

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 12 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

THE LATE MR JOHN FEE

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the Assembly of the death of Mr John Fee, a former Member for the Newry and Armagh constituency. I want to take this opportunity to extend my personal condolences to his wife and family circle on this very sad loss.

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, I join with you in extending the SDLP's condolences to Collette Fee and to John's wider family circle. Members will recall John as being very diligent on behalf of his constituents and very dogged in his arguments. He had a sense of honour and a sense of humour, and he brought passion and compassion to politics. His only commitment was to try to make people's lives better, and, sadly, his own life was all too short.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had the pleasure of knowing John Fee for some years, and I served with him during the first mandate of the Assembly.

He was a very diligent and committed public representative and, when working with him, I found him to be an individual of great integrity. It is very sad, and an awful shock, that a man of such young years has passed away. As well as my personal condolences, I offer condolences on behalf of Sinn Féin to John's extended family.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I should like to associate the members of the DUP with the remarks that have been made by the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Death comes to us all, and is often sudden. It is a reminder that we are not here for ever, and it is good, in the whirl of our lives, to be reminded that there are more important things — those of eternity.

Mr Kennedy: I join with others in the House in expressing my profound sympathy to Mrs Collette Fee, to John's mother Mrs Deirdre Fee, and to the Fee family. In his time, John was able and outstanding,

both as a representative of Newry and Armagh constituency and as a member of the Newry and Mourne District Council. I am profoundly saddened by his premature death. He was a man of intellect, ability and, most of all, integrity, and for that he will long be remembered in South Armagh.

Mr Neeson: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I express sympathy to John Fee's family on his untimely death. John was only 43, yet in that short life, he made a major contribution to his local community and to politics in Northern Ireland. He was a man of the highest integrity. We know that, at times, he faced major difficulties head on, and he will be sadly missed by all in Northern Ireland.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I beg to introduce the Pensions Bill [NIA7/07], which is a Bill to make provision about pensions and other benefits payable to persons in connection with bereavement or by reference to pensionable age; to make provision about the functions of the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker: That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed. The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I beg to move

That the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (SR 2007/354) be approved.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I shall outline the background to the Order and the reasons for its introduction.

The pig production development committee is an executive, non-departmental public body, sponsored by my Department. It is funded by statutory levy and its functions are the provision of services to the pig sector, mainly genetic testing and research and development. It comprises eight members, and the posts are unpaid.

One recommendation of the review of public administration (RPA), which concluded in March 2006, was that the functions of the committee be transferred to the Livestock and Meat Commission. Following extensive consultation on the outcome of the RPA, and with those specific stakeholders involved in the proposal, the committee and the wider pig industry rejected the merger, on the grounds that it was against the best interests of the pig sector. Moreover, those consulted did not wish to see the pig levy used for any other purpose, such as funding the overheads and administration of the larger body.

Accordingly, the committee recommended to the Department that it be wound up, as its parent legislation entitles it to do, and undertook to explore alternative voluntary arrangements that would better serve the pig industry. This course of action has the support of stakeholders and will ultimately provide the new body with the flexibility to collect and disburse a voluntary levy. It also meets the primary aim of the RPA, in that the number of public bodies will be reduced.

The proposals have been seen by Ministers, who are content with this course of action. My Department undertook to ensure that any new voluntary body is properly constituted and that appropriate safeguards are in place, with an assurance that the new arrangements will be suitably robust and sustainable. The industry is aware that there will be no reinstatement of the present arrangements should the alternative fail. A new body, Pig ReGen Ltd, has been incorporated with the appropriate memorandum and articles of association.

The Order before the House provides for the dissolution of the pig production development committee, with effect from 31 March 2008 and the transfer of its assets to Pig ReGen Ltd. It deals with the property, rights and liabilities of the committee in connection with its dissolution, with the discharge of the committee's liabilities during the winding-up period, and with any legal proceedings to which the committee is party prior

to the dissolution date. It sets out the manner in which contracts or agreements made by the committee, which are still in force at the time of dissolution, are to be dealt with, along with the committee's records. It provides for the final report and accounts of the committee and specifies the action to be taken by its creditors.

There are no human-rights or equality issues arising from the Order, and it has no impact on business, charities, voluntary bodies or the public sector. There are no financial implications, as the committee posts are unpaid, and any savings to my Department will be minimal.

A separate Order is being made to revoke the Pig Production Development (Levy) Order (Northern Ireland) 1996, also with effect from 31 March 2008. The primary legislation — the Pig Production Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 — will effectively become redundant, and will be removed from the statute book at the earliest opportunity.

In bringing forward this legislation to assist the pig sector by allowing for the formation of a voluntary body, which is not bound by legislative constraints, I am aware that the industry is experiencing difficulties at this time. I am working directly with the industry and the unions on this matter. I am aware that the Ulster Pork and Bacon Forum is doing a great job in difficult circumstances, and I fully support it in doing so. Recently, I met the senior management team of a leading pork processor to learn at first hand about the difficulties that it faces. I have also written to every supermarket in the North about rising costs for producers due to high feed prices.

I am aware that the increased cost of feed has placed additional pressure on producers, but that is a market issue, and Government cannot intervene. The situation is not confined to the North; producers across these islands are facing similar problems. I fully intend to do all that I can to support the local industry at that time. I commend the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): On behalf of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I support the motion.

The Department brought its proposed legislation to the Committee in June, and we had the opportunity to put questions to departmental officials. The Committee has accepted that it is necessary to wind up the existing organisation, and is satisfied that the best way forward is to transfer its assets and functions to a new company, Pig ReGen Ltd. I believe that the directors of the new company will be drawn from three categories of pig producers, with a representative from the Ulster Farmers' Union. On 4 September, my Committee formally recorded that it had no objection to the rule's being made.

I hope that no one in this House is under any illusion as to the current state of the pig industry in Northern Ireland. In October, we had a defining report from the red meat task force, setting out the hard facts of the future for the beef industry in Northern Ireland. If that was bad news, it does not start to describe the state of the pig industry. Just over a year ago, producers were receiving a reasonable farmgate price for finished pigs, and there was a certain confidence about the future.

Unfortunately, since then, farmgate prices have fallen by 15%, while grain and feed costs have risen by more than 20%. That situation cannot be sustained.

12.15 pm

The pig-farming community is under tremendous pressure. Urgent action from the Department, from processors and from retailers is needed, or else there will not be an industry for us to support. It is a case of simple economics rather than of farmers complaining when times get tough. A business that costs more money than it makes cannot and will not survive. Therefore, the Department and the Minister must take urgent action, because when crises have hit the pig industry in the past, other European countries — those considered the great Europeans — were very active in supporting their industries. Our Government, however, were unwilling to give our industry any financial support.

I wish Pig ReGen Ltd well. I hope that it will make good use of the pig production development committee's assets and its income through the levy to take the pig industry forward. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee have already raised most of the relevant points. I support the legislative change, as do the farming organisations. It will benefit them in their attempts to support the industry. The legislation is also consistent with the RPA's intentions.

However, for most of those in the industry, the dissolution of the pig production development committee and the transfer of its assets to Pig ReGen Ltd are not as important as the position in which the pig industry finds itself. It is a local industry, so we must support anything that can help it. The pig industry is under massive pressure, as the Chairperson has mentioned.

The Minister has been very active in writing to all those bodies that can make a difference. Processors, and supermarkets in particular, must realise that, if they want there to be local food production — in this sector and in the red-meat sector — they must play their part. They must do something other than, as they have been doing for years, simply listen and sit on the sidelines.

Just as has happened to the steel industry, and other industries, we risk local pig production's coming to an end. That would not be to the good of anyone, as it

would mean the quality and safety of food would suffer. I must commend the Minister for her personal efforts to ensure that everyone be made aware of the situation. We must apply pressure in order to do something on behalf of the people.

Prices have been rising worldwide. The price of ordinary food in shops and supermarkets is also increasing, but retailers tend to make up for that elsewhere. Feed is one of the single biggest costs in pig production. The cost of feed is severe, having almost doubled in the past year.

Therefore, the pig industry is finding it particularly difficult to continue to survive, even though those involved in it have always been under great pressure. Peaks and troughs have been the nature of the pig industry for many years. It has always been a matter of surviving until the next downward trend occurred. Farmers in every part of Ireland have always been diligent; they work with the industry and take account of price trends. Nevertheless, worldwide trends and the manner in which food is produced have led to their experiencing a very difficult time. There is no longer room for flexibility. If something is not done, we may lose the pig industry entirely, and we do not want that to happen.

The Order will be beneficial. The legislative change is something that everyone supports, so it causes no great difficulty. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Savage: I support the motion and the subsequent approval of the Order. The Order ensures the dissolution of the pig production development committee and that its assets and funds will be transferred to Pig ReGen Ltd for the benefit of all those who are involved in the industry.

At a time when pig meat is being bought for very low prices at the farm gate, the news that money will be recouped from the winding-up of the pig production development committee is good because that will benefit pig producers ultimately. Quite frankly, pig producers could do with being given a lot more money.

I support the motion and welcome the Order. I hope that this will open new doors, and that the pork industry can be established as an important niche market.

Mr P J Bradley: The SDLP supports the winding up of the pig production development committee and, like other Members who have spoken, my party wishes Pig ReGen Ltd every success. Its role is tough, and I am sure that it would welcome any assistance the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development could provide. The industry is going through a very tough time.

Ms Gildernew: I am grateful to the Members who have contributed to the debate. I concur with what has been said. The pig industry has come through many changes since I was a child. Thirty years ago, a lot of farms would have kept a few pigs. However, the industry came through some very bad difficulties in the

1990s and has restructured itself, trying to become more competitive. It is a resilient part of our industry and must be respected for that. The Department wants to do all that it can to support the industry in maintaining local pork and bacon products. None of us could conceive of not having local ham with our turkey at Christmas. Indeed, given the way in which grain prices are moving, having turkey at Christmas might be in jeopardy in a few years' time.

I accept the stress and difficulties being experienced by pig producers, and I will continue to work closely with the industry to do all in my power to help it through this difficult time. I thank Members for their support, and I wish Pig ReGen Ltd every success in these challenging times. It is hoped that the industry will become stronger and more profitable in the years to come. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/354) be approved.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week in the House, a Member accused the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety of misleading the Assembly. Will you give a ruling on whether that accusation was unparliamentary, and whether it should be withdrawn and an apology be given to the Minister by the Member concerned?

Mr Speaker: I intend to make a ruling on the matter. However, I can do so only when the Member concerned is in her place. I ask Members not to pre-empt that ruling.

Dr W McCrea: Further to that point of order. I draw the Speaker's attention to another House — one that is superior to this House in parliamentary terms. A similar situation occurred there involving the Prime Minister and it was ruled that the language used was not unparliamentary.

Mr Speaker: I hear and appreciate what Dr McCrea has said. I do not want to develop further in responding to this point of order what I will say in the House when I give my ruling. I ask Members to leave the matter at this point.

Mr McNarry: I appreciate and accept what you are saying, Mr Speaker. My question relates to your powers to ensure that the Member in question will be in the House in order to hear your ruling. It would appear to me that if you do not have such powers when you wish to make a ruling, Members could disrespect you and your position as Speaker. I hope that when you are in a position to give your ruling, you will use whatever power is necessary to ensure that the Member is in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I note what the Member has said. I have nothing to add to what I have already said on the matter.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Road Deaths

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes 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 P J Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appeal to the proposers of the motion and of the amendments to try not to divide the House on this matter —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr Boylan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an all-Ireland summit to tackle the crisis on our roads, and for the integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority, to deal with the issue of road safety on an all-Ireland basis.

Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate. I am pleased to have the opportunity to propose the motion.

At the outset, I ask Members and interested parties outside the Chamber to put their fears aside in respect of the mention of the term "all-Ireland" in the motion. Death and serious injury that result from road accidents do not recognise a border drawn on a map. Whether such deaths occur in County Cork or County Antrim, the waste of life and the pain and grief that are left behind are the same, and do not distinguish between religions, colour, ethnic background or gender.

Sinn Féin believes that the island of Ireland should have a single strategy for road safety. We are dealing with the same road-safety issues, and there is a large number of accidents and casualties on many of the roads that are shared between the North and the South.

This year, up to 8 November, there have been 89 road deaths in the North, and 280 in the South — a total of 369 tragically lost lives. Last year, a total of 493 people were killed on Ireland's roads, and a substantial percentage of those deaths took place in the border areas of Donegal, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Derry, Monaghan, Louth, Armagh and Down. Of the 89 deaths so far this year on the North's roads, 46 have occurred in the border areas — just over 50%. That highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy to deal with road safety on an all-island basis.

I have read the North of Ireland's 'Road Safety Strategy 2002-2012', and I acknowledge that a target has been set to reduce deaths and serious injuries on

our roads by 33% and that, within that overall target, a further target has been set of a 50% reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured. I believe that we are making progress towards meeting those targets, but we should be aiming higher. I also acknowledge the publication in Dublin of the South's 'Road Safety Strategy 2007-2012,' but I believe that those two documents are largely cosmetic exercises.

Examples of co-operation include the possibility of reciprocal recognition of penalty points that have been issued on either side of the border, and continued North/South co-operation on road-safety awareness campaigns. I agree that the TV advertisement campaigns have been very effective, but there are opportunities for further co-operation. Areas for further co-operation include an agreement on the implementation of the EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications, and the publication of a consultation document on vocational driver training, in line with EU directives. The road-safety strategies make no mention of harmonisation on serious issues such as alcohol limits, ways to tackle speeding or cross-border educational initiatives.

After a recent incident in the South, public opinion on alcohol limits has veered towards zero tolerance. Sinn Féin has called for zero tolerance, not only in the Twenty-six Counties, but across Ireland. Anyone who is travelling North or South with a pint on them could be dealt with in the same way, North and South, if there were one set of measures. We believe that there should be zero tolerance of drink-driving throughout Ireland, but that that will be possible only if we harmonise legislation on an all-Ireland basis.

Road signs that indicate speed limits should state those limits in miles per hour and in kilometres per hour to highlight the difference. Speed is the main contributing factor in road accidents on this island.

We should also consider reducing speed limits not only in and around schools, as we are currently trying to do, but on rural roads where many of those accidents take place.

12.30 pm

Not enough is being done to educate young people, North or South, about road safety. Any summit that takes place should take a comprehensive look at what can be done in that area, especially in the 17- to 24-year old bracket. Most accidents involve people in that age group — as, sadly, do most of the tragedies. The list of issues that a summit could address is not endless — pedestrians, driver training, safety of children in and out of vehicles, older drivers, enforcement. All of those matters could be examined to try to improve road safety and ultimately reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

There should also be increased North/South ministerial co-operation to look at the following: a single road

safety authority; a harmonisation of speed limits and road signs; an all-Ireland licensing system; a common penalty points system; the fitting of safety-compliant speed inhibitors on all new cars; increased provision of night-time public transportation; full-time posts for road safety and road education officers throughout the island. Some measures can be simple such as a feasibility study to look at the practice in other European countries of making it compulsory to drive with headlights on all day in order to increase vehicle visibility. It should be compulsory for driving lessons to be carried out in various weather and traffic conditions, in busy traffic on motorways and in urban and rural areas.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the importance of the issue and the number of deaths that the Member outlined, it would be rather unfortunate if the House were to divide. As someone who represents a constituency close to Donegal, which has the highest figures for road fatalities, I ask the Member to consider not allowing this matter to be put to a vote and so achieving consensus in the Chamber. The public would then understand that the Assembly wants an end to deaths on the road and the continuation of discussion on the themes that the Member mentioned at the road safety conference.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for the intervention.

We have been elected by our communities; therefore we must act. We must educate, legislate and eradicate. Recently I saw an analogy that stated that if we take a very conservative view that 10 people are affected emotionally and mentally by a death in a road accident, already in the North this year, 890 people are grieving and suffering a great sense of loss. Throughout the island that number rises to 3,690. If the total for last year is added, that makes over 8,500 people affected, not to mention the concern and suffering of others in those communities. It must be remembered that 10 is a conservative figure. If the number of people who have been affected over the last 10 years is taken into account, it is frightening.

Any all-Ireland road safety strategy will have to look at providing proper support services to anyone affected by the death of a loved one in a road accident. Those people are usually forgotten about because the trauma is not recognised to the same extent that it is in the case of other tragic deaths.

I call on all Members who are available and who wish to do so to attend an interdenominational remembrance service in Newry Cathedral on Sunday 18 November 2007 at 3.00 pm to show the Assembly's support for those who have been affected by death or injury due to road traffic accidents. I am sure that everyone here has cause to know someone or has visited the family of someone who has been injured or killed on the roads.

I hope that Members will agree that the carnage on our roads throughout this island is something that knows no boundaries and that a common-sense attitude is required. I trust that they will show common sense today and support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

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

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

"notes the existing level of cooperation between the road safety authorities in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic of Ireland; further notes that a review of Northern Ireland's road safety strategy is currently under way which can draw on experience from other countries; and calls for further measures to be taken to ensure that the current progress on improving road safety is sustained and increased."

I agree with the last comments of the Member when he said that a common-sense approach must be taken. That is why the DUP has tabled this amendment.

A road death is a tragedy, wherever it occurs. It is a sad indictment that throughout the many years of the Troubles, with the exception of one year in the 1970s, the number of road fatalities was always greater than the number of people who died through terrorist action.

That shows the scale of the problem that must be tackled. Therefore, it is timely for the House to be debating a motion on road deaths.

Unfortunately, however, the scope of the motion is limited and is focused in the wrong direction, and I will explain later the reason that that is the case. First, it is important that we recognise, as our amendment does, that a great deal of good work is being carried out to combat road deaths. Indeed, I am glad to say that some progress has been made on that front. The Minister of the Environment is pushing a review of the road safety strategy, and we believe that that will be of benefit. Year on year we have seen how hard people in various Departments and bodies have worked to ensure that road deaths are reduced.

The statistics for 2006 show that approximately 1,300 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads. That is a reduction of around 24% on the 1996-2000 average. In 2006, a total of 126 people were killed on the roads, which was the lowest figure for 60 years. By 12 November 2006, 107 people had been killed on our roads, and, until that date this year, fewer than 100 people have been killed on our roads. I acknowledge that 126 road deaths are 126 too many; however, we must recognise the hard work that many people in various Departments have done to reduce that figure. We must also recognise that a strategy exists that is starting to pay dividends, and the year-on-year reduction in fatalities illustrates that.

The motion would have more merit if a lack of co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland existed. However, a great deal of co-operative work is being carried out on the ground.

The motion calls for “an all-Ireland summit”, but we need to move away from Reagan/Gorbachev-style summits and develop something that actually delivers for people. Department of the Environment officials and representatives from the Road Safety Authority recently jointly chaired an all-Ireland conference on road safety. Therefore, in that sense, an all-Ireland conference has taken place. Several initiatives have also been implemented; for example, there have been publicity and advertising campaigns on the matter, and the British Government and that of the Republic of Ireland have mutually agreed to recognise UK and Irish driving disqualifications and initiatives such as penalty-points systems. Indeed, the regulations that will give effect to that arrangement have also been agreed by both Governments. I understand that the Minister of the Environment will introduce those regulations.

Additionally, a scoping exercise has taken place on lesser infringements of road-traffic laws, the results of which will be brought to the House. A cross-border co-operation team has existed for the past 15 years. That is a multi-agency steering committee that is involved in increasing road safety in the border counties. Therefore, a range of initiatives has been implemented, and work on them is ongoing.

It is not true to say that there is a lack of co-operation on road safety. It is perhaps unfortunate that the call in the motion to integrate the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland and the Road Safety Authority shows a lack of understanding of those two bodies. One is a small voluntary group that was established and is sponsored by the Department of the Environment, and the other is a large state authority. Merging the two is the equivalent of the developer of a set of apartments merging their project with the Housing Executive: it is not comparing like with like. In applying a common-sense solution to the problem, we should consider issues that work on the ground.

I acknowledge the Alliance Party's amendment, but although we strongly support finding the maximum level of productive co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, we must look beyond these shores. The Public Accounts Committee has examined road safety closely, and its 'Report on Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy' was published last week. That report highlighted that it has become abundantly clear that international comparisons and those with other parts of the British Isles show that both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland lag behind.

We are not having the same level of success with regard to road safety. Instead of trying to co-operate across the island, we must approach the issue from a broader perspective and with a wider scope.

Mr P Ramsey: I ask the Member a question similar to that which I asked earlier: does he not accept that it

would be better for the House to reach a consensus today, rather than to divide on an issue that is so important to so many people across Northern Ireland and the border counties? That would enable the Assembly working group on road safety to note all the issues that are raised in the motion and the amendments. Would the Assembly working group not be able to examine the issue to a greater degree?

Mr Weir: The DUP is keen to see consensus. My colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, who is a member of the road-safety group, will sum up the debate on the DUP's amendment and will make my party's position clear.

We wish to see practical co-operation, which is why our amendment tried to encompass every angle. It is right to acknowledge North/South co-operation, not only in the work that has been done, but in looking further afield. The House should be able to unite around our amendment. I understand the Member's concerns and, if it were possible to avoid dividing the House, I would like to see such consensus, because this issue is very important.

A range of issues must be examined, some of which were highlighted by the Public Accounts Committee report. For example, driving standards must be reviewed to ensure that they are pitched at the appropriate level. We must also look at why, although there has been a massive reduction in the number of road deaths involving motor cars, the statistics on accidents involving motorcycles are much worse than those in other parts of the British Isles.

We must examine quality-control issues and the roll-out of the Roadwise programme, and we must consider the matter of graduated licensing, which was identified in the Public Accounts Committee's report, to ensure the maximum level of protection.

In particular, we must examine the levels of compulsory basic training for motorcyclists. They have not always been afforded the same level of regulation as drivers, and that is one of the factors that have led to many deaths.

We must also consider ways to achieve increased detection rates and enforcement. I am aware that, ahead of the debate and the road-safety review, the Department has introduced a range of additional offences, which will have the immediate effect of ensuring increased road safety. However, we must look, for example, at the safety-camera programme that has been rolling out since 2003. Some of us might be critical of the safety-camera programme and wonder whether it was designed to boost finances rather than to achieve road safety. However, if used effectively, cameras can produce a mechanism to ensure the proper screening of speed, which is one of the major killers on our roads.

Above all, we must consider education and ensure that the driving culture changes in Northern Ireland.

People might say that that is an impossible task, but we have only to look at how attitudes have changed since 30 or 40 years ago, when people had a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to wearing seat belts. It was common — particularly for children in the back seats — not to wear a seat belt. Now, that would be regarded as utterly irresponsible.

Unfortunately, people are still dying as a result of drink-driving. However, there have been changes in social attitudes towards drink-driving over the last 30 years. Perhaps 30 years ago, some people might have thought that it was OK to drive home after having a few drinks, but that attitude has greatly changed.

By focusing on education and a wider remit, we can start to tackle the problem of road deaths effectively. Co-operation is important, but we must go beyond the North/South outlook and draw lessons from around the world.

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes the cooperation between the Department of Transport in the Republic of Ireland and the Department of the Environment, as well as the rapid progress made by the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland in the past year; and calls for increased cooperation between it and the Road Safety Council in Northern Ireland to promote best practice in road safety education and enforcement across the island, including bilateral conferences not less than once a year.”

On behalf of my group, I welcome the fact that this issue is being debated, and I thank Cathal Boylan for proposing the motion.

12.45 pm

I also pass on apologies on behalf of Naomi Long, who is secretary of the all-party group on road safety. She is unwell and is therefore unable to take part in the debate.

I make it clear that our amendment is designed to make more concrete the actions of the House in tackling the levels of fatalities and casualties on our roads. It has been pointed out that although those levels are reducing, they are still far too high.

Mr Weir pointed out that fatalities have reduced. The baseline fatality figures for each million people in 2005 were: 56 in the United Kingdom and 80 in Northern Ireland, which is almost 50% higher than the UK figure. The average for the 15 EU member states was even higher at 86, and the Republic was higher still at 97. Mr Weir has beaten me to the observation that those figures may lead people to look for best practice beyond these shores. It is clear that lessons are to be learnt from elsewhere, particularly from across the water. I accept that that is a fair point.

However, we must also be realistic about another point that Mr Weir highlighted: the culture of people's behaviour in cars. There is a significant and serious problem in driving attitudes in Ireland as a whole, but

specifically along the border. Pat Ramsey pointed out the kinds of events that occur virtually every weekend on the Derry and Donegal border and in other parts of that area.

Some 40% of in-vehicle victims of fatal accidents are males who are under the age of 24. That is a huge percentage, considering the overall proportion of drivers that that age group comprises. We all know that the age of drivers is a significant factor in events that occur every weekend.

It is important to be realistic. That is why we must consider introducing a significant and serious cross-border strategy to deal with the problem. Although it is true that we can learn from other places, simply stating that fact does not realistically assess the cultural, educational and, in some cases, road-maintenance problems that both jurisdictions on this island face.

In an attempt to recognise the need for useful co-operation, by recommending more regular cross-border co-operation, our amendment addresses how that should be done. It also clearly states that it is time for action, not words. That action must begin in this Assembly through ministerial deeds and through legislation.

We have already heard about the Road Safety Council's recent annual general meeting, which was held in my constituency. A number of experts in the field of road safety spoke, including the new chief executive officer of the Road Safety Authority of the Republic, who has worked with Kent County Council. In effect, that meeting was the cross-border summit that the motion calls for. The meeting represented North and South speaking together about matters of mutual interest, and it clearly demonstrated that the cross-border co-operation that exists between the relevant authorities is alive and well.

However, what role does this Assembly have? Does it have a responsibility to pass legislation and to take action that is based on all the evidence that we have gained from such co-operation? It is clear that there are limitations to what has been done so far. Mr Brett, the chief executive officer of the Road Safety Authority in the Republic, highlighted issues such as driver-licensing reform, improved road-worthiness testing, and increasing the number of garda. All those issues may or may not have relevance north of the border. He also stated that a Cabinet subcommittee on road safety, in which three Ministers are involved, has been established in the Oireachtas. Surely we can draw a direct and important lesson from that.

The Government in the Republic have recently made great strides in addressing their huge road-safety problem. The Road Safety Authority is now a transformed organisation. In many senses, it is playing catch up. However, the fact that there is a drive to

address the issue, with Government Ministers being involved at a key level, shows that they are treating the issue seriously. That same seriousness is not yet apparent in the workings of this Assembly.

There should be co-operation on issues such as testing for drug-driving, reducing the drink-driving limit and enforcing speed limits, especially in border areas. It is a matter of deep regret that a great deal of time has been spent recently on harmonising driving penalties — penalty points in particular — across the EU, when much greater progress could and should have been made under direct rule to harmonise the only cross-border issue that has direct relevance to the vast majority of drivers in Northern Ireland: what happens across the Irish border, rather than what happens across the border between Bulgaria and Romania.

This is a matter that needs to be addressed. If full harmonisation of the legislation cannot be achieved, we should strive for maximum harmonisation on this island.

Northern Ireland should recognise areas in which the Republic is well ahead. The Road Safety Authority is already considering development of separate strategies — for example, for motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians — because there are differences in the nature of their involvement in accidents. The authority recently updated 'Rules of the Road' — the Republic's equivalent of 'The Official Highway Code' — and delivered a copy to every house in the Republic. Most Members will have read 'The Highway Code' in the week or two before they sat their driving tests. I suspect that most of us, except those who have had the privilege of sitting beside their children as they learnt to drive, have not looked at 'The Highway Code' since that day. Reading that is, perhaps, something that we should institute as an example, to ensure that 'The Highway Code' is followed. That would help to educate our people in that respect.

In the Republic, the key achievement of the Road Safety Authority has been the establishment of a Cabinet subcommittee on road safety. Three Government Ministers attend it, providing direct answers to questions and clear lines of accountability. The formation of an all-party Assembly group is a welcome step forward, but it is a long way short of the establishment of a Cabinet subcommittee with direct responsibility. We need to ensure that we get those sorts of ideas and promote co-operation to the highest extent.

We have to consider the different aspects of road safety promotion: education, engineering and enforcement. In the context of the Assembly, there would be a role, not just for the Minister of the Environment, who is present, but also for the Minister of Education, the Minister for Regional Development and, as we await the possible devolution of justice, perhaps junior Ministers in OFMDFM as well. Can we have a commitment from

the Executive as a whole, rather than just from the Environment Minister, that those Ministers will attend meetings of the all-party group, take road safety seriously in the Assembly and answer questions from the all-party group to ensure that there is action? The most effective form of cross-border co-operation is noting things that our neighbours are doing right and effectively and implementing them in Northern Ireland without delay. Most of all, Members should consider what they can do in the Assembly, rather than demand that others take action.

Mr Weir has already highlighted the difference between the two bodies, North and South. In Northern Ireland, the Road Safety Council and the all-party group in the Assembly are voluntary groups, whereas, in the Republic, the Road Safety Authority is a statutory body with full powers. It is not realistic to talk about integration; however, we should strive to ensure the fullest possible co-operation.

The Alliance Party's difficulty with the DUP amendment is that it does not recognise that a key factor is the culture of driving, North and South, on this island. Nothing in my party's amendment obviates the learning of lessons — whether from GB, the Netherlands, Canada or wherever. We have to face the clear cultural issue of the way that people drive on this island. That is why the Alliance Party's amendment serves to strengthen the motion, to regularise co-operation — rather than holding a one-off summit — and to ensure that lines of co-operation between the authorities, North and South, are effective. There is no point in summits, integration or co-operation if Members, and particularly those with ministerial responsibility, are not prepared to act on the outcomes.

I had left myself time to respond to Mr Ramsey's intervention: however, he has not chosen to make it to me.

We should be seeking the maximum possible level of co-operation and agreement on this vital issue. I believe that the amendment which stands in my name would be the best way of bringing the House together. However, I will listen with interest to what other Members say.

Mr Armstrong: No sensible person would oppose any practical measure to reduce the horrific toll of death and injury on our roads. In 2006, 126 people lost their lives on the roads. That statistic is appalling, yet it represents an improvement — if it can be called that — on each of the previous eight years. The equivalent figure for the Republic was 368.

Those are not mere numbers: each one represents a human being, a loved one who can never be replaced, and a family circle that will be diminished for ever.

The difficulty with the motion is that it appears to indicate that a perceived lack of North/South co-operation on road safety is part of the problem. As a

result, I am happy to support the amendment. Cross-border co-operation on matters of shared concern in order to achieve mutual benefit should be supported. There is no question that the loss of life caused by the carnage on roads in Northern Ireland and in the South of Ireland is a major problem facing the authorities and wider society in both jurisdictions.

Mr Weir: The Member said that he had problems with the motion but supported the amendment. As there are two amendments, will he clarify which one he supports?

Mr Armstrong: If the Member listens, he will have no problem figuring out which amendment I support.

The motion appears to ignore the significant amount of cross-border road safety co-operation that has already taken place. By April 2007, there had been 12 cross-border road safety campaigns commissioned jointly by the Road Safety Authority and the Department of the Environment. Furthermore, in July 2007, it was agreed at the British-Irish Council meeting that from 2008, drivers who were disqualified from driving in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom would be banned from driving in the Republic. That decision followed the emergence of the fact that one sixth of drivers caught speeding in the Republic last year escaped penalty points because they were registered in Northern Ireland.

Existing cross-border initiatives include an anti-drink driving campaign, which was launched in November 2005. In April 2007, the Road Safety Authority launched 'Mess', a sixty-second, hard-hitting, anti-speed television advertisement.

Members may be interested to learn that in 2006, a partnership arrangement called Co-operation and Working Together, which facilitates collaborative working between health and social care organisations and staff on a cross-border basis, published findings from the Steering to Safety project. That study researched road traffic collisions in the border region of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and produced interesting results. The study demonstrated that there were marked differences between the numbers and types of accidents in counties North and South of the border, and fatal collisions in particular.

The fact is that there are two separate jurisdictions on this island, with consequential differences between legal systems and penalties. In addition, the functions and remits of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority are markedly different. Therefore, a merger is more easily said than done.

Rather than pursue an exclusively all-island agenda, as suggested in the motion, it would be preferable to remain within the United Kingdom's road safety strategy, seek to work closely with our Southern counterparts, and apply best practice and new ideas from wherever they are found.

Most importantly, we must constantly seek measures that will help to reduce the toll of tragedy on our roads and try our best to limit the number of families who suffer the heartbreak of losing loved ones in such a way.

Mr Gallagher: I commend Cathal Boylan and Raymond McCartney for tabling the motion, which highlights an important issue. The contributions from those who support the amendments, including UUP Member Billy Armstrong, make it clear that we all share key concerns. We are at one as regards collisions on our roads across this island. It is unacceptable that hundreds of people still die every year. Thousands of families and loved ones are left damaged, broken and traumatised.

I am sure that one would be hard pressed to find a community anywhere in the country that has not, at one time or another, been traumatised and numbed by the death of a local person in a road tragedy.

1.00 pm

Members have heard comments from my party colleague Pat Ramsey, who is totally committed to the improvement of road safety. If there is a failure to reach a compromise, the SDLP will support the motion, because my party is particularly supportive of the notion of an all-Ireland summit that would focus attention on the problem and move it much higher up the agenda. However, an-Ireland summit should not, in any way, be qualified by the integration of one body or another. The summit must happen first; then, whatever the summit decides must be developed.

I want to acknowledge the high level of co-operation and good work that takes place both North and South on the part of all those who have responsibility for road safety, who strive to reduce the statistics for road death and injury and to make the roads safer for everyone. The vast majority of people support co-operation among the PSNI and the gardaí, the two relevant Government Departments and the road safety authorities, which work closely to combat the major problems of people who speed or drive while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Recently, the North/South Ministerial Council carried out work to develop mutual enforcement of driving bans, which will come into force soon. It is hoped that, before long, penalty points will also be mutually recognised in the law of both jurisdictions.

An all-Ireland summit would provide the opportunity to highlight some of the serious problems that drivers encounter regularly. Speed is one of the main causes of accidents. It is wrong to assume that all drivers on the island would easily be able to synchronise the speedometers on their cars with the speed limits that they are warned about when they cross the border. Some drivers do not understand metric conversions. Much more work must be done to make information available that is clearly displayed for drivers when they cross the

border — drivers who not only come from here or from the South, but who, these days, could be workers from Poland, Portugal, Latvia, and so on, or some of the thousands of others who visit every year from all around the globe. Their safety must also be considered.

Different rules that exist North and South — for example, about the use of hard shoulders — pose problems for road safety that must be dealt with. When one drives in the Republic of Ireland, the road verge is tarmacked and smooth. A driver can pull in and allow another driver who is behind him or her to pass out safely. Once drivers cross the border, however, that is not the case. The hard shoulder usually has a poor surface and is, often, a gully or a drain. There are no signs or warnings about the risks to safety. That is a key issue; another is that of provision for learner drivers, which has been mentioned. Driving tests, North and South of the border, are outdated. They must be revised, renewed and made fit for purpose. It is time that the Assembly got down to solving those problems.

Mr I McCrea: I want to make it abundantly clear to Sinn Féin, and any other party, that their desire for an all-Ireland agenda is only a dream, and will remain so. Any misconceptions that they might hold will never become reality so long as the DUP is in the Assembly.

The DUP welcomes the debate. I welcome my colleague, the Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, who will respond on the serious matter of road deaths, which affects people throughout Northern Ireland.

Any life that is lost on our roads is a tragedy. There are so many road deaths, and each is a great loss to the family involved.

It is a disgrace that, once again, Sinn Féin is playing politics — through an all-Ireland agenda — with road safety. If that party was seriously interested in tackling road safety, it would work with the Department of the Environment to strengthen its role, rather than trying to weaken it, which is what it is trying to.

Road safety must be high on our agenda, and I welcome the Minister's announcement, early in the Assembly's current mandate, that it is an issue that is high on her agenda too. Her recent statements have proven that to be the case. I remind Members that a number of cross-border works and joint campaigns are already taking place. I ask the Minister, when she is responding, to confirm the detail of those and to say whether she feels that they have been worthwhile. There is a vast difference between cross-border co-operation and an all-Ireland road safety body. The latter would be of no benefit to Northern Ireland. It would involve two separate jurisdictions, two separate legal systems, and different laws and restrictions. Those differences alone would result in there being too many hurdles to cross in trying to find and bring to justice someone who

was at fault or had caused an accident on the roads, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Boylan said that Members are elected to legislate. That is what we are here to do. We are here to legislate and to make decisions for the people of Northern Ireland, in co-operation. I do not think that anyone objects to learning from other countries about the benefits of measures that they might have taken with regard to road safety. We are here to make decisions, not to reduce our powers and pass decision-making over to another jurisdiction. We are here to strengthen those powers and to take any action necessary to reduce road deaths in Northern Ireland.

I said that any accident on our roads is a tragedy. I do not believe that going down the all-Ireland route is of benefit to Northern Ireland. We can learn from the Republic of Ireland without the need to pass any of our decision-making powers to it, or vice-versa. Therefore, I support the amendment in my name and those of Mr Donaldson and Mr Weir.

Mr T Clarke: I welcome the debate and support the DUP amendment. Without making the issue a parochial one, I would like to mention one of the most recent deaths in my constituency and extend my condolences to the Devlin family on the loss of their 17-year-old son.

David Ford suggested how wonderfully well the Republic of Ireland is doing on the matter of road safety. I did a few sums while others were speaking. I notice, from the figures, that there is only a 9% decrease in road deaths — just the same as in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is not faring any better than we are in Northern Ireland.

One of the problems that we have in Northern Ireland — and with which most Members are familiar — is that of the 30 mph speed limit in built-up areas. I have been contacted at my constituency office about that matter, and its implications for safety, on numerous occasions. However, when we ask the Department to undertake surveys, it cites statistics based on averages. Unfortunately, on some estates, there are speeds of up to 46 mph. That is something that I urge the Minister to consider.

Dr McCrea and I met the Minister for Regional Development to discuss the new A6 road. We were sorely disappointed when we read the Department's response on the safety of the road, which will stretch from Randalstown to Toome and will run alongside Lough Neagh. Some 18,500 vehicles will travel on the road daily, and the Department said that there would be only momentary vision problems.

I am calling into question what the Department for Regional Development is doing. Today's motion is about tackling road deaths, and here we have a situation in which 18,500 vehicles will be travelling on a proposed new road every day, and although the Department

recognises that there is a problem, that problem has just been passed over. That point was a concern for Dr McCrea and me at that meeting.

Most of my points have already been covered by other Members, so there is no point in my repeating them. I support the amendment.

(The Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair)

Mr McCartney: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion.

Seo ár seans leis an rogha ceart agus an rud ceart a dhéanamh. The motion deals with a matter that affects us all. Hardly a day passes without road safety featuring in the media; and scarcely a week goes by without the call for more to be done to raise public awareness on road use, speed and other aspects of road safety.

One could roll out statistics that are all too familiar. However, I want to avoid that and instead zero in on the core issues. Great strides have been made in raising public awareness about road safety, and, as a result, the number of deaths on our roads has been reduced. However, we must accept that much more can and needs to be done.

The purpose of the motion is to help to confront the complacent attitude that road deaths are an unavoidable consequence of road use — they are not. Road deaths can be avoided, and it is worth noting that the World Health Organization has enshrined the concept that road injuries and deaths are not the inevitable consequences of increased road use. When I use the word “avoided”, I mean that very practical and straightforward measures can often be put in place to reduce the number of collisions and, therefore, the numbers of injuries and deaths.

Today, no one has spoken against the need for a proper and co-ordinated strategy to tackle the problem. The Minister of the Environment and her Department are currently conducting a major review of road safety, and I welcome her presence here today. Her initiative came in the immediate aftermath of a fatal road collision, and perhaps the findings of her work will provide some indication about a proposed structure that will deal with road safety across the island. No one in the Chamber today can, or will, disagree that it is a fact of life that people from Derry have died in road accidents in Donegal and vice versa. Such experiences are common in all our counties, North and South, and they highlight the need for co-operation among the agencies involved and the need to implement measures to combat that phenomenon.

I acknowledge that co-operation already exists and has had beneficial and proven results. However, now that the Assembly has been re-established, perhaps this is an appropriate time to adopt an all-Ireland approach and to take co-operation to an even higher and more qualitative level. I contend that many recommendations

in the Public Accounts Committee’s report on road safety point to the need for such an initiative. Indeed, I welcome Peter Weir’s observation that the Minister has already chaired an all-Ireland meeting. In many ways, such an approach is neither a principle nor a dream but a reality.

Another means of achieving greater co-operation would be through the integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority, as the motion proposes. Such a body could be tasked with carrying out a safety audit of road networks on an island-wide basis, with particular emphasis on what are often called the border counties. There should be a focus on that central issue.

There was an instinctive reaction to any suggestion of an all-Ireland approach — that is the predictable reaction to such an approach in almost anything. However, I urge everyone to move beyond instinct and reflect on this question: if the agencies tasked with road safety on the island work together in a co-ordinated and collective way, would that improve their ability to deliver their objectives? In posing the question, I do not wish to detract from, or question, the great work that has been carried out to date by any agency working in this field, North or South. Such an approach would not detract from their ability to deliver in the future; indeed, it is my contention that it would assist delivery.

1.15 pm

Great work is already being done in Ireland, North and South, to highlight the correlations among speed, alcohol, poor driving skills and the incidence of accidents. International experience and programmes have been called on in the past and, no doubt, will be employed in the future, simply because they are beneficial in reducing death and injury. That should be the only criterion on which such decisions are made.

Having a framework within which to co-ordinate the work of both road-safety agencies, which will impact on each others’ work and improve it, can only be viewed as a positive step. Do not allow the usual instincts to stand in the way of logic or good sense. The integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority would be a logical step in improving public awareness of road safety matters and in reducing death and injuries on the roads of Ireland. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I support the DUP amendment. There can be no doubt that road safety must be a priority in Northern Ireland. That also appears to be the case for our neighbours in the South. Road safety is unquestionably one area on which the two Governments can work in tandem, targeting scarce financial resources for the Assembly and making a difference by reducing deaths and injuries.

The two jurisdictions have shared road-safety campaigns for several years. Some of the hardest-hitting TV advertisements ever seen on Northern Ireland screens came about as a result of those campaigns. The Minister of the Environment has already assured me in an answer to a written question that another tough Christmas and New Year message is planned to run between 20 November 2007 and 6 January 2008. That is a joint campaign, which I welcome.

Taking everything into consideration, the motion calls for something that is already a reality; therefore, it makes no sense. The motion calls for something that would put Northern Ireland into reverse gear. The DUP amendment calls for the continuation and strengthening of current measures. Northern Ireland must have an increased, sustained and adaptable attitude to road safety. A review aimed at achieving those objectives is already under way, which will lead to the adaptable strategy that I envision.

The one area in which there is, perhaps, a need for greater concentration is that of other EU nationals. Particularly, eastern European nationals appear to be at greater risk. The Minister of the Environment has stated on several occasions that literature on driving and the law is available in a number of languages. However, special attention must be paid to this issue. Doubtless, that will be an integral part of the road-safety strategy that will result from the current review.

We all take our road-safety responsibilities most seriously. Therefore, I ask all Members to support the DUP amendment, which supports the Minister and provides for a proactive vision for the future.

Mr P J Bradley: Time is short, so I shall be brief.

In July 2006, I met Ursula Quinn as she began a walk from Lurgan to Ballybrittas, County Laois — the scene of the death of her only daughter, who was killed in a road accident on the way to her first day at university in Cork. I walked some of the way with Ursula, and invited her and the group that she had set up, 'Driving Kills' — later renamed 'Hidden Victims' — to the Assembly. In October 2006, Ursula came to Stormont and gave an excellent presentation about the work of the group and what it was trying to achieve. At the end of the debate, Jeffrey Donaldson proposed the establishment of an all-party group or an Ad Hoc Committee to identify areas where we could make progress. Everyone was happy with that and, at the next meeting, Jeffrey was elected chairperson of the new working group, and Mr Boylan and I took the deputy chairperson positions. I must also pay tribute to Naomi Long, who is not present today, who became the group's secretary.

The working group has been very active, and I am proud to be a member of it. In its short lifetime, it has met several agencies, such as the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service and driving

instructors, among others. It is for that reason that I attempted to intervene at the beginning of the debate. I do not want the House to divide, because this issue is too important to become a political football. Most people would agree with that.

However, I am concerned, because I do not know whether the motion is intended to pre-empt the all-party group's work or whether there was a different agenda behind the motion. I would be happy if the matter were left for the working group to deal with in the future. The working group has no powers and could be seen as toothless, but, with the co-operation of the Minister of the Environment and the Executive, its members can progress the issue in the interests of the people whom they represent. The aim is to reduce road deaths and to show some understanding to people who have suffered in the past. I appeal to the Members who have proposed the motion — and to those who have tabled the two amendments — to consider not dividing the House and instead reaching some form of agreement.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I also welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. The debate gives me the chance to restate my personal commitment to road safety and to doing everything in my power to reduce the number of people who are killed or seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads. I have said before that road safety is a subject that is close to my heart, and since becoming the Minister of the Environment, I have become even more acutely aware of the senseless carnage on our roads. I ask the House to remember that a commitment to reduce deaths by one third by 2011 is reflected in the draft Programme for Government, which was debated in the House on 25 October.

The number of people who have been killed or seriously injured on our roads has fallen substantially over the past 30 years. In the 1970s, twice as many people died or were seriously injured. The 126 road deaths in Northern Ireland in 2006 constituted the lowest total for almost 60 years. The nine child deaths constituted the lowest total on record.

I am sure that the House is also interested in the latest comparisons of the positions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In 2006, the road death rate per 100,000 people in Northern Ireland was 7.2; in the Republic of Ireland the rate was 8.7. My friend Mr Trevor Clarke stated that there was a 9% reduction in road deaths in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In fact, there have been 90 deaths on Northern Ireland roads in 2007, compared with 107 this time last year, which is a reduction of almost 16%. There have been 284 road deaths in the Republic of Ireland, compared with 318 this time last year. That is a reduction of just over 10%.

However, it is easy to get caught up in statistics. I regard every death or serious injury as a tragedy. I have had the privilege of meeting many victims and their families, and I feel my responsibility intensely for trying to prevent others from facing the same pain.

The review of road safety in Northern Ireland, which was announced shortly after I came into office, is ongoing. I will continue to ensure that my Department and its road-safety partners work tirelessly on measures to complement those that are currently saving lives on our roads. The fact that there is a review of the strategy does not mean that my Department will sit back. Members will know that some announcements that were made in the summer are being implemented.

I now move to the thrust of today's motion. I have no plans to establish a single road safety authority for Ireland, and, if I did, the Government of the Republic of Ireland might have something to say about that. The motion proposes to integrate the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland with the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland to try to deal with road safety on an all-Ireland basis. I found the motion somewhat surprising, because the Road Safety Authority and the Road Safety Council are not comparable organisations in their structure, background or roles. The Road Safety Council is a voluntary-sector body and is funded by my Department to support its activities by promoting road-safety messages in the community. It promotes voluntary activity, organises competitions and other events and encourages local participation. Funding for the Road Safety Council is £160,000 a year, and it has one full-time and one part-time employee.

I commend the work of the Road Safety Council. I had the privilege of attending its annual general meeting last month, which was an extremely worthwhile event. I also commend the work of the Assembly's all-party working group on road safety. Despite being a new group, it is doing good work.

In contrast, the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland has an annual budget of about €38 million and employs more than 300 people. It is a statutory body created by the Republic of Ireland's Road Safety Authority Act 2006, which transferred functions to it from the Department of Transport, the National Roads Authority, and the National Safety Council. The Road Safety Authority is responsible for many, but not all, of the road-safety functions that my Department undertakes, such as promotion, research, driver and vehicle testing and standards and licensing.

Putting aside the two organisations in question; even if I wished to do so, the creation of a single authority with responsibility for road safety across two separate EU member states would be incredibly complex, if not impossible. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have distinct legal frameworks, statutes, penalties,

enforcement operations and policies. Mr Boylan called for harmonisation on all of those, but that simply could not be done — it is not an option. I noted my friend Mr Weir's comparison of an all-island summit to the Reagan-Gorbachev summits. I welcome his likening of me to a Hollywood superstar.

Mr Weir: I did not say to which of the two I likened the Minister.

Mrs Foster: I would rather be a Hollywood superstar than a bald Russian.

I take Mr Weir's point about having a summit for the sake of being seen to do so. I strongly feel that road-safety outcomes are what matter, not window dressing. I have often said that I am happy to continue to work according to the established arrangements of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, both of which consider areas of co-operation that affect Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I am happy to meet my counterparts from the Republic of Ireland to discuss issues of mutual interest. I have already met Noel Brett, the chief executive of the Road Safety Authority, to whom Mr Ford referred. Officials are drafting regulations on the mutual recognition of UK and Irish driver disqualifications, with a view to laying them in Westminster and the Assembly in 2008.

I noted Mr Ford's comments on progressing the same practices in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I simply cannot introduce a measure to part of an EU member state.

Mr Ford: I take the Minister's point. I thought that I had referred to the United Kingdom and the Republic, given the particular difficulties between Northern Ireland and the Republic, rather than waiting for the rest of the EU.

Mrs Foster: I am glad to have that clarification. I thought that Mr Ford meant moving towards mutual recognition only in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Progress is being made, and I will meet my counterparts from the Republic of Ireland and GB in early 2008 to discuss proposals on mutual recognition of the lesser road traffic infringements that incur penalty points, etc.

As for the future of road safety in Northern Ireland, I have stated that the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland will be included in my current consultations. My officials are considering holding several safety events next year, and counterparts from the Republic of Ireland will be invited to attend.

Publicity and advertising are, perhaps, the best-known areas of ongoing operational co-operation with the Republic of Ireland. In response to Ian McCrea's request for details, 12 cross-border road-safety campaigns have been commissioned jointly by the Department of the Environment and the Road Safety Authority in the

Republic of Ireland. Mr Ford made a point on the need for cultural change. The advertising campaigns have done more than anything else to tackle that issue. The percentage of people who wear seatbelts, to which Mr Weir referred, is up to 95%. Given the much lower rates of compliance in the 1970s and 1980s, that is a tremendous achievement. Cultural change will not be achieved by institutionalising road safety, but through the continuation of those highly effective road-safety campaigns.

Mr Ford mentioned the subcommittee that was set up in the Republic of Ireland following some difficult days of road deaths. He said that we should have a similar committee to deal with education, engineering and enforcement. We do have a useful body, which is taking forward my road-safety strategy; and the Minister for Regional Development, a high-ranking officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and I sit on that committee. Although Mr Ford will probably say that that is not a formal Executive subcommittee, it is an effective tool.

Road-safety education is a matter for me. Mr Boylan referred to the fact that 17- to 24-year-olds are not being educated about road safety, and I have to ask myself why that group is not being reached. Part of the problem is that many of them are not in formal education, so we cannot target them through that area. Therefore, how will we target that group?

1.30 pm

I have had some good meetings with representatives from sporting organisations about how to address the problem. I met with representatives from the GAA, who said that they will help me to get the message to the 17- to 24-year-olds who use their facilities. Therefore, a lot of work is ongoing to educate young people, but not in the area of formal education.

The Department for Transport in Great Britain is considering improvements to the driving test, and my officials are liaising with their counterparts in London to consider whether those proposals can be brought to Northern Ireland. The driving test must be looked at again. A few weeks ago, I announced changes to the motorcycle driving test, which will be introduced next year. Compulsory basic training for motorcyclists will be introduced, and Members should welcome that.

Therefore, a high level of co-operation on road safety is ongoing between the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland and my Department. Mr Boylan said that that co-operation was cosmetic, but I do not accept that. We are doing a lot of work, and that work will continue. I have not even touched on the co-operation on engineering and enforcement that the Minister for Regional Development is engaged in; and the Police Service of Northern Ireland is doing a lot of work with the police in the South on other issues.

I am content to continue with the successful working relationship that is helping to make a real difference on our roads. I appeal to Members to listen to the voices of Pat Ramsey and P J Bradley and try to achieve consensus on an issue that, thankfully, is not party political and should not be dealt with in such a way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are experiencing considerable interference with the audio system because Members are insisting on having their phones switched on. I ask Members to switch off their mobile phones. Do not put them on silent mode. Switch them off; and the word “off” should be easily recognised. I call Trevor Lunn to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr Lunn: Primarily, it is for Members to deliver an improved environment for road safety in Northern Ireland. To do that, we must work with the legislation in our jurisdiction, and over which we have direct authority. However, it also makes sense to learn good practice from other places, particularly when they are on our doorstep. From that point of view, I commend the proposer and seconder for bringing the motion before the House. The issue is important and topical. I have never listened to a debate before in which there has been so much agreement. In fact, there has been little disagreement in the debate.

As soon the words “all-Ireland problem” are mentioned, people’s hackles rise. However, this problem is common to the whole of Ireland. The same problem exists in Limerick as does in Lisburn — or Canterbury. Mr Weir referred to the Public Accounts Committee’s report on the road-safety strategy. I recommend it to anyone who has not yet read it. It is a good, incisive report that was launched on Friday 9 November 2007.

Much of what he referred to is addressed in that report, particularly the section on motorcycles. I was glad to hear the Minister state that compulsory basic training is finally to be introduced in Northern Ireland for motorcyclists, albeit 17 years after it was introduced in England. There is a culture and attitude of carelessness on the roads in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Ireland is one of the few places where there is still motorcycle road racing, which encourages our 17- to 24-year-olds to ride motorcycles at very high speeds, with inevitable outcomes. Outside Parliament Buildings, on the grounds of the Stormont estate, one can see the evidence of the enjoyable mayhem that will take place on Thursday evening. That too points to the culture of car driving.

We must try to convince our youngsters, North and South, that reckless behaviour on the roads is not acceptable. It is a question of hearts and minds and attitudes.

There is such a degree of unanimity that it would be a pity if the House were to divide, and I add my voice to the others who have indicated that that is not necessary.

We have expressed ourselves; now let us leave it to the Minister to carry on the necessary work.

I noticed that Mr Gallagher of the SDLP said that he would support a summit, but presumably not the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party, which urges annual bilateral conferences with ministerial input. If there is a difference between that and a summit, I would like to know what it is. As soon as the word "summit" is used, some people's hackles rise.

The Minister and others said that the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority are incompatible, because one has a huge budget and the other does not; one is a state-led authority and the other is not. That is no reason why some type of all-Ireland body, with a high level of co-operation, could not be established to deal with road safety. Ian McCrea rather starkly expressed why the DUP is not, for the time being, ready for that.

Mr Weir: Never.

Mr Lunn: Never. *[Laughter.]*

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland represent a special case in Europe when it comes to driving, because we have the worst imaginable driving record, and we have had it for donkey's years. We will continue to have such a record until people's attitudes and hearts and minds are changed. From that point of view, there is much merit in cross-border co-operation and in learning from each other. That makes good sense, and poses no threat, because this issue is about lives, and we should be able to co-operate.

I also hope that Members can co-operate today and not force the matter to a division. However, I am still supporting the Alliance Party amendment. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: There have been several references to Hollywood superstars. I remind Members that Lassie was a Hollywood superstar.

Mr Donaldson: We are all trying to work out the link between Lassie and the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn. I am sure that that will become clear eventually.

The DUP welcomes the opportunity to debate this issue. As chairman of the all-party Assembly group on road safety, I want to see this issue given the priority that it deserves, and I welcome the comments of my colleague the Minister of the Environment. Shortly after coming to office, she initiated a review of the road-safety strategy for Northern Ireland, and that indicates that this issue is a priority at both Executive and departmental level.

Therefore, I say to the Member who moved the motion and to Mr Ford that this issue is being treated with the seriousness that it deserves.

However, we must make sure that we get it right. I add my voice to those of Members from the SDLP and the Alliance Party who said earlier that the motion is

potentially divisive. That is unfortunate. I say to my deputy chairperson Mr Boylan that it would have been better to bring the matter before the all-party group on road safety first. The group could have had a good discussion, might have identified areas of consensus on co-operation between both parts of this island with regard to road safety and, as an all-party group, might have brought proposals to the Assembly.

There is, however, no consensus, because the motion is not acceptable, either to my party or to the Alliance Party. That, too, is unfortunate because — as other Members said — we do not want to turn the issue into a political football. For that reason, the all-party group was the way to achieve consensus.

Although people try to paint them in various colours at certain times, roads in Northern Ireland are neither orange nor green. They are used by everyone, regardless of religious, political, cultural or ethnic persuasion. Members, therefore, must ensure that the issue does not become a political football.

Before the end of the debate, I hope that the motion's proposers consider withdrawing it. If not, our amendment stands, because the DUP believes that it is wrong to talk about harmonisation and integration while the Northern Ireland road-safety strategy is under review. Our priority is to consider what can be done to improve that strategy, and going down a road of harmonisation and integration deflects us from the task at hand. For that reason, I repeat that Sinn Féin should consider withdrawing the motion.

The motion should be discussed in the all-party road-safety group. The DUP supports the existing level of co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and notes that in its amendment. The DUP is happy to draw on the experience of the Road Safety Authority. I met Senator John Ellis, who chairs the equivalent of the Assembly's all-party group on road safety in the Irish Parliament. I am keen to see those two groups working together to explore fully how co-operation can be achieved. Surely that is the right way to advance the issue, rather than with a politically motivated motion that does not help us to arrive at that consensus.

To Mr Boylan and his colleagues, I say that we should sit down and discuss the issue in the all-party group. Let us meet our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland; let us look at areas where co-operation can be enhanced; and let us talk to the Minister, the Department, the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland, and to all interested parties.

Finally, I remind Members that the public launch of the all-party Assembly group by the Minister takes place on 11 December in the Long Gallery. Would it not be good for the group to be launched on the basis of consensus?

The motion detracts from that aim and I hope that it is withdrawn. If not, the DUP amendment stands.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the work that the Minister has done so far on road safety, and the work of the Assembly's road-safety group. As David Ford said, that group is voluntary and has met three times since its inception, but the Assembly must go much further than that. Sinn Féin does not want to see the House divided. The role of the Assembly is to legislate, and that is how affirmative action on this issue will be achieved. In the broad sense, the motion is not political; instead, it is practical and makes sense with regard to improving road safety. The amendment tabled by the Alliance Party reflects the common-sense approach that we seek, and Sinn Féin supports it. That is a compromise, and it demonstrates that the House need not divide on the matter.

1.45 pm

Peter Weir said that Members must recognise the hard work that statutory bodies are doing to reduce the number of road deaths. Appropriate legislation must be implemented to ensure that those bodies do the best job possible. David Ford stressed the need to recognise that all-island co-operation is the way forward in reducing the number of road deaths, particularly in so-called border areas. Billy Armstrong said that the statistics in respect of road deaths are appalling; the Minister said that those figures have improved in recent years, but obviously a lot more can be done. As my colleague Raymond McCartney said, road deaths are not inevitable, and that is the basis on which we should move forward.

Mr Donaldson: The DUP has no difficulty with the spirit of the Alliance Party's amendment, but we are concerned that the Road Safety Council is a non-statutory body, and to ask a non-statutory body to take forward enforcement issues, for instance — which it has no power and authority to do — alongside an authority that is a statutory body, is inappropriate. The DUP is open to exploring with all parties ways to tackle the issue, but our concern is a technical one. That is why it would be more beneficial to find consensus on the issue in the Committee for the Environment and bring forward a proposal to the Assembly for its consideration, rather than put it to a vote today. I ask Mr McKay — and the Alliance Party — to consider that.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will certainly give the Member for South Antrim the opportunity to respond.

Mr Ford: I thank Daithí for giving way so that I can respond to Jeffrey. I am not sure whether that is parliamentary, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you have not

pulled me up on it yet. Does Daithí accept that in referring to co-operation to promote best practice in education and enforcement, the purpose of the Alliance Party's amendment is not to suggest that the Road Safety Council has enforcement powers but that it has a duty to promote those ideas, and that it is proper that that be done by two bodies that have different statutory responsibilities?

Mr McKay: I agree with Mr Ford, and, as I said, Sinn Féin will back the Alliance Party's amendment.

Tommy Gallagher said that he supported an all-Ireland summit and that it was important that such a summit take place to push the issue up the political agenda. The number of people killed on the roads over the past 30 or 40 years is abysmal, and road traffic accidents are the biggest killer in society today. Until that is pushed up the political agenda, it is unlikely to be addressed.

Mr Gallagher also mentioned driving tests. I agree that they need to be revised, in the North and in the South. We have a responsibility to ensure that young people are prepared as well as possible for driving on the roads. Research shows that high levels of accompanied practice before licensing for solo driving, involving a variety of driving circumstances, result in lower levels of fatalities. A minimum of 50 hours' pre-licensing practice is recommended, but in one country where 120 hours was required, the number of crashes in the two years following licensing fell by about 40%. Some young people can barely afford driving lessons, and, therefore, try to pass their tests after taking as few driving lessons as possible. The price and affordability of those lessons and the severe lack of post-licensing education for young drivers — mandatory or otherwise — must be looked at.

One key finding in 'Young Drivers: The Road to Safety' was that road safety measures are seldom popular prior to their implementation, so strong political leadership will be required to address the challenge of young driver risk.

Ian McCrea began his contribution by analysing our dreams; I suggest that he wake up to the fact that his party is already involved in all-Ireland bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council. That might be a nightmare for him: I do not know, but it probably is.

In regard to those all-Ireland bodies, the North/South Ministerial Council, and the fact that the DUP —

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not know whether you will class it as a dream for you or a nightmare for me, or vice versa —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr I McCrea: My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will rephrase that: I do not know whether the Member is in the nightmare or I am in the dream, or vice versa. An all-Ireland agenda is a dream for Sinn Féin, whether it wants to accept that fact. However, as long as my party is involved in the Assembly, that will not be a dream for us.

Mr McKay: The reason for North/South co-operation on this and other matters is quite simple: it is to improve quality of life in the North and the South. In this case, such co-operation is designed to reduce the loss of life on our roads. It is a serious issue, and Sinn Féin's motion is practical rather than political.

Trevor Clarke referred to a recent death in his constituency. I have been to the funerals of four or five people in my own locality who died in road-traffic accidents. Indeed, one such funeral took place in my village in the past two weeks. Road-traffic accidents affect all communities on the island, urban and rural. I do not think that any area has not suffered the tragedy of a road death. Road safety is in crisis, and more can be done to improve it. Elected representatives should not be reluctant to make tough decisions in order to prevent further tragedy.

Human error is usually the cause of road-traffic accidents, but speed determines their outcome and whether someone lives or dies. We should face the fact that speeding is a national habit. The Road Safety Authority's website shows that after the speed of drivers on the Galgorm Road in Ballymena was recorded, 94% of them were over the speed limit. I am not isolating drivers in Ballymena; figures were similarly high for other roads in the North that were surveyed. That should not surprise us.

Raymond McCartney rightly said that a co-ordinated approach is needed, not only between Departments, but on an all-Ireland basis. As I said previously, road deaths are not inevitable, and that is the basis on which we should proceed.

The Minister referred to the welcome commitment in the draft Programme for Government to reduce road deaths by one third by 2011. That is an ambitious target, and, if we are to meet it, we should be open to all suggestions for improving road safety. That may mean introducing radical measures, which we should not be reluctant to do. The Minister also said that the matter is complex and that, perhaps, it is not possible to integrate work on road safety on an all-Ireland basis. It is possible: it is a question of having the will to work on that basis to improve road safety where necessary.

The Minister also said quite rightly that 17- to 24-year-olds are not being reached. I welcome the educational work —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. You were very generous in allowing interventions.

Before I put the question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I shall proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the existing level of co-operation between the road safety authorities in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic of Ireland; further notes that a review of Northern Ireland's road safety strategy is currently under way, which can draw on experience from other countries; and calls for further measures to be taken to ensure that the current progress on improving road safety is sustained and increased.

Co-Ownership And Shared Equity

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

Mr Gardiner: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers.

I welcome the Minister for Social Development to the House to respond to the debate.

The issue of affordable housing has occupied a good deal of the Assembly's time, just as it occupies a good many column inches in newspapers and is a frequent news item on broadcast media. It is a matter of deep and immediate concern to every family in Northern Ireland, and it is a fitting subject to occupy the Assembly's time. In a sense, all housing problems are related; the general level of house prices has an impact on the number of homes available for purchase, which, in turn, has an impact on the affordable housing stock.

Two problems lie at the heart of the affordable housing issue: one is the price of the house in question; and the second is the prospective purchaser's ability to pay for it. Many solutions have been suggested to adjust the price of houses downward. I do not intend to dwell on those issues today, other than to say that some of the solutions that have been proposed are self-defeating. It is always dangerous to interfere with the operation of a free market, as it often has unintended consequences.

The price of property in the apartment and town-house market, which is the type of housing that first-time buyers find manageable, has been driven up relentlessly by the operation of buy-to-let mortgages. Such mortgages have created a level of demand that has led to inevitable rises in house prices. We must end buy-to-let mortgages that allow speculators to speculate on the cheap. People who invest in the buy-to-let market should borrow money at normal commercial bank rates. That would leave the apartment and town-house market open to first-time buyers without that disproportionate level of competition. We should also regard apartments as suitable first-time homes, much as is the case on the Continent. Every day, Northern Ireland becomes more and more like the rest of Europe.

It is unreasonable that self-interested pressure groups prevent first-time buyers from getting homes by restricting infill development in urban areas. Although some areas have settled characters that are worth preserving, many others are not worth preserving. Some of our housing

stock is in a sorry state, and it must be upgraded with modern, high-standard buildings.

New developments will revitalise our towns and town centres with an influx of young first-time buyers into areas that are ageing and sometimes dying. I am not against some restrictions on infill development, but I totally oppose blanket bans on such development. The Assembly must protect the interests of first-time buyers against self-interested groups that want to stop all building. If we cannot build in the country or the town, where is left?

I want to turn to the core issue behind the motion. The second main problem behind the affordable housing issue is how the prospective purchaser will pay for the house he or she hopes to buy.

Shared ownership is the most obvious solution to that problem; however, it is one that has not been adequately or properly explored in Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

I want to see an increase in the range and diversity of options available. The issue of what is on offer must be tackled. Affordability, in the last resort, is determined by the mortgages available, and the best way to expand those is by widening the range of shared equity options. At present in Northern Ireland a shared equity home-owner will own between 40% and 75% of his or her home and pay rent for the remainder. In Great Britain, it ranges from 25% to 75%. That additional range at the lower end of the scale, from 40% down to 25%, makes an enormous difference to the number of people who qualify for the scheme and can use shared equity as a step on the ladder to home ownership. Those people could own 25% of the equity in their homes and pay rent on the rest. That could become a major weapon in our armoury in tackling the affordable housing crisis.

The average house in Northern Ireland costs between £180,000 in Londonderry and Strabane and £260,000 in Lisburn. In my Upper Bann constituency, the average price is £222,000. Across Northern Ireland, the average price for a terraced house is £177,000 and for an apartment, £183,000. Taking these as the entry points for first-time buyers, with an average price of £180,000, the difference between a 40% and 25% level of equity is £27,000 — the difference between a first-time buyer's having to find £72,000 or £45,000. That great difference of 40% in the base amount would be of enormous assistance to those who aspire to home ownership. The affordable housing landscape would be transformed in one easy and achievable move.

There are good reasons why this is the right time to take action on shared equity. Shared ownership, together with an end to buy-to-let mortgages, is the mechanism to make that happen.

Miss McIlveen: Sustained rises in housing prices over several years have favoured those with multiple properties, and have had the Chancellor of the Exchequer rubbing his hands in glee at the prospect of income from inheritance tax and capital gains tax. It comes as a welcome relief to those who are not on the property ladder that growth has halted, and that there is some evidence that prices are decreasing.

The fact remains, however, that first-time buyers are still at a significant disadvantage. The UK average house price is almost £200,000, and given that the average Northern Ireland wage is £402 a week, or £20,904 a year, it is clear that anyone applying for a mortgage without the benefit of the equity from a previous purchase faces significant difficulties.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) states that mortgage lenders traditionally lend up to 3.5 times an applicant's pre-tax salary; therefore, in an ideal world, the maximum loan to someone on an average salary should be £73,164. However, sometimes those eligible to self-certify their incomes overstate them, leaving themselves with considerable difficulty in repaying the loans and open to prosecution for mortgage fraud.

Mortgage lenders are also sometimes prepared to lend more than three-and-a-half times the applicant's pre-tax salary. That again leaves the homeowner working just to pay off the loan.

In Northern Ireland we have only one shared-equity scheme, run by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association (NICHA or Co-Ownership Housing), which has assisted in the provision of 20,000 homes in Northern Ireland since its inception 30 years ago. In the rest of the UK there has been a considerable expansion of shared-equity schemes, such as HomeBuy in England and Wales and Homestake in Scotland. One of the arguments against the investment of public money in such schemes has been expressed by housing charity Shelter, which said at the time of the Chancellor's announcement establishing the HomeBuy scheme:

"We are talking about subsidy being directed away from providing housing for the poorest, in favour of enabling people who very often already have adequate housing to profit out of home ownership. We question whether it's a legitimate priority to subsidise people to acquire wealth."

I think, however, that it is a legitimate priority to assist people in this way. By investing in people we are giving them an opportunity to improve themselves, rather than to waste money in the rented sector and receive no tangible benefit after 20 or 30 years of spending.

Entering into a shared-equity scheme such as that run by NICHA means that a mortgage becomes affordable. Equity increases with house-price rises, so that the homeowner can pay a lump sum towards the cost of his or her new home. A further advantage of such a scheme is that the profit made through the increase in

house prices is split between the homeowner and the scheme provider. That means that after resale, the full amount of the money loaned plus a share of the profit made is repaid to the Government. According to NICHA, it has received £84 million in grants and returned £16 million over and above that. That return can go towards housing for the poorest in society, who are not able to purchase a house or even be eligible for a shared-equity scheme.

Clearly, we do not want to encourage people to burden themselves with unmanageable debt, but the repossession rate for homes purchased under the scheme stands at around 0.01%. The scheme provides an extra layer of scrutiny to ensure that prospective homeowners do not get in over their heads. Such schemes need to be expanded in today's market, given the rapid increase in property values. As I said, the average house price is around £200,000, but the property-value limit for NICHA is £225,000. In other council areas in Northern Ireland, it can be as low as £180,000.

Expanding the scheme to cater for at least 10% of the housing market would require considerable investment. However, such an investment would provide substantial benefits to all the partners — homeowners, the banking sector and the public purse. For those reasons, I support the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Téann an rún seo go díreach go croí cheist na tithíochta. In many ways, this motion goes to the heart of the housing debate — namely, what exactly constitutes an affordable housing sector. I was at a conference in England last week, and some of the submissions said that, five years ago, the issue of affordability rarely surfaced in the housing debate. However, they went on to say that, in recent surveys, housing affordability has featured third in order of priority among people's concerns, after the economy and the environment. That gives an idea of where this issue sits in people's minds.

Any debate in this Chamber on housing shows the level of concern that people have about the issue. This motion concerns me in that it is asking us to put all of our eggs into one basket. I know that quite a lot of people have gone down the road of co-ownership and are quite happy with what it delivered to them. However, there are those who say that co-ownership created problems for them. A television news item some months ago raised some of the difficulties that people faced, and I have dealt with people who have had the same difficulties.

Ní hé sin an cheist ar maidin, ach caithfimid í a chur san áireamh. That is not the issue at hand this morning, but it does need to be taken into consideration. It would be wrong to ask this Assembly to pass a motion without knowing all the consequences or having all the facts.

I was reading the website of Co-Ownership Housing last night. That body is obviously pushing out its boat in relation to the overall affordability debate; it says that it is ready and able to scale up rapidly to meet the escalating housing demand — subject to funding — and that it wants to play a key role in article 40 planning agreements.

Were the association to do that, we would be pre-empting a fundamental question that the Semple Review will attempt to answer: how do we develop an affordable sector? A number of recommendations may come from the Semple Review. I have previously argued in the Chamber that, were land made available for housing, an affordable sector could be kick-started. Moreover, we must consider vacant dwellings and options that deal with land prices, as well as the many other suggestions on the development of an affordable sector — not least, article 40 of The Planning Order 1991, which will compel developers to set aside land for affordable and social housing.

Co-ownership, shared equity and shared ownership will also be discussed in the review, but we must be clear that many options are available, not just those. To vote in favour of the motion would be to do an injustice to those who expect us to come up with answers to the many problems that are faced by those constituents who are in need of social and affordable housing. I appeal to the proposers of the motion that, rather than pursue it, they allow discussion and debate to continue in a manner that allows all options to be considered and does not simply seek out one option to solve what is a huge social problem. Let us see whether a cocktail of measures can be developed that deals with the question of affordability.

To that end, I propose that we await the outcome of the Semple Review. I believe that the team's recommendations are expected in the coming weeks. When armed with that information, we will surely be in a better position to look at real solutions to the affordability problem, instead of taking the premature decision of committing the Assembly to a call for 10% of the housing market to be taken up by one association or another.

Let us not set a figure. Sinn Féin is not opposed to co-ownership in itself. However, we should wait for the affordability review's recommendations before we commit ourselves to it.

Mar gheall air sin, beidh Sinn Féin ag staonadh ar an mholadh seo. For that reason, we in Sinn Féin will abstain from the vote, purely because we believe it to be premature to commit ourselves to a particular course of action. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. I need not say much by way of introduction other than to restate that we now find ourselves in the midst of a housing crisis.

Although the problem is complex and multi-dimensional, we all knew that one existed. However, it

was allowed to grow unchecked. Under direct rule, there was little that we could do about the problem, so we now find ourselves in a somewhat desperate situation.

The problem was not of our making, but, thankfully, the solution can be. An increase in co-ownership can be part of that solution. It genuinely saddens me that many thousands of people out there with good jobs, who work very hard to get on in life, and who earn what most people would consider a good wage, simply cannot afford to buy their own home. In the current climate, those on average wages, let alone those on low incomes, have no chance of owning their own home. As I have said, it fills me with regret that so many people in our society cannot achieve their ambition. No matter how hard they work, they cannot afford their own home.

Co-ownership has proved popular because the scheme is credible and has a strong track record. The scheme meets the needs of the wide range of people who face affordability problems. Simply put, co-ownership is a good way in which to get a foot on the property ladder. It is for that reason that I support that part of the motion that calls for an increase in co-ownership, whether that be to 10% of the overall housing market or to another increased figure.

I suggest that most people think of co-ownership as a buy-half/rent-half deal.

In fact, some variation in shared equity — from 40% to 75% — is already available. Although that offers some flexibility, Co-Ownership Housing outlined in its strategy document that it wants an expanded range of co-ownership purchase options that could be individually tailored to buyers' needs. If the organisation believes that that would be a good thing, then I am happy to offer my support.

2.15 pm

The current maximum purchase-price limits, which restrict co-ownership buyers to the lower end of the market — apartments or small houses — are not fair. I support the review of upper limits. However, I offer some words of caution. Although the market has been rising in the past few years, we have witnessed a slowdown recently, which suggests that some houses are overvalued. I do not want people to enter into co-ownership arrangements in the hope of purchasing affordable homes and then to find that the value of their houses drops. Co-ownership must be considered to be an attractive investment, and people must get a good return on their outlay.

I urge Members to keep in mind the many hard-working people who cannot afford to purchase their homes. The Assembly can contribute and make a real difference to the housing crisis, and I hope that we can seize this opportunity to affect those people's lives for the better.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. There is no disputing the fact that there is a crisis in affordable housing in Northern Ireland. According to the Semple Report, property values have increased by 165% in the past five years. House prices here are above the UK average, although wages are significantly below average. There is a huge gap between incomes and house prices. Subsequently, too many people are being priced out of the Northern Ireland housing market. In particular, it is hard for young people to find a home — even at the bottom of the housing stock. I have spoken out about that problem, which is particularly acute in my constituency of South Belfast. It will not be solved unless there is more affordable housing.

The Semple Report made various recommendations relating to co-ownership schemes. Such schemes can provide the means through which people can bridge the gap. Co-ownership provides people with a better long-term option than short-term rented accommodation, in which tenants feel no sense of ownership or security. However, I was surprised to read in Co-Ownership Housing literature that in the past 30 years only 20,000 homes have been provided by the association for low-income households. There must be many more such facilities for people who desire to be owner-occupiers.

The Semple Report recommended the abolition of the current property-value limits, about which other Members spoke earlier; reducing the level of rent charged on the equity retained by Co-Ownership Housing; and reducing the initial minimum equity stake from 40% to 25%. Members also spoke about that. I agree with the recommendations, and their implementation would be welcomed by low-income households.

Many more of them will be able to participate, thereby increasing the demand for co-ownership homes and ensuring the sustainability of such schemes.

A more flexible approach will enable people to purchase bigger or better properties in more attractive areas rather than houses at the lowest end of the market. On the other hand, it may contribute to regeneration in areas of low demand.

More people buying their own homes will have an impact on reducing the current lengthy social-housing waiting lists. There are resource implications from a rise in the limits, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not been generous to the affordable housing sector in his so-called people's Budget. However, co-ownership is a well-proven, cost-effective policy, without which ordinary people will be priced out of housing in much of greater Belfast, and an unhealthy divide will grow between the haves and the have-nots.

The affordable housing crisis is one of the toughest challenges facing the Executive. Therefore, I urge the Minister and the interdepartmental affordability review implementation group to examine how co-ownership is working across Northern Ireland and to use it to its full potential.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I am only too aware of the pressures on first-time buyers who are trying to secure their first homes. The debate on co-ownership is increasingly relevant for first-time buyers in today's market. If the Assembly does not get the balance correct on the issue, it will be catastrophic not only for co-ownership but will put more pressure on other aspects of the housing market such as social housing.

There is massive interest in the co-ownership scheme Province-wide. The fact that there have been over 100,000 hits on the website so far demonstrates the clear interest in the scheme. One positive aspect of the scheme is the fact that all grants for co-ownership properties are subsequently paid back. In many instances, there is surplus funding, which, in turn, is recycled for making future purchases.

Over the past 10 years, co-ownership has received £84 million in housing grants. That money enabled the purchase of homes worth £390 million, which is a grant input of some 45%. At the same time, co-ownership returned £16 million to the Government over and above the grant that was paid out.

As a Member for Lagan Valley, it is only right and proper that I focus on the benefits of the co-ownership scheme to some of my constituents in their attempts to get onto the property ladder. As was pointed out earlier, the average house price in Lagan Valley is approximately £260,000, and it is difficult to see how many of my constituents will get onto the property ladder at all. That is why co-ownership has a vital role to play in offering a path into the housing market for first-time buyers, and it is one reason that the Assembly should make funding available to build on the success of co-ownership and, in turn, give many first-time buyers the real possibility of purchasing homes.

In Lagan Valley, over 1,600 homes have been purchased through the co-ownership scheme. Thirty homes have been purchased so far this year at a value of £5.5 million, and another 80 applications are pending in the Lisburn area. That makes Lagan Valley one of the top five places in Northern Ireland for using the scheme, and some £14.5 million worth of homes are waiting in the pipeline to be purchased.

The Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association is currently processing six applications in Lisburn, with an average price of £175,000. Considering that the average income for the people who are making those applications is £16,500 a year, the scheme is clearly helping low earners to enter the property market.

Despite all those positive outcomes, and the money that was well spent over the past 10 years, concern remains over the level of future funding, and, in particular, funding for the coming year. That must be considered urgently.

Co-ownership Housing has stated that, if it gets the £55 million that it requested for 2008-09, and the £60 million that it requested for 2009-10, it will fund the purchase of 800 homes annually.

There are chronic waiting lists for social housing. If schemes such as co-ownership are not made available to more people, those waiting lists will become ever increasing.

As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I will work with the Minister to make the issue a priority for the Assembly. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease until then.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the way in which the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland is dealing with infrastructure matters, in comparison to the work of the previous Executive. (AQO 791/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The previous Executive's financial planning looked mainly at the year ahead, and included capital investment in infrastructure. For the first time, the Executive has developed a 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which will cover the period 2008-18. The new approach sets a new course for infrastructure investment planning — one that is fully aligned with the Budget and the Executive's priorities, as set out in the Programme for Government. Future investment and infrastructure will be targeted to provide an essential platform on which to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society, in which everyone can enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the years to come.

The new draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland adopts a sustainable-development approach, ensuring that the key priority of growing a dynamic and innovative economy will be delivered in ways that promote positive social outcomes and enhance our environment and natural resources.

We are also taking steps to improve programme management to ensure that we keep a firm focus on delivery.

Ms Anderson: Will the investment strategy address regional disparity in infrastructure? I am particularly concerned about the Foyle constituency and the city of Derry, from which I come.

The First Minister: My answer is absolutely in the affirmative. We intend to do exactly that. I visited Foyle recently and I was struck by the wonderful potential there. Belfast will have to pull up its socks to keep in tune with Londonderry — and, in saying that, I intend no reference to a party tune.

Mr K Robinson: The draft investment strategy refers to a step change in the pace of infrastructural

investment, with a 25% increase on the previous three years. To deliver that, the Executive has identified a spend of £3,567 million, of which £400 million is identified as “additional funds”. That is some 10% of the total spend. With efficiency savings of, at most, 5% from the Departments, will the First Minister explain from where the Executive envisage that £400 million will come?

The First Minister: I am glad that the honourable Member has made a study of the matter and has acquainted himself with what we hope to achieve. There are cross-cutting objectives in economic, societal and environmental spheres, and we look forward to accelerating economic growth in all those aspects to improve the competitiveness of business. Investment in infrastructure to promote equality of opportunity and good relations will promote regional balance in future development and will tackle areas of social disadvantage. Environmental investment in infrastructure will protect and enhance our environment, and in particular, it will address areas affected by EU directives. Those objectives can be mutually reinforcing and can help to ensure that development is sustainable. The objectives influence both programme selection and delivery to maximise returns.

Mr Durkan: Will the First Minister agree that as the Treasury has made the capital allocation available to Northern Ireland over a 10-year period, it makes sense to have a 10-year plan? The SDLP welcomes the broad purposes and priorities of the 10-year investment strategy, having conceived of the idea of a joined-up investment strategy during the life of the previous Executive.

That Executive envisaged an investment strategy that would be planned and agreed on a basis of social partnership, and a strategic investment body composed on the same basis. Have the current Executive plans to make that a reality?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for his remarks about what we are attempting to do, and what I believe we will do. I am glad that he realises that we are in a new situation, which demands a different outlook. The fact that we are looking into the future to meet its challenges is a good sign, and I congratulate myself as one of the evangelists who helped to convert him to that view.

Investment Conference, Spring 2008

2. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps it is taking to prepare for the investment conference planned for spring 2008. (AQO 785/08)

The First Minister: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Nigel Dodds, is leading preparations for the conference through his Department and Invest

Northern Ireland. Where it is appropriate, the deputy First Minister and I work with Minister Dodds in order to ensure that the fullest preparations are in place for the conference and that maximum benefits for Northern Ireland are achieved as a result of the conference.

On 16 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I hosted a lunch event for an inward mission of 17 US companies, led by the US ambassador to London, Mr Tuttle, and his counterpart in Dublin, Mr Foley. That event provided an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of US investment to the development of the economy and to demonstrate that we are open for business in preparation for the US economic investment conference to be held in Belfast in spring 2008.

Next month, when the deputy First Minister and I visit the United States, we will take the opportunity to promote the conference and encourage senior company representatives to travel to Northern Ireland. We are glad to accept the invitation from the President to meet him in the White House on that occasion. In addition, the US Administration has plans to send a further inward delegation to Northern Ireland, a visit for which arrangements have been finalised. Minister Dodds is in talks with the United States special envoy, Paula Dobriansky, and the US Consul General in Northern Ireland, Susan Elliott, about the composition of the delegation.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for that extensive reply. In light of the forthcoming closure of the Seagate Technology operations plant in Limavady, which will happen in the same time frame as the investment conference through no fault of anyone in this House or in the Executive, will the First Minister assure me that counteracting the regional disparity in equality of opportunity will be a key priority of that investment conference?

The First Minister: Absolutely. Jobs are put at risk when other parts of the world offer to do the same work at a far cheaper rate; therefore all the jobs in Northern Ireland that are in that category are in danger. Steps must be taken to avoid that. An injection of outside finance is needed to revolutionise the outlook of the business community and to change it from being publicly to privately financed, and to work towards the best possible target, which is to have jobs situated in Northern Ireland that cannot be done anywhere else in the world and which are, therefore, not subject to pressure from outside.

Miss McIlveen: Will the First Minister assure Members that when he travels to the United States, the economic development and promotion of Northern Ireland will be his priorities while he is there?

The First Minister: Yes; the economy will come first. I believe that the deputy First Minister and I will start to write a success story for the Province.

Dr Farry: In the past, inward investment in Northern Ireland has been towards the low-added-value end of the market, with low-sustainability jobs and has been based upon such limited tools as selective financial assistance through grant-making. In the absence of fiscal measures such as tax-varying powers, what fresh thinking will the Executive bring to the table to attract high-value-added jobs that have long-term sustainability?

The First Minister: I suggest that it would do the honourable Member good to read 'Building a Better Future: Draft Development Strategy 2008-2018'. I will not delay the gentlemen with a Genesis to Malachi reading of that particular document.

Sustainable Development

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to outline how it intends to progress and promote sustainable development across all Departments. (AQO 775/08)

The First Minister: Sustainable development is a cross-cutting theme of the draft Programme for Government for Northern Ireland. Building a sustainable future is a key requirement for the office's economic, social and environmental politics and programme. That approach is supported by a public-service agreement that aims at promoting sustainable development across the public sector, business and wider society by using the guiding principles of the sustainable development strategy as the basis for governmental policy.

The deputy First Minister and I also plan to publish a new sustainable-development implementation plan that will set out in more detail the Executive's approach to sustainable development between 2008 and 2011.

Mr Weir: I thank the First Minister for his response. Will the First Minister give the House more details on the new implementation plan for sustainable development?

The First Minister: Since May, the deputy First Minister and I have continued to progress the sustainable development strategy and implementation plan. Departments are making progress in delivering the plan, which was launched in November 2006. Several of its targets and associated actions have been achieved or almost achieved. Of course, the deputy First Minister and I recognise that although that represents progress, there is still much work to be done.

That is why sustainable development is included in a public service agreement and as a cross-cutting theme in our Programme for Government. OFMDFM has taken forward work across a range of areas, including the introduction of a new statutory duty legislation that imposes a requirement on all public bodies to take

account of sustainability in the exercise of those functions. Others are the development of a high-level, overarching indicator set to monitor and measure progress towards sustainable development; the preparation of a communication strategy; the publication of departmental action plans for 10 Departments; and the hosting of a reception, at which junior Ministers — Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr G Kelly — welcomed the sustainable development commissioners to our Province.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister tell me how many times the sustainable development champions have met?

The First Minister: I regret that I do not have that information to hand. I will provide it in a letter to the Member.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the First Minister indicate whether there has been any progress on furthering a tidal electricity generation facility near Rathlin Island, which the Sustainable Development Commission claims will produce 10% of Northern Ireland's energy needs? Does he think that it will damage in any way the tourist potential of that great tourist area?

The First Minister: As the representative — in another place — of that island, I have made representations on the matter and will continue to do so. There should be such a supply of electricity to Rathlin Island. When I was first elected as MP for the island, there were no public toilets there, and no new houses had been built during a 40-year period. Although there were no roads, the people on the island still had to pay tax on their motor cars. I am proud, with others who worked so hard, that prospects in the island have improved so much, and I hope that they will improve even more. I would like to see that supply of electricity bringing light and power to the island.

2.45 pm

Ministers' Interests

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what procedures are in place in the Executive Committee to protect the interests of individual Ministers from those parties with the fewest members in the Executive. (AQO 729/08)

The First Minister: I am grateful for the Member's question. However, I am surprised that he — apparently — thinks that the Executive needs protection from the parties with fewest Members. I assume that he actually meant to ask about protection in the Executive of the position of smaller parties. He was so eager to set the question down that he did not explain it properly. In that regard, I assure all Members that, since the inception

of the present Executive, my co-Chairperson and I have been very careful to observe fully all provisions of the ministerial code, including those on decision-making in the Executive.

I want to make it absolutely clear that, in taking forward the Executive's business, we are committed to reaching decisions by consensus at every possible opportunity, thus protecting the interests of all Members. However, there will be specific circumstances — which, I hope, are rare — where full consensus cannot be obtained. In those circumstances, we are bound by the provisions of the ministerial code that was agreed, prior to devolution, by the four parties who are now Members of the Executive.

Of course, the honourable Member belongs to one of those parties.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his response, and I hope to provide sufficient clarity in my supplementary question.

Will he assure the Assembly that the Executive, which he jointly heads, operate — as per the Belfast Agreement and St Andrews Agreement — on the basis of consensus, given that they are a mandatory coalition as opposed to a coalition of choice? What steps is he taking to ensure that that Executive can be more democratically accountable to the Assembly?

The First Minister: The Executive are democratically accountable to the Assembly; no thanks to his party's representation at the talks but to mine.

Some Members: Hear, hear. *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: There is an old story that when one pours the water of heaven on the fire of hell, there is a hissing noise. *[Laughter.]* We are experiencing that at the moment.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Those Members should hiss off. *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: The ministerial code, to which the Member's party agreed and signed up, stated that:

"It is the duty of the Chairmen of the Executive Committee to seek to secure that decisions of the Executive Committee are reached by consensus wherever possible: if consensus cannot be reached, a vote may be taken".

That is what the Member signed up to; and that is what I signed up to. I find no burden in that: he evidently does and wants to have it changed.

That section of the ministerial code also provides for such a vote, if required, to be taken on a cross-community basis. It should be said that the honourable Member's party is as much a party of the Executive as my party is, and as the other parties are. There is supposed to be a coalition, but sometimes when one looks at the Executive, one does not see much coalescing from certain Members — the reason being that they are no

longer in power and thus can no longer dictate to the real representatives of the people of this Province.

In view of the concerns expressed by ministerial colleagues and the wider public interest following the Minister for Social Development's statement to the Assembly on 16 October, it was our agreed view that seeking to adopt on 18 October the minutes of the previous meeting was of fundamental importance, and thus we took that decision. As regards how many votes have been taken in the Executive between our first meeting on 10 May and the meeting of the 25 October, during that time the Executive have considered 105 items of business, and there have been only three occasions when full consensus has not been obtained. That is a record, certainly for Northern Ireland. The record speaks for itself. Instead of denigrating this Assembly, the honourable Member would be far better to pay tribute to it and to work a bit harder to see that it is successful.

Mr Ford: I realise that by asking questions from these Benches, one is merely laying oneself open to abuse. However, I will give it a try.

Given the recent debacles over funding for health and social services and the conflict transformation initiative, will the First Minister give us any evidence to suggest that this Executive operates under the principle of collective responsibility?

The First Minister: The answer that I gave the honourable Member some time ago in this House remains the same. I am sorry that when he does not get it the way he likes it, he considers it abuse. I have never abused the honourable Member; if I had, he would not be sitting in his place today. *[Laughter.]* I assure him that I will not abuse him in the future. I would simply say to him that he would be far better using his vast talents to help the Assembly to succeed.

When I say that, I do so with a feeling of truthfulness in my heart.

Mr Donaldson: Does the First Minister agree that the procedures that he has described that allow and provide for ministerial accountability in the Executive, and for consensus to be arrived at, were put in place as a result of political negotiations? Although some parties in the Assembly may try to pretend otherwise, they are every bit as much a part of the Government as my party is. Therefore, as an integral part of the Government, it is time that they started to work with us instead of trying to work against us.

The First Minister: I agree with my honourable friend. This House should give the people of Northern Ireland a lead, instead of joining sides to run down the democracy that we have achieved. That was achieved through very hard bargaining, and although other Members offered nothing but criticism, we worked hard at this job, and we have produced not the perfect

remedy, but a remedy that can give every man and woman a right to speak his or her mind and know that, if there is truth in what he or she is saying, it will be listened to by the Assembly.

More people are visiting this Building than ever did before, and I have worked in this Building for many years. I am glad that the ordinary people of Ulster are taking an interest in the Assembly and coming here to see how we are doing. All Members should add with energy to the strength of this Building and the work that happens here, which will mean that we have pure democracy for this part of this island.

North/South Ministerial Council

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the means through which an individual or an MLA can influence the subject matter for consideration at future North/South Ministerial Council meetings. (AQO 776/08)

The First Minister: The memorandum of understanding on procedure in respect of the operation of the North/South Ministerial Council states that the agenda for each meeting will be settled by express agreement in advance by relevant Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, through the NSMC's joint secretariat. Individuals or MLAs may influence the subject matter for consideration at North/South Ministerial Council meetings by raising issues of concern with the Northern Ireland Executive Minister who holds responsibility for that subject.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his answer. I asked the question because it has not been terribly clear to individual Assembly Members how to secure an item on a North/South Ministerial Council agenda when it meets in sectoral format. Will the First Minister consider the adoption of the mechanism used by Departments in Dublin, through the appointment of North/South unit co-ordinators? If I want to speak to the Education or Health Departments in Dublin to influence the inclusion of a matter on an agenda, I can speak to a North/South unit co-ordinator. I would greatly appreciate the help of the First Minister in this matter.

The First Minister: If the Member would speak in the English language when he speaks to me, I would at least get the substance of his message. The way in which the matter would be dealt with was agreed. I do not know whether the Member has attempted to put a proposal to anyone. He could, of course, make representations to his own party leader, who would, I am sure, be happy to help him to see that such a proposal is made.

There would be no guarantee that the Member would get his way. If it were a plea for more Dublin involvement

in our affairs, I would say no; if it were a plea for the United Kingdom link to be strengthened, I would say yes.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural Wages Board

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her proposals in relation to the implementation of the Assembly's resolution on the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board.

(AQO 763/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Following the debate on 22 October, I reflected both on its outcome and on Members' concerns. Having considered the case for the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB), I remain of the view that the national minimum wage structure does not offer farm workers the same level of protection that the board affords, particularly where wage rates are concerned. Although wage costs are slightly higher, that must be balanced against the need to retain suitably skilled agricultural-wages workers in the North. The level of bureaucracy that is associated with the board's rate is not significant and is no different in the North than anywhere else in these islands.

Additionally, the board is also a valuable forum where wage negotiations take place, and, importantly, it is used as a benchmark for the wider agrifood industry and other rural occupations. I do not believe that it is in the interests of the agriculture industry to allow the North to become, as has been suggested by the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU), the sweatshop for agricultural workers on these islands. Abolition of the board would place agricultural workers here at a disadvantage when compared to workers elsewhere on these islands.

In the absence of an alternative mechanism to protect the rights of agricultural employees in line with the equality agenda, I remain of the view that the board should not be abolished. My decision is in the interests of sustainable farming; it protects the rights and continued availability of farm workers, including migrant workers, in the North. Finally, I do not propose to implement the Assembly's resolution to introduce legislation that will abolish the AWB.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her eloquent explanation of the reason that she takes no notice of what happens in the Assembly. I note that in any other legislature in these islands, at least 70% of business

comes from the Executive, but in this Assembly, at least 85% of business comes from Back-Benchers and is then ignored by Ministers from all parties. Is it not about time that the Executive started to produce some real legislation in order that votes in the House can have effect?

Ms Gildernew: I acknowledge that in the debate on the motion that called for me to introduce the required legislation to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board, unionists voted primarily in favour of abolition and nationalists voted against. I repeat that I have decided to retain the board. I am not prepared to undermine the rights of farm workers or to dispense with the board's work. I am not prepared to sacrifice the rights of low-paid workers or the protection of migrants because of the lobbying of employers, or because of the partisan position of Members. I am the Minister, and it is my responsibility to do the right thing. I make my decisions based on the evidence of what is best for everyone who lives and works in the rural community. Five thousand pounds a year is a small price to pay for the protection of workers' rights. Those who disagree with that must explain their position to vulnerable farm workers. I reject the call to abolish the board, and I stand by my decision.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister's answer is completely unacceptable. A decision was made by the Assembly. Why does the Minister believe that an additional financial burden that is not placed upon other prosperous businesses throughout Northern Ireland should be placed upon a crippled and suffering farming industry? If the Minister does not wise up on this issue, it may fall to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to introduce legislation according to the mind of the Assembly.

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what I am responding to as there was no question in that outburst. *[Interruption.]*

What was the question? I ask the Member to repeat the question. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Burns: During the debate on the Agricultural Wages Board on 22 October, I recall that the Minister expressed concern that some migrant workers would be at a disadvantage were the board to be abolished.

Will the Minister inform the Assembly which sectors of the agriculture industry she has identified as taking advantage of migrant workers?

Ms Gildernew: I am not suggesting that any sector takes advantage of workers; I was talking about the protection of all workers, including migrant workers. The board sets rates for all sectors of agriculture to provide protection for every worker.

Reducing Red Tape and Bureaucracy

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her Department's

progress in reducing red tape and bureaucracy.

(AQO 796/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. In June, I announced a review of the regulatory controls, applied by DARD and DOE, to the agrifood sector, particularly farmers. An independent panel will conduct the review, the terms of reference of which were agreed with the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, as was the make-up of the panel.

The panel comprises a chairperson and two other members who have the range of skills required to balance the different governance, agricultural, environmental and legal interests. My Department took responsibility for identifying suitable candidates to represent governance and agricultural interests, and the DOE was responsible for environmental and legal interests.

Although the process is taking longer than I had hoped, I am pleased to inform the Member that the final make-up of the panel has been agreed with Mrs Foster and appointments have been made. The panel's first meeting will be on 22 November, at which point the review will be under way. The review's output will be a simplification plan to make it easier for everyone involved in the agrifood industry to comply with the relevant regulations and to reduce the costs of doing so.

On the one hand, I want to improve the way in which the regulations are delivered and enforced through having the appropriate organisations and regulations in place; on the other, I want as much as possible to reduce the administrative burden and, therefore, the cost to the industry of compliance with regulations.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer and for announcing to the House the establishment of the panel. Has she any further information —

Dr W McCrea: The Member should ask his question.

Mr McCartney: If the Member bides his time, he will hear me ask a question, unlike him. Could — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCartney: Will the Minister share with the Assembly any appropriate information on the make-up of the panel?

Ms Gildernew: The agreed panel will be chaired by Michael Dowling, a former secretary general of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; David Graham, a retired chief executive of the Fane Valley Co-operative Society; and Brian Jack, a law lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, who has a particular interest in environmental law. I wish the panel luck in its deliberations, and I have no doubt that the review's outcome will be a simplification plan in the best interests of the industry.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister tell Members what targets have been set to save money by reducing staff and bureaucracy? What savings will be passed on to benefit the agriculture industry? Will she detail the additional funding that will be available to assist the farming community, the agriculture industry and rural development?

Ms Gildernew: I cannot pre-empt the findings of the review panel: its three highly experienced members will consider what can be done to help the industry. No targets relating to the Member's question have been set; however, there are targets for the reduction of bureaucracy. Ultimately, I want a reduction of at least 25% in the cost of the administrative burden on farmers by 2013, and DARD's public service agreement sets an interim target of a 10% reduction by 2010. My Department will strive to eliminate all unnecessary red tape and to use the budget to achieve the most value for money and the best value for the farming industry.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister mentioned targets for 2011 and 2013. What is she doing in the short term to reduce red tape and bureaucracy for farmers?

Ms Gildernew: The panel has been set up to consider ways of reducing bureaucracy. I am sorry, but I did not catch the first part of the Member's question. Does that answer his question?

Mr T Clarke: No, it does not.

Ms Gildernew: I am sorry, I — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Gildernew: I am not the best person to decide how we should reduce bureaucracy — I have to ask the experts. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to answer the question.

Ms Gildernew: I am setting up the panel, in conjunction with the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, to examine how we can reduce bureaucracy. We are consulting the industry on the issue, but we are limited by some European regulations. We are also pressing to find out what can be done from a European point of view to reduce bureaucracy and red tape for farmers. We have a big job ahead, but we are intent on doing the best for the industry.

Mournes and Slieve Croob Area

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the concerns of the agriculture community about the designation of the Mournes and Slieve Croob area as a National Park. (AQO 742/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am aware of all the issues and sensitivities around the idea of a national park in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area. I appreciate that such a proposal would be contentious and could be strongly opposed by many farmers in the area. However, there is support for a national park from some people in the local tourism industry and in the rural business community. The Minister of the Environment has referred the report of the Mourne national park working party to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee for the Environment before making any decision on the way forward. Therefore, it is not yet appropriate for me to meet the Minister of the Environment on the issue.

However, officials from my Department have had an advisory role on a national park policy and legislation interdepartmental working group since 2004. They have been alert to the potential effects on local agriculture, fisheries and forestry interests. Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have also sat as observers on the Mourne national park working party. It is important to stress that the working party has not recommended progress towards setting up a national park while the concerns of the agriculture community remain unresolved.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her reply, but I wish to develop it. Does the Minister have any plans to meet farmers from the Mournes and Slieve Croob area on their own patch? If not, will she accept an invitation from them to do so?

Ms Gildernew: I have spoken to some people in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area, and I am prepared to talk to anyone on the issue. I am aware that there are contentious opinions around the idea of a national park, and it has been strongly opposed by many farmers in the area. Local people are worried about restrictions on farming practice, liability risks from increased access to private land, risks of environmental damage due to increased visitor numbers, and possible limits on rural housing that could threaten to break up rural communities. Any proposal for a national park in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area must address those widely held concerns. Although the Minister of the Environment will ultimately make the decision, it is incumbent on me to ensure that she understands the views of farmers in the area. I am prepared to listen and to talk to anyone about the issue.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the creation of a national park would bring enormous economic benefit to the entire community of the Mournes? Does she also accept that the working party tackled, head-on, issues such as insurance, footpaths and compulsory purchases? In many people's opinion, it bent over backwards to meet the needs of the farming community. Will the Minister accept that although a couple of issues

are outstanding, the best thing for South Down and for the Mourne area generally is to find some way of pushing forward the idea of a national park that will keep everyone, including the farming community, on board?

Ms Gildernew: Absolutely. Finding a solution that everyone is happy with would be the best outcome. Any proposal for setting up a national park in the Mourne area will be unable to progress while the concerns of the agriculture community remain unresolved. I will consider the views in the working party's report, and its recommendations, at the appropriate time. However, ultimately, the deciding factor on any proposed national park should be the views of the people from the area.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Having consulted many farmers in South Down, I have found that the vast majority have major concerns in relation to the creation of a national park. Is the Minister aware of those concerns?

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: Yes, I am aware of them. I appreciate that farmers are concerned about possible restrictions on their farming activities. However, the Mourne national park working party was clear that there should be no new or compulsory restrictions on farming activities. The working-party report recommends that any change to farming practices should be voluntary and appropriately compensated. It is worth noting that many farmers in the Mourne area are already voluntarily participating in DARD agrienvironment schemes and are farming in an environmentally sensitive way. More than 19,000 hectares — two thirds of the eligible land in the Mourne area — is designated as an environmentally sensitive area and is currently farmed under agrienvironment-scheme agreements. Therefore, farmers in the Mourne area are largely farming in a manner that enhances the Mourne area and the beauty of that part of the world. Farmers will be very much an integral part of the outcome of the working party's report.

Fuel Prices

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to assess the impact on rural areas and, in particular, agricultural businesses of rising fuel prices.

(AQO 770/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Department does not have any data on the general impact of rising fuel prices on rural areas. Agricultural businesses estimated that expenditure on heating fuel, machinery fuel and oils increased from £27.8 million in 2002 to £37.9 million in 2006. Despite the increase, those costs account for only 5% of gross input costs for agriculture, and, therefore, the direct impact from rising fuel prices is relatively modest.

However, increased fuel prices also impact on the cost of other inputs, notably feed and fertiliser, which account for a much greater proportion of inputs. It is not possible to quantify the increase in the cost of other outputs that is attributable to rises in fuel prices.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister may not have precise details, but perhaps she could tell the House how many farmers have been prosecuted for illegal-fuel offences, including ones that may have been committed in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Gildernew: I do not have the detail of that information here, but I will try to find that out and respond to the Member in writing.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister, like everyone else, must be aware that as a result of the closure of small filling stations, as well as the loss of thousands of jobs largely due to the supply of laundered fuels, rural communities have become more impoverished than ever in recent years. What message does the Minister have for those who still engage in the supply or purchase of illegal fuels?

Ms Gildernew: That issue is clearly outside my remit, so I am not sure what response the Member seeks.

However, this is a good time to remind the House that the Department is doing everything in its power to militate against further costs to farmers, to help them with supply-chain development and to ensure that they are profitable.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is not involved with tax. That is a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I will obviously highlight the impact on agriculture should the Assembly discuss the issue.

Mr Irwin: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has put a considerable amount of resources towards the growing of willows. Will the Minister tell the House how much money DARD has put towards the growing of willows, and does she believe that that money is a good use of departmental resources?

Ms Gildernew: DARD promotes the growing of crops for use as biofuels under the EU energy-crop aid scheme. Aid of €45 per hectare is payable for all crops that are used for the production of energy products, with the exception of those grown on set-aside land. Under the scheme, crops that may be used in the production of biofuels include oilseed rape, cereals and hemp.

The Department is also working in conjunction with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the Carbon Trust, which commissioned a study of the energy use of agricultural and horticultural primary-producer businesses. The findings of that study were presented at a renewables open day at CAFRE's Loughry campus in August 2007. To facilitate improvements in energy efficiency, CAFRE is designing

a series of contextualised energy-efficiency training programmes, with delivery commencing early in 2008.

Local Agricultural Produce

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to promote the purchase of local agricultural produce in Northern Ireland. (AQO 768/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I fully support the promotion and purchase of local food, and my Department has carried out a range of actions to underpin that. For example, my Department administers the regional food programme, which aims to promote quality regional food. Under that programme, assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communication between all sectors of the food industry. That programme complements the work that my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have been doing to implement the recommendations of the 'Fit for Market: Report of the Food Strategy Group: July 2004'.

I fully support the work of the newly formed Food Promotion Northern Ireland Limited (FPNI Ltd), an industry group representing a range of sectors that are taking forward and funding a domestic marketing campaign. FPNI Ltd aims to provide the highest levels of transparency for customers and consumers in identifying food and drink products. The funding made available under the processing and marketing grants will also provide better capacity.

The Livestock and Meat Commission is responsible for providing support to various sectors of the livestock industry, which is primarily achieved through strategic marketing initiatives that are complementary to the activities of the commercial operators in the sector — the Love Beef campaign was one of the most recent examples.

My Department is also contributing to the success of the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFEAL) project, which aims to encourage local authentic food producers to develop new markets and thereby help to promote the use of local food as a firm foundation for public health, as well as ensuring that local food is brought to the attention of consumers.

I also intend to write to public-procurement bodies in the North, reminding them of the high animal welfare and productivity standards of locally produced food. I continue to stress the benefits of the local food supply to the major retailers.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her brief answer. I note that there were some heckles from the

vegetarian in the DUP — I do not want to name him, but we all know him as Mr Wells. *[Laughter.]*

Will the Minister clarify that all food products sourced and used by DARD are produced in Northern Ireland? I mean those products that can be produced here — I know that the pineapple season in Fermanagh and South Tyrone was hit by the wet summer. *[Laughter.]* Will the Minister assure the House that all products purchased by DARD are — as far possible — produced locally? She will remember that that was one of the Ulster Farmers' Union's five recommendations, and we do not want another one to slip off the list.

Ms Gildernew: Thank you, John. That supplementary question was nearly as long as my answer *[Laughter.]* Only the best for you, John. *[Laughter.]*

EU legislation prevents the procurement of food by public-sector bodies being based solely on local supply. Therefore, the challenge is to work with suppliers to help them to compete more successfully. DARD staff continue to provide technical support and advice to individual farmers or processors, producer groups or co-operatives, large and small, to help them to engage in public-sector contracts.

I have approved a new processing and marketing scheme under the rural development programme. Staff from the Loughrey campus of CAFRE have supported the central procurement directorate by providing advice on the specifications for public-food contracts. In addition, they have had an input into the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Fit for Future initiative, which aims to improve the nutritional quality of food in hospitals.

The short answer to the Member's question is yes; I am doing all that I can to ensure that all Departments — particularly those with the big spending power, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — engage in widespread public procurement wherever possible. I have written to the Health Minister and the Education Minister to encourage them to do that. My Department wants to see local produce on the menu, whether it is in Departments, Civil Service buildings, our hospitals or our schools. As the Member stated, that is one of the UFU's five recommendations, and I assure him that it has not slipped off the list.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give the House an update on her efforts to promote Northern Ireland produce in mainland Europe?

Ms Gildernew: There are fairly strict Government rules about what can be done. However, I recently attended the Anuga trade fair for food and beverages in Cologne in support of the local red meat industry, and our local meat-processing companies used that fair to meet current overseas customers and many potential importers. It was important to attend that fair in order to send the clear message to international buyers that

our food and produce are high quality and that we are ready for business and to promote our produce on the European and world stage.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister provide additional detail on the RAFAEL project and the impact that it may have had on the agrifood sector west of the Bann?

Ms Gildernew: The RAFAEL project is funded by INTERREG III and is aimed at encouraging local authentic food producers to develop new markets. The main focus of our project, which was centred in the west, is to encourage and support local food producers and processors to develop and compete successfully for business in the public sector, particularly in hospitals and schools. Figures from Age Concern show that many people are suffering from malnutrition before they go into hospital, so it is important that the food that they receive in hospital is of the highest quality in order to help them through their convalescence. In that respect, the lack of food miles in those products — as well as the support that the RAFAEL project provided to the local food industry — is important, and I want it to be rolled out across the Six Counties.

Electronic Identification: Cattle

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will provide an update on progress on the electronic identification system for cattle. (AQO 755/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development provides technical input and advice to an industry-led working group on cattle electronic identification, which aims to have a voluntary electronic identification system in place on farms, cattle markets and meat plants during 2008. The system will work in parallel with existing statutory provisions and is expected to introduce efficiencies in the recording of animal details in those locations. It may also improve the effectiveness of the system of cattle identification, registration and movement by reducing the scope for human error in recording and transcribing information.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister provide the House with an estimate of the financial cost to the agriculture industry of the establishment and running of an electronic identification system for cattle?

Ms Gildernew: Electronic tags are between 60p and £1 more expensive than sheep or cattle tags, but it is anticipated that the price differential will decrease — perhaps to under 50p for a pair of cattle tags — when large volumes begin to be used. The benefits of fewer reading errors and mistakes when entering existing tag details into a computer — along with the ease of recording animals during inspections or tests, or at markets or abattoirs — will greatly outweigh any slight additional cost to the farmer.

Red Meat Task Force

7. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her assessment is of the response required to the report of the red meat task force. (AQO 797/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. The task force report clearly shows the serious challenges facing the red-meat sector and provides a clear view on the choices that have to be made by each farmer. DARD will play its part, but it is an issue for all stakeholders. Everyone involved has a pivotal role to play, and everyone must move forward in partnership to secure the future sustainability of our red-meat sector and wider rural communities. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will continue to support those who want to remain in the industry, and I will ensure that Government resources are focused and targeted on viable production options. We will help farmers who want to diversify or leave the industry and provide them with a range of reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

My Department will continue to play an active role in the work of the task force in developing more constructive relationships in the supply chain, and I will continue to engage fully with all parts of that chain. The continuation of the task force's work is vital in developing a cohesive plan for the future sustainability of our industry.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member may ask a brief supplementary question.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What specific measures are being taken to respond to the report?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for a brief response.

Ms Gildernew: That will certainly be difficult, given the amount of detail that I have in my file.

My Department will help everyone who wants to stay in the industry and will encourage involvement in benchmarking initiatives. I will ensure that Government resources are focused and targeted on viable production options. The task force report identifies models of production that could form the basis of sustainable production. We will work closely with the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) to devise a blueprint on one of those models — that is, producing beef from the dairy herd. We will also look at running a pilot scheme on that model, as it is likely to offer the best chance of providing a return to farmers.

There is a lot of detail, given the nature of the supplementary question, and I will provide the Member with further information in writing.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Culture, Arts and Leisure Projects

1. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to develop specific funding packages for culture, arts and leisure projects in areas of high social need. (AQO 734/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through its non-departmental public bodies, is involved in a range of projects aimed at areas of high social need. Several projects are currently managed by Sport Northern Ireland in areas of special social need, including the Sport in Our Community programme and the Building Sport programme. Those funding streams represent a total investment of approximately £6.5 million in revenue in areas of high social need for the period 2005-10.

The 2012 Olympics present a wide range of opportunities for sporting developments across the Northern Ireland community, and those are captured in the strategic intention of the document, 'The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2007-2017', which I published recently for consultation. The strategy proposes a series of high-level targets and interventions aimed at increasing participation in sport and physical recreation in areas of high social need. The Department has provided funding of £500,000 per annum in 2006-07 and 2007-08 for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Re-imaging Communities programme. The main aim of the programme is to improve the physical environment of our communities through the replacement of paramilitary murals and other divisive symbols.

Although the programme is open to all communities in Northern Ireland, some of the projects have been funded in areas of high social need. Some examples of projects that have been funded in areas of high social need include the Rathcoole Residents Association, which was awarded £8,910 to replace one of the notorious murals in the Newtownabbey area. The community is keen to see the area represented in a new, more positive way.

The Greater Shankill Community Council has been awarded £30,890 for a community garden in the Black Mountain Grove. Paramilitary murals will be removed as part of that project, aiding good community relations.

The Upper Springfield Development Trust has been awarded £8,950 for the base alley mural. The base alley is a busy meeting place for young people, and the project aims to remove offensive graffiti and turn the alley into an art feature.

In addition, in the arts sector there are projects such as STart UP, which is specifically aimed at communities that have not previously received funding of any kind

from the Arts Council. The STart UP project is aimed at strengthening arts activity in the community and at making a real difference to groups that have not previously engaged in the arts.

The policy framework document 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' recommends a public library service to develop innovative measures targeted at disadvantaged communities, and 10% of library resources are skewed towards such areas and their needs. My Department has encouraged the service to participate fully in cross-departmental initiatives such as neighbourhood renewal.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister agree that programmes and initiatives such as the midnight soccer leagues, which took place in different areas of Belfast and in the Lisburn area, benefit the social well-being and health of those areas? He said that there would be a cross-departmental approach, and that is important. Is the Minister willing to look at pilot schemes to reduce anti-social behaviour in areas of high social need, as that would enhance the health and social well-being of many of the citizens of those areas?

Mr Poots: Midnight soccer has been a useful tool in reaching out to younger people in the community. It has helped to reduce antisocial behaviour in some areas, and the PSNI have been closely involved in its delivery. Part of the sports strategy is to identify funding streams to provide more coaches. That may be one way of ensuring that midnight soccer plays a greater role.

Ms Lo: Given that the proposed £4.25 million increase in arts funding is not enough to cover the shortfall caused by the raid on lottery money, and that Northern Ireland's per capita spend on the arts is only 51% of that in Scotland and 49% of that in the Republic, how does the Minister propose to deliver the goods to match his fine rhetoric?

Mr Poots: In the first place, the Member should get her figures right. Over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, the spending increase will be £6.75 million, which will more than outweigh the amount of money that will be lost as a consequence of the lottery reduction. Obviously, we need more money for the arts, and we will consider how to deliver further efficiency savings to fund the arts directly. Furthermore, I aim to raise greater arts contributions from the private sector and local government. That funding issue is not exclusive to central Government. If it were, we would fail.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's response on initiatives such as midnight football, and I compliment the PSNI on its work with communities.

Will the Minister give an undertaking to meet the Ulster-Scots Agency to explore projects that might

develop the cultural and artistic talents of young people in areas of social deprivation and high social need?

Mr Poots: I have met the Ulster-Scots Agency on a number of occasions, and to progress the wider community's interests, I will continue to meet with all the relevant people that my Department serves. Obviously, if we had more funding, we could deliver more. Perhaps, the Member who said that 48% of the overall Budget for one Department was not enough might consider giving more money to my Department in order to keep more people out of hospitals by engaging in sport and the arts, which are beneficial for people's mental health.

Irish-language Legislation

2. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why there was no direct communication between himself and the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure about his statement on the Irish-language legislation consultation process prior to 16 October 2007. (AQO 784/08)

10. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why there was no formal communication with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure prior to his statement on the Irish-language legislation consultation process. (AQO 783/08)

Mr Poots: I will take questions 2 and 10 together. Prior to the 16 October plenary session, I provided all Members and, specifically, members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure with copies of my statement. Furthermore, my statement took on board the views of those groups and individuals — including those of the Committee — who responded to the consultation on the proposed Irish language Act. Interestingly, the Committee's written response failed to show consensus on that issue, and Members should note that.

Mr Brolly: Will the Minister give an undertaking that, in the future, he will properly consult with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee about key policy statements that emanate from his Department? Does he regard his failure, prior to his Irish language Act announcement, to meet the Chairman of the Committee to have been a discourtesy to the Committee and its Chairman?

Mr Poots: On that occasion, the Minister observed all the relevant protocols, gave the requisite notice to both the Assembly and the Committee, and, prior to his statement, based his conclusions on the Committee's written responses.

Mr F McCann: Given his responsibility to the Committee, does the Minister understand the protocols? Considering the way in which he acted on that occasion,

does he agree that members of the Committee felt insulted and undermined by his behaviour?

Mr Poots: In the absence of the Member's identification of any protocols that have been broken, I take it that, perhaps, I understand the protocols better than he does.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister agree that, given the serious financial constraints on his Department, had the Irish language Act proceeded, it would have had a detrimental impact on other areas, such as the arts, sport and culture?

Mr Poots: On Thursday night, I was advised by a member of the Dáil Éireann that I should go ahead with the Irish language Act and that I should find the money in my Department to do so. Therefore, I look forward to Members identifying which aspects of sport, the arts or culture do not need money, because everyone seems to think that they all require more money. I cannot manufacture money, so I must use it wisely. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Simpson: Does the Minister agree that, given that responsibility for the Irish language is a devolved matter, and given the absence in the Westminster legislation of any requirement on him to bring forward an Irish language Act, Mr Brolly's question and Sinn Féin's whole stance on the issue are more about covering their own backs than about any genuine concern for the Irish language?

Mr Poots: I do not know whether it would be appropriate for me to comment on Sinn Féin's negotiations at St Andrews and what it got included in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, which established this Assembly and Administration and the terms that govern them. The absence of any cover on Irish-language legislation is pretty glaring at this point.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the arrangements that are in place in relation to responsibility for personnel issues in the Fisheries Conservancy Board, in the absence of a deputy chief executive. (AQO 732/08)

Mr Poots: Personnel management in the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) is the responsibility of the support manager, who is a member of the senior management team, reporting to the chief executive. The responsibility of the deputy chief executive for personnel issues is limited to those issues implicit in his role as line manager of the FCB field staff.

In his absence, the direction of the field staff is being undertaken by the chief executive and the support

manager. Overall organisational arrangements in relation to responsibilities for personnel issues in the FCB are, therefore, unaffected by the absence of the deputy chief executive.

Mr McNarry: I am indebted to the Minister for his reply. However, I am sure that the issue is being raised as a direct result of absenteeism.

Does the Minister agree that equipment, particularly boats, is being neglected, and, therefore, will he carry out an inventory to identify whether all boats owned by the FCB can be accounted for? Can he tell the House why one boat has been left for safekeeping on someone else's property, because the board could not find a suitable place in which to keep it?

Mr Poots: The FCB's auditors are carrying out an audit of the board's assets, including boats, and my Department will assess the condition of equipment and whether it needs to be upgraded when that audit is complete.

I will ask officials whether any boats are not being kept on FCB property and, if so, why that should be the case. I will respond to the Member in due course when I have the relevant information.

Irish-language Legislation

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain how he will gain the confidence of all sections of the community, in relation to his decision not to introduce Irish-language legislation, given that 65% of responses to the consultation process were in favour of the introduction of such legislation.

(AQO 787/08)

Mr Poots: In my statement to the House on 16 October, I acknowledged that there are those in the Northern Ireland community who have a close affinity with the Irish language and have legitimate aspirations to secure official recognition and protection for it. I also stated that it was my assessment that the legislative approach for the protection and development of the Irish language was a disproportionately costly route, and I outlined my reasons in that regard.

I continue to hold the view that the duty on the Executive to adopt a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language offers a more cost-effective and proportionate approach to achieving tangible outcomes for the provision of public services through the medium of Irish.

3.45 pm

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister highlighted the duty to enhance and promote the Irish language. Following the Minister's announcement that his Department will not fund an Irish language Act, does he have any plans to meet representatives of the

Irish-language community so that this issue can be taken forward?

Mr Poots: Subsequent to the announcement that I made, I met my counterpart from the Irish Republic, Mr Ó Cuív, at the North/South Ministerial Council language sectoral meeting; representatives of Foras na Gaeilge were also present. I will continue to have discussions with Foras na Gaeilge as the lead Irish-language body. I will also take opportunities to speak to groups such as Pobal, and any others who may seek meetings with me on the matter.

Although most respondents to the consultation were in favour of an Irish language Act, the legislation that flowed from the Belfast Agreement and, subsequently, the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, requires cross-community support for novel or contentious issues. This issue could certainly be described as contentious. Therefore cross-community support to implement an Irish language Act is required.

The Member said that an Irish language Act should proceed because a majority of respondents to the consultation exercise supported such an Act, and she and her party leader may want to press the issue. If they want majority rule in Northern Ireland, the Members on these Benches will be happy to oblige.

Mr Shannon: Subsequent to his statement on an Irish language Act, has the Minister had any correspondence from the Human Rights Commissioner?

Mr Poots: I have had no correspondence from the Human Rights Commissioner subsequent to my statement. I am aware of speculation that correspondence was sent to the Secretary of State; however, it has not been forwarded to me. If the Human Rights Commissioner wants to do things in order, it would be right and proper that she communicate with me on the issue.

Mr Speaker: Question No 5 has been withdrawn.

National Stadium

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether a business plan has been prepared for the national stadium at the Maze site.

(AQO 750/08)

13. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the proposed national stadium.

(AQO 764/08)

Mr Poots: I will take questions No 6 and 13 together. My Department, in conjunction with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), has been actively working to develop a modern, operationally viable, fit-for-purpose stadium that will provide suitable flexibilities to be used by the three main ball sports in Northern Ireland.

The three sports — football, Gaelic games and rugby — have agreed in principle to the provision of such a stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site, and are fully co-operating with the Department and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in progressing the main issues associated with its development. That includes the production, by independent consultants, of a robust business plan against which the project can move forward.

A draft of that business plan has already been issued to the three sports' governing bodies for their consideration. The Irish Football Association has formally responded positively, and similar positive responses are expected shortly from the governing bodies of the other two sports.

The consultants will finalise the business plan once all comments have been received. That, together with the work of the design team, will enable an outline business case to be finalised, which will be subject to normal scrutiny and approval procedures. Following that action, I will be in a position to make a recommendation to the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Cree for a supplementary question.

Mr Cree: My supplementary question has been answered in the Minister's response.

Mr McCarthy: What conclusions should the Assembly draw from the absence of any direct reference to the sports stadium in the draft investment strategy, as outlined by the Minister last week?

Mr Poots: If the Member scrutinises all the documents that were released on that day, he will see, in the Budget papers, that the requisite funding has been set aside for the sports stadium.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister confirm whether the Department is still confident that the stadium project is on schedule for completion in 2010? That would enable some of the Olympic Games' football matches to be played there.

Mr Poots: I confirm that the project will be delivered on schedule. More important than the Olympic Games, however, are the current requirements of association football, in respect of the safety report on Windsor Park, continuing FIFA inspections, and our responsibility to provide a stadium that is fit for international football to ensure that Northern Ireland home matches are not played outside the Province.

Mr Campbell: The Minister is aware of the emerging consensus against a stadium that would incorporate controversial elements of the Maze site. Will he take account of those views when he presents his proposal to the Executive?

Mr Poots: I will. Any proposal that includes the development of a shrine — or anything akin to a shrine

— is unacceptable. Development at that site must be inclusive, constructive, positive and capable of buy-in by all sections of the community.

BBC Coverage

7. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with BBC Northern Ireland about the coverage and programming of the commemorative events of 12 July, 12 August and Black Saturday in 2008. (AQO 728/08)

Mr Poots: I have held discussions with BBC Northern Ireland and the Loyal Orders on a wide range of issues, including cultural programming. The particular matter that the Member mentioned has not been raised.

Mr Burnside: If the matter has not been raised, will the Minister give a commitment to the House that he will raise it with the BBC? I also include UTV in that; however, the BBC is a public broadcasting corporation, financed by taxpayers' money. It is very important that our British Protestant cultural heritage and way of life be promoted in commemoration of those historic events.

There is much speculation that Her Majesty the Queen might visit Ireland next year and that she might visit Dublin. Might she come north of the border during one of our great loyalist, royalist, traditional celebrations?

Mr Poots: I am happy to raise those issues with the BBC. Other Members can do likewise; such issues do not have to be raised through me. I am unaware that any Member has raised that particular issue with the BBC. If I were to raise it, it would be better if I had support from other Members.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that my question is superfluous. Will the Minister ask the BBC that all major cultural events are given equal airtime? Could he possibly fit in the Pope as well, if he is coming? [*Laughter.*]

Mr Poots: Unusually for Mr Dallat, he is correct: his question is superfluous. I know of no cultural event in Northern Ireland other than the Twelfth that attracts 100,000 people every year.

Lord Morrow: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said. Does he agree that the three dates referred to — 12 July, 12 August and Black Saturday — probably draw the biggest crowds of all Northern Ireland's annual events? Does the Minister recognise the importance of that? Will he reassure the House that he will take up that matter with the BBC, bearing in mind that there is a perception among the unionist and Protestant community that the BBC does not always give fair coverage to those events?

Mr Poots: I recognise the importance of those events because the community recognises the importance of them. That is demonstrated by the numbers that attend

those events. Some have set out to denigrate that aspect of our culture, and that is unfortunate.

As I indicated in my response to the initial question, I have had, and will continue to have, meetings with the Loyal Orders. There is a great opportunity to introduce more tourists to Northern Ireland as a consequence of the marching season, and much can be done to add to the existing colour, music and variety of the event. If we build upon that, much can be done that will be positive for Northern Ireland and its community.

Mr Speaker: The Member who is due to ask question 8 is not in his place.

Proposed Libraries Authority

9. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the proposed library authority will have a member, or members, of staff with expertise in sourcing external funding. (AQO 740/08)

Mr Poots: External funding is additional to public funding and can be valuable in providing targeted provision in particular areas or for pilot projects. Such funding forges useful partnerships that are for the benefit of the funding provider, the library service, and most importantly library customers. A number of existing library staff already have experience in successfully sourcing external funding and will employ that expertise on their transfer to the library authority.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House about the arrangements that will be put in place to ensure that the proposed library authority will have a member, or members of staff, with the expertise to source external funding?

Mr Poots: Existing library staff already have a degree of knowledge about sourcing external funding. We have been successful in obtaining £300,453 from the EU under the Special EU Programmes Body for the inspiring readers project. In addition, the cross-border mobile library will receive £231,539. For the Bookstart project, Peace III funding has been used to cover salary and subsistence costs for an early-years support worker until June 2008. In the Belfast Central Library, the European information point, which is one of only two in Northern Ireland, has received European funding for staff training costs, including staff time and materials.

As far as lottery funding is concerned, we have received £202,000 for information and communication technologies from 2001-04, and the electronic libraries project received £4.5 million. We have also received funding from the British Council, Belfast City Council, Starbucks, W H Smith, Open College Network Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the victims' strategy implementation fund. Therefore, there is a history of success in

sourcing external funding, and the relevant expertise will remain part of the Library Service.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister recognise the sterling work carried out over many years by local councillors on the library committees of the five education and library boards to ensure that local services reflect local needs? Will he ensure that the proposed centralised library authority will have councillor representation in its membership to ensure that the vital reflection of public opinion is retained on that body?

Mr Poots: That issue has been discussed with the Committee for Culture, Arts, and Leisure and it is something of which I am very cognisant. I trust that it will be reflected in the final legislation.

Mr Speaker: I must bring Question Time to a halt as the remaining Members on the list to ask questions are not in the House.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Co-ownership and Shared Equity

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers. — [Mr Gardiner.]

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The main issue with any house purchasing scheme is affordability to the buyer. One third of younger working households cannot afford to buy. It is possible that many people who rent privately would take advantage of the co-ownership scheme to get on to the property ladder. A number of independent research projects have confirmed the usefulness of co-ownership and its effectiveness as a way of assisting people to buy affordable homes. The scheme can be user-friendly and does focus on the needs of aspiring local homebuyers.

The private-rental sector plays an important role in meeting housing needs. It has been recommended that consideration be given to the merits of assessing all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme in order to ensure that it tackles need and has an impact on waiting lists.

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

4.00 pm

The private-rental sector has grown steadily during the past 10 years. There are now 49,000 privately rented dwellings. That sector plays an important role in meeting housing needs, particularly in areas where there is high demand for social housing. Households have no choice but to turn to the private-rental sector because there is little or no public housing available in areas such as my constituency. At present, there are approximately 37,000 people on the waiting list for public housing. It seems sensible that consideration be given to the merits of assessing all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme in order to ensure that it deals with need and waiting lists.

In recent years, there has been concern over the erratic and uncertain level of funding that is provided for co-ownership. Co-Ownership Housing contributes to the social housing budget. A realistic and sustained level of funding is required to ensure that the scheme continues to develop. However, funding has continued to decrease from £12.9 million to £7.9 million. Projected funding is just over £5 million. The steady decrease in funding means that there has been a decrease in the number of houses that are available.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a report in 2006, which recommended lowering the initial equity stake that eligible applicants can purchase, as was

mentioned earlier. Lowering the initial equity stake that eligible applicants can purchase in order to access the scheme would enable more households to participate. The initial equity stake currently stands at 40%, and could be reduced to a minimum of 25%. Entry to the scheme could be at any 5% interval between 25% and 75%. Those changes would encourage more people to participate in co-ownership.

Co-Ownership Housing must increase awareness of the scheme and encourage more people to participate. As someone who was involved in the advice sector for many years before becoming an MLA, I was struck by the lack of knowledge of co-ownership. The benefits of the scheme are not always recognised. Perhaps public perceptions need to be addressed and changed. The co-ownership scheme can certainly help to alleviate some of the housing problems that exist. Priority must be given to people who are on the social-housing waiting list. The lack of affordable social housing represents a huge crisis.

There is a caveat to the motion, insofar as the Semple Review panel has not yet reported; it is however, due to do so soon. This problem must be dealt with urgently and properly; not by rhetoric, but by positive action.

Mr Shannon: Mr Speaker, A'hm strangly fer this motion accause the reality bes at hit's no exaggeration tae alloo hoo monie fowk ir i a state o' hoosin crisis. I particular yin hes mich cympany wi' thaim buyin hooses fer the furst tim.

The price o' hooses bes a bag worry fer clatters o' mae constituents acroass Strangford es A houl hit tae bae acroass Norlin Airlan'.

Waefully fer monie fowk the thocht o' ownin' the hame yin bides in hes cum tae bae a fadin' hope fer the price o' hooses aa the mannit maks ownin a hoose impossible.

This hes an' wul cairry oan haein a waefu' effect oan oor society an' hit's social an' economic progress. Action bes needed the noo tae address thon.

Monie noo face intae awffy hannlins in tryin' tae get a fit oan the furst rung o' the hoosin ladder by buyin thair furst hame.

It is no exaggeration to state that many people are facing a housing crisis. Therefore, I am strongly in favour of the motion, particularly because it empathises with the desperate plight of first-time buyers. Housing affordability is a concern for many of my constituents in Strangford and for people throughout the rest of Northern Ireland.

Sadly, for many, the aspiration of owning one's own home has become a fading hope. Current house prices mean that, for those people, homeownership is impossible. That has, and will continue to have, a devastating effect

on society and economic progress. Urgent action is required to address the problem.

Many people now face unprecedented difficulties in attempting to get their foot on the first rung of the housing ladder. I could provide many examples of that. I will cite the example of a young woman, a graduate and a professional who works in Newtownards. She has just got a 40-year mortgage for a small terraced house. Pain is etched on the faces of parents who come to my constituency office and tell me that their children have had to move considerable distances from Newtownards in order to be able to afford their own home. That is unsustainable in the long term.

One does not have to look too far to see the crisis in housing affordability. According to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors — and it should know — in April 2007, house prices rose faster in Northern Ireland than in any other region of the United Kingdom. For the first quarter of 2007, the average cost of a home in Northern Ireland stood at almost £216,000. In my constituency of Strangford, the figure is more than £10,000 in excess of that.

There was a change of 40·1% in the average cost of property in Northern Ireland in the past quarter and a change of 11·9% in the past year. Those may seem to be simply paper figures, but they are much more than that. It is salutary to note that the Council of Mortgage Lenders has noted a sharp slowdown in mortgage lending in the UK for September 2007 — a dip of 12%. We must acknowledge that that is a disaster for first-time buyers. We must address urgently the social, family and economic challenges that house prices present. Research indicates that the cost of housing has led to many couples delaying having a family — with all the implications that that has for our ageing population.

Affording a mortgage has led to many families having to rely on two incomes — just to get by — which has an impact on family life. If we do not take action now — and we must take action now — how many of the key workers in our society, such as nurses, will find it impossible to live, work and own their homes in their local areas? Many schemes, such as the Living over the Shop town centre initiative, can help. We need to allocate land specifically for social housing. Co-ownership is clearly part of the solution and must be part of long-term strategic housing planning. Co-ownership allows people to have a home without having to raise the entire mortgage. If a person can raise 50% of the mortgage, he or she can rent the remaining 50%. If the person's financial position improves, he or she can acquire more of the mortgage on the property — perhaps 75%. Eventually, he or she can gain total ownership of the property.

We need to expand the co-ownership scheme to alleviate housing stress. Evidence across the UK

indicates that it is increasingly difficult to access co-ownership and that there are lengthening waiting lists. We can all say amen to that. Affordable housing assists in building strong communities. Health, education and the core of family life improves with better social housing.

Across Members' constituencies, we all understand and appreciate the needs and aspirations of families in relation to housing. In supporting the motion, I seek to have a healthy, affordable, and — above all — sustainable property market that has the capacity to meet those identified needs. I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I apologise to the House because I failed, until now, to declare and register an interest in the motion, given that I have a married relative who is an employee of the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Ltd. I now place that on the record.

The issue of affordability cannot be approached simply from the point of view of housing supply. At the heart of affordability lies the purchaser's ability to buy. That is the core issue that today's motion addresses. There is a need for more flexible financial instruments that would enable that to happen. Those adjustments could be put in place without the need for legislation in what is already an over-regulated market. We have only one vehicle for shared ownership in Northern Ireland — the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Ltd. That compares with 101 shared-ownership housing associations across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Wales has 10 shared-ownership housing associations; the south-west of England has 15; the Midlands has 12; London and the south-east has 43; the north-east, with a population of 2·5 million, has eight; and the north-west has 12. Interestingly, in Scotland, where house-price rises are considerably slower than they are here, there is, just like here, only one shared-ownership association. The national average indicates that there is one housing association for every 500,000 people.

However, I do not believe that the answer lies in a greater number of agencies or housing associations offering shared ownership mortgages. Rather, the answer lies in widening the range of options that are available through shared ownership.

I make it clear that the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association deserves our praise for its work — it has done a very good job. A recent analysis by Professors McGreal, Berry and Adair on behalf of the Department for Social Development noted, and confirmed, the ability of the co-ownership scheme to bring an appreciable number of households into the owner-occupied sector over the past 25 years. That was achieved at a relatively low cost, and, indeed, the association has been a net contributor of funds to Government over the past 10 years.

A recent study concluded that the co-ownership scheme had been a highly cost-effective initiative for the public purse. However, we should be concerned about the first-time buyer, not just the public purse. The housing market is driven in part by population growth. Northern Ireland's population has grown by 75,000 in the past eight years, which, apart from the economic catch-up factor after the end of the so-called Troubles, is one of the main drivers of house prices here. It is a mistake to see Northern Ireland's house-price market as merely a subset of the national UK housing market.

Apart from all those factors, which may see Northern Ireland's housing market improving on national averages, one grim reality lies behind all affordability issues — the interest rate. That interest rate will make mortgages either possible or impossible for first-time buyers. Having said that, widening the equity spread that is taken by shared-ownership housing associations from 40%-75% to 25%-75% would have a considerable impact on affordability.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. He talked about the importance of young people getting on the property ladder. Does he also accept that in Northern Ireland there is a severe shortage of suitable housing for senior citizens, who also sometimes find that they are unable to afford mortgage payments? There is an opportunity to create a co-ownership scheme that is similar to those that operate in many parts of mainland GB for that area of the housing market in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I largely agree with the Member's point. It would be a far better financial option for young people — and, indeed, for older people — and particularly first-time buyers, to own a stake in the home that they live in, rather than simply pay rent. At least they would then have a part share in an appreciating asset. For such individuals, rent money is dead money.

Home ownership is therefore the dream to which people aspire, and we must help them to realise their aspirations in a property-owning and prosperous democracy. It must never become a case of them and us, with the public sector against the private sector. That is the road to nowhere. We, for our part, must ensure that this Assembly provides the mechanism through which that can happen. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Much has been said that does not bear repetition at this point, so I will make a few general points. Given the house-price hyperinflation, as it were, of the past two or more years, everyone in the House recognises that it is clear that we have an affordability crisis.

4.15 pm

However, in the margins at least, we have a mechanism for dealing with that, which is co-ownership. It is clear

that the model and the organisation that we have are admired by others outside this jurisdiction. Some years ago, when at the University of Ulster, I had the benefit of being a student of Alan Murie, who is an expert on housing. In 'A Home of My Own', the report of the Government's low-cost ownership task force, he remarked that Northern Ireland's co-ownership scheme was a real success. He said that:

"The problems with shared ownership in England are partly to do with the diversity of providers"

— which Mr Kennedy referred to —

"and the complexity with detailed differences between different providers. In this sense again Northern Ireland has a great advantage in having a single co-ownership scheme which is tried and tested and presents no problems to lenders and others. It also appears to have been successfully targeted and can be used to achieve mobility within the social rented sector."

That is praise indeed. In our current difficulties it is a useful tool. Furthermore, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2003-04 also praised the co-ownership scheme and the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association. It is important to remember, however, that it warned the then direct rule Government thus:

"We are concerned at the erratic and uncertain level of funding provided for co-ownership over recent years. In view of its success, and given the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association's contention that it is a net contributor to the social housing budget, we find this approach difficult to understand. We recommend that a realistic and sustained level of funding is provided to ensure that the co-ownership scheme can continue to develop."

I hope that the Minister for Social Development will take that point on board, as it is important that the co-ownership scheme be properly funded. Reserves can be used, but Government must, nonetheless, play their part in supporting co-ownership.

The Semple Report on affordable housing made several recommendations for the improvement of the co-ownership sector. First, the abolition of current property value limits and a move to an eligibility system, which is an important change in the way that the scheme should develop; secondly, a rolling property portfolio should be introduced, using a proportion of resources to provide for co-ownership; and a reduction in rents charged on equity retained by co-ownership to 2%. That is important, because it will ease the burden on people in that sector. Other Members mentioned the reduction in the initial equity stake from 40% to a minimum of 25%, and entry levels increasing by 5% thereafter on a "staircasing" structure. The Semple Report recommended the abolition of stamp duty or a waiver of land tax. I hope that the Minister for Social Development can influence the Chancellor of the Exchequer in that regard. Sir John Semple also recommended the streamlining of application processes and renewed marketing campaigns with lenders; in other words, engagement with the private

sector. That will provide an imaginative and innovative way of dealing with the co-ownership sector.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion because it furthers the debate on the difficulties that people face in trying to access affordable housing.

However, that is not what all of the motion is about. Sinn Féin has some difficulties with the 10% figure. We have all raised the issue of affordability and how difficult it is, particularly for young people, to get on the first rung of the ladder. According to Advice NI, one young person commented that the property ladder does not even have a first rung. Everyone accepts that there are difficulties.

As a member of the Committee for Social Development, and as a Member of the House, I know that Minister Ritchie has made housing a priority. She has been unequivocal about that, and that has been welcome. Co-ownership is one option on the route to accessibility. However, the figure of 10% could be problematic. Sinn Féin does not want the Assembly to impose that at this stage. The Committee for Social Development has plenty of opportunity to make the argument. In addition, there is an interdepartmental group, chaired by the Minister and advised by a panel of experts on such issues. Both groups use the Semple Report as their reference point.

I will quote from the Semple Report, which I read in research for the debate, as it is relevant to the figure of 10% that is referred to by the motion. How can the Assembly determine the housing market? It is difficult; changes are occurring. Mr Shannon and Mr Burns made the point, and Sinn Féin agrees, that the housing market is fluid. We are concerned that the target of 10% could be limiting, as we cannot predict the market. The Semple Report is the reference point for all the panels and groups that have been set up, and we should have confidence in those groups. On the housing market, the Semple Report states:

“The relationship between demand and supply for lower value private properties, applications for social housing and take up of the right to buy is complex and has a number of external drivers.”

I recommend that the Assembly have confidence in those groups and that, as my party colleagues Mr McCann and Mr Brady said, the Assembly should wait for the interdepartmental group, having been advised by the panel of experts, to report back. The Assembly would then be better informed.

The motion also refers to the expansion of co-ownership to 10% of the housing market. Sinn Féin is in favour of co-ownership per se, but, as the Semple Report points out, it is important that co-ownership be sustainable. All of those points are being taken into account, as I would hope that they would be, in the review. Sin é, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Sinn Féin will abstain on the motion, but we are in favour of its sentiments. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank every Member who contributed to the debate, and I hope to address all the issues that have been raised. However, if I cannot do that today, I am happy to write to Members about any outstanding matters.

I support the thrust of the motion, and having listened to and reflected on Members' contributions, the one recurrent theme was that there is insufficient affordable and social housing throughout Northern Ireland to meet the need and demand. I have no doubt that the draft Budget provides an inadequate capital resource for my Department over the next three years. However, I am exploring other options to raise private finance.

I hope that my ministerial colleagues and all Assembly Members will support my attempts to secure an adequate budget for the provision of social housing over the next three years. That is required to deal with the extremely difficult area of demand: the 36,000 people who are on social housing lists, many of whom are homeless. I want to set the record straight on that matter.

I have seen at first hand the problems that potential first-time buyers face when they try to get a foot on the housing ladder. I am determined to do all that I can to help those in greatest need. I am keen to act quickly to increase the supply of affordable housing, thereby offering real opportunities to potential first-time buyers who have recently been priced out of the market. I am fully committed to implementing those recommendations of Sir John Semple's report on affordable housing that will increase the supply of homes.

One of Sir John Semple's main recommendations on shared equity is to maintain co-ownership as the only shared ownership scheme in Northern Ireland. The clear benefit of a single scheme is that it is easier to understand and to deliver, and it enjoys considerable support, not least from many members of the expert panel that I established to advise on affordability.

I hope that Members will agree that the existing co-ownership scheme has been a success story over the past 29 years. The simple, flexible model, sponsored by my Department and operated by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association, meets a range of housing needs. Since 1978, nearly 20,000 households have been helped onto the housing ladder, 16,000 of whom have progressed to full ownership of their homes.

As Members know, co-ownership is a transitional housing tenure scheme that offers first-time buyers a stake in their first home and an opportunity to buy more equity as their circumstances allow. The scheme aims to encourage buyers to progress to full purchase

of their homes, at which point the income generated is recycled to help other first-time buyers.

Property purchases are at a 10-year high, and activity this year is already treble that of 2006. Commitments have been made to purchase some 800 properties that will be occupied in 2007-08. The popularity of co-ownership is likely to continue for some time. I am committed to working with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to increase capacity, but make no mistake: finding the funding to meet the large rise in demand will be challenging. I need everyone's support to ensure that the provision of various types of social and affordable housing remains a number-one priority, which is a clear reflection of the extremely active housing market.

Although there are signs that the market has cooled in certain areas in the past few months, many first-time buyers are still unable to afford their first home. Some rent privately or extend the time that they live with parents. Others add to the growing waiting lists in social housing's rented sector. They represent what is known as the intermediate housing market, which describes potential first-time buyers who work and often pay rent, but are unable to buy a house at the lower end of the market. My Department aims to help that group by providing shared-equity solutions.

However, as acknowledged by several experts, including Sir John Semple, determining the size of the intermediate housing market and assessing where best to target assistance to meet the need and demand is no easy task.

Nevertheless, it is clear that action must be taken. I assure Members of my firm commitment to doing all that I can to give potential first-time buyers a foot on the housing ladder. My main focus in the short to medium term is to increase the supply of affordable housing and to improve the co-ownership scheme further, in order to ensure that potential first-time buyers who have been priced out of the market receive the necessary help.

4.30 pm

In the Semple Report, recommendations on improving the co-ownership scheme include removing the system of property-price limits and making the scheme easier to access, especially for those on lower incomes. I support the thrust of those proposals, and I am examining carefully their implications.

I am also committed to the introduction of developer contributions, as provided for in article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, as quickly as possible. That will require developers to provide a percentage of their private housing schemes for affordable housing, both social-rented and private equity-shared. I have been heartened by the support from my ministerial colleagues Arlene Foster and Conor Murphy and their departmental officials on the issue. I am meeting

Arlene Foster tomorrow to examine ways in which to speed up the introduction of developer contributions.

I am encouraged by the early signs that affordable housing has been provided on new developments. There is a good example of that in Derry where ILEX, the urban regeneration company, is setting aside a large number of units on the Ebrington site for private affordable housing.

I continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to explore other avenues to increase supply. I saw the benefits of partnership between the Co-Ownership Housing Association and Habitat for Humanity when I visited the Model Farm project in Downpatrick on 15 June and on 20 October. Such projects will play an important role in delivering community self-build houses for lower-income households. Habitat for Humanity has other schemes in Northern Ireland. I am encouraging the Co-Ownership Housing Association to develop proposals for other pilots and initiatives, including closer working relationships with other housing associations and private-sector developers.

Funding is always an issue, and we must find new and innovative ways in which to lever more private finance into the housing arena. To that end, I am working with Baroness Ford, the chairperson of English Partnerships, to identify opportunities and to learn from experiences elsewhere. My officials have been in discussions with the Council of Mortgage Lenders, and I will host a seminar in Belfast on 28 November on making best use of private finance. The Council of Mortgage Lenders is bringing across eight members of financial institutions that are not currently involved in lending to affordable housing schemes in Northern Ireland. All housing associations, including the Co-Ownership Housing Association, the Housing Executive and other key stakeholders, such as the Northern Ireland Housing Council and the Semple panel of experts, have been invited. I look forward to an interesting and, I hope, fruitful day.

I acknowledge the recent success of Fold, Clanmil and BIH housing associations, who together recently negotiated a good deal with Barclays Bank for their borrowing for the next three years. That is a great example of housing associations working together to procure services for the benefit of a group. It augurs well for the introduction of my Department's procurement strategy, which requires all housing associations to come together in groups to negotiate better services and management for the whole movement.

Mr Gardiner referred to changes in the level of equity to be purchased initially. The Semple Report recommended changes to the co-ownership scheme, including a lower level of equity to be purchased. I am considering those recommendations carefully. Michelle McIlveen asked why there are lower price limits in some

district councils. Again, that is based on market value in given areas. Land and Property Services provides that data.

Fra McCann referred to different schemes to be introduced, and I clearly understand the benefits of one scheme covered in his speech. However, the panel of experts has set up a subgroup to look at the whole co-ownership scheme and whether it needs to be amended to meet different situations. The panel will report back to me before Christmas, and I will reflect on all the recommendations. I assure everyone that I have not just set those committees up for the sake of it. I set them up with a purpose in mind: to provide me with the best possible advice on the way forward.

Anna Lo raised the issue of whether the co-ownership scheme should target areas where the affordability problem is greatest for first-time buyers. There is some evidence to suggest that certain areas suffer greater affordability problems than others. As I work with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to improve the current scheme, I will ask it to develop proposals to market and target the scheme to address that issue.

Ms Lo also asked whether the current price limits would be increased or abolished. The abolition of price limits for the co-ownership scheme is one of the recommendations in the Semple Report, and that will be considered along with other changes to the scheme recommended by the affordability review.

Jonathan Craig referred to future funding and the whole area of the comprehensive spending review. I agreed the Budget on the understanding that it was a draft Budget for consultation, with the final allocations to be agreed by the Executive in early January 2008. I assure the Assembly that I will be pushing for a greater level of funding than that proposed in the draft Budget to meet the important housing challenges that I face, and which I have already outlined.

I do not face the housing challenge on my own; the Executive, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland also face it, particularly the many young people who have experienced terrible difficulties in accessing the first rung on the property ladder. People experience many other difficulties, such as homelessness and living in houses that do not meet the decent-house standard. We must be able to continually address those issues, and I will be seeking the support of everyone in order to do that, although funding will always be a challenge.

Mickey Brady raised the need to assess all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme, which is the key to the social-housing waiting list and the basis and technique used to allocate houses in the social-rented sector. Shared ownership is aimed at the intermediate housing market, which includes some households on the social-housing waiting list. The

common selection scheme is not an appropriate tool to determine access to co-ownership.

Danny Kennedy raised the issue of whether other registered housing associations are interested in operating co-ownership schemes, and there are a number of registered housing associations that might be able to do that. However, in Northern Ireland, lenders and estate agents prefer to work with one organisation. A few registered housing associations are currently working with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to provide for affordable housing.

My friend Mr Maginness raised issues and some research that was pointed up by various organisations, including a former lecturer of his at the University of Ulster. Another was raised by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee when it undertook an inquiry into housing in Northern Ireland. I assure Mr Maginness that my officials and I will look into those particular matters, and I will return to him with my findings.

Finally, Claire McGill asked what 10% of the housing market represents. That is difficult to know: 10% of overall new building; 10% of the social-housing development programme; 10% of houses for sale at any time? We could be talking about large numbers, and we need to take that into account.

With the support of my Executive colleagues and of this Assembly, I am confident that we can address affordability problems and increase support for first-time home buyers. Lest we forget, that is the challenge facing the Executive, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Ulster Unionist Party for proposing the motion, and I also thank the Minister for making the winding-up speech on my behalf — it was very good of her.

The motion is designed to address the issue of affordability. Until now, most of the focus in the debate on house prices has been on the actual price of the homes, the availability of land for housing, the possibility of up to 20% of new buildings being reserved for affordable housing, and public investment in social housing. The consequent debate has been somewhat unbalanced, given that it has not addressed the fundamental question of how those who are seeking to get their feet on the first rung of the ladder — if it exists — can finance that undertaking. The twin pillars of the motion seek to address that problem. The first pillar is a call to end buy-to-let mortgages, and the second seeks an extension to the lower level of equity that an individual must find to obtain a co-ownership or shared-ownership mortgage.

On 5 June, the Council of Mortgage Lenders revealed that the number of first-time buyers had fallen sharply from 18,300 in 2001 to roughly 8,000 in 2006, which is the lowest level in 26 years. The numbers of people getting on the property ladder here fell from 700 in

August 2006 to just 400 for the same period this year. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive stated that the number of new home buyers in the Province has fallen considerably in recent years, with first-time buyers now accounting for less than 30% of the overall market. Between 2000 and 2005, there was a 24% decline in the number of first-time buyers in Northern Ireland, compared to a fall of just 7% in the UK as a whole. First-time buyers make up 31% of the total housing market in Northern Ireland, compared to 36% in GB. Northern Ireland has also witnessed a strong growth in house-price inflation in recent years. It rose from 22% in 2005 to 30% by mid-2006, which is higher than any other region in the UK.

Clearly, there is an acute problem in the Province that will have to be addressed through extraordinary measures. The Council of Mortgage Lenders proposed a wider shared-equity scheme, which is a suggestion that I first made in 2005. In October 2007, I again suggested an extension to the level of co-ownership from the present 4% to about 10%. I also suggested that more flexible shared-equity options should be offered, such as a 25% to 75% option. That would make homes more affordable for more people.

In his report on the review into affordable housing, Sir John Semple stated that there is scope for the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to expand its business and that since its inception in 1978, the association has helped some 19,000 people to enjoy home ownership. Sir John also drew attention to the limits of the scheme, which largely relate to the rise in house prices. He also pointed out that the only action that the Department for Social Development took to address the problem was to raise the qualifying house-price limits for NICHHA co-ownership loans to reflect more accurately market conditions by area. Nothing had been done to address the range of shared-equity options that was available to the home buyer. On 2 July 2007, I raised the matter in a supplementary question to the Minister, Margaret Ritchie, and I suggested that a wider range of equity options should be available than exists under the present co-ownership scheme. In reply, she said that she would consider that matter as part of the implementation of the affordability review.

Other countries have developed strategies for dealing with the problems that first-time buyers face. I could refer to strategies in Canada, but, for obvious reasons, I will not refer to those in America. The Assembly must develop strategies that are appropriate to our situation, and it should address causes and circumstances that are particular to us. That is why the twin-track approach is a good idea. It will end the false competition that was introduced into the system by buy-to-let mortgages, and it will widen financing options for first-time buyers in order that they can afford to get at least some equity

on their home. At present, many prospective homeowners are forced to stay in the rental trap, where their money is essentially dead because it earns them no return and never becomes an investment.

I will review those contributions that the Minister has left untouched for me.

In a nutshell, the debate is about need — not greed — in the housing market. The current need has been mentioned by many Members, and I will not go over those issues again, but I remind Sinn Féin Members that the motion calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to “at least 10%” of the overall housing market. We had to decide on a figure, and 10% is the figure that we looked at. It is not set in stone.

4.45 pm

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr K Robinson: No, I will not give way at this time, if the Member does not mind.

We are trying to achieve a consensus to move the issue forward. I am encouraged by what the Minister said in her summary: she is working with the parties. I appeal to Sinn Féin to find a way to move forward with us on this issue. I know that it has decided to abstain from voting, but from what I heard today, I believe that all Members are, more or less, on the same wavelength.

Sam Gardiner mentioned buy-to-let mortgages and how they have contributed to pushing up the property prices. That core issue must be addressed.

Michelle McIlveen talked about the first-time buyer being disadvantaged, and she mentioned the difficulties faced by householders here when one considers the differences in pay between here and Great Britain. She said that in many cases one owner is working to pay off the mortgage, but I suggest that two owners are working to pay it off.

Fra McCann pointed out Sinn Féin's difficulties with the motion, and he referred to article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. The Minister mentioned article 40 in her contribution.

Tommy Burns referred to the housing crisis. I tried not to use that language in my speech, but I know exactly what he means. There is a housing crisis, and we all recognise that.

Anna Lo talked about house prices in her South Belfast constituency in particular, where there are extreme pressures put on some of the housing because it is perceived as being an affluent area of the city. She mentioned the need for more investment in the co-ownership schemes.

Jonathan Craig said that the debate on co-ownership is increasingly relevant, and he referred to the positive impact on the social housing lists that the co-ownership schemes could achieve.

Mickey Brady stated that there are 49,000 people living in private-rented social-sector housing, because insufficient numbers of public housing have been built, and even many of those that have been built are no longer available for public letting.

Jim Shannon talked about clatters of his constituents having worries about the housing situation, and he said that the housing crisis is having a devastating affect on society. He also highlighted the fact that the crisis is breaking up social cohesion, because people have to move a considerable distance out of their area to find an affordable house. Therefore the support mechanisms that they would give in other social settings are also being broken up.

Danny Kennedy talked about widening the options for co-ownership, and he complimented the association in Northern Ireland on being a cost-effective mechanism for the Government and first-time buyers.

Tom Elliott referred to the plight of our senior citizens — compared to those in other parts of the United Kingdom — and their being unable to get access to co-ownership and shared equity schemes, and I think that all Members are aware of that. That will be a growing problem in future years.

Alban Maginness said that our single system is not only helpful in its present form, but is admired outside Northern Ireland. It is not often that that is said about our systems, but he also expressed concern over the erratic levels of funding. The Minister also referred to that, and her winding-up speech contained several commercials for more money.

Claire McGill welcomed the motion for furthering the debate and expressed the Sinn Féin reservations about the 10% figure mentioned in the motion. She also said that there might not currently be a first rung on the property ladder. That was worth listening to.

Minister Ritchie undertook to address the issues concerned. She took up the theme of the lack of affordable housing in areas across Northern Ireland, and she said that her budget is less than adequate, but, as my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety did in Question Time last Monday, she also stressed that it is only a draft Budget. She will explore private finance — which is to be welcomed — and she referred to the support for the existing single co-ownership scheme that has already helped 20,000 people on to the housing ladder and enabled some to progress up it. It is good that the income generated by those schemes can be recycled to help others join them.

The Minister also mentioned funding in that regard, and she was more eloquent in making her case for more funding than I could be. Her comments on article 40 of The Planning (Northern Order) 1991 will help to ease some Sinn Féin concerns, particularly those mentioned by Fra McCann. Developers should provide a greater

input: they should be brought to account on that. The practice of land banking is a scandal, and if the Assembly can bring developers into the loop in order to help in the provision of social housing, it should do so.

The Minister also replied to several other Members, but I will not repeat any of that. I simply reiterate my plea to Sinn Féin to support the motion, so that we can adopt a united approach.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

