
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to ask you whether you intend to hold a reception to celebrate the remarkable performance of the Northern Ireland football team and its supporters in the quest for qualification for the 2008 European Football Championship finals?

Mr Speaker: Order, order. That is certainly not an appropriate point of order, but I am sure that the appropriate Minister is listening.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate on the review of public administration on 13 November 2007, the Deputy Speaker rebuked the Minister of the Environment and me for supposed “political point scoring”. Do you intend to investigate the issue? That seems to be a very inappropriate use of language by the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That issue was brought to my attention immediately after the debate, and I understand that the appropriate Minister has written to me. I assure Members on all sides of the House that the matter will be dealt with.

Mr O’Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking a ruling in relation to the debate on Irish-medium club banks that was held on 13 November 2007. During that debate, Mr Dominic Bradley intervened to state that:

“during the establishment of the national schools in Ireland ... Irish-speaking children were made to wear a bata scoir — a tally stick — around the neck. Each time a child spoke Irish, a notch was cut in the tally stick, and the child was later punished for each notch.” — [*Official Report, Vol 25, No 4, p174, col 2*].

From the opposite Benches, Mr McNarry was clearly heard to state “Good enough for them”. Is that appropriate language for a Member to use in relation to child punishment? Also, why was that remark not recorded in the Hansard report?

Mr Speaker: Fairly soon, I shall turn to several issues regarding this House. I hope that when I have finished, Members will understand where I am coming from and what I am saying to the House. It is a statement, rather than anything else.

I wish to make a statement on a number of issues, some of which were raised as points of order during the sittings of 12 and 13 November 2007. I shall begin by making a number of general points.

First, let me make it clear that, in my view, Members resort more often than is necessary to raising points of order in the Assembly. Many of these remarks are not points of order at all, and others are raised to oppose or defend points of order that have already been made. In either case, the remarks often refer to matters that could be more appropriately dealt with other than on the Floor of the Chamber, and often to greater effect.

That is not to say that Members have not raised valid and helpful points of order: they have, and those are very welcome. However, I appeal to Members to be more understanding when using points of order. I have often said to Members from all sides of the House that I understand that, on occasions, making a point of order is the only time on which a Member can speak on a particular subject. I have been fairly lenient in allowing Members to intervene on serious issues, especially if they make very quick points of order. If, however, all sides of the House abuse that facility, I must deal with the issue in another way.

Secondly, too often in recent weeks, a number of Members, in their choice of language, have failed to display the good temper that should characterise proper parliamentary debate. There are seasoned politicians in the Chamber who will say that the moderation of language is the characteristic of any debate.

I recognise that this is a debating Chamber, and it is understandable that, on occasions, debates can raise the temper of some Members. However, Members must moderate their language in any future debates. Furthermore, Members should be mindful that points of order — and interventions from this Chair — would be less common were they to behave in that way.

With regard to the recent point of order, I said on Monday 12 November that I intended to make a ruling on the phrase “misleading this House”, which was used by Mrs I Robinson during questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on Monday 5 November. I shall do so in a moment.

Since that debate, on Tuesday 13 November 2007, Mr P Robinson made a point of order in which he asked me to consider whether breaches of Standing Orders must be dealt with promptly and at the time at which they take place, or can be dealt with retrospectively. In making his point of order, Mr Robinson referred to Erskine

May, to which Speakers of this Assembly refer when our Standing Orders and conventions do not provide guidance on matters of order.

In one respect, I agree with Mr Robinson. Members should, where possible, raise what they feel to be breaches of order at the time at which they occur, or as soon as possible thereafter. Those matters will be dealt with at the time, or after reflection. However, I will not be drawn into lengthy searches of the Official Reports of previous sittings. Once again, I make the point that were any Member to come to me immediately after a debate with a fairly important point about which he or she feels very strongly, I believe that I have a duty to try to respond to that point.

However, if Members are going to come to me days or weeks later, that is a different issue. Nevertheless, neither Erskine May nor our conventions state that it is beyond the Speaker's authority to rule retrospectively on any matter of order. I reserve the right to deal with matters that come to my attention as I deem appropriate.

Finally, Members, I will move on to the use of the phrase "misleading this House" by Mrs Robinson. Although I did not hear it at the time, the remark was recorded in the Official Report. Having reflected on the matter and taken my own counsel on the issue, I believe that the remark was unparliamentary. As I said, I am guided by our own Standing Orders and conventions, and then by Erskine May, which clearly states that the term is unparliamentary.

I am aware — and Dr McCrea has raised the issue — of a recent ruling by the Speaker of the House of Commons that suggests that the term may not be unparliamentary in certain circumstances. It will be for the authors of Erskine May to decide how that may be reflected in a future edition. In my view, the remark is clearly unparliamentary.

I know that Mrs Robinson is not in the House today; I intend to deal with the issue at the next appropriate sitting when she is in the House.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not clear from the statement that you have made just what the guidance is to Members. First of all, you said that you will not allow days to pass before you deal with a complaint. However, it appears, in this particular instance, that although, by your own admission, the complaint was not made until nearly a week after the event — which, in my interpretation, is "days" — you have still made a judgement on it. Secondly, in the House of Commons, the Speaker has ruled that the Prime Minister is exempt from being ruled unparliamentary when he uses the term "misleading". Why has a different attitude been adopted by you in this House?

Mr Speaker: I believe that I made myself absolutely clear on this issue. Mrs Robinson's remark was reported to me directly after Question Time on Monday 5 November. I have said to Members on all sides of the House

that if they come to me a week later, two weeks later or three weeks later, I will have to reflect on a different issue. I hope that the Member is not saying that if somebody comes to me directly after a debate to raise a very serious issue, I cannot reflect on it. Surely not.

I think that I have made myself quite clear. I am not prepared to take any further points of order, and I intend to move on. If Members read the Hansard report, they will know that I am very clear on this issue.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on the same issue?

Mr Attwood: It is not on the same issue.

Mr Speaker: OK.

Mr Attwood: I am seeking clarification, Mr Speaker. Is your statement not only in response to the matter that has just been referred to —

Some Members: Same issue.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: It is a point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is the same point of order, or coming very close to it.

Mr Attwood: My question is whether your statement is a response to previous points of order in respect of comments made during the bill of rights debate in the Assembly a number of weeks ago.

Can you clarify whether the height of your response to those points of order is what you have just outlined?

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I have made a general ruling, because several points of order were raised on all sides of the House that were not real points of order. I hope that my ruling lays down a marker and will draw a line under all those issues. I hope that my response is helpful to the Member.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I note what you say, but I must raise a number of issues. First, the comments that were made during the debate on the membership of the Bill of Rights Forum were —

Mr Speaker: I will not allow the Member to continue. I ask him to take his seat. Today, I have tried to deal generally with points of order that have come to my attention. If I were to deal with every point of order raised, which was not a point of order, we would probably spend a week in the Chamber in an attempt to deal with them all. I hope that all sides of the House appreciate that. I will not allow the Member, or any other Member, to raise a further point of order.

I have also noticed in recent weeks that when asked to take their seats, some Members have not done so. In fact, I have had to call to account two Members, if not three, on at least three occasions for their not taking their seats. If that happens in future, I assure the House that those Members will not be called during debate.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Petition of Concern: Irish-Medium Club Bank

Motion proposed [13 November]:

That this Assembly opposes the introduction of a club-bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland. — [Miss McIlveen.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that a valid petition of concern was presented on Tuesday 13 November on the Irish-medium club-bank motion that was being debated on that day.

Under Standing Order 27, the vote could not be taken until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee agreed that the vote should be taken as the first item of business today.

I also remind Members that another effect of the petition of concern is that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 47.

AYES

Unionist:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy,

Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Other:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Brady.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>(49.46%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>(0.00%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>(100.00%)</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>(0.00%)</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

12.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At about this time last week, a bus that had equipment to screen women for cervical cancer was ordered out of the Markets area of south Belfast by a Sinn Féin election agent. Is it in order to ask that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety makes a statement to the House about the details of that incident and that he describes any alternative arrangements that have been put in place to resume that screening service?

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say that that is not an appropriate point of order, no matter how strongly the Member might feel about the matter. Once again, I am sure that the Minister is listening.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Speaker and, undoubtedly, the whole House will be aware of the two recent brutal attacks against police officers, one of which occurred in Londonderry and the other in Dungannon. Do you believe that it would be appropriate for you, sir, to send a message of support to those officers and their families on behalf of the entire House, thus demonstrating the utter condemnation that the House has for such attacks on our police officers?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member has said. I will reflect on his request; however, I believe that tabling a motion to debate the matter is the appropriate way in which to deal with it.

I shall come back to the first issue that I dealt with this afternoon. Members will be aware that I clarified that the manner in which the word "misleading" was used in a debate on 5 November 2007 was unparliamentary. I call on Mrs Robinson to withdraw the remark.

Mrs I Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Naturally, I have respect for the high office that you hold. However, your ruling does not allow me to establish the truth, which is that, despite his protestations, our Health Minister did indeed sign off on the draft Budget.

Therefore, in order that the truth is not compromised, I will not withdraw my comments.

In another place, our Prime Minister used the same word, and the Speaker ruled that the use of that word was not against Erskine May. Following that incident, when a Back Bencher actually accused the Speaker of misleading the House, the use of the word was not ruled out of order. Despite the fact that Members who have since come to you to make the complaint did not do so on the very day that I made my comment, with respect to you, I disagree with your ruling. I cannot and will not withdraw my remark, given that I was trying to establish the truth.

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member that as she has not withdrawn the comment, under Standing Order 60, I shall order her to leave the Assembly and its precincts for the rest of the day.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understood that in an earlier ruling that you made today, you said that you would deal with this matter at the next sitting of the House at which the Member concerned were present. This sitting is the same as that in which you made your ruling, but you have spoken about what would happen after today.

Mr Speaker: No. I will clarify what I said: I said that I would deal with the matter as soon as the Member was present in the House.

Lord Morrow: You said, “at the next appropriate sitting”.

Mr Speaker: I am dealing with it now. I have asked the Member to withdraw.

Mrs I Robinson: Very well, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When can we expect you to deal with the issues, which must be dealt with, of other Members, who said nothing worse than what Mrs Robinson said?

Mr Speaker: I have already had two Members from another party in my office this morning about those issues. I intend to deal with them. I understand the rule, and there could be an apology on one of those issues.

Let me say to Members on all sides of the House that it gives me no satisfaction to stand here this morning and make rulings on some of these issues. In fact, I came to them with a very heavy heart. Members need to understand that. They must understand clearly that I do not fudge issues, and I certainly do not shirk issues. I will take issues on, now and in the future. Let me make it clear that, irrespective of what side of the House an issue comes from, I will deal with it — no matter how difficult it may be.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Agricultural Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agricultural sectoral format — *[Interruption.]*

Order, Members.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 about the eighth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the agriculture sector, which was held in Harvey’s Point Country Hotel in Donegal on Friday 9 November. The Executive were represented by the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster MLA, and me. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Coughlan TD, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This statement has been agreed with Minister Foster.

The Council noted progress made since the last meeting in September 2002 and welcomed the opportunity to come together to discuss co-operation in the agriculture sector. The Council also welcomed the mutually beneficial collaborative work undertaken in response to the recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, bluetongue and avian influenza in Britain.

The Council noted an all-island animal health and welfare strategy paper developed by the North/South animal health and welfare steering group. It agreed that the free movement of animals on the island of Ireland remained the ultimate aim of the animal health and welfare strategy, and that the way forward was through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.

It was noted that the animal health and welfare strategy included a list of initial activities for delivering key elements of the strategy and outlines various milestones and deadlines for the coming months. The Council requested officials to oversee progress on those issues and submit further measures to implement the strategy for approval at the next agriculture sectoral meeting.

The Council agreed that North-South co-operation on plant health should focus on the status of pests and diseases which threaten the island’s plant health and on co-operation on EU matters. There has been ongoing and continued liaison between the North and the South on, for instance, an outbreak of *Phytophthora ramorum*, or sudden oak death — which affects trees and shrubs

— in the North, and brown rot — which affects potatoes — in the South.

It was noted that DARD (the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development) is developing a plant health strategy for Northern Ireland which will include a section on North/South co-operation consistent with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's plant health strategies. The Council also agreed that the work of the North/South pesticide steering group should focus on the production of co-ordinated pesticide usage surveys for grassland and fodder crops and for arable crops.

With regard to the common agricultural policy (CAP), the Council agreed that officials from the Departments should remain in close contact on a range of key issues, including the Council of Ministers' recent adoption of a single common market organisation, the reform of the fruit and vegetable sector and the forthcoming CAP health check. It was noted that future agriculture sectoral meetings would consider and review common challenges and opportunities arising from the EU dimension of agriculture.

The Council noted the work of the North/South steering committee on cross-border rural development. The Council agreed that future work should focus on developing maximum co-operation in implementing rural development programmes and policies, including EU programmes, and examine the scope for a common approach on the feasibility of developing cross-border, area-based strategies and rural development research.

The Council welcomed the progress achieved as a result of the funding provided by EU Peace programmes and requested that officials submit a report and recommendations to the next meeting on the rural development programme 2007-13 and co-operation projects.

It was agreed that the next meeting of the NSMC in agriculture sectoral format would take place in spring 2008. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr W McCrea (Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): As Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I welcome the Minister's statement. The Minister is aware of the Committee's views, and it is important that those views are developed at future Committee meetings.

It is accepted that the animal health and welfare strategy is the primary issue. I am pleased that the Minister outlined that that strategy was noted — not approved — at the meeting and that the way forward is through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.

As an individual member of the Committee, I welcome the fact that there is co-operation and that

complementary policies are being developed. However, as I have said to the Minister on a number of occasions; although I welcome that co-operation, I am glad that that Council noted, rather than approved, the all-Ireland animal health and welfare strategy and that there is co-operation, not convergence.

There is anger in the agriculture industry because nothing effective has been decided that will enable the free movement of animals between Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe. The Minister knows that the issue is important, and the industry wants to know when there will be movement on it.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. An all-island animal health and welfare strategy was discussed at the meeting on Friday 9 November. Therefore, a discussion on the rest of Europe was not part of that meeting.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Regarding the strategy that is in place on North/South co-operation on rural-development issues, is there a list of programmes currently progressing to develop co-operation between the different sectors, particularly concerning agricultural waste?

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

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As I outlined in my statement, officials have been tasked to examine the scope for a common approach to the feasibility of developing cross-border, area-based strategies and rural development research. Therefore, there is a great deal of scope for considering how we can best utilise resources on both sides of the border. Officials will be working to bring forward policies on that matter.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. Far be it from me to support some sort of all-Ireland co-operation. Regarding health checks, will the Minister consider bringing voluntary modulation for farmers in Northern Ireland into line with that in the Republic of Ireland, as their farmers do not have any?

Did any discussions take place at the NSMC meeting regarding the recent reports of BSE outbreaks in the Republic of Ireland? Was that issue on the agenda, and if so, were there any conclusions to it?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. BSE was not discussed at any great length at the meeting; although, obviously, it is part of the working group's work. We had a lot of ground to cover, and BSE was not dealt with specifically.

12.45 pm

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement. However, I am obliged to reiterate my party's commitment to the development of North/South policies on agriculture that will benefit the industry and secure its future. I note that plant health was discussed at the

meeting. I have often said in Committee that I am concerned about the adverse effects that a total ban on some selective weed killers and pesticides may have on the quality of our pasture land and cereal crops. With those comments in mind, I ask that plant health be kept on the agenda.

The Minister stated:

“the way forward is through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.”

Will she give the Assembly some examples of the development of such policies?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As the Member has pointed out, considerable work is ongoing in the North/South pesticides steering group that will focus on producing co-ordinated pesticide usage surveys for grassland, fodder and arable crops. A considerable body of work has been completed, and research has been shared between North and South.

With respect to co-operation and the development of complementary policies, a wide range of groups are covering animal health, epizootic diseases and the free movement of animals. One of the most topical issues is foot-and-mouth disease, and North and South are co-operating with complementary policies which will work well together to keep foot-and-mouth disease out of the island. That is a recent example of how complementary policies are essential if we are to keep out such diseases.

Mr Ford: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement, which, I notice, refers to brown rot in potatoes, which is currently active in the South. Will she give us her assessment of the threat to Northern Ireland potato production from that disease?

Furthermore, I would refer to the Minister’s remarks in answer to P J Bradley’s question on complementary policies. I am surprised that, after five years, any discussion on agriculture in the NSMC did not mention the largest threat to a major sector of agriculture, North and South — Brazilian beef. Was there any discussion of that matter? What proposals does she have for dealing with it on a co-operative basis?

Ms Gildernew: As regards brown rot, much work has been ongoing between the two Departments since the disease was discovered in the South earlier this year. The plant health strategy for the North sets priorities for maintaining and promoting high levels of health in arable and horticultural plants and produce; protecting the natural environment and local agricultural and horticultural industries from imported pests and diseases; and supporting domestic trade and export. We did our best to ensure that brown rot did not spread. All consignments of potatoes from the South were checked, and there was immediate sharing of information with respect to the disease.

The issue of Brazilian beef did not come up at the meeting but was discussed at the press release afterwards. As the Member says, five years of work was surveyed at the meeting, and time was therefore limited. It was a general discussion. We went through all the work that had been done during the past five years and there was not much time to get into the nitty-gritty of any particular issue. However, I see room for further collaboration on all of the issues.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question is on a practical issue. Northern Ireland farmers receive a very poor price for dairy-bred bull calves and, as a result, many are forced to put down those calves at birth because of the lack of markets. Why will the Minister not change the rules in Northern Ireland and make them similar to those in the Irish Republic, which allow exporters to buy calves at local auction markets? That would help the situation that farmers face.

Ms Gildernew: As I have said many times in the Chamber, Committee and in other places, I will do all in my power to help the agriculture industry. However, I do not enjoy the same luxury as the Minister in the South, who represents a member state in the European Union and brings that authority with her when she attends EU meetings. There are also financial issues involved in some cases that prevent me from doing some things.

I do not have specific details on the issue today. However, I will respond in writing to the Member. I assure Members that I will do everything I can to assist the agriculture industry here.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister’s statement and ask her to outline the discussions that she has had about a vaccine being made available in the spring to combat the spread of bluetongue.

Ms Gildernew: While bluetongue was mentioned at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, there was not a specific discussion on the detail of how to deal with it. The steering group, made up of officials from North and South, will deal with that issue. Currently, the EU does not allow vaccination in bluetongue-free areas, so the work that is being done on the basis of the area being bluetongue-free would change if it were unlucky enough to become affected by bluetongue. Officials continue to work on that detail, but it was not discussed at any great length at the meeting.

Mr Shannon: In the Minister’s statement, she said that the Council agreed that North/South co-operation on plant health should focus on pests and diseases as well. Has the Minister made approaches on an east-west basis in order to utilise the expertise and knowledge that the UK Government — and DEFRA in particular — have gained, which could be used to the advantage

of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as the Republic of Ireland? Will the Minister provide a detailed response on that?

Ms Gildernew: My statement dealt with the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on 9 November. However, I can assure the Member that we work with scientists and experts from many places, including DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), to ensure that we are privy to the most up to date scientific information. Officials from my Department work closely with officials from DEFRA on that issue. As part of today's business I do not have detailed information to hand, but I am happy to come back to the Member with that.

Mr Savage: In her statement, the Minister made reference to the reform of the fruit and vegetable sector and the forthcoming CAP health check. In my Upper Bann constituency, there are many apple orchards. Will the Minister elaborate on the effects that the proposed reforms and the CAP health check will have on them? More importantly, will the Minister give an assurance that there will be no detrimental effect to the future of the fruit and vegetable industry in Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As I have discussed before with the Member, the issue of top fruit is part of the new single farm payment regime, and there will be benefits for the orchards of which he speaks. Indeed, I live not too far away and know many of the apple producers and processors. There is good news for that sector, and I reiterate the point that I have made many times before: my Department will do everything that it can do to help any sector. Last week, for example, the Agricultural Forum met in my office in Dundonald House, and work is ongoing between officials and the industry to ensure that we can get the best deal possible.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement and her ministerial colleagues, North and South, for the work that was done at the meeting. The Minister indicated that a future sectoral meeting would receive a report on the next round of the EU programme for peace and reconciliation. Will the Minister ensure that that report addresses not only the peace programme, but also the potential for rural development under the whole range of EU programmes in order to identify those measures, specifically according to programme, but also in aggregate terms, on both sides of the border? In that context, would it be in order for the sectoral format to be used to explore the potential to use some of the moneys in the national development plan's social inclusion pillar to support rural development work, especially, but not only, in border areas?

Ms Gildernew: DARD will not have a formal role in the implementation of Peace III; however, following a call from the Special EU Programmes Body

(SEUPB), the rural development division, along with DCRGA in the South, has submitted an expression of interest to SEUPB for a regional programme of activities with the rural community network (RCN) and Irish Rural Link under the building positive relationships at the local level measure.

That is currently being assessed by the SEUPB. The programme, which is known as a rural enabler, will deal with issues such as sectarianism and racism in rural areas under the following headings: young people; flags and emblems; housing; interfaces; racism; community relations and community development; and rural institutions. The total estimated cost of the programme of activities is £2.4 million, North and South.

Other cross-border opportunities exist. Apart from the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 9 November, I had a meeting in September with Éamon Ó Cuív in Dromahair, County Leitrim, at which several of those issues were discussed. There is great potential to maximise spend — particularly in border areas — by working closely together.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for her statement and for the work that has been done so far in the North/South Ministerial Council. I am particularly grateful for the work that was done at the agricultural sector meeting in Donegal.

An all-Ireland approach to an animal health and welfare strategy benefits everyone, despite the difficulties that some people may have with it. Indeed, it benefits every farmer in Ireland as much as everyone else. It is important that an all-Ireland approach, rather than any other, is taken to animal and plant health.

Have Ministers — North and South — and scientists considered the impact that global warming will have on plant health in Ireland in the future? Further to that, have they considered the effect that it will have on animal health in coming years?

Ms Gildernew: Full co-operation in Ireland on animal and plant health has the potential to help reduce and prevent the spread of disease, to facilitate trade, and to improve the sustainability of farming in the North. The ultimate objective of North/South co-operation should therefore be to facilitate trade by allowing the freer movement of animals on the island and to optimise the animal-health status of Ireland by aligning policies that control animal disease.

Careful consideration must also be given to climate change and to other global factors that may affect plant health. Climate change has implications for much of the Department's work. On Friday 16 November, I visited the marine research vessel, *Corystes*. Climate change featured in several of the discussions on fish stocks and fishing sustainability that I had with the researchers. All the available scientific evidence must be examined.

The steering groups work closely on all those issues, and they share information and scientific knowledge.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Given the importance to the fishing industry of the Fisheries Council meeting in December, can the Minister indicate what discussions on fisheries took place at the agricultural sectoral format meeting and what were their outcomes?

Ms Gildernew: Fisheries were not discussed at that meeting. As I said, the meeting was a chance to overview the work that has been carried out on animal and plant health and rural development over the past few years. There was no specific discussion on fisheries.

However, I hope to meet with Mary Coughlan in the coming days in order to discuss the Fisheries Council meeting. I have also had meetings on the issue with ministerial colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales. In preparation for the December Fisheries Council meeting, we will take part in a video conference today or tomorrow. Although there was no discussion of the issue at last Friday's meeting, a great deal of work has been done.

1.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. The Further Consideration Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill (NIA 6/07) is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee: Draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that there is an error in the Order Paper. The date should read "2008", not "2007".

Motion made:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 48(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the proposal for a Draft Criminal Justice Order 2007, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 28 January 2008.

Composition:	DUP	3
	Sinn Féin	3
	UUP	2
	SDLP	2
	Alliance	1

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

— [Ms Ni Chuilín.]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Justice for the Bland Family

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

Mr Donaldson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the failure of the Irish Government and Irish Courts to provide justice for Patricia, Sarah, James and Julia Bland, in light of the evidence presented by the family concerning the alleged crimes committed against them by Rory Bland; and calls on the Irish Prime Minister and Minister for Justice to give this case priority attention, so that justice is done and is seen to be done.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. The House first debated the matter in September 2001. The Bland family has endured 28 years of sorrow, loss and heartbreak stemming from a miscarriage of justice on the part of the Irish state. Six years after our previous debate on the matter, and despite much effort on the family's part to discuss its plight with the Irish Government, it is still without justice. Once again, the family has asked for our help to highlight its concerns and to bring the matter to the point at which justice is done and is seen to be done.

The sorry affair started with Rory Bland allegedly committing the crimes of rape and incest against his youngest daughter, Sarah, when she was a young child. Despite the allegations that were made against him, the Irish courts issued an order that allowed this man to have continued access to his children over two years, during which time he allegedly committed additional crimes against Sarah. A judge then sent Mrs Patricia Bland and her three children, Sarah, James and Julia, into exile in Canada. Due to wrongful court orders, the Bland children could never safely live in the Irish Republic, which is the land of their birth.

Sarah's health was — and continues to be — compromised by her early ordeal and by the length of time that the unresolved situation has affected the entire family. Sarah was only three years of age when the alleged abuse started. She has lived all that time knowing of nothing but the case that hangs over her head. The same applies to her brother and sister. Mrs Patricia Bland, their mother, has spent all those years trying to protect her three children from the dreadful implications of the crimes and the resultant injustices.

She was, and is, a mother who is simply trying to protect her children, yet she was actively prevented from doing so by orders emanating from Irish courts, which undermined her position and rendered her

children vulnerable and isolated. That ought to be unheard of in a civilised society.

Patricia Bland was also wrongfully sued for many years by her husband while her children were young. Unaided by any lawyer in Dublin — in fact, she would say that she was betrayed by some, if not all, of the lawyers involved in the Bland case in Dublin — she has had to battle all the way to keep her family safe.

A lengthy legal opinion on this entire case obtained from outside the Republic highlighted that the Bland v Bland case was void from the outset by virtue of the fact that one firm of solicitors acted for both parents — acting in conflict of interest between the parties — and then went on to act for one parent against the other, whom they knew full well to be of unsound mind. Under Irish and British law, neither of those acts is permitted, yet they happened. Those very acts caused a snowball effect of utter chaos for the Bland family. The situation could never be remedied as to do so would have exposed the initial criminal acts and automatically exposed the perpetrators — we have reason to believe that more people than just Rory Bland were involved in those acts.

This Irish family with a British mother was failed by every single organ of the state, which meant that the children were not protected under the constitution. Fraud and criminal acts ensued against them, and 13 years of wrongful court action has left the family bereft of their ancestral home and has utterly destroyed three childhoods. The loss to the family runs into millions of pounds.

It has often been said that the case could be resolved through judicial means. However, the court process was compromised at every stage, and in such a way as to stymie the possibility of the hoped-for outcome being a remedy. The only remedy that the Irish state has ever given to this family was back in 1983, when they were officially ordered to leave the Republic and never come back. However, that was two years too late for Sarah, who was aged just six at the time. Surely, requiring the victims of this whole sorry episode to leave the country cannot be a proper way to dispense justice.

There are many examples in this case of how the Irish state has evaded its responsibility through the manner in which it has responded to the miscarriage of justice faced by the Bland family. I quote from a letter dated 6 August 1999 from the then Irish Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform who stated:

“You will appreciate the Judiciary are, subject only to the Constitution and the Law, independent in the exercise of their judicial functions, and I am precluded from commenting on or intervening in decisions in individual court cases.”

Another useful insight is taken from a letter from the Taoiseach dated 14 April 2004:

“The Taoiseach is very conscious of the very serious allegations that are contained in your correspondence. He has forwarded the

material to his colleague, Mr Michael McDowell, TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform for his consideration.”

The matter still rests with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and there is still no remedy for this case.

A further quote for the House to consider is from another letter from the Taoiseach's office to my colleague Mr Ian Paisley Jnr dated 28 February 2005, in which it states:

“neither I, nor any other political figure, can intervene with regard to a decision of the Courts.”

This case is an example of one which has fallen between the pillars of the constitution, and the Irish Government have denied any responsibility in the matter. All they are doing is shifting the Bland case between the Department of the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on an annual basis — that has been the case since 1983. Unfortunately, that means that the Irish constitution is being interpreted by the Government in a way that prevents any remedy for the Bland family. The matter simply goes from pillar to post and back again.

The failure by the Irish Government to act on the Bland case has raised grave concerns internationally. The Bland family rightly demands that the Taoiseach acknowledge the miscarriage of justice that has occurred in this matter and find a way to deal with the family's statement of claim that is before the Irish Government. The Bland family also asks that the Irish Government take steps to ensure that no other Irish family is so gravely failed by the state, as has been their experience, and that any reforms arising from the Bland case be rapidly undertaken for the benefit of the citizens of the Republic of Ireland.

I am sure that some people will wonder why the Assembly should be considering this case. Well, our neighbours in the Irish Government have failed to deal with the matter in an open and honest way that would give the Bland family some sense of justice for the terrible ordeal that they have suffered. When people come to us out of sheer frustration and desperation, we have a duty to speak up. We have done so in the past here, when wrongs have been done against people in other countries. The Assembly has, rightly, raised its voice on the international stage to mark its concerns, and it is appropriate that we do so in this case also. I hope that, following this debate, and subject to the motion being passed, there will be an opportunity for my ministerial colleagues and others to raise this matter with the backing of the Assembly.

When writing of those who favoured the retention of slavery, President Thomas Jefferson said that:

“Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”

The same might be said of many in the Irish state who have had the opportunity to consider this case. Self-

preservation must never be allowed to outweigh justice in any democratic society. I urge the House to support the Bland family in their ongoing quest for justice.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion, and want to address a number of issues that the proposer of the motion, quite rightly, mentioned. The Assembly debated a similar motion in September 2001, and six years later there has been no change. Normally, when a motion is debated in this Assembly on a subject that is beyond its control, the relevant edition of Hansard and a covering letter are sent to the relevant authorities. Did that happen in 2001, and if so, what was the response? I ask the Speaker's Office to examine that issue.

The key elements of this tragic and disturbing case are domestic violence; severe and continuous child abuse; and alcoholism. The tragedy was compounded by the decision of the court to award care of the child to the father, at whose hand she suffered the kind of trauma and torture to which no child or individual should ever be subjected. In turn, that left the child's mother to fight an ongoing court battle to gain any kind of protection for her child. The situation was further compounded by the failure of the courts and the Irish Government to provide any kind of help or apology to a family who had been ill-treated. Indeed, the family has seen its life savings drained away by a system that has completely failed it. It is right that the Assembly should call for justice.

Although the facts of the case are extreme and disturbing, the failure to provide justice for those who suffer from sexual abuse, rape or domestic violence is not peculiar to the Irish justice system. Many women and children in our own and other jurisdictions face difficulty in securing both the conviction of the perpetrator and the kind of justice that they require. We must learn the lessons of other jurisdictions.

Domestic violence in residence and contact cases must be clearly identified, and the risk to children living in such situations must be assessed.

1.15 pm

The police and the courts must be clear — and they were not in this case — that domestic violence is an abusive context for children and that they may experience emotional or other damage, or suffer physical harm, as a result. Research findings indicate that where there is domestic violence, a child is at an increased risk of physical or sexual abuse. The perpetrator may abuse the child as part of his violence against the woman. The perpetrator can continue to abuse the child emotionally and physically during contact visits. Domestic violence must be viewed as a serious child protection risk, and all court interventions for that risk must be assessed and fully taken into account in residence and contact issues. If only such a view had been taken in the case

of the Bland family, further serious abuse would have been prevented.

A risk assessment model has been developed and is being used in several health and social service trusts in the North. I call on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that that model is being used across all trusts. The proposer of the motion covered some issues about the judiciary. It is essential that the judiciary is trained to understand the risk assessment model and to take it fully into account when making decisions that are linked to residence and contact. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am speaking on behalf of Sir Reg Empey, who is attending the funeral of Lord Cooke, who served on the Senate of the Parliament of Northern Ireland many years ago.

It would be impossible for anyone to read, as I have done, the chronology of events as presented by Mrs Bland without a deep sense of unease. Although the events that are detailed took place exclusively in other jurisdictions, the Assembly has been asked to lend its support to the family's search for justice. For almost three decades, Mrs Bland and her children have constantly sought redress through the Irish legal system for a set of grievances, thus far without anything that could reasonably be described as success. The file that she has painstakingly prepared on the case raises many concerns regarding the part that has been played by some in the Irish legal system.

The family's troubles began in September 1979, when Mrs Bland sought legal advice in an effort to save her husband from suicide. That led to a series of events that, at first sight, look stranger than fiction but are nevertheless supported by well-presented documentary evidence. Mrs Bland and her children state that, because of the unwillingness of the Irish legal system to act properly, they have endured physical, mental and sexual abuse, financial ruin, and were for a time exiled to Canada by an Irish judge, who realised — too late — that Sarah had been sexually abused for two years on foot of court orders.

From a powerless position, Mrs Bland and her children have watched the dissolution and dispersal of family assets, including land, property and the contents of the primary family home, Rath House in County Laois. Those contents included antique furniture, works of art in oils and watercolours by a variety of Dutch and other European masters, crystal, silver, Chinese porcelain and a library of approximately 10,000 leather-bound books that was considered so important that the Irish Government once requested its donation as a national treasure. In addition, there were personal items belonging to Henry Grattan that linked the Bland family to four saints, among them Sir Thomas More and Oliver Plunkett.

All that represents a capital loss to the Bland family of €17 million. The family also seeks damages of €4 million each for Mrs Bland and her daughter Sarah, and a further €2 million each for James and Julia Bland. Those are not small amounts of money, but Mrs Bland's documentation of the case is well presented. The time factor is all important, as 27 years of such a massive miscarriage of justice have passed while the Irish state has denied any misdoing.

Many years ago, a leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, who was also a highly regarded legal figure, was involved in the George Archer-Shee case, in which a cadet was dismissed from a naval college for allegedly stealing a small-denomination postal order.

It was reported that, at a vital stage in the proceedings, Sir Edward Carson passed a note to his legal opponents that simply stated: "Let justice be done." Surely we, in this Chamber, could make no stronger demand of those in a position to progress the case than to say to the Irish Government: "Let justice be done." As Sir Reg is now in the House, he may wish to second the motion.

Sir Reg Empey: I formally second the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Any injustice to any person in any jurisdiction is a matter of grave concern. The case of the Bland family raises several questions about how it was treated by its legal representation and how the courts in the Irish Republic considered its case, and it is right and proper to raise such questions.

It would be appropriate for Members to meet the Justice Minister in the Republic, Mr Lenihan, to discuss the case. My understanding is that the Secretary General of the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform ordered the DPP to investigate complaints raised by the family. The result of that investigation was that nothing untoward was found in the way that the criminal complaint was handled, and no evidence of discrimination or anything of that nature was unearthed.

However, having said that, such a serious matter should be vigorously pursued, and any element of doubt should be eliminated. The previous debate on the case indicates that there were suggestions of some kind of conspiracy by the judicial authorities and solicitors who acted wrongly on behalf of the family, or the father of the family. Any such impropriety must be fully investigated. If the Bland family considers the original investigation to be inadequate, a further investigation should be carried out to remove the suspicion of conspiracy by any judicial authority in the South, solicitors or state authorities, including the DPP and the police.

Again, reading about the case shows that the family was ill served on occasions by its legal representation. Initially Mrs Bland asked a firm of solicitors to represent the family, as opposed to individual family members, and perhaps that was the genesis of a conflict of interest. I support the examination of certain matters relating to

the case. I hope that Members will pursue such an examination with the Justice Department in Dublin as a matter of urgency, and should they gain no satisfaction, perhaps the family can take legal action in the courts in the South. However, I stress that the judiciary in the Republic is totally separate from Government.

It is an independent judiciary that acts under the law of the land and the Constitution. The Constitution is an effective safeguard for any citizen. If the matter were to come before the courts again, in whatever form, one would hope that they would consider it seriously and vigorously examine and scrutinise what has happened in the past.

Dr Farry: I, too, support the motion, and I thank its proposers for bringing it to the House's attention. This is a truly dreadful situation for the Bland family, particularly for the children. There appears to have been a systematic failure across the board to deal with the situation effectively, and that failure extends throughout the system. The statutory agencies; the police, through their investigation; the legal system, which did not regulate solicitors effectively; and the political and judicial systems in the Republic of Ireland have all failed the Bland family.

The proposer of the motion has set out well the history of the case, but some points must be stressed. First, this debate should not necessarily be seen as an attack on the Republic of Ireland. Such situations can arise in almost every jurisdiction. In the UK in recent years, there have been miscarriages of justice, failures of the justice system to take effective action on serious cases, and failures of statutory agencies and the police to deal with sex offenders and instances of domestic violence. Therefore, the Republic of Ireland is not alone in this situation. Nevertheless, it is imperative that it addresses the failures that have been identified in its system.

It is important that lessons be learned from what has happened and that any prospect of justice, even at this late stage, be pursued to the maximum. As we all know, justice delayed is justice denied. That seems very much to be the case with the Bland family.

I fully support the mood of the House, which seems to be that we send a copy of today's Official Report to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in the Republic of Ireland, in order that that they might read MLAs' views. I am also keen that our Ministers raise the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council. Although it is unusual for individual cases to be discussed in any legislature, there are sometimes extreme cases in which it falls to legislators to discuss matters that should be dealt with at an operational level. When legislators discuss such matters, it indicates serious concerns about what has happened at an operational level. It is unusual for a legislature in one jurisdiction

to refer to the justice system in another jurisdiction, but this is an extreme case in which justice has not been delivered effectively. The Government of the Republic of Ireland have taken an interest in some cases in our jurisdiction; therefore, it is reasonable that we voice our concerns about what is happening down there.

This debate must serve as a clarion call to explore whether Northern Ireland has sufficiently robust procedures in place to prevent a similar situation arising. In recent years, our criminal justice system has undergone major reforms, which have been generally welcomed. Nevertheless, it is useful to have an ongoing monitoring process to ensure that we have the systems in place to deal with such cases. The Department of Finance and Personnel recently concluded a consultation on the regulation of legal services. There are lessons to be learned from what happened with sister firms in the South of Ireland.

It would be useful to reconfirm that systems are in place to prevent the conflicts of interest that arose in the case of the Bland family. There is no doubt that that is the case, though the system in Northern Ireland is still effectively self-regulatory.

1.30 pm

This issue is much wider than criminal justice: it includes how we deal with sex offenders in society and how we approach domestic violence — a subject that the House considered in a debate in June. The issue needs to be set within the context of the wider issues that we need to consider in Northern Ireland, while putting pressure on our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that their systems are fully robust. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Donaldson and the Member for East Belfast Sir Reg Empey for getting this matter on the Order Paper. This is the second time that the Assembly has debated the issue, the first time being during a previous mandate. That indicates how serious this House and Members continue to regard this gross miscarriage of justice to the Bland family.

It has been said, rightly, that a country can be judged by how well it treats its most vulnerable. The way in which the Republic of Ireland has dealt with this case has set a poor standard. If people were passing judgement on how that country treated a vulnerable woman and her vulnerable children, they would find the standard to be far too low, and that all the effective safeguards supposed to be in place to protect citizens, quite frankly, failed this family miserably.

A miscarriage of justice is possibly the most pernicious insult to a person's character. How deep and awful must be the scar upon a family when someone has been wrongly treated, defamed by the courts of the land, abused

verbally and in the press, and knows in his or her heart of hearts that they are nothing more than a victim.

This House does well today to reflect on this miscarriage of justice — almost 28 years of passing a case from pillar to post. As a public representative, I know how frustrating it can be to deal with cases that have been delayed by months; but 28 years — almost a generation — of delay is unacceptable, and that is why this House ought to be saying most powerfully to its neighbour that it wants this matter resolved, not expeditiously, but now. We need to make that point very clearly.

The Member for Belfast North Mr Alban Maginness made a very telling point when he asked whether there was anything else that the Assembly could do. We should take up that offer. I would be more than happy to join a cross-party delegation of Members representing this House and the Bland family to meet with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, or indeed the Taoiseach, to make it very clear how the House feels about this case and to drive home the need to have it resolved. The matter can go back to trial or it can be extended further; however, we need to see political will in the Republic to resolve the case.

My colleague Jeffrey Donaldson quite rightly said that this matter has been passed from pillar to post. I have in my hand a massive manuscript containing letter upon letter, to Taoisigh, justice ministers and all sorts of officials in the Irish justice system. To pursue this case again through the courts would simply extend the pain that the Bland family has already suffered.

Let us encourage the Republic of Ireland authorities to find the political will to resolve this issue. I do not know any other jurisdiction that could tolerate the fact that a neighbouring jurisdiction regularly debates a case of injustice and yet does not appear worried about getting it resolved. The Irish Government should be seeking a way to resolve this matter urgently and expeditiously.

I met Judge Smithwick to discuss the case — and I am reminded of what the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said: there appears to have been an inadequate handling of the case — and during our conversation, that senior judge of the Republic of Ireland courts made it clear that he disagreed with the evidence in front of him. Members can rehash the case time and time again. However, if there is a simple disagreement, we must get the political will to solve the case and to find a way to get the Republic of Ireland's Government to allow it to be addressed satisfactorily. I hope that the Assembly can do that.

The Bland family have given me details of the horrific catalogue of abuse that was waged against Sarah Bland. I am prepared to place the DVD, numerous drawings and a report drawn up on behalf of the family by Professor Ivor Browne in the Assembly Library so that Members can study the abuse that this young

woman faced and understand the necessity of having the case solved expeditiously.

Sir Reg Empey: I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak at such a late stage in the debate. I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being present at the beginning of the debate.

Dr Farry asked why the Assembly is looking at this case when the legal, and other, remedies are in another jurisdiction. On a number of occasions, the Irish Government have involved themselves in justice matters in this jurisdiction that they were sufficiently concerned about, including miscarriages of justice. Therefore, there is no reason why Members should feel any compunction about raising a matter about which they feel concerned.

I support Alban Maginness's suggestion — which was echoed by junior Minister Paisley — that a delegation of Members could meet with the Irish Republic's Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, or the most appropriate official. This case involves a most unusual catalogue of events, and I appreciate that anyone who has not seen or studied the facts may find it difficult to comprehend. Virtually every issue of grave concern to our society, from legal protection to child abuse, appears in this case. The family have suffered for a prolonged period of, as junior Minister Paisley said, 28 years. That is a very long time.

I am thankful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the debate and commend the motion to the House.

Mr Donaldson: I sincerely thank all my colleagues in the House who participated in the debate. I give a special word of appreciation to Sir Reg Empey the Member for East Belfast for his support for the motion and for coming back to the Chamber so quickly after a funeral — the House understood the reasons for his absence. I thank the Member for North Antrim Rev Dr Robert Coulter for delivering the remarks on behalf of his party leader.

In her comments, the Member for West Belfast Ms Ramsey indicated her support for the motion and asked what follow-up there has been since the matter was debated in 2001. As I understand it, since that motion was passed by the Assembly, letters have been written to the Irish Government, and the matter has been raised at ministerial level with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Office.

Therefore, there has been a follow-through, but, unfortunately, no progress has been made as a result of those representations. The Member also called for additional safeguards to protect children in the Republic, and I am sure that all Members would echo that sentiment.

Rev Coulter spoke on behalf of Sir Reg Empey. He mentioned his support for the case — which we appreciate — and highlighted the injustices that have been dealt to the Bland family. He made particular mention of the

family's statement of claim, which, as he rightly said, is a valid statement that ought to be responded to by the Irish state authorities.

The Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness suggested that a cross-party delegation meet the Irish Justice Minister, Mr Lenihan, to discuss the case, and my colleague junior Minister Paisley said that the DUP would be happy to support that meeting. Sir Reg Empey also gave his assent. Between all the parties, we will seek an appropriate way in which such a delegation can be arranged to meet the Irish Justice Minister and representatives of the Bland family. That meeting would be timely and, I hope, productive.

Mr Maginness also emphasised the separation of powers between the judiciary and the Government in the Republic of Ireland, and we appreciate and respect that. Nevertheless, the injustices that have been visited upon the Bland family carry political implications, to which the Irish Government ought — and need — to respond. I hope that a meeting with the Irish Justice Minister will help to expedite that response in due course.

Dr Stephen Farry, the Alliance Party Member for North Down, offered his party's support for a cross-party delegation to meet the Irish Justice Minister, and we appreciate that. He also stated that the motion should not be seen as an attack on the Republic of Ireland, and I — having moved the motion — can confirm that it is in no way an attack on the Irish state. Dr Farry rightly said that there are cases of injustice in our own country, and it is right and proper that we criticise those — just as it is appropriate to criticise the injustice against the Bland family. He also said that justice delayed is justice denied. That is an appropriate way of describing how the Bland family feel about their situation.

The junior Minister Mr Paisley Jnr also contributed to the debate. On behalf of the Bland family, I acknowledge the long-term support that the junior Minister and his father, the First Minister, have given to them over the years. They have raised the issue persistently in meetings at political level and — as my colleague said — with representatives of the Irish judiciary in their search for justice for the Bland family. The family appreciates Mr Paisley Jnr's commitment to the case. He rightly said that political will was needed to solve this problem and that it was not a matter solely for the courts. He is right; and I hope that following this motion — provided that it is supported by the House — we can apply further pressure to ensure that that political will is exercised soon, because the ongoing delay is unacceptable. The Bland family are entitled to some form of justice now, despite the lateness of the day. The junior Minister stated that he has material — of which I have also had sight — that he will place in the Assembly Library in order that Members can consult it if they wish.

There is much detail associated with the case, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not think that the purpose of today's debate is to go through in precise detail what has happened and the injustices that have occurred. However, I want to reiterate two examples of the injustices that have arisen in the Bland case — and they are only two of a number of injustices. First, as a result of Irish court orders, Sarah, as a young child, was placed in the care of her father, and was subjected to ongoing assaults, including rape. That must be addressed by the Irish state.

1.45 pm

The second injustice is that, over a lengthy period, Patricia Bland was subject to her husband's ongoing legal proceedings. Those proceedings damaged her health, undermined her role as a mother, and kept unacceptable pressure on the family. That all happened when the solicitors acting for Mr Bland were claiming to the revenue commissioners in the Irish Republic that he:

“is not capable of taking business decisions”.

They also claimed:

“Because of his state of mind my client does not recall receiving any Notices to Appeal”.

etc, etc, etc. Despite knowing that this man was not of a sound mind, and despite making that case to the Irish Revenue Commissioners, those solicitors continued to sue Mrs Bland on behalf of their client. That brought enormous pressure to bear on the family, and it is another example of how the family has been subjected to injustice and unfair treatment.

I believe that it is right to debate the matter today. It is right that the Assembly, if minded, reiterates its support for the Bland family. We ask only that the family be given proper consideration. The Irish state, whether that means the political system, including the Government as a whole, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of the Taoiseach, or whether it means the Irish judicial system and the courts, must address themselves to the issues at hand and to the outstanding and unresolved matters. The Irish state must do so quickly in order that the Bland family can take away some sense of justice from the whole sorry affair. The motion states that justice must be done and that it is “seen to be done.” The sooner that that happens the better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the failure of the Irish Government and Irish Courts to provide justice for Patricia, Sarah, James and Julia Bland, in light of the evidence presented by the family concerning the alleged crimes committed against them by Rory Bland; and calls on the Irish Prime Minister and Minister for Justice to give this case priority attention, so that justice is done and is seen to be done.

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

Closure of the Seagate Operation in Limavady

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

Mr McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north-west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 900 jobs; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to agree a co-ordinated strategy to assist Seagate workers back into employment.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin accepts the amendment that the party opposite has tabled; it usefully updates the situation in light of the subsequent announcement of even more job losses in the area.

The announced closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady, with the loss of 930 jobs, was a devastating blow to the local economy. It was the most severe in a series of job losses that has been announced in the Limavady area, and, quite literally, it has brought that subregion to its knees economically.

The affected workforce is drawn from a wide area that encompasses Derry, Antrim, Tyrone and Donegal. The closure will have an impact on the Limavady and Coleraine areas in particular. However, the crisis will have a detrimental economic effect on all the areas that I mentioned. That means that it is imperative that all parties in the Assembly co-operate fully with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI and, if possible, with enterprise agencies across the border to repair the economic damage that will be done to the north-west economy.

It would be easy to be critical of the company or of the various statutory agencies. However, at this juncture, raking over the coals of what could have been done to prevent the Seagate closure would serve no positive purpose. Invest NI could tell us when it first became aware of Seagate's intention to close the plant; what steps it took to prevent that or to attract other investors; and what it can do to recover as much grant aid as possible. However, important as those issues are, they are for discussion on another day.

Lessons can be learnt from this experience. As the downturn in major economies continues, competition

will increase and multinational companies will come under significant stockholder pressure to maximise profits by moving operations to emerging, low-wage economies. Therefore, it is time for us to radically rethink how we plan to develop our economy.

We should address the issue of proper employment conditions and security of entitlements for workers — an issue that exercises all parties. Companies, particularly those in receipt of substantial Government or departmental subventions, must adhere to the basic human and financial rights of workers, including the right to organise. No company should be encouraged to locate in our economy or be eligible for grant aid if it insists on a non-unionised workforce. In addition, the Assembly must address the wider issue of the recruitment of so-called “agency” workers who are being employed on one-year contracts as a way of circumventing local employment legislation.

If we are to compete for sustainable, inward, direct investment and expand our indigenous manufacturing sector, we must equip ourselves and our workforce with skills and expertise in higher-knowledge-based disciplines. We must target investors who specialise in those areas, and we must invest in the future by enabling young people to focus on achieving qualifications in areas such as engineering, research and development, intelligent design and medical research. I welcome the fact that that focus has been reflected in the recent Programme for Government statement, in ISNI, and in wider Budget discussions. Such disciplines and skills will attract employment from the higher end of the economic spectrum, which is an area of intense competition — not least between this region and similar economic regions on this island. That is a key area in which we must record progress and display an increasing ability to compete for investments.

Locally generated employment tends to be less susceptible to competition from low-wage economies and provides a sustainable basis for future planning. However, if the indigenous sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, is to compete, we must ensure that the wider economy provides benefits and opportunities — particularly from procurement policies that will give those enterprises access to Government contracts.

In the Seagate factory in Limavady, we have a skilled workforce that is housed in one of the most modern manufacturing plants in the North. The facilities are of the highest specifications, including the water treatment plant. In meetings with the workforce, I discovered that if that water treatment plant is mothballed, it will not be capable of being recommissioned — it will have to be replaced or scrapped.

The factory is built to high specifications, with a 1-metre-deep anti-vibration floor that is essential for

modern production processes. It has a fully-equipped office suite with 100% broadband connectivity, a canteen that can cater for more than 1,000 workers, and two massive car parks.

This is an unusual set of circumstances. I invite the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to state how we might deal with the projected Seagate closure rather than issuing a terse two-line statement to the effect that the company has withdrawn. We have some notice — a gap — in which an opportunity exists to match the skills of the still-intact workforce, combined with high-specification factory accommodation, with a suitable inward investor.

My approach to this crisis will be non-confrontational, but the situation presents a challenge to Invest NI. Given that an important investment conference is scheduled to take place a month before Seagate's projected closure date, in the meantime, can Invest NI match the facilities and the workforce to an inward investor to ensure continuous employment? All Members should co-operate and support Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and other Departments, if current employees need to be reskilled or upskilled. All parties must co-operate in order to demonstrate that not only can we deal with this crisis — which is not of our making — but that we can realistically address our targets for the generation of new jobs and the expansion of the economy.

This crisis presents a challenge for all parties in the Assembly, all MLAs and all Departments to co-operate and to work with DETI and Invest NI to show that a local Assembly can respond differently to the way that it did in the past when job losses were announced. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “loss” and insert

“of 1,000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north-west.”

I am glad that the amendment has been accepted. There was some uncertainty about the number of jobs being lost. Seagate employs 930 people, but, on further investigation and after several meetings with the management of Seagate in Limavady, it transpires that two other companies directly employ more than 80 people who will also lose their jobs. That takes the total number of jobs being lost to more than 1,000.

I hope that Members across the Assembly agree that the sequence of events is unprecedented, and the motion and the amendment seek to outline the measures that Invest NI must establish. The largest employer in the Limavady area announces its closure; the second-largest employer — Magilligan Prison — is at risk; and there have been other announcements, including the closure of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd over the weekend.

Limavady has a population of some 30,000, and Belfast has a population of 300,000, which is 10 times that of Limavady. If there were a series of job loss announcements, and the potential threat of closure from a significant employer, in the Belfast area, the pro rata number of job losses would be approximately 12,000 to 13,000. If that were to happen in the Belfast area, “crisis” is not the word that would be used, and the situation would merit urgent action by all the statutory authorities. However, that is an indication of the magnitude of the series of blows that has hit the Limavady area. As has been pointed out, the crisis has spread, because Seagate is a regional employer that employs people from Coleraine, Londonderry and the Irish Republic in high-value jobs.

Employees feel that Seagate has offered a reasonably helpful redundancy package. That is good progress, but it is not enough. Some 1,200 to 1,300 people will be looking for life after Seagate and H.

We must ensure that Paul Goggins, the Minister of State with responsibility for prisons, takes the right decision and retains Magilligan Prison, thus preventing a further 350 job holders from being added to the lengthening dole queues in Limavady. I understand that that decision is due in the next month or so. I am sure that the NIO follows proceedings diligently, so I hope that, when Mr Goggins reads Hansard, he will take into account the effect that further job losses would have on the area.

2.00 pm

We must ensure that that series of events is addressed. Unfortunately, in the past, I have had cause to be critical of Invest Northern Ireland. I refer to a response, which has proven to be ironic, that I received from the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Barry Gardiner to a question for written answer in the House of Commons. In April 2004, I asked:

“how many visits have been made under the auspices of Invest Northern Ireland by potential inward investors to the East Londonderry constituency within the past 12 months; and how many jobs have been created as a result.”

His response, on 28 April 2004, was that, from April 2003 to March 2004, there had been two visits — to the entire constituency, that is, not to Limavady.

Mr Gardiner's written answer continued:

“While these have not led to investment to the area, Invest NI continually seeks to build on the recent successes, which has seen a re-investment by Seagate Limavady”.

I am sure that the irony will not be lost on the people of Limavady.

Earlier this year, I asked the then Under-Secretary of State Maria Eagle, also in a question for written answer:

“how many potential inward investors have been to (a) Limavady and (b) Coleraine council area at the invitation of Invest Northern Ireland during 2006.”

Her answer, on 19 February 2007, was straightforward. She did not avoid the question but answered it deliberately and specifically. She wrote:

“During 2006 there were no visits under the auspices of Invest Northern Ireland to Limavady and Coleraine council areas by potential inward investors.”

We begin to see the nature of the problem, and I hope that the Minister will deal with it. He has made endeavours and efforts since taking office; however, Invest NI must be seen to produce the goods. It must respond, so that people see tangible, effective results on the ground. I assume that that is the reason behind the motion. It is certainly the reason behind the amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): First, on behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I acknowledge the Minister’s prompt attendance at the meeting on 6 November to brief Committee members on developments. I was in the United States, so the meeting was chaired by the Deputy Chairperson, Paul Maskey. On that occasion, the Committee shared the Minister’s regret and huge disappointment at the impending closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady, with the loss of more than 900 jobs, and the consequential impact that that will have on other firms. Since then, further job losses in Limavady have been announced.

The Committee was happy to receive assurances that the Department will do all that it can, in conjunction with its own and other agencies and with other Departments, to provide support mechanisms for Seagate employees. The Committee took note of Members’ concerns by writing to the Minister, urging him to consider support for agency workers. Mitchel McLaughlin mentioned that point in proposing the motion. Moreover, Members wanted the needs of migrant workers who will be affected by the closure to be taken into account.

At that same meeting, the Committee heard from the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce, which highlighted the urgent need to find a replacement for Seagate in Limavady. The direct impact that the closure will have on other firms was mentioned, as was the indirect impact on the wider economy. Members have recognised that the closure affects not only those who live in the East Derry constituency but those in Foyle, West Tyrone and, in a couple of instances, North Antrim.

Taking account of the impact that the closure will have on local suppliers and retailers and the local housing market, the Committee shares the concern of the Chamber about the overall economic impact on Limavady and the wider north-west. Of course, that has been further compounded by the decision in respect of HÜCO in the last week.

Proposing the motion, Mitchel McLaughlin rightly said that this is not a problem that we should dump on each other’s laps, whether as Ministers, Departments,

agencies or parties. In asking the Minister to consider what measures are necessary to lessen the impact on the local economy and to seek further investment for the Limavady area, the Committee has a view to being as supportive as possible of all the local efforts and those of the Minister and his agencies. As has already been said, we are conscious that the US/NI (United States/Northern Ireland) investment conference might afford a timely opportunity to seek potential investors for the area.

We know that there is a quality workforce. Their performance and productivity did not contribute to this decision, which was made on the basis of cost margins that the workforce could not control. On the basis of the quality workforce and the quality estate available at the Seagate plant in Limavady, it seems that a featured and focused sell would be particularly appropriate in the context of the US/NI investment conference. I do not think that anyone would take that focus as being untoward or in any way discriminatory against the interests of anyone else. It would be an honest and genuine response to a dire situation.

The Committee also welcomes the stated intention of the Department to pursue clawback consistent with the contractual arrangements. The issue highlights once again the need, not just for an active concentration in pursuing FDI (foreign direct investment) that gives us employment scale, but also to make sure that the role of Invest NI in helping indigenous small business start-ups to expand is further reinforced. That has been brought into sharp relief by the scale of the impact of the Seagate announcement. We will be using the US/NI conference, I hope, to try to address the issue of FDI. The Committee will be at pains in the coming weeks to ensure that the focus on indigenous enterprises is not lost either.

Mr Cree: I sympathise with all those in the Limavady area and further afield who will lose their jobs as a result of Seagate’s closing its plant at Limavady. We are told that this action was necessary as a result of significantly lower wage costs in Asia, foreign exchange and shipping costs. We have heard that many times; it is a problem that will be with us for some time to come.

It is disappointing to lose these high-tech jobs. The situation clearly illustrates the need to increase our efforts to attract new, high-value-added jobs. That has already been referred to, and is anticipated in the draft Programme for Government and the investment strategy. We need to obtain new jobs quickly in order to alleviate the situation in the north-west. It may be that Invest NI should review its strategy on FDI to ensure that, as far as practicable, publicly-funded jobs are protected, bearing in mind our experience with Seagate.

The Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee referred to the Minister’s visit to the

Committee, when a useful exchange occurred. I will not cover the ground again, except to say that everyone agreed the need for action. The Ulster Unionists will be supporting the motion as amended.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the debate. It is now some weeks since the announcement was made, but the urgency of dealing with the matter remains.

I understand how the people of Limavady are feeling. In the early 1980s, Carrickfergus, my hometown, suffered a major setback when three major factories closed within a short time, with the loss of some 8,000 jobs. Importantly, when those factories closed, the local council was prepared to take the initiative. Realising that it was important to do something, it adopted a multi-agency approach. The situation did not change overnight, and it took some time to restore people's confidence in the Carrickfergus economy. What worries me about the situation in Limavady is that people could lose confidence in the future. That must not happen, because it is important that people have that confidence.

We live in a global economy, and we are all aware of the issues associated with our doing so, some of which Mr Cree has already mentioned. However, Invest Northern Ireland must provide safeguards that reduce global companies' opportunities to pull out on a whim, which is what is happening in Limavady. We all know that the economy's development is not the sole responsibility of a single Department but must involve others, such as DEL (Department for Employment and Learning) and DOE (Department of Environment). I propose to the Minister that Invest Northern Ireland try to investigate other uses of the Seagate factory site when it is vacated. That is what we did in Carrickfergus way back in the 1980s. The relevant Departments and the workforce must also remain focused on the issue at hand.

Finally, I suggest to the Minister that he set up a Seagate foundation, similar to the Enkalon Foundation that was set up in Antrim a number of years ago. The establishment of a foundation would help to ease the problems that the pull-out creates. As I have said, I welcome the debate, from which I hope something positive will emerge.

Mr McQuillan: In recent years, I have become increasingly frustrated as I watch more and more jobs disappear from East Londonderry. The loss of the Seagate operation is on a scale of unimaginably damaging proportions. Seagate is the largest employer in the area, and its loss is creating an employment and economic problem that must be addressed with the utmost urgency.

The loss of that one employer could do more economic damage to the area than 35 years of terrorism did. It could force the leisure and retail sectors into a crisis that would undoubtedly lead to more job losses and economic deprivation. I fully recognise and accept that other areas of Northern Ireland will also feel the impact

of Seagate's withdrawal, but East Londonderry will bear the brunt of the economic damage.

Some perceive Invest Northern Ireland as being focused on creating jobs in Belfast. Indeed, it is often referred to in East Londonderry as "Invest Belfast". That trend must be stopped, unless the most northerly part of Northern Ireland is to become an employment and economic wasteland. That is an outcome that my party colleagues and I will not accept and will work tirelessly to prevent. Therefore, it must become a priority for Invest Northern Ireland to put together a package that aims to make East Londonderry its number one concern for investment.

As rural employment shrank and the countryside became a dormitory area for the towns, the more rural areas of my constituency — for example, Garvagh, Kilrea and Dungiven — were always glad of the employment opportunities that factories such as Seagate provided. Invest Northern Ireland (INI) must therefore take a long, hard look at supporting businesses in rural areas as well as in the main population centres, and that support must form an integral part of any strategy that is devised and pursued.

2.15 pm

Like my colleagues, I am grateful to the First Minister and to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for taking the time to visit the plant in person to talk to management, staff and local representatives. That alone reassured many that the oncoming economic storm was being treated as a matter of urgency at the very highest level of Government. I am confident that the Executive understand the gravity of the coming problems and will make every effort on behalf of the East Londonderry constituency.

I am happy to support the call for the rebuilding of Magilligan Prison at its current location. If the Westminster Government permit the closure of what will be the area's largest employer after Seagate's departure, I, for one, will roundly condemn them as loudly and as publicly as I can. Our MP, Mr Campbell, has raised the issue many times at Westminster, and I am sure that he will continue his efforts with renewed vigour in the light of recent events.

In his reply to Mr Campbell at Westminster, Paul Goggins stated that the issue of the location of the new policing college was closed, as a site had been identified. I ask the Executive and our MPs to ensure that the case for locating the college at the former Shackleton Barracks, for example, be reopened and emphasised in the strongest possible way to the appropriate Ministers in London. An excellent case can be made for the protection and enhancement of employment opportunities for all East Londonderry residents — regardless of their religious or political beliefs. I support the amendment.

Mr McCartney: Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. All of us who live in the north-west are only too aware of the impact that losing 900 jobs in Seagate will have on the region. As has been stated, Seagate is the largest employer in Limavady, and it is estimated that up to 450 workers come from the Foyle constituency. The closure will have a knock-on effect for north and west Tyrone, County Donegal and, as Mark Durkan pointed out, north Antrim, so the impact on the economy is obvious.

There is a focus — indeed, an expectation — on the Assembly, the Executive and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to deal with the matter in the coming months. Therefore I welcome the Minister's presence this afternoon.

I commend Mitchel McLaughlin's suggestion that INI and the Department should prioritise matching the skills of the workers with the needs of corresponding companies; that option should be explored fully. I have no doubt that the Minister will consider that suggestion, and I hope that he will report to the Assembly in the weeks and months ahead. We must avoid letting the workforce break up in the meantime. When the redundancy package is in place, people might not wait to see what happens, and if the signal is not sent that the intention is to match skills with suitable companies, the workers might vote with their feet.

The Assembly, the Executive and the relevant Ministers should follow every possible avenue to ensure that, in future, the impact of a firm's closure on an area should not be dictated by the firm alone.

Members should reflect on the example of Molins in Derry several years ago, where the workers took the initiative. They were faced with the inevitability of the firm's closure, but they showed that there was another way. They used their skills to set up a new company and acted as a supplier to Molins, which was leaving the area.

It is important to note that the company responded by gifting the factory to the workers and providing funding. I understand that Seagate owns the machinery and the building, and the Minister should investigate what will happen to them in the weeks ahead.

The appropriate Department at that time also provided funding and the workers bought into the company. The new company was a success; not only did it supply its parent company, Molins, but it diversified and supplied other companies. The workers demonstrated in the clearest terms that closure is not inevitable.

When I met representatives of Seagate recently in Derry, they said that they would take on board such a community renewal initiative. I hope that the Minister will also explore it when he talks to the company and INI.

We should send a signal that the Assembly, the Executive and the Department do not see redundancies as inevitable and that if anything can be done to avoid them, they will do it. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: I support the amendment. Not only during this debate, but in conversation, I have listened to the comments of my colleagues Gregory Campbell and Adrian McQuillan, who represent the area that is affected by the closure of Seagate Technology.

The only way that I can comprehend the economic damage that will result from the forthcoming closure is if I compare it to a similar, hypothetical situation in my own constituency. For example, if a firm such as the Camden Group in Antrim, which has a workforce of over 1000, were to close, there would be immense damage to the local economy. Therefore, my views on the economic damage that such a scenario would create in South Antrim are based on that hypothetical situation.

Given that another firm that is in the same locality as Seagate Technology announced its closure, there is a real and immediate need for Invest NI to develop and implement an economic-regeneration plan for East Londonderry, which is suffering most as a result of the closures. I share the worries about the future that the Members who moved the amendment expressed. It is only through the co-operation of Invest NI that a manufacturing base can be re-established and the economic future safeguarded.

I urge the Assembly to support the amendment and to show the people of East Londonderry that we, as Members of their Assembly, recognise their plight and that we are determined to assist in every possible way. People in any area who are suffering as a result of such a devastating blow would expect their Government to seek solutions to the problems that that created. Those solutions must come via a body such as Invest NI, and they deserve the support of all Assembly Members.

I was stunned to hear of the negative and politically based opposition in Limavady Borough Council to the positive approach that is employment protection and creation. However, I am glad to hear that the Members opposite have adopted a different stance to that of their colleagues on Limavady Borough Council: perhaps the decision-making of the councillors in Limavady was coloured by the fact that DUP Ministers, MLAs and councillors took the lead when the closure of Seagate Technology was announced.

It is blatantly obvious to everyone that the area has many positive points to interest employers. The strategy for future economic investment in the area must be based firmly on those positives. I support every effort to bring investment and employment to Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, I share the views of my colleagues that the race, colour, class or creed of any employer or

employee is of no importance whatever. The most important factor is that employment is available in every area — there should be no ifs, buts or maybes about that.

The DUP has demonstrated its wish to work for the benefit of all Northern Ireland's people, and it has exposed the hypocritical political stance of others.

I have pleasure in supporting the amendment.

Mr McClarty: I support the amendment. The afternoon of 29 October 2007, when the employees at Seagate Technology's Limavady plant were informed that they were about to lose their jobs, was a black day for Limavady and for the Northern Ireland economy. Once again, Northern Ireland has lost jobs as a result of the significantly lower wages and shipping costs that exist in competing Asian countries.

The impact of the Seagate Technology job losses not only had a shocking and distressing affect on its workers, but it had a seriously negative impact on the entire community in Limavady. The news was truly devastating for Northern Ireland's economic ambitions, and it has led to considerable concern about the economic future of Limavady and the surrounding north-west region.

Unfortunately, the news got worse for an already beleaguered Limavady community when HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd, an electronics firm, announced that it will close in January 2008, with the loss of a further 70 jobs. That closure brought the total number of manufacturing jobs lost within weeks in Limavady to a staggering 1000. That should be deeply worrying for the Assembly and the new Executive.

I want to put on record my firm belief that the Seagate Technology job losses were in no way a reflection of its employees, who are fantastically skilled, motivated and inventive. In 2002, Seagate Technology's Limavady plant was the recipient of two awards: the company's media substrate operation was awarded the internationally recognised Mark of Excellence for quality management, and, in a separate scheme, it was granted the Business in the Community Award for Social Responsibility. Therefore, it is evident how big a shock it was to learn that 930 jobs were being lost at a firm that employed some of the UK's most skilled and talented workers in their field.

The economic consequences for Limavady and the north-west continue to be of serious concern. It is estimated that unemployment could double in the area. Furthermore, it is also reported that the latest redundancies could mean that an estimated £4 million to £5 million per annum will no longer be spent in the Limavady area.

In the 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005', Limavady was ranked as the sixth most deprived council area in Northern Ireland: Londonderry was ranked third. The closure will have a further negative

impact on those economically deprived areas. The north-west has experienced considerable job losses in the past few years, namely, the closure of the Desmond & Sons Ltd factory at Dungiven, the Daintyfit Foundation Wear Company at Limavady, FarmFed Chickens Ltd in Coleraine and the ongoing threat of public-sector job losses in the area. That paints a very bleak picture.

What governmental response is needed? The work of assisting the Seagate workforce to re-engage with the labour market — having regard for their skill profile and geographical location — is already under way. That is extremely important. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, along with Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning must work diligently to find alternative employment for the Seagate employees who want to remain economically active. Those workers are extremely talented and must be given every opportunity to avail of retraining and educational programmes to enable them to remain in employment. I would welcome a progress report from the Minister on that. Furthermore, I would be interested to learn from the Minister what progress he is making, even at this early stage, in achieving potential replacements for the Seagate factory in the near future.

I would also be grateful if the Minister would inform the House whether, as a result of the Seagate job losses, there were any renewed plans to promote the north-west of Northern Ireland as a prime location at the investment conference to be hosted by the Executive in the spring of next year.

The Executive and the Assembly must act now so that we can offer hope and economic prosperity for this already beleaguered and fraught community.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question time will begin at 2.30 pm, so Members may take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Binge Drinking/Illicit Drug Use

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education to detail the role that her Department will play in developing and expanding programmes to educate young people on the dangers of binge drinking and illicit drug use. (AQO 856/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. I recognise the dangers facing young people and, indeed, adults from binge drinking and illicit drug use. Schools have a role in addressing those issues, but they cannot provide an answer on their own. I hope that every person who is in a position to influence young people will do their best to avoid such danger. I am impressed by the work that schools do in that area. Last week, I saw another example of that at a prize-giving in Armagh, at which the principal gave a very strong message to the young boys and girls not to drink and drive.

I am committed to ensuring that everything that we do for education and youth promotes the well-being of our young people, as well as their academic achievement. Alcohol and drugs are difficult challenges facing everyone, which require the support of families, schools, youth and community groups as well as other key voluntary and statutory agencies — for example, in the area of health.

My Department has a range of policies to help to educate young people about the risks associated with drug and alcohol misuse, including a requirement for all schools to have a drugs policy, which must include a focus on alcohol. We have issued drugs misuse guidance to all schools as part of drugs and alcohol education. Additionally, the revised curriculum is designed in a way that will give every young person an opportunity to learn about the dangers of binge drinking. It will also help them to develop the skills that they need to deal with peer pressure, and an understanding of the problems that may lead them to drugs and alcohol in the first place.

Those interventions are supported and complemented through each school's pastoral care arrangements, including the new counselling service, which is proving to be successful, with 95% of post-primary schools

availing of it. The eight schools that do not use our counselling service already have existing counselling provision in place. Outside school, the youth and community sector has a number of programmes in place that target those most at risk of drugs and alcohol misuse to help them to make healthy choices.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister explain why that serious subject is covered by the public service agreement 8, objective 3 of the Programme for Government, but the Department of Education is mysteriously not named as one of the Departments contributing to it, bearing in mind the horrendous effects that illicit drugs and binge drinking have on our children and young people?

Ms Ruane: I reiterate that the Department takes the subject very seriously. It is not possible to put every single action in the Programme for Government. One of the major programmes that we have brought in is the counselling service in schools. In order to deal with the issue seriously, we must deal with prevention, and that is one of the most dynamic and innovative programmes that has taken place. The fact that it is not mentioned does not mean that we do not take seriously; we do — and I take it very seriously.

Mr Campbell: Given that there has been a series of incidents of illegality ranging from alleged intimidation in the Markets area, which the Minister may have heard raised in the Chamber this morning, to murder in the Republic, which emanated from south Armagh — a place she referred to earlier — will the Minister give an unequivocal and unambiguous response outlining her attitude to support for the police in such circumstances, the giving of information to the police in order to bring those responsible before the courts, and the need for everyone to do likewise in order to bring lawbreakers to justice?

Ms Ruane: In any instance where there is wrongdoing, Sinn Féin calls on people to bring information to the police.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware that suicide is one of the biggest killers on this island — 500 people took their own lives through suicide in one year. What action is the Department of Education taking to address suicide among young people as a result of drugs overdoses, including alcohol abuse?

Ms Ruane: This is a very important issue facing our society. Suicide is a difficult issue that faces the entire community, as recent tragic deaths have reminded us. I have been in many schools throughout the North where teachers and pupils are reeling from young people having taken their own lives. The promotion of pupils' emotional health and well-being has been identified as a priority for action at ministerial level. I am a member of the suicide prevention team.

As I said earlier, professional counselling services are now available for young people in schools to support them during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives. Young people can refer themselves to the service or be referred by their schools. Schools in the post-primary sector report that the availability of the counselling service has been a major boost to their capacity to support young people. Although it is good that there has been huge uptake, it shows that there is much work to be done during 2008 in order to examine how to increase that uptake in schools. A strategy for the provision of counselling is being developed. It is hoped that the service may, eventually, be extended to primary schools in order to deal with issues that concern younger children where that is appropriate.

Work has also begun to develop an emotional health and well-being programme for pupils in partnership with all key stakeholders and interested parties, which will focus on pupils' health and well-being, support systems for pupils who are under stress and support for schools in the event of a crisis. The boards have a crisis response team that can be brought into schools.

Suicide prevention is a key issue for society; and it is one that the Assembly cannot run away from. I welcome the work that has already been done. However, much more must be done. An all-Ireland strategy on suicide prevention is needed. We must build young people's confidence and self-esteem and ensure that they leave the education system as confident, articulate and creative individuals who feel valued by society.

Mr Speaker: Before I invite Mr Ford to ask his question, I remind Members that all supplementary questions must relate to the original question.

Education in Comparative Religion

2. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce education in comparative religion to all schools in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 854/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. It is important that all young people understand the major religions of the world, and I believe that young people are keen to do so. From September 2007, a revised core syllabus for religious education is being phased into all schools. As well as Christianity, it includes new requirements for young people to study at least two other world religions at key stage 3 and to study Christianity from both a Protestant and Catholic perspective at key stage 4. As it is the core syllabus, teachers also have flexibility beyond that to offer additional learning that is focused on religions other than Christianity.

During the development of the core syllabus, the four main Christian churches, who were charged with drafting it, consulted schools and other religious groups. The

Department also consulted representatives of other religions as well as young people and schools during its equality impact assessment of the core syllabus.

We live in an increasingly diverse Ireland, in which there are people of many faiths and of none. There should be a culture of respect for all religions. The revised core syllabus for religious education provides the basis for schools to meet those changing needs. I must stress that the core syllabus is exactly that: a core syllabus. In keeping with the principles of the revised curriculum, it gives schools the flexibility to build on it in a way that suits their pupils' needs. Every school will be different, and I encourage schools to build on the core syllabus by including more content on religions other than Christianity in order to reflect and respect the increasing diversity in Ireland.

Schools have the flexibility to build on the core syllabus and link it with aspects such as citizenship and personal development. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Churches have also set up a representative working group, which includes representatives of religious minorities, to advise on guidance materials to support teachers. That will include material on world religions, prejudice, sectarianism and reconciliation. I consider that to be a welcome step forward.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, as far as it goes. She mentioned increasing diversity in society. Given that that also extends to primary-school pupils, it would seem that the core syllabus is lacking if it only addresses those issues at key stage 3.

The fact that the core syllabus was drawn up some years ago by representatives of the four main Churches may have been a step forward. However, it totally fails to recognise the increasing diversity that exists these days — a point that has been made by such varied people as the Examiner of Statutory Rules, the Bahá'í community and the Council for Integrated Education.

Does she accept that there will be a real problem if those issues are not addressed in every school — as part of the core syllabus — and that we will, increasingly, marginalise those who come from the non-Christian sector?

Ms Ruane: I agree. It is important to ensure that people who come from different parts of the world — with religion, and without — have their beliefs respected. The revised curriculum has also been adopted in primary schools. I know, from visits to schools, that children in many of those primary schools do study world religions. It is important, as our society becomes more diverse, that we respect all religions. One has only to look at parts of the world where there is conflict to know that we need to build a culture of respect and tolerance, rather than one of intolerance and prejudice.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Minister accept that, while learning about all world religions is important to a pupil's knowledge and understanding, a concentration on Christianity is even more important?

Ms Ruane: I take my section 75 duties seriously — they are important. At the risk of repeating myself, there is a welcome for all cultures and religions on our island. It is important that we respect those religions and understand them. I hope that people from the Muslim culture, the Jewish culture, and the Baha'i faith will understand the Christian faith, and vice versa. We are trying to build a new society that is based on tolerance and respect.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Department taken any steps to ensure that the core syllabus complies with equality and human rights legislation?

Ms Ruane: Last December, the Department carried out an equality impact assessment and consulted widely with a variety of groups throughout society. There are issues that we need to deal with as a Department. Those are issues that we will take seriously. The bottom line is that we must build an education system that puts each child at its centre, and that values all of our children.

Academic Selection

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to bring forward proposals to replace the 11+ with an alternative form of academic selection. (AQO 823/08)

Ms Ruane: It is well known that I do not favour academic selection and, therefore, I do not intend to bring forward proposals that simply replace one form of academic selection with another. However, I will bring forward proposals that offer all children equal access to a quality post-primary education. Rather than have a form of transfer based on two short high-stake tests that each last one hour — which results in a sense of failure for far too many children at a formative stage in their development — it is better to base such decisions on the preferences expressed by a young person who has experienced three years of post-primary education and who has received valuable teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance. By that stage, a young person will have begun to form a clear picture of his or her preferred career pathway, and will be capable of expressing preferences for an appropriate mix of academic, professional, and technical courses.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that we have a schools estate that is capable of sufficient flexibility to accommodate those preferences. I will address that issue when I bring forward my proposals.

Mr Hamilton: In the past, and again today, in stating her opposition to academic selection, the Minister has spoken of her belief that the test is stressful for schoolchildren. Is she aware that the biggest cause for concern and stress for parents, pupils and teachers is the uncertainty that she has caused by her failure to bring forward an alternative form of academic selection? Her inaction leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that she is callous and uncaring as regards schoolchildren in this country.

Ms Ruane: Absolutely not — I do not accept that at all. I care deeply about every child in the North of Ireland. I will ensure that we bring forward proposals that put every child at the centre of education, rather than starting with institutions and matching children to them. My proposals will be designed to build on the strengths of our system. I am modernising a 1947 institutional model — one that would not be acceptable in any other part of the world. The 1947 model matches children to one of two school types. A twenty-first century model would match children to provision. We will continue to match academically gifted pupils to suitable provision, just as we will match all children to suitable provision. However, it will be done on the basis of equality.

That will be done on the basis that every child deserves a fair chance. We cannot continue to tell the majority of our children that because they have failed a test, certain schools are not open to them. That is wrong, and changes must be made to the system.

2.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that those who advocate the retention of academic selection have a very narrow and elitist agenda that enables only a very few to succeed? *[Interruption.]*

It would be far better if those people advocated the promotion of academic excellence rather than academic selection. Does the Minister agree that rather than lowering standards, abolishing academic selection would raise standards in our schools?

Ms Ruane: I agree. It is very important to find a way of matching our education system with children's needs. At the moment, children must sit two one-hour tests at a very young age. As I said, I would prefer that children make their selection at 14. Our young people naturally make choices at that age; Members who have children will know that it is at that age that children decide whether to choose maths or science or which vocational courses they should take. There are some very innovative models and there is collaboration between schools. Rather than make a political football of the issue, people should work to create a system that best meets the needs of all our children so that no child

is left feeling that they are a failure as a result of two one-hour tests.

Mr B McCrea: Northern Ireland has the best education system in the world, and it does not need to be broken by people who do not know what they are talking about.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree with CCEA that 31 January 2008 is absolutely the last date by which a decision can be made on a transfer test or alternatives to it? Will the Minister say whether she intends to bring proposals to the House before that date, or will she simply let the clock run out so that there can be no discussion on the matter?

Ms Ruane: I am very disappointed by Basil McCrea's remarks. I wish that he had been with me the other day in Coleraine or three weeks ago on the Shankill Road; I wish that he had been with me when I met principals in north Belfast or when I was in Mount Vernon. People need to wake up and smell the coffee.

Mr S Wilson: Is that Colombian coffee?

Ms Ruane: It is fair-trade coffee.

Basil knows that we fail 4,000 of our young people every year and that they leave school with poor qualifications, poor literacy and poor numeracy skills. What chance do they have? If we have such a world-class education system, why do we fail so many young people? We need to create an education system that provides every child with a fair opportunity. I will do that.

Some Members: When?

STEM Subjects

4. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to increase the uptake of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, as referred to in PSA 2, Objective 4 of annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011. (AQO 862/08)

Ms Ruane: Over the past decade, there has been a 31% decline in the number of A-level students taking maths, chemistry and physics in combination. In addition, as a result of the falling age profile, it is likely that there will be a reduction in the number of students taking any science, technology, engineering and mathematics A levels after 2009.

In further education colleges the number of students achieving an engineering qualification decreased from 3,526 in 2001-02 to 3,130 in 2005-06. The number of students taking maths and computing science also decreased from 13,920 to 9,970. That represents a 28.3% decrease over the same period.

In light of the effect that declining numbers might have on the science base of the economy, my Department

and the Department for Employment and Learning are jointly carrying out a review of STEM subjects to produce a strategy for the development of STEM subjects through schools and further education colleges.

That review will identify progression routes to higher education and employment, and emphasise the links to the skills and innovation needs of the wider economy. The review will also consider how to enhance pupil uptake in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and increase the number of qualified teaching staff in those subject areas so that the North of Ireland can compete in the global marketplace, particularly in the area of the knowledge economy.

Furthermore, I am pleased to inform Naomi Long that, on 8 November 2007, in one example of good practice, Norbrook Laboratories announced a partnership with St Paul's High School, Bessbrook, and St Colman's College, Newry, which will upgrade and develop new science laboratories and provide both schools with equipment no longer required by the company. Norbrook personnel will be in contact with the students throughout the academic year, both to assist their science studies and make them aware of the availability of future employment possibilities. The company will also provide opportunities for work experience for pupils.

Several schools and colleges have collaborated through the vocational enhancement programme to make engineering more relevant and interesting for young people. Queen's University in Belfast has launched a scholarship scheme — the first of its kind here in Ireland or in Britain — which will help to ensure future economic competitiveness and attract high-quality students. The scheme offers awards of £1,000 to all students who achieve three A levels at grade A and who, in 2008, go on to study a STEM subject, other than medicine or dentistry, at Queen's University.

Gender imbalance in the uptake of STEM subjects must also be tackled. It is important that the STEM review and the various initiatives that I have mentioned result in more women and girls being encouraged into STEM-related professions.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. As someone who studied those subjects and qualified as an engineer, I have a particular interest in the matter. However, although the Minister has outlined the length of time over which uptake of those subjects has declined, and has described activities being undertaken by other agencies, I am interested to know how soon the Department will produce its own proposals to tackle that decline at the earliest stage — in the classroom. If there is to be an increase in the uptake of STEM subjects, we must begin by introducing those subjects to children currently in primary school.

Ms Ruane: I agree absolutely that it is important to find ways of stimulating young people from an early

age. I am very pleased with the revised curriculum: I visited one school in which it operates very well for the youngest children, where they learn science through play. The curriculum is carried out as a literacy programme and as a science programme, but involving play. It was easy to see that the children found it stimulating. The revised curriculum will make a big difference to the study of mathematics and science by very young children. The review's proposals are currently out for consultation, and will be put to the Assembly in the near future. The Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are both working on the matter.

Mr Newton: Earlier, the Minister gave us some information on illicit drugs. However, the FARC organisation was involved in illegal drugs in Colombia, not fair-trade coffee.

Does the Minister recognise the needs — *[Interruption.]* If the Members opposite do not understand, I will explain it again in the interest of clarity. The Minister informed us earlier that she was involved in the fair-trade coffee area. On this side of the Chamber —

Mr Speaker: Order. I would prefer that the Member asks his supplementary question.

Mr Newton: I am thanking the Minister for a piece of information, Mr Speaker. We believed that she was involved — I am sorry — we believed that FARC were involved in illegal drugs. The Minister informed us that they are involved in fair-trade coffee.

However, given her answer to Naomi Long, does the Minister recognise industry's need to be involved in research and development and innovation? How will the Minister specifically address the identified needs of industry in the education system?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his comments. I am delighted that fair trade is top of the agenda. On Friday 16 November 2007, I organised a meeting in Warrenpoint, which signifies, I hope, the starting point for Warrenpoint's becoming a fair-trade town. I am sure that the Member will be interested to know that Newry is a fair-trade city and that there are now 24 such towns and cities across Ireland. We do not discriminate on countries; we support fair trade from whatever part of the world it comes.

It is important that my Department works with industry on the economy's needs and on how those can be developed in the curriculum. I met representatives from the Institute of Directors and the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) to discuss the curriculum. Those bodies are pleased about the revised curriculum, and they see the need for more flexibility in the curriculum. The Member will be glad to hear that they also see the need for changes to the 11-plus system.

Mr Attwood: In the Minister's opening reply, she said that there had been a 31% decline in maths, physics and chemistry uptake over the past 10 years. Given the catastrophic collapse in the uptake of those subjects, does the Minister agree that the target that is outlined in annex one of the draft Programme for Government for a 5% increase in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects over the next three years is not very ambitious? Does she agree that she should be setting much more ambitious targets and that she has not stretched herself on STEM subjects in the draft Programme for Government? Will she reassure the House that, given her Department's moderate ambitions on STEM, the commitments made by DEL and the Department of Education to implement a strategy to address the shortage of skills by 2011 will be realised?

Ms Ruane: The STEM review will make proposals. Terms of reference have been drawn up for that review, which is being taken seriously by my Department and by DEL, of which Reg Empey is the Minister. The review will recommend how schools and further education colleges should progress with pedagogy, curriculum and coherence across subject areas. Part of the review will consider how to promote interest in, and understanding of, the importance of STEM subjects to society and how to make them interesting for young people so that they are not turned off science or engineering. A small steering group has been set up to oversee the review. Dr Hugh Cormican, former managing director of Andor Technology, and Dr Alan Blair from the Association of Colleges in the North have been appointed as project manager and secretary respectively, and there will be three different working groups. The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have set the targets to which the Member referred. We will meet and, I hope, exceed those targets. There is a nice little saying in Ireland: *Tús maith leath na hoibre*. — a good start is half the work. If we were to exceed the targets, that would be good, but there is nothing worse than not meeting the targets that one sets.

Integrated Education

5. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Education whether she will explain why no reference to integrated education was included in the draft Programme for Government and the associated public service agreements.

(AQO 853/08)

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief.

Ms S Ramsey: Supplementary questions need to be brief.

Ms Ruane: The draft Programme for Government reflects the careful consideration that the Executive have given to priorities. When education is named in

the draft Programme for Government, it refers to all sectors. Irish-medium education is mentioned in the PSA (Public Service Agreement) because a review is under way, after publication of the Bain Report. I take seriously the statutory duty that is placed on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. It has been my pleasure, as Stephen Farry knows, to visit a number of integrated schools and to speak at several NICIE (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education) conferences. During those visits, I have been impressed by staff commitment to the education and development of children in their care and to the openness of the sector in its approach to seeking collaborative opportunities with schools in other sectors.

Integrated education, and integrating education, plays an important role in the vision that is outlined in the Bain Report, which highlights the need for greater integration and collaboration within the wider education landscape.

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I must announce to the House that, unfortunately, time is up for questions to the Minister of Education. *[Laughter.]*

ENVIRONMENT

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have made a ruling that points of order cannot be made during Question Time, but I will be happy to hear them afterwards.

Ministerial Communication

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of occasions on which she has communicated officially with her ministerial colleagues since taking office; and to outline the general nature of those communications. (AQO 813/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I would not be able to do justice to that complex and detailed question in the 30 minutes that are available to me. If the Member is content, I will write to him with the detail that he has requested. To give him a flavour of it: I have had 25 ministerial meetings and 51 correspondence cases with ministerial colleagues, mostly about cross-cutting issues. However, on occasions, Ministers have written to me about constituency issues. For example, I have received 11 letters from the Minister for Social Development on constituency matters.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her offer of a written response, which I accept. Will she focus on

contact with her colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on 10 September? Which of her official communications with that Minister may have led to his abandonment of the public-sector scheme for the visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway on the same day that she announced that she was minded to approve a private scheme?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that. I have had three correspondence cases with Minister Dodds; none were about the Giant's Causeway. As the Member is aware, from memory I had a meeting with the Minister in August on his return from holiday. If the Member will bear with me, I will check my records. I had meetings with that Minister on 21 August about the Giant's Causeway and on 7 June to discuss cross-cutting issues. All that information will be sent to the Member in writing.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míe maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the number of occasions on which she has communicated officially with her ministerial counterpart in the Twenty-six Counties, John Gormley? Will she outline the general nature of those communications?

Mrs Foster: I do not have that information in front of me, but I am happy to write to the Member. The work was carried out with my ministerial colleagues in the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Storey to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Storey: I have no supplementary question, Mr Speaker.

Mr O'Loan: I also have a question about communications between the Minister's Department and DETI about the Giant's Causeway. Following a question for written answer, she informed me that DETI had made no representations to her in support of the Seaport Investments planning proposal. However, it is now known that the DETI and DOE Ministers came to a shared understanding in June in favour of a private-sector proposal. Does she now accept that there is a legitimate public demand for transparency in her decision-making process? In particular, will she tell me why I have not received a response, which was promised by 9 November, to my freedom of information request? What is her Department attempting to hide?

Mrs Foster: I am somewhat surprised that the Member has asked me that, given that he told the 'Ballymena Guardian' on 14 November that I am not in control of my Planning Service. If that is the case, I am at a loss to understand how I can answer the question.

He is well aware that on 10 September I made a statement, from which I will now read to him and the House. Given the amount of attention that the statement

attracted, I am amazed at the great deal of talk that there has been about it. It was:

“I have asked my officials to engage with the developer and key local stakeholders on some aspects of the proposal so that I can make a formal decision on it at the earliest opportunity.”

There is nothing to hide in that statement, and the Planning Service has nothing to hide. I cannot understand why a new story runs every week when, in fact, there is nothing new in the story. Mr O’Loan and other Members would do well to concentrate on getting a planning application, of whatever nature, for the Giant’s Causeway visitors’ centre so that we can have world-class facilities —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mrs Foster: —at the Giant’s Causeway, which we do not have at present. That should be the main concern for Mr O’Loan and other Members.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Tree Preservation Orders

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the possibility of implementing automatic tree preservation orders for native trees over a certain size or age to ensure that they cannot be cut down without prior permission. (AQO 847/08)

Mrs Foster: Tree preservation orders are used to protect specific trees, groups of trees and woodlands with amenity value, where their removal would have a significant impact on the local environment and on public enjoyment.

As part of the area plan process, the Department is designating local landscape policy areas that identify areas of landscape importance in and adjacent to settlements, including areas with significant trees. Importantly, native criteria alone would exclude many of our visually significant trees with high-amenity value, such as beech, horse chestnut, lime and most pines that are not native. I have no plans to introduce automatic tree preservation orders for all native trees in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her response. In 2002, the Committee for the Environment considered strengthening tree preservation orders as part of a planning Bill that it was considering before suspension. As a result of suspension, the Bill went through Westminster as an Order in Council, and a weaker approach was taken. Will the Minister re-examine what the Committee considered then to see whether anything can be done to strengthen the Order? It is an important issue.

Mrs Foster: It is an important issue, and I am more than happy to re-examine what members of the

Committee for the Environment said at that time. The power to make tree preservation orders will be passed to local government under the review of public administration. New councils will be the appropriate bodies to deal with the matter; they can include tree preservation orders in their new local plans.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister undertake to explore the potential for green development, as exemplified by cities in Germany such as Rostock and Dresden, where housing densities are maintained at a high level to meet the legitimate demand for town and city homes, while, at the same time, integrating them with a green environment? Will she ensure that, in future, native trees and others that are almost native to this country will be included in any density planning?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to consider that suggestion. Perhaps the Member could share that information on Germany with me. Recently, I paid a nice, informative visit to Poundbury, where I saw high-density planning that deals with the issues that the Member mentioned. I would be happy to share my experience in Poundbury with him.

Mr Wells: We welcome the Minister’s commitment to strengthening the tree preservation legislation. How many tree preservation orders are there in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: In Belfast, which is the area to which the Member’s question relates, 124 tree preservation orders have been made. So far in 2007, 93 tree preservation orders have been made; in 2006, 149 tree preservation orders were made. They are a useful tool for dealing with these issues. Many of our deciduous trees are not native to Northern Ireland, and as Rev Robert Coulter said, wider consideration must be given to the trees that we deal with.

Christmas Road Safety Adverts

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the frequency with which the proposed adverts in relation to road safety will be shown on television over the Christmas period; and to indicate whether there will be a series of adverts dedicated to drink-driving. (AQO 832/08)

Mrs Foster: I will deal first with the anti-drink-drive campaign. The anti-drink-drive campaign Just One will launch tomorrow, 20 November. It will continue throughout the Christmas and new year holiday period and will end on 12 January 2008. The campaign will consist of a 60-second television advertisement; washroom posters displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; radio adverts; and an electronic-message system on motorways carrying the strapline “Never, ever drink and drive”.

The Christmas and new year anti-drug-driving campaign, *Smashed*, will launch 1 December 2007 and continue until 13 January 2008. The campaign will consist of a 40-second television advertisement; washroom posters displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; and an electronic-message system on motorways carrying the strapline “You will get smashed if you drive on drugs”.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her very positive response on how she will deal with the issue.

Will the Minister state how much will be spent on those advertisements? Will she tell the House how often they will appear on TV? Will she also tell the House whether the traffic branch of the PSNI will work in tandem with the advertising campaign to ensure that those who are under the influence of drink and drugs will be caught and taken to court?

Mrs Foster: The Department has an effective and good working relationship with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and it will continue to do so.

The Budget allocation for road-safety advertising for 2007-08 is £1.739 million. Spend on advertising over Christmas and the new year will be £242,028, of which £185,000 will be spent on anti-drink-drive television advertising; £7,000 on intervention radio; £40,000 on anti-drug-drive television advertising; and a further £10,000 will be spent on anti-drink-drive and anti-drug-drive poster advertising in pubs, clubs and restaurants.

I cannot be specific about when those advertisements will be aired. It would not be practical to provide the exact detail of when ads will be put on air; however, they will appear at peak viewing times. I know that because there has been some very good feedback on the ads that are broadcast at this time of the year.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister have any evidence about the success of the road-safety adverts? Further to that, does she know whether they are reaching their target audience?

Mrs Foster: It is difficult to measure the sole, unique contribution that any specific road-safety strategy, including advertising, makes towards reducing casualties. That is because a range of interventions and factors can have a positive, or, indeed, negative impact on road safety. However, the research that was carried out on behalf of the Department of the Environment shows that our advertising is influential in improving driver attitudes and in producing positive changes in behaviour.

Mr Cree: Given the persistence of road deaths, is the Minister minded to introduce any new regulations on blood-alcohol levels or any other measures that will deal with driver impairment or fitness to be in control of a vehicle?

Mrs Foster: I told the House at the previous Question Time that I attended that the limit in Northern Ireland is currently 80mg of alcohol for each 100ml of blood. Most other European countries have a limit of 50mg for each 100ml of blood, and some have a limit as low as 20mg for each 100ml of blood.

The Department is considering the issue in the ongoing road-safety review. Clearly, I want to bring that review to a conclusion as quickly as I can, and I hope to be able to say something about it early in the new year. However, just because a review is going on does not mean that we are not actively considering what we can do now. That is the reason why we are considering the drink-drive limit and are hoping to come to the House with something more on it in the near future.

3.15 pm

Review of Public Administration

5. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the opportunities for stakeholder views to be taken on board, prior to conclusions being reached, in relation to the review of the decisions of the review of public administration on the functions that will be transferred to councils. (AQO 834/08)

Mrs Foster: As I said in response to the Member’s question on 22 October, my ministerial colleagues and I are committed to working in partnership with local government, business and the community and voluntary sectors to prepare for, and deliver, the change that will achieve the strong, effective and efficient local government that we all want. Following the publication on 19 October of the emerging findings of the review of the RPA decisions, as they relate to local government, a major stakeholder event was held in Cookstown on 25 October and attended by over 120 delegates.

Additionally, in response to earlier representations and to ensure that as many stakeholder representatives as possible would have the opportunity to discuss and share their views on the emerging findings in a focused forum, four subregional events were held last week in Armagh, Limavady, Omagh and Lisburn. The consultants who facilitated those events will prepare a report on the views that were expressed during the focus discussions in the breakout groups and the plenary sessions.

As I have indicated previously, stakeholders have also been invited to submit written comments on the emerging findings and initial proposals, if they feel that that is appropriate. The views expressed at the stakeholder events, in any written responses and in last Tuesday’s Assembly debate — and those that I receive from the Environment Committee — will all inform the discussions in the Executive subcommittee and any bilateral meetings that I have with ministerial colleagues.

The Department wants to ensure that those views are fully and carefully considered as the thinking on the three strands is drawn together before final recommendations are made to the Executive.

Mr Weir: In regard to a timetable for the review, how confident is the Minister that the Executive will be able to announce a final decision in January 2008?

Mrs Foster: We are very much aware of the timetable. I said that I wanted the review to be tight for a number of reasons, not least due to the uncertainty for the staff who work in local government — we must all be mindful of them. There has been a slight delay, but I aim to conclude the review and report to the Executive before the end of January. I want to make a statement to the Assembly as early as possible — hopefully in February.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she guarantee that additional money and adequate resources will be made available to the new councils established under the RPA?

Mrs Foster: The money, resources and functions for the new councils have not been finalised. I listened carefully to the debate last week in the Assembly; some good and considered views were put forward. Bilateral meetings with my ministerial colleagues begin tomorrow, and we will be considering the functions that we believe must be looked at again. Members must approach this in a creative and innovative way, because our colleagues in local government — many Members have served in local government, and continue to do so — were the only elected representatives in Northern Ireland, apart from our MPs, during 35 years of trouble. Those people provided a democratic voice for many of us, and I want to acknowledge what they did in the past and look to the future and a strong local government for them.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that one of the best measures of the potency and credibility of local government is the overall budget that it controls? If so, does the Minister accept that there is a gaping disparity between Northern Ireland and England in overall budgets given to local government, and can she estimate the increase in the percentage spend for each of the powers being considered for devolution to local councils under the emerging findings document?

Mrs Foster: We do not need to do what they do in England, we need to do what is right for the people of Northern Ireland — Members should be cognisant of that. When the first review of public administration was carried out — the report of which was published in late 2005 — there was no functioning devolved Administration. We have to deal with the context of where we are now. Local councils, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the National Association of Councillors (NAC) and all the other stakeholders know that the Department must work in the current context, and they are very supportive.

Members must decide what is right for Northern Ireland now and, instead of focusing on budgets, find the right way to deliver services so that they make a difference to people.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

6. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on proposals for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 852/08)

Mrs Foster: My Department has received only one planning application for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. Since my press release of 10 September 2007 on the matter, my officials have been engaged in discussions with the key local stakeholders and in giving further consideration to various aspects of the proposal. When that process has been completed, I will make a formal decision on the planning application.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has already said that nothing new is emerging about the visitors' centre, but last week, I — along with others — was concerned to learn that a private investor might benefit from a major grant from the public purse. Can the Minister assure the House that any planning permission will not endanger the Giant's Causeway's status as a world heritage site?

Mrs Foster: That is one of the key issues surrounding any planning application that comes before me in relation to the Giant's Causeway. As Mr Neeson is aware, the Giant's Causeway is our only world heritage site. There are only three natural world heritage sites in the United Kingdom, and I had the opportunity to visit one recently — the Jurassic Coast along the Dorset and east Devon coastline. It was an informative visit. The third natural site is St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides: I do not know whether the Committee for the Environment wants to accompany me to the Outer Hebrides.

I am aware of the world heritage site designation, and I am in correspondence with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in relation to it. The Giant's Causeway's visitors' centre is a member state issue, and that Department is the body through which we speak to UNESCO, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister colour in for the House who are the key local stakeholders with whom her officials are engaged? What aspects of the proposals are under discussion? Can she also clarify how a planning Minister — whose policy function, we are told, strictly relates to land use and not to any other policy area — somehow appears to be the lead Minister on a significant aspect of a region's tourism portfolio and the important tourist development that all Members want to see there?

Mrs Foster: I do not know how many questions the Member has asked, Mr Speaker, but I will attempt to answer them. I have already mentioned my statement of 10 September 2007 in which I said that I asked my officials to engage with the developer and key local stakeholders.

Mr Durkan's first question queried who the key local stakeholders are. They are the National Trust and Moyle District Council, and I gave an undertaking that we would have meetings with them. If the Member is interested, I can share with him information about the discussions between the Planning Service and the two local stakeholders. His colleague Mr O'Loan said that the Planning Service is acting as my postman with regard to details on the Giant's Causeway site — or did he say that it was acting as Seymour Sweeney's postman? I am trying to get the issue brought to a head. We have sat, paralysed, for seven years, unable to do anything about the world heritage site.

Mr Durkan says that the matter is the responsibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. With respect to the Member, when I have a planning application before me, I will deal with it. I will not be told what to do by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; I will do what is right for the planning application that is before me.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ciúnas, le bhur dtoil. According to a BBC report last week, the Minister has asked her departmental legal advisers to examine statements that I made on the Giant's Causeway site. Will the Minister confirm whether she will use her Department to take legal action against me, and, if not, will she recognise that the role of departmental legal advisers is not to take part in political witch-hunts against Members of the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that the Minister may not be willing to answer that supplementary question. I advise the House that there are complications for the Minister in answering the question. I advise the House to be aware of that issue.

Mrs Foster: There is a hymn in the Church of Ireland hymn book called 'Tell Me the Old, Old Story'. I know that the Member is not an Anglican, but I am happy to give him the hymn reference number and he can look it up. Frankly, every time I come to the House, he asks the same question.

I am seeking legal advice on his statement of 8 November and, therefore, I will not make any further comment. I am sure that the Member will be hearing from either me or the Departmental Solicitor's Office in the near future.

Review of Public Administration

7. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the progress that has been made in relation to (a) the number of councils; and (b) the system of governance within the proposed new councils, in light of the decisions of the review of public administration.

(AQO 837/08)

Mrs Foster: Discussions are continuing in relation to the number of councils and configuration that can best deliver our vision for local government. The issues are complex and require the most careful consideration, and there is a considerable volume of material and commissioned research to inform the discussions. While there is a need for, and benefits to be drawn from, reducing some of the existing diversity between councils, at the same time, there is a need for that to be balanced by creating councils of a scale that promotes the abilities of communities to identify and interact with local councils.

One of the decisions of the previous RPA process was that a system of council governance, with appropriate checks and balances, would be developed and placed on statute. The Executive subcommittee remains committed to that position, and believes that if everyone is to have confidence in the new councils, there must be a statutory system of safeguards. The proposals for the system of governance in the new councils will best be informed by the decisions on the number of councils and the functions to be transferred to local government flowing from the current review. The development and testing of detailed governance models will, therefore, be taken forward as part of the implementation programme to deliver the changes to local government.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of concerns that minorities have — particularly unionist minorities on nationalist-controlled councils — given their harsh experiences in some instances, irrespective of any token appointments that may be made in those councils, and the need for governance arrangements to be put in place that would deal with very partisan and discriminatory practices that occur from time to time.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his point. He will know, as he was in the House when the issue was raised during the Assembly debate last week, that governance is mentioned in paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper. I was disappointed last week when some Members across the Floor thought that it was funny when we were talking about unionists in the west, but did not think that it was very funny when we were talking about nationalists and republicans in the east. Equality — if it is to mean anything in governance — is for everyone in Northern Ireland. It should not be seen as a threat to anyone. I hope that it will not be a controversial issue in the RPA.

Training for Driving Examiners

8. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to ensure that driving examiners are trained in sufficient numbers; and are available within reasonable distance, to facilitate the needs of learner drivers with disabilities. (AQO 805/08)

Mrs Foster: All driving examiners are trained to an approved UK standard prior to conducting driving tests. The testing of disabled candidates is included as an integral part of their overall training. As such, all 74 driving examiners provide the service at 16 of the Department's 17 test centres. The Mallusk centre does not conduct driving tests, as it deals exclusively with vehicle tests.

I had useful meetings recently with two of the approved driving instructors associations, where we exchanged ideas and discussed, among other things, changes to the driving test process. The Department for Transport in Great Britain is considering improvements to the driving test, and my officials are liaising with their counterparts in GB to consider whether those proposals can be brought to Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member be brief, as the time for questions to the Minister of the Environment is almost up?

Mr Dallat: My supplementary question relates specifically to people with disabilities who are not facilitated in all the driving test centres. For example, anyone living in Coleraine has to travel to Derry, and that is three hours out of a working day and causes additional costs. Will the Minister ensure that people with disabilities are treated equally everywhere?

Mrs Foster: That is news to me. I will look into the matter immediately.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

STEM Subjects

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he was taking to increase the uptake of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, as referred to in PSA 2, Objective 4 of Annex 1 to the Draft Programme for Government 2008-11. (AQO 863/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The draft Programme for Government identifies economic growth as the Executive's top priority over the next three years. The objective is

to develop a dynamic, innovative, modern economy that can hold its own in a fiercely competitive world. In order to make the transition to a knowledge-based economy, we need a good supply of appropriately trained and skilled people.

The decline in the number of students who opt to take science-related subjects at an early age is a matter of concern. That is why my Department is fully engaged in the work that is being led by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to review the position on science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, and to produce a strategy for their development through schools and further-education colleges. That work will identify progression routes to higher education and employment, and will emphasise links to wider economy's skills and innovation needs.

I am pleased to say that we are not alone in tackling that issue. The private sector has recognised that it has a role to play, not only in highlighting businesses' future workforce needs but in being part of the solution. I look forward to the outcome of next year's review and to contributing to the formulation of the new strategy.

Mr Lunn: As part of its remit to promote foreign direct investment, what role will Invest Northern Ireland play in the promotion of STEM subjects?

Mr Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have roles to play in that area. A senior DETI official is leading the Government stream of the STEM review, which is tasked with ensuring the coherence of Government policy in promoting STEM subjects in society and in defining the links between STEM subjects and schools, further-education colleges and the Executive's skills and innovation strategies. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI are working on a new regional innovation strategy action plan, in which the promotion of STEM subjects is a key objective.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answers. He has touched on a subject that is close to my heart. Does the Minister have any plans to liaise with his fellow Ministers in the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education in order to encourage entrepreneurial awareness in schools and further-education colleges?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the Member's question, and I am aware of his interest in that area. It is important for parents and schools that we place greater emphasis on those subjects. As I said in my reply to the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn, my Department is fully engaged with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and is liaising with them in their work to review the position on STEM subjects and to produce a strategy.

Mr S Wilson: When the Minister of Education was asked earlier about the promotion of STEM subjects in schools in Northern Ireland, she indicated that, in the draft Programme for Government, her Department envisaged a 5% increase in spending on STEM subjects, even though there had been a 31% decrease in spending in the past 10 years. Given the low target that the Minister of Education has set for her Department — about which she seems to be pleased — is the Minister happy that there will be sufficient investment in those subjects in order to ensure that industry's future needs will be met by school-leavers?

Mr Dodds: The Member referred to what the Minister of Education said, and I am sure that he is aware that PSA 2, objective 4 in annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government aims to increase skills and careers choices in STEM subjects.

As he mentioned, the proposal is to increase by 5% the number of people studying those subjects.

Those are minimum standards; the public service agreements and the objectives set out in the Programme for Government set minimums, not maximums. We aspire to greater increases in all those areas. The outcome of the current review, which is being carried out with the involvement of the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and my Department, will lead to outcomes that will encourage increasing numbers of people to take up those subjects and carry them through secondary school and into further and higher education.

Start a Business Programme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the Start a Business programme and its contribution to encouraging enterprise. (AQO 884/08)

Mr Dodds: Since the launch of the Start a Business programme in September 2001, 44,000 individuals have accessed some elements of the training that it offers, and 17,000 people have completed the full programme and started their own business. That has resulted in the creation of approximately 22,000 new jobs — something that is important to emphasise in the context of the discussion about foreign direct investment.

Seventy-eight per cent of the businesses started are still trading three years after they received the initial support, and that compares favourably to the UK average, which is 73%.

Those impressive statistics demonstrate the considerable contribution that the programme has made to encouraging enterprise across Northern Ireland. Its value has been further endorsed by a recent independent evaluation.

The evaluation recommended that, given the need to raise the overall level of entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland, a business start-up programme should continue to be available to all. However, despite the considerable success of the current programme, the evaluation concluded that improvements can be made to deliver even greater value for money and provide a more flexible support package for the client. It is envisaged that a revised programme that takes into account the review's recommendations will be launched in the autumn of 2008.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am impressed by the number of people who have been through the scheme. It is vital for Northern Ireland. In towns in my constituency, such as Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, the programme has been deemed very successful. However, is the Department running down the Start a Business programme in anticipation of transferring the matter to local government as part of the review of public administration (RPA)? How will the Minister ensure that the enterprise agencies and Enterprise Northern Ireland will continue to play a role in any RPA process?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his remarks. The programme is a very positive one, and I assure the Member that it is not being run down. He is right to point out that we envisage transferring the programme to local councils. In the context of the discussion on the RPA, I am happy to say that this is one area that can, perhaps, be more appropriately dealt with at that level.

I assure the Member that under no circumstances is it envisaged that whenever that transfer takes place the programme will be run down at all.

Mr Beggs mentioned also the role of Enterprise Northern Ireland. He will be aware that any future roll out will have to be tendered for through the normal processes. However, it is right to take the opportunity to say that the programme has been very successful. The review and evaluation will introduce, from the autumn of 2008, a better, more flexible programme, which will increase value for money all round.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for the information that he has provided. Does he agree that the positive impact of the Start a Business programme reflects great credit on the local enterprise agencies that have done so much — often under difficult, uncertain and changing budgetary circumstances? Will the Minister underline the assurance that any future devolution of the programme through the RPA will not mean its demotion? Many people fear that INI gives the impression of already having withdrawn psychologically from the areas of social-economy activity and local enterprise.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, for his contribution. I reiterate the point that, as regards

business start-ups, for obvious and topical reasons, there is much discussion and emphasis on foreign, direct investment.

My Department and I put enormous emphasis on local indigenous companies. They must be a major part of our focus, as are business start-ups.

In the Member's constituency of Foyle, there were 146 business start-ups per 10,000 of the adult population, which compares well to the 113 in Northern Ireland as a whole. That figure does not take account of FDI, but it shows the level of activity.

I assure the Member that as far as my Department is concerned, there is no withdrawal from the social economy. I have had meetings with a number of groups, including the Social Economy Network (Northern Ireland) Ltd and Enterprise Northern Ireland. I listened carefully to what they said, and I am aware of the enormous contribution that they make.

The Department's role and a future strategy are being considered. However, there is no intention to change the current position regarding business start-ups.

Mr Simpson: Will the Minister outline some of the recommendations from the evaluation of the Start a Business programme that will be included in the revised programme?

Mr Dodds: Several recommendations will be incorporated into the new programme. The idea is to make it more relevant to the needs of entrepreneurs and more flexible, and to produce greater value for money. Part of that entails ensuring that potential entrepreneurs can access only those elements of the support package that are appropriate for them, instead of having to take the entire package. Additional resources will be skewed to those start-ups with growth potential, and an initial online diagnostic tool will be used to differentiate appropriate levels of support for each client.

Members will be aware that the universal grant element — which currently stands at £400 per start-up — will be withdrawn and reinvested in training and mentoring to make better use of the available resources. Some 84% of participants who were surveyed for the evaluation stated that they would have completed the programme and started their businesses even if no grant had been offered. Money saved through the withdrawal of that grant will be reinvested for enhanced mentoring, more training courses and better online resources. That will improve all aspects of the programme.

Belfast City Hall/Ulster Museum

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether or not his Department had carried out a study to assess the long-term effect of the closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum on tourism in Belfast, and in particular, on visitors' impression of the city. (AQO 881/08)

Mr Dodds: Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum are important to tourism in Belfast. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have met all relevant organisations to discuss what can be done during the periods of closure. However, the marketing and promotion of Belfast, including the provision of visitors' services, is the responsibility of Belfast City Council and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB).

Although no study has been carried out by my Department, next year's tourism monitor survey, which will be conducted by Belfast City Council, will include questions aimed at gauging visitors' impressions about the closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum.

While the City Hall is being refurbished, the Waterfront Hall, Malone House and Belfast Castle will be available for functions, ranging from small-scale events to conferences. The grounds of the City Hall will remain open for visitors and events — as I am sure Members are aware — including the popular Continental Christmas Market and the new attraction, the Belfast Big Wheel.

National museums have put in place a significant outreach programme that is designed to continue engagement with existing museum audiences by taking artefacts to the people. In addition, a full marketing and communication plan has been in operation since the Ulster Museum closed. That has included TV and radio coverage and the distribution of over 160,000 events and exhibition booklets.

Belfast City Council and the BVCB have undertaken to encourage tourists to visit Belfast by considering opening out of season or extending their opening times so that visitors can still find plenty to do in the city. There are also additional places to visit in Belfast because of the new attractions. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board also continues to support the Belfast Welcome Centre and the information desks at two local airports that welcome people as they arrive in Northern Ireland.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Given the success of the World Rally Championship last week, can more be done to promote the Stormont Estate — for example, by providing tour operators for the general public?

3.45 pm

Mr Dodds: The Member raises an interesting point. All of us who attend the Assembly on a frequent basis will be aware that both Parliament Buildings and the grounds are already popular places to visit. The exposure that this place gets on TV and radio encourages people to visit. Perhaps not all the visitors come to look at the Building: some come to look at the inhabitants of the Building as well, and come away with mixed views.

The Member's question is obviously a matter for the Assembly authorities and, in particular, the Assembly Commission, which is in charge of the use of the Building. The Commission will be aware of what the Member has said, and I will ensure that his comments are relayed to the appropriate authorities.

Ms Lo: Earlier, the Minister mentioned the Belfast Wheel. Is there any plan to keep the wheel as a permanent feature? It is very popular, as he said.

Mr Durkan: Go round in circles on it.

Mr Dodds: As the Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has said, I should avoid the temptation to go round in circles in answering this question.

The question as to whether the Belfast Wheel remains as a permanent fixture is a matter that lies outside my Department's remit. It is for others to decide — I am sure that Belfast City Council has a view on it. The Member is right to point out that it is already a very popular attraction. There is much talk of innovation and imagination: this is a good example of what these qualities, applied to the tourist industry, can bring. I am in favour of the use of the grounds of Belfast City Hall for this type of activity. The Christmas market, which I mentioned earlier, has also proved to be very popular. There is clear evidence that people are coming into Belfast primarily because of these new attractions. Obviously, that is to be welcomed.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree with me that when Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum reopen in 2009, they will greatly enhance the tourist potential not only of Belfast but of the rest of Northern Ireland, as Belfast is both the capital city and the gateway to Northern Ireland for tourists?

Mr Dodds: The Member shares with me a vested interest in ensuring that the City Hall, when reopened, looks even better than ever. He is right to point out that Belfast is a major player in the tourism market. Northern Ireland Tourist Board statistics show that, last year, 793,000 visitors and domestic holidaymakers stayed at least one night in the Belfast City Council area, and that there were 5.6 million day trips to Belfast in 2006. The other day, I noticed a survey in the newspapers which ranked Belfast second only to London as a destination for weekends away and short city breaks. Combined with the 'Lonely Planet' description of Northern Ireland as a must-see destination for 2007, that shows the enormous potential that exists for growth of tourism from an already promising position to something that will drive the economy forward.

The Member has mentioned the closures of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum; both reopen in 2009. As he knows, in that year we will welcome back to Northern Ireland the Tall Ships. In 1991, the arrival of that tremendous attraction provided an enormous boost to Northern Ireland. It is regrettable that both the City Hall and the museum are closed at the one time. Unfortun-

ately, work had to be carried out to both buildings for health and safety and other reasons. However, when they reopen in 2009, they will provide an enhanced visitor experience for those who come to our city and to the Province.

Women in Business

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what his plans were to encourage more women to become involved in business in Northern Ireland. (AQO 836/08)

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he was taking to encourage more women to become involved in setting up their own business. (AQO 818/08)

Mr Dodds: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 6 together.

Invest Northern Ireland is committed to increasing the level of female entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland. The agency's Go For It campaign, its enterprise and education programmes and the Investing in Women programme all seek to encourage more women in Northern Ireland to start businesses or grow their existing businesses.

Investing in Women provides awareness programmes, role model promotion and sponsorship of conferences and events, in which more 4,000 women a year are engaged. Additionally, a further 16,000 young women are involved in various enterprise and education programmes. The women's enterprise taskforce was announced in February 2007 by Margaret Hodge, the then Minister of State for Industry and the Regions. The taskforce aims to increase the quality and quantity of women's enterprise across the UK over a three-year period.

Northern Ireland is represented on the taskforce by the vice chairperson of Invest Northern Ireland. Over the period 2002-07, the proportion of female-driven start-up businesses supported by Invest Northern Ireland's Start a Business Programme, to which we have just referred, increased from 35% to 47%, which is very encouraging, as I am sure Members will agree.

Miss McIlveen: I am encouraged by the trends that the Minister outlined. Will he give us an assurance that further research will be carried out to ensure that we build on progress? Furthermore, has he plans to transfer the Investing in Women initiative to the new councils under RPA?

Mr Dodds: I am happy to confirm that the Department proposes to transfer both the initiative and the budget associated with it to the new councils, as Members who are involved in local government will be glad to hear. It is an important programme that focuses on supporting women starting businesses that operate

primarily in the local market. Therefore, it is entirely correct and appropriate that that should transfer to the remit of local authorities. The Department continues to engage in research into female entrepreneurship. There has been and continues to be research into how women who are already in established businesses may develop their businesses further. I have been encouraged by the increase in the number of women who are starting up businesses; this must be promoted even more in the future.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his reply, which addresses an important issue. Northern Ireland is eleventh in 12 United Kingdom regions where women are involved in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, and we must improve on that. With that in mind, is the Minister satisfied that enough is being done in schools to ensure that teachers have the knowledge to talk to children about becoming involved in the business world? I realise that that is a cross-cutting matter.

Mr Dodds: The Member has touched on an issue that we discussed earlier in Question Time in relation to STEM subjects. The matter is cross-cutting in the sense that career advice and the encouragement of entrepreneurship in schools is primarily a matter for the Department of Education; however, it is cross-cutting as it impinges on the work of the Department for Employment and Learning and of my Department.

We must give careers advice in schools — for which a new strategy is being devised — much greater emphasis than heretofore; we need to invest in up-to-date information and proper research for careers guidance. If we do not, we will fail our children; stereotypes will continue, and kids will go into professions and follow courses because of tradition. We must present them with the opportunities of the global economy. Those who encourage women into business or who encourage people into science, technology, engineering and maths, for example, must make clear the tremendous opportunities available in business and entrepreneurial activity.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers to both questions, which are encouraging to women. Given that the Minister has accepted that women are under-represented in business, has he or have his officials had discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that women are offered the correct courses so that they are better equipped to set up their own businesses?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for her comments. I assure her that my Department works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning. In general, it is vital that my Department has a good relationship with that Department on skills and so on. I will certainly ensure that the areas to which the Member referred will continue to be explored with the Department for

Employment and Learning. She is correct to put emphasis on that and can be assured of my support for it.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister tell the House how many women were in receipt of grants to help with business start-ups during the previous financial year? Will he indicate whether he has met with the Women in Business network recently? They are concerned about their ability to tender for public procurement.

Mr Dodds: I assure the Member that I will provide the specific information that she has requested for the previous financial year as soon as possible. I will write to her and will, obviously, share that information with the House. I have met several people with regard to the general issue that the Member has raised and I am aware of the concerns that exist. She can be assured that the Department is examining the issue. I will write to her with the information that she requests.

New and Emerging Markets

5. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he had to identify new and emerging markets for indigenous business.

(AQO 861/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI focuses actively on developing business opportunities for local companies in new and emerging high-growth markets. During the current financial year, Invest NI expects to assist 200 companies to explore export markets for the first time and a further 400 companies to explore markets that are new to them.

Invest NI puts particular emphasis on high-potential new and emerging markets, such as India, China and the Arabian Gulf states. Two trade missions, involving 32 companies, visited India in 2007. Companies that have enjoyed success there include Telestack International Ltd and CDE Ireland. In addition, Invest NI now has a permanent presence in Mumbai, India, in order to seek new trade and investment opportunities.

Invest NI also supported 30 company representatives to visit China in May 2007. That visit will be followed up later in November when Invest NI will take 40 local companies to China — the UK's largest mission to that market in 2007. The agency has opened an office in Shanghai to further exploit the potential that the Chinese market presents for Northern Ireland companies. Delta Print and Packaging Ltd and Wrightbus Ltd are examples of local companies that have secured substantial new business in China already.

In November, Invest NI will publish its 2008 trade events programme, part of which is the agency's plan to take Northern Ireland companies to trade fairs and on missions to countries as diverse as China, India, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Thailand and the USA. In 2008, it

will facilitate over 50 market visits, many of which will be to new and emerging markets.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer to my question. Earlier, he said that although FDI gets a lot of attention, he does not overlook indigenous business. What is the Minister's view on the balance in Invest NI's current strategy between the promotion of FDI and the promotion of emerging markets for indigenous business? Will he set job creation targets for indigenous business, such as those that have been set for job creation in the FDI sector?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for her question. She may wish to stay in the Chamber for the remainder of the debate on the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, during which I am sure that the matter will be explored in more detail.

I am apprised of the essential need for balance between those matters. That has already been discussed. However, with regard to the assistance that has been offered during the past five years from 2002-03 to 2006-07, Invest NI's contribution to indigenous companies was 54% and to international companies 46%.

When the enormous work that has been done on business start-ups is added to that, it shows that while it is easy to put all of the focus on FDI — and it is important that we do attract FDI and that targets are set for that, because every economy in the world is doing so — we must not lose focus on the important role of ensuring that more new local companies are created and that our small and medium-sized companies are encouraged to grow and export more.

In that regard, we are setting targets: 45 brand new companies to begin exporting globally in the period up to 2011; 300 to begin exporting outside Northern Ireland; and in the same period, between 2008 and 2011, 600 existing companies to begin exporting for the first time. Those are challenging and hard targets, but I am determined that we should try to meet them. That is on the indigenous front, not leaving aside FDI.

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time for today.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to raise a point of order that was deferred until after Question Time. Earlier, you said that Members should ensure that their supplementary questions relate to their original question. Despite the fact that you reminded Members of that instruction, others continued to make statements that had nothing to do with the question that was laid down. May we please have a ruling on that issue?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for her point of order. I have made it clear many times that, as far as possible, supplementary questions should relate to the original question. I have gone as far as to rule Members

out of order, which has resulted in their not being heard. Once again, I say to Members on all sides of the House that it is vitally important that supplementary questions — as far as possible — should relate to the original question.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today you made a ruling on the subject of parliamentary language. Will you also make a ruling on the use of the term “the North of Ireland”? It is confusing when a Minister, who represents the Executive, uses the term “North of Ireland”. In my estimation, that refers to Malin Head and nowhere in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, will you make a decision on the Minister of Education's continual use of the first name of a Member of the House? It is part of parliamentary procedure that a Member should be referred to by constituency. While the Members on the opposite side of the Chamber try to give the impression that a love-in is going on in the House, I assure you that I would prefer that they referred to Members by parliamentary constituency rather than by their first names.

Mr Speaker: Mr Storey has raised two points of order. As regards the first point of order, unfortunately, I do not have the power to dictate how a Minister — or any Member — might ask a question in the House. On the second point of order, it is the convention that, when Ministers or Members are speaking, they refer to other Members by their surnames, and if not a surname by his or her constituency. That is a clear convention not only in this House but in another House.

Mr McCartney: If I refer to the Member for Foyle, I might be referring to any one of six Members. That would be not be clear for the Hansard report — someone could be wrongly named.

Mr Speaker: When a Member refers to other Members, whatever constituency they represent, they should be addressed as, for example, Mr Hamilton, or Mr Robert Hamilton. The Member's surname might be used — not his or her Christian name. As I have already said, that is a clear convention not only in this House but in another House as well. There are seasoned politicians in the House who know that fact, and they were learned on those issues, long before I was.

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The second member of the Robinson clan was expelled from the House earlier today.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I told Members that they should be careful about how they might address the House, and about how and why they might address the House. The Member should be careful about how he starts his point of order.

Mr K Robinson: Further to that point of order, and the admonishment from the Chair, Mr Speaker. I have been expelled from the House on a previous occasion.

Having the same surname as the person who left earlier today, and considering the fact that there are several Robinsons in the House, I take it that it is in order for our Christian names to be used as a means of indicating which Robinson is being called?

Mr Speaker: I am not too sure whether that is a point of order. Certainly, when I call any of the Robinsons, I call the Member by his or her first name: Mr Peter Robinson; Mr Ken Robinson; and Mrs Iris Robinson. The point of order that was raised concerned Members using Christian names only. That is wrong.

Mr K Robinson: I thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Closure of the Seagate Operation in Limavady

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 900 jobs; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to agree a co-ordinated strategy to assist Seagate workers back into employment. — [Mr McLaughlin.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “loss” and insert

“of 1000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north west.” — [Mr Campbell.]

Mr Dallat: I hope that no one gets jilted until we have resolved the serious problems in the north-west. We must all work together to address this issue.

Such is the momentum of job losses in the Limavady area that the motion is already outdated. As well as the 900 jobs losses in Seagate, 70 jobs are to be lost at the HÜCO Lightronics plant. Furthermore, some 300 civilians are employed at the army camp in Ballykelly. The SDLP had hoped to propose an amendment to the motion, which called for the setting-up of an economic task force. That amendment was deemed not competent. However, I am pleased that a similar motion was passed by Limavady Borough Council last week, although I regret that it was not supported by the council's Sinn Féin members.

The SDLP remains convinced that it is absolutely essential to have a specific plan dedicated to the particular needs of East Derry. If we simply ask for support, or call on the indulgences of an outside body such as Invest Northern Ireland, we may as well shout until the cows come home. A hands-on approach is needed to address the particularly difficult problem that now besets the people of that area.

I believe that, sooner rather than later, an economic task force will be set up. That task force will have a time-limited work programme, and it will involve academics, particularly from the University of Ulster at Coleraine and Magee College, as well as local businesspeople, the trade unions, and community and regeneration groups. It is not rocket science. Such task forces have worked successfully in parts of the Republic that were devastated by the withdrawal of large multi-nationals. They have worked successfully in Canada and elsewhere in the world. We must believe that we can tackle this problem as a team. We must be united in our efforts rather than trying to score party political points.

The motion refers to 900 job losses, and the amendment to 1,000. It does not matter whether the figure is

900 or 1,000. Both those figures are fundamentally wrong, because those direct job losses will lead to many other jobs being indirectly displaced, particularly in the service industry. I spoke to a women's group in Limavady on Friday, and its members were concerned that those who worked in the service industry would lose their jobs. Obviously, when the main employer goes out of business, businesses that rely on that employer go out of business, too. A geographical economic analysis of where the jobs have gone in the past and where they have been lost is needed. That was promised in a response to a parliamentary question, and it is needed if we are to identify East Derry's particular problems.

The whole infrastructure in East Derry is weak. Broadband technology is not available everywhere in the constituency. Some emerging job-creation initiatives are not available there either — for example, the “live/work” concept that provides employment to people involved in architecture, IT and suchlike who live in rural areas.

The area's infrastructure is also weak, with the roads a particular problem. Dungiven has the distinction of being the most poisoned town anywhere on these islands because the promised bypass will not be built until 2015. I must, of course, mention the rail infrastructure. No capital expenditure will be spent on the Coleraine-to-Derry line until 2011.

When I was young, I remember that my father had trouble finding jobs. His steadiest employment was working on the building of the M2 motorway. Of course, that motorway has neither reached Derry nor the rest of the north-west.

The motto that is inscribed on the coat of arms that is on display in the University of Ulster's Coleraine campus reads “Build Anew”. At the conclusion of the debate, we should promise each other that collectively, we will build anew from the devastation that has occurred in the East Derry constituency and that has had an impact on that of Foyle, on Donegal, most certainly on Coleraine, and, indeed, on Mid Ulster.

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

Dr Farry: The closure of the Seagate Technology plant in Limavady has been a sobering experience for us all. In one sense, it illustrates the perils of a globalised economy. In saying that, however, we must recognise that Northern Ireland can survive and prosper only as part of such an economy. Therefore, we must appreciate the opportunities that globalisation presents and the major challenges that the mobility of capital creates. At the same time, we must appreciate the impact that those can have on communities such as Limavady.

Most of my remarks will apply to what we do in Northern Ireland as a whole. The implications of and the lessons that can be learned from the Seagate experience

apply to our entire economy, and they will affect how we proceed in the coming years.

However, before doing that, it is important to reflect on the impact that the closure will have on a particular community in the north-west of Northern Ireland. In the long term, it is important that we treat the Northern Ireland economy as a single entity and ensure that investment and new economic opportunities are secured in the areas in which they can bring most prosperity. In the short term, however, we must be conscious of the impact that those job losses will have on that particular community and of all the consequent difficulties that may arise in the social fabric of the area.

In general, we must be conscious of what the situation means for the Assembly's overall economic strategy and for the work of the Executive. Indeed, my party has some reservations about that. As a region, Northern Ireland is dependent on the UK economy as a whole. Despite the Labour Government's worthy and often-spoken words about an active regional policy — words that often came from the Conservative Government as well — the fact is that growth in the UK economy is based around what happens in London and the south-east. All the other UK regions, including Northern Ireland, are left in a dependency culture. Nothing is done to upset the apple cart by giving those regions the ability and means to try to make jobs more sustainable. As a consequence, we have a large public sector and a small private sector. It is difficult to argue that we have the means to overcome that situation.

Invest Northern Ireland has, effectively, been left with a strategy of trying to attract foreign direct investment by awarding grants, thus leaving us prone to attracting only the low added-value end of the investment spectrum. As a result, we are left with jobs that are not as sustainable as they would otherwise be. The nature of inward investment into Northern Ireland can be contrasted with that in the Republic of Ireland.

We await the outcome of the Varney Review, but the indications are not very hopeful. However, it should be restated that this part of the world needs effective fiscal measures to attract a new type of investment. Short of that, along with encouraging entrepreneurship innovation, much worthy work can be done in investing in skills, which is a key element in dealing with the immediate situation. Nevertheless, those measures can have only a limited impact in the absence of a broader strategy to attract inward sustainable investment. We must examine closely the contents of the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget and ask ourselves whether they are sufficient to make the step change in the Northern Ireland economy that we all want to see or whether we should seek simply to do more of the same. Although some FDI may produce successes, the downside is that some other foreign direct investment will be lost to us.

The job losses at Seagate must be used as a clarion call for some fresh thinking about what can be done to make FDI jobs more sustainable.

4.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I thank Mr McLaughlin and Mr Brolly for tabling the motion and giving me the opportunity to provide an update on the matter of Seagate's proposed closure of its Limavady plant. I welcome the approach of all the Members who have spoken today. The debate has taken a constructive approach, and has had the common theme of ensuring that we all work together as much as possible for the benefit of the people who, sadly, have been put out of work, and for the benefit of the Limavady and north-west area in general.

I am sure that I speak for everyone when I say that the shock of the announcement is still very real. We all appreciate the anxiety and uncertainty that it has brought for the employees and their families, as well as others who indirectly rely on Seagate's Limavady operation for much of their business or income. In addition, as other Members have mentioned, the plans of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd to cease manufacturing will release many of the 70-strong workforce in January. As has been mentioned by several Members, it has been of some, albeit limited, comfort that the timelines of the redundancies at Seagate Limavady are longer than is often the case in such situations. Therefore, there is an opportunity for Government and the community to take stock of the implications and ensure that everything possible is done to try to redress the balance and re-establish the economic potential of Limavady and the wider north-west region.

I assure the House that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning, is making strenuous efforts to minimise and, it is hoped, eradicate the negative effects of the planned closures by ensuring that those currently employed at Seagate Limavady and HÜCO are provided with all the available support and advice to ensure that they move as seamlessly as possible into new employment or self-employment opportunities. I will later return to the practical implications of that joint approach.

In addressing the motion as amended, it is useful to put on record the quantifiable economic contribution that Seagate Limavady has made over the years and, consequently, the potential impact that the closure may have on the local Northern Ireland economy. I have given the figures to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I appreciate the remarks that were made by the Committee's Chairperson about that. However, it is important to put the figures on the record of the Assembly Hansard. Moreover, it is important to realise that I outline a worst-case scenario

as I am confident that, for the reasons that I will outline later, we will be able to minimise some of the potential effects.

Seagate established its Limavady facility in 1996 to produce aluminium substrate platters that are used in the manufacture of computer hard disk drives. In the intervening 11 years, the company has invested over £120 million in capital at the facility. It has created employment for an average of 900 people each year, and that has resulted in a payment of a total of £216 million in wages and salaries over that period. In addition, many other companies, as has been identified, have benefited from Seagate's business activities in the region. For example, in the year to June 2007, the company spent £7.8 million on on-site contractors and a similar amount on products and services with other Northern Ireland-based operations. Undoubtedly, the loss of the Seagate business will be a serious blow for many of those companies and their employees.

In recent years, the annual wage bill for Seagate employees has been in the order of £22 million, excluding social security and pension payments. It is recognised that much of that income is then spent by individuals in their local communities. It is important to note that, over that period of 11 years, some £16 million has been paid back in the form of income tax, national insurance and corporation tax. When the money that Invest NI has put in is considered, all of those figures, including the return from taxation, must be taken into account.

It is important to point out that the make-up of the workforce is drawn from a wide geographical base, as many Members have acknowledged. Two hundred and sixty-one of the permanent employees — or 34% — come from Limavady.

A further 327, or 42%, come from Londonderry, and 120 temporary staff also live in the Londonderry/Limavady corridor. Unless alternative, good-quality opportunities can be found to replace those jobs, the loss of wages to the local economy will have a considerable effect, because the primary impact of the closure is across the north-west.

Other towns that are home to the remaining workforce include Coleraine, Dungiven, Claudy, Ballymoney, Portrush, Magherafelt and Strabane, although in many cases only a small number. However, it is important to consider that geographical distribution because, in one sense, it is positive: people seeking re-employment will necessarily cast their net across a wide area of the north-west.

It also means that employers new to those areas, or companies seeking to expand, will have access to a workforce that has a track record of employment with a major US company and that, with appropriate training or retraining, will be ready and eager to make

a significant contribution to the success of other organisations based in the north-west. I mention that to re-emphasise the point that has been made so often: council and constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets. Members know that from experience and by looking at the number of people who work in Belfast city centre; they do not all live in Belfast. The same applies to any council area or to any investment that Members care to mention.

Nevertheless, the news from Seagate will have a massive impact on Limavady. A significant proportion of the workforce resides there, will continue to do so and will be seeking alternative employment. To set the Seagate closure in context, I want to highlight to the House several recent investments in the north-west. Only 10 days ago, AXA Insurance announced plans to create 153 new jobs in Londonderry. Firstsource Solutions opened its second Northern Ireland operation, again in Londonderry, in November 2006 and is well on its way to employing 570 people by early 2008. Stream International plans to increase its workforce by 300 over the next two years, bringing the total number of employees to 950.

Londonderry is not alone in benefiting from such successes. Northbrook Technology, which is involved in financial technology services, will expand its presence in Strabane by a further 110 jobs in 2008, taking its total number of employees in the town to 360. That workforce will be drawn not only from Strabane but from further afield. Northbrook has done much to redefine the economy in Strabane by moving it from traditional textile-based businesses to the new economies of international tradable services.

I was pleased to attend the recent announcement of an investment by Fujitsu Services, which is a prime example of the type of investment that Invest Northern Ireland must increasingly focus on and seek to win for Northern Ireland. Fujitsu Services is a leading IT services company and part of a world-class organisation. Its £18 million investment in Northern Ireland will create 402 high-value jobs, the vast majority of which will be in the north-west, with the remainder in Belfast. Much of the investment will be in the new managed IT services centre of excellence in Londonderry.

Over the next three to four years, therefore, more than 800 new jobs for the north-west are already projected and committed to. The combined annual earning potential is in excess of £15 million. Those growth projections create a demand for employees from many disciplines, possessing a range of skills and abilities — a point to which I will return shortly. The announcements have already taken place, and many of the companies are involved in the planning and running of recruitment campaigns.

Other activities in the north-west will contribute further to the recovery of the economy. People have talked about action plans and task forces, but we already have the north-west action plan. Phase 1 of that plan has already achieved or exceeded its targets for 2003-06 for investment leveraged, the number of new jobs created and the level of interaction with new and existing businesses. It also delivered over £80 million of Invest Northern Ireland assistance that was committed to the north-west region by 31 March 2006; the original target was set at £60 million. It has also led to the establishment of the £20 million centre of excellence for intelligent systems at the University of Ulster. It is an innovative, world-class centre of excellence that I had the pleasure of opening on my first day in ministerial office. Invest Northern Ireland invested a substantial sum of £8 million in that centre.

Timber Quay, which was a £10 million speculative building project in Londonderry that was supported by Invest NI, is now the site for Fujitsu Services' foreign direct investment project. An enterprise hub consisting of 23,000 sq ft of high-specification flexible work space has been established at Skeoge Enterprise Park. I also had the pleasure of being involved in its launch.

Phase 2 of the north-west action plan was set up to build on the capital and infrastructural investments of phase 1 by focusing on joint initiatives with the councils in the north-west, under the three key themes of innovation, internationalisation and business development. Under phase 2, a number of initiatives by the five council areas in the north-west are due for completion in January 2008.

Notwithstanding those achievements, Invest Northern Ireland will continue to seek new investment opportunities across the globe. It is aware that a significant labour resource and high-specification facility will be available in the Limavady area in the near future. Invest Northern Ireland and I are keen to match the skills, accommodation, and so forth, with any potential investors, should the opportunities arise in the coming months.

Last week, I visited the United States to help to prepare for a major investment conference in May 2008. I had meetings with business colleagues and others in the political and civic world across four cities, and I was overwhelmed by the level of interest, goodwill and willingness to help that was expressed by representatives of many major companies.

There is enormous potential for Northern Ireland to build on the exceptional capabilities and work ethic of our labour force and to develop an economy that will benefit our entire current and future population. Some Members mentioned that the emphasis must be on skills, expertise and the knowledge-based economy. They pointed to the fact that that has been emphasised in the Programme for Government, the investment

strategy for Northern Ireland and the Budget for the next three years. That is absolutely right. We talk about a radical rethink and a different new approach, and when people examine the Programme for Government, they will accept that that is exactly what we are about.

In setting the targets for foreign direct investment, we talk about the promotion of new jobs, 75% of which will provide salaries above the Northern Ireland private-sector median and 2,500 of which will have salaries that will be at least 25% higher than the Northern Ireland private-sector median. The idea is to get to high-value-added jobs that will be based on the skills and knowledge of our people and that are, therefore, not as easily transferable on the grounds of labour costs. We have seen important advances in that regard, but we must emphasise that even more as we move forward.

I reiterate my earlier commitment that Invest Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning are working together, and the Minister for Employment and Learning has been here throughout the debate. We are working closely together to ensure that all possible assistance is provided to help the workforce to prepare for the new opportunities that will undoubtedly arise.

4.30 pm

I do not want to suggest that this is going to be easy or that it will be without significant challenge. I recognise that many of the instances that I mentioned earlier about new investments will not immediately read across to the existing skills that are present in the current Limavady workforce. As a result, the provision of appropriate and targeted, retraining opportunities will be a priority for the combined, cross-departmental effort.

To that end, senior officials from Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning have commenced interaction with Seagate management to establish a joint plan of action. The objective is to best-equip employees for the future through a co-ordinated approach in partnership with the Social Security Agency and the local further-education college. Based on an assessment of the existing and future skills needs of the workforce, employees will be given advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education opportunities, as well as information on careers and benefit entitlement.

The Department for Employment and Learning has well-established procedures to assist those facing redundancy, which are now being put in place to match the timetable for closure and the specific needs of the workforce.

On-site services will include group sessions and job clinics through which workers can avail of one-to-one counselling and guidance, and arrangements will be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the range of

employee shift patterns and the company's production schedules, and will be timed to reflect the potential closure date of the company.

The company is committed to working closely with my Department, Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning to assist the workforce to the maximum degree possible. The provision of on-site facilities, targeted, time-flexible training programmes, and one-to-one assistance with self-employment guidance are all options that are being explored.

This is an opportunity for the Government, the company and the workforce to work together to assist the employees to prepare for the future in the labour market at the appropriate time, and I am satisfied that Invest NI, the Department for Employment and Learning, social services and further-education colleges are already engaged in the co-ordinated strategy called for in the motion, as amended.

For example, both Departments have already engaged with the company to identify the composition of skills profiles in the workforce and the geographical location of the employees, an issue that was raised by a number of Members. By cross-referencing that information against the known opportunities that exist in the market and the knowledge of skills best suited to our emerging economy, it will be possible to provide targeted and relevant training and advice that will be planned to meet the needs of individuals in a timely fashion. None of us in the House want to mislead, or send out any false signals, about the economic challenges presented by the closure of the Seagate and HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd operations.

Several Members have raised other issues that are relevant to the Limavady and north-west area such as road infrastructure and the future of Magilligan prison. Although the latter lies outside the remit of not just of my Department but of the Assembly, I will ensure that the remarks made by Mr Campbell and other Members from the area are brought to the attention of the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office.

I assure Members that Invest NI will continue to put resources into the north-west. It is important to note that the north-west received £513 of Invest NI assistance per head of adult population in the last five years, compared to £439 for Northern Ireland as a whole; and £2,328 planned investment per head of population in total, as against £1,912 for Northern Ireland.

When all of the issues and facts are looked at it is important that we work together. Nothing can be gained by putting up false arguments about what people are doing, or attempting to do. We must continue with the approach that we have seen evidence of in the House already, which is one of working together as elected representatives with local government, the local Chamber of Commerce, the local workforce, Invest NI, and the

Department for Employment and Learning to do our very best for the workforce, recognising that what we have in the north-west is an opportunity to build on what are very positive advances thus far.

However, there is still much more to do; that is the challenge for me, for Invest NI, for the Assembly, which all of us can work together to accomplish for the people of the north-west.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the Minister and commend his proactive commitment to the north-west and the Limavady area where I come from. I also commend Sir Reg Empey for his proactive approach. It was good to hear the unanimous support for the people of Limavady and East Londonderry; I am sure that they will be grateful to know that there is such support for them in the Chamber. I also welcome the acceptance of the DUP amendment by the proposer of the motion.

There were many of useful contributions: the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan; the Member for North Down Mr Cree; the Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson; the Member for East Londonderry Mr McQuillan; the Member for Foyle Mr McCartney; the Member for South Antrim Mr T Clarke; the Member for East Londonderry Mr McClarty; the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat; and the Member for North Down Dr Farry. All those Members made a valuable contribution to the debate, but I only have five minutes so I will not go through each one.

However, I take exception to what Mr Dallat said: I brought two proposals to Limavady Borough Council, one in support of the retention of HMP Magilligan, and the other regarding the site of the policing college. Unfortunately, Mr Dallat's colleagues, along with Sinn Féin, did not support them.

All Members appreciate that the loss of the largest employer in any area will have devastating consequences for its economy. People are already worrying about their mortgages, providing for their families, and how to gain new employment in an area where job losses — not gains — have characterised the past few years. In Coleraine, 400 jobs were lost at the Farm Fed Chickens processing plant; the AVX factory has a much reduced workforce compared to a few years ago; and there has been a steady drip of job losses from County Hall. Limavady has lost Ministry of Defence jobs due to the forthcoming closure of Shackleton Barracks, and last Thursday another 70 jobs were lost with the closure of HÜCO Lightronics. The Daintyfit clothing factory has been closed for several years.

The bright lights for those two council areas were the Seagate operation and HMP Magilligan. Now the largest of those employers, Seagate, is relocating to another country leaving an employment and economic crisis in its wake. I am also aware that the closure has ramifications beyond my East Londonderry constituency —

North Antrim, Foyle and Mid Ulster will also feel the effects of the closure. However, the major impact will be felt in East Londonderry, Limavady and Coleraine.

It is essential that Invest NI urgently draws up a strategy for the area's employment and economic future to deal with the aftermath of such an announcement. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has publicly given me a commitment to assist in any way possible to support new employment in the area. I thank him and the First Minister for visiting Seagate on the day that the closure announcement was made — we called it black Monday. That enabled the workforce and the people of the area to see that — in the aftermath of the announcement — there was genuine concern and a concrete determination to address the resulting problems. That has also been demonstrated in the Chamber today.

I want Invest NI to make a strenuous, determined and urgent effort to locate new businesses in East Londonderry. There are many reasons for locating a business there: there is an efficient road network, even if it does need major upgrading; Eglinton airport is an underused asset in the import and export of raw materials and finished products; and there is a proven, hard-working, well-trained and willing workforce at the ready. I appreciate that training, or retraining, may be required, but I am sure that the Minister for Employment and Learning will put the means for that to happen in place. He has referred to that today.

Given that we have some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in the world, there is huge potential to develop and extend the area's tourism industry.

Northern Ireland is renowned for its small, specialist firms that produce quality products for niche markets. Therefore, we must encourage our entrepreneurs to supply such small units. I firmly believe that Seagate Technology should hand over its factory site — free of charge — to DETI (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment) or to the local council so that the facility can be utilised for such a purpose. I appeal for that to happen. The vast Shackleton Barracks site will also be vacant soon, and it should be signed over to DETI or the local council — also free of charge — following vacation by the Ministry of Defence. That would also be an ideal site for small industry or tourism projects, or even for the proposed new policing college.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Francie Brolly to make his winding-up speech.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the attendance of Minister Dodds and Minister Empey at the debate. I support the motion and the amendment.

The motion, which was moved by my colleague a Member for South Antrim, was tabled immediately after the announcement of the closure of Seagate Technology.

The motion reflected both our concern at the announcement and the need for urgent action. I am happy to say that those views are shared by all the Members who contributed to the debate. Mitchel McLaughlin, rightly, was brief in his comment on the looming closure of Seagate Technology. However, he asked what steps Invest Northern Ireland might have taken to prevent the closure or to attract a new tenant. He also asked whether Invest Northern Ireland will try to recoup as much of Seagate Technology's grant aid as possible. The Minister put that question into context for the House.

Mr Campbell was critical of Invest Northern Ireland's apparent reluctance to invest in the East Derry constituency. He detailed accurately what could be described as the culture of neglect that that area has endured over the past five years. Mr Durkan welcomed the Department's assurances that it will do all that it can to redress the huge loss that the impending closure will mean, not only for the employees, but for the economy of the north-west. He reiterated Mitchel McLaughlin's comment that hope for the future lies in the fact that it is an excellent plant and that a well-trained and disciplined workforce is immediately available.

Mr Cree offered his sympathy and best wishes to those who are set to become unemployed, and he declared his support for the motion and the amendment. Mr McQuillan — a Member for East Derry — shared his thoughts on the neglect of the constituency and suggested that the relevant Departments and agencies might turn their backs on Belfast and look west now and again, especially towards East Derry. Mr McCartney, who is a Member for Foyle — I have to be careful how I describe the Members — raised the question of Seagate's ownership of the Aghanloo plant. That is a valuable property that is set in 17 acres of land. He advised that we should begin negotiations immediately to persuade Seagate to return the factory to the community. Such a gesture would not be unwarranted, and it would help us in our efforts to attract a new manufacturer.

David McClarty, who is another Member for the constituency, referred to the fundamental reason for the departure of Seagate Technology: lower labour costs. The significant cost difference in this case is best illustrated by considering that manufacturing the company's product in Malaysia will cost 60 cents less for each item.

As well as referring to the closure of Seagate Technology, John Dallat — another Member for East Derry — mentioned the loss of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd and the closure of Ballykelly Army camp, which provides a significant economic spin-off for the village and the wider region. He did not mention the fear of a recession in the building industry, but he referred to the unacceptable, substandard road network and its contribution to the lack of inward investment in East

Derry. He also made special mention of the appalling and ridiculous delay in building a bypass at Dungiven.

4.45 pm

Mr Farry made the important point that, although Seagate, Limavady, is the focus of today's debate, we should look at the general economy here and our overall investment strategy. He was critical of our over-dependence on the public sector and the lack of a vibrant, revenue-creating private sector. Aghanloo should be a wake-up call for all of us.

The Minister gave us figures, which we were very glad to receive, as there is some confusion about where the investment went to, how much was invested, how much Seagate invested and, in particular, whether there will be any payback from Seagate. However, the Minister has not given us any great hope that there will be payback. He also made the point that it is not a loss only for Limavady; the loss is spread over a wide area of the north-west, including Glenshane. The local labour market is mobile and, as the Minister said, people travel easily from the west to work in Belfast; it is no longer considered a terrific burden.

The Minister's good news is that jobs have been created, and are about to be created, in the north-west region. That is heartening because, recently, it has been all doom and gloom, by any standard.

I attended the launch of the Timber Quay site, and I am delighted to see that it is up and running.

However, notwithstanding the achievements that the Minister outlined, he said that Invest Northern Ireland is keen to work on the twin values of the Seagate facility and its employees to attract a new tenant to the site. I had a meeting with some of the workers from Seagate, and their priority is to get the site up and running again with a new tenant. Inevitably, that wonderful, modern, up-to-date facility would deteriorate very quickly if it were untenanted, unused and unheated.

I urge the Minister, as his single priority, to reopen the Seagate plant with a new tenant. He should look to America, China or wherever is necessary to get a new tenant in the Seagate plant. That is what the workers want. The Minister told us that there is no shortage of goodwill in the United States, and we are all aware of that. However, like the Seagate facility, we should not allow that goodwill to dissipate by wasting time over the next eight to nine months.

The Minister and Invest Northern Ireland are committed to helping the workforce to avail of the new opportunities that will inevitably arise in the absence of Seagate's reopening. However, he cautioned that, although everything will be done to create jobs for the unemployed, it will not be easy. Employees will be given all the advice and guidance possible from all the relevant Departments and agencies — everything to

help them to get back to work. The Minister urged us all to work together.

I will finish with the old shibboleth: united we stand, divided we fall.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 1000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north west.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.