
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Future Delivery Arrangements of the Community Festivals Fund

Tuesday 4 December 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Easton: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During last Tuesday's debate on the draft Budget, the Minister responsible for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) moved to the Back Benches in order to speak out. However, instead of speaking as a constituency Member, he spoke as a Minister. Will you look into that matter and give a ruling on it, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. I have already written to the Minister reminding him of the conventions and practices when a Minister is called as a private Member. I have dealt with the matter.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the future delivery arrangements of the community festivals fund.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): I welcome this opportunity to make a statement on the future delivery arrangements for the community festivals fund.

Community festivals have for some time been important vehicles for local communities to celebrate their social and cultural heritage and the talents of their people. They entertain us, educate us and enrich our lives. Many community festivals have grown from modest beginnings as a result of the vision and efforts of dedicated volunteers who encourage and inspire others to make things happen. They instil a sense of belonging among organisers, performers and audiences and play a vital role in knitting together the fabric of communities.

The scale and nature of those events are extremely varied. One of the oldest and best known is the West Belfast Féile, which began some 20 years ago in the difficult circumstances of those times. It is now one of the biggest community festivals in Europe and attracts internationally renowned artists and provides a programme of events that appeals to a wide audience, including visitors to Northern Ireland.

With regard to the number of participants and the size of the audience, the biggest event is the Twelfth celebrations, with the largest parade in Belfast and local events throughout the Province. I know that efforts are ongoing on the part of the Orange Order and others to promote the day as a family-friendly festival that benefits the economy through exploiting the potential for cultural tourism.

Many other colourful re-enactments of important events in our history are celebrated year on year. There are also smaller festivals in which local communities expound their culture and talents through music, the arts, sport and heritage — for example, the Glasgowsbury Music Festival, held in the Sperrins near Drapers-town, which brings together emerging performers and fans of contemporary music from all parts of the community and further afield.

Another example is Country Comes to Town, held in Portadown, where the town centre is taken over for a day by displays of farm animals, agricultural machinery and all things rural. In my constituency, there is the culinary sophistication of the Hillsborough Oyster

Festival. The Lady of the Lake Festival, based in Irvinestown, has been running for many years and is an important date in the calendar for boating enthusiasts on both sides of the border. There are also festivals emerging that are organised by ethnic minorities, which raise awareness of their cultures among the general community, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and good relations.

I am sure that Members will all agree that this is an eclectic mix, and I have mentioned only a few of the community festivals organised across the country. All these events, in some way or other, contribute to major Government initiatives such as 'A Shared Future'. The organisation of such events builds confidence and develops skills and capacity that may be used to address other issues facing those communities.

However, as with all such activity, it costs money to organise community festivals. In the past, small pockets of funding were available from a number of Departments, but this was not widely known and, with a lack of capacity in new and emerging festivals, the funds were not easily accessible. Only a small number of specified festivals were supported from public funds. These included the West Belfast Féile, the Ardoyne Fleadh and the Greater New Lodge Festival.

Following a review of community-festival funding and consultation with stakeholders, it was clear that a more transparent, fair and equitable funding policy was required. From this process emerged the community festival fund, which came into operation in April 2006. The main purpose of the fund is to improve the capacity of community festivals, so as to make them more sustainable and less reliant on public funding. The fund enables community organisations to celebrate their cultural identity and to strengthen community relations.

The budget for the community festivals fund is a relatively modest £450,000 per annum. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) entered into a two-year agreement with the Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC) as the delivery agent for the fund. In 2006-07, the fund supported 42 festivals from all parts of Northern Ireland, the majority of which had not previously received public funding. In 2007-08, the fund has so far supported 40 festivals.

Part of the community festivals budget has also been used to provide training for festival organisers, the vast majority of whom are volunteers. The skills developed through this training become embedded in local communities, thereby increasing their confidence and building capacity to address wider issues. Demand for this was high, particularly in the first year of the fund, reflecting the lack of capacity in many communities. This support for the development of skills and knowledge is a sound investment for the future.

During the second year of operation, NIEC commissioned an independent evaluation of the community festivals fund, which was carried out by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland. The report concluded that the fund is making a valuable contribution to the realisation of a number of key Government policies and priorities, including promoting good relations and social cohesion. It also concluded that the events supported make a significant contribution to community life and that, given the number of communities benefiting from the fund, the diversity and range of activities and events supported and the considerable level of voluntary input, the fund represents good value for money.

The evaluation also highlighted a number of areas where the administration of the fund could be improved, including the introduction of a less complex application process for smaller grant awards. The application process was seen to be disproportionate to the amount of grant sought, and was likely to inhibit some of the least able groups from applying for support.

In the light of that, I have concluded that the community festivals fund provides positive benefits to local communities at a relatively modest cost to the public purse. The fund will, therefore, continue.

However, I have reviewed the future delivery arrangements, taking into account the emerging findings from the review of public administration (RPA). Under the RPA, the work undertaken by NIEC was to transfer to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) on 1 April 2008. Nevertheless, it was not envisaged that community festivals would be part of that transfer, as that function is not central to NITB's remit. It is recorded in the RPA that the community festivals fund should transfer as a function to local government and, in the most recent paper from my colleague Arlene Foster, Minister of the Environment, on the emerging findings and next steps, that position remains.

The vision of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) for new local government is:

"to develop vibrant and cohesive local communities, in which all citizens have a voice and opportunities to shape the service which contribute to their quality of life."

It is clear that the logical home for the community festivals fund is with local government. Local councils already have departments that deal directly with local communities, and officers who specialise in community development. That direct interface means that councils are best placed to build capacity at grass roots level, and to identify the events that will benefit their communities.

My intention, therefore, is to transfer the delivery of the community festivals fund to local authorities from 1 April 2008. It is a pressing issue, as there is a significant lead-in time for the funding application

process. In most cases, planning for festivals in 2008 is already under way, and organisers need to know their budgets to enable them to book artistes, venues and equipment well in advance. By transferring administration of the fund to local government, it becomes much closer to the community and the people it supports, making it more responsive to differing local needs.

The Minister of the Environment has confirmed that, given the pressing need to inform festival organisers of funding arrangements, she fully supports my proposals. My Department has taken legal advice, and I understand that there is no legal impediment to an early transfer of the functions to local authorities. No legislation is required, as local authorities already have statutory powers to fund local events. Indeed, many local councils are already involved in funding festivals.

My Department has consulted with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) on the mechanics of transferring the fund to local government. The preferred option is that DCAL retains responsibility for community festivals policy, and that the Department makes an annual allocation to each council under a specific grant process. That model is successfully operated by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to award grants to district councils for their community-relations programmes.

Councils will be required to take account of the Department's policy and guidance framework on community festivals. However, consistent with the ethos of devolving decisions to local councils, they will have considerable flexibility to develop their own application processes, with local criteria. As councils already operate a number of small grant schemes, that should not be onerous to administer. Furthermore, I anticipate that the application process will be much less onerous for festival organisers, and I know that they will welcome that.

It is my view that councils should support local community festivals from their own resources; therefore, I shall seek match funding. Many councils already fund community festivals, and will continue to do so, and pooling of the community festivals fund and local support will maximise the benefit. The Department will liaise with NILGA on the detailed arrangements for implementing the scheme.

10.45 am

I intend to move quickly to transfer those functions to local government, because local councils will need lead-in time to publicise the new arrangements and to process applications for events that are to be held in the spring and summer of 2008. I am confident that the House will agree that that is the best way forward for the delivery of the community festivals fund.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith

agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's bringing the statement to the House. I agree with him that community festivals play a vital role in our social and economic life. I am pleased that he referred to Féile an Phobail, and to the scale of that particular community-based festival. In the past, the organisers of Féile an Phobail often felt that fine words were not matched by appropriate funding levels, but I shall leave that issue to one side for now.

I also note that responsibility for the community festivals fund is to transfer to local government, which, as the Minister has said, is its logical home. In 2006-07 and 2007-08, how many projects west of the Bann received public funding or support from the Events Company? How was that funding administered and rolled out?

Do the Minister and the Department intend to increase the overall budget for the community festivals fund? It currently stands at a relatively modest £450,000, but are there any plans to increase that figure? Moreover, the community festivals fund's profile was never high enough in rural areas. Can the Minister confirm whether the Ulster Fleadh Cheoil, which was held for two years in a row in Coalisland, received any support or funding from the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: The following councils west of the Bann received public funding: Omagh District Council applied for funding for two events and received £7,000, although Omagh will now get considerably more than that; Limavady Borough Council applied for funding for three events and received £12,000; Londonderry's council applied for funding for four events and received £38,000; Coleraine is on the Bann, and Coleraine Borough Council applied for funding for five events and received £15,500; Cookstown District Council and Strabane District Council did not receive anything; Fermanagh District Council applied for funding for three events and received £13,200; and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council applied for funding for four events and received £12,090. I suppose that Craigavon is also on the Bann, and Craigavon Borough Council received £24,400, having applied for funding for four events. Almost all those councils will receive an increase in funding as a result of this morning's announcement. Those local authorities will be able to liaise closely with individuals to deliver that funding.

The Chairperson asked whether additional funding would be made available. I want councils to match the budget of £450,000. Many councils already contribute to festivals, so they will not be asked to give more. However, money is to be given out on the basis that councils at least match whatever we give them. If, for example, a council were to get £20,000 from us, it must match that £20,000. Should councils wish to put more into festivals, that is totally their decision.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Minister's statement. Under direct rule, funding of festivals was inequitable and discriminatory. Year after year, preferential treatment was given to the three nationalist — indeed, republican — festivals in north and west Belfast. Those three festivals were locked into funding, to the exclusion of other festivals.

What was the breakdown of funding for festivals last year, particularly for the aforementioned festivals? Will the Minister assure us that we will see a change and that funding of festivals will be an equitable and equality-driven process?

Mr Poots: Festivals that were perceived as being nationalist festivals, based on the community-background designation on funding application forms, received £120,242.

Festivals that were perceived as cross-community in character received funding of £113,015. Festivals that were perceived as unionist in character received funding of £45,150. Indian festivals received funding of £5,000, and Turkish festivals received funding of £3,000.

Mr McNarry: I welcome the Minister's statement. The measures that he has announced are innovative and in keeping with forward thinking.

Will the Minister provide details of what the specific-grant system and match funding mean for the proportion of funding that will be available to each council — particularly for Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, and Castlereagh Borough Council in my constituency of Strangford?

Mr Poots: I do not have to hand the details for each council, but funding will be based on population and levels of deprivation. Deprivation has already been taken into account by the Department in deciding on the distribution of funding. It is up to councils what to do thereafter, but they are not under any obligation to consider deprivation in their distribution of festival funding because the Department will already have done that. That is the legitimate and correct thing to do, and that is worth emphasising.

Ards Borough Council would receive a considerable amount of money as a result of the measures that I have outlined — without being specific, that will probably be roughly £40,000 in match funding.

Mr P Ramsey: I also wish to commend the Minister on his statement and on his leadership in such a short period of time, which will give comfort to groups that have great worries and concerns. Perhaps, at a later stage, he can deal with the issue of community sport.

I welcome the fact that funding will be allocated on the basis of population distribution and deprivation levels. In common with other Members, I share the view that the return on such small investment is

enormous, in respect of acknowledging and recognising people's cultural and historical backgrounds.

Are figures available on the grants that were awarded by the Events Company over the past two years? One would imagine that the idea of a community festival is to encourage others to come forward with ideas for new festivals — it cannot just be the usual suspects all the time. We must be innovative in allowing other cities and community groups to take advantage of funding. What has the Minister in mind in that respect?

I particularly welcome funding for the Maiden City Festival, the Gas Yard Féile, an Gaeláras, and the Golden Links Festival. We want those events to continue, but it is important that others have similar opportunities.

Mr Poots: Funding was introduced to assist communities to develop festivals, to introduce fresh revenue streams, to help groups liaise with — and secure sponsorship from — the private sector, and to allow groups to demonstrate to the private sector that festivals can bring significant benefits.

It is not the view of my Department that festival funding should remain with the same groups. Once a festival is established and up and running, it may still require some funding — and most of them will. However, as capacity develops, festivals should be able to develop a greater capacity for introducing funding from the private sector, because they should be able to demonstrate the ability to organise a good-quality festival that will bring many local people into an area and bring real benefits for that community, and for the business sector. The training work that took place in the past year should have assisted in that, and should help smaller groups to get established.

We want to see festival funding continually moving so that more groups and new festivals are introduced and brought on stream, widening the scope of such funding.

Ms Lo: I very much welcome the Minister's new approach, which will also be welcomed by many communities that, in the past, when applying for funding for community festivals, had to approach their local council, the Events Company, and various sponsors.

I think that the new approach will simplify the process. My concern is that if it is cost-effective, we will need to increase the pot of money; first, from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and, secondly, using match funding from councils.

How will the process work as regards the councils? Do they all have the same capacity to provide full match funding or would some of them be discouraged from providing such funding?

Mr Poots: As regards the latter point, for my own council, it would mean finding a sum of between

£25,000 and £30,000 from a rate base of £25 million. It should be remembered that most councils already contribute to festivals; therefore, it will be relatively easy for them to provide match funding.

However, it will be for councils to decide whether to take advantage of the funding that is on offer, and funding will be redistributed to those councils who wish to avail of it. I am minded to skew such a redistribution — if it takes place, because some councils do not see the value of community festivals — to areas that have taken the greatest amount of festival funding in the past.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Minister's statement, which again shows that the Assembly, at ministerial level, is delivering for local communities. Today's announcement is good news.

Will the Minister confirm that the community festivals fund will be spread across the 26 council areas? Ards Borough Council has received no funding in the past either through community festival funding or directly from the Government. There are many community festivals in the Ards borough and other events, such as the Ballygraffon Horse Trials and the BASC Northern Ireland Games Fair, as well as the Twelfth of July celebrations, which, collectively, have the potential to bring a lot of people to the area. Has TSN been applied to each of the council areas? If so, will the Minister confirm that Ards Borough Council will be the recipient of financial assistance from the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: Yes, I can confirm that the TSN criteria have been applied and that Ards Borough Council will benefit. I have no doubt that the Member will be very quick to inform groups about the opportunities that may exist — I know him quite well. His colleague from Strangford Mr McNarry asked how much money would be going to the Ards area. If Ards Borough Council is prepared to provide match funding, £18,000 will be provided by the Department. Match funding will raise that sum to £36,000, to be distributed in an area in which, previously, no money was distributed.

This is a great opportunity for many areas across Northern Ireland — five council areas, three of which are unionist and two of which are nationalist — to benefit from festival funding. I think that that is good for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I do not know whether I welcome it because some issues need to be further teased out.

In one of his remarks, the Minister said that if council areas do not take up the offer of match funding, festivals in those areas will not receive funding. That is a flaw. I am not sure whether the Minister has spoken to all the councils. If he has not done so, that is also a flaw and it must be addressed.

I am glad that the Minister mentioned Féile an Phobail at the start of his statement. Like him, I recognise the importance of that festival. In earlier comments, the Minister stated that some groups may be being hindered and restricted as regards funding because they have been organising for many years and funding has been reduced. That issue needs to be addressed also. Some of the most important festivals have had their funding restricted over the years — by half on some occasions.

11.00 am

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please ask his question?

Mr P Maskey: Has the Minister discussed the issue with all the councils?

Mr Poots: We have not discussed the issue with the 26 councils, although we have spoken to NILGA representatives. Through the review of public administration, we have consulted local authorities, and it was clearly identified that community-festival funding would come under their remit, as is stated in the emerging findings paper.

With regard to match funding, this is a tremendous opportunity to ensure that festivals are expanded, not diminished. Councils must not use these moneys to replace moneys that had previously been allocated to festivals. Councils have a chance to enhance festivals, with only a modest impact on their rates base.

Lord Browne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will the Minister acknowledge the fact that, historically, cultural festivals have been driven from a narrow culture base? How does he intend to ensure an equitable distribution of future community-festival funding? Will criteria be established to ensure consistency across councils? To what extent will the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure be involved in overseeing the fund?

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will set the overarching policy and guidance framework, which will outline broad criteria for funding festivals. However, councils will have considerable flexibility in determining their own processes and detailed criteria. The Department will issue letters of offer to each council, monitor how the funds are drawn down and ask local authorities to publish their assessment criteria, application processes and procedures for making awards. Local authorities will have control over funding decisions and funding levels. I am confident that no one is better placed than public representatives on local authorities to gear festival funding towards local community needs. I am also confident that our local councillors will identify the projects that are best suited to, and most beneficial for, their areas.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister's statement and the proposals that will allow local authorities to deliver community-festival funding. Will the Minister assure the House that measures will be put in place to ensure that groups that do not come from the majority section of a local community will receive fair access to that funding?

Mr Poots: All equality provisions and safeguards that apply to local authority decisions will also apply to community-festival funding. I am sure that, if a local authority discriminates against people on the basis of their being members of a minority group, the local community will make its voice clearly heard. It is not in the best interests of a local authority to discriminate against any section of a community. In recent years, there has not been much evidence of that happening, and I trust that that will continue to be the case.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I do not welcome its content. The Benches opposite have missed the point entirely; there is not enough money for community-festival funding. I declare an interest, because I am a director of Féile an Phobail, and I thank the Minister for his complimentary remarks about that féile, which he recognises as being one of the largest. In recent years, funding for that féile has been slashed, and the community festival fund owes it £30,000. We are now in a situation where £450,000 will be available for 40 community festivals. Will the Minister tell the House whether there are guarantees to ensure that local councils will match funding? Will efforts be made to increase funding? Will the community festival fund repay the £30,000 that is owed to Féile an Phobail?

Mr Poots: I cannot guarantee what individual local authorities in Northern Ireland will do — thankfully, for everyone, I do not have that authority. Ultimately, Members will seek to influence their local authorities in the best interests of their communities. I do not think that there is a strong case for anyone not to accept the funding being offered, provide match funding and create the best opportunities for their communities to develop festivals.

The West Belfast Festival has been very successful, and its success should lead to more private funding streams. As that festival moves towards receiving more private-sector funding, having demonstrated its success, opportunities can be created for new festivals on the basis of the funding being distributed across Northern Ireland — west of the Bann; east of the Bann; in nationalist and in unionist areas. My Department is not discriminating against people; funding is being allocated on the basis of population and deprivation, and this is an opportunity for everyone to get a slice of the cake. The larger festivals have the capacity to move forward, and, hopefully, smaller festivals will come on stream

that can also move forward and benefit from the funding that might not have been available to them previously.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister, and I welcome his statement. He will be aware that this year's Belfast Festival at Queen's was very successful and attracted many visitors to Northern Ireland. Will he assure me that that festival will continue to get funding through today's announcement?

Mr Poots: I am looking at a different mechanism of funding for the Belfast Festival at Queen's. As the Member is aware, the festival is arts-based and already receives funding from the Arts Council, and I hope that the Arts Council will continue to fund the festival.

There was some pressure, particular this year, on the festival, and there was concern about it. First, I hope that there will not be any concern about the Belfast Festival at Queen's continuing — I want to remove any uncertainty about that. Secondly, I want to see the festival expanding, and I will both work with the private sector and ensure that public money is maintained to grow the festival and make it an even more significant event that will bring huge benefits to the community.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the establishment of objective criteria; the Minister is approaching the issue from the right direction. Despite the progress that we can record in our communities, some comments from the Minister's own Benches reflect a shared concern about how the policy will apply in individual council areas. It should be acknowledged that there have been problems in some council areas. Will the Minister outline the checks and balances that will accompany the regulations to ensure that a fair and equitable approach is taken?

Mr Poots: As the Member is aware, the equality regulations that apply to local authorities will continue to apply in this case. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and other equality measures will help to ensure that funding will be distributed on an equitable basis and that people are not discriminated against. Ultimately, local authorities will draw up the criteria.

However, I do not get the feeling, nor have I for a long time, that local authorities are out to discriminate against sections of their own communities. Local authorities are there to serve their communities, and they do so well. Those who suggest that local authorities may choose to discriminate against their communities in some shape or form do not reflect their true nature. It is a somewhat disparaging suggestion.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to the shared future initiative. However, he referred to the Belfast Féile, which began some 20 years ago, as one of the oldest community festivals in Northern Ireland. I inform the House that

the Portaferry Gala, which is held annually in my constituency in the second week of July, has just celebrated its fortieth birthday, and it gets better every year. Any Member of the House who has not been to the gala is more than welcome to come this year.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member come to the question?

Mr McCarthy: Indeed.

In his statement, the Minister acknowledges that most of the festivals in question are run by community volunteers, and the acquisition of funds is vital to their activities. Will the Minister assure the House that, by handing over the funding of community festivals to local councils, and taking into account the future amalgamation of councils, festival organisers will not be disadvantaged or squeezed out from receiving sufficient funds, because the new larger councils will be further removed from local communities?

Mr Poots: Perhaps the Member should refer that question to the Minister of the Environment, who was sitting beside me a moment ago, because part of her Department's remit is to ensure that, when the new local authorities are established — and they may not be as large as Mr McCarthy thinks, although that remains to be seen — they take cognisance of those communities that are smaller or are on the periphery of the council areas. Much responsibility falls to the local representatives, and, if they state their communities' case strongly and cogently, I am sure that their council colleagues will listen.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and particularly his commitment to giving local government a greater role. As a local councillor, I declare an interest. Will the Minister leave a provision for those councils that may not have community structures in place to avail of the new community festival fund? Last year, local councillors in Dungannon found that sufficient funding was not available for the Flight of the Earls festival, given that it is a sizeable event. It is important that local government has the facility to fund such events.

Mr Poots: Councils must develop funding criteria. The community festival fund is, by its very nature, community-based. However, if it is a matter of reaching out to communities and working in conjunction with them, with the council taking the lead, my Department will examine establishing criteria for that. There will be overarching policy guidelines, but the Department is prepared to work with local authorities on the development of their criteria. If that best meets the needs of a particular area, it can be considered.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Outline of a Vision for our Education System

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the outline of a vision for our education system.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When the Administration came into being on 8 May 2007, Ministers in the Executive from every Department faced unique challenges and opportunities. Local Ministers who are accountable to local people are now taking decisions. Unlike under direct rule, local Ministers are accessible, available and, most importantly, working on the ground. One of the principal —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order after the Minister's statement.

11.15 am

Ms Ruane: One of the principal challenges facing education has been the need to reform a system that was constructed more than 60 years ago and that is still in place today. For decades, successive Education Ministers talked about dealing with the issue of the 11-plus — and for decades, all we have got is talk.

In 2002, Martin McGuinness, in his capacity as Minister of Education, announced the end of the 11-plus. We now have an opportunity to truly transform our system into one that is world class and fit for the twenty-first century. In recent months, I have spoken to teachers, parents, pupils and administrators, and there is a real appetite out there to embrace change, to improve our system and to end the two-tier culture that brands so many of our young people as failures at the age of 11.

I relish the challenge of transforming our outdated and unequal education system into a modern, flexible one that places equality of opportunity for every child at its core. Such a system will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but can deliver it for all. That is what local decision-making is all about. The previous lack of local accountability is one of the reasons why no action was taken to change a system that was put in place in the late 1940s and that is still expected to deliver for our children in 2007.

This is an Executive with an agenda for change at its core: this is an Executive that has been mandated to transform our society for the better. As I proceed in carrying out the changes to our education system, equality is my watchword; equality of access and equality of educational opportunity. I plan to bring our

education system into the twenty-first century and lay down a foundation that will ensure educational excellence and greater participation in the future.

My proposals are ambitious. They require further work at a detailed level, but the direction in which I wish to travel is now clear, and the time is right to share that with you.

Central to the 1947 education system, through which children in today's primary schools are still being processed, has been the 11-plus transfer test. Following consultation on the Burns Report, Martin McGuinness announced the ending of the transfer test in 2002. Subsequently, direct rule Minister Jane Kennedy announced that the final transfer test would be held in 2008. That means that the final children to transfer under the existing system will commence post-primary school in September 2009. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 causes the current admissions arrangements to lapse for September 2010 admissions.

That is the context in which I have been focused; the creation and delivery of a fundamentally exciting new vision for the education system in the North. The changes proposed will, with proper planning and effective implementation, have an immediate and positive effect. I have written to my Executive colleagues outlining my vision and I have briefed the Education Committee. I was to have a meeting with the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, but he did not make it, as he was held up in traffic. However, he will be glad to know that under my new arrangements there will be less traffic on the road, and children will no longer pass each other on buses. My colleague Conor Murphy will also be delighted with that.

I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past six months. Additionally, I have taken detailed and considered account of the changing environment in which our education system is expected to function. I am conscious that the debate on education has become narrowly focused on the contentious issue of academic selection as the basis for transferring to the post-primary sector. That narrow focus by sectoral interests has been a matter of considerable concern to me because the debate is really about delivering a vision for a world-class education system reflecting the needs of all our children equally.

I am an advocate for dynamic and effective change in education. Today, I am outlining a clear vision that moves us all beyond the outdated concept of the two-tier education system that has failed so many of our children.

Such a system will have to provide our children with the life skills required for today's complex, rapidly transforming, socially changing and globalised world. That system must also provide children with the qualifications and skills required in a modern and dynamic economy. The blue-collar and white-collar

world has gone, and with it the primary rationale for a two-gear post-primary system. It is imperative that we develop a more flexible and agile post-primary system. Surely, in 2007, we can develop sophisticated models of school organisation.

The reformed post-primary system that I am outlining will, quite properly, have to take account of the full reform agenda that is already affecting the education system in the North. For example, the revised curriculum is being introduced over the next three years. The entitlement framework within the curriculum will introduce new and exciting opportunities for our young people. Before and after GCSE, we envisage access to a broad range of academic, professional and technical courses.

I have seen the revised curriculum, which is being delivered in classrooms across the North, beginning to work. Teachers are energised by the revised curriculum and children are stimulated by it, and that combination is helping to ensure that our children get the best possible education. Those changes will be supported by the significant reform of education administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA). The development of area-based planning will play a key role in that. Tá sé ráite agam roimhe sa Tionól go mbeinn sásta moltaí a thabhairt chun tosaigh atá dírithe ar a chinntiú go mbeidh fáil chothrom ag gach páiste ar an oideachas iarbhunscolaíochta is fearr. Tá sé léirithe agam freisin go dtabharfaidh mé chun tosaigh moltaí chun an córas oideachais a mhúnlú ar leasa an pháiste in áit an páiste a mhúnlú ar leasa institiúide oideachais éigin.

On several occasions, I have stated in the Chamber that I would bring forward proposals aimed at ensuring that all the children in this society have equal access to high-quality post-primary education. I have also made it abundantly clear that I will bring forward proposals to mould the system around the interests of the child, instead of a system that matches the child to the interests of a particular educational institution. That is the direction in which the Department will proceed.

Children and parents must be able to have confidence that their local post-primary schools will offer the quality and depth of educational provision that they want, need and deserve. I am determined that my Department — in partnership with all educationalists — will ensure that every school is a good one, is sustainable and has a clear focus on high standards. That is why I have brought forward my revised school-improvement policy, 'Every School a Good School'.

I intend to mobilise and co-ordinate the resources at my disposal to build a modern and flexible education system, which moves us away from the outdated 1947 institutional model that divides children aged 11 years into just two school types — grammar and non-grammar.

A twenty-first century model will transform that unequal and outdated approach by matching children of all aptitudes to the full breadth of provision that they want, need and deserve to fulfil their maximum potential as citizens and members of society. However, the key principle that underpins the new model of educational provision will be equality. No longer will any child be at a disadvantage because their parents cannot afford tuition or coaching, and no longer will the potential of any citizen be undermined because, as a small child, aged 11 years, he or she fell through the cracks of an unequal two-tier system that was born 60 years ago.

Geallaim don Teach inniu go mbeidh cearta comhionanna gach páiste ag croílár an chórais úir. My pledge today is that the equal rights of all children will be at the heart of the new system.

During the past six months, I have been told that we have the best education system in the world. Undoubtedly, the capacity of our education system to deliver high-quality academic excellence is widely — and correctly — celebrated. However, regardless of the selective presentation of figures for the academic achievement of one section of our children, the cold reality is that the system still fails a high proportion of our young people.

A system that does well for some and does not deliver for the rest is unacceptable.

I am the Minister of Education for all children. I cannot — and will not — ignore the fact that every year 4,000 young people leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills. I believe that it is possible to develop a system that will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but will deliver it for all.

To those — particularly on the unionist Benches — who still believe that our system is not broken, I ask: look at the situation in many working-class areas. Unionist working-class communities such as the lower Shankill, Mount Vernon and Tigers Bay have been left behind, and many are completely disconnected with the education system before they reach the age of 16. The same can be said for many working-class nationalist communities whether they are in the Falls, Downpatrick, Strabane or Derry. That is the reality; and it is a reality that I am not prepared to stand by and allow to continue.

Tá mé ag iarraidh córas oideachais a chumadh ina mbeidh fáil ag gach páiste ar réimse cothrom de roghanna ardechaighdeáin sna pointí criticúla ina bhforbairt oideachasúil. Creidim gurb é ceithre bliana déag an aois is criticúla.

Let me be very clear; I am not advocating a one-size-fits-all system. Rather, I am seeking to devise an

education system in which all children will enjoy access to an equal range of high-quality choices at the critical junction points in their educational development, the most significant of which is at age 14. That will involve building a system that will sustain a range of schools and provision and that will value all of them equally. We want to retain everything that is good about our current system — including academic excellence — and improve on its performance so that it will cater for the needs of all our young people.

Making fundamental educational determinations for children at the age of 11 is wrong; and such decisions, for most children, become irreversible. By moving the point of transition to age 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into the structures, we will make it possible for the transformed education system to facilitate the deserved and diverse needs of children — reversing the negative demand of slotting children into a system that has historically branded some as failures and others as, potentially, successes. The key point is not that academic selection is unjust, but that it is unnecessary and unjust. I firmly believe that we can collectively deliver all the benefits of academic excellence without the trauma of academic selection at the age of 10 or 11.

In my vision, young people will enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways, as determined by the planning of education in their local areas. They will include: access within an 11-19 school; transfer to an alternative 11-19 school; access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school, which offers the entitlement framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community. A local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14-plus provision.

An academic pathway will remain that will be accessed by intelligent, well-informed and mature election and available through modern, organisational flexibility. Testing is not the best way to inform admissions decisions at 14 about a young person's educational and career pathway. Such decisions should be based on a process of formal, structured election: it will take account of the outcomes of three years of post-primary education and teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision. Contrast that with the way in which our current system approaches matching pupils to provision — by using two one-hour tests sat by 10- to 11-year-olds to determine entrance to one of two types of school.

11.30 am

Through the entitlement framework, academic courses can be well integrated with challenging professional and/or technical courses, providing a much better base

for many future third-level entrants, which is more properly tailored to the requirements of a modern economy.

That framework will also ensure the capacity to deliver high-quality professional and/or technical pathways, accessed by choice, available through modern organisational flexibility, and, above all, enjoying parity of esteem.

Some may criticise the structural change that my vision may entail. However, it is a fact that structural change will be required, regardless of my approach to post-primary education. After 10 years of dramatically falling pupil numbers, we have an increasing problem with school sustainability and surplus places, resulting in 50,000 empty desks — and that figure will increase over the coming years.

Structural reform is unavoidable. George Bain's independent review is clear about that. Far from being a matter of unnecessary structural change, it is a matter of embracing the massive potential that this opportunity offers us to modernise our service provision and education system.

Structural change need not mean vast amounts of new capacity. By reorganising the existing capacity within the framework of my vision for education, I intend to deliver not only effective education, but efficient education. For example, extended access to professional, technical, general and academic courses could be achieved through the process of school and further education collaborations, and the careful management of the schools estate at a time of falling school numbers.

Tá an dréachtChlár Rialtais soiléir sa mhéid seo, nó dearbhaíonn sé go mbeidh na focail “cothroime”, “cuimsiú” agus “comhionannas” mar fhocail faire ag an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin agus é ag soláthar a chuid polasaithe agus ina chlár.

The draft Programme for Government is explicit in declaring that the watchwords of the Executive, in delivering all its policies and programmes, will be fairness, inclusion and equality.

The 1947 education system, which encompasses a post-primary transfer system that brands 11-year-old children as failures, is not fair, inclusive or equal. Because of that, it is my intention, following a period of consultation, to bring forward regulations governing the operation of post-primary transfer for 2010, and for the subsequent interim period before the implementation of a 14-plus system of election.

There will be no 11-plus transfer test in the 2009-10 school year. Pupils transferring to post-primary school in September 2010 will do so overwhelmingly on the basis of preference for certain schools, in much the same way that primary schools and preschools are chosen

now. From 2010, the criteria will include community, geography and family.

I am conscious that many grammar schools have been admitting a wide ability range for some years now, and will receive all their pupils in September 2010 without regard to academic assessment. Some grammar schools may need some time and assistance to adjust to the new system that I have outlined today, and, in my forthcoming discussions with them, I hope to be able to reach an agreed way forward to facilitate that transition. I hope that all grammar schools will see a positive future for the continuation of academic excellence in my vision for education. If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.

It is important that the transfer from primary to post-primary education be as seamless as possible. I am confident that we can find the best way forward to meet the needs of all our children, based on a vision that places quality educational outcomes and equality of educational opportunities for each and every child at its epicentre.

Next year will be the last year of the 11-plus. There will be no 11-plus in 2009, nor will I be asking primary school educators to ever again disrupt or interfere with the teaching of the revised curriculum in furtherance of a transfer test.

Children in year 5, their parents and their teachers can now focus on the job in hand — educating our young people and concentrating on the curriculum in a way that allows each and every child an equal opportunity to fulfil his or her full potential as citizens in the future.

I recognise the critical role that principals and teachers will play in implementing my proposals, and I know that we will work together in the best interests of our children and young people.

I have outlined today how we are to proceed in the years ahead. Let the construction of a new education system now begin. This is no longer a debate about the merits of academic selection. My focus now is on delivering a world-class education system for all our children. I ask Members to join with me in building that education system, which will benefit everyone. I believe that these proposals offer us the road map to get there. Tosóimid anois ar an obair thábhachtach seo.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is my understanding that, where a matter is of significance or where there are important cross-cutting issues, it should first be brought to the Executive. Can you give a ruling on whether it is appropriate for the Minister to bring this significant issue to the Floor of the House without having first brought it to the Executive?

Mr Speaker: I am responsible for ensuring that business in the House is conducted within Standing Orders. The Minister's only requirement in Standing Orders is that not less than two and a half hours' notice of a statement is given to the Speaker. That requirement was met by the Minister of Education yesterday. I also understand that the Whips were contacted immediately.

Mr McElduff: Further to that point of order, will Mr McCrea confirm whether the Ulster Unionist Party is a member of the Executive?

Mr Speaker: That is not an appropriate point of order. I call Lord Morrow for a further point of order.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will Sinn Féin confirm whether it intends to discuss this matter seriously?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order. I call Lord Morrow.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If there is doubt that a section of the Minister's statement is inaccurate, should it not be brought to your attention? The Minister said:

"I have written to my Executive colleagues outlining my vision and I have briefed the Education Committee."

When did the Minister write to her Executive colleagues?

Mr Speaker: I hope that Lord Morrow will be able to put that question to the Minister.

Mr Poots: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, as a ministerial colleague, I did not receive any correspondence from the Minister. I informed my Executive colleagues that I intended to make a statement on community festival funding, and I gave them a week to respond. The Minister has not given us the same privilege. She should realise that she will not be able to implement such policies — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to all sides of the House, I am not responsible for Executive protocols and who enforces them. As the Speaker, I am here to protect the House and its protocols, and that is as far as my responsibility goes.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In respect of what you have just outlined, and in deep appreciation of it, the House finds itself in a similar position to when the Minister for Social Development took a step that resulted in a legal question being asked about her actions, to the extent that I cannot talk about the issue because it is sub judice. Is it in your interests to rule that, in the interests of the House, there may be legal complications about the Minister's statement and that the House should reflect on that?

Mr Speaker: I have already said that I received notification of the Minister's statement yesterday. The

Minister has followed all protocols, and my responsibility ends with that. Whatever happens within the Executive happens within the Executive, and it is for them to resolve.

My main duty is to protect the House and its procedures, and that is what I have done this morning.

Before I call Mr Sammy Wilson to ask the Minister a question, I advise Members that there is a full list of people who also wish to ask questions. Therefore, I ask Members to refrain from making speeches and to keep their questions short and to the point. By doing so, they will increase their colleagues' chances of asking a question.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): I thank the Minister for prior knowledge of her statement, which she made available to me before the sitting. I understand that some of her Executive colleagues may not feel the same way. I apologise for that, because it is perhaps due to the fact that I rushed her into making today's statement in advance of the motion that is tabled for next week.

As usual, the Minister's statement contains a plentiful of platitudes but only a spoonful of substance. Therefore, I have several questions, and, given that the Minister has had from May to contemplate the matter, I trust that we will get some answers from her this morning, rather than being told that we must wait until the consultation period is over.

First, given that there will be a gap between the old and new arrangements, between 2008 and 2011, how will the Minister reassure school principals and parents about what will happen during that period?

Secondly, after 2011, how will places be allocated if schools are oversubscribed?

Thirdly, given that the Minister emphasises the geographical context of transfers, how will she ensure that her vision of equality and fairness will be met and that people will not simply buy a house close to the school to which they wish to send their children?

The Minister said that significant structural changes will be necessary. What will those changes entail? How many schools that currently accept pupils aged 11 to 18 will be required to change in order to accept children aged 11 to 14 or children aged 14 to 18? How much will those structural changes cost?

Finally, given that the Minister has ignored the political reality that such changes require cross-community support, as well as ignoring the views of 70% of the public, 65% of teachers, and half of the House, how does she intend to get those proposals through the House?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat le haghaidh na ceiste sin. First, I confirm that I sent a letter to all my Executive colleagues,

and it might be wise for Executive members to check with their officials — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Give her some order.

Ms Ruane: On a previous occasion, when I sent a letter to the Minister of Culture, Arts, and Leisure, he wrote back to say that he had not received it, but subsequently confirmed that he had. Executive members will find that the letter has been sent.

I thank Sammy Wilson for his comments. I am disappointed that we did not have a chance to talk this morning; nonetheless, his comments are welcome.

There will always be popular and oversubscribed schools. We must ensure that every school is a good school, with good leadership, and that children attend the nearest local school.

On the question about a postcode lottery — what do we have at the moment? We have a life lottery in which we are playing with our children's lives using two one-hour tests. Is that fair? Is that right? I believe that it is fundamentally wrong that generations of our young people have been put through two one-hour tests, which amount to a life lottery.

We need to build a new vision of an education system. We need to transform our education system for every child. I welcome the fact that young people are here today. For the first time, they will be at the centre of the decision-making.

For the first time, their voices are going to be heard. It will not be other people — *[Interruption.]*

11.45 am

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: For the first time — *[Interruption.]*

I am answering the question. For the first time, it will not be other people making decisions for them.

In relation to geographical — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Allow the Minister to answer.

A Member: She is not answering the question.

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for how a Minister answers a question. Members ought to know that.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: No points of order will be taken. The Minister is on her feet. *[Interruption.]*

I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr McNarry: Is there a time limit as to how long the Minister can take to answer a question?

Ms Ruane: I was actually asked aon, dhá, trí, ceithre, cúig, sé ceisteanna. I was asked six questions, and I am

answering the six questions. I want to go through the questions that I was asked by the Cathaoirleach — the Chairperson — of the Committee for Education.

Regarding the geographical issue, I am bringing forward a school-improvement policy in which every school will be a good school. Regarding structural change and cost, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, it appears that some politicians in the Assembly know:

“the price of everything, and the value of nothing.”

I intend to deliver not only effective education, but efficient education. Structural change need not mean vast amounts of new capacity, but, rather, by the reorganisation of existing capacity and the careful management of the schools estate — at a time of falling pupil numbers — we will be able to deliver a better education system, which is the most important thing that we can do for our children. What price do we put on our children's education?

I will be consulting on my proposals, and, as a Minister, I will comply with all my requirements and duties. I want to find the way forward. Political consensus is important to me, as is the agreement of parents, teachers, children and educational administrators. We will have many discussions about our vision for education, and I look forward to those discussions with people from every political creed.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire agus tacaíocht a thabhairt di —

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for one Member to refer to another as a “lapdog”?

Mr Speaker: I am not taking points of order during questions to the Minister. I will be happy to do so afterwards.

Mr Butler: Maith thú, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Caitríona Ruane for her statement. This is a historic and momentous day for our education system. The statement is good for children, parents, and the education system. It sets out a vision for transforming the education system from one which has been dominated by academic selection to one in which academic excellence will be achieved. The new system will give every child and young person an opportunity to leave school with qualifications. The best education system is one that caters for, and gives opportunities to, all children.

The Minister has said that key decisions will be taken at the age of 14, rather than, as now, selection at 11. Will that fundamental change to the education system result in children being better equipped to make those choices at 14, and able to select a pathway by which they can leave the education system and go into the workforce?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, Paul. There is broad consensus among educationalists that age 14 is a key decision point for young people. Under the current system, that is the age at which young people make important decisions about their courses of study and future career pathways.

At 11, pupils have not completed their formative core curriculum, and dividing them into academic and non-academic categories by two one-hour tests — or, indeed, by any other means — lacks educational justification.

An individual's decision on his or her post-14 pathway should be taken within a framework of choice and flexibility, informed by parents, teachers and the career strategy that Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I have jointly put out to consultation. Ask any young person today what they like, what they are good at, what they want to do more of and what they want to do less of. Informed, mature election at the age of 14 is the way forward, and many educationalists will agree with that. There is consensus in the House around that.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that, had she come to the House and asked for more resources for early-years education to help tackle educational underachievement, she would have had its full support? Had she talked of increasing parental choice and effort, or asked for more resources for under-performing schools, she would have had the full support of all Members. Is it not somewhat ironic that, instead, someone who chastises the high-stakes, winner-takes-all approach has brought measures to the House that are confrontational, do not build consensus and are unlikely to help?

Instead of tackling the issues that she brings —

Some Members: Where is the question?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister undertake to fully involve the House and give it an opportunity to debate her proposals? She does not have the support of this half of the House or of the people of Northern Ireland. She will destroy the education system. This will be the ruination of —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Ms Ruane: I went before the electorate with our policies in relation to academic selection. I have been out and about in every part of the North of Ireland over the past six months. I have met people and visited many different areas; I have met school principals, from every community, who are crying out for change. We are debating the proposals now, and we will have many more debates, which I look forward to, as I look forward to working with all Members in building a new, dynamic education system.

The Member described the present system as world-class: I do not accept that. Pupil numbers are falling dramatically. Each year we fill grammar schools with an increasingly mixed-ability intake, and we leave many of the rest of our children to suffer the consequences of shrinking, unsustainable and potentially failing schools. That is despite the best efforts of principals in those schools. Our 69 grammar schools represent 30% of the 229 post-primary schools, but they now educate 42% of post-primary pupils, and the latest NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) figures show that in 2013-14, that will be 45%. Our system is changing negatively and drifting. I am looking to galvanise it.

As I have said, I am not prepared to allow the system to continue to fail young people throughout the North. It is unfair. It is unfair to working-class communities, and it is not good for our economy or for the development of life skills among young people.

We have to move forward. We cannot put our heads in the sand and pretend that there is no problem. There are difficulties here, but we now have the opportunity to change. It is a unique opportunity. Instead of squabbling, let us move forward together and build the world-class education system that some think we have now.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá cúpla ceist agam don Aire. Is it not the case that the age of 14 was suggested as pivotal by the DUP at the Programme for Government Committee's Subgroup to Consider the Schools Admission Policy? After becoming Minister of Education, Ms Ruane abandoned the recommendations of the Costello Report, initiated by her colleague Mr McGuinness, and went along with the DUP's suggestion.

Furthermore, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that pathways that are chosen at the age of 14 genuinely reflect the ability and aptitude of pupils, rather than primarily coinciding with social and economic advantage? How can she reassure the public that the new system will not replicate the worst effects of academic selection and social disadvantage?

Ms Ruane: I have given the reasons that explain why 14 is a key age to choose a pathway, and I have stated that there is consensus on that among all parties, not just the DUP. The Member sat on the Committee that discussed that matter, and the consensus was that 14 is a key age for young people to make decisions.

We will do everything possible to ensure that every child is given a fair chance. We will ensure that every child's needs are met within our education system, and that they are matched to suitable provision. However, choice is a key principle — young people know what they want, along with their teachers, career advisers and parents. There is a much better way to make decisions than the one that was used in the past. We do

not need academic selection at 11, or 14, to make decisions. Young people and their parents can do that, helped by the good careers guidance that is crucial to those decisions.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party broadly welcomes the Minister's statement, as far as it goes. It is a vision statement, so we shall await concrete proposals. On the last page of the Minister's statement, there is a reference to what would happen if grammar schools opt for independent admission arrangements:

"If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding."

For those of us who like things to be absolutely clear, is the effect of the statement that there is no obligation on the Department to assist with funding related purely to the setting up and administration of those tests, or is there an implied threat to the funding of grammar schools?

Is the Minister comfortable with the proposed timescale? The year 2011 may appear to be far away, but that is no time, and to work within that short timescale will be an achievement.

In the statement, reference is made to the development of area-based planning, which plays a key role and which the Alliance Party welcomes, but how will that be developed within the proposed timescale?

Finally, to repeat a question that has been asked by two Members, but which has not yet been answered: do the Minister's proposals require cross-community support or not?

Ms Ruane: The transfer of the majority of children in the North will occur as it has always done. Most children transfer on the basis of non-academic criteria. I intend to discuss with grammar schools my proposals to move beyond the 1947 selective system, and I am committed to persuading them that academic selection is no more necessary to enable children to have access to an academic education, than vocational selection is necessary to enable children to have access to professional and technical courses.

I am aware that some grammar schools may need time to adjust to an intake that is based on non-academic criteria — the system to which I am committed. Therefore, I am keen to explore with those schools transitional arrangements that build on existing practice. In the new year, I shall make a further statement on progress towards an agreement for transfer arrangements in 2010. On securing the agreement, I will prepare draft regulations to underpin it, and I will bring that to the Committee for Education, and the Executive, for consideration.

If any school chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer,

I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.

12.00 noon

Mr Storey: I do not welcome the fact that the Minister has come to the House with proposals that add to the confusion that already exists. She said that her proposals will:

"require further work at a detailed level before a number of questions can be answered".

Therefore, the Minister is not even in a position to answer questions in the House. If the statement was as well prepared as the one that she made on the amalgamation of two schools in my constituency — St Joseph's Primary School in Ahoghill and St Patrick's Primary School in Aughtercloney — in which she made a fundamental error that is now being reviewed, there will be serious consequences for the announcement that she has made today.

Will the Minister state how she intends to deal with her proposals in a legislative framework? Has she any plans to consult with parents, whom she ignores, and their children, for whom she alleges that she has a conscience? I do not know from where Sinn Féin has suddenly got its conscience about children. Will the Minister tell the House what plans she has to consult with parents, so that Members know exactly how parents have reacted to her proposals? When will flesh be put on the bones of the skeleton proposals that the Minister has put forward?

Ms Ruane: At present, there is confusion and mess — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: There is confusion and mess amid dramatically falling pupil numbers. I will repeat what I have already said, because I do not believe that the Member heard me. Each year, grammar schools are filled with an increasingly mixed-ability intake. Many other children are left to suffer the consequences of shrinking, unsustainable and potentially failing schools. Our 69 grammar schools represent 30% of the 229 post-primary schools. However, they educate 42% of post-primary pupils. I want to galvanise that provision. I have made proposals that will fundamentally change the system and improve it for all children, by matching them to suitable provision rather than to institutions.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister answer the question?

Ms Ruane: I am answering the Member's question. The programme of change will be structured, phased in over several years and locally developed. Of course, parents will be part of that, as will teachers, trade unions, different education sectors and the various Churches. Everyone in society has a stake in this, and it is essential that all their voices be heard.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, not least because I am the parent of a child who is due to transfer to post-primary education in 2010. However, I welcome it not only on my child's behalf but on behalf of all children, who have the right not to be deemed failures at a young age.

Will the Minister confirm that she will ensure that those excellent rural primary schools that are not, at present, in close proximity to secondary schools will not be adversely affected by what many people describe as a "postcode lottery"?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I understand the Member's concerns. However, I can assure her that the vision that I have outlined will ensure that her concerns do not come to pass. As I said in my statement, pupils who transfer to post-primary education in September 2010 will do so overwhelmingly on the basis of their preference of school, in much the same way in which children's parents choose their primary schools and preschools at present.

The permitted criteria that are issued to schools include family, community and geographical details. A section that deals with feeder primary schools is contained in the community and geographical criteria. The quicker that the move is made towards area-based planning, the quicker that the concerns about a postcode lottery can be put to bed.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister of confusion and mess has said that substantial structural change will be needed and that she will — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Miss McIlveen: She has said that she will require the co-operation of the controlled sector, the maintained sector, the voluntary sector and the integrated sector in order to change the nature and number of their schools and the method of their admissions. How does she intend to ensure in her vision the co-operation of all those sectors?

Does she intend to enforce structural change on those sectors? Amidst what she said earlier, the Minister did not actually answer Mr Lunn's question on her threat to remove funding. Which aspect of funding will she not give to those schools who do not comply with her new system?

Ms Ruane: As I said earlier, area-based planning will be the way forward. Part of area-based planning, as the Member will know, is about working with all education stakeholders. I am also chairing a high-level group of chairpersons, from all education sectors, to consider how we can move forward with all aspects of education reform.

I have answered the question on funding. The Department is under no obligation — let me give my exact words so that I am not accused wrongly. I said:

"If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding."

A Member: I heard that.

Ms Ruane: I know that you did. However, I am saying it again because you obviously did not listen to what I said.

Mr K Robinson: I am not going to welcome the Minister's statement this morning. However, I will note it. I note that her message is contrary to that of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who are currently in America where they are praising our education system and trying to sell it to the Americans as a basis for investment. That is a bit of a mixed message, Minister.

The Minister's statement is high on clichés, platitudes and phrases, and all that that is leading to, and it has been referred to again and again by other Members, is confusion for parents, teachers and children. That is not fair to any of them.

The way in which the Minister has brought her statement to the House is reminiscent, for those of us who have served in local councils, of those edgy — and Mr Speaker, I am coming to my question and I will save you from the effort of getting to your feet — planning applications that are presented just before Christmas, Easter or the Twelfth of July. Members in the House will know exactly what I mean.

Will the Minister tell us whether she really consulted with her colleagues in the Executive? In particular, did she consult with the Minister for Social Development and the Minister for Employment and Learning? Will she also tell me why she feels that she can bring these proposals to the House when she cannot get cross-community support in her Committee and is also unlikely to get the required support in the House by bringing the matter forward in the manner in which she has done?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's comments on the economy: it is essential that our education system is built for the dynamic economy that will be created by the Executive. I welcome the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are in North America, where they are promoting the North. That is very important.

Members will know that I met with the Institute of Directors (IOD), the CBI and other organisations that understand the importance of the economy and the role that the education system plays in it. I know that they will be pleased by the proposals that I have brought to the House today. We are sending out a new message that says that we have a vision of a world-class education system, a vision in which equality for all our children

is the cornerstone, and a vision in which life skills and job skills are matched to the needs of the economy.

It is a good time for the North; it is a good time for this island, and it is a good time for relations between this island and England, Scotland and Wales. We can be part of bringing about change in the North for all our children and not just for some.

Mr Gallagher: I hope that many Members in the Chamber agree that we have to do something about the present education system, which labels and stigmatises so many of our young children as failures. Having looked at the flowery language of the Minister's statement, there are some worrying matters. I am certain that in September 2010, there will be confusion and chaos.

Does the Minister not recognise that, even with the criteria that were outlined today, there will be a free-for-all that will suit the grammar schools but do serious damage to secondary schools? That will sound the death knell for many secondary schools. It is very worrying that, in her statement, the Minister makes much of her contact and discussions with the grammar schools. Will she give an assurance that she will take steps to protect small schools and the rural communities that support them, and that children in rural areas will not have to travel excessive distances to urban centres?

Ms Ruane: I do not accept that there will be a free-for-all. This will be carefully managed change. I would not use the term "flowery"; I would use the term "visionary". *[Interruption.]*

We are creating an education system that places the child at the centre. Unfortunately, to date, the children have not been placed at the centre of the system. We will now be doing that.

I share the Member's view on secondary schools. They have borne the brunt of demographic decline. I have been out and about in secondary schools right across the North, in all different communities, and they are crying out for change. I ask the Members across the Chamber to listen to them; they need to listen. At the moment, we have chaos and the secondary schools are bearing the brunt of demographic decline. It is not fair. We need change.

In relation to small schools and rural schools, there will, for the first time, be area-based planning. The people involved in the local education sectors are best placed to put that provision in place. In fact, in many cases, the work has already started, and those people are leading the way.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a secondary-school teacher for 35 years, I saw all

that was wrong with the 11-plus selection system. I want to ask the Minister, with regard to —

Mr Speaker: Order. A number of meetings are taking place around the Chamber.

Mr Brolly: There seems to be a feeling that the 11-plus decided how many excellent youngsters — youngsters well capable of academic education — there were. In fact, the number of people who passed the 11-plus depended much more on the number of grammar-school places that were available — as the Minister has said, about 30% of the total school capacity.

The 11-plus started life as a way of providing — *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: Where is the question?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the Member get to his question?

Mr Brolly: I am going to ask a question now. I am just trying to think of one. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: He has worked himself up to it.

Mr Brolly: The 11-plus started life as a means of giving scholarships to poor youngsters so that they could get into secondary education. However, when secondary education became compulsory and free, everybody was able to get it, and the 11-plus, unfortunately, was used —

Some Members: Question.

Mr Brolly: I am going to ask a question.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr Brolly: Some Members took much longer to ask their questions than I am taking. Anyhow, my question is — *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: He has forgotten it now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Brolly: Does the Minister agree that the day of the grammar school is now gone, given that grammar schools now go out to the highways and byways to gather up anyone whom they can so that they can receive further funding?

12.15 pm

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I believe firmly that we must have academic excellence in our education system. I look forward to working with all schools, including grammar schools, to ensure that the future arrangements — *[Interruption.]*

A Member: Answer the question.

Ms Ruane: I am answering the question. I wish to ensure that the future arrangements that I will introduce will guarantee academic excellence in the education system.

Mr Ross: I will try to bring a bit of calm to the Chamber. I am glad that the former Sinn Féin MLA recognised the reality of the situation over the weekend: namely that — just as an Irish language Act needed DUP support — to get rid of academic selection, which is safeguarded in the legislation that came about as a result of the St Andrews Agreement, Sinn Féin needs my party's support, and that of this side of the House. That is not going to happen, and the Minister knew that it was not going to happen. Therefore, it was her responsibility to put proposals that could secure the support of everyone in the House. She has failed to do that.

In her statement, the Minister said that she had spoken to teachers, parents, pupils and administrators, and that she plans a further process of consultation. I do not know in which language she conversed with those people, because in successive polls and surveys, and among people to whom I have spoken, the message is clear: there is public support for the principle of academic selection. Parents support it, as do teachers. My question is a simple one that requires only a yes or no answer. Does the Minister believe that her proposals will secure the support of the people of Northern Ireland, the Executive and the House?

Ms Ruane: I do.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister's proposals narrow the gap between respect for vocational qualifications and academic qualifications? It is important, as we go forward, that greater respect is accorded to vocational qualifications.

Ms Ruane: Sin ceist an-mhaith. We must ensure that all children have access to various pathways, and that equal respect is afforded to whatever pathway is chosen. It should not be an either/or situation; it can be both. We can provide for choice between professional, technical or vocational qualifications, and the academic route. If a young person wants to be an engineer, is it not better that he or she can study technology alongside maths and sciences? That is common sense.

In line with the current curriculum, one third of all courses in all schools must be either academic or professional and technical. The Member has raised a fundamental point: if our economy is to thrive, it is essential that vocational qualifications be given respect.

Mr Hamilton: It is very clear on this side of the House that we give the Minister's proposals a grade F for failure, and that her report card would read, "must do much better." She has given no consideration to the current legislation, which enshrines academic selection, nor has she given any consideration to what happens between 2009 and 2011, nor the need to achieve cross-party consensus in the Chamber for her proposals. What consideration has the Minister given to the

inevitable cost of the upheaval that her proposals will cause — proposals that are doomed to fail!

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for the F grade. The Irish word for vision — *fis* — starts with the letter f, so I will take that as a compliment. I hope that we will achieve consensus; that is my plan. I hope that we will agree a way forward and create an education system that values all our children. I have answered the question on cost. I believe that we can transform our education estate within the resources that I have, and bring about the changes that are necessary.

Mr McCallister: The Minister has not provided much clarity. Has the Department carried out any work on valuing the schools estate, and has it assessed the work that needs to be done? Since the Minister is so confident that she can secure cross-community support, will she give an undertaking to the Assembly that Members will have the opportunity to vote on her proposals?

Ms Ruane: My Department and I have been working on these proposals for the past six months. Therefore, the answer to the Member's first question is yes. I forget his second question. Perhaps he will repeat it.

Mr McCallister: Will there be an opportunity for the Assembly to vote on the proposals? I shall ask another question: where are the Minister's officials today?

Mr McNarry: Yes, where are the Minister's officials?

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

Ms Ruane: My officials, who have been working closely with me for the past six months, are working today. They are busy, because this is a very exciting day for the education system in the North. I am grand here on my own. I know what my vision is.

In answer to the second part of Mr McCallister's question, I will make a further statement in the new year on the progress being made towards agreement for transfer in 2010. I will prepare draft regulations to underpin the securing of agreement. I will then bring the proposals to the Executive and to the Committee for Education for consideration and comment before engagement. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister believe that the focus on transfer at the age of 14 brushes under the carpet some of the problems about transfer at the age of 11? There will still be problems with oversubscription and possibly selection by postcode. What steps are being taken to avoid selection by postcode and the related pressures on the housing market? Although Francie Broolly has declared that grammar schools are gone, I want to ask whether secondary schools will be able to obtain funding to make them equal to grammar schools.

Ms Ruane: Rather than creating a postcode lottery, I intend to abolish a life lottery. As I said earlier, under the old regime, that life lottery gambled with the lives of children and the futures of families, based on children of 11 years of age completing two tests lasting one hour each. Under my new vision, the watchword will be “equality”. Many families do not have the wherewithal or the personal desire for additional tuition or academic coaching for their primary-school children. Those considerations will no longer be necessary. We have here the outline of a vision that is based on local and area-based planning. The resources for the schools in that system will be allocated in a fair and equal way.

Lord Morrow: Having listened to what the Minister has said and read some of the stuff in her statement, I have to say that it is no wonder that the entire education system is totally confused. She says that she wrote to her colleagues. In fact, she wrote to one colleague and delivered the letter today at 10.50 am. That is the consultation in which the Minister believes. However, that tells Members something: the Minister knows perfectly well that there is no hope of her proposals going through. Those proposals have come from a narrow, sectarian, political viewpoint — the Minister’s sectarianism drips from her. We have news for her: not only will she not get her proposals through the Assembly, but she has no chance of getting them through the Executive. That is why she refuses to consult her Executive colleagues. If the Minister thinks that this stuff —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to the question.

Lord Morrow: If the Minister thinks that this stuff is going to anywhere in the Assembly, we can tell her today that it is going absolutely nowhere. She had better learn that and learn it quickly. She has introduced proposals and manifestly made an attempt to close all post-primary rural schools in County Fermanagh. She talks about equality, but, in fact, she is going to round up people in Fermanagh —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please come to the question.

Lord Morrow: I am coming to the question now.

She intends to round up people in rural areas and send them all into Enniskillen town. Will the Minister tell the House where the rural equality is in her proposals? She should hang her head in shame.

Ms Ruane: This is a proud day for me. I am delighted with the outline of the vision that I have presented. It will give every child a fair chance in an education system that matches children to suitable provision. The proposals that the Member mentions in relation to Fermanagh have been brought forward by the boards.

Lord Morrow: And?

Ms Ruane: And it is very important that all political representatives read them carefully and engage with the process. I do not know where the Member lives, or what world he is living in. Maybe he should visit some of the secondary schools in the unionist community, talk to the principals, and hear directly from them how they are being affected under the current system. I have had meetings with principals from all kinds of schools — all the different sectors, all the different creeds and all the different politics. They tell me that we need change. We need an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century. We need a system that puts the children at the centre, and that is what I am going to do.

Maybe the Member is willing to live in the past and condemn 4,000 young people to poor literacy and numeracy skills, but I am not. I am the Minister of Education for every child in the North of Ireland, and I am going to ensure that every child has opportunities.

Ms Purvis: I welcome the Minister’s commitment to ending the 11-plus, but I am extremely disappointed, as many of those disadvantaged by the current system will be, by her proposal to sustain a range of different types of school. In effect, that is selection, slotting children into schools. It brands the schools as failures or successes. This vision is a new system of social selection, which represents a missed opportunity for the Minister. She has abandoned Sinn Féin’s former policy and she has abandoned the most disadvantaged children in society. It is a missed opportunity to create one system — not a two-tier or two-gear system, but one of equality in schools and education that values each child equally.

Does the Minister agree that a ‘ChuckleVision’ view of education does not create a tiger economy? East or west, tiger economies are not based on academically selective systems. Will the Minister outline — and other Members have talked about it this morning — what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues and with other parties in the Assembly on these proposals, and how she proposes to secure the broadest community support for them?

Ms Ruane: First of all, every area is different, as Members will know. One size does not fit all. We are going to look at a range of provision, and I do not accept that it is a postcode lottery. We are going to look at access to an 11-19 school, transfer to an alternative 11-19 school, access through an 11-19 or post-14 school, and transfer to a 14-19 school. The Member needs to understand that everywhere is different. Rural areas are different from urban areas. I will be seeking the views of all the different stakeholders in relation to the provision that we will be having. It is important that we do not go down the road of one size fits all. No

child will be disadvantaged, and all children will have access to a wide range of subjects and pathways.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome today's statement and the debate that it has begun. It is simply a statement of fact and reality that there is no consensus for the current education arrangements, particularly the transfer system. Therefore, change is required and inevitable. Does the Minister agree that the challenge for Members of this Assembly is to give leadership on this issue, to embrace change and to reject the failed status quo, not to behave as the dysfunctional product of a failed education system? Is she listening carefully to the Shankill Road principals' consortium and its rejection of academic selection and transfer tests?

12.30 pm

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree that we must show political leadership to match that of the principals and teachers in our schools, who are crying out for it. They understand the impact on secondary schools of 50,000 empty desks, of changing the review of public administration, of creating the education and skills authority (ESA), and of demographic decline. I am confident that we can bring forward proposals that will have the support of the vast majority of secondary and grammar schools. I ask all the political leaders here to show the necessary leadership; we can either hide our heads in the sand and pretend that there is no problem or we can lead by example. With that in mind, I welcome the question.

I have been in many different communities, one of which was the Shankill. I have met the principals' forums and the north Belfast controlled sector forum. I have been to Millburn in Coleraine, and to Ballymena, Derry, the Falls Road — all over the North — and, by and large, the current system is failing working-class pupils. There must be change, and I ask you to work with me, rather than fight that change every step of the way. I will fight if I must, but I would like to work with Members to create the system that is needed.

Mr Ford: I would have been happy to join in welcoming the Minister's vision for education. However, this morning, the problem is that we have a right to expect something more than a vision that could have been expounded a few months ago. There is a huge amount lacking in her statement. For example, can she explain how she will make area-based planning meaningful when, in many areas — such as Antrim, in my constituency — the education and library board on one hand and CCMS on the other have already gone through a rationalisation process? The problem of empty desks remains.

In a rare moment of unity with Miss McIlveen — and my colleague Trevor Lunn — I repeat a point that the Minister made and ask what the implications are:

“If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer ... there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.”

Does that relate solely to the funding of the new transfer arrangements, or is there an implied threat to those schools in general?

Ms Ruane: I have already answered the last question, so I will not do so again.

Area-based planning is fundamental. It must be — and will be — put in place with the support of all the education partners.

Mr Burnside: Listening to Radio Ulster on the way to Stormont this morning, I was looking forward to an important statement on education. Something along the lines of Dickson academic selection at 14 was being flagged up, and I thought that that meant some progress, with an announcement that could receive cross-community and popular support for our future education system.

What disappoints me about the Minister's statement is its total lack of content and clarity. I therefore ask for a precise answer to a precise question. Referring to the future, she mentioned — after the Irish bit — the introduction of regulations, following a consultation process. Regulations are clearly understood to be under her executive authority as a Minister. Are we, therefore, about to see the destruction of our grammar schools and academic selection by Martin McGuinness mark II, or will that be blocked by the authority of this House? Can she be clear: is it to be regulations or legislation?

Ms Ruane: I, too, listened to Radio Ulster today. The principal of Portadown College spoke, and her vision was interesting. She said clearly that the area in which the Dickson method operates has been much more effective than other areas in the North. I differ from the current system in that I do not believe that academic selection is necessary at 14; it is unjust and unnecessary.

We can create a system of academic excellence by matching children to suitable provision. I have answered the Member's question already, so I do not know how much clearer that I can be. I will bring my proposals to the Executive, and I will work with my colleagues in the Assembly.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Speaking as someone who was a teacher for more than 30 years, predominantly in Northern Ireland grammar schools, I fully endorse the principles behind the changes, which reflect the need to provide an appropriate educational pathway for every child, and an equal opportunity for every child to realise his or her potential.

If places in heavily subscribed schools are allocated on the basis of residential location — the proximity of a child's home to a school — does the Minister accept

that that will lead to property hot spots and, ultimately, to a system in which money talks? Surely a system that allocates school places according to how much money a child's parents have is even more unjust than one that allocates according to academic ability. Will the Minister guarantee to the House that she will avoid, at all costs, a system that reserves places at the most desirable schools for those who are better off?

Ms Ruane: First, I say go raibh maith agat to the Member for his initial comments. There will always be pressure on popular schools in our education system. However, we now have an opportunity, because of excess places in our school system, to be more responsive in future.

Secondly, the focus on admissions will shift. The post-14 provision in local areas will be flexible and agile in order to enable all children to be matched to suitable provision through the organisational capacity of larger or collaborating institutions. The key point to make is that no doors will be closed to children.

Mr Elliott: I hope that I have more success than other Members have had in getting an answer from the Minister, after the party-political spoof that I have heard from her today. On what does she base her suggestion that her announcement will have the support of children, teachers and parents? It is certainly not what the opinion polls have indicated up to now.

Ms Ruane: As I have said, I have been out and about, and I have met with many groups and sectors. An increasing number of people understands that we need change in our system; an increasing number of people understands that we need to create an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century; and an increasing number of people understands that choices for children should not be based on the outcome of two one-hour tests. Opinions on academic selection are shifting. I ask that Members go out and talk to their communities. I have been out talking to them, and opinions are shifting. Members should talk to the IOD, the CBI, all the teachers' unions, and the various boards and education sectors — they might hear something that they would not expect to hear.

Mr A Maginness: As someone who belongs to a party that has been totally opposed to the 11-plus, one would have loved to have come to the Chamber today to say congratulations to the Minister. She has said that this should be an exciting day, because she is presenting her vision for the future of our education system. However, it is a sad day, because the Minister has created only more confusion and a further lack of clarity on the future of our education system. The Minister has talked about there being a range of schools and a range of options. Surely that is antipathetic to the ideal of equality for people in education.

Ms Ruane: “Equality” and “diversity” are closely linked words. I am disappointed that the Member does not understand the range of provision. My proposals offer local solutions, because different areas have different needs. I urge Members not to stay in their constituencies but to go out into other constituencies to see the differences that operate at different levels. Equality does not mean that everything need be the same. Equality is a celebration of diversity but with a fair system put in place.

Mr Savage: The Minister's proposals are far-reaching. Can those changes be made within the existing education budget, or will the Minister require more finances to complete the task that lies ahead?

Ms Ruane: Many of the changes are far-reaching, and I will use the existing resources to bring about maximum change in the system.

Mr Speaker: No more Members wish to ask questions. That brings to an end questions on the ministerial statement. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 60(1)(e) relates to the use of unparliamentary language. When Paul Butler rose to his feet to ask a question, the word “lapdog” was called out in the Chamber. Will you rule, Mr Speaker, on whether that is parliamentary language, and if it is not, will you ask the Member responsible to withdraw the comment?

Mr Speaker: I continually say to all sides of the House that there are debates that can give rise to some tension in the House. I have always said that Members must be mindful of the language that they use. I will study the Hansard report and return to the House on the matter.

As I was trying to say before I was interrupted on a point of order, the Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

Second Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item of business is the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] —

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Are we entitled to proceed without there being a quorum in the Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, not if the Member has an objection.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

On resuming —

2.02 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now have a quorum, so it is safe to proceed.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] be agreed.

The Bill is exceptionally brief but is important nonetheless. Chernobyl and other environmental disasters have demonstrated that ships coming into and leaving port can present a greater threat to public health than the infectious diseases that rats and other vectors carry. Therefore, the 2005 international health regulations, which the World Health Organization issued, seek to strengthen the defences against a wider range of threats, such as chemical and radiological contamination.

The Bill is necessary to enable ports in Northern Ireland to implement the new inspection and certification regime. The Bill simply amends the regulation-making powers in section 2A of the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. That section deals with the control of certain diseases. The Bill has two clauses. By adding new paragraph (c) to section 2A(1) of the 1967 Act, clause 1 will extend my Department's power to make regulations to prevent:

“the spread of infection or contamination by means of any vessel or aircraft leaving any place, so far as may be necessary or expedient for the purpose of carrying out any treaty, convention, arrangement or engagement with any other country”.

Clause 2 sets out the Bill's short title.

In order to be able to comply with the international health regulations, the Public Health (Ships) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1971 and Public Health (Aircraft) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1971 must be amended. The international health regulations were remade in 2005 and agreed with the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is therefore obliged to provide a legislative framework to implement our international obligations under those regulations. This will allow new ship sanitation control certificates to replace deratting certificates, which will have no international validity after this month.

The new certificates deal with infection and with rodents that can carry human disease, and, for the first time, chemical and radiological contamination will be addressed. The Bill is necessary so that the Port of Belfast, for example, can have the same certification power as Liverpool and can impose the same sanitation standards as Shanghai or Liberia. We must put in place new regulations for Northern Ireland in the form of subordinate legislation, which requires parent legislation. Having examined the 1967 Act, I concluded that its powers are inadequate for that purpose. Amended ships and aircraft regulations will, therefore, have to be made under the 1967 Act's new powers.

We must act quickly by passing the Bill, in order to enable our ports to once again carry out those functions that are required under the World Health Organization's regulations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): As the Minister stated, the Public Health (Amendment) Bill is very short. It consists of one main clause and a further clause that sets out the short title. The Minister advised the Health Committee that he intended to introduce the Bill, and I am grateful to the officials who came to the Committee on 15 November to explain its background and purpose. The officials explained, as has the Minister today, that it is a technical Bill, and that it is necessary to allow the Department to respond to new international requirements. It is designed to enable the Department to comply with international health regulations introduced by the World Health Organization. The Bill will give the Department power to make regulations that are aimed at improving and modernising the way in which public health checks are carried out on ships and ports.

The explanatory and financial memorandum states that the introduction of the Bill was the only option available to allow the Department to comply with international health regulations. This type of single

clause legislation must surely be a costly way in which to proceed, from the perspective of both the Department and the Assembly, and given the time and resources that must be devoted to it. It is a process that should be used only in exceptional circumstances.

What options, other than legislation, were considered to allow the Department to meet its obligations in that regard? If legislation is the only option, when did it first become apparent that a change in legislation was required? It appears from the explanatory and financial memorandum that the Department has been aware of the issue for at least a year, as it states:

“stakeholder engagement has been taking place since the beginning of 2007.”

If that is the case, what consideration was given to including such provision in any other Bill?

The Bill, if agreed, will come before the Committee for detailed consideration. I note from the explanatory and financial memorandum that the consultation with stakeholders produced no concerns or comments. I am sure that the Committee will wish to examine the nature and extent of that consultation. I trust that the Minister will make all the paperwork relating to the consultation available to the Committee. Subject to a satisfactory explanation from the Minister, I am content to support the general provision of the Bill.

Mr McCallister: As a member of the Health Committee, I welcome the Bill. The Minister drew attention to the Port of Belfast, and, as a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I am well aware of the necessity for our ports to meet international standards. Therefore, I have no problem in welcoming the Bill and supporting the measures contained therein.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I will deal with some of the points made by the Chairperson of the Health Committee. As far as legal advice is concerned, it was not possible to simply amend the existing ship and aircraft regulations, as they were made under powers contained in section 143 of the Public Health Act 1936. Although the Act did not extend to Northern Ireland, section 143(9) entitles the provisions of that section to be extended to Northern Ireland only in so far as they relate to regulations with respect to matters on which the Parliament of Northern Ireland has no power to make laws. Therefore, the steps that we take are correct, according to legal advice.

The World Health Organization’s regulations were passed in 2005. The process began at that time, and it has been under discussion and consultation since the beginning of this year. The formal consultation on marine and public health interests in Northern Ireland has elicited no comment or concerns. The only concerns expressed to my Department relate to the failure of

Northern Ireland to come into line with England and meet our international obligations, which we now do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved: That the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill (NIA 8/07) be agreed.

Pensions Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate amendments to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there will be no opportunity to discuss the Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at the next Stage. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the 22 clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the six schedules and the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 to 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 6 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07]. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Drink-Spiking

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

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in view of the increase in 'spiking' of drinks, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide for date rape prevention kits to be made available free of charge.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide date rape prevention kits free of charge, and I hope that it gets the full support of the Assembly. One purpose behind the motion is to raise public awareness that drink-spiking has happened; is happening, and can happen to anyone.

It is timely that the motion is being debated today as Christmas is three weeks away. Christmas is the time of year when we, as a society, go out more, attend more parties and — unfortunately — drink more. Sadly some people see that as an opportunity to ruin lives.

Last year, the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre received a number of reports from women who feared that their drinks had been spiked. Dozens of similar cases have been reported throughout the year. Overindulgence in alcohol plays a big part in the problem, and in some cases people have not had their drink spiked but have just drunk too much. However, in other cases drinks have been spiked; figures from the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre indicated that there were 40 reported incidents of drug-related rape and sexual abuse in the North in 2006, which is an increase on previous years.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs clearly states that drug-facilitated sexual assaults — including the use of alcohol — are a significant problem. I congratulate the Health Promotion Agency and drug and alcohol support groups for accepting that there is a problem with people having their drinks spiked, and for developing an advertising campaign that includes putting up posters in pubs and clubs.

Education is a key factor in ensuring that people can protect themselves — every effort must be made to alert people to the issue. As I said, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs highlights a number of issues and offers good advice.

The advisory council states that advice that will minimise the risk of drug-facilitated sexual assaults

should be targeted at secondary schools, as well as further and higher educational establishments. Furthermore, that advice should, as appropriate, include the following message: plan journeys to and from home; avoid going alone to a club, pub or party; make sure that someone knows where you are going and what time you will be back; stay aware of what is happening around you, and avoid situations in which you feel uncomfortable; do not accept a drink from anyone that you do not trust; do not share or exchange drinks; and do not leave your drink unattended — even when going to the toilet, take it with you.

2.15 pm

That final piece of advice has been made more difficult by the introduction of the smoking ban, because most pubs and clubs do not allow their customers to take their drinks outside. Everyone should follow that advice from the advisory council, and doing so will minimise the risk of drink-spiking.

Although some organisations — including the advisory council — have said that the public should be made aware that the so-called drug detectors cannot be relied on, they will help in making people aware of the issue. The advisory council also states that further research should be promoted. The motion calls on the Minister to provide date-rape prevention kits free of charge, but that does not mean that finance should come solely from the Health Department's budget. Pubs, clubs and the vintners' associations have a part to play, because public houses are where most drink-spiking takes place.

Door staff also have a part to play in ensuring that people are safe. They must accept that drink-spiking takes place, and they need to be trained to deal with the issue. Door staff should not assume that someone is drunk; they have a duty to ensure that people are safe and feel safe in their premises. They must also ensure that people feel safe when they leave establishments and are not in a vulnerable state, as is so often the case. I urge the Minister to organise a meeting with the relevant bodies as early as possible to ensure that drink-spiking prevention kits are provided free of charge. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion. I do not drink or frequent pubs and clubs; nonetheless, I am concerned about the increase in assaults and rapes on women. This is an area in which we should exercise zero tolerance. Drink-spiking receives a lot of media attention, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it is very much on the rise. It is not possible to know whether the stories are always true, but it is true to say that many young people are fearful about falling victim to having their drinks spiked.

Some figures suggest that Northern Ireland has a problem, and for a region of the United Kingdom that has a population of only 1.7 million, we have an incidence equal to or higher than other regions that have a much higher population. Therefore we cannot dismiss the problem as the result of exaggerated stories or pretend that drink-spiking does not happen to people in Northern Ireland. Although we must remain aware of the dangers of drink-spiking, we must also remember that, whatever the incidence of drink-spiking, alcohol is a drug that remains the main contributor to date rape. Whatever steps are taken to ensure that nothing is added to a drink, the effects of the alcohol — when consumed in the quantities often associated with today's binge-drinking culture — can leave someone open to the same types of assault as any of the so-called date-rape drugs.

The drinks that are popular among young people — particularly young women — can allow for drink-spiking. Strong flavours and bright colours can mask any tastes or colours that could be telltale signs that a drink has been spiked. It is much better to attempt to prevent drink-spiking from occurring, and many women take many of the simple steps that can prevent their drinks being tampered with. By ensuring that they do not leave a drink unattended, they are taking a simple step to reduce the chances of anything happening to their drink. However, it is difficult to ensure that there is no opportunity during a night out for someone to tamper with the drink at some stage of the evening.

Improvements are being made. Public awareness is strong, and some good initiatives are being introduced by pub and club operators.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for her support for the motion. Raising awareness is a key issue.

In my opening remarks, I forgot to mention men, who are also being targeted and are having their drinks spiked for other reasons. I did not mean to give the impression that it is only women who are victims, because young men's drinks are also being spiked.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for her comments, with which I agree. I am talking about women specifically, and I have been in contact with the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. However, that does not preclude the fact that men's drinks are also being spiked.

One of the main times that a drink is left unattended is when someone is in the toilets, so some premises have installed small lockers where drinks can be deposited and locked away. The measures that I have mentioned so far can be taken either by an individual or by the drinks industry, which can help to put extra safeguards in place.

The motion calls on the Minister to make date-rape prevention kits available free of charge, and although the provision of anything that helps to prevent such terrible abuse of an individual will be welcomed, we must ensure that any prevention campaign does not lead to complacency and people ignoring the fact that alcohol itself can be as powerful a drug as the one that may be placed in their drink.

Small plastic stoppers that can be fitted onto the top of bottles are a relatively cheap, but effective, way to prevent substances being added to drinks. Whether the Department provides the stoppers or simply works with the drinks industry to encourage their provision, that measure is only one part of an overall strategy to reduce the incidence of drink-spiking.

Kits that are supposed to detect whether a drink has been tampered with may play a role, but there are questions about their reliability. Therefore, prevention of spiking in the first place is the ultimate goal.

I hope that today's debate will ensure that people will take extra care over the Christmas season so that we can prevent even one person's drink being spiked.

I ask the Minister to consider seriously the role that the Department can play and how the availability of some relatively inexpensive measures could help to reduce the problem even further.

I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion, if only to give the House an opportunity to debate some of the issues that surround it.

The Roofie Foundation is the only specialist agency in the UK that deals with the issue of drug rape. The Northern Ireland branch runs in conjunction with the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. The foundation was established by Graham Rhodes after he had conducted research in spring 1996 into the subject of drug-related rape and sexual abuse. Statistics issued by the foundation show that 68% of date-rape drugs were administered in pubs, clubs, wine bars or bistros, which is 6,285 out of a total of 9,260 incidents. Those statistics point overwhelmingly to the need for a solution that involves premises being regulated.

We are not dealing only with sexual offences. The Roofie Foundation believes that there may be up to 2,000 cases of drug-assisted robbery, compared with 900 incidents of drug-assisted rape, to which some Members have already referred.

The prevention measures fall short of legislation, but they could be combined with minimal legislation. Although the police and voluntary groups have issued a number of guidelines on drink protection that include urging people to watch their drinks, refusing to allow strangers to buy them drinks and not leaving drinks unattended, there are devices on the market that seek

to prevent drink-spiking. They come in two main varieties: those that prevent a drink being spiked in the first place; and those that prevent a spiked drink being drunk.

Those include the Drink Detective, a matchbox-size test kit for drinks, which indicates clearly whether a drink has been spiked. The kit can be used by paramedics and club and bar owners to test any suspicious drinks. SafeFlow, which has been tested by police forces across the UK, is another system that relies on prevention rather than detection. A packet of six SafeFlow bottle tops costs around £2. A cap is placed on the top of a bottle, which cannot be removed easily, and the drink can be accessed only through a straw. Spikey is another device that emphasises protection.

We must stress also the responsibility of the bar owner. A duty of reasonable care must be placed on bar owners, who, after all, profit from the sale of drink. They should be expected to provide a safe environment for their customers. Pub and club owners are responsible for enforcing licensing laws, so they should be responsible for administering safety laws in respect of pub and club users.

In response to a question tabled in the House of Commons, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, Caroline Flint, stated:

“While bottle caps and drink holders may reduce the potential for drink-spiking, they too can provide a false reassurance of safety, given evidence that it is the consumption of alcohol, rather than drink-spiking, which more commonly increases vulnerability to sexual crime”.

That brings me back to the problem of binge drinking, which Mrs Robinson has already mentioned. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say on the measures that his Department is taking with regard to binge drinking.

Binge drinking leaves young women vulnerable to sexual predators and young men vulnerable to other forms of crime. The problem is not just about drink-spiking, but about how much alcohol a person drinks. Positive steps must be taken against bar and club owners who boost drink sales through special promotions, in which highly alcoholic shots are sold at a heavy discount. We must have dialogue with the drinks and entertainment industry. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank Sinn Féin Members for bringing the matter to the Floor.

This issue must be addressed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and others. However, the whole drink culture is an associated issue, and it must be addressed urgently. Excessive drinking and binge drinking — abusing alcohol and consuming it irresponsibly — are ongoing problems in Northern Ireland, and the negative effect

that that has on physical and mental health cannot be underestimated. The dangers of alcohol abuse must be made clear and prioritised by the Department, as too many lives are being ruined.

In response to a question for written answer to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about alcohol, I was told that more than 8,000 people in Northern Ireland received hospital treatment for alcohol-related illnesses last year and that treatment over the last three years cost Northern Ireland £35 million. The misuse of alcohol is a major public-health issue.

Numerous problems arise when alcohol is abused. People spike drinks for several reasons; the intention being to sexually assault, rape or rob the person whose drink has been spiked. Sometimes the only motivation is to see what effect the drug will have. All types of people have become victims of drink-spiking, but the majority of victims appear to be young women. The act of spiking a drink is a criminal offence and can gravely endanger a person's life. If that person has a serious reaction to the drug and dies, the person responsible for spiking the drink could face a murder charge.

These attacks often go unreported, and, therefore, the issue may be more serious than we realise.

2.30 pm

It is important that staff in bars and clubs — where the majority of drink-spiking occurs — pick up on what is happening, report any incidents, and are trained to deal with victims. Likewise, accident and emergency staff must be on hand to deal with cases, which are most likely to be seen in the early hours of the morning when A&E departments are crammed with patients.

As with binge drinking or drink-driving, approaches to dealing with drink-spiking come back to the need for better education and putting out clear messages to people who drink irresponsibly. I am aware that campaigns are running, and they must continue. However, to reduce the prevalence of drink-spiking, even if we do get the date-rape prevention kits, messages such as “Don't leave your drink unattended”, “Never let someone that you don't know buy you a drink” and “When you buy a drink, watch the barperson pouring it” must continue to be hammered home.

Even if one does these things to prevent drink-spiking, there is still a risk, and I understand the reasoning behind date-rape prevention kits. However, if such kits are recommended by the police or the Department, it is important that they be foolproof and give accurate results.

I am worried by a recent University of Ulster report suggesting that excessive drinking is a factor in the rise of sexual attacks and rapes. Although I do not blame the victims for such attacks, it is fair to say that responsible drinking could improve women's well-being and safety, especially that of younger women, who may be

particularly vulnerable. Sex attackers often take advantage of situations and perpetrate opportunistic assaults as a result of victims' voluntarily drinking themselves into helplessness.

The risks associated with the rise of binge drinking are plentiful, and drink-spiking is another example of the dangers. The Minister of Health has told the Health Committee that he will prioritise health education, and the University of Ulster report suggests that the Department must sustain that prioritisation if we are to highlight the risks of binge drinking and drink-spiking and reduce their frequency in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann for bringing such an important issue to the House, particularly in light of the fact that the festive season is approaching.

As a Pioneer, a teetotaler, and a person who knows little about what goes on in drinking environments, I have no problem supporting the motion if it contributes to increased safety for those who wish to socialise and consume drink in a public place. However, the motion does not consider the cost to the taxpayer of providing free date-rape prevention kits. Perhaps that issue might be addressed in the winding-up speech.

Ms S Ramsey: I did not for one minute suggest that money should come from the Department's budget, which I know is under pressure. Pubs, clubs and vintners have a responsibility and must play their part, because, as John McCallister said, they make big profits. I ask the Minister to ensure that the costs impact collectively on those groups that have a duty and responsibility to deal with the issue.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for that clarification. Even if such kits were to be supplied free of charge, would they be used? Would they justify the expenditure, and how could the usage and results be monitored? Many questions must be answered.

There is also a problem with the escalation of drug use. If such kits are provided, and then new or different drugs appear, will the kits be fit for purpose, or will they be useless and thrown on the scrap heap?

The Alliance Party believes that — as other Members have said — education is more important. We encourage the use of publicity campaigns and help from drinking establishments — as Sue referred to just now — in order to get the message home and put the responsibility on to those people who are at risk.

A big responsibility rests with young people who have little or no experience of what might go on in certain establishments. More could be done to make people aware of the dangers that they might encounter on a night out. As other Members have said, the message must be that people should never leave a drink unattended, even for a second, and should not accept drinks from

people whom they do not know or trust or, in some cases, even from those whom they might trust.

As the Alliance Party's health spokesman, I support any measures that might prevent people ending up in a GP's surgery, a hospital accident and emergency unit or worse. If all else fails, and if it can be proved that the date-rape prevention kits are a cost-effective and appropriate answer, I will support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call on the next Member to speak, I ask all Members to check that their mobile phones are switched off, as someone's phone is affecting the recording equipment.

Mr Buchanan: I apologise on behalf of the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mrs Robinson, who has had to leave to go to London. She would have liked to stay for the rest of the debate but has asked me to convey her apologies.

I support the sentiments of the motion that is before the House. Drug-related rape and sexual abuse throughout Northern Ireland are clear indications of the changing face of the sinful society in which we live. Stories of unsuspecting victims having their drinks spiked for nefarious purposes have become a sickening trend, which is on the increase, and such crimes must be tackled to protect the vulnerable in society.

As other Members have mentioned, it is important to point out that the problem affects men as well as women. However, it must be said that, irrespective of any measures that may be taken, there will always be predators who will target and prey upon unsuspecting victims in order to satisfy their lusts and desires. Therefore, the message of safer and more responsible drinking, alongside increased awareness and vigilance from friends and bar staff, will be most effective in increasing the safety of people who might be vulnerable to drink-spiking. That is why education is a key factor in alerting people — young and old — to the dangers of drink-spiking.

Bouncers and bar staff have a responsibility to be vigilant, and they should be trained to recognise the difference between the tell-tale signs of someone who has been drinking and someone who has been drugged. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that some responsibility lies with those who consume alcohol and leave themselves in very vulnerable situations.

A survey conducted by the University of Ulster on 8 May 2007 revealed that young women in Northern Ireland are making themselves vulnerable to rape or serious sexual assault through their binge-drinking habits. The survey's findings demonstrated that the average alcohol levels at the time of alleged assaults were almost three times higher than the drink-driving limit. That is real cause for concern among Members,

especially for members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Although the motion calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make date-rape prevention kits available free of charge, the Minister must focus on a much wider issue. Drink-spiking is not a matter just for the Minister and the Department. The various statutory bodies and stakeholders should take a co-ordinated approach. There should be joined-up action from the vintners, local district councils, community safety partnerships, district policing partnerships, the PSNI and other bodies in order to provide the kits at little or no expense to the Department.

Mr McCarthy asked whether the kits would be fit for purpose; if they were not, the Minister and other bodies would not be introducing them. I wish to alleviate the Member's concerns; we will not bring forward measures that are not fit for purpose, because that would be a waste of money.

Therefore, although the Minister should take the lead role, it is important that the other bodies be brought into the equation to help to eradicate the problem and to provide a much safer environment for society. I support the sentiments of the motion.

Mr Easton: I thank Members opposite for proposing the motion, which I fully support. I also thank the Member who proposed the motion for clarifying her position regarding pubs and clubs taking their share of the responsibility in dealing with this issue. Perhaps the Minister will also take on board the point regarding DPPs and councils.

The term "date rape" was first used in a magazine article in 1982. The term refers to rape perpetrated by a person who is known to the victim. Date rape is a brutal, and, sadly, common crime. It is evil and cowardly. Incidents of date rapes are rapidly increasing and must be treated seriously. Drugs are also being increasingly used to render a victim incapable of resisting — or even remembering anything about — an attack.

People from all walks of life need to be made aware of the drugs that are increasingly used in instances of rape. Drugs such as ketamine — which was developed as an animal tranquiliser and anaesthetic — affect the central nervous system and can take effect in 10 to 20 minutes when added to alcohol. Rohypnol is another example; it has a sedative effect, can be administered as a powder added to a drink, and is also used as an anaesthetic. Its effects are also intensified when added to alcohol.

Gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB) is a drug that is odourless, colourless and is perhaps the most dangerous of all. It affects the brain and induces dizziness, incoherent speech, and, if too much of it is consumed, it can even induce coma and heart seizures. GHB can be created by an amateur chemist using advice

that can, unfortunately, be downloaded from the Internet. It is a dangerous drug, and those who use it are aware that it can be a killer drug.

However, the most dangerous drug of all is alcohol. In modern society, pub crawling and clubbing, associated with the consumption of large amounts of inexpensive alcohol, is part of almost every young person's social experience. The price of alcohol needs to be considered, not just for general health, but also in order to help to address this issue.

Sexual predators can easily find soft targets. It is sad to think that young people are being stalked by evil people who have no remorse, no moral component, no regard for their defenceless victim and no fear of the law or the courts.

Educating young people is important, especially as to the dangers of alcohol and heavy drinking. They must receive timely warnings and advice on self-protection. There are various date-rape prevention kits, some of which include personal alarms, Mace sprays and a variety of devices to prevent drinks being tampered with. It is each young person's responsibility to avail of — and provide themselves with — the protection that they may need.

As public representatives, we can ensure that young people are offered help, support and advice. We can support and further develop awareness programmes that impress on young people the need to take sensible precautions when going out to pubs or clubs. Advice that can be offered includes: go out with friends and come home together with friends; keep an eye on friends during the evening; never leave drinks unattended; never accept an open drink from a stranger; and call the police immediately if there is a suspicion that someone has been drugged.

Rape is one of the most serious offences that a person can commit. Often, it goes unpunished because the victims are afraid to go to the police. They feel a sense of shame; they fear having to describe and relive the event; they fear that their family, friends or employers will treat them in an unsympathetic or even hostile manner; and they fear being mocked by their attacker as they stand in court, reliving the horror of the attack. Rape sentences the victim to a lifetime of fear, damage and distress. More often than not, the predator walks away undiscovered, unnamed and unpunished. It is a brutal crime that is made even worse when drugs are used to make the victim unable to resist or offer defence.

However, it is not enough for Members to stand in the Chamber and offer informed and sympathetic advice; it is not enough to simply debate the availability of date-rape kits; it is not enough to offer our sympathy after the event. It is time to take the war to the enemy. We need to put fear of retribution in the mind of the perpetrators. There is little evidence that those who

commit sexual crime can be successfully rehabilitated. The victim is sentenced to, and has to endure, a life sentence of psychological and emotional damage.

2.45 pm

When people are convicted, we must do all in our power to ensure that retribution is related to the enormity of the crime. We must ensure that those who have been brutalised can have confidence in the police and in the justice system when they have the courage to report such crimes. The system must do more to protect the victim, and much more to punish those responsible for such crimes.

If devolution is to mean anything, we must have the power to treat sexual predators, date rapists and those who prey on innocent children with the severity that those offences merit. We must ensure that the Assembly spells out its intention to work in every possible way to support victims of crime and ensure that the punishment fits the crime.

I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP supports the motion. However, although we recognise that there is some evidence of an increase in the use of date-rape drugs, we share the concerns of many Members about a culture of binge drinking.

Recent research by the University of Ulster, and an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' in November last year about a study of drug rape, indicate that the overwhelming majority of people who had come forward with allegations of rape had been between two and three times over the legal alcohol limit for driving.

I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will look to the Investing for Health strategy and bring together Departments to try to educate not only children — as many Members have said — but parents. I am sure that, in every constituency, stories circulate of parents purchasing alcohol for young children. Some think it acceptable that alcohol should be provided for young children and underage drinkers. Shame on them.

We have seen a great campaign aimed at educating people about the dangers of tobacco and smoking, but a similar message has still to be driven home about the long-term impact of alcohol abuse. I ask the Minister to consider the establishment of a forum to take forward such work.

All parties represented in the Assembly have the opportunity to have their say on the provisions of the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, not only with respect to date rape, but in respect of the definition of when a rape has occurred. If someone is so drunk that they cannot give rational consent, that should be considered when deciding whether consent was given or whether sexual assault or rape has been committed.

Some Members commented on the type of detection kits that are available. The Minister is aware that community-safety partnerships — at least in Craigavon — supplied bottle stoppers two years ago.

There is a need for interdepartmental co-operation, but the NIO's community safety unit also has a responsibility because it may have money to put towards such projects. The proposers of the motion recognise the difficulties of providing such kits, free of charge, from the health budget, and have stressed that that is not what they are asking for. However, the NIO could be a source of money for that purpose, because a precedent has already been established, and it has considered that measure in the past.

I am not sure whether the Minister's Department runs the current television advertisements about Christmas parties and how people are getting out-of-their-minds drunk. Perhaps the money for those advertisements comes from some other source. However, that advertising campaign appears to be driving the message home. Does the Minister have any plans to establish such a campaign on a longer-term basis, to drive home the message about date rape, the undue influence that alcohol has on behaviour and the consequences of being unable to make informed decisions when drunk?

The SDLP, therefore, supports the motion, but would welcome a cross-departmental strategy to tackle the societal problems that binge drinking poses.

Furthermore, I commend the Department of the Environment on its campaign against drink-driving. Reports have shown that drugs are increasingly involved in such cases.

Date rape is not just connected to unusual drugs used specifically for that purpose: people also take recreational drugs and prescribed medication, which affect alcohol uptake and physiological interactions.

Mr Shannon: Thair hes aye been badness i this worl', fae the faa thon furst tim' i Eden's Gairden. A wus raired i tims tha' mae gran'parents alloed wurnae laike thair day, an' yet leukin beck oan thaim the day they leuk tae bae idyllic compeered tae quhat oor young fowk the day cum ap agin. Hit leuks laike thaim wi' evil notions hae mair tools than iver afore tae heft thaim tae cairry oot thair disgustin' purposes.

There has always been evil in the world, since the first fall in the Garden of Eden. I grew up in times that my grandparents bemoaned as not the same as their era, yet as I look back on them they seem idyllic in comparison to what young people face today. It appears that those with evil intentions have more tools than ever to help them carry out their disgusting purposes.

I commend the proposers for tabling the motion. I am aware of the circumstances of certain people in my

area and of what nearly happened to them, which could have been worse but for the actions of their friends.

Due to the rising number of rape cases in the UK, a scheme was implemented in schools whereby girls of 15 and 16 were given self-defence classes in PE. The scheme made sense; it gave participants the tools to fight off an attacker, scream and run for help. As with everything else, that is no longer enough. The self-defence classes were laudable, but not sufficient to provide a fighting chance against someone with evil intent towards a woman, who must deal with not only brute strength but drinks spiked with drugs that make her pliable and forgetful.

I am not a chemist, and I will not even attempt to pronounce some of the ingredients that are used in the drug cocktails; other Members have already said what they are. There are 27 drugs that may be used to spike drinks; the main problem is that many of those drugs are tasteless and colourless, and even those with taste and colour may be masked by putting them in a strong cocktail, so that in many cases the victim is none the wiser.

That is highlighted consistently through the medium of TV advertisements and, to some extent, through soap operas. In recent years, the publicity around date-rape drugs has been stronger. I do not watch soap operas, but my wife does, and she tells me that those issues have been addressed in 'Emmerdale' and, for the younger audience, in 'Hollyoaks'. I am reliably informed by the girls in my office that the soaps have given advice in a manner that also shows the dangers of the abuse of alcohol in those situations, as well as offering practical advice such as ensuring that your journey is pre-planned and that others know where you are, what you are doing and when you are going home.

That is backed up in certain schools where teachers are taking the time in class to explain the dangers and signals of alcohol overuse and drug use. Pupils are also given invaluable advice, such as to stay in groups. In 2006 in Northern Ireland, some 40 cases were reported to the Roofie Foundation, although it must be pointed out that the majority of women and men who are sexually attacked do not tell anyone, especially if they feel somewhat to blame, as is the case with many girls.

It has been shown that of those who have rung the helpline, only 10% to 15% will inform the police and take the case further, which also gives cause for worry and concern. The Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre estimates that up to two women a week are raped using drugs in Northern Ireland. The number of times that drugs are used to attack girls is unquantifiable. It is estimated that in the UK some 754,000 women over the age the 16 have been the victim of drug-related sexual assault. It is unclear how many of those happen in Northern Ireland.

There are prevention kits; one gadget, referred to as a Spika Stoppa, seals a bottle to allow liquid to come out through a straw but nothing to go back in. I ask the Minister to implement a push of that type of gadget into clubs, to ensure that the clubs work alongside the Minister so that people are protected and are drinking sensibly.

I have read conflicting opinions about the usefulness and accuracy of the drug-testing kits on the market. However, research suggests that the drink-tester used by the police was much more accurate than other detectors. Therefore, the Minister should implement research to determine the effectiveness of the police test and, if necessary, introduce such testers into clubs and bars as a priority.

I am not so naive that I would believe that tests alone will stop all attacks. A combination of tests and publicity to raise awareness among people of all ages, which is not just directed at young people, is needed. It has been shown that those who are most at risk include women who are at house parties, not necessarily clubs, and who are in their thirties. Such an awareness and advice campaign must be combined with a concerted effort by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide any device that would lessen the risk. I urge Members to support the proposal.

Mr G Robinson: It is a strange experience to debate the need for such kits, which can detect drugs that leave those who are unfortunate enough to take them so physically incapable that assaults of such heinous proportions can occur. I condemn outright the perpetrators of such cowardly attacks.

Although there is no question of the necessity to legislate to outlaw some of those substances, it is also sensible to make people aware of the problem of so-called date rape. Date rape is rape — it as simple as that. One case is no different from the other when it comes to the trauma that it causes the victim. Society must get the message, loud and clear, that that is not acceptable. Some people may wonder why the Assembly is discussing the issue. If anyone thinks that, he or she should speak to a rape victim, who may have been drugged as well. It is also worth noting that although rape is usually considered to be a crime against women, men can also be victims.

Although prevention kits are a useful tool in tackling that crime, some research has not been supportive of them. The 2005 'Drink-spiking Report' by Liverpool John Moores University into the effectiveness of the proposed kits found that they cannot be relied upon. Research was conducted for the study under laboratory conditions. That makes the results even more frightening. If the kits show poor reliability under ideal conditions, it casts doubt on their effectiveness in the settings in which they are designed to be used. That does not mean that they should not be used: however, any kit's

usefulness must be evaluated before it is issued to ensure that it serves the purpose for which it is designed.

Advice on people's drinking habits should also be more firmly emphasised and available. I appreciate that young people, in particular, consider those who offer such advice to be killjoys and fail to understand that there is genuine concern for their personal well-being and safety. If people must drink, they should be aware that they are more susceptible to crimes such as rape.

Research that was published by the University of Ulster in October 2007 indicates that alcohol, either alone or combined with prescription drugs, is a major factor in assaults. The study also found that during the six-year period that it covered, there were no cases of the use of GHB, Rohypnol and ketamine in toxicology reports. That is why a multi-stranded approach should be employed to tackle such despicable crimes. Certainly, well-tested and reliable detector kits should be made available. However, the message must be put across that alcohol is a major factor in many rape cases. I urge young people and others to be as vigilant as possible when out socialising in nightclubs and pubs — particularly at this time of the year — so that that heinous crime can be detected and eradicated. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): At the outset, I want to make it clear that anyone who spikes another person's drink or food behaves in a wholly unacceptable and disgraceful way. That behaviour must not be tolerated by society, especially when it is used to take advantage of someone and to commit a serious sexual assault, such as rape.

Spiking someone's food or drink is a crime and a breach of trust that may affect the victim's mental health and well-being for the rest of that person's life. Drink-spiking and the use of date-rape drugs should be everyone's concern. I thank the two Sinn Féin Members who raised the issue for giving the Assembly the opportunity to discuss it in more detail. It is a complex subject. The Assembly must ensure that any action that is taken by Government is effective and worthwhile.

3.00 pm

Although spiking drinks can take place for a range of reasons, including a so-called prank that is played on friends, it is usually seen as an attempt to take sexual advantage of someone. The relatively new term "date rape" is appalling, and is one of which modern society should be ashamed. The term refers to rape, or non-consensual sexual activity, between people who are known to each other, and it can be either spontaneous or premeditated. In some cases, date-rape drugs are slipped into food or drink in order to remove a person's resistance or render him or her unconscious, so that the perpetrator can assault his or her victim. Those drugs,

whether they be gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB), ketamine, Rohypnol or alcohol, can often affect the victim's memory of the event and make it difficult to prosecute the perpetrator.

Police in Northern Ireland do not record statistics for rapes that are alleged to have been drug-assisted. There is anecdotal information that levels of drink-spiking have increased. However, when one considers the nature of the subject, it is extremely difficult to get any measure of the current level of drink-spiking, or to determine whether it is a growing trend. Therefore, it is important that we make the best assessment of the degree to which it is a problem.

A UK study found that 2% of a total of 1,014 rape victims actually had their drinks spiked. Most victims of that type of sexual assault go to the police, or for a medical evaluation, hours after the incident has occurred and, usually, after waking up the next morning. A time lapse of 10 to 12 hours is common. By that point, in many cases, evidence of drugging may be gone. In other cases, the incident may not be reported at all.

However, the lack of evidence of the level of drink-spiking does not mean that there are not significant risks, or that we should not be taking it seriously. I take the issue very seriously, and it is one that my Department has been addressing over many years. I am conscious that a lot of time, energy and money is being spent in making Northern Ireland's towns and city centres safe for entertainment and socialising. It is vital that all our citizens, male and female, are able to go out and enjoy themselves safely.

Since 2000, my Department has funded the Health Promotion Agency to develop and roll out information campaigns on drink-spiking. A series of high-profile posters have been designed and located in prominent places in bars and clubs throughout Northern Ireland. When those posters were being designed, the experiences and views of the target group — the young people who go to pubs and clubs — were taken on board. Two posters deal specifically with keeping safe. One carries the strapline, "Never leave your drink unattended", and a more recent poster, which specifically targets women, highlights how excessive use of alcohol or drugs can make a person particularly vulnerable.

Both campaigns encourage people to look after one another and watch over each other's drinks. Evaluations of the campaigns have been very promising, and the message that one should not leave drinks unattended has been picked up by the young adults who were surveyed as part of the evaluation.

My impression is that young adults are, in general, aware of the risks and that most take the necessary precautions. The message, "Never leave your drink unattended" strikes a chord among the generation who frequent pubs and clubs. Excessive use of alcohol leaves

people in the position in which they are unable to protect their drinks. Apart from any concerns about drugs, there is increasing concern that spiking drinks with additional alcohol is becoming a more significant problem.

Excessive alcohol consumption by males and females makes them more vulnerable to unwanted attentions and can also alter their ability to make decisions. Research by the University of Ulster, which examined alleged sexual assaults over the period 1995 to 2005, concluded that young women in Northern Ireland are leaving themselves vulnerable to rape or serious sexual assault because of their binge drinking. The research findings showed that the average alcohol level at the time of an alleged assault was almost three times that of the drink-driving limit. The study also failed to find any trace of specific date-rape drugs such as GHB, Rohypnol or ketamine. However, the report did caution that delays in reporting alleged assaults and in taking samples of bodily fluids, could mean that such drugs might no longer be detected.

We must acknowledge that excessive alcohol consumption increases a person's tendency to take risks and to put themselves at greater risk from others.

To that end, further to the successful public-awareness campaign, we are also working with the drinks industry, particularly on efforts to encourage bar staff to refuse to serve alcohol to someone who has clearly already had enough. My Department is implementing the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, and the strategy's aim is to reduce the level of alcohol- and drug-related harm. It also focuses on young people's drinking.

It is important to note that 70% of all adults in Northern Ireland drink: 75% of men and 67% of women. Some 43% of male drinkers and 33% of female drinkers currently binge-drink, and those figures increase to 63% of males and 50% of females among 18-year-olds to 29-year-olds. Therefore, one of the Department's key focuses is on reducing excessive alcohol consumption. Binge drinking carries with it a range of risks, which is why we have undertaken a regional public-information campaign to tackle it.

Mr Shannon mentioned how times have changed. Over the past generation, the range of alcoholic products and the number of outlets that sell alcohol have grown dramatically, yet the relative cost of alcohol has decreased dramatically. Those factors, combined with powerful advertising campaigns for alcoholic drinks, mean that we, as a society, are drinking much more.

I am aware that several date-rape prevention products are on the market, and I understand the strength of feeling that is out there. However, I must also point out that there is a lack of evidence on their performance. In June 2005, Liverpool John Moores University's centre for public health published its 'Drink-spiking Report'. Two date-rape prevention products were assessed:

Drink Detective, which costs £2.95, and Drink Guard. The report stated:

“Neither testing kit was consistently successful.”

It went on to say that both kits failed to detect the presence of drugs on occasions, and that they also returned false positives when no drug was present. The report concluded:

“Based on these findings we do not believe that either Drink Detective or Drink Guard should be recommended for use.”

Therein lies the problem, which is to find a drinks-testing product that works. There are clearly serious ramifications if a test shows that a drink has been tampered with when it has not been, or if it shows that a drink has not been tampered with when it has been. That could lead to serious problems, so that key hurdle must be overcome if we are to provide safe testing kits.

The other problem is that the overwhelming drug of choice for spiking drinks is alcohol. Bottle stoppers were also mentioned. They are available and have been successful. However, most people drink out of glasses rather than bottles, and that makes preventing drinks being spiked more difficult.

Sue Ramsey mentioned the need to gather relevant bodies together, and that is important. We are working on that; in fact, the regional alcohol and drug forum will meet next week. That body is an important vehicle, and it can be effective, as can the binge drinking advisory group.

The issue is that people drink too much. The drinks industry is very powerful, so, in order to address the problem, we must attempt to work with the industry and to educate individuals about the damage that excessive alcohol consumption causes. Alcohol misuse has serious consequences, and the heavy price of excessive alcohol consumption is borne by the Health Service and society. Figures show that alcohol misuse resulted in 246 deaths in 2005, and it results in around 7,000 admissions each year to acute hospitals. I take seriously the problem of alcohol misuse. I am always looking for ways in which to move forward, and drinks-testing kits may be part of a solution, if we can find products that are absolutely effective.

However, education, advertising, the promotion of better and healthier lifestyles and the proper and sensible use of alcohol will offer a more productive way forward for the Health Service.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleague Sue Ramsey for opening the debate. Many relevant points have been made, and I hope that I will be able to cover all of them.

The addition of alcohol or drugs to someone's drink in order to render them semi-conscious and facilitate rape or sexual assault is commonly known as drink-spiking. It has become an increasingly worrying trend in recent years. Very often, the unsuspecting victim

will not be aware until it is too late that his or her drink has been spiked. Incapacity may be mistaken for drunkenness, which allows the predator who spiked the drink to go unchallenged when he or she leaves with the individual concerned.

I welcome the suggestion made by a Member that training of bar staff, particularly doormen, might help to address the situation. The most commonly used drugs in drink-spiking incidents are GHB and ketamine, but alcohol is often added to non-alcoholic drinks. Some Members mentioned people going into bars, but not everyone who goes into a bar takes an alcoholic drink. It is important to remember that some people go in for a soft drink, which can often be spiked with an alcoholic drink.

The long-term devastating effects of rape and sexual assault are well documented. People must be aware of the dangers of drink-spiking, and measures must be put in place to protect them. Mr Buchanan said that a joined-up approach was required to move things forward. His colleague Mr George Robinson pointed out that men, as well as women, can be victims of drug-related rape. Those are important points.

Mr Shannon talked about the perpetrators; another Member criticised the sentences handed down to people convicted of such criminal offences, and said that we should send out a clear message. I concur with that sentiment; sentences for convicted rapists are not stiff enough.

We ask today that Government play their part in this campaign, and take the lead in providing drink-spiking prevention kits, free of charge. Some Members have asked for a joined-up approach — that the vintner's associations and the owners of bars and nightclubs should take responsibility to ensure that their customers are protected. Although drink-spiking prevention kits can help to detect whether something has been added to a drink, they are not meant to be used as protection against drink-spiking. People must take their own preventative measures.

Several Members mentioned binge drinking. Mrs Kelly and the Minister pointed out that it is not always perceived as being as big a problem as drugs misuse. Although binge drinking is a problem, the debate today concerns drink-spiking and the related use of alcohol and drugs. Other Members have made valid points about educating young people, and the Minister mentioned his Department's drugs and alcohol strategies. It is important that those campaigns continue, and that people are educated about the dangers of binge drinking.

Ms Ramsey pointed out that the kits that we ask for are prevention kits. They should provide information on preventative measures as well as practical items. Several Members mentioned the plug that is on sale for 50p from some of the drug and alcohol misuse centres. Many young people who drink in bars use that plug,

which fits on the top of the bottle so that the contents can be drunk only through a straw.

3.15 pm

A project in England allows people who feel that they, or a friend, have had a drink spiked to text the number of an organisation that can give them access to help straight away. That might be another initiative that we could consider introducing.

People should never leave their drinks unattended, and if people need to go somewhere without their drinks, they should ensure that someone that they trust watches them until they return. If that is not possible, the drinks should be discarded. People should not let a stranger buy them a drink, and they should be watchful of the person who is serving the drinks because there have been cases in which drinks have been spiked by the person who was serving behind the bar.

Although things can be done to prevent drinks from being spiked, people may still be at risk. Going out with other people and watching out for one another can help. Last year, an initiative in west Belfast encouraged women to travel home together and to ensure that their friends were dropped off at their front doors. Such small initiatives are preventative measures that people can take.

Other Members said that particular attention must be paid at Christmas. At that time of year, people tend to let their guard down and relax more. Simple steps can be followed. If someone is behaving out of character and seems to be really out of it, friends should not simply assume that the person is drunk, as they may need immediate medical assistance.

The use of legal and illegal drugs to spike drinks is a big problem because they are so readily available in local communities. The problems associated with ketamine have been publicised in recent weeks. It is important to point out that most people who are involved in community-drugs programmes will say that drugs are more widely available now than they were a year ago.

In summary, the points that were made during the debate were positive, particularly the call for joined-up thinking on this issue. That means that all citizens, male or female, have the right to be safe. The poster campaign that the Minister mentioned, which is targeted particularly at young people, has been evaluated as being highly beneficial.

I thank all Members for taking part in the debate, and I am glad that the motion seems to have cross-party support, and perhaps the full support of the Assembly. I hope that the motion is passed. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in view of the increase in ‘spiking’ of drinks, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide for date rape prevention kits to be made available free of charge.

Royal Commission — United Kingdom

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

Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

Mr Savage: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes, following devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, that a Royal Commission should be appointed to review the steps that need to be taken to maintain the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

The Ulster Unionist Party’s election manifesto of 2007 stated that our party was:

“Advocating a Royal Commission to strengthen the Union — and build the partnership between Westminster and the devolved Administrations.”

Along with my party, I am interested — if not concerned — about the constitutional composition of the United Kingdom. It is deeply concerning that every devolved Government in the United Kingdom is headed by nationalists of some type. In Wales, Plaid Cymru is in coalition with Labour. In Scotland, the SNP forms a minority Government, and in Northern Ireland, the Executive comprise an uneasy coalition of Ulster nationalists and Irish nationalists.

For that reason, the Ulster Unionist Party wants to ensure the continuance of the Union, which lies at the core of being a unionist. One of our central aims is to promote, strengthen and maintain the Union.

Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party represent the greatest threat to the maintenance of the United Kingdom. The SNP’s website has a section dedicated to independence, in which it is argued that it is time for the Scottish Parliament to have:

“full control over Scottish affairs and the right to decide when to share power with others.”

The SNP believes that despite devolution, the “new level of democracy” is “limited”, and that restricts how much can be achieved for the people of Scotland. The following quote from the SNP is most worrying:

“The 300-year old Union is no longer fit for purpose. It was never designed for the 21st century world. It is well past its sell by date and is holding Scotland back.”

That displays an interesting logic. Many academics and scholars consider that the constitution of the United States is not fit for purpose: it is old, vague, and, in some

parts, oblique. However, there are few, if any, calls to scrap the US constitution.

In August 2007, a White Paper entitled 'Choosing Scotland's Future: A National Conversation: Independence and Responsibility in the Modern World.' was published. The following comment from an Irish home ruler Charles Stewart Parnell appears at the start of the document:

"No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further'".

The summary of the section entitled —

Mr Moutray: Will the Member give way?

Mr Savage: No, I will not. There will be plenty of time for the Member to speak when I have finished.

The summary of the section entitled: "Extending Scottish devolution" states:

"Significant powers are currently reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament and the United Kingdom Government. Further devolution in these important areas would allow the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government to take their own decisions on these issues in the interests of Scotland and reflecting the views of the people of Scotland. In some areas, further devolution could also provide greater coherence in decision-making and democratic accountability for delivery of policy."

The document outlines a variety of areas to which it is hoped that devolution can be extended, examples of which include taxation and spending responsibilities; anti-terrorism legislation; legislation on firearms; misuse of drugs; the level of pension for the older population; the regulation of the major health professions; the taxation of tobacco and alcohol; and the Civil Service in Scotland.

That list clearly indicates the intention of the SNP's Administration to attempt to use devolution to weaken the Union. In last night's 'Belfast Telegraph', Alex Salmond said:

"When Scotland becomes independent, England will lose its surly lodger and gain a good neighbour."

I urge Members to look up the definition of "surlly".

On 3 July 2007, the Westminster Government published a Green Paper entitled 'The Governance of Britain', which sought to address two basic questions: how to hold to account those in power, and how to uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen. Paragraph 143 states:

"Devolution does not cede ultimate sovereignty. The decisions Parliament takes have consequences for all the people of our nation. The great strength of our constitution is its effectiveness. It can accommodate difference and rough edges in support of wider goals of national unity, affiliation to the institutions of the state and the service of those institutions to the public."

'The Governance of Britain' Green Paper restates the supremacy and sovereignty of Parliament. However, it fails to address adequately the relationship between

Westminster and the devolved Administrations. For that reason, a Royal Commission should be appointed.

Gordon Brown has gone on record as saying:

"There is a debate to be had about the future of the United Kingdom."

However, when one considers the arguments, family ties, economic connections, shared values and history of our relationship, which has lasted for over 300 years, people will decide that we are stronger together and weaker apart: united we stand, divided we fall; what we have, we hold. I have one simple message for those who wish to destroy and dismantle our most excellent union: no surrender to the break-up of the United Kingdom. I commend the motion to the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

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

"notes the proposal within the Government Green Paper, 'The Governance of Britain', to develop a British statement of values; welcomes the strong emphasis of the Executive, reinforced within the draft Programme for Government, to fortify links in the East-West dimension between Northern Ireland and Great Britain; and believes, following devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, that a Royal Commission should be appointed to review the steps that need to be taken to promote further the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom."

I hope that Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches agree that the amendment enhances the motion.

I welcome this opportunity — indeed, any opportunity — to underscore the benefits of the Union. Unless Members are in any doubt, I am an avowed unionist and not an Ulster nationalist, whatever that may be. If my colleagues and I stand charged of trying to seek the best possible deal for Northern Ireland within the Union, we are guilty of that charge but not of any other silly titles that people might level at us.

Like many of a unionist persuasion, I became involved in active politics partly because of a perceived threat to the very existence of the Union. For me, it was the Belfast Agreement. For others, it was the Anglo-Irish Agreement or even the Sunningdale Agreement. Perhaps some go further back, but I do not think that there is anyone on these Benches who can quite remember the Ulster Covenant, although there may be some Members who could surprise us.

For half a century or more, unionists have often had cause to believe that the Union's days were numbered, and, at times, who could blame them? They were under the cosh of terrorism, betrayed by their Government and let down by their leaders. Fortunately, those days are gone. I hope that the intention of the Ulster Unionist Party in bringing the motion to the Floor is to celebrate the Union and see a way in which it can endure. It is worth celebrating, and the fact that the retention of the

Union enjoys such widespread support across our community must be celebrated.

The motion refers to maintaining the Union in a manner that suggested that there was a threat to it. At times during the proposer's speech, I felt that I had been transported to Edinburgh. Now that the IRA has been defeated and Irish republicanism is in its weakest state in living memory, beaten on both sides of the Irish border, we should not start to panic about the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru.

Now is not the time for defeatists and doom merchants, although I suspect that some may still exist. I do not wish to go too far down this route, but it is laughable that the Ulster Unionist Party seeks to portray itself as some sort of steadfast defender of the Union, when it has such an appalling track record.

Between 1998 and 2003, the Union was undermined, symbolically and substantively, by the acquiescence of the Ulster Unionist Party. The Union flag was removed from public buildings, the name and symbols of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were ditched, good old-fashioned British democracy was tainted by the presence of terrorist representatives in our Government and unaccountable all-Ireland institutions were established.

I am happy to say that those dark, gloomy days when the Union was under threat are long gone, and I am happy to welcome the Ulster Unionist Party in its refound support for the Union. Welcome back, boys. It is good to have you back.

Support for the Union is strong. A BBC 'Hearts and Minds' survey conducted in November 2006 found that 82% of unionists and almost 40% of nationalists believed that Northern Ireland would still be part of the United Kingdom in 2020. That level of support was the highest recorded to the same question since 1998.

3.30 pm

It is no coincidence that that huge level of belief in the Union was secured during the DUP's tenure as the leader of unionism; contrasting with the low level of 61% in May 2000 in the midst of the Trimble and Empey era. The figures were backed up by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in June, which showed that 54% of all people in Northern Ireland supported the Union and only 30% preferred a united Ireland.

Even 22% of Catholics surveyed — over one in five — favoured the retention of the constitutional link between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is little wonder that the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs was recently forced to admit that the constitutional question has been parked.

The Sinn Féin mantra of having a united Ireland by 2016 completely lacks credibility. Today, nine years from that target date, Sinn Féin representatives sit in Stormont,

exercise British power in part of the United Kingdom's political system and support the Police Service of Northern Ireland and British justice — that is what Gerry McHugh would say. A united Ireland is a pipe dream, and support for the Union will get stronger —

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

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

"that the democratic requirements of the principle of consent will determine any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland; believes in the deepening of relationships between the people of these islands; encourages policy engagement and joint actions among the different administrations in these islands, and on this island; and calls for the significant expansion of North-South areas of co-operation and joint implementation."

Unlike the previous Member who spoke, I do not intend to rubbish the views of anyone who expresses their opinions in the debate — these matters are too important and too sensitive, and people hold too many deep values for those sorts of comments to be made in any speech in this Chamber.

Although the SDLP opposes the motion, it is not diminishing the fact that people who value the Union have reasons to assess what it means to them. The old certainties of the Union — the British empire, the monarchy, and Westminster rule in all parts of what is referred to as the United Kingdom — have changed utterly. The British empire has gone, the monarchy has changed, and one Parliament is no longer responsible for four jurisdictions.

The SDLP acknowledges that there may be reasons why those who value the Union want an assessment of what it means. As George Savage said, given the rise of the SNP, the presence of Welsh nationalists in the Welsh Government, and the fact that a constitutional position has now been agreed for the North, there may be more fundamental changes to the nature of the Union.

The SDLP has three reasons for opposing the motion. First, there cannot be debates about the future of the Union or the future unity of Ireland — both must be part of the same debate. There cannot be a debate that is narrowly defined by either the Union or Irish unity. If we are going to have a debate, let it cover all the issues that people have.

Secondly, it must be recognised where politics now resides. Politics in the North has moved on from only being about the Union: it is now about the three sets of relationships that historically made up our political conflict and that now are the basis of political agreement; the relationships between North and South, Britain and Ireland, and between the communities in the North. I say to the proposers of the motion and amendment No 1 that anything that does not address the fact that that is the nature of our past conflict, and will consequently

be part of the future political solution, disregards something that is very important.

Thirdly, any motion that discusses the Union but does not address the reality of politics that Members practice every day in the Chamber does a disservice to the debate in general. Only yesterday, the Minister of Finance and Personnel outlined proposals for European funding, in the border counties in the South and the west of Scotland as well as in the North. Every week, motions are proposed and reports are made about the British-Irish Council, and sectoral meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. Anything that disregards how Members practice everyday politics does a disservice to the issues regarding the future of the Union that the proposers of the motion and amendment No 1 want to discuss.

Therefore, the SDLP will oppose the motion. There are also many good reasons why Members should support the SDLP amendment: it recognises the new constitutional situation in the North, the diverse relationships that exist between these islands and the real politics that involve all the parties in the Chamber. The SDLP amendment touches all the necessary bases for a proper, informed and embracing debate with prejudice to nobody in respect of the future of the Union or the future of Irish unity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise to Simon Hamilton for cutting him short: I assure him that it was not political. Likewise, Alex Attwood cut himself short. Each Member should have been allowed 10 minutes to propose their amendments. *[Interruption.]*

I am not sure how that can be interpreted, but I call Martina Anderson.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt in éadan an rúin seo agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do leasú an SDLP. I apologise to the House for being late.

I do not support the motion, and I speak in support of the SDLP amendment. No one in the Chamber will be surprised to hear that as a republican Member of the Assembly who is committed to the constitutional reunification of Ireland — North and South — I do not support the motion calling for a Royal Commission to outline the steps to maintain what some call “the Union”.

The dislocation of the United Kingdom has been a slow but steady process since its inception. Indeed, the Union has always been a concept under stress. The 1801 Act of Union was challenged by the second rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1803. That stimulated successive insurrections — all of which had debilitating political consequences for Ireland’s part in any union with Britain. I remind Members that they would not be sitting in a democratic Assembly if it were not intrinsically grafted to an all-Ireland executive body. Therefore the notion that the Six

Counties is part of some insular set-up with Britain that can be supported by a Royal Commission is a forlorn hope, and it is disconnected from reality.

Although the Six Counties remain constitutionally linked to the island of Britain politically, socially, infrastructurally and economically, it is becoming increasingly integrated with the rest of this island — and that is a fact. It is doing so for the best of reasons: for the common good and for the mutual benefits of all our people. For the first time since the Act of Union of 1801, we are an island united in how we govern ourselves, through agreed and evolving structures outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, with strand two mapping out how we can pool sovereignty for the benefits of the whole island.

On the island of Britain, the Union is dislocating through the transfer of powers to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The unitary state in Britain is history: it is politically dead. Any developments in Britain regarding the Union are firmly beyond the control of anyone in this Assembly. The Scottish Labour Party, the Welsh Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Conservative Party and the Welsh Conservative Party agree on one thing: to stay politically relevant in their respective local assemblies, they must advocate more autonomy. The process will not stand still or be hindered. The destination of the process of dislocation on the island of Britain does not lie with a desperate collection of politicians in a Royal Commission, but with the sovereign will of the people of Scotland, Wales and, increasingly, the people of England — many of whom are pushing for some form of English assembly.

The Welsh Assembly now supports the finding of the Richard Commission, which calls for that Assembly to have powers equivalent to those of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has outlined the parameters for a national conversation on Scotland’s future, and there are only two real areas on the table for debate: a significant increase in the powers of the Scottish Parliament, and national independence.

Standing still is not an option. Indeed, even the recent Steel Commission, which examined fiscal practices across the EU, recommended, among other things, a form of fiscal federalism that would see the powers of the Scottish Parliament increase, and the retention of some of its own taxes. The Scottish and Welsh people are moving on, and so should we.

Rather than doing a King Canute, our time in this Assembly would be better served promoting and shaping new emerging relationships through the designated structures outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, which would be to the mutual benefit of all concerned.

Finally, I do not like to stand in this Chamber without saying the words “stand up for Derry”.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: On these occasions, I sometimes feel as though we are intruding in a private squabble, and I wonder whether some of my colleagues pay the slightest attention to anything that goes on outside this House. Do they actually talk to anyone outside Stormont? Do they speak to constituents, or, even better, non-political friends and neighbours, or listen to 'The Steven Nolan Show', or 'Talkback'? When I see motions such as the one on the Order Paper, I wonder whether some Members are living in a fantasy world.

The people to whom I talk want to see us get down to real business, and they are fed up with seeing politicians engage in an endless round of sectarian squabbling for the sake of a few seconds' coverage on the evening news. Instead, they would like to see us tackle issues such as the terrible toll of road deaths in this country, or developing the type of economy that we need to survive in a twenty-first century of brutal global competition, or the fact that our inability to implement European environmental rules means that we are still dumping raw sewage into the sea.

The motion will do absolutely nothing to make Northern Ireland a better society. It is simply an attempt by the right wing of the Ulster Unionist Party to outdo the DUP in the silly game of "who leads unionism?". The motion will do nothing except divide the House on an issue over which the Assembly has absolutely no power — an issue to which no one outside Northern Ireland will pay the slightest bit of notice.

As a believer in free speech, I absolutely support the Ulster Unionist Party's right to bring business to the Chamber. If it makes them look foolish, I should probably welcome it, but I really wish we were spending our time talking about something useful. I wonder whether they have even thought through the implications of the scheme that they are proposing. Of the three devolved Governments in operation in the UK, the one in Scotland is entirely nationalist, the one in Wales is half nationalist, and, at the danger of stating the obvious, the one here is also half nationalist.

I can just imagine the nature of the input from the nationalist half of this Assembly if Mr Adams and his party found themselves able to contribute to such a commission. What do the proposers of the motion think that Alex Salmond or Ieuan Wyn Jones would say to a Royal Commission? Do they think that a Royal Commission would take evidence only from people with whom the UUP agrees?

The world has changed fundamentally over the past decade, as indeed has the nature of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party still seems to struggle with that reality, and, with their amendment, the DUP seems to be determined to give themselves a pat on the back, and then propose

exactly the same action. The SDLP amendment appears worthy, and does not say anything that the Alliance Party would take major issue with, but given that the thrust of the motion is to set up a Royal Commission to further promote the unity of the United Kingdom, what is the connection between the original motion and the SDLP amendment? It does not even mention a Royal Commission.

Mr Burnside: The Member appears to be in favour of the SDLP amendment, and against the original motion from the Ulster Unionist Party, and the DUP's amendment. I thought that the Alliance Party supported the principle of consent of the people of Northern Ireland, who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. Is it now leaning towards becoming a nationalist party?

3.45 pm

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for his contribution. I did not realise that he had read the rest of my speech.

The motion is another example of unionist insecurity to try to obtain yet another assurance that is now being proposed by both unionist parties. The second amendment seeks to emphasise the significant expansion of the North/South dimension, but it does at least emphasise that the principle of consent will determine the future status of Northern Ireland. We are really at the point at which the SDLP can acknowledge that. However, once again, the unionists display their lack of faith in the many confirmations given by other interested bodies that their Britishness is secure — unless the population votes otherwise.

This debate is an example of how to waste valuable Assembly time that we can ill afford to lose. The Alliance Party will oppose both of the amendments and the motion.

Mr Simpson: It is regrettable that Alex Attwood was cut off in his prime. However, we should be grateful for small mercies when we receive them. Mr Savage — one of the proposers of the motion — will be glad and will go home to Upper Bann saying that he is now a right-winger. George will be dancing the whole road home.

I welcome any debate that will forge greater links with the United Kingdom. Despite the comments from the Sinn Féin Members, they are living in a fantasy world. However, only time will tell exactly what will take place.

The DUP amendment incorporates all that is best in the original motion, including the call for the establishment of a Royal Commission. However, our amendment goes further than the motion. It makes considerable improvements to the motion and takes greater account of where the United Kingdom is on political and constitutional issues than the original UUP motion. The motion restricts its call for a Royal Commission:

"to review the steps that need to be taken to maintain the unity of ... the United Kingdom."

The DUP amendment goes way beyond that admirable goal. It calls for the appointment of such a Royal Commission:

“to review the steps that need to be taken to promote further the unity”

of that United Kingdom. On that fact alone, the amendment ought to command widespread support. I ask those Members who tabled the motion to fall in behind the DUP amendment. Our amendment also refers to the commitments made in the draft Programme for Government, and it is very plain as regards east-west relationships. The draft Programme for Government refers to “mutually beneficial and practical co-operation”. That is a good principle that ensures that any arrangement should be beneficial to Northern Ireland. However, it also takes account of our ongoing relationships elsewhere. I congratulate the Executive for committing themselves to benefiting the United Kingdom as a whole.

Our amendment takes greater account of where the UK currently stands on political and constitutional issues than the Ulster Unionist Party motion. Our amendment refers to Government proposals to develop a British statement of values. Those proposals are designed to work with the British public to develop a British statement of values that will set out the ideals and principles that bind us together as a nation. Surely the DUP amendment gives far more expression to the hoped-for outcome of those who tabled the motion.

I believe that I have shown why amendment No 1 deserves support, and much of what I have said exposes the fact that amendment No 2 completely ignores the idea that any east-west relationship could be beneficial to Northern Ireland. Instead, amendment No 2 is about outdated ideology. Only the SDLP can say why it wraps itself in political notions that are well past their sell-by date.

I believe that amendment No 1 is worthy of the support of all people of goodwill in the Chamber, and I commend it to the House.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt in éadan an rúin agus i bhfabhar an leasaithe.

Mr Simpson: That sounds painfully like the Six Counties?

Mr McElduff: The occupied Six Counties. I speak in opposition to the motion and in favour of amendment No 2, which was tabled by the SDLP.

The wording and substance of the motion bespeak a lack of self confidence on the part of the proposers — why introduce them at all? Do the proposers fear that the union with England is losing relevance in the minds of people day by day, which is what I believe? It would explain the defensive nature of the motion.

In recent times, the British Government have transferred significant powers to the Assembly, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, and that has been universally welcomed. Last March, the proposers even went to the electorate on a manifesto platform of reducing Westminster’s political powers in the North of Ireland and exercising greater local responsibility. The Royal Commission seems to be an anachronism — something that belongs to an imperialist notion of history — and that is enough to be saying on that matter.

A cursory reading of the UUP motion and the DUP amendment makes it clear to whoever is interested that unionist internal party-political rivalry is the main reason why today’s debate has been tabled. It might even explain the context for George Savage’s unusual, untypical and intemperate affirmation of no surrender — fair play to George, I am sure it will have helped someone in his townland.

One key flaw in the motion is the presumption that the political union between the Six Counties and the island of Britain is in the best interests of the people who live in the North of Ireland. Of course, many people do not believe that to be the case, but rather that their best interests lie in a future united Ireland of equals. The unionist community might enjoy more clout in a new Ireland than they do as a small minority in the so-called United Kingdom. It is agreed that people have been disadvantaged by the union — not least the farming community, to which the UK label has never been of benefit in this, or any, part of Ireland.

The motion ignores the North/South dimension, and Martina Anderson covered that point adequately in her contribution. In fact, the motion robs people in Scotland and Wales of their right to national self-determination by binding them to something to which they may not consent.

In the recent past, I was one of four MLAs who attended the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body in Oxford, England. Although it is wonderful that David Simpson says that he wants closer links with the UK, I found that English MPs, and members of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Channel Islands’ and Isle of Man’s legislatures cannot understand why the UUP and the DUP refuse to take up their membership of that body.

What hope do they have of winning the day via a Royal Commission, when they cannot work the mechanisms that already exist?

In conclusion, I wish to make a suggestion. There has been much talk about the future constitutional position of the North and whether it rests with the UK or with a new Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement makes provision for a referendum on our future constitutional status and for a border poll. I invite the unionist parties to consider conducting a border poll,

or a referendum on our future constitutional status, because they might discover that the results would challenge a whole lot of notions and assumptions. There is even a possibility that the unionist majority in the Six Counties might remain in the short term; but let us put that to the test. I look forward to a time — in the not-too-distant future — when the people of Ireland will take their rightful place among the nations of the world. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: The motion is terrible. It is a pity that it was proposed, because it will only do damage. The reaction of the parties is predictable — all the unionist parties support the motion or the DUP amendment; all the nationalist parties oppose it. Anyone watching from outside the House could have scripted every speech in advance. The DUP needs to show that it is more unionist than the Ulster Unionist Party, so it has proposed an amendment.

Mr Simpson: Change your speech. Let us see whether your speech will make a difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: It is hardly surprising that the House is relatively empty this afternoon; that is appropriate for a debate that is a fairly empty ritual.

What provoked the motion and the DUP amendment? Was it, as one Member remarked, confidence in the Union? Of course not. It was simply the opposite; concern about the fragility of the Union initiated the motion. It cannot be unconnected with the substantial interest in independence for Scotland that is being pursued by Mr Alex Salmond, who is a good friend of our First Minister.

What is wrong with the motion is that it represents the politics of old. It is a statement that comes entirely from one side of the community, pretending that the other side does not exist. It presents an orthodox unionist view as if it were the whole truth. Nobody reading the motion would think that we had forged, with the greatest difficulty, a way of conducting politics that embraces the whole community. That way of conducting politics achieved its summit in the Good Friday Agreement. Despite protestations to the contrary, that is essentially where we still stand.

The agreement is worth quoting from. The declaration of support says that:

“We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.”

The thinking behind the agreement is simply light years away from that of the proposers of the motion or the DUP amendment. The thinking behind the agreement is the only way forward for Government here.

I wish to refer to a couple of instances of “bad language” that I recently heard in the Assembly. First,

Members may have noticed the phrase “four-party mandatory coalition”, which was used by the Minister of Finance and Personnel once or twice.

Mr Simpson: Is that not right?

Mr O'Loan: I will comment on it. Members might notice in particular the use of the word “mandatory”. The coalition is not mandatory at all. The DUP, or any party, could have walked away and lived with the consequences of doing so. However, that is not the most important point. The only way in which we can do business here is together.

If we are going to do business together, and do it well to counter our very real social and economic problems, we cannot afford to do it begrudgingly. We have a choice. We can talk ourselves down, or we can talk ourselves up. In talking about working together as being “mandatory” we are talking ourselves down. We must embrace the common project — not damage it by careless use of language that causes real damage.

The other piece of language that I want to refer to happens quite often, but this struck me particularly just yesterday: the Minister of Health, Mr McGimpsey, was talking about cancer treatment, and he referred to creating the best facilities in the north-west, making much out of comparisons with the rest of the United Kingdom.

He then said that he would co-operate with the health system in the South. At first glance that may sound generous, and, as a unionist Minister, he probably thinks that it is. However, that policy is woefully inadequate when dealing with healthcare; and that point extrapolates to other policy areas.

4.00 pm

Who seriously thinks that, with a population of 1.7 million, we can do everything efficiently and in a world-class manner by ourselves? Co-operation is not adequate, and it is not the right and necessary language to be using. We need to free ourselves and organise our structures on a North-South basis when it makes sense to do so, as it often will, and on a British-Irish basis when it makes sense to do that.

The SDLP amendment is a model of common sense and fairness. That is why, in all probability, Members of this Assembly will reject it, or certainly will attempt to do so. If there was real political maturity in this Assembly or this society, the proposers of the motion would withdraw it, and the amendments would fall. However, I fear that I ask for too much.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In a spirit of reconciliation and atonement for my earlier mistake in cutting off the proposers of the two amendments, I have decided that those summing up the two amendments can have a little extra time to do so.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with my colleague Mr O'Loan that the stated positions of all of the parties were predictable, and conformed to what one may have expected.

As a result of the Good Friday Agreement — which all Members are now committed to, either directly or indirectly, officially or unofficially — the principle of consent is central to the constitutional position. Therefore, to use the words of Dermot Ahern, the constitutional position has been parked. That is a sensible decision.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [McClarty] in the Chair)

As my colleague Alex Attwood said in his speech, we now have a new type and period of politics. The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement — or Belfast Agreement, as some people prefer to call it — means that there is now a partnership arrangement in Northern Ireland, between North and South, and also between Ireland and Britain. The SDLP amendment simply reflects the realities of the Good Friday Agreement.

To some extent, I am disappointed with colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party who have tabled a motion that, if it is not contrary to the Good Friday Agreement, is certainly contrary to the spirit of that agreement. What we are trying to build — *[Interruption.]*

I know that George Savage disagrees with me, and I have every respect for him and his unionist opinions. Nonetheless, as a result of the Good Friday Agreement, we are now into new politics, which have led to partnership and will, I hope, ultimately lead to reconciliation in this society. I do not know, and no one can predict, where that will lead to. It could lead to a realignment of politics, not just in Ireland, but throughout these islands.

One should also remember that we are members of the European Union, which as a dynamic institution, has done much to reduce the tensions and the ancient and historic hostilities between Ireland and Britain.

The relationship between the Republic and Britain has never been better — it is much better than the relationship between Northern Ireland and Britain. That is something that unionists should examine.

We respect unionists' point of view; we respect unionism; we respect their right to feel proud of being unionists and to have an association with Britain. However, Northern Ireland is in an era of new politics, so let us work to create partnership and bonds between people in Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. We do not exclude the east-west relationship. Although we consider the North/South relationship to be extremely important, we do not seek to diminish that other relationship.

I am pleased that Barry McElduff and Martina Anderson expressed support for the SDLP amendment

and that the Alliance Party recognised its merits, although I am disappointed that its Members will not be supporting it. If that party sees value in the amendment and considers it sensible and consistent with the agreement, it should support it rather than opt out.

The speeches of Mr Simpson and Mr Hamilton were predictably nationalistic — British nationalistic — and there is nothing wrong with that. However, those Members miss the centrality of our new politics: to build relationships in our society, in the Assembly, in the Executive and between North and South. Emphasising such nationalism does injury to the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement: bringing about peace and reconciliation and harmony among all our people. Everyone recognises the great value of those objectives.

Extensive devolution in Britain has created new political relationships between the Scottish, the English and the Welsh. More power has been ceded to the National Assembly for Wales, and yet greater power will be given to it in the near future. The Welsh, the Scots — and, perhaps as a reaction to that, the English — are less interested in the unitary system that has existed in Britain for the past couple of centuries. Where the process will end no one knows; but those natural and important relationships are developing, and it is important for us in Northern Ireland to recognise them. By failing to do so, we are burying our heads in the sand. The peoples on the island of Britain are developing a new form of political relationship and a new form of constitution, and Members ought to recognise that.

I urge all Members to support amendment No 2, which is both reasonable and fair.

Lord Morrow: I have listened intently to Members' contributions. Sometimes, I am amazed at the position that certain people adopt in debates. Often, the phrase that we in Northern Ireland have "moved on" is used, inside and outside this House. That is correct: people have moved on. When are the politicians going to move on?

In fairness to Alban Maginness, he made a very strong case in support of the SDLP amendment. I would prefer it if he were to support the DUP amendment, because he has said some things with which I agree. He said that we have developed an arrangement in Northern Ireland that seems to be working, which is correct.

Surely, if we are going to develop a strategy and a way forward, we must do so on the basis of deciding where we are? Simply put, we are rooted in the United Kingdom. Barry McElduff may have a problem getting his head around that concept. However, the real problem for the Shinnars is that they must try to live with and justify — *[Interruption.]*

You have tried to free Ireland — as you call it — with the gun for over 35 years, and you have not done it yet. You will find that even the people that you claim

to represent are quite happy and content to live in this part of the United Kingdom. You have tried to make unionists feel that our cause was not legitimate, proper and correct. At least now we have an acknowledgement from the SDLP that there is nothing wrong with being a unionist, and that, indeed, one may be very proud to be a unionist. Therefore, we must be grateful for the small mercies that fall from these great tables from time to time.

Mr O'Loan takes great exception to the repeated references that were made to the four-party mandatory coalition in the House on Tuesday of last week. One can turn that one around and twist it over as many ways as one likes, but the fact remains that it is a mandatory coalition, and a four-party mandatory coalition. I see the SDLP shaking their heads — perhaps I can persuade them to shake them the other way. *[Laughter.]*

As unionists, we acknowledge that the only way in which we will achieve change is to move forward together. That is the reason for there being a mandatory coalition at the moment. That is not the best or the most satisfactory arrangement in the world, and I suspect that it may not even endure — but what do we want to do? We want to put something in place that will endure in the weeks, months and years that lie ahead.

That is not to say that the DUP will not be respectful of others who hold different opinions. We accept that there is a divide in Northern Ireland, but at least we have a Government in place that appear to have the popular support of the people of Northern Ireland. I wonder whether we can move forward from that position.

I do not often agree with Barry McElduff, but I ask the SDLP to withdraw its amendment, because it now acknowledges that we have a right to exist within the Union, and it says that it is not going to try to take that away from us.

Barry McElduff said of the Ulster Unionists that the motion's wording and substance bespoke a lack of self confidence on the part of the proposers.

For once, Barry, you are right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, I ask the Lord Morrow to refer all his remarks through the Chair. I have given you some latitude until now, but please direct your remarks through the Chair.

4.15 pm

Lord Morrow: I cannot think of a better way to do it, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much. I apologise for my not being up to the mark again.

That lack of confidence is why the DUP has tabled its amendment. Having considered the motion, my party says sincerely to the Ulster Unionists that it shows a lack of confidence. My party does not lack confidence in the way forward — absolutely not. The DUP believes

that the Union is secure. Even the Taoiseach says that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is settled for the long term.

Mr McElduff: A LeasCheann Comhairle, why, then, does the DUP not take up its membership of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body? That is a straightforward question. Why did the DUP not take up its place at the Body's thirty-fifth conference in plenary format that was held in Oxford a week ago? Might the DUP decide to take up its places on the Body by the time the plenary in Wexford takes place in April 2008?

Lord Morrow: Mr McElduff will be aware that the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body of which he speaks was a product of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was foisted over the heads of unionists. Does he recall that agreement? It is the reason that my party does not take up its places on that body. I hope that the Member will rest content.

The four parts of the United Kingdom were mentioned, as too was the danger that, under devolution, the United Kingdom will split up — and that Alex Salmond is one of the people who must be watched. I want to draw Members' attention to certain comments that Alex Salmond has made. In fairness to him, he is committed to restoring the ferry service between Ballycastle and Campbeltown. One might say that that is not a big deal. However, it is a big deal in that it shows that there is an affinity between Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the same Mr Salmond exclaimed that Scotland was free in 1993, and a separatist heaven in 2007. However, 1993 is long gone, and Scotland is still an integral part of the United Kingdom. Now 2007 is almost gone, and the utopia that Mr Salmond referred to has not arrived. Unless he gets his skates on within the next two or three weeks, it will not arrive in time. I know that much, folks.

I implore the Ulster Unionists to unite with the DUP on this matter. After such a reasonable and rational debate, I ask you, Mr Maginness, to withdraw the SDLP amendment and accept the status quo.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It may have been a senior moment, Lord Morrow, but you did not address your last remarks through the Chair.

Lord Morrow: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. Do I still have the Floor?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, for 10 seconds.

Lord Morrow: I will, therefore, apologise once more for my not being up to the mark. Again, I make an emphatic plea to the SDLP, which tabled the other amendment to the motion: now is the time for the House to unite steadfastly behind the DUP amendment in support of the United Kingdom. I suspect that Mr McElduff will not even bother to vote against my party's

amendment because he is aware that the cause for which his party fought for the past 40 years is a lost one.

Mr Burnside: I thank all Members, with one exception, for their contributions to the debate, which has taken place in a good mannered and courteous atmosphere. It would be a bad state of affairs if at Stormont — or in the Dáil, Scotland, Wales or the sovereign Parliament at Westminster — democratically elected Members could not call for a debate or find the time to discuss the relationships in these islands among the devolved assemblies of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The most intemperate remarks — which always seem to come from moderates — came from a friendly Alliance Member, who said that the debate was a waste of time. I do not regard it as a waste of time.

Without going into too much detail, I wish to comment on the two amendments. There is some reasonableness in the SDLP amendment, which recognises the principle of consent. The SDLP is a constitutional nationalist party that has recognised the principle of consent throughout its history. My party welcomes that. However, I object to the SDLP amendment because it concentrates too much on all-Ireland relationships.

We already have all-Ireland relationships, yet the SDLP now wants more of them. We have never had so many all-Ireland institutions that the Ulster Unionist Party supports and that the DUP completely supports, including two new all-Ireland institutions that were set up as a result of the St Andrews Agreement. Therefore, there are lots of institutions. On many occasions, those institutions are set up to appease nationalism's philosophical and political objectives rather than to aid real economic co-operation.

Unionists in the House will oppose the SDLP amendment, because it is too narrow and seeks to increase the number of North/South bodies rather than to increase relationships across these islands. The Ulster Unionist Party is more than happy to accept amendment No 1, which Democratic Unionist Party MLAs tabled. Their proposed amendment supports the main thrust of our motion to set up a Royal Commission, something which the SDLP amendment opposes.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the motion because to have consent from the regions of the United Kingdom is not enough. I remember when consent for maintaining the Union was not enough. Devolution was ill-thought out and badly timed. Different systems were used for Scotland and Wales, and different systems, techniques and procedures were used for Northern Ireland. Obviously, Northern Ireland had a violent rebellion going on for 35 years that turned the whole peace process into a political process. Things have changed

on the mainland. Some of those changes have been good for the Union and some have been bad for it.

I remember when, 15 or 20 years ago, the Labour Party — the current party of Government — was advocating the withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland. It is to be greatly welcomed, and it helps the confidence of the unionist people throughout the whole of the kingdom, that the Labour Party now recognises the principle of consent. Its old attitude on withdrawal from Northern Ireland has been replaced, and that has undermined the militant republican, Sinn Féin/IRA position of withdrawing the British presence from Northern Ireland.

The Conservative Party is changing, too. In some ways, I do not like the way in which that party is changing. However, it is evolving. Undoubtedly, the English Conservative Party is applying pressure, because it seeks the magic number of 255 Members in the British House of Commons. That is what it is after. It is not showing as much interest in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, which account for one seat, three seats and no seats, respectively, at Westminster. The Conservative Party is looking for a majority in the Commons. Internally, it is considering and debating whether England should have its own Parliament, be it in the form of a Grand Committee of the House of Commons or some other form. However, it is certainly considering the idea of England having its own Parliament. If that were to happen, Northern Ireland's MPs, Scotland's MPs and Wales's MPs would not vote on internal English matters. Therefore, changes are taking place in the Conservative Party that are changing and affecting the relationships between the three devolved institutions — one Parliament, two Assemblies — and the national Parliament and Government at Westminster.

The Liberal Democrats, who are a bit like the Alliance Party in that they cannot make up their minds about anything, have their views as well. They accept the principle of consent and that the United Kingdom will remain as long as its consenting parts — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — wish to remain part of it.

A Royal Commission, within tight terms of reference, is a constructive way in which to have a sensible debate on the future relationship between the two Assemblies, the one devolved Parliament in Scotland and the national Parliament.

Changes are also happening externally, to which our SDLP friend Alban Maginness has referred. The relationship between the United Kingdom's Government and the European Government is on the agenda again. Whether one calls it a constitution or a treaty rather depends on whether one comes from the centre, is a Euro-sceptic or is on the pro-European side of the debate. Great constitutional changes are continuing to

evolve in the United Kingdom, in the relationship between the UK and the European Union, and in our relationships with friends and neighbours, such as the Republic of Ireland.

Nationalism in England, Scotland and Wales poses a major threat to the Union. I like Alex Salmond and get on well with him. He was a great operator in Westminster at a time when I was in that House.

He is a dangerous, Machiavellian man. When Mr Salmond came here at the invitation of the First Minister, I said to him: "You are the most Machiavellian man I have ever met." He said to me, "David, Machiavelli was not nearly Machiavellian enough for me." He is trying to create the circumstances in Scotland that will get the English to end the Union. There are two sides to the Union, and my greatest fear is that circumstances may arise that will threaten it.

I find very worrying some of the comments that the First Minister, as a unionist and as leader of the Assembly, made about Alex Salmond's policies. Supporting Alex Salmond's call for a Queen of Scotland would end the unity of the United Kingdom that was established by the Act of Union in 1707. There would no longer be a Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We do not need another Mary Queen of Scots; we need a continuation of one Crown for the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have concerns about the views that our First Minister expressed, although I wish him all the best in his campaign in the United States to bring investment to Northern Ireland.

We must continue to examine whether, under the principle of consent, there are constructive and democratic ways to develop the institutional relationships between the devolved Parliament and Assemblies of the United Kingdom and the national Government. That relationship is under strain. If there was an economic recession across the entire United Kingdom, increasing English nationalism would put pressure on Scotland. The English would say, "Go away, Scotland; take your North Sea oil and have your own Parliament and your Queen of Scotland." Northern Ireland would not escape the effects of that sentiment. Our Members of Parliament who have devolved powers in Northern Ireland would not be treated differently from other Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom.

Therefore the Ulster Unionist Party recommends that there should be a Royal Commission, with tight terms of references, under the leadership of Gordon Brown. Now is the time to establish a Royal Commission because Gordon Brown is playing the pro-Union card of Britishness — even though he and his colleagues have ludicrous ideas about putting a dragon on the Union flag. However, they are considering the issue of

nationality. For Gordon Brown to continue to be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland he must be a unionist. It would be inconceivable for a British Prime Minister who comes from Scotland not to vote on most of the legislation that passes through our national Parliament and Government.

I want the pro-Union card played as often as possible in the interests of English and mainland politicians. Ulster unionists on this side of the Irish Sea should strengthen the relationship between Stormont, Scotland and Wales and the national sovereign Government at Westminster, and the best way to do that is by establishing a Royal Commission. I ask for as much support as possible for the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party will support amendment No 1, which strengthens our motion. In the cause of unionist unity —

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

Mr Burnside: — the Ulster Unionist Party will accept that amendment. It is a great pity that we cannot have wider support from the supposedly pro-consent Alliance Party.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I put the question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will proceed to put the question on the motion, as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd,

*Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey,
Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 36; Noes 44.

AYES

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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 Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,
Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, 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.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke,
Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton,
Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford,
Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin,
Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson,
Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells .*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr K Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 42.

AYES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert
Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott,
Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross,
Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey,
Mr Weir, Mr Wells .*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr K Robinson.

NOES

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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,
Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew,
Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,
Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey,
Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

Main Question accordingly negatived.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Provision of Traffic Attendants in Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak.

Mr O’Loan: I thank Members for their attendance, and I thank the Minister for Regional Development, who has responsibility for the provision of traffic attendants, for his presence. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the matter of traffic attendants in the north Antrim villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

I will give a bit of background on the three villages. I know that they are well known and well loved by many Members. Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun are traditionally Irish in character with attractive vernacular-type buildings and narrow streets. The villages are situated in the glens of Antrim and along the Causeway coastal route, which runs from Belfast right through to Derry.

In July we saw the installation of nearly 400 signs along the Causeway coastal route, signed off — if Members will excuse the pun — by the Minister responsible for tourism, Nigel Dodds, who said:

“The Causeway Coastal Route is one of the key driving routes in Northern Ireland and the new signage will encourage visitors to experience and enjoy all of the scenic attractions within the Causeway Coast and Glens region. The route will lead visitors to inland scenic areas, bringing increased visitor number and tourism revenue to a wider geographical area.”

My point here is to outline the importance of the main road through the three villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

On 30 October 2006, there was a transfer of enforcement powers from the police for most parking restrictions, including yellow lines, urban clearways, bus lanes, limited-waiting parking places and pay-and-display bays. NCP Ltd was appointed to carry out that enforcement on behalf of Roads Service.

In July 2007, I asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of traffic-attendant patrols in the Moyle District Council area since the implementation of the new traffic-management scheme. The Minister responded that, from October 2006 to the end of June 2007, there had been 62 patrols in the Ballycastle area, six in the Bushmills area and three at the Giant’s Causeway. There was no mention of any patrols in the rest of the Moyle District Council

area, including in the villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

The Causeway coastal route runs through those three villages; they are at the heart of the master plan for the Causeway Coast and glens area, and they regularly face total gridlock. Cars are parked on both sides of the street, drivers ignore yellow lines, lorries are abandoned outside local businesses while goods are delivered, and, daily, coaches attempt to manoeuvre around tight corners.

The traffic problem is not just a seasonal one. In February, a colleague met two Roads Service staff in the centre of Cushendall to discuss an unrelated issue. In the space of about 30 minutes, they saw five large coaches travelling through the village. The Roads Service employees saw for themselves how difficult it is to drive through the village, because people are able to abandon their vehicles wherever they like in the knowledge that there is no enforcement in the area.

In March, at a meeting of Moyle District Council’s retail and environmental working group, the same colleague raised the issue of the lack of traffic attendants in the area with Roads Service employees, and was told that the Roads Service would monitor traffic over Easter and that, over the summer, due to the influx of tourist traffic, traffic attendants would specifically staff the Causeway coastal route. That did not happen.

The Roads Service website states that the objective of the new enforcement scheme is:

“to reduce the number of illegally parked vehicles on our roads. This in turn will reduce traffic congestion, improve road safety and improve accessibility for all road-users, including Blue Badges holders.”

Significantly, the website also states that one of the positive changes to the scheme is:

“Helping traffic to flow more freely”.

Elsewhere, the decriminalisation of parking enforcement may well be a success; however, it does not serve rural villages such as Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun. If traffic and parking is not managed in those three villages, people will begin to avoid the area, local businesses will suffer and the full benefit that the Causeway coastal route brings to increased visitor numbers and tourist revenues in the area will be lost.

The Minister should urgently review the provision of traffic attendants in the mid-glens area and in other rural villages. He should do as his Department says in its information leaflet on the decriminalisation of parking enforcement, and get tough on illegal parking. Of course, such enforcement must be discreet; however, it must happen.

Mr Storey: The implementation of the traffic-decriminalisation legislation makes it abundantly clear that the people with responsibility for implementing enforcement priorities are not impartial. Answers to recent questions about the number of tickets that have

been issued in towns such as Ballycastle reinforce the comments of Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan.

Towns such as Cushendall and Waterfoot are being neglected. I am gravely concerned that the consequences of the decriminalisation legislation are the driving motivation of revenue generation, rather than traffic management. I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing the issue to the attention of the Assembly and, particularly, of the Minister.

Legislation must be well enforced; nevertheless we must ensure that consideration of each area's traffic needs — not only the needs of Cushendun, Cushendall and Waterfoot, but those of areas across Northern Ireland — is paramount. Traffic management is not just about issuing tickets in order to reach a monthly quota, and to ensure that the company with the contract is satisfied that a good return has been made on its investment.

Furthermore, I thank the Member for bringing the Causeway coastal route to the Minister's attention.

The North Antrim constituency has the coastal route, and we can say with some pride that it is of idyllic beauty. We are very proud of it, and we want to encourage people to visit it all year round. If visitors are hindered when they come into the villages, such as Cushendall or Waterfoot, which are mentioned in Mr O'Loan's proposal for the Adjournment debate, surely they will sail on through or bypass them. We must adopt a pragmatic approach to traffic control, which requires sensible enforcement.

5.15 pm

I also wish to talk about the input of the PSNI. The rural community suffers not only from the lack of enforcement of traffic management, but from a lack of a PSNI presence. At weekends, the part of my constituency from Cushendall to Bushmills is neglected, and there is only what might be called a skeleton staff on duty. One weekend, there were only three police officers on duty in the Ballycastle station to cover the whole area. That is totally unacceptable, and I have raised the matter with the district commander.

I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing the matter to the Minister's attention, and I welcome the fact that the Minister is here. I trust that he will bear in mind the genuine concerns of people who want to enhance the lives not only of those who pass through the area, but of those who live in the rural villages. We must ensure that they can go about their business unimpeded, and I trust that consideration will be given to the points that have been raised.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Member for bringing the issue of traffic management in the glens to the House. When I speak of the glens, I refer to the Glens ward, which includes Armoyle, a village that sometimes is

forgotten when it comes to issues such as tourism. As far as I am aware, however, it does not face any great problems with parking and traffic.

I recognise the need for adequate enforcement, but it requires a multifaceted approach. We must ensure that appropriate parking facilities are available throughout the glens and that the public make use of them. There is an excellent car park in Waterfoot, which is filled to the brim in the summer. The recent provision of lighting there has allayed some concerns about security. However, the pedestrian access to and from the car park is not safe, and that must be greatly improved before it can be offered as a viable alternative to the public.

I am not aware of any yellow lines or parking restrictions in Cushendun, but I am well aware of the problems that Waterfoot and Cushendall face, especially during the summer and when community festivals are held in the area. I know that Roads Service has already agreed to give priority to a request from the local council for more resources to be used at weekends during the summer months.

There is very little room for manoeuvre for drivers on Waterfoot's main street. However, most of the vehicles parked there — especially at this time of year — belong to people using the local shops and businesses. I am aware that the provision of lay-bys along the main street is being explored. That scheme may help to improve the situation, although it will depend on the views of the householders who live there.

Another issue is the livestock market that is held in the middle of Cushendall, which adds to the traffic problems. Planning Service and other agencies should support any efforts to establish the market outside the village, which could help to alleviate congestion. An increase in the provision of traffic wardens will not solve the traffic and parking problems in the area. Traffic-management schemes, the provision of more car parking places and meaningful consultation with local residents will help to address the problems.

I ask the Minister to examine the possibility of providing parking bays for disabled drivers in the villages in the glens, especially in close proximity to essential services, such as post offices.

Better public parking facilities throughout the glens of Antrim are required, and the possible provision of car-parking permits for local residents should also be explored. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing this issue to the attention of the House and for giving us the opportunity to air these important points in the presence of the Minister.

There are three areas that should be considered. First, there is tourism. As representatives for North Antrim, we are doing our level best to encourage tourists

to visit that beautiful area. It is almost impossible, especially during the summer, for traffic to get through some of the villages that have been mentioned. Considering the coaches that are now being used, and the number of people who arrive to see the beauty of that lovely route along the coast, it is important to take this issue seriously and to ensure that there is a free flow of traffic through those villages during the summer.

As Members have mentioned, it is not simply a question of traffic management; it is important to provide areas in which people can park their cars. If we are to increase tourism, this issue must be taken seriously, progressed and examined in its entirety to ensure that those who are breaking the traffic laws are brought to book.

Secondly, the economics of the area must be considered. People who drive along that route to see the beauty of the road may wish to stop for a meal at one of the hotels. However, because of the traffic problems and congestion, they may turn off to the left to find somewhere else where they can enjoy their meal without worrying about the traffic.

It has been mentioned, in connection with the economic issue, that people who own shops and businesses, and especially the farming community — who come to the area for the market and to exchange their goods — must also be considered. How on earth are those people supposed to conduct their business if illegal parking on both sides of the road is allowed to continue?

Thirdly, this problem should not be considered only from the point of view of the three villages to which reference has been made. The issue needs to be addressed with reference to the road from Belfast right through to Ballycastle. When that is taken into account, it will be seen in the context of something far greater.

I am glad that the Minister is present, and I ask him to take on board the fact that regulations have been put in place but that no follow-up action has been taken, which has led to the continuation of old bad habits. I am sure that if the issue is taken seriously, those habits will eventually be broken, because when people are hit in their pockets, they are hit in the most tender part.

Again, I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing this issue to the attention of the House.

Mr Neeson: I also thank Declan O'Loan for raising the issue, which concerns an area that I know well. I remember, way back in my single days, spending many weekends in Cushendun and enjoying nothing more than canoeing on the River Dun and out in the bay. Therefore, it is an area that I not only got to know very well but that I grew to love very much.

There is no doubt that there are major problems, particularly during the summer. The issue that stands

out more than any other is the lack of public-parking facilities in the three villages.

There is a car park in Waterfoot and another in Cushendun, but Cushendall lacks adequate parking provision. We live at a time when we want to increase tourism not only in Northern Ireland as a whole but in the glens of Antrim in particular. It is the most beautiful part of the island of Ireland. The road to Torr Head is much more spectacular than the Ring of Kerry.

The area has a lot going for it, and it is important that we make it more amenable for those who want to come for a holiday and stay in the places concerned. Adjacent to Cushendun lies Knocknacarry, where there is also very limited parking.

I know that the Minister will address the problem, but rather than take a heavy-handed approach, we should be sensible about the whole thing.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Declan O'Loan, the Member who tabled the debate, and all Members who have contributed to it. I welcome the opportunity to discuss parking enforcement and general parking issues along the Antrim coast — a very beautiful part of the countryside — and, in particular, in Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

I will try to address most of the points raised in the debate, but, as Ministers generally do in these debates, I have asked my officials to study the Hansard report and I will respond in writing to Members about local or specific issues raised.

By way of background for Members who may not be familiar with the subject, I would like to explain my Department's involvement in the enforcement of on-street parking restrictions. On 30 October 2006, certain parking restrictions were decriminalised, and my Department assumed responsibility for their enforcement. Roads Service entered into a contract with NCP Services Ltd to deploy traffic attendants to perform that service on its behalf. Prior to decriminalisation, responsibility for enforcement rested with the PSNI, through its traffic warden service.

On average, 100 traffic attendants are deployed, from Monday to Saturday, in larger towns and cities. They are mainly deployed on foot. However, in some instances, they use bicycles and scooters to patrol certain routes, such as clearways and bus lanes. In certain locations, attendants are deployed on Sundays. In addition, 16 mobile attendants are deployed in cars: their responsibilities are to provide support to on-foot attendants at certain times and to cover smaller towns and villages as needed.

I take this opportunity to dispel any myths about the contract between my Department and NCP Services Ltd. Mervyn Storey, in particular, referred to those

arrangements. NCP Services Ltd is not paid according to the number of tickets issued, and individual attendants are not set ticket quotas that they must meet. NCP Services Ltd is paid a standard rate for the number of hours each attendant is deployed, irrespective of the number of tickets issued. Revenue generated by the payment of penalty charge notices, along with income from car parking and other charges, supplements the overall financing of Roads Services by central Government — it does not go to NCP Services Ltd.

The objective of on-street enforcement is to reduce the level of illegally parked vehicles, which helps to reduce congestion, improve road safety and facilitates easier parking for blue badge holders and delivery vehicles. To ensure that maximum benefit is derived from on-street parking enforcement, Roads Service deploys attendants to areas where traffic volumes are highest, and where illegal parking causes most disruption. Targeting available resources to areas of highest priority is key to the success of the enforcement project.

I now turn, a LeasCheann Comhairle, to Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun. As my colleague Daithí McKay pointed out, Cushendun has no waiting restrictions and, therefore, there is no requirement to deploy traffic attendants in that area. However, Waterfoot and Cushendall have a small number of restrictions in place: there are 75 restricted metres in Waterfoot and 227 restricted metres in Cushendall. That must be compared with 800,000 restricted metres across the North.

When initial deployment routes for the mobile patrols were established, no illegal parking problems were identified in those villages. As a result, they have not been included in routine mobile patrols. As a result of Mr O'Loan's query, Roads Service re-examined the Waterfoot and Cushendall areas. During those assessments no illegal parking problems were observed and no penalty charge notices issued. I have been advised by the parking enforcement unit that it intends to keep the situation under review, and that it intends to deploy mobile patrols in those areas, particularly next summer.

5.30 pm

I am aware that Mr O'Loan supports the need for effective parking enforcement, and he has made positive contributions to the related debate. I know that he is aware of the benefits that it can bring, and I welcome his support. The Department's objective is to ensure that people park properly and legally, in order to reduce congestion and improve road safety in towns and cities across the North. In that regard, the preliminary findings from compliance surveys are encouraging; they show a significant reduction in the number of illegally parked vehicles since the decriminalisation of parking enforcement.

I hope that I have addressed all the concerns. A general issue was raised around parking facilities in the villages on the Antrim coast. Roads Service is happy to work with elected representatives, and other interested groups and individuals from those areas, to see where parking facilities can be enhanced and improved. That was referred to by Daithí McKay, Rev Robert Coulter and Sean Neeson.

Following discussions with local representatives about traffic management measures in Waterfoot, a number of options have been established for the provision of lay-bys on Main Street. Those measures will help to reduce parking on the carriageway, and thereby assist through traffic and help to relieve congestion. Roads Service is in a design process for that scheme, which will be discussed with local representatives and frontagers to seek their opinion. Subject to the outcome of that discussion, it is hoped that the scheme may commence during the present financial year.

Members made references to other areas where parking facilities could be improved. I will be happy to study the Hansard report and, if necessary, I will meet local representatives to see how those issues may be developed.

In conclusion, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I hope that I have addressed all the concerns and points raised by Members. As I said at the start, I have asked officials to take note of the Hansard report; if I have missed any points that Members have raised, I will write to them with clarification. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.