ireland Water, should be transferred to the budget of the Department for Regional Development. The panel's report identifies a sum of £48 million for that cost. The Committee takes the view that it would not be prudent to endorse any recommendation that may place additional unquantified pressures on the departmental budget. Should the Executive decide to accept such recommendations, the necessary additional budgetary cover should be agreed at Executive level. The Committee would be particularly concerned if there were any attempt to reduce the roads maintenance budget, which, at present, is underfunded by 40%, to facilitate that cost, particularly as the acting chief executive of the Roads Service has, in the 'Road Service Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2007', highlighted the increased risk of skidding that arises from failure to make adequate provision for the roads maintenance budget.

I turn to, arguably, the most important issue, and one that I have already touched on briefly, namely water poverty and the affordability tariff. That work will be dealt with in strand two of the review, but it is important for the Committee to put down a marker at this stage on its concerns. Water poverty and the affordability tariff had been a key element in the Committee's consideration of the review of water and sewerage since its earliest meeting in May. The Committee welcomes the panel's comments on affordability tariffs and the ongoing work on water poverty to enhance the affordability tariff.

In particular, I draw the attention of the House to chapter 9 of the panel's strand-one report. The panel reported that, without the affordability tariff, almost

50% of households would experience water poverty. About 40% of those households were occupied by pensioners or couples with children. With the existing affordability tariff, the report estimated that 11% of households would still be in water poverty, and that the affordability tariff would take those eligible for the tariff out of water poverty. That tells us that the existing affordability tariff, if it were taken up by those who are eligible for it — and that is a big "if" — is not sufficiently inclusive to embrace all those who will face water poverty as a result of the water and sewerage tax.

It is the view of the Committee that much more work must be done on enhanced affordability arrangements —

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

Before I call Mr Wells, I should tell the House that the Minister is on his way to the Chamber. He has been caught in traffic and he is well aware of the debate.

**Mr Wells:** It is extremely unfortunate that the Minister is not present. He has already missed the contribution of the Chairman of the Regional Development Committee. It now looks as though he will miss the contribution of the Deputy Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, which, to my mind, is particularly significant. *[Laughter.]*

This issue dominated the election of May 2007 and has generated vast numbers of correspondence, emails and phone calls.

The Minister cannot even organise his diary to ensure that he is in the Chamber to listen to the debate on this important issue. We will ask him for a good excuse when he comes to the House, dishevelled, no doubt, in around 30 minutes' time.

If I were asked to summarise the review report, I would say that much has been achieved but there is a great deal more to be done. The achievements are notable and are in line with the DUP's manifesto. It has been established that homeowners will not be asked to pay twice for the provision of water in Northern Ireland. That is a major achievement of the review, and it is one for which my party and others have pressed for many months.

As a result of effective analysis of the statistics, the review panel has been able to establish that £109 million already being paid through the rates should have been going towards the payment for water provision. The link was broken in 1998; however, the review panel has been able to calculate the amount that should have been included for water provision retrospectively. That works out at approximately £160 per household per year, which has been hypothecated and will be removed from any future charge for water provision. That is good news.

Another aspect of the review panel's work that will reduce bills is the transfer of £25 million for the



provision of road drainage from Northern Ireland Water back into the Roads Service budget. That is to be welcomed, but there may be an element of robbing Peter to pay Paul, because transferring that money back to Roads Service may cause a reduction in roads maintenance. Therefore, we must watch what happens to that £25 million carefully.

There has also been an increase in developer charging. Currently, for house builders, there is a subsidy for linking houses into the water and sewerage systems. However, from now on, they will pay a realistic amount. I realise that that may have a knock-on effect for affordable and social housing, and perhaps mitigating factors could be instigated to prevent that happening. However, if a man is building a house for which he will be charging £300,000, he should be charged a realistic amount for linking that house to the water and sewerage systems.

The review panel has stated that greater efficiency savings will be required from Northern Ireland Water. However, the targets in the report are extremely challenging, and I am not certain that Northern Ireland Water will be able to achieve them in the time given. I will return to that point.

There are still issues outstanding, and the affordability tariff is one issue on which Members will dwell this morning and this afternoon. Acceptability of the proposed water charges by the general community will stand or fall on whether the affordability tariff is fair and is seen to be fair. There must not be a situation in which a pensioner living alone in a large family home and using a tiny amount of water each week is paying three or four times more than the household down the road in which six children are using huge volumes of water. Capital valuation is not the way to determine whether a person can pay for water, and the review panel will have a very difficult task in squaring that circle and in bringing about a sense of fairness.

The DUP is extremely keen to give pensioners, widows, or people who live alone the option of using water meters: that would solve the problem. Water metering is fair; it simply taxes people on the basis of the amount of water they use, and it promotes the conservation of water. If the Minister bothers to turn up, I would like him to tell me whether the proposals, as they stand, have been tested against the EU Water Framework Directive, which demands that Governments carry out actions to conserve water. However, the question is academic because the Minister is somewhere between here and Camlough, and has not turned up to answer our questions, which is a disgrace.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has been in touch. He had a previous engagement and is running late as he is stuck

in traffic, but he will be here shortly to answer MLA Wells's points.

Sinn Féin has been consistent in its opposition of the imposition of water charges, which it considers to be a regressive form of taxation that would have the greatest impact on low-income families, single parents, the elderly, farmers and small businesses.

Since the formation of the Executive in May, my party has committed itself to undo any plans for the privatisation of water and sewerage services. Our focus has been to stop the introduction of water tax, because we believe that the initial consultation process was deeply flawed and that the models proposed were limited and were based on a predetermined outcome.

My party is determined to tackle what most people consider to be the injustice of having to pay twice for something — double taxation for water and sewerage services. It is also wrong that the people of the North should be penalised unfairly and made to pay for an investment that successive British Governments failed to deliver. For generations, people here have been paying for water through their rates, yet that investment has not resulted in the maintenance and the upgrading of the water and sewerage system to European and international standards.

The independent review on water charges carried out by Professor Paddy Hillyard marks the end of British Government proposals for water charges. People are looking to the Executive for a fair deal and for a root-and-branch review of the direct rule proposals. I welcome the approach that has been adopted by the Regional Development Minister, Conor Murphy, who proposed the fundamental review. I also congratulate Professor Hillyard and his team for the work that they have done on the project and the staff of the Department for Regional Development.

The Hillyard report recommends that British Government plans for water charges should be scrapped. Sinn Féin endorses that position, as it has always argued that no one should have to pay twice for water. Indeed, we fought the election on that commitment, on which this report delivers. People will pay for water within their rates bill, as was the case in the past. The improvement is that there will be a clear, separate line on the rates bill, and people will be able to see the amount that they will be paying. It will also mean that people who are eligible for relief under the rating system will be eligible for relief for water charges. People on low incomes will benefit significantly as a result of the review. Water charging will be open and transparent.

There is a recommendation for further targeted assistance; for example, for people who are asset rich but cash poor. The affordability tariff will undergo further work in strand two of the review. Although metering has merit, it would be costly and would push

up the cost to the individual. Some people believe that metering is a panacea, and that its introduction will mean that water will be cheaper. That is not the case.

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

**Mr W Clarke:** I do not have much time.

**Mr Wells:** The Member will get an extra minute.

**Mr W Clarke:** I doubt it. *[Laughter.]*

People believe that metering is a panacea, which it is not. Ultimately, water and sewerage infrastructure must be paid for. If everyone used meters, tariffs would continually rise in order to pay for infrastructure. Therefore, metering is a red herring.

I welcome the fact that the Regional Development Minister has ruled out privatisation, and I fully agree with his assessment that imposing water charges was an attempt by the British Government to provide an incentive to sell off water services. The review's recommendations include a £160 reduction in the rates element of the combined bill to meet the cost of water in 2008. The result will be that people will pay less for water and rates than the amount forecast.

The second part of the review will consider the overall governance, accountability, management and status of the water company. In that context, the Executive have considered strand one of the report and have agreed a way forward that presents a much fairer deal and that will be an important step towards ensuring that the people of the Six Counties are not taxed unfairly for water.

**Mr Dallat:** I also want to add my thanks to the Committee staff and, in particular, the groups who gave evidence. I recall with great clarity those who represented people on low incomes and those at the margins of society. The Consumer Council also deserves particular thanks for its work.

It is regrettable that the Minister is not present, because I would have liked to assure him that any stories that he may have heard about the report's being put together with great enthusiasm have been highly exaggerated and are, perhaps, even inaccurate. Indeed, as the Chairman of the Committee will be aware, the Committee was recalled to discuss certain serious issues further because it could not reach agreement on them.

The Minister will be aware that the SDLP was the only party that met the review panel. From that point of view, we are pleased that our concerns are featured in the report.

11.30 am

However, given that so many imponderables are outstanding, it would be impossible to begin to claim a victory for common sense. To date, it is not known how far down the river the direct rule Ministers went in signing up — legally — to the contract with Crystal

Alliance. That was disgraceful and should never have happened. I urge the Minister to end that contract and to confirm that there will be no separate water charges. I hope that those matters are realised sooner rather than later.

Again, it is recognised that people are already paying for water and that a notional figure is accepted. However, is that figure accurate? We know that for several successive years, there was a hike in the regional rate. The reason given for that was the cost of investing in water services. In that case, it must surely and logically follow that if the bulk of the increase in the regional rate were spent on infrastructure and water, the charge of £160 per annum would increase.

The SDLP has always said that if we are not to have water bills, the cost of metering would be prohibitive and quite unnecessary. I hope that I am correct in that assumption. We welcome the fact that there is now recognition that water consumers should never have had to pay for the dispersal of surface water, a matter to which the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development has already referred. We hope sincerely that we do not play a game of draughts in which that cost has simply been moved to the rates section of the bill, leaving the consumer no better off. There is, of course, the review of public administration to deal with, and that is another imponderable.

We have dealt with only strand one of the Independent Water Review Panel's report. It would be unwise to declare any opinion on that until we know the outcome of strand two. However, we can assist the Minister by repeating our view that there should be no separate bill for water and sewerage services. We also believe that there must be protection against water poverty, whether in the form of charges or metering. However, metering would merely restrict the use of water by those who can least afford it. We can also tell the Minister that the notion of a shareholders' dividend is a feature that is designed for privatisation and that we do not need it, given that there is an understanding that privatisation is out of the window for all time. I hope that I am correct in saying that.

Finally, and most importantly, the savings that the review panel suggested would be achieved are not unreasonable, given that the original target that was set out for the company could hardly be described as a target at all. With a great deal of goodwill and an acceptance that the decisions that were taken in our name in the past — under direct rule — were wrong, or, dare I say it, even wicked, we can move on and provide a water service that is of the highest standard, at a cost that should vary little from that which is being charged presently. That is the challenge that the Minister must meet. He will not find the SDLP wanting in its determination to ensure that that challenge is met.

I hope that the Minister has more success with water than he is having with traffic management this morning.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Mrs Long to speak, I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones. They are causing problems for the audio system in the Chamber.

**Mrs Long:** I apologise to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development and to Mr Wells for missing part of both their speeches. However, what I heard of Mr Wells's contribution, I found very interesting, and, no doubt, I will refer to it at some point.

Water is a valuable and expensive commodity. Even here, where there seems to be an overproliferation of it at times, we should not lose sight of the fact that the provision of potable water is an expensive business. The biggest public-health investment that we as a society can make is in water and sanitation, rather than in hospitals. The greatest change in mortality rates over the past few centuries is due to the delivery of good sanitation and clean water.

We must be realistic and accept that the debate is about how we pay for water; it is not about whether we pay. It is important that, in the context of what has already been produced, we focus on three key interlinked issues: fairness, affordability, and sustainability. We must address them comprehensively and give them good consideration. On reading the report, my concern is that I am not convinced that each of those issues has been fully addressed.

First, where fairness is concerned, most people are uncomfortable with the notion of paying an additional water charge while their rates remain unaffected. That was the original direct rule proposal. However, if people have to pay a separate charge, they would be relatively more comfortable paying for what they use, rather than simply paying for services that are based on the value of their houses.

When I have discussed water charges with members of the public, I have noticed very little resistance to the notion that people should pay for what they use. The fundamental resistance seems to be to the introduction of any kind of flat-rate charge based on the capital value of property. People believe such charges to be punitive and are much happier with the idea of paying for the water that they use — they believe that to be fairer. However, that approach obviously raises a more complex argument because of the huge infrastructural costs that would be involved. Nevertheless, I believe that most people are comfortable with the principle of paying for what they use.

Fairness is also an issue in relation to basing charges on the capital value of property, and, therefore, it cannot be detached from the general discussions on the rating system. A single person living in a particular property will end up paying the same in water charges

as a large number of people living in the same size of property. That is inherently unfair and runs contrary to people's expectations. Although such a system clearly badly affects pensioners, they are not the only people who will be affected — it will also impact on single working adults and young people, who will also find that they are paying the same amount for water as larger families. Single people are annoyed that they have to pay the same rates as larger families, even though they feel that they do not make the same demands on services. That will continue to be an issue with water charges.

I accept that these proposals have attempted to address the issue of paying twice for water. However, there has been a significant escalation in our rates bills in recent years, so when people compare what they were paying three or four years ago with what they are going to be paying under any new system, they will find that they will be paying more. There is no point in our trying to disguise or hide that fact.

The Sinn Féin Member Willie Clarke suggested that people will now find that they will be paying less than was forecast — that argument is unsustainable, because if we are determined to invest more in water services, there will be a requirement on people to pay more. We must be honest and open with people about the costs involved, not just in the short term but in the long term.

That leads me on to affordability. Affordability is not just an issue of the level at which the charges are introduced; the long-term cost of the charges is important. If, over time, rates bills continue to escalate in the background, through continued hikes in the regional rate and district rate and rises in water charges, the proposals will not necessarily be affordable in the long term. We must have a strategy, and I will address that further in my comments on sustainability.

This matter also concerns those who are asset rich but cash poor. We are very aware of people who have worked their whole lives, are now on fixed incomes, and live in rather modest properties but find that, due to the property boom, their houses have been valued at quite a high level. One may have a good property, but one cannot take a brick out of the wall to pay the water bill. We must be realistic about that.

If the charges are to be sustainable, we must be realistic about conservation. We need a proper, sustainable water policy that deals with, for example, grey-water recycling and limits the usage of potable water in properties to a minimum. If we can develop a sustainable water policy within which the context of charging can be considered, it is more likely that we will have sustainable, affordable and fair charging down the line.

**Mr Moutray:** When reflecting on the introduction of water charges, and, in particular, the Independent



Review Panel's strand-one report, it must be said that, without doubt, progress has been made towards achieving an improved water and sewerage service for the people of Northern Ireland. At this point, it is necessary to note publicly that advances have been made on two particular issues — there will be no payment until 2009, and consumers will not have to pay twice for water services.

A recent publication, 'Water Matters: Have Your Say!', details the implications of having a water supply that is unclean and unfit for use. We know that Northern Ireland is not immune to such problems, so it is essential that this country has in place a strong and robust water and sewerage system that we, and future generations, can enjoy.

As the population increases, further demands will be made on water supplies, so it is essential to plan for the future. In doing so, we must take practical action to ensure that our entire water infrastructure is in a healthy state. We, as an Assembly, must endeavour to align ourselves with the rest of the UK with regard to quality and usage of water, to reduce our carbon footprint and to develop sustainable ways to deliver clean water and dispose of sewage.

However, my party is concerned about two particular aspects, the first of which is the property values option in which domestic users are required to pay an amount based on the capital value of their property. My party feels that that is not an accurate measure. Members know how much water would be used by a person living alone in a relatively large house in comparison with a family living in a similar-sized dwelling. Therefore, how can such a measure be justified? My colleagues and I call on the Minister to reassess the charging mechanism and protect the vulnerable in society, particularly elderly people who may not be able to pay such high charges for water. The implementation of such a charging mechanism would be contrary to the Minister's statement to the House on 22 October 2007 in which he said that:

"there will be robust arrangements to protect the vulnerable in society from hardship and water poverty." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p418, col 1*].

I call on the Minister to ensure that his words have substance and not just spin. Such a charging mechanism would cause major distress to the vulnerable in society and particularly to those who are asset rich but income poor.

Secondly, the report suggests that domestic metering should be discontinued; in essence, that metering would be prohibited. My party believes that because there is broad public interest in volumetric measuring, some consideration must be given to that method. I recognise the significant cost of the mechanism, but metering would benefit many people, such as elderly persons, particularly if they believe that they are not

using large volumes of water. It is important to protect the vulnerable in society, particularly elderly people, who would be susceptible to extortionate rates and water poverty owing to their inability to pay. In light of that, the Minister must take water usage into consideration.

Furthermore, the people of Northern Ireland still have misconceptions, having neither been consulted on nor informed about the decision that water services would no longer be funded out of the regional rate. People assumed reasonably that they were paying for the service through the rates when it was announced in 2004 that there would be a direct charge. That gave rise to the suggestion that users were being asked to pay twice for the same assets and services, but people could not comprehend why, in that case, the rates bills had not been reduced correspondingly.

We must learn from that mistake. Decisions made by the Assembly on water rates and the appropriate charging mechanisms must be made public. I call on the Assembly to consider the issues raised in the debate and to ensure that the vulnerable in society are not susceptible to water poverty as a result of the use of inappropriate charging mechanisms.

**Mr McHugh:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would not normally speak on an issue such as this, but it is important for my constituency, and, in particular, for towns such as Enniskillen. It has been said that efforts are being made to end double taxation, and that people are pleased that a new approach is being taken. The "Durkan tax" was also mentioned, and it is important to note that the link between the rates and water charges that was created by Mark Durkan and David Trimble, though broken, has been re-established, which is all to the good.

**Mr Cobain:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Member explain to the House who else was in the Executive at that particular time?

**Mr Speaker:** That is not an appropriate point of order.

**Mr McHugh:** That is interesting: perhaps I drew that particular remark from the Member.

My constituency, and the town of Enniskillen in particular, has paid dearly for historical underfunding and the underdevelopment of infrastructure. There is too much pressure on the sewerage system, and, partly because of Planning Policy Statement 14, developers have been allowed to go flat out and build any number of houses in towns and villages.

For example, in at least two villages, the building of more than 200 new houses is proposed in the next couple of years, but there is no capacity for dealing with sewage.

11.45 am

**Mrs Long:** Does the Member accept that the cost of providing sewerage services to individual houses in the countryside, and the potential environmental consequences of not doing so, are much more significant than those of connecting to existing services in the city and upgrading those services?

**Mr McHugh:** I disagree — that has not been proven to be the case. There are new methods of dealing with sewage in the countryside that are less dangerous to the environment. In Enniskillen, raw sewage can run into Lough Erne when there has been any degree of rainwater over a weekend. That happens in Enniskillen and other areas, year in, year out.

Sometimes, departmental breaks have more impact than anything that happens in the countryside. I take Mrs Long's point about the overall way forward for planning. However, overall planning does not currently consider the towns to which people are being pushed. The area plan has not been adhered to in any part of the North, and that has implications.

Serious efforts must be made to advance the affordability issue. Older people who live in large houses have to pay similar tariffs to others who pay a large amount of money each year. In England, some vulnerable people paid £360 a year, but paid £5 a week after a meter was installed. That is an example of the difference that metering can make, and yesterday I asked the Minister for Regional Development to give further consideration to water metering. Metering must be considered, although I am aware of the infrastructural difficulties.

Farmers know what it is like to have meters, and I know what it is like to pay water charges on a cubic-metre basis. Under that system, we try to save water. However, when water is charged at a flat rate, there is no incentive from an environmental point of view to save water, to stop the waste of running water, or to stop watering gardens — on which there is a ban for most of the year in England. We wash cars here several times a week.

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

**Mr McHugh:** I do not have enough time.

Recycling has already been mentioned, and global warming must also be taken into account. Water, as a resource, will be seen in the future as oil is today. Food, quality of water and rising temperatures as a result of global warming will mean that issues that relate to water will have to be taken seriously in the future. The Minister has taken those concerns on board and he is prepared to do something about it. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr G Robinson:** I begin by considering what the situation would be if a direct rule Minister were still responsible for water charges. Every person in

Northern Ireland would already be paying a separate water charge. The non-domestic sector would already be paying a separate water charge. Those charges would not have taken into consideration the amount that was already being paid through the regional rate.

Those points must also be set against the background of direct rule Ministers who did not — and do not — understand what is required in Northern Ireland, and against the background of the historical underinvestment in Northern Ireland's water and sewerage infrastructure.

Since devolution, all of the MLAs and residents of Northern Ireland have come face to face with the realities of governance. That includes tackling the poor state of water and sewerage infrastructure. The Independent Water Review Panel has produced its strand-one report to give us all a clearer picture of the immediate and mid- to long-term priorities, and guidance on solutions. To my mind, the fact that stands out most is the panel's agreement that, until 1998, all of us had been paying for water and sewerage services via our regional rates. Therefore, the scheme that was to have been implemented by a direct rule Administration would have represented a double whammy of water payment.

The Executive took the tough decision to scrap the plans for a separate payment for water and sewerage and to introduce a system whereby people are charged for those services as a component of their household bills. However, that has been deferred until 2009-10. The additional money will be used to put in place the infrastructure that Northern Ireland desperately needs to meet all the European water benchmarks. Parties agreed that no one should find themselves in hardship due to the additional charge. In his speech of 22 October 2007, the Minister for Regional Development said that "robust arrangements" would be necessary to protect those who are asset rich but cash poor.

Thanks to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the number who may be affected by water poverty will be reduced. The average of £160 per household that has been paid for water through the rates since 1998 has been recognised, and the additional charge takes that into consideration. The deputy First Minister, speaking on 25 October 2007, stated:

"We will invest £3 billion in the water, waste water". —  
[*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p480, col 1*].

Regrettably, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not got a magic wand, and, with the agreement of the Executive, he must allocate the resources at his disposal in the best possible way. He has done so, but the system entails each and every household making an increased contribution via the rates bill. The stepped introduction of the additional charge, the acknowledgement that people have always made a financial contribution for water and the introduction of a reduced charge — compared with what was proposed

under direct rule — demonstrate that the devolved Government are working, and will work, for the best deal for the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCallister:** As a dairy farmer who produces a vital product and, of course, as a water user, I declare an interest.

**Mr S Wilson:** The Member produces watered-down milk.

**Mr McCallister:** That is to keep Mr Wilson healthy, because I know what a great environmentalist he is. [Laughter.]

It is crucial that the Assembly gets this vital issue right. Water and sewerage services are extremely capital intensive, and the Assembly must set out its long-term proposals. Mr Clarke talked about Sinn Féin's total opposition to water charges, but I do not know how he can get round them. On 28 February 2007, Councillor Alex Maskey said:

“Today it was officially confirmed by the Department for Regional Development that a re-established Assembly would have the power to abolish the proposed Water Tax.”

Not only has the Assembly been re-established but there is a Sinn Féin Minister for Regional Development. No matter how it may be dressed up, it is a tax on water. I acknowledge that initially it has been decided that it will be included in the regional rate; however, as Mrs Long pointed out, the rate may be frozen for the next two years but it will unquestionably rise at some point.

I commend the work of the panel, and I agree that it has produced an excellent document that enables Members to start the debate. However, it is only a start: huge issues and questions must still be addressed. The panel's report acknowledges the cost that has, historically, been paid for water and has incorporated the issue about paying for water twice.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way: at least he is more sympathetic than the last Member whom I asked to do so, Mr McHugh. Mr McCallister referred to the fact that, as a farmer, he already pays water charges. I have not fully grasped all that is in the report: does it mean that you and I would pay twice for water through the meter system and regional rate?

**Mr McCallister:** I am glad that Mr Elliott asked that question. When I asked the Minister the same question on the 22 October 2007, following his ministerial statement, his response was:

“The Member may be straying into areas that will be dealt with in the strand-two report.” — [Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p421, col 1].

That is not correct, because it is not an issue for the strand-two report; it is an important issue about fairness, and I am sure that the Minister will want to address it. When he gets rid of the domestic allowance for metered customers — who are predominantly farmers, like myself

— will they then have to pay a double taxation? I hope that the Minister takes advantage of the debate to answer that point.

Owing to the state of the roads, the Minister did not arrive in time to hear Mr Wells's comments. Nevertheless, will the owners of the 100,000-plus septic tanks that are dotted round our countryside have to pay for a service that they will not receive, considering that the charge will be levied on water and sewerage services?

There are many issues in the report, and the Minister must respond to, and address, those that concern Members. My colleague Mr Cobain mentioned Land and Property Services and its ability to conduct the matter. Will the Minister clarify whether his Department has considered the cost of transferring part of the contract from Crystal Alliance to Land and Property Services, and whether it can deliver that service? Crystal Alliance's contract deals not only with billing, but with customer services.

The matter of efficiency targets is vital. If Northern Ireland Water does not meet its efficiency targets, who will pick up the bill? Will it be the ratepayer, through the rates, or the customer, through water charges? Either way, they are more or less one and the same person. The 22% efficiency target was set by experts, and it was approved by Deloitte and by the Department for Regional Development.

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

**Mr McCallister:** Am I not allowed another minute for the intervention? I hope that the Minister will answer those questions.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The intervention did not take one minute. If interventions are lengthy, granting a further minute is not a problem. However, if interventions are short, we must consider the time.

**Mr S Wilson:** I welcome the Minister's attendance, although he has found out to his cost this morning that the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland probably needs some upgrading. I hope that he pays attention to the lesson that he has learned.

This has been a good debate. It has been measured, in a way that some of the pronouncements that were made when the report was first issued were not. Even the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development has moderated his comments. About three weeks ago, he said that he would not support any moves to make every Northern Ireland household pay for their water. Of course, that was contrary to the opinion of most of his party members, apart from perhaps the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who was here for a while. He seemed to take the head staggers for a while, but then he began to realise that he could not ask for more money for his own budget while, at the same time, saying that he did



not want money to be raised in the ways in which the Assembly had put forward.

There has been some moderation in the tone. We have even seen some conversion from Sinn Féin. I welcomed Mr McHugh's speech, but I do not know what it will do for his promotion prospects in the party opposite. He can thank his lucky stars that there has been decommissioning and everything else. Otherwise, he might have faced some sanctions from his own party.

*12.00 noon*

I am glad that he has accepted that charging people for what they use is a way to make water charges fair — it is a common-sense approach. It may go against the ideology of his party, and even be contrary to what Mr Willie Clarke said, but it is common sense if we want to conserve water. We should not simply give people a fixed charge and let them use as much water as they want — as if to leave the tap on or have a burst pipe does not matter. It is fair that people should pay for water as they use it; that is the case with electricity, gas and many other services, so why not water as well? I hope that the Minister gives serious consideration to metering water consumption, because it will be essential in ensuring that people find water charges acceptable.

As a party, the DUP made a commitment; it did not hold out an unrealistic prospect that a service could be got for nothing. People were going to pay for water in some way — if they did not pay through water bills, they would pay as a result of other services being pruned due to the use of money from the block grant. The DUP has ensured that people are not paying twice for water — that was unfair and has been addressed. Affordability remains an issue, and I hope that in the second stage of this process that will be properly addressed for those who are asset rich and cash poor and do not opt for the meter — although they should have the opportunity to do that — or those who find themselves in difficulty for other reasons.

Naomi Long made the important point that we have to find ways to reduce expenditure on unnecessary infrastructure when it comes to collecting water — whether that is grey water from houses or rainwater — which could be used again. As a gardener, I collect a lot of water from the roof of my house, which is very good for plants in greenhouses and in the ground, et cetera. That is a very useful way of recycling water.

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

**Mr S Wilson:** I just wanted to get my green credentials on the record.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr O'Loan:** I welcome the strand-one report and congratulate Professor Paddy Hillyard and the members of the Independent Water Review Panel, who have done an important job on our behalf. Although all comment

at this stage is provisional — as final conclusions must await stage two — strand one represents real progress and offers much for a constructive way forward.

Fundamentally, the SDLP has been opposed to a separate water charge and to the privatisation of the water system. We are reassured by what has been indicated so far, but will continue to be vigilant on those issues. Equally, the SDLP is fundamentally concerned about the relationship between any payment for water and the ability of people to pay. Affordability is a key issue for us. Although I welcome the proposal for an improved affordability scheme to prevent water poverty, we must see the full detail before giving it full backing. Water is essential to life and good health; there must not be a system that makes such a basic necessity a major financial burden for any part of the community.

Any consideration of this scheme — designed as it is to be included in the rates bill, which is based on property value — inevitably leads to consideration of the many issues that are currently part of the review of rating. I do not want to go into those in detail, but rather make some broader points.

A property tax is a crude mechanism for raising revenue. As I said in the Chamber previously, houses do not pay rates or any inbuilt water charges; it is the owners or occupiers who do that, and their ability to do so is only loosely related to property values. Therefore, a growing system of relief schemes is required to make the system fairer. However, there is a significant problem with the take-up of relief schemes, and we will scrutinise closely the detail of those schemes to see that they genuinely address the difficulties of those who are low paid but who are above the benefit levels, and groups such as pensioners who are often — and I hesitate to describe them as such — asset rich but cash poor. There is real need for an effective and workable affordability scheme.

I believe that the Minister has not ruled out the introduction of metering in his immediate response to the report. Many people are keen on metering, and it must be recognised that they include the pensioners to whom I just referred, but those most keen are the people who use the least water. It remains to be seen whether any system of metering would be compatible with a broader system of charging that is based on property values. It will be useful for everyone to recognise that there is no perfect way of imposing water charges: there are difficulties and anomalies with any scheme. Some recognition of that point might make any future scheme more acceptable.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the comments of some Members and especially those of the Chairperson, who I notice has just left the Chamber. I thank my Committee colleague, Mr McCallister, for mentioning the predica-

ment of farmers. He is the only man who pays for water in his part of the country. Sammy Wilson mentioned decommissioning. I hope that we will not be talking about decommissioning or hosepipe bans in years to come. I add my voice and that of my colleagues to those who welcome the report, and I congratulate Professor Paddy Hillyard and other members of the panel for their work on strand one. Their efforts in dealing with this difficult issue in the time frame that they were given is to be commended.

Sinn Féin called for a mandate to oppose unfair separate water charges and any attempt at privatisation, as did all the political parties here. I welcome the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, to the Chamber. He ensured that an open and transparent review was conducted, that a fair payment for water through rates — as has always been the case — be highlighted on any bill, and that the notion of privatisation be consigned to the dustbin. I welcome those assurances. Members must also welcome the suggested freeze on payments. This is a clear illustration of local politicians making local decisions, which is what Members are elected for. I am sure you will agree, Mr McCallister.

We must ensure that there is adequate protection for families for whom higher bills will cause undue hardship, those on benefits and the working poor. I am pleased that all Executive Members welcome and endorse the independent water review panel's recommendations. I hope that any surplus assets found — now or in the future — will be reinvested in the infrastructure to further alleviate any payment from the public purse. I look forward to the next part of the review and to focusing the debate on ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and equally in the required water reform initiative. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr Irwin:** Like Mr McCallister, I declare an interest as a farmer and I declare that I pay for my water. However, he omitted to say that he gets a free allowance for his household water, just as all farmers do.

**Mr McCallister:** It is well and truly known that that is the case.

**Mr Irwin:** I am grateful that future decisions and deliberations on our water and sewerage infrastructure will be taken by locally elected politicians, and I am delighted that we have a high level of control over how the matter will be finalised. I also welcome the opportunity to debate the response to the strand-one report. The report contains the recurring theme of the need for transparency and the restoration of public confidence while deliberating on the reform process.

There is a general feeling that direct rule Ministers had damaged public confidence and, indeed, many votes in the last Assembly election were cast on the basis of parties' pledges on the water issue. As a member

of the Committee for Regional Development, I am keen to ensure that this matter is concluded in the best interests of the consumer.

In the context of the public's wish for transparency, who could disagree that a step in the right direction was taken with the announcement that we would not be paying twice for our water, and that the amount that had already been contributed through the regional rate would be recognised and documented?

I am under no illusion about the huge challenge that the Committee faces in deciding how best to take this matter forward. However, the initial steps that have been taken have provided a firm foundation for that work.

I am encouraged that the report pays particular attention to the vulnerable in society, because we must not let a situation develop in which, for example, the elderly or those on low incomes are forced into becoming severely prudent in their use of water, or are forced to use water instead of home heating or other vital services in the home.

The report refers to the lack of consensus on metering and on the capital-value method of charging. It could be argued that both methods could affect the vulnerable, with varying consequences. However, it is vital that, at the very least, the option to have a meter installed be a right that is afforded to any consumer. Protection of the vulnerable should be a key priority in any new arrangement, and the determination of methods to apportion charges must avoid, where possible, a detrimental impact on that section of the community.

Efficiencies can be made in the water and sewerage network to help to reduce the level of water wastage and, ultimately, reduce the tariff that customers must pay. I await the review's strand-two report with interest, because I understand that issues of efficiency will be dealt with in that. I also look forward to the publication of that report because of the further opportunities that it will present to debate this matter.

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

**Mr Irwin:** No, I will not. I am almost finished.

We have an opportunity that did not exist under direct rule to establish a fair and accountable system, and we have already seen positive steps towards that. I pledge my full commitment to tackling the challenges ahead.

**Mr McCallister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Irwin made an allegation about my not declaring a water allowance. Actually, the non-domestic —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an seans labhairt ag an díospóireacht seo. Easy now lads, easy. Glac go réidh é.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Independent Water Review Panel report and its recommendations.

Until the establishment of the panel, the history of water reform was one of a lack of public confidence. It was felt, with great justification, that the system was not open and transparent. Indeed, people held the firm view that there was a hidden agenda, at the heart of which was privatisation and, with it, unfair water charges.

Sinn Féin opposed the direct rule proposal and involved itself in the public campaign to stop it. Going into the 7 March elections, Sinn Féin stated — and I quote directly from our election material, in case anyone is in any doubt:

“If we get a fresh, enhanced mandate, Sinn Féin will go back into Stormont to oppose the present system of water charges. In a future Executive Sinn Féin will bring forward workable alternatives that will include full and open consultation, fairer arrangements and a pledge not to privatise water services.”

I have listened to other Members this morning, and perhaps they should read their election manifestos, because the Ulster Unionists said that they were going to ask everyone to pay £100, irrespective of their ability to pay. Fred Cobain, the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, said that he is totally opposed to that, so he is obviously opposed to the UUP's own manifesto.

As the Minister for Regional Development —  
[*Interruption.*]

There it is, Danny, in black and white, and I deliberately did not —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Members should address their remarks through the Chair.

**Mr McCartney:** Our election material was available in both Irish and English. However, not to confuse Members, I decided to read in English, but it seems that Danny Kennedy still does not understand it. Perhaps his uncle, or his great-uncle — or whoever it was that gave up the Irish language for English — did not pass his knowledge on to Danny, because he does not seem to understand English.

12.15 pm

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

Indeed, Conor Murphy, as Minister for Regional Development, helped to deliver on that pledge. Perhaps this is more false information from the Executive, but I am told that the Executive subcommittee — which is made up of all parties, and includes the Ulster Unionist Party leader — and the whole of the Executive, including the two Ulster Unionist members, agreed that it was a positive report.

No one can dispute that, under Paddy Hillyard's direction, the review has been open and transparent. Its

findings were influenced by the panel's contention that the society we live in is often described as:

“a 25/25/50 society with 25% of households living in hardship, 25% living in comfort and 50% with a good standard of living.”

The report stated clearly that any increase in the outgoings of poor families would push them further into poverty. Rather than make petty political points in the debate, we should focus our attention on the protection of the most vulnerable in society.

It is evident that the panel had that foremost in its mind as it set about its work. Sinn Féin welcomes the report as an important, positive first step in the process of creating a fair and equitable system and ensuring that water poverty will not be a facet of life in the North.

I want to highlight several positives from Sinn Féin's point of view. In particular, we welcome the declaration that the direct rule proposal should be abandoned and put in the dustbin. Furthermore, we welcome that there will be no separate bill for water and sewerage services, and the acceptance that we already make a considerable contribution to water through the rates. We also support the recommendation that the efficiency savings should be doubled. Some say that that is an ambitious target, while others argue, correctly, that the current target lacks ambition; therefore we agree that there should be efficiency savings. We also want to ensure that there are affordability arrangements and look forward to that matter being addressed in the strand-two report.

I want to acknowledge the work of Paddy Hillyard, Joan Whiteside, Charles Coulthard, John Fitzgerald and their secretariat. Some believed that their task was onerous. Some said that they were involved in a paper exercise. It was an onerous task, which the panel members embraced with gusto and integrity. They did not seek comfort zones and nor should this Assembly. We asked for an independent assessment; we cannot now hide from its findings. The panel's recommendations point the way to a fairer system: an end to paying twice; an end to the water charges that the direct rule Administration wanted to impose; and to the delivery of the Sinn Féin manifesto. Go raibh maith agaibh.

**Mr B Wilson:** I welcome the report. The Green Party has always argued that water should be funded from general taxation and therefore supports the recommendation that there should be no separate water charges.

The report is useful in identifying potential savings; however, I suggest that some of the assumptions are unduly optimistic. For example, I cannot see Northern Ireland Water making 40% efficiency savings within two years, particularly when it has no control over much of the costs.

The main recommendation that £109 million should be transferred from the regional rate, and the suggestion that Roads Service should pay £25 million for road



drainage, will clearly reduce Northern Ireland Water's costs. That also means that there will be £134 million less to spend on other services, a fact that has been ignored by Members who have spoken previously.

In accepting the report's main recommendation and freezing the regional rate for two years, the Executive are giving the impression that the problem of paying for water and sewerage services has been resolved. In fact, nothing has changed, and any public celebrations are premature — the issue has not gone away. Even on the most optimistic assumptions of the Hillyard report, the domestic sector will still have to raise £217 million to pay for water services. The fact is that, under the Barnett formula, there is nothing in the block grant for water. In the rest of the UK, consumers pay the charges directly to the water companies, and there is no call on public finance. Therefore, Northern Ireland Water must be funded from existing resources — that is, either from the regional rate or from the block grant.

Given that the Executive have decided to freeze the regional rate, funding must come from the block grant. That would mean that £217 million less would be available to spend on other services that are funded from that grant. Therefore, any money that we give to Northern Ireland Water must come from another source. That fact seems to have been ignored, and it explains the reason that the NHS here received an increase of only 2.6%, while the NHS in England received an increase of 4% in real terms, despite the fact that it does not share our problems of people waiting on trolleys and waiting lists.

In practice, demographic trends and the fact that NHS inflation is significantly higher than basic inflation mean that that 2.6% increase for the Health Service represents, at best, a freeze in overall expenditure. That may mean that no funding will be available to implement either the recommendations of the Bamford Review, the new cancer screening programme, or measures to reduce incidences of MRSA.

Although the rates freeze is politically attractive, it is unacceptable if a reduction in healthcare services for the sick and the elderly is to pay for it. Taking the longer-term view, the panel's report suggests that household payments in future should be based on property values. The Executive appear to agree with that. For example, Hillyard suggested that £84 million would have to be raised in 2009-10. That sum would represent an increase of 16% in the regional rate. However, it would not represent a freeze in the regional rate, as the Budget suggested. We are totally opposed to any increase in the regional rate; rates are regressive and take no account of ability to pay. The payment load falls heaviest on the elderly and those who are on fixed incomes. It is unacceptable for those vulnerable groups to shoulder the main burden of water charges. I

ask the Assembly to re-examine other forms of taxation, particularly one that is based on ability to pay.

I was previously opposed to metering, particularly on grounds of fairness. I also doubted whether it was of any benefit to the environment. Having read the report, and having spent some months listening to evidence from many NGOs and pressure groups, I feel that metering cannot be justified on social, economic or environmental grounds. Evidence on the matter from Welsh Water and Scottish Water was significant, stating that metering is unnecessarily expensive, causes many technical and administrative problems, and adds between £40 and £50 to every water bill. Evidence from NGOs that shows that metering has led to public-health concerns in English cities and that the burden of payment falls heaviest on those who are on low incomes, the disabled, and young families casts doubt on the claimed fairness of the measure. I therefore support the recommendation not to introduce metering.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet today as soon as the House suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00pm, when the Minister for Regional Development will deliver his response to the motion.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

2.00 pm

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Thank you, go raibh maith agat. I apologise for my late arrival this morning. I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House, and in particular to those Members whose contributions I missed. I have had an opportunity over lunchtime to pick up on what some Members said, and I certainly intend to reply to their contributions. As is normal, I shall study Hansard and, if I have missed any points, endeavour to reply to Members in writing.

I welcome the motion. The Assembly has had the opportunity to discuss the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report on the cost of water and sewerage services, and how those are to be funded. I thank Members for contributing to what has been a wide-ranging debate. I have listened to the points that have been raised, and I acknowledge that we face serious challenges in deciding the best way to deliver sewerage and water services.

Before I deal with some issues that were raised during the debate, I shall recap the Executive's position. The Executive have agreed that the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report provides the best way forward for achieving sustainable delivery of clean water and disposal of sewage, while minimising the cost to users and taxpayers. The Executive have accepted the recommendation that, from 2008-09, there should be full recognition that revenue from the domestic regional rate contributes to the funding of water and sewerage services. The independent panel has estimated that amount to be around £109 million, based on an uplift to today's prices of the 1998 position. It has calculated that that equates to an average household contribution of around £160. In 2008-09, that will be households' only contribution to the funding of these services, with the balance being paid from the NI block. That represents the Executive's commitment to tackling the inequity of double charging.

The Executive have accepted the panel's finding that the revenue from the regional rate does not cover the full cost of water services, and we have agreed that, from 2009-10, additional contributions from householders will be necessary. We have concluded that those additional contributions should be phased in, and are working on the basis that, in 2009-10, household contributions for water and sewerage will equal the existing contribution from the regional rate, plus two thirds of the balance of the income that is required to fund the services fully. In 2010-11, household contributions will equal 100% of the amount that is required to fund the services fully. However, the amount that is due to be collected from domestic households will be reduced by the amount that households already contribute via

the rates — £109 million, or an average of £160 per rates bill. That means that there will be no double payment for households.

The Executive have noted the proposal that a single bill be issued to customers, with rates and water and sewerage charges identified separately. Further analysis by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel will be necessary to determine how that might be done and to assess the implications for existing billing arrangements and contracts. The Executive have also noted the panel's recommendations on the way in which payments for services should be made in future, but have reserved our final decision until the panel has completed its strand-two report.

I do, however, wish to allay one concern about the panel's proposals on the use of property values as the basis for calculating water and sewerage payments. There is a belief that an increase in house prices will automatically lead to an increase in water and sewerage payments. First, payments will be based on the capital value of properties at 1 January 2005, as assessed by the former Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA). Secondly, the total payments that consumers make will cover the cost of the services provided. That will remain the case, even if there is a revaluation and the overall level of property values rises. Property values are used only to distribute total costs among individual consumers. Were the overall cost of water and sewerage services to stay the same and everyone's house price to rise by about the same amount, bills would not change. Increases in house prices will vary, and that will lead to some redistribution, just as is the case with rates.

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

**Mr Murphy:** I am not sure whether it is appropriate for a Minister to give way when responding to a motion, but I am happy to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, it is appropriate, Minister.

**Mr Wells:** The difficulty is that some parts of Northern Ireland have already experienced the rapid house-price increase. In my constituency of South Down, there has been an enormous price rise since 1 January 2005. However, that rise in house prices will kick in only when the revaluation occurs in five years' time. When that happens, people will face an enormous rate hike, far higher than that in any other part of Northern Ireland. Equally, they will experience a much greater increase in their water payments.

**Mr Murphy:** Declan O'Loan asked me about that during Question Time yesterday. The Member is presuming that, if house values increase, contributions to water and sewerage services will also increase.

The amount of money required from domestic and non-domestic customers will be what is required to

cover costs. If the cost of providing water and sewerage services does not increase, then, regardless of house values, that cost will remain the same. There will not be a corresponding increase in the amount required to fund water and sewerage services should house values rise. That is a misunderstanding, which this debate and other discussions on strand two of the report may clarify. There is a presumption that because house values may increase, the amount taken from domestic customers will rise accordingly. That is wrong. What will be taken from domestic customers will be enough to pay for the services provided to them and will not increase just because house values increase.

Although the Executive wish to see the strand-two report before determining the method of payment, they have agreed that there will be robust arrangements to protect the vulnerable in our society from hardship and water poverty regardless of the payment system adopted. The Executive recognise the challenges and difficulties faced by the non-domestic sector and have decided to phase in the new charges more slowly; at 50% of the full charge in 2008-09 and at 100% of the charge in 2009-10. The Executive will also endeavour to reduce the burden on the consumer — both domestic and non-domestic — through delivering efficiencies and by attracting further revenue resources.

There were several common themes running through the debate: affordability; ability to pay; metering; implementation of the panel's recommendations on efficiency; the single bill; and other matters. Several Members welcomed the panel's approach to dealing with double payment and the overall approach taken by the Executive on that matter. On issues such as affordability, Members have noted that we will have to await the strand-two report. In other areas, such as metering, there is a divergence of views, and we can debate those as we go forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development and John Dallat made the point that the estimated contribution of £109 million was too low. That figure is not mine: it was derived by the independent panel and is comparable to the figure provided by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. If Members believe that the figure is too low, they will have the opportunity to speak to the panel about it during the course of its ongoing work.

Mr McCallister stated that a water tax was being introduced. The Executive's decision not to impose water charges in 2007-08 and to set up an independent review reflects their commitments and is in line with the recommendations of the Committee on the Programme for Government at the start of the year. The aims of the review are as follows:

- Carry out an independent and comprehensive review of the costs and level of funding needed for water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland, to review how these costs should be met and

how the services should be managed and governed within a public ownership model.

To help ensure that there is public trust and confidence in the future arrangements for financing and delivering water and sewerage services."

That is what we have sought to do.

I heard Mr McCallister's reference to party manifestos. Perhaps he should check his own party's manifesto, although I realise that he was a late entry into the Assembly race. Nonetheless, he should have checked his party's manifesto because I am satisfied that the position that Sinn Féin outlined in its manifesto is being met by the approach that is being taken by the Executive.

John Dallat, Naomi Long, Gerry McHugh and the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development mentioned affordability protection. The panel has identified an issue that is within the scope of the affordability tariff, and that will be considered under strand two. I am confident that the panel has the required expertise in that area. The Executive's key concern is that there should be adequate protections for all those on low incomes.

Several Members, including Declan O'Loan, mentioned people who are asset rich and income poor. The strand-one report specifically says that the panel will look at that issue in its second report. Of course, all Members will have the opportunity to engage with the panel if they wish to do so.

Domestic metering has provoked some discussion: it was mentioned by Naomi Long, Stephen Moutray, Sammy Wilson and others, and Brian Wilson had a counter-argument. We must bear in mind that the panel's recommendations on charging will not be introduced until 2009-10, and that there are different views on domestic metering. The Executive will be reconsidering the matter following receipt of the panel's second report in December. In my view, we should undertake a thorough appraisal of domestic metering as recommended by the panel.

Several points were made about metering, and I will make several observations. One would have to question whether an immediate, universal, metering operation would be feasible. If everyone who might benefit from installing a meter chose to do so, that would require a high upfront cost of around £40 million and could prove to be unmanageable. Considered from a social perspective, metering does not prioritise those who might need help most — the asset-rich, income-poor group. From an environmental point of view, it is far from clear that metering would be the most effective solution.

Even if it is popular with the public, metering is unlikely to provide the cost reductions that people imagine. In identical properties with the same consumption, a metered bill will be higher than an estimated bill.



Water conservation requires a longer-term outlook that must relate to all those propositions, and that must happen sooner rather than later.

Mr McHugh and George Robinson raised the matter of underinvestment, and the Independent Water Review Panel's findings support the argument that, since 1989, investment levels have been lower than those in Britain. The panel is satisfied that, over the next few years, a substantial programme of investment is required to reduce the continuing gap in compliance performance. I wish that we could secure the funds to rectify underinvestment, but we must address the situation in which we find ourselves. I emphasise the investment that we are making — more than £500 million in sewerage alone before the end of the decade. Therefore, we must continue to rectify the shortfalls. Unfortunately and regrettably, we have been charged to find those funds from our own means.

Naomi Long asked about a sustainable water policy, and I agree that we need such a policy. That is why, by the end of the decade, we will have invested more than £1 billion in our services. That will enable NIW to reduce leakage, to meet EU standards for drinking water and urban waste-water treatment, to improve the quality of bathing water and to protect the environment.

John Dallat spoke about the dividend. The purpose of the dividend is to ensure that the company applies the appropriate disciplines to make a return on capital. I can confirm that the dividend is not linked to privatisation and that privatisation is off the agenda.

John McCallister, Ray McCartney and others mentioned the single water and rates bill, and I have already stated that further work is required on that matter. Members asked whether such an arrangement could work and about the ability of Land and Property Services to make progress with it.

John McCallister asked whether I had already begun to assess the situation with Land and Property Services, but it would have been inappropriate for me to have done so before the publication of the independent panel's strand-one report. It would have been presumptuous to have anticipated that report's outcome. However, on 22 October, I stated that my Department would work with the Department of Finance and Personnel to help to progress its assessment. Arrangements have been initiated to do that.

John McCallister and Brian Wilson asked questions about efficiency targets. Executive subcommittee colleagues and I have not yet reached a view on the panel's recommendations, which may require further investigation. Under direct rule arrangements, the Department for Regional Development was responsible for setting efficiency targets. That was in the context of reaching agreement on the strategic final plan for NI Water. The regulator is responsible for setting efficiency

targets for 2009-10 onwards. It is prudent to engage the regulator in the review process as soon as possible — the advantage being that efficiency targets could be set independently. The fact that domestic contributions will be phased in over two years means that there will be more time in which to consider how to achieve more appropriate efficiency levels than those that are suggested in the panel's report.

John McCallister also spoke about the removal of the domestic allowance. The domestic allowance will remain until households make additional payments in 2009-10, when those who qualify for the domestic allowance will begin to pay a little more. The Member's query related specifically to agricultural land. That land is not valued on the VLA database.

Several Members mentioned septic tanks. Beyond their being emptied once a year, no charge is levied for septic tanks. When the sewerage contribution is removed from the regional rate in 2009-10, customers will begin to pay to have septic tanks emptied. The new charge will not mean that customers will pay twice, because it will be balanced by a reduction in rates.

Declan O'Loan made the important point that no charging regime is perfect. Capital values are used only as a proxy for ability to pay or as an indication of water usage. The aim is to achieve the best balance between conflicting objectives, and the Executive are committed to finding the fairest and most transparent method of doing that. I take Mr O'Loan's point that questions are raised. The fact that Members are in this arena discussing such issues shows that the matter has been taken up by a locally elected Assembly and Executive, and gives people a sense of confidence that they are being dealt with openly and transparently.

Cathal Boylan mentioned surplus assets that belong to NIW. I agree that those assets should be disposed of in order to maximise benefit to customers and to invest, where possible, in future infrastructure. We will ask the regulator to undertake the proposed review of NIW's assets. I note that the Committee for Regional Development has pointed out that it is not in anyone's interest to engage in a fire sale of those assets.

*2.15 pm*

Brian Wilson raised various issues about funding and where it should not come from, although perhaps his speech was not so strong on where funding should come from — he suggested some other form of local taxation. At present, NIW is fully funded from existing resources. The additional payments from domestic customers will release funds for other services, as will the extension of charges in the non-domestic sector. That will not be to the detriment of other services, but to their benefit. Brian Wilson also suggested that rates will increase as a result of the proposals. Rates will decrease in the short term, and the Minister of Finance

and Personnel has said that rates will be frozen for the next three years.

A household payment for water and sewerage services will be introduced because the strand-one report states that the current contribution that is made through the rates is not sufficient to pay for the service that is required.

Those are some of the points that I managed to pick up. Again, I apologise for my absence during some of the contributions. I will study the Hansard report and, if there are other points that I have failed to answer, I will contact the Members who raised them.

I thank the independent panel for its work in providing a way forward on this issue. I also thank the Committee for Regional Development and other statutory partners for their constructive comments. The Executive have shown leadership in accepting the independent review's recommendations as the basis for progress. However, a great deal of work remains to be done by the Executive, the independent panel, the Committee for Regional Development and all the stakeholders. With co-operation and commitment from everyone involved, we can meet the challenge of providing a modern high-quality water and sewerage service at the lowest possible cost. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development:** I thank all of the participants in this morning's interesting debate. Many issues were raised, and the House is better off for that.

I am sorry to see that the Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson is not in the Chamber, because he implied that I was going soft when I spoke this morning. I will reiterate my position: I represent a large working-class constituency where thousands of families fall into the economically-challenged bracket. They deserve a voice in this debate. At the last Assembly election, in common with many MLAs, I gave an undertaking that I would not support the introduction of any water tax during this mandate, for precisely the reasons that all the Members who spoke outlined. I refuse to make tens of thousands of working-class people poorer than they are today.

As I said when proposing the motion, water reform is probably one of the most important and challenging issues that face the Assembly. I listened with great interest to many thoughtful contributions that were made. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Jim Wells, put it aptly when he said that:

“much has been achieved but there is a great deal more to be done.”

Several key themes emerged from the debate, which I will touch on in turn. First, there is a need for careful consideration and for more information, and most of the Members who spoke in the debate mentioned that.

John Dallat, who is also a member of the Committee for Regional Development, made several important points in the debate. In particular, he spoke of the cost associated with varying the existing Crystal Alliance contract.

Northern Ireland Water's ability to meet increased efficiency targets was also raised, as the Minister said, as was the ability of the existing rate-collection mechanism to deliver a single bill with separately identified charges for water and sewerage services to all customers — including those on a non-commercial meter, those with a domestic allowance, and households that are not connected to the sewerage or mains-water systems. It will be interesting to see whether those individuals will have to pay twice.

The Committee's broad view was that there was a need to explore the costs of many of the proposals before making a decision. The Minister's statement of 27 October 2007 on the Executive's responses to the strand-one report showed that the Executive shares some of the Committee's concerns. The key concern should always be the impact on the customer of service level and cost.

Affordability was the most important issue for many of the Members who spoke today. The plight of asset-rich but income-poor householders was a recurring theme, as was the need to ensure that an enhanced affordability tariff clearly meets the needs of those who will face water poverty as a result of the introduction of water tax.

As Naomi Long rightly pointed out, affordability is a long-term issue, and we now consider a short-term one. Charges will be frozen in 2009 and 2010, but not after that. Water will cost £218 million this year and in the next financial year; however, that will rise to £428 million by 2013. Who will meet that deficit? The Minister for Regional Development has not addressed that today.

Experience of other relief and benefit schemes has often demonstrated low take-up rates from the very groups that those schemes are designed to benefit. Therefore, any affordability tariff must be accompanied by a focus on a take-up campaign. Advice NI, Help the Aged and Age Concern could share their many years of expertise in that field.

Allied to the issue of affordability is the question of fairness. For some Members, fairness is paying for what is used. For others, fairness means that those who cannot afford it do not have to pay more. There is no clear consensus. Indeed, the ministerial statement of 22 October 2007 made no reference whatsoever to that.

Another recurring theme in Members' contributions was transparency. There was a great sense that the mistakes of the past should not be repeated. Several Members, including Willie Irwin, Stephen Moutray

and Naomi Long, felt that, this time, the proposed charges must be explained and publicised in an open manner in advance of the introduction of any tax.

Mrs Long made a useful suggestion regarding the development of a sustainable water strategy. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Gerry McHugh made a general point on the need to consider the linkages between sewerage infrastructure needs and patterns of housing settlements in the regional development strategy. The Member for South Down Willie Clarke talked about the need for the affordability system to catch all those who are in need.

The rating system is central to many of the panel's strand-one recommendations. The present rating system provides relief on a pro rata basis. For those people who are most deprived — including pensioners, the working poor, near-benefit-level families and those individuals suffering from a disability — there is total relief.

Irrespective of how generous the new affordability tariff is, there will not be total relief. Tens of thousands of working-class families in this part of the United Kingdom will be driven into water poverty because of this tax. It is a regressive tax, and there is no relief. That point was emphasised by the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he said that, because this is a hypothecated tax, there will be no relief.

Members should be aware that thousands of people — including working-class individuals who are the poorest in society, and who look for help and guidance from Members — will be listening to this debate. It will be an absolute disgrace for Members of this House to drive those people further into poverty. I will not be one of those Members.

Yesterday, the Minister for Regional Development raised an issue regarding the previous Executive, and several members of his party raised it again today, giving responsibility for this particular problem to David Trimble and Mark Durkan. I remind the Minister and members of his party that there were also two members of Sinn Féin in the previous Executive — the current deputy First Minister and Ms de Brún. Members of the party opposite fail to recognise that point.

The Minister referred to Mr McCallister, and some issues were raised regarding the Ulster Unionist Party's manifesto. A submission made by Sinn Féin to the consultation on water reform and sewerage services stated that:

“Sinn Féin are opposed to the introduction of water charges. We view it as an additional tax. We are concerned that this consultation is premised on limited options around water charging and misleading perceptions about how people here have in the past paid for their water”.

The same submission stated that Sinn Féin:

“endorse the view that everyone has the right to an adequate supply of safe, wholesome water as a basic entitlement.”

Perhaps a better one is —

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development:** No, I will not give way. I asked the Member a question this morning and he would not give way for me. The Member should sit down. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. It is for the Member who is speaking to decide whether to give way. Members should not persist in asking to intervene.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I should not have to read this out. Members of Sinn Féin should know this word for word, because this is their submission. *[Interruption.]*

I am dealing with the submission made by the Member's party. I hope that I am not in the same position as the Member. Clearly, he does not know his party's submission. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, will I be allowed to finish?

**Mr Speaker:** Let the Member finish.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development:** This is a better quotation:

“Given that we oppose direct charges for domestic rates, we cannot support proposals for metering of domestic water supplies. The Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly has already ruled out the option, and it is our belief that there is no reason to revisit that decision.”

And this one is even better:

“Given that we propose that water services continue to be funded through general taxation and rates, we believe that the issue of safeguarding vulnerable groups can be dealt with through a generous rate rebate system.”

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Independent Water Review Panel's Strand One Report.



## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Teaching Jobs

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and have been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

**Mr D Bradley:** I beg to move

That this Assembly abhors the fact that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and calls on the Minister of Education to formulate a strategy to bring these teachers into full-time teaching over the next three years.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.  
Agus caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm an cheist seo a thógáil sa teach seo inniu.

I am delighted to move the motion. On 6 July, I received an answer from the Minister of Education to a question asking her to detail the number of teachers on the substitute teachers' roll who had not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching, and to state how many were male and how many were female.

I was totally taken aback by her response. She stated that, since September 2005, there had been 3,176 female and 695 male teachers, giving a total of 3,871 teachers in all, who, to quote from the Minister's answer:

"have never worked in a permanent teaching post."

By any standard, that statistic is alarming, and, as I have said, it has been supplied by the Minister herself.

On 17 September, in response to a question I asked on the progress made in reducing the number of teachers on the substitute roll who have never been in full-time employment in teaching, the Minister told me that her sports and languages programme for primary schools offer another means for newly-qualified teachers to gain experience of working in schools. I am interested to hear what the Minister says today, and I welcome her.

I want to know how many posts that will involve and what length the teachers' contracts will be in those cases. The Minister also told me that:

"It should be recognised that teachers trained here have the opportunity to apply for teaching jobs in the South of Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, where they are highly regarded."

I am afraid that the message there is clear — get out, take — tá fáilte romhat a Aire — the emigration boat, like many of your ancestors had to, and find work elsewhere.

2.30 pm

Will the Minister tell me into which Sinn Féin policy that particular proposal fits? Although it may be handy to travel South, the Minister has told me that she has no plans to provide for An Scrúdú Le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge — the Irish-language qualification exam — at either initial or in-service training level in Northern Ireland. That is hardly an all-Ireland approach that encourages North/South worker mobility.

When we debated a related matter on 19 June 2007, Mr Storey, who is present today, said:

"We cannot disallow people from travelling and choosing to live elsewhere. However, it is essential that we do not operate policies that encourage people to leave Northern Ireland. I trust that we have left those days behind, and that no Member will encourage that." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, No 13, p543, col 1*].

I agree with Mr Storey on that point, given that immigration contributes to the brain drain from Northern Ireland. In this case, it denies young people the chance to experience the skills, enthusiasm and dedication of many of our young teachers.

Where does all that leave us? Apart from introducing those two relatively small schemes, does the Minister have any plans to bring those teachers into permanent employment? Members have already debated the introduction of a guaranteed initial year of employment for newly qualified teachers, yet little progress has been made. In the previous debate on the matter, I discussed the findings of part two of the final report of the 'Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Service Inquiry', also known as the Curran Report, which was commissioned by the Minister's party colleague and predecessor as Minister of Education. Some progress has been made in implementing the report's findings; however, three key proposals in that report would help to improve the lot of teachers and take more into the system permanently. Those proposals include: a guaranteed initial year of employment for newly qualified teachers; 10% preparation, planning and assessment time for all teachers; and two days' administration time for teaching principals in small primary schools.

Recently, the East Belfast Primary and Nursery Principals' Group gave a presentation to the Committee for Education outlining a wide range of educational issues that it would like to see addressed. That group comprises people who are working daily at the chalk face and who understand the situation well. At the end of the session, when the group was asked which one of those issues it would prioritise, it unanimously placed the 10% preparation, planning and assessment time at the top of its list. I have no doubt that its views are representative of those of a wide range of teachers across the system. If that element alone were introduced, the burden on an already overburdened teaching profession

would be lessened and space for more teaching posts would be created.

The group also told us of the plight of teaching principals in small schools. Their duties stretch far beyond their hours of service, and they therefore need those two days' administration time. I welcome the reference that was made to a related aim in the current Programme for Government, and I am sure that the Minister will update us on her intentions in that respect.

Although the provision of administration time is welcome, it will result not in more full-time jobs, but in more substitute days. Other Administrations have been far-sighted enough to introduce some or all of those measures. So far, the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland has not benefited from any of them, and teachers are losing parity with their English and Welsh counterparts.

The teachers who are on the substitute roll awaiting full-time employment in education are a huge and invaluable resource. We have invested in their education and training. They have worked with dedication and diligence to gain their qualifications in highly competitive situations, and they have done so in the expectation that they will have the opportunity to work in the vocation that they love.

That resource should be used to the benefit of children in the education system. It is not good enough to point teachers to the emigration boat. It is not good enough to consign them to short-term schemes or contracts. They deserve the opportunities that a permanent career path offers. The Assembly must agree to, at least, make a start towards ensuring that they get those opportunities.

I want to hear the Minister respond to the issue with commitment, rather than with the repetition of more Civil Service-speak. Members debated issues to the walls during the Transitional Assembly, when there were no Ministers in the Chamber. Now that devolution has been restored, Members expect Ministers to listen and to act. Unlike the Minister for Regional Development during the previous debate, I hope that the Minister of Education will acknowledge Members' proposals and give them serious consideration. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Butler:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"acknowledges that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and asks the Minister of Education to consider ways to bring these teachers into full-time teaching."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I dtaca leis an leasú seo, sílim go gcaithfidh an tionól seo tacaíocht a thabhairt dó.

All Members support teachers — particularly newly qualified teachers — who want to obtain full-time permanent employment in the teaching profession.

There is increasing recognition of the important role that teachers play in delivering a broad and balanced education curriculum in schools.

The Assembly must recognise that teachers have chosen to pursue careers in the education sector. Although I support efforts to get teachers into full-time employment, the motion as it is worded gives the impression that there are nearly 4,000 teachers who cannot get full-time permanent employment. That is simply not true: there are not 4,000 teachers who seek full-time permanent employment. The motion is, therefore, misleading, and one would have to question the real motive behind it. It makes wild and unsubstantiated claims.

Many unemployed teachers currently experience the frustrations that are felt by qualified members of other professional occupations. However, the figures that were quoted by Mr Bradley are wrong, because the substitute roll contains the names of individuals who are not actively seeking employment as teachers at present, including, I believe, Mr Bradley himself, who is an Assembly Member.

Indeed, figures from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June —

**Mr McElduff:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to request that Members who may have a declaration of interest to bring to the Assembly's attention, should, indeed, do so in the debate?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a matter for the Speaker's consideration.

**Mr D Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not on the substitute-teachers' roll, nor have I ever been. I may be in the future, although that is in the hands of the electorate.

**Mr Speaker:** It might be useful if Members indicated their profession in the debate, particularly if they are currently involved in the teaching profession or will be in the future.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Perhaps you will indicate whether it is required under Standing Orders for Members in the Chamber to bring their interests to your attention, or rather that those matters are best dealt with after the debate and that it is for individual Members to decide whether they should declare an interest.

**Mr Speaker:** If any Member feels that he or she wishes to raise a point of order with regard to a motion that is being debated in the House, it is appropriate to do so. Although proper points of order in the House are rare, I consider Mr McElduff's point of order to have been proper.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment statistics for June 2007 show that 240

teachers are on jobseeker's allowance. The substitute teacher register includes not only newly qualified teachers, but teachers of all ages, who wish to be employed as substitutes. It also includes teachers who no longer wish to be full-time members of the teaching profession. Therefore, it is disingenuous, to say the least, to call on the Minister to formulate a strategy — to be implemented within three years — to employ a supposed 4,000 teachers. That proposal could not be implemented under the present Executive's proposals for expenditure on education over the next three years. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin supports ways of trying to find full-time employment for newly qualified teachers.

The amended motion is a more realistic way of trying to bring that about without placing time constraints on the Minister. Therefore, I appeal to the Assembly, given the budgetary allocation to education and the priorities set by the Executive in the Programme for Government for the next three years — to which the SDLP have signed up — to accept the amended motion as the only possible way in which the Minister can make sensible and realistic progress on the matter.

**Mr Neeson:** Will the Member agree with me that his amendment is deeply flawed because he has criticised the numbers to which Mr Bradley has referred while, in that same amendment, acknowledging that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute teacher register?

**Mr Butler:** I acknowledge that that number is on the register. I have already pointed out that they are not all seeking full-time employment. Many of them are happy to work as substitute teachers. That is the reality of the matter. Shortly, I will explain why some retired teachers are coming back into the system.

I appeal to Dominic Bradley that, if he is going to take on the Minister for Education, he does so on her record of work, on what has been planned in the draft Budget and on the Programme for Government — and not on some fanciful and undeliverable motion such as that which has been proposed today.

Sinn Féin acknowledges the difficulties faced by young and newly qualified teachers who, after taking a conscious decision to enter the noble vocation of teaching, have increasingly experienced the frustration and disillusionment that comes with failing to secure full-time employment. I know that the Minister would like to address that issue. However, I will not follow Mr Bradley's attempt to belittle the challenges that lie ahead in tackling this difficult issue by trying to score some petty political points.

The problem of the disparity between the number of qualified teachers and the number of available teaching posts in the North of Ireland must be addressed. In short, we are training more teachers than we can employ. Therefore, the type of sensationalist motions that are laid down by Mr Bradley will not effectively address

that problem. The simple fact of the matter is that we are in the midst of a period of significant demographic decline, with thousands of empty school desks — a fact that has been the subject of a number of reports, such as the Bain Report. Faced with the declining number of pupils it is natural, though regrettable, that there will be a reduction in the number of teaching posts needing to be filled by young and newly qualified teachers.

The motion, which calls for the creation of nearly 4,000 additional teaching posts — on a whim — adds nothing to the genuine discussion between many in the education sector about how to effectively reduce the number of unemployed teachers who are actively seeking recruitment in the profession.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Butler:** No.

If the Assembly were to pass the proposed motion, which Department would lose out to the tune of between £75 million and £85 million annually to fund the Member's proposal? Perhaps Mr Bradley would like to ask his fellow party member in the Executive, Margaret Ritchie, how she would react to the announcement that her Department would lose approximately £80 million, annually, to fund the employment of 4,000 extra teachers at a time when the number of pupils in our schools is steadily falling. Sinn Féin is seriously committed to trying to introduce measures that, when taken together, will go a considerable way to opening up more opportunities for young and newly qualified teachers.

For example, Sinn Féin has proposed curtailing the ability of retired teachers to re-enter the classroom as substitute teachers, thereby opening up more opportunities for young and newly qualified teachers. I know that the Minister is currently considering that option.

2.45 pm

The following points can be noted from the figures on retired teachers that the Department of Education obtained. More than 1,750 retired teachers have been employed in the classroom as teachers. Their employment accounted for over 70,000 teaching days, which amounts to an average of 376 retired teachers being employed every day in the school year. It costs between £47 and £71 more a day to employ a retired teacher than to employ a newly qualified teacher. Thus, the cost to the Department of employing retired teachers is around £4 million to £5 million more than the cost of employing newly qualified teachers.

Imposing tighter restrictions on the re-employment of retired teachers in schools can help to provide much-needed employment opportunities for the growing number of unemployed young and newly qualified teachers. Tens of thousands of teaching days are taken up annually in our schools by retired teachers, who are



in receipt of pensions from the Government following formal retirement from their profession. That is a long-standing problem in our education system, but, due to the demographic decline of recent years, it has become all the more difficult for young teachers to find employment, temporary or full time, in the profession for which they trained. It is shocking that retired teachers filled some 376 teaching positions every day of the past year, particularly when one considers the hundreds of young teachers who, due to their failure to obtain employment, are struggling to remain in the profession of their choice. Imposing those tighter restrictions is one way in which the Minister, Caitriona Ruane, could effectively and permanently address the issue in order that we can provide more opportunities for those young teachers to remain in the profession.

I am in no way blaming retired teachers for the current situation. Indeed, many retired early, and, in the process, prevented a younger teacher from being made redundant. Rather, the system must be changed in order to compel schools to give unemployed and newly qualified teachers the opportunities that they desire to establish themselves in our schools.

I ask Members to examine the issue more realistically, rather than table some fanciful motion that cannot be delivered on.

**Mr Lunn:** I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first "to" and insert

"prioritise these teachers for temporary teaching posts, and examine whether employment for newly qualified teachers is being restricted by the widespread employment of retired teachers in temporary posts."

This is an important problem that is growing, and I am glad that Mr Dominic Bradley has brought the matter to the House today. It is clear from listening to the contributions of the first two Members to speak that there is a clear difference of opinion on the matter, yet there is not much difference between the motion and amendment No 1 — there are merely a few words of difference. The thrust of both the motion and amendment No 1 is exactly the same. However, amendment No 2 is designed to be more precise and realistic in tackling the issue.

As has already been said, we have every sympathy for the many well-educated young people in Northern Ireland who have trained to become teachers yet cannot access their profession of choice. That difficulty affects not just newly qualified teachers, but their family circles as well. The accompanying uncertainty is tough for any young graduate and for their wider family. It is a major let-down for them after having worked so hard.

The fact that so many bright young people wish to remain in Northern Ireland is a tribute to recent developments here. The brain drain that was referred to earlier remains an issue, but we should at least be glad

that Northern Ireland is a place in which professionals who are well qualified in many fields wish to remain. It would be a waste if so many well-qualified young people were left with no option but to leave, despite having a strong desire to stay. It is therefore right that we, as elected representatives, examine the issue as a matter of priority.

However, there is no point in labelling an issue a top priority unless a decision is also made to tackle it head on. It is a fact that, as Paul Butler said, there are too many qualified teachers for the places available. It is another simple fact that we cannot guarantee every graduate a job in their chosen field. The situation will become worse as the programme of amalgamation and closure of schools rolls on. Sooner or later, the Minister and the Executive parties will have to learn how to make tough decisions. Such decisions should include an immediate reduction in the number of teacher-training positions to a more appropriate number and a broadening of teacher-training education so that those who go through the system will have sufficiently flexible skills to move into other careers, if necessary.

It is unfortunate that the four parties that are represented on the Executive have failed to include any action on this matter in the draft Programme for Government, apparently condemning us to having to deal with the problem during another Assembly mandate.

The problem is not that newly qualified teachers do not have access to full-time jobs, but that they have no access to any type of teaching job. It is standard practice in many occupations for people to gain experience by working on temporary contracts, and teaching is no different. The problem is that even temporary positions are too often unavailable in Northern Ireland, and anyone who follows the profession will by now have reached the inescapable conclusion that one of the main reasons for that situation is the number of teachers who retire and then return as substitute teachers, depriving graduates of the opportunity even to gain experience on a temporary or part-time basis.

It is long past the time when we can afford to pass vague motions calling for strategies on this and that. People know what the problems are and want them to be tackled directly. My party's amendment calls for the blockage in the system to be tackled and for the Minister to find ways immediately by which substitute positions in schools can go automatically to newly qualified teachers so that they can gain experience. Our amendment offers a way forward so that our best young teachers get the experience that they require to qualify them subsequently for full-time jobs here at home. Those who enter the profession deserve nothing else. I commend amendment No 2 to the House.

**Mr Donaldson:** I support the SDLP motion, and, in so doing, live in hope that I might get an invitation to its party conference next year, if I am lucky.

The entire House acknowledges that there is a problem to be addressed, even though there may be differences of opinion on how to deal with the matter. It is wrong that young teachers, who have qualified after a considerable time spent in higher education, are unable to enter the profession on a full-time and permanent basis. We have already heard some of the reasons for that situation. There is no doubt that demographics are a major factor; a downturn in pupil numbers has led to empty seats in classrooms and a reduction in the number of teaching staff required.

Nevertheless, it is important that the motion be debated. My friends the Member for East Antrim Mr Ross and the Member for Strangford Mrs McIlveen — Miss McIlveen; I am sorry, I just married you off there, Michelle — proposed a similar motion earlier this year on this matter. It is an important matter, and we are happy to support the motion.

As I carried out my research for the debate, I was mindful of the young teachers that I have met in my constituency, in places such as Dromore and Lisburn, who have graduated from teacher training and who have been employed in temporary substitute teaching positions for several years. They are increasingly frustrated that they are unable to obtain a permanent post in their chosen profession. I accept what the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn says: we cannot guarantee that every graduate in a certain profession will get a job of their choosing. I am sure that Mr Lunn is aware, as I am, of young teachers who have given up the hope of teaching and have moved into other spheres of work. There are teachers who, after a few years in the profession, move on and develop their own business or take up some other type of professional work. Unfortunately, that natural turnover process is not making way for young teachers to come through, and demographic changes have prevented that space from being created.

I must challenge the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Butler. It is wrong to suggest that the motion seeks 4,000 additional teaching jobs. I did not understand Dominic Bradley to say that. Rather, he proposes a strategy that enables us, over a period of time, to address this issue. One way of addressing this matter is to consider the point that Mr Butler made about the 1,750 retired teachers who are teaching in schools. If even 1,000 of those posts were freed up, it would take care of just over a quarter of the number that is needed. There are ways of filling teaching posts without having to create new ones.

I accept that there are budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, it is important to have a timescale,

otherwise this matter will not be high enough up the Department of Education's list of priorities to secure the proactive approach that is required. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say later. At this stage, I support the SDLP's proposal that there be a time limit on the formulation of a strategy. It is widely acknowledged that this issue must be dealt with, and I hope that the Minister will come forward with some proposals. In the meantime, the DUP is minded to support the motion — we believe that there must be a strategy and that there must be a timescale within which it is hoped that that strategy will be delivered. Let us send out a positive message from the Assembly to those young people who want to get into teaching that we will do something about this matter.

**Mr B McCrea:** As the previous contributor said, this issue was discussed not long ago. Therefore, it is a pity that more was not contained in the Programme for Government in order to deal with the issue. That is why I am grateful to Dominic Bradley for bringing the issue back to the attention of the Assembly so that we can consider it further and see whether we can do something about it.

I read the amendment that was tabled by Mr Butler and, in common with Mr Lunn, I thought that there was little difference between it and the motion, other than some tweaking of the words. However, the debate has revealed fundamental differences of opinion, and I am confused and bemused about what the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Butler was talking about. His argument seems to be all over the place — I am not even sure whether he acknowledges that there is a problem. He tried to rubbish the figures as incorrect, but he then used those same figures in his speech.

If there is a problem, can we please quantify it and come up with a plan to deal with it? I know, anecdotally, that there is a problem. I have spoken to people in Lagan Valley who are in their seventh year as temporary teachers. The problem facing them is that they become more expensive to employ each year as they go up the salary scale, but they cannot secure proper employment. Is it any wonder that people in such a position eventually decide to do something else?

I can also tell Mr Butler that we are exporting our teachers. I know of 40 teachers who responded to a recruitment campaign in the 'Belfast Telegraph' for jobs in Scotland. How is it that we can let some of our best teachers leave the country? Surely, the Member accepts that there is a problem.

However, there is not only a problem, but an opportunity. All of our discussions about education involve increasing pupil-to-teacher ratios to try to focus more attention on those children who need it. Levels of literacy and numeracy must bear some relationship to the number of teachers in our schools.

Schools are currently being closed, which means that more teachers are being made redundant or are taking early retirement. That has a knock-on effect on newly qualified teachers. When a substitute is needed, it is quite natural for a primary-school head teacher to recruit a retired teacher whom they know to have the experience to look after a class. Discipline is important, and an experienced teacher is better able to provide that.

However, employing retired teachers in substitute posts prevents new teachers from gaining experience, and that is the point made in Mr Dominic Bradley's excellent motion. I am afraid that I must inform Mr Butler that there is a problem, and the Assembly should be tackling it.

3.00 pm

Several teachers have told me that they are burnt out as a result of the plethora of initiatives that are forced on them. Burdened with administration and experiencing angst and worry, they tell me that they cannot cope. Surely it would be a good idea to place the excess of teachers in schools, if only temporarily, thereby enabling established teachers to receive training on the new curriculum, and so forth.

Teachers simply do not have enough time to do their jobs. Members of the Committee for Education will recall that primary-school teachers recently told it that in an entire week, they had only 45 minutes for any form of preparation. They asked the Committee how they were meant to prepare for the new curriculum.

The motion, which I fully support, highlights the point that nothing in our country is more important than the education of our young people. It is not acceptable for those excellent teachers to be thrown on the scrap heap. The Assembly cannot wash its hands of them; it must act. It is the Minister of Education's responsibility, and I look forward to her doing something about it.

**Mr Storey:** Lest anyone is in any doubt, Halloween has passed. There is no witch-hunt this afternoon — in case the Minister's minder, Mr Butler, rises to her defence on this issue.

A clear rhetoric is developing. The current Minister of Education seems to be rehearsing the same responses that were given by her colleague and predecessor, Martin McGuinness. Records show that the same questions were asked of him during his term. Miraculously, his answers then appear now to be coming, practically verbatim, from the current Minister. Between them, however, they have made little or no improvement to the situation, and that does not portray Sinn Féin as a friend of the teaching profession. It is ridiculous that a staggering total of 3,871 substitute teachers are awaiting full-time permanent posts. I commend the Member for bringing the motion to the House.

The Member for Sinn Féin disputed and questioned the facts. Of course, it is known that his party has a difficulty with truth and fact. Remember its lapse of memory when it did not know the people in Colombia, before it suddenly realised that they were party members?

The Minister has been asked practically the same question three times, from three different Members, and she has dished out the same reply each time. She lays the blame firmly at the door of the employers but claims that her Department has issued guidelines on recruitment. Where has that type of rationale been heard before? The dispute involving classroom assistants is another example of the Minister's shifting the blame to someone else and saying that it is not her responsibility — although she just happens to be the Minister of Education.

Despite the Minister's strong protestations, she has done nothing to amend the situation. Just over two weeks ago, she was asked in the Chamber for her views on plans in Scotland to introduce an induction year for teachers, and whether it would be viable for Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind that, as has been mentioned, this problem was first raised in June, the Minister obviously felt that it was not important enough to deal with as a matter of urgency.

Instead, she fixed a provisional date of 12 December 2007 on which to meet her Scottish counterpart. In the intervening period, however, she has been able to travel throughout the Republic of Ireland talking to representatives of an education sector that is small in relation to the overall provision of education in Northern Ireland.

As has already been said, there has been six months of nothing. The Minister is again displaying her disgraceful habit of picking and choosing those matters that she deems to be a priority in her society of so-called equality. I see no such stringent efforts to ease the current crisis of dealing with the issue in hand; namely, the permanent posts expected, and, indeed, deserved, by teachers.

How will the Minister address the problem? We await her reply today. When does she intend to do something, or will it be like the 11-plus situation where there is no need to panic, no need to worry, no need to be in any rush about the issue, because suddenly parents and children are not that important? However, the rhetoric that she used in the 'News Letter' the other day tells a completely different story.

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

**Mr Storey:** I will give way, but I hope that I will be given an extra minute.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member point out anything that the Minister has attempted to do with any sense of urgency on any topic?

**Mr Storey:** The Minister is considering club-banking for — would you believe it — Irish-medium schools,



because that issue is important to her, and it is more important than providing for the majority of parents and children in Northern Ireland. Only issues that are close to the Minister's own thinking are afforded the courtesy of a swift response. That is entirely unacceptable. It does not take a genius — and I am not the sharpest pencil in the box — to realise what is going on. I await the Minister's explanation — or should that be excuses — as to what should be done. The facts speak for themselves. She has proved on paper and in the Chamber that if an issue is not on her personal agenda, she does not care. We have the rhetoric, but not the results.

How many of the 3,871 substitute teachers awaiting permanent posts are dedicated Irish-language teachers? We will await a response to that. If such a terrible nightmare were to rear its head, Ms Ruane would stop at nothing to ensure that all the stops were pulled out and a purpose-built facility miraculously set up to address the matter. Perhaps the Minister is confused about the content and expectations of her role. She is not, as she continuously attempts to portray herself, an Assembly ambassador for the virtues of the Irish language, although I have no doubt that she would carry out that task admirably. She is, however, the head of a Department that structures, manages, maintains and develops the education system for all the children of Northern Ireland, not just for one sector that she feels is important. I support the motion.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I support the motion. I, too, have met young teachers who are or have been on the substitute roll for a year or longer. They have applied for job after job only to be disappointed time after time. They are dedicated young teachers who only want to practise their chosen vocation. It is soul-destroying for them to rise every day wondering whether the phone will ring for someone to inform them that they will have employment for that day.

We have heard the stark statistic that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute teacher register. However, we must never forget that among those are young teachers struggling to make a career for themselves. Many have been unable to finish their early professional development, which is a total shame, considering the investment that society has made in their education and training, not to mention the cost to themselves. All our young students leave university with bank loans, so they really need to get jobs.

I spoke to a young teacher who is now a bank clerk because she could not get a permanent teaching job. She told me that she was broken-hearted making the decision to abandon the career that she had worked towards all her school and college life. She had worked with children all her secondary-school and student life in summer community schemes and had developed a love of teaching. Therefore, I understood her disappointment at having to turn to another occupation purely for

financial reasons. That is part of the human cost of the statistic reflected in the motion.

Members should also bear in mind the young teaching talent that our education system is losing. The Alliance Party amendment slightly baffles me; the motion calls for the development of a strategy over the next three years to bring these teachers into full-time employment, yet the Alliance Party amendment would condemn them to temporary work with no chance of a permanent position. That would weaken the motion, so I cannot support it.

My colleague Dominic Bradley has clearly outlined several proposals, arising from part two of the Curran Report, which would be effective if implemented incrementally. That is particularly true of the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, which has the potential to create opportunities for young teachers, as it did in England.

The Sinn Féin amendment would water the motion down and is a pale reflection of it. We need to see action on the issue within a specific time frame, or the Curran Report proposals will remain on the shelf gathering dust for years to come. We owe it to young teachers to take action that will enable them to develop their careers in education in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

**Miss McIlveen:** I declare an interest, having been a teacher in a previous life. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the proposer of the motion for raising the issue, which ties in neatly with the motion that my party tabled on 19 June. The key question is what has been done to deal with the issue since then.

In that debate, the Minister advised that she and the Minister for Employment and Learning had agreed that they should meet Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to discuss a range of education matters. That was after she had had dinner with Alex Salmond, who had suggested the meeting only the day before. The Minister had managed to speak to Sir Reg Empey that morning, and matters seemed to be moving apace. That was extremely encouraging, and I am sure that the rest of the Assembly waited with bated breath on the outcome of that meeting. Consequently, we were all disappointed to hear on 15 October, when my colleague Mr Ross asked for an update on the meeting, that only a provisional date of 12 December had been set for the meeting. That is a full six months after the debate.

I fear that Mr Bradley's wish for the Minister to formulate a strategy to get the 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll into full-time employment will suffer the same fate of delay and inaction that blights the Department of Education. The amendment tabled by the Minister's colleague Mr Butler asks only that she "consider" ways to address the problem, which merely

allows for more procrastination. A strategy that can be implemented sooner rather than later is needed.

I sympathise wholeheartedly with the plight of substitute teachers, many of whom are newly qualified teachers for whom we have sought to guarantee a one-year teaching post. For such teachers, there is uncertainty over whether there will be any work available in any given week. Many ultimately make the decision to seek alternative employment or to leave Northern Ireland.

This matter has come before the Assembly time after time, with questions asked of the Minister and of her party colleague who held the post after 2000. We continue to find ourselves stuck in limbo, as with academic selection and classroom assistants. Perhaps if the 3,871 substitute teachers came to Stormont and attempted to ambush the Education Minister, there would be a swifter resolution to the issue. We could wipe 25 off that number immediately if they were employed in the Irish-medium schools to fill the posts taken by unqualified teachers. A former hunger striker was keen to point out in the media that many positions in Irish-medium schools — including some principal posts — are held by former IRA prisoners. We would not want to take any jobs away from “the boys”.

During suspension, my party continued to press direct rule Ministers on the issue in Westminster. The DUP has been concerned about this matter for a considerable time, and it is no surprise that we felt that it was necessary to raise the issue again during this Assembly. Given the lack of job opportunities for young teachers, Northern Ireland faces the prospect of losing a teaching generation. We are told that:

“Teachers, now, are potentially the single most important asset in the achievement of a democratically just learning society.”

Why, then, do we seem to be sitting back and letting that asset slip through our fingers? Only 22% of newly qualified teachers find employment in their first year after graduation, which is an astounding fall from 83·4% in 2001-02.

The NASUWT suggests that 25% of those obtained temporary posts only, and the remainder joined the pool of substitute teachers — if they had not already become disillusioned with their job prospects.

3.15 pm

The Alliance Party's amendment focuses primarily on those teachers who have seized the opportunity to take advantage of early retirement and who then realise how profitable it is to become a substitute teacher. The policy that the Alliance Party is suggesting already exists and has had little impact on securing long-term employment for newly qualified teachers. Substitute teaching is not a satisfactory alternative to a full one-year induction period, which would address experience

problems and provide untold benefits to the schools that take advantage of the scheme.

The motion is worthy, and I feel that the Member would have been well served in supporting the motion that was tabled by the DUP in June. That would have gone some way towards ameliorating a problem that will increase year on year unless it is tackled. It will require cross-departmental co-operation between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, and I ask both Ministers to clear time in their diaries and sit down and produce a clear workable policy.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú a chur Paul Butler ar aghaidh sa díospóireacht seo. I support the amendment in the name of the Member for Lagan Valley Paul Butler.

I listened carefully to Michelle McIlveen's comments, and I am seriously concerned about her remarks regarding the employment of former IRA prisoners in the teaching profession. She may have placed the lives of people in danger given that some people in the loyalist community have not put their weapons beyond use. Her comments were more than careless and irresponsible, and I ask her to be more careful about her remarks in the future.

All Members support newly qualified teachers who are at the start of their careers and wish them well, and we call on the Minister to consider ways to act and ensure that all teachers who wish to go into full-time permanent employment can do so.

To add value to Paul Butler's comments, I would draw Members' attention to the guidance that was issued to employers by the Department of Education and, specifically, by the Minister. Mervyn Storey referred to that guidance and contrived it, somehow or other, to be a negative development when, in fact, it is a positive development.

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

**Mr McElduff:** OK, Mervyn, keep her lit.

**Mr Storey:** I was not saying that it was a negative development, but we have seen guidelines that have been issued by the Minister and the Department with regard to the classroom assistants' strike. That dispute is not resolved, and the Minister is merely shifting the blame. She has issued guidelines on this issue, and she is now trying to shift the blame on to other people. It is time that the Minister took responsibility and started to run the Department.

**Mr McElduff:** I join Mervyn in commending the Minister for issuing guidance to employers, advising them that preference should be given to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers who are seeking employment. That guidance is a welcome and

positive intervention, and I thank Mervyn Storey for bringing it to our attention. He has played a stormer: fair play to him.

Paul Butler is also correct to place the motion in the context of the Programme for Government. I have great personal respect for Dominic Bradley and Basil McCrea. However, a man from Eskragh in rural Tyrone — a place familiar to you, Mr Speaker — recently told me that he listens to BBC Radio Ulster's evening coverage of events in the Chamber.

He said that the more he listens to Basil McCrea and Dominic Bradley, the more he thinks they are playing the politics of Lanigan's Ball — stepping in and out of Government, stepping in and out of the Executive, and pretending to be semi-detached.

The fact is that Basil McCrea's and Dominic Bradley's ministerial colleagues were around the Executive table when the Programme for Government was signed off, and yet they want an entirely new Programme for Government with respect to education over a three-year period. Some of the contributions have been mischievous, at best, and not terribly realistic.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McElduff:** Not on this occasion, Dominic.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I thought you said that you liked standing. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McElduff:** Apart from that, are you keeping well, Dominic?

Undoubtedly, there is considerable work to be done in the creation of job opportunities on an all-Ireland North/South basis for teachers throughout the country. I hope that that issue will feature very strongly in the immediate future in North/South Ministerial Council meetings when Caitríona Ruane meets Mary Hanafin TD in the education sectoral format.

The situation is problematic, but the shortage of Irish-language teachers can be addressed. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has drawn attention to that issue, and it must be addressed with creative, all-Ireland solutions. If there is an oversupply of teachers in the Twenty-six Counties, and an undersupply in the Six Counties, we have a duty to address that and to ensure a harmonised approach.

I also welcome the recent introduction of sports and language programmes for primary schools, which offer a way for newly qualified teachers to gain experience in our schools. The Minister and the Department need to act on ways and means of bringing more teachers into full-time employment.

**Mr K Robinson:** I wish to declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of Whiteabbey Primary School and Hollybank Primary School and —

since this is obviously confession time — once upon a time, I was a young teacher, too.

Manpower planning throughout the public services is a fundamental function that the Assembly has a right to expect from all the Northern Ireland Departments. Under direct rule, the lack of public accountability seriously undermined the planning function of the Civil Service, and the whole regime was characterised by a lack of planning culture. Generally, Government tended to be reactive, and those reactions tended to be knee-jerk in nature, and driven by events.

All that will have to change now that the Assembly is in control of public affairs, and nowhere does that need to change more than in the manpower planning that lies behind the teaching workforce. It should be clear to any observer that there is no point in training teachers for whom no jobs exist, or are likely to exist, within the system. Not only is that wasteful of the very precious resource of young talent, but it is deeply cynical in the face of the hopes and aspirations of young people who spend years in training, only to find that there are no job opportunities when they qualify. Considering the amount of public money involved in training young teachers, it is an absolute disgrace that this situation ever arose in the first place.

Emigration is not the answer to unemployment — whether on the boat to England, or Scotland, or across the border, as Mr McElduff pointed out, as an escape route. That simply covers up the woeful lack of manpower planning in the first place.

Only 22% of new teachers manage to find work in their first year after qualification, and that signifies a serious problem both in human and educational terms. Beyond that figure, and based on payroll information since September 2005, there have been 3,176 female and 695 male teachers paid as substitute teachers who have never worked in a permanent teaching post. That is not a new problem. The former Minister of Education had this matter drawn to his attention in 2000, but nothing has changed in the past seven years.

The Assembly has debated the need to provide a guaranteed year of employment to young teachers, based on the Scottish model. That guaranteed year would help young teachers who are fresh out of college to apply for substitute teacher posts, which would be an improvement on the existing situation.

It is quite obvious that the drop in school rolls indicates that the reform of the education system, which is already under way, is necessary and needs to be far reaching.

Enrolment has already fallen by 9% — about 30,000 pupils over the past decade — and it is projected to fall by a further 9.5%, which amounts to a further 30,000 pupils over the next 10 years. In that context, major rationalisation of schools, sharing of resources,



amalgamations and various other strategies will be undertaken to deal with the situation.

The Minister is already reported as considering school selection at age 14 instead of 11, which perhaps indicates the introduction of primary, middle and high school splits in educational provision. Apart from the debate over the selection process, which is one for another day, such a major restructuring will have a dramatic impact on the configuration of the present teaching workforce. It will undoubtedly lead to many teachers wanting to retire early, either burnt out or wanting to opt out of such a major, or even seismic, change in education provision. Surely that must be facilitated, and the employment of young teachers must be considered in that context.

Irrespective of that scenario of change, there is a need for rational planning of teacher training. That must begin now, so that the number of young teachers qualifying bears some relationship to the actual number of young teachers needed by our schools.

We must ensure that any gains made through restructuring and rationalisation are not frittered away by the continuance of poor manpower planning by the Department. The new curriculum proposals, if they are properly introduced and developed, will provide an opportunity for up to 10% preparation time. That must be translated into extra teaching posts, aimed at those who have been out of college not just for one year, but anything up to five or seven years, and who have yet to acquire a permanent position.

Today's debate must be seen in a wider context than that of simply addressing the issue of unemployment among young teachers by the implementation of the Curran Report or some similar strategy. A range of interconnected and interrelated issues is involved, from manpower planning through to rationalisation of schools and the whole structure of the school system, all of which have massive implications, not just for young unemployed teachers, but for the employability and skilling of our entire workforce. I support the motion.

**Mr Ross:** As my party colleagues pointed out, today's motion in the name of Mr Bradley is not miles apart from the motion that Michelle McIlveen and I introduced to the House in June. It, too, recognised the difficulty that young teachers have in getting permanent full-time teaching posts and called on the Minister to look into the idea of introducing an induction year as a means of addressing the matter. However, since that debate, the Minister has taken absolutely no action on the issue, and today's motion is a timely reminder to her.

I am surprised to see the Alliance Party's amendment. It would seem to suggest some kind of discrimination against those teachers who have taken early retirement. I agree that there is a problem with younger teachers being prevented from gaining temporary work; however,

that is due to their not having the experience needed — an issue that would be addressed by introducing a teaching induction year, as proposed by my party in June.

I am less surprised by Sinn Féin's amendment, which tries to give its Minister more wriggle room so that her inaction can continue. Mr Butler got his excuses in early.

Given the fact that my party took the lead on the issue, and that the SDLP is following, I am happy to support the original motion proposed by Mr Bradley.

Although the Minister is often coy with her figures, we know that only one fifth of teaching graduates get a teaching job in the year after they graduate. 'The Irish News' reported on 26 July this year that more than 7,000 qualified teachers cannot get full-time employment in schools. I refer to teaching jobs: figures on those who are employed in some sector and in some form are irrelevant to the debate. The Minister should take the opportunity to tell the House how many of those young people who graduated with a teaching qualification this year, or last year, now have a full-time permanent teaching post in Northern Ireland, and not whether they are working in Tesco or somewhere else in the country.

The problems facing young teachers are well known, and today's motion specifically addresses the substitute roll. However, many young teachers cannot even get supply work, as many experienced teachers take early retirement and, given that experience, are ideal for supply work or maternity cover. We cannot fix the problem by actively discriminating against experienced teachers, as the Alliance Party suggested earlier. Rather, we must help young people to get the experience that they need to get jobs. We already spend huge amounts of money each year in training new teachers; however, many of those who have completed their training are forced to look for jobs in other regions of the UK, or to go into part-time work in other areas, as no teaching jobs are available.

3.30 pm

It is clear that the role of the Assembly and the Education Minister is to implement a strategy that will assist young graduates into permanent teaching jobs.

Previously, I highlighted to the Assembly the merits of an induction year as a means by which young teachers might attain the level of experience that they require in order to apply for full-time posts; yet, as my colleague said earlier, the Minister informed the House on 15 October that she was no further forward in considering the issue than she had been six months ago.

A full induction year has been supported by the NASUWT and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, which, in its final report for the Department of Education, recommended the introduction of a guaranteed

induction year for all newly-qualified teachers. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation also recommended that route, saying that it feared that the

“brightest and best young teachers [would be] lured across the water by an offer of £5,000.”

The stark reality is that many young teachers are demoralised because they cannot find permanent teaching posts. If the Minister continues to procrastinate on this issue — and my colleague Mervyn Storey reminded me that procrastination is the thief of time — and no strategy is put in place, more students who are interested in a teaching profession will leave Northern Ireland never to return. Our brightest and best young teachers will be lost or they will pursue careers in other areas.

A strategy must be put in place and money must be spent prudently — spending huge amounts of money on teachers who will ultimately head for the mainland to find jobs is not prudent. There must be a return on the money that is spent on training teachers — they must get jobs here. As with other professions, we do not want our most talented people to leave, and it is important for our education system and our economy that they stay in Northern Ireland. Do teachers currently have the opportunity to follow their careers at home, or must they leave Northern Ireland? We should be creating opportunities for young teachers by opening doors rather than closing them.

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

I support the motion, and I hope that the Minister will take this issue seriously and get on with the job of finding solutions that will fix the problems that exist in education.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Tá mise iontach sásta éisteacht le gach aon duine a bhfuil suim aige nó aici san oideachas lena n-áirítear dearcaidh an Choiste Oideachais. I welcome the debate on this important issue. During my time as Minister of Education, I have seen the quality, commitment and professionalism of our teachers at first hand. They do a tremendous job, and I wish to give them every possible support.

We are fortunate in that we continue to attract large numbers of highly qualified young people for every teacher-training place that is offered by universities and teacher training colleges. I am keen to hear the views of everyone with an interest in education, including those of the Committee for Education.

Is maith a thuigim go bhfuil muinteoírí óga, i mblianta luath a slí bheatha go háirithe a bhfuil deacrachtaí acu poist lánaimseartha a fháil. Feictear sna treochtaí, áfach, go bhfaigheann cuid mhaith acu post sealadach nó fostaíocht phartaimseartha san oideachas.

Turning to the motion, the issues relating to teaching jobs are complex. The figure of 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll, which appears in the motion proposed by Dominic Bradley, relates to information from the

Department's payroll system and refers not only to the number of teachers who are paid to work as substitute teachers in grant-aided schools but also to those qualified to teach in the further education sector. The figure also includes people who are not yet fully qualified and who are only eligible to teach for limited periods of time.

The Department has sought information from the substitute teachers' register. However, although that register records those who are eligible to teach in grant-aided schools and who are registered with the General Teaching Council, it does not give information about those who have not yet secured full-time employment.

It is worth remembering that the register includes retired teachers, those who are currently pursuing other private or occupational paths but who wish to remain a part of the teaching profession, and those who are not actively seeking full-time employment. That said, updated figures from the Department's payroll system indicate that there has been a slight decrease in the number of teachers who are paid to work as substitute teachers but who have not yet secured a permanent teaching post.

I am conscious of the fact that there are young teachers, particularly in the early years following qualification, who find it difficult to get full-time jobs, although trends indicate that many of them secure temporary or part-time teaching employment.

Tá mise báúil do mhúinteoirí nuacháilithe agus tá súil agam go n-éireoidh leo post buan san oideachas a fháil.

In that context, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, which is the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded higher-education institutions, collects data about the destinations of higher-education students six months after they graduate. The latest available data, relating to the 2005-06 academic year, shows that, of those students gaining initial teacher-training qualifications at higher-level institutions here, 82% of those who returned destination information were employed variously in a teaching capacity six months after graduation, and 67% of those respondents were employed on a full-time basis. Allied figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June 2007 show that 240 jobseeker's allowance claimants specified teaching as their profession; 72 of those were under the age of 30.

We must examine the career opportunities that are on offer and whether it is correct to say that we are oversupplied with teachers. To that end, a first-rate career strategy is essential if the needs of learners are to be matched with an appropriate range of careers. The Department's mission is to ensure that all learners have an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential and enter the world of work with the appropriate skills, a

strong grounding in numeracy and literacy, appropriate qualifications in a broad curriculum — which includes vocational skills — and personal esteem and confidence.

To help achieve that objective, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning's draft careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) strategy was issued for consultation on 22 October 2007, and responses to that are due by 14 December. The CEIAG strategy is aimed at developing effective career decision-makers who have ownership of their careers and a commitment to lifelong learning. The strategy outlines a cohesive structure that is built around the key elements of education, information, advice and guidance, employability, and work-related learning.

I am sympathetic to the plight of newly qualified teachers, and I hope that they will be successful in obtaining permanent teaching posts.

Ní bhíonn na deacrachtaí céanna i dTuaisceart na hÉireann go ginearálta i gcompóráid le dlínsí eile. Is amhlaidh go mbíonn an iomarca daoine ag cur isteach ar chúrsaí anseo, bíonn suas le hochtar ag cur isteach ar gach aon áit. Léiríonn sé seo neart an choras oideachais, an dea-chuma atá ar an mhúinteoireacht mar shlí bheatha agus na roghanna saol a dhéanann daoine óga.

However, I have asked the newly qualified teachers to be creative and flexible in their choices when determining their career paths. Teachers are highly qualified professionals, and, as such, they have skills that prepare them for other jobs in related areas.

Dominic Bradley may scoff at a sport and languages programme for primary schools and at the idea that it offers opportunities for newly qualified teachers. However, I have met many of the new sports coaches, who are very excited about their posts — not only because they are teaching, but because, for the first time ever, there is a programme, supported by the Department of Education, for teaching Gaelic sports and soccer in primary schools. That is a very exciting initiative.

The issue is not about the number of posts that are created; it is about a new way of bringing sports and languages into the classroom. Given that we hear about levels of obesity almost daily, I am disappointed that Dominic does not see merit in that programme.

Secondly, perhaps Dominic Bradley views emigration differently, but I see it as a natural movement across borders — it is natural to go from Down to Louth or from Derry to Donegal. I also believe in the rights of young people to make choices. Young people choose to go abroad, and, in a previous debate on the matter, I urged young people to come back to Ireland to avail of the opportunities that the peace process is creating across the whole island of Ireland.

I welcome that fact that opportunities are opening up for young people in Ireland — North and South — in England, Scotland and Wales and, indeed, further afield. It is good for our young people to have such opportunities. Having said that — and I will say it again, in case Dominic misses it again — I call on all the young people to come back and join us in building a vibrant island where there will be opportunities for everyone.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Despite the fact that she would like all those young people to come back to Northern Ireland, there are no teaching jobs for them to come back to.

**Ms Ruane:** I recently attended the North/South Ministerial Council's second institutional meeting in Dundalk. One of the issues discussed was cross-border mobility and the need to make it as easy as possible for people to move freely across the island in order to work, live and study. Facilitating mobility for the teaching profession will provide additional employment opportunities for teachers. Next week, I will be meeting Mary Hanafin at the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting, and that is one of the issues that we will be discussing.

I am glad that Mervyn Storey is not the Minister of Education. To quote a famous poet, when he is:

“old and grey and full of sleep”,

he will still be talking about Colombia and prejudicial views on the Irish medium, and he will still be urging that creationism be taught as part of the science curriculum. The rest of the world is moving on, and I urge people to move on.

**Mr Storey:** The Minister eats and sleeps equality — *[Interruption.]*

We do not need her minder to be jumping to her defence; surely the Minister is old enough to be able to answer for herself. If the Minister believes in equality, why is she afraid to deal with the issue of creationism and allow people the opportunity to have equality in the classroom?

**Ms Ruane:** Thank you for your interesting contribution.

**Mr Storey:** No answer, then?

**Ms Ruane:** The Member has received my answers to many questions. I suggest that he reads the answers to the questions that I gave him. I was asked how many Irish-medium teachers are on the substitute register. There are currently 148, so there you go.

There are subjects here that have too many teachers, and others in which teachers are in short supply — for example, maths, science, engineering and technology. Those subjects are central to the future economic success of society if we are to compete successfully in a global



market. There is also a demand for more Irish teachers to service the growing Irish-medium sector.

The North of Ireland has not generally experienced as many teacher recruitment difficulties as other jurisdictions. All the courses offered here are heavily oversubscribed, with up to eight times more applications than there are places. That is an indication of the strength of the education system, the continued attractiveness of teaching as a career and the life choices that young people wish to make.

Is ceisteanna tábhachta iad fostaíocht bhuan, oiliúint agus tacaíocht leanúnach dár gcéimithe uile sa Tuaisceart agus go háirithe do na céimithe sin atá nuacháilithe.

Regarding the determinants of demand, the direct matching of supply with demand is difficult, given that the number and type of vacancies for which newly qualified teachers may be eligible to apply in any one year are influenced by a wide range of factors, including, principally, the decisions of schools regarding the desired size of their teaching complements and the designation of teaching posts as full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary. Schools make those decisions in the context of their overall budgets, and particularly in light of the funding that they receive under the local management of schools common funding formula arrangements.

I will continue to seek to maximise the resources that schools receive under those arrangements. That will mean that, on the demand side, schools have the resources to devote to the most valuable resource — the teachers themselves. In that context, I am currently considering the implications for school budgets of the recently announced draft Budget proposals for education. For their part, schools, in trying to maximise their resources, will be cognisant of the fact that the cost of employing a teacher from the substitute teacher register varies from £24,500 per annum for a newly qualified teacher to £42,000 for an experienced teacher.

Another key issue is demographics. Some people like to forget that pupil numbers have declined from almost 347,000 in 2001-02 to under 333,000 in 2005-06. During the same period, the full-time equivalent teacher count has dropped by just over 1,000. It is anticipated that, over the next five years, pupil numbers will continue to decline.

3.45 pm

Demographics, or else falling pupil numbers, have a significant impact on our system, and further decline must inform the number of qualified teachers that we need in coming years. Education authorities are required to plan how to make the best use of resources and ensure that schools are sustainable, with sufficient pupils and resources to provide the quality of education that children deserve. That will necessitate examining rationalisation options in the context of falling rolls.

Demand side is also affected by the number of teachers who leave the profession each year. In the past three years, some 2,300 teachers have left our schools, mainly because of their reaching the retirement age but also because of ill health and other reasons. The age profile of our existing workforce also influences the number of newly qualified teachers who will be employed in future. Of the 19,811 permanently or temporarily contracted teachers who are registered with the General Teaching Council, 5,573 — that is, more than 28% — are now 50 years of age or over.

The Department already has regard to many factors that affect demand, including inward migration, falling rolls and geographical disposition. The annual determination is informed by statistical analysis in the form of a teacher-demand model, which is sensitive to a considerable range of factors. Moreover, annual intake to initial-teacher education institutions has been reduced by more than 20%, from 880 in 2004-05 to 699 in 2007-08. Those numbers are set to be reduced further for the 2008-09 academic year. I thank Trevor Lunn for his thoughtful contribution on that topic.

The Department is also in the process of collecting information from all grant-aided schools on the number and detail of teaching vacancies that exist in each school. That will be an annual survey, ensuring that there is sufficient intake of teachers to meet demand from the grant-aided sector.

The Department continues to tell employers that, when filling vacancies, they need to give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment. In the past, it has been suggested that retired teachers should effectively be banned from seeking further employment. Although I understand the reasons behind that suggestion, I have resisted it on two grounds: we cannot seek to restrict someone's right to seek employment on the basis of age, as such a measure would be open to legal challenge; and —

**Mr K Robinson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Ms Ruane:** I will.

**Mr K Robinson:** Retired teachers are entitled to teach up to 110 days per annum before all sorts of benefits start to be affected. Will the Minister undertake to look at that ceiling, with a view to reducing it?

**Ms Ruane:** I will certainly look at it. I thank the Member for his contribution.

Schools have also been advised that, where there are genuine vacancies, they should seek to fill those on a permanent rather than temporary basis, unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature. We will continue to insist that, when filling vacancies, employers give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment.

Before 1999-2000, evidence pointed to schools appointing low-cost substitute teachers when costs were met from the school's budget but high-cost teachers when costs were met centrally. Since then, the reimbursement of the cost of substitute teachers from the centrally held funds of all the education and library boards has been restricted. That measure has enabled more funds to be delegated to schools, while providing them with an incentive to employ newly qualified teachers for substitution purposes. However, schools have the flexibility to decide to engage a teacher at a higher cost, charged to the school's budget, if they so desire.

The Department is currently examining ways in which the escalating cost of premature retirement in the teaching profession can be managed more effectively.

The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have jointly undertaken a major review of teacher education to ensure that the profession is best placed to cope with the changes facing the education system in the coming years. In the near future, I will consider the way forward on a range of matters that affect teacher education, including the phases of initial teacher education, induction, early professional development and continuing professional development. Stable employment and continual training and support are important issues for all our teacher graduates in the North, particularly for those who are newly qualified.

As I indicated to Alastair Ross in my oral reply of 15 October 2007, I have arranged a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in Scotland to discuss a range of educational matters, including how the Scottish Government address the employment of newly qualified teachers.

Following completion of the teacher education review, my colleague Reg Empey and I will explore ways by which newly qualified teachers employed in grant-aided schools may gain greater stability of employment during their early years of teaching. However, any strategy that addresses the needs of the newly qualified teacher must have regard to the overall costs and the availability of resources. I accept that more must be done to improve the matching of supply and demand, and for that reason we have initiated our annual survey.

To summarise, the career strategy that Reg Empey and I jointly put out for consultation will be important. On the priority status for young teachers, we will continue to insist that schools employ newly qualified teachers and create as many opportunities for newly qualified teachers as possible. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Kennedy:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification on the Minister's habit of using bilingualism. For those Members who are not versed in the Irish language it is difficult to establish

which sections of her speech are made in Irish and directly translated into English. The Irish sections seem much shorter than the English ones. Therefore, it would be helpful to clarify if all sections are translated or if only selected sections are translated.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I understand that the Minister and other Members who speak in Irish give a translation of what they have said directly before or after. Furthermore, Hansard has an accurate report of what is said by all Members in the Assembly.

**Mr K Robinson:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that the Minister has spoken in Irish for part of her speech and some of us are not sure whether she was translating the piece that had just gone or the piece about to come, will the Minister assure the House that she did give an English translation before or immediately after the Irish parts of her speech?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** There is no such requirement on the Minister. The solution to avoid those problems in the future would be a simultaneous translation service for the House, which the Assembly may consider in the future.

**Mr Neeson:** At the outset, I declare an interest as I am a former schoolteacher, and one of my daughters qualified for the teaching profession this year. I am well aware of the issue that we are debating, which is serious and not straightforward. As I know many teachers, I am aware that many who take early retirement return almost immediately to take up a substitute teaching job. Dominic Bradley has correctly made the point that jobs are available elsewhere. There are many teaching jobs available across the water, but that is not the answer to the problem.

It is important to take into consideration the falling numbers on school rolls. Are too many teacher-training places being created? Is enough effort being made to train teachers for specialist subjects such as science, maths and engineering, as the Minister mentioned?

To turn back to the debate, Paul Butler commented that more teachers are trained than can be employed, which is an important point. Trevor Lunn said that those teachers should be given the opportunity of experience, even in a substitute role.

That is part of the substance of the Alliance Party's amendment. Interestingly, trainee teachers across the water are given greater opportunities to train in the classroom than trainees in Northern Ireland.

Jeffrey Donaldson made the important point about the influence of demographics on the present situation and the need for a strategy to deal with that. That is the crux of the matter. I am not convinced by the Minister's speech that such a strategy is emerging. However, I welcome the fact that she and the Minister for Employ-

ment and Learning are to work together on a strategy to deal with the problem.

Basil McCrea rightly gave consideration to many other duties that teachers must undertake. Mervyn Storey said that he would not get involved in a witch-hunt. In fact, however, he did get involved in a witch-hunt. Mary Bradley outlined the costs of training teachers, which are considerable. Michelle McIlveen made the point that the situation is currently stuck in limbo. She reiterated the need for co-operation between DENI and DEL. Barry McElduff confirmed that he is a member of the fan clubs of Basil McCrea and Dominic Bradley. *[Laughter.]*

Former schoolteacher Ken Robinson mentioned the lack of a planning culture under direct rule. I agree entirely with him. That is why a strategy must be developed. Alastair Ross restated his party's view that there is a need for an induction year for newly qualified teachers.

The Alliance Party amendment is a realistic proposition that takes the facts of the situation into consideration, whereas the Sinn Féin amendment is simply a slight rewording of the original motion.

The lack of full-time permanent teaching jobs is an important issue, which I am glad that the Assembly has had a chance to debate. I urge Members to support the Alliance Party's amendment.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although all Members of the House support the spirit of the motion and efforts to find newly qualified teachers full-time permanent teaching jobs in the education system, it is unfortunate that, once again, the motion has simply been used as a platform from which to launch an attack on the Minister of Education.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** A mobile phone has been left switched on in the Chamber, and is interfering with the recording equipment. Can the Member whose phone it is switch it off, please?

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat. I have taken on board some of the proposals that were made by Ken Robinson. However, the Members opposite did not put forward any realistic proposals on how to deal with the issue. Instead, they launched an attack on the Irish language, the Minister and how she is handling the Education Department.

In the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government, education has done better than any other departmental area, with almost a 4.5% rise in its budget. It is planned to open 100 new schools over the next several years; there is a focus on early-years provision; the gap between children who achieve less and those who achieve the best is to be narrowed; and a greater range of subjects will be made available to post-primary schoolchildren. Those are the positives.

Certain Members brought issues such as Colombia into the debate. I do not know what that has to do with the motion.

I also have to mention Basil McCrea who, for the past few months, has been stalking the Minister of Education, looking for her on every occasion — he is the Assembly's serial protester or serial whinger.

4.00 pm

When we get to the nub of the issue, figures have been obtained from the Department of Education, which show that there are 1,750 retired teachers in the system. Many took advantage of the early retirement scheme that has been available for the past number of years, and tighter restrictions on the number of days during which they can teach in each term might provide a way in which newly-qualified teachers could be brought into the system. We are not saying that retired teachers cannot come back into the system — they are needed.

We should look to the South of Ireland where there is a policy that retired teachers may not re-enter the education system if they have declared formally that they wanted to take early retirement. Therefore, we can learn a lot from the South of Ireland.

The Minister of Education has said that she is considering ways to bring newly-qualified teachers into the system. We have calculated that it would cost £70 million or £80 million to employ the almost 4,000 people listed on the substitute-teachers' roll in the education system. Are the Members on the Benches opposite going to ask Peter Robinson for another £70 million or £80 million? He has already referred, in the Assembly, to people bringing forward fanciful motions with implications.

**Mr Storey:** Constantly, we come to the House and hear Members — and we are all guilty of it — talking about the amount of money it takes to run Departments. Will the Member accept that if there were one education system in Northern Ireland — and not five — the Minister would have all the money that she needs to run the education system, rather than always trying to blame someone else because she is unable to run the current system due to her budget?

**Mr Butler:** There is one education system. Under the review of public administration —

**Mr Storey:** Is it a maintained system?

**Mr Butler:** Look at the proposals that George Bain is going to bring forward, which include: area planning; 'A Shared Future'; and schools in the Irish-medium, controlled, and maintained sectors that will share facilities.

**Mr Storey:** By the time that the Minister begins to implement 'A Shared Future', the policy on sustainable schools, and the Bain Report, she will have to allow all of the maintained schools to amalgamate, and then area



planning will be absolutely useless. It is time that we implemented those policies. We are all keen about that and we want to sign up to that. It is time that we did it now, rather than wait until the demographics have changed so dramatically that they will have absolutely no impact.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Unfortunately, his views are not reflected in the debate. As the Member knows, I am a member of the Committee for Education, and his views are not reflected on that Committee either. All he is doing is attacking all of the proposals that come forward and attacking the Minister and her officials who make presentations to the Committee. Perhaps, Mervyn should try to take on board what Caitríona Ruane is trying to do. We have an education system that will change in the next few years for the betterment of everyone.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad to make the winding-up speech on the motion. At the beginning of his speech, Mr Butler said that the figure that I quoted was not accurate. I said that there were 3,871 teachers — as stated in the motion — on the substitute-teachers' roll who have not yet been in full-time, permanent employment in teaching. The source of that statistic is the Minister of Education. I did not draw that statistic down from the clouds: it came from her and her Department. Now I am not telling lies. Perhaps, the case is that, for once, the truth has leaked out and now they are trying to reel it in again.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to moderate his language, and also to be careful in relation to the word "lies".

**Mr D Bradley:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I did not think that my language was immoderate. However, I will defer to you on this occasion.

My question clearly related to the number of teachers who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in the teaching profession. Mr Butler says that the figure of 3,871, which is mentioned in the motion, includes retired teachers.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not sure whether I heard you correctly, but I think that you said something about lies. Surely if a Member of this House is telling lies, he is out of order?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I cautioned the Member about using the word "lies" and to be careful in the language that he used. I was simply cautioning the Member.

**Mr D Bradley:** In fact, what I said was, "I am not telling lies". I do not think that I should be admonished for saying that.

In any case, I will move on. As I said, I asked the Minister for the number of teachers in full-time permanent employment. Mr Butler said that the figure of 3,871

includes retired teachers. However, retired teachers have previously been in permanent employment in education. Mr Butler said that that figure also included teachers who have taken voluntary redundancies — such teachers have also previously been in full-time employment in education. Therefore, I believe that I got the figure right. If I have not, the fault does not lie with me; it lies with the Minister and her Department.

As was said earlier, Mr Butler's amendment is only a pale reflection of the original motion. An amendment should strengthen a motion, but this one seeks to water it down, and does so very poorly. I am also disappointed by the Alliance Party's amendment, which would seek to continue with temporary employment for teachers and thus exacerbate the problem, rather than solve or relieve it. Therefore, I cannot support that amendment.

Other Members made useful points. Mr Donaldson mentioned the frustration that young teachers feel at being unable to find employment in their chosen profession. He rightly challenged Mr Butler's misinterpretation of my motion. He pointed out that the motion allows for a defined time for the development of a strategy. The Sinn Féin amendment leaves that open-ended, resulting in more dust gathering on the proposal.

Basil McCrea referred to the fact that some teachers on the substitute list have been on the list for seven years. He also mentioned that 40 young teachers have recently left to seek employment in Scotland, and he highlighted the problems with literacy and numeracy in our society and how lower pupil:teacher ratios could help to solve those problems. He referred to the burnout experienced by many teachers. That problem could be alleviated by young teachers' being given jobs in primary schools. Primary-school teachers have only 45 minutes of preparation time during the week. The Curran Report proposes 10% planning, preparation and assessment time. If that proposal were to be adopted, many young teachers could be taken into the profession.

Mr Storey accused the Minister of riding the coat-tails of the employers. He also mentioned that she did the same with regard to another issue. Mary Bradley told of the soul-destroying experience faced by young teachers in their daily wait to hear whether or not they will be employed for a day. Miss McIlveen referred to the lack of progress that had been made since the previous debate on an issue related to this motion.

Mr McElduff is a great friend of mine. *[Laughter.]* Cara mór liom féin. He referred to an old Irish music hall song called 'Lanigan's Ball'. Mr McElduff and the Minister should perform a duet of Christy Moore's 'Go, Move, Shift', because that is what the Minister is telling young teachers to do: go, move, shift to Scotland, England, Wales — and Donegal.

The Minister told the House that she was calling on young people to come back home. Mr Storey said that

the Minister had brought three people home from Colombia, but in answer to my question, she was sending more than 3,000 young teachers away from home.

Ken Robinson mentioned woefully inadequate manpower planning, and said that it was a disgrace that this situation had been allowed to develop — only 22% of newly-qualified teachers gain employment in their first year after qualification. He also mentioned the importance of the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, yet, in her summing up, the Minister gave us more Civil Service-speak and statistics. If her original statistic has been called into question by her own colleague, how much faith can we put in the statistics that she has presented today?

The Minister berated me, and said that I had devalued her initiatives on sport and languages. I did not; I welcomed them. However, I did ask her how many teachers would be involved in those initiatives and how long those contracts would last. She did not answer my first question or my second question, which speaks volumes.

In conclusion, I want to refer to some of the core proposals of the Curran Report — the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, and the two days' administration time for teaching principals in small primary schools. Although those proposals are referred to in the draft Programme for Government, I did not hear the Minister expand on them today. Perhaps we will hear from her about those proposals in the future. I did not hear any reference to the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time. That is a feature of teaching in England and Wales, and it shows how teachers in Northern Ireland are losing parity with their colleagues elsewhere.

The Minister made a passing reference to the guaranteed initial year, and mentioned that she would discuss the matter with Minister Empey, but I would have preferred to have had more detailed evidence that the matter was being treated seriously.

We have had a lively debate. It has been humorous at times, but also serious. This is a serious issue, and I hope that the Minister will not only take note of the comments made by all Members, but act on them in the future. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the question on amendment No 2.

*Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.*

*Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly abhors the fact that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and calls on the Minister for Education to formulate a strategy to bring these teachers into full-time teaching over the next three years.

4.15 pm

*Motion made:*

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

## ADJOURNMENT

### Homelessness in Foyle

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Ciúineas le bhur dtoil. I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak. Depending on the number of Members who take part in the debate, all other Members who speak will have approximately five minutes.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an mholta seo. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the major problem of homelessness in my constituency of Foyle. Homelessness in Derry is at crisis point. Despite the huge commercial development that proximity to the border and the Celtic tiger economy have brought in recent years in the form of shops and commercial properties, the most appalling levels of homelessness lie underneath that commercial smokescreen of wealth. I am also sure that homelessness and the lack of social and affordable housing are issues that are continually brought to the attention of many other Members. Day and daily, my constituency office receives calls from distraught — and mostly young — people who are unable to put a decent roof over their heads.

That includes young families, some of whom are struggling to get by on benefits and some of whom are struggling to survive on low incomes, but all of whom are unable to enjoy the right of a decent home in which to raise their children. The stark reality is that there are currently around 2,300 people on the housing waiting list in Foyle. More than 1,100 of those are deemed to be in housing crisis — a term that masks the reality that those people face. They may not be sleeping on the streets, but they are homeless — that is for sure.

However, some people are sleeping on the streets. They have been failed by a system that does not provide the care that they need and to which they are entitled. Homelessness is not an isolated issue. The Programme for Government, which was presented to the Assembly last week, rightly stressed that homelessness is an interdependent, cross-cutting issue that is inseparable from health, education, employment and simple poverty.

Those issues cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. If someone's family is homeless, that person's health suffers, the education of the children suffers, access to employment suffers, and the confidence that is required to play a full part in the community is

deeply undermined. As a result of homelessness, the social capacity of our community is much reduced. The homeless are the disadvantaged people in our society that the Programme for Government mentions. Who here can stand in judgement on people who are homeless if they are driven, through the misery of their circumstances and ill health, to the abuse of alcohol and drugs? Our social policy must be based on compassion towards people who have borne the brunt of bad policies in the past. I have met people who are suffering from addictions and who have ended up on the streets of Derry. They come from decent homes; they are good people who have been failed by a bad system. Those people, and all those who come from the city of Derry, deserve better.

A co-ordinated approach must be headed and driven by Department for Social Development (DSD), with other Departments, to ensure that adequate services are provided. New thinking is required to tackle the wider problem of the housing crisis because it is clear that what has gone before has simply not delivered. We must make the aspirations that were set down in last week's Programme for Government a reality.

The number of people who are on housing waiting lists is at its highest level for 30 years. I find it incredible that Members are in the Chamber today to demand one of the same rights that brought people on to the streets during the civil rights campaign, which was led by the people of Derry: that is, the right to a decent home.

In some cases, people have returned to the pre-1969 situation, with three generations of one family living in appalling, overcrowded conditions in the same sub-standard house. We have come full circle, and the Assembly is now making the same demands as were made during the civil rights campaign. That is a damning indictment not only of the decades of neglect by British direct rule Ministers but of the failure of the previous Executive to tackle the issue.

It may sound incredible, but those who are defined as homeless may be the lucky ones. Of the 21,000 people who declared themselves homeless across the North, up to 60% were not accepted as such. The vast majority were young people, who ended up in private accommodation that they could not afford or, worse still, they ended up on the streets. In Derry, the best-case scenario for the coming year is that more than 300 applicants for social housing will be turned down. I ask the Minister where those people are supposed to go. They are at the mercy of private landlords, or, worse, some are at the mercy of the elements as they struggle to survive on the streets. Therefore, will the Minister tell Members whether the Semple Review of housing affordability caters for the needs of the many young people who fail to meet the current criteria for homelessness?



Despite past failings and the current crisis, the Assembly and the Executive have the opportunity to right those wrongs by creating a co-ordinated and integrated strategy that will tackle homelessness. Part of that must include a comprehensive and proactive building programme of social housing in those areas where need is greatest. Objective need must be the only criterion that is used. Homes must be built where there is the greatest need, not where the cheerleaders of the failed NIO policy, which abused the concept of a shared future, consider that it would look good for such homes to be built.

I welcome the pledge in the Programme for Government to build 10,000 new social homes over the next five years. However, it is clear that that will not go far enough. What steps is the Minister taking to secure additional funding to provide more social-housing stock? It is also clear that additional homes must be built, but that is only part of the solution. Innovative, cross-cutting approaches are required. Given that the Programme for Government also pledges to overhaul the planning system, social responsibility clauses should be incorporated into all applications for major housing development schemes. Property developers have made countless millions of pounds from housing projects across the North. Although they are perfectly entitled to do so, they must realise that they have a responsibility to those who are —

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Anderson:** No.

— either priced out of the market or find themselves on a housing waiting list. In order to provide much-needed accommodation, housing associations end up purchasing a considerable proportion of houses that have been built by private developers. However, should the planning process not incorporate a requirement for developers to provide a certain percentage of social and affordable housing as part of their projects? Is the Minister's Department considering the inclusion of such social responsibilities in applications for housing developments?

An entire generation has been failed, and many face a bleak future in which owning their own homes will always remain an unattainable dream. Others live in overcrowded and poorly maintained housing conditions, or even on the streets. Is that all that lies ahead of them?

It is Members' responsibility to change that, to tackle the issue head-on and to come up with solutions. It is our responsibility to give our children a better future, and I am particularly concerned about the children of the Foyle and Derry area. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Campbell:** The issue of homelessness has come back onto the political agenda. To some degree, it had disappeared through the 1980s and 1990s, as affordability of homes, in relative terms, was reduced because of

interest rates and the lower cost of accommodation. However, due to a combination of factors, it is now a priority issue.

Homelessness in Londonderry, as in other constituencies across Northern Ireland, has become a matter of concern, not only for people who are directly affected — those who cannot get a roof over their heads and those who are in housing stress — but for others who are affected as a result of the unaffordability of housing, particularly for young people. The Housing Executive has reported that, in most areas of Northern Ireland, the number of people in housing stress increases every month.

In Londonderry, a case is unfolding as we speak. Retail centres, and one of them is one of the largest shopping centres in Northern Ireland, are affected by people, many with alcohol-related problems and some of whom are homeless, who gather in significant numbers — not just two or three, but sometimes several dozen. Those people create difficulties for shoppers and for those wishing to use the car parks near Craigavon Bridge that are owned by the Department for Regional Development. Those problems occur as a direct result of the increasing problems that homelessness brings to society.

I appreciate that the Minister for Social Development is endeavouring to bring to bear her expertise, in the hope of obtaining resources from the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide more housing units for those people who are directly affected by homelessness. However, it is not only an issue for the Department for Social Development; it is also a problem for wider society and it must be dealt with systematically. The problem will not be resolved overnight, but we must try to ensure that we minimise it.

In Londonderry, retailers have told me that they keep their shop doors locked and unlock their doors as individual customers arrive at their premises, because they are concerned about the proximity of homeless people and of those who are affected by alcohol problems. Those problems are directly related to, and complementary to, homelessness, and we must try to resolve them.

The Minister is considering the provision of social housing, and, hopefully, she will get support for that. As a society and cross-departmentally, we must try to address the issues of those who have been directly affected by homelessness and also address the wider problems in society.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank Martina Anderson for tabling it. I acknowledge that there is a crisis in Derry.

Homelessness is a disaster for individuals and families, and it is the starkest cause of social exclusion. It both causes, and is caused by, poverty, ill health and family breakdown. It separates people from their communities

and cuts them off from opportunities for employment and proper education. As a public representative for Derry, I have been concerned about homelessness for many years.

In fact, homelessness and its causes were key reasons for setting up the SDLP in the first place. The allocation of housing — one family, one house — was one of the key goals of the civil rights movement. However, the civil rights slogans of “one man, one house” and “one man, one vote” seem strange given the current awareness of gender equality. We will be celebrating 40 years of the civil rights movement soon, and we hope that it will provide a reminder that we need to effect change. I have every confidence that the Minister will succeed in giving hope and comfort to the many families who are struggling at the present time.

4.30 pm

From the work in my constituency office, I know the problems that homelessness causes. Every day people arrive at my office asking for help to be housed after family or marital breakdown. Many of those people are single parents. Some are elderly and are homeless because their accommodation is not fit for habitation or because they can no longer manage to use stairs due to disabilities and are sleeping in their living rooms.

People wait for years to get housed in Derry. I am sorry that Gregory Campbell has left because I recall that, at annual meetings with the Housing Executive, it was denied that someone could wait a year for a house. Some people are now waiting for years to get housed. That puts a terrible strain on family life and on the education and development of children. Housing Executive figures show that there are over 500 families and individuals on the waiting list who are classed as homeless or as being in “housing stress”. Last year, almost 1,200 people declared themselves as homeless, although only half of those were given priority.

It is an indictment of the economic situation in Derry that people should be so dependent on social welfare and housing and have been for some time. It is also an indictment of historic governance that successive Governments failed to invest adequately in jobs or social housing.

The pressure on the social-rented sector is influenced by a number of factors in addition to unemployment, low wage levels and employment security. Marital breakdown, underage pregnancies, disability and ill health all contribute to the high demand placed on the social-housing sector. Therefore, in addition to ensuring that we continue to build social housing for those who need it, we must also reduce the demands from some of those quarters by taking people out of unemployment and low-wage employment and investing more resources in helping young people. Martina Anderson pointed out that, under the present housing selection

scheme, young people are not given priority among those named homeless in the figures.

An environment must be created in which marriages and partnerships are supported to reduce the pain and cost of marital and family breakdown. I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an assurance that all Government Departments and public bodies will work alongside DSD to find surplus land on which to build the social housing that is required. I ask Martina Anderson to convince her party colleagues on the Executive of that, too.

Recent spiralling house prices have made the problem of homelessness worse; people who would previously have planned to buy a house are now unable to do so. In the last five years house prices in Derry have more than doubled. A recent housing affordability study by Derry City Council showed that none of the houses sold in Derry were affordable for first-time buyers. I have a son who is married and is finding it difficult to compete with housing associations as a first-time buyer. I appeal to the Minister to give serious consideration to the regulations that enable housing associations to buy single properties that are, in effect, inflating the market against first-time buyers.

In addition to the price of houses, the cost of housing has been exacerbated by recent hikes in interest rates, which put house owners — particularly people who have bought recently — under terrible financial stress. In many cases, both parents are forced to work long hours to keep a roof above their families’ heads.

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

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm labhairt ag an díospóireacht seo inniu. I thank my party colleague Martina Anderson from Foyle for bringing the issue to the House. The contributions from Pat Ramsey, Gregory Campbell and Martina have spelt out the extent of the problem of homelessness in Foyle. I have no desire to repeat their remarks, except to say that in the city of Derry there are 2,300 people on the housing waiting list and 1,100 in what is termed “housing stress”.

I welcome the Minister’s presence in the Chamber, and I hope that she will take the opportunity to provide a definition of “housing stress”. I ask her to do that so that no one can mask the reality of homelessness by trying to dress it up as the latest newspeak. I welcome and support the pledge that the Minister made when she took up office that social and affordable housing would be a major priority for her in the coming years. All Members wish her well in her attempts to achieve that.

I also welcome the Programme for Government’s target that 10,000 new social houses will be built in the next five years. That will be one of the major yardsticks on which the Programme for Government, and the Assembly, will be measured. Therefore, I agree with

Pat Ramsey's suggestion that all Departments should look for excess land on which to build social housing, but the Minister for Social Development must also be satisfied that all the land available to her Department can be used.

I urge the Minister to tackle the problem fairly and equitably, by making provision to address any regional disparities. The process must be effective and transparent. Perhaps, in the weeks and months ahead as the Programme for Government rolls out, the Minister will be able to outline on a constituency-by-constituency basis where she feels social housing should be built, so that Members have something for which to aim. The challenge faced by the Assembly is to make an impact on the lives of the people whom we represent. Members should be doing that, and we should view it as a collective responsibility. One sure way in which to achieve that is to bring an end to homelessness, be that in the constituency of Foyle or elsewhere. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I am grateful to Martina Anderson for bringing the issue of homelessness in Foyle before the House. It is a problem in our city of Derry. For instance, there are only nine prospective social houses to be built in the Collon area of the city — an area in which a Housing Executive district office is situated. That is hopeless. There may be at least 400 social houses built in the Skeoge Road development in two years' time, but that is some time away.

Homelessness is linked to alcohol, drugs and substance abuse, and physical- and mental-health issues also play their part. In fact, homelessness can lead people to abuse drugs and alcohol in an effort to escape from reality.

There is also the threat of another interest-rate increase this side of Christmas, or immediately after.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am not a Member for Foyle, but there are homeless people in my constituency. I plead with the Minister, as did Mr McCartney, to look at other areas across the North, because, regardless of the numbers of people on waiting lists for houses, their difficulties are the same. Does the Member acknowledge that one of the reasons for homelessness is that the cost of division and the Troubles meant a lasting legacy of lack of investment, poor investment in our infrastructure and a dispersed people?

**Mrs M Bradley:** I agree with Mrs Kelly. Furthermore, the past has caused so much antisocial behaviour in some areas that the Housing Executive cannot allocate some properties. People simply will not accept the available housing in some areas.

If more people experience serious financial hardship because of the probable interest-rate increase either side of Christmas, they will be forced to sell their homes. Although they will have some equity, most of

them will walk away from their homes with nothing, and the number of homeless people will, as a consequence, be forced upwards. Repossessions have increased by 60% in Northern Ireland in the past five years, and, with five interest-rate increases since August 2006, the situation is set to get worse.

A gentleman in our city recently camped out in Waterloo Place to highlight his, and others', plight. Many people signed his petition, because they recognised why he was doing what he was doing. I have every confidence that the Minister will set us right over the years if she is given the necessary money. That cannot happen soon enough.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I thank the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic, Martina Anderson, for showing her concern about homelessness in Foyle.

I share that concern. I thank Members for their contributions today, and I hope to address many of the issues raised. However, if I cannot do that today I will be happy to write to Members on any matters outstanding. I also welcome Members' continuing interest in the very serious issue of homelessness, and I would briefly like to describe, or characterise, how serious it is.

There are 21,000 people in Northern Ireland who are homeless, and that number is rising every year; it rose by 4.4% last year, and by 16% the year before. Homelessness in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than the UK average, and homelessness in Derry is around the Northern Ireland average.

There is a real problem, and I am fully committed to tackling it. The issue is complex, and it is a good example of where having a policy involving joined-up Government is essential, which is the point that was made by the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development.

In July, I launched a strategy for promoting the social inclusion of homeless people. That strategy aims to ensure that Government Departments, agencies and voluntary sector bodies, in a joined-up way, try to prevent homelessness where possible, and try to ensure that people who lose their accommodation can continue to access services.

The strategy rightly recognises that homelessness is not just about bricks and mortar; it is fundamentally linked to factors such as health, employment and personal relations — issues raised by Martina Anderson in her speech. Therefore, we are relying on a range of partners to ensure that the action plan will be delivered.

My priority is to deliver on accommodation for homeless people. The Housing Executive's strategy on homelessness recognises that the nature of homelessness has changed, and that traditional responses are no longer adequate. Traditional family units account for



only one third of all homelessness in Northern Ireland, while single households account for more than 50% of the total. By far the biggest causes of homelessness are family disputes and relationship breakdowns, and we must deploy a caring, compassionate attitude in any approach that we take to resolve the issue.

A high proportion of homeless people also suffer from other problems, including abuse and addiction; therefore, this multi-faceted problem requires a multi-agency response, so that homeless people do not slide into a downward spiral leading to destitution.

It is not only the absence of accommodation that causes the problem, but the absence of an address. Members might like to reflect on how a homeless person would go about registering with a doctor or a dentist; or how they would open a bank account, apply for a job or do any of the things that we consider normal. How can someone apply for a job if they do not have an address?

In Derry there are concerns that the closure of the John Street hostel has resulted in more people sleeping rough. Although I understand that there is a reasonable level of accommodation in the city I will be asking the Housing Executive if more can be done.

When I visited Derry city in late August I made a point of visiting two social housing projects. The first was the Strand Foyer, which is a facility designed to address the housing needs of young people aged 16 to 25. It aims to prevent the downward spiral of homelessness and unemployment by linking provision of supported housing to training, guidance, personal development and job-search facilities. I recommend that everyone in the House visit the Strand Foyer.

Later that day, I visited the Sevenoaks project, which caters for people at the other end of the age range, many of whom suffer from dementia. During both visits I met with staff and residents, and the commitment of staff in both places was inspirational. I plan to visit Derry later this year to meet the staff at the district offices of the Housing Executive, along with others who work at the front line of homelessness, including a number of housing advocacy groups.

4.45 pm

Turning to the all-important issue of investment, if I am to succeed in tackling homelessness and the accommodation needed — as I intend and am determined to do — then I must find the resources. Equally, I must have the support of all my colleagues in the Executive to ensure that those resources are found and made available for social housing, which the people in Northern Ireland consider — along with health — to be a top priority.

I am pleased to say that, in the past two years, the Housing Executive has invested £28.15 million in

existing housing in the Derry City Council area, and this year it intends to spend a further £12.5 million. However, there is no doubt that more social housing is needed. The Housing Executive informs me that 1,054 new units of social housing are required to meet housing needs in the Derry City Council area between now and 2011. There are currently 846 new homes planned for the city, and the Housing Executive is working closely with local housing associations to identify other sites for the building programme. Successful delivery depends on securing land, planning permission and, of course, funding. The Housing Executive remains confident that sufficient land can be identified to deliver what is needed to meet the housing needs of the city.

The question of funding is challenging, but I will not let up in my pursuit of the necessary resources. My Executive colleagues have also agreed that social housing should be given top priority for funding when assets such as land holdings are released by Departments. I hope that all Ministers will adhere to that resolution and that all Members will ensure that the respective Ministers from the political parties represented in the Executive adhere to those requirements and that resolution.

The upsurge in house prices over the past three years has increased the need for more affordable housing in Foyle and across Northern Ireland. I am keen to meet the aspirations of first-time buyers, many of whom have been priced out of the market recently. I also intend to introduce a requirement on developers to provide a percentage of their private housing schemes for social and affordable housing. There is no doubt that increasing the supply of affordable housing will free up social housing and allow us to reduce waiting lists and homelessness. That applies right across Northern Ireland, but particularly in the Foyle area.

I am delighted that Derry's development corporation, Ilex, is setting aside a large number of units for affordable housing on the Ebrington site. I will soon launch the Fort George master plan in Derry, and expect to be able to announce an exciting affordable housing element in that major regeneration project.

Various issues were raised in the debate. Martina Anderson referred to the number of households in the Foyle area. At March 2007, 674 households were accorded full duty status by the Housing Executive. There are plans to provide 1,051 new houses in the Foyle constituency, and 119 new homes are currently under construction. It is intended that a further 156 houses will be started in the current financial year. Other houses are planned for future years, and I will write to Ms Anderson on that subject.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will the Minister give way?

**Ms Ritchie:** I am near the end of my time. I will speak to the Member after the debate.

Raymond McCartney asked how many households were in housing stress: in September 2007, 1,342 households were in housing stress. Gregory Campbell also referred to the issue. I do not have figures that show housing stress increasing weekly, but I will check and write to the Member.

All in all, although there is much work for Members to do, there is also much work under way to tackle homelessness in Northern Ireland, and in Derry in particular. I look forward to the continuing support of my ministerial colleagues for efforts to secure a 100% return — or more — on capital receipts for land, and support for other measures that will increase the supply of social housing throughout Northern Ireland, and particularly in the Foyle constituency.

*Adjourned at 4.50 pm.*