
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 21 October 2008

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Molloy] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council Summit in Edinburgh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council summit that was held in Edinburgh.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the eleventh summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC), which was held in Edinburgh on 26 September 2008. All Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the summit have approved the report, which I make on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit in Hopetoun House, South Queensferry, Edinburgh. The heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister for Scotland, Alex Salmond. The British Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon Paul Murphy, the Secretary of State for Wales. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Chief Minister, Deputy Mike Torode, and the Government of Jersey were represented by the Chief Minister, Senator Frank Walker. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Chief Minister, the honourable Tony Brown.

In addition to the deputy First Minister, junior Minister Donaldson and I, the Northern Ireland delegation comprised the Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development. A full list of participants is attached to the statement that has been provided to Members.

The summit was the third such BIC meeting since the restoration of the institutions in May 2007. The

Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, chaired the meeting, which focused on demography, energy, an update on the strategic review of BIC and a report on progress in the various BIC sectoral areas.

The Scottish Government lead the demography work sector. That is an important topic, because migration is a contributory factor in determining the population of each BIC Administration. Migrants tend to be relatively young, and, therefore, help to rejuvenate the population. Enlargement of the EU, coupled with increased mobility, have been major, and unpredictable, factors. All BIC members share concerns about the impact of migration on public services such as housing, health and education. The British-Irish Council could facilitate a joint approach to policy-making and better understanding of potential impacts. Therefore, the Council must strive to understand migration and its impact.

During the summit meeting, the British-Irish Council noted the progress made on migration issues and endorsed further work on understanding migration and its impact, fertility, healthy independent ageing, and student flows.

The importance of accurate and timely migration statistics is recognised by all Administrations, as is the value of greater sharing of information, methodology and sources between Administrations. The Irish Government have offered to lead the sharing of information on the measurement of migration, with a view to enhance the understanding of migration statistics and to provide a context for potential solutions to be explored.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government on the experiences of employers working with migrants from A8 accession countries has been completed. That research indicated the potential economic gains that could be achieved if migrants' skills were to be fully utilised and their language skills and careers were to be developed. It highlighted also that employers require an understanding of the immigration system and support in applying United Kingdom employment legislation. Further work is planned on the effect of migration on the labour market, its impact on public services and the factors that encourage longer-term settlement.

Northern Ireland, which has conducted a survey of migrant workers, plans to host a meeting of the BIC demography work stream in order to present the findings of that survey. The event will also provide an opportunity for the dissemination of similar research carried out across the BIC member Administrations.

Each BIC member Administration faces a future with relatively few working adults to support those people who are in retirement. That places great importance on planning care and support for an ageing population.

Healthy ageing policies can help older people to live and work according to their capacity and preference.

The aim of such policies is to prevent or delay the onset of disabilities and chronic diseases that limit independence and are costly to individuals, families and the health and social services systems. It is important to promote opportunities for physical, social and mental health, and to ensure that older people continue to be active in their communities, remain independent and enjoy a good quality of life.

The demography ministerial meeting held in March 2008 endorsed co-operation at governmental level, with a view to adopting an evidence-based approach to the effect of integrated accommodation, care and support strategies for older people. An event to showcase the results of research on independent healthy ageing is planned for November 2008. The British-Irish Council summit agreed that that event would be used to identify the key policies in each member Administration relevant to healthy independent ageing, with a view to identifying areas of work where sharing of experience would be beneficial.

At the British-Irish Council summit held in Belfast on July 2007, it was agreed to undertake a strategic review of the Council, and to consider work programmes, working methods and support arrangements, including those for a standing secretariat. That work was taken forward by the British-Irish Council secretariat, in liaison with member Administrations. An interim report was considered at the Dublin summit in February 2008.

In relation to the work programme, the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, discussed the viability of adopting energy as a new work stream, and he offered Scotland as the lead on that issue. The Council agreed that energy is an area of mutual interest, not only as a vital contribution to economic growth, but in tackling climate change. Ministers discussed the need to ensure security of energy supplies, including the opportunities for renewable energy resources, such as harvesting the offshore energy between the coasts of Scotland and Ireland via a sub-sea grid.

Ministers also considered the impact of energy on climate change, and agreed that reducing emissions through improving energy efficiency would help towards reducing fuel poverty.

The Council agreed that carbon capture and storage presented parallel opportunities to make a contribution to climate change, and to export an advanced technology as a commodity to other countries. The Council agreed that the proposal that energy be adopted as a new work stream should be subject to further work and be taken forward for decision at the next summit in Wales.

The Council considered progress on the strategic review of the British-Irish Council. It noted the proposal for the remit of the standing secretariat to be expanded to provide for an enhanced role in managing the work of the British-Irish Council and supporting the agreed

work programmes, in addition to continuing to fulfil its current secretariat responsibilities. The Council discussed the principles that should be applied in determining the location of a shared standing secretariat. It noted the likely costs of the standing secretariat and also considered the further work that would need to be done to develop the accountability and financing structures for the standing secretariat. The Council mandated the current secretariat, in consultation with member Administrations' co-ordinators, to continue its work, with a view to presenting full proposals at the summit in Wales in 2009.

The Council recognised the valuable work that had been achieved by the work streams in tourism, the knowledge economy and e-health, and agreed that those could now be concluded. In addition to the decision taken in relation to the Scottish proposal on energy, the Council agreed that proposals on child protection, housing and collaborative spatial planning from Northern Ireland, and a proposal from the UK Government for a work stream on digital inclusion, should also be subject to further work, to be taken forward for decision at the next summit in Wales. The Council agreed to adopt an early-years policy work stream, with Wales leading.

The Council noted the recommendations arising from the tenth summit meeting, held in Dublin, which had focused on the importance of supporting families in overcoming the problems caused by drug use and how those recommendations could be used in any future drugs strategies.

The Council welcomed plans for transport and environment ministerial meetings in the months ahead.

The Council took the opportunity to consider the current global economic climate. Ministers expressed their deep concern about the impact of the global financial crisis on the local economies. They noted and welcomed the efforts being made internationally to stabilise the situation. Ministers noted the value and importance of learning from, and co-operating on, measures taken and being considered in all member Administrations.

Finally, I can report that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Welsh Assembly Government on 20 February 2009.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I welcome the First Minister's statement on the September meeting of the British-Irish Council. However, it raises a number of questions. When officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) briefed my Committee in May 2008, they advised that the review of the British-Irish Council would be completed in time for the September meeting in Edinburgh. Will the Minister explain the

delay, and indicate when he expects the review to be completed?

The First Minister made reference to the likely costs of the standing secretariat. Will the Minister indicate what additional work needs to be done, and give a timescale for the completion of that work? Did OFMDFM propose that the shared standing secretariat be located in Northern Ireland? What is the likelihood of Northern Ireland being chosen as the location for that?

The First Minister: All who were present at the Edinburgh meeting will recognise that very real progress has been made by the secretariat on the issue of a standing secretariat, and issues arising from that, such as determining the level of staffing, the location, and many other similar issues.

10.45 am

The review was delayed because of the focus on the work streams. Everybody recognises that, perhaps, more than ever before, there has been a greater focus on east-west and North/South relationships. Certainly, I have found that the stilted format of those meetings, at which Ministers were almost at the level of simply delivering their lines, has made way for a much freer flowing style. That has proved valuable. In that context, it is important to have structures in place to take account of what really works for Ministers. The costs will be determined by the location and the number of staff required, which could be substantial given that the number of work streams is ever increasing. That shows the increased level of involvement of each of the Administrations in an east-west context.

We have submitted a bid for Northern Ireland to be the location for the standing secretariat. However, Scotland, Wales and, I think, the Isle of Man, have also submitted bids. Each of those Administrations will propose the detail and the particular attractions of their bid. It is hoped that we will examine those options at the Wales summit in 2009.

Mr Weir: I welcome the First Minister's statement. I am glad that the Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the conference had their satnavs working. At least some Members from Northern Ireland managed to find their way to a conference of a British-Irish nature.

I am sure that the First Minister and the House will agree that the biggest issue facing people throughout the British Isles, and BIC Administrations, is the present economic crisis. What proposals were suggested at the summit to help to address that problem?

The First Minister: I am just glad that the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body had not taken up one of the earlier options of meeting in Perth, Scotland, or someone may have ended up in Australia. Members from the Northern Ireland Administration managed to

be there on time and make a very full contribution to the summit.

One of the strengths of the summit was the sufficient flexibility afforded to Administrations to raise matters that are of particular importance to them. That is our new *modus operandi*. As a result, there was a lengthy and detailed discussion on the economic crisis, even though the issue had not been originally included on the agenda. There was significant common ground in the concerns expressed by each Administration. The Northern Ireland delegation proposed that further collaboration should take place between the Finance Ministers, to which delegates at the summit readily agreed.

Since then, meetings have already taken place and contacts have been established. The Administrations have exchanged information on the steps that they have taken and those that they are considering so that each can learn how the others are tackling the issues. That has allowed us to assess whether there is benefit in our adopting steps carried out by other Administrations and has been very useful.

Taoiseach Brian Cowen had just returned from the United States, and he was able to provide delegates with an update on issues relating to the credit crunch and the economic crisis. That also helped to inform our discussions.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his statement. I welcome that BIC will adopt energy as a new work stream. Will work be undertaken to consider social tariffs for energy companies' profits?

I note that the Minister said:

“reducing emissions through improving energy efficiency would help towards reducing fuel poverty.”

However, we should examine the issue of imposing social tariffs on energy companies' profits to help to alleviate fuel poverty.

Raymond McCartney and I will host an event in Derry tomorrow. It is to be an information day and a public event on the rising fuel and energy costs. Across the North — even across the whole island — many people are talking to us, on their doorsteps, about the rising need for the Assembly to assist them in dealing with the fuel poverty that many of them are facing.

When we take into account the work that will be taken forward, there is an opportunity for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Ministers to talk to BIC about their work programme and to seek to address the specific issue of social tariffs on energy companies' profits in order to further alleviate fuel poverty.

The First Minister: The Member for Foyle has done well to advertise her event tomorrow, and those

who have listened will be able to go along and hear what takes place.

The decision on social tariffs will be taken, ultimately, between the regulator and the energy companies. Undoubtedly, the Administrations will have a view on that issue. It was not among the matters that were discussed at the BIC meeting. It is an issue about which there may well be some controversy before a view is taken by each of the Administrations, but the Member is entitled to her opinion on the matter. The issue was not discussed at the summit.

Mr Attwood: I, too, welcome the report, not least because the BIC is one sector of the agreement's architecture that is meeting and doing good work on behalf of the various Administrations.

I refer the Minister to his statement, in which he confirmed that the Council adopted two new work streams — for an early-years policy and for energy. The Council has also stated that it may adopt new work streams next year in respect of child protection, spatial planning and digital inclusion. Given that the Minister said, in answer to a previous question, that work streams are “ever increasing” and that there is greater involvement of the respective Administrations, can he reconcile the Council's ability to get on with those work streams and do good work in that regard with the impediments that are placed in the way of initiating and agreeing new work streams in other areas of the North/South architecture?

I hope that, when the Minister replies, he will not say that that is different because there is an ongoing review of the North/South bodies — which there is — given that there is also an ongoing review of the Council. Even though that review has not been concluded, as Mr Kennedy has indicated, the Council can nonetheless develop its work programme and new work streams, and get on with good business on behalf of the people of these islands and elsewhere. The same principles do not inform what is happening in respect of the North/South bodies and other North/South initiatives.

The First Minister: What the Member fails to point out is that the east-west relationships must catch up with the existing North/South structures. All the delegations and, literally, each of the parties involved have recognised that we can take the work of the institutions away from the party political and recognise that each of the separate institutions have very real advantages in the networking, information sharing and collaboration that takes place. That is just as important on a North/South basis as it is on an east-west basis. It is not a case of the east-west relationships moving ahead of the North/South ones; the east-west relationships are catching up. In the previous Administration, the ratio of meetings was 10:1 in favour of “North/Southerly”.

Both are important. We are committed to all the institutions and to making them work for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. The deputy First Minister and I are committed to ensuring that all the institutions move forwards apace.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the First Minister for his statement, and I welcome that BIC sees value in greater sharing of information, methodology and sources between Administrations. I will comment on the part of the statement, which indicates that BIC welcomes better facilities for an ageing population.

Mr Shannon: The Member is almost a pensioner, himself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: We are all heading in that direction, and one has to look after oneself.

As the First Minister knows, there is free personal care for the elderly in Scotland, which means that they do not have to sell their homes when they need care. Were there any discussions with, or advice received from, our Scottish neighbours about the provision of free personal care for the elderly, so that we can introduce it here sooner rather than later?

The First Minister: The decision on whether Northern Ireland adopts a policy of free personal care for the elderly will be taken by the Executive and the Assembly. The only issue that is slowing down that process is cost, and it is for the Finance Minister and the Health Minister to decide whether the appropriate funding is available. The Assembly has supported the principle of free personal care for the elderly, but funding is the key issue. Unless the Member and his party can tell us which of our existing services should be removed to provide free personal care for the elderly, we must wait until additional funds become available.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister outline the work that Northern Ireland has undertaken in the demography sector? Will he confirm or deny that, as part of that work, there are plans to hand out satnavs to elderly politicians?

The First Minister: Northern Ireland's contribution comes in the form of a study that is already under way. Over a short period, emigration from several EU countries and, in many cases, further afield, has significantly increased our population. That has been necessary for, and helpful to, our economy. Indeed, many parts of our economy would be in much difficulty if the immigrant population decided to go home. Therefore, it is significantly important to the running of some sectors in our economy. It also is important because, by and large, our population is ageing. Migrants are young and they help to balance age profiles in the economy.

The study will try to gather more information about their length of stay, their purpose for being here, whether they are putting down roots in Northern Ireland, and

all the factors that are important in our decision-making on day-to-day issues, such as health and housing. The survey has been carried out, and officials are beginning to examine the outcomes. We also want to share our findings with colleagues in the other Administrations and examine the studies that they have carried out.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the First Minister's statement. Mr Deputy Speaker, I, along with your Deputy Speaker colleague Mr David McClarty, have just returned from Newcastle upon Tyne — not Newcastle, County Down. Yesterday, Minister Eamon Ryan TD addressed the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which is the new name for the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, on energy issues. That will be of interest to the First Minister, given the content of his statement.

11.00 am

Does the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have a vision of a particular type of relationship between the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the British-Irish Council? That assembly has an appetite for an oversight role. Does OFMDFM have a notion to adopt such a course?

With regard to migrant workers, there is no emphasis on the exploitation of migrant workers in all the jurisdictions that are mentioned in the report. Not having to reinvent the wheel is a good thing. Committee D of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has just completed a report on promoting the rights of migrant workers, and I commend that report to OFMDFM for its consideration.

Therefore, do the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have any vision for developing a relationship between the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the British-Irish Council, and are there any preliminary assessments of the costs of the secretariat that would administrate it?

The First Minister: I welcome the fact that the parliamentary tier has moved and improved its method of working in a way that is now much more inclusive of the two unionist parties that are now taking their place in that new assembly. It is an indicator of the maturity of our own institution and the progress that we have made that the parliamentary tier is moving away from having a body that, in effect, considered Northern Ireland problems and fitted them into the overall British-Irish context, to one that examines wider British Isles issues.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has, to some extent, a useful role if it shadows some of the work of the British-Irish Council. The deputy First Minister and I will encourage that work, and we are prepared to play our full part in any invitations for us to attend the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which can do useful work.

The deputy First Minister and I have some knowledge of the issues that are connected to the exploitation of immigrants, particularly migrant workers. We recently met consuls from the Latvian and Lithuanian embassies and consulates in the UK, and they made clear some of the difficulties experienced by their workers, including exploitation of some of the migrant workforce. That has to be a concern for us, and we will discuss those matters with our appropriate ministerial colleagues. The Member is right to draw attention to the issue. We must ensure that people, whether migrants or otherwise, are not exploited in the Northern Ireland workforce.

Mr Ross: I also welcome this morning's statement. The First Minister said that there were plans to hold a transport ministerial meeting in the months ahead. It is clear that road safety is a big issue in Northern Ireland. Will the First Minister update the House on the work that the transport sector has done on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications?

The First Minister: Northern Ireland takes the lead in the transport sector, and considerable work has gone into recognising the penalties that exist in each of the other Administrations. I believe that legislation is being introduced in several of those Administrations, including our own, in order that there is recognition of those from Northern Ireland who have penalties in other Administration areas.

It is right that we have that new relationship, which was advanced under my colleague Arlene Foster when she was Minister of the Environment. Legislation on the matter is, I believe, progressing in other Administrations, and that is to be welcomed.

Mrs D Kelly: I refer the First Minister to matters under "Any Other Business". Apparently, the credit crunch was discussed. Was there any discussion about the acceleration of publicly funded work programmes? Given that during the past few days the construction industry has issued a cry for help and called for the Assembly to develop publicly funded work programmes in order to assist it in its difficulties, have any such discussions on the matter been held on a North/South basis?

The First Minister: I am aware of the ill-informed call that was made by a particular individual who purports to represent the construction industry. That person is clearly unaware of how decisions are taken in Government and would do well to appraise that position before he speaks publicly about such matters.

Decisions on the acceleration of work programmes are not being held back due to the Executive's position. The deputy First Minister and I have met representatives of the construction industry. At that meeting, we undertook to attempt to develop and accelerate the capital spend programme. To make good that promise, we met soon afterwards with the chairman of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and asked him to develop a programme

that will not only accelerate the capital build programme, but will carry it out smoothly so that there is continuity of spend.

We pointed out to the construction sector that there is a good-news story on capital spend, which has increased from approximately £750 million each year during the last comprehensive spending review period to approximately £2 billion each year for the next 10 years. That is a considerable uplift. The proposals that are being considered by SIB are intended to accelerate the capital spend programme in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, every Department will have responsibility for that, because it deals with housing, hospitals, roads, schools, and so forth. The Executive hope to be able to accelerate the capital spend programme.

The one difficulty that has been placed in the way is a successful legal challenge to procurement policy, which requires either for the decision to be appealed or for new procurement methods to be examined. Indeed, that might involve a return to more conventional procurement methods in order to accelerate the process. Ministers will take those issues into consideration when they examine how to progress the matter.

As regards the first part of the Member's question, BIC did consider fast-tracking capital spend programmes. The Member will have noted that during the past few days, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has adopted a "spend, spend, spend" policy, which is in common with the package that the Scottish Administration have developed. The Executive will also adopt that policy.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the First Minister's statement. Undoubtedly, the British-Irish Council's work is important. Nonetheless, Executive meetings are more important in trying to tackle Northern Ireland's problems. Can the First Minister advise the House of any suggestions from the various Administrations about potential new work streams?

The First Minister: I agree with the Member that it is important that the Executive's work gets under way. I must counter some of the nonsense that has been uttered publicly, which claims that Ministers do nothing and that Assembly Members have gone on holiday. All the Assembly's work continues. Ministers' work, apart from new policy direction and new legislation, continues. Therefore, work goes on. The Member is correct. However, new projects, policy direction and legislation are being stifled by the absence of Executive meetings.

We are working hard to find ways to get over the present difficulties and to ensure that outstanding issues are resolved. That is work in progress.

The Northern Ireland Administration have been taking the lead in several new work stream proposals. In the statement, we outlined three of the proposals put forward by the Northern Ireland representatives at the summit. Our colleagues at the Edinburgh summit agreed that the detailed consideration and decision on

those potential new work streams will be taken at the summit in Wales in the early part of 2009. As the SDLP Member said, that will include housing. There was, in principle, general support that we move forward in that direction. In Wales, we will, I hope, pick up those new work streams, which will indicate a deeper involvement and a greater interest by BIC to expand its work programmes.

Mr Shannon: I am encouraged by the First Minister's statement. I am encouraged, too, that the Scottish Government have adopted at least some Ulster-Scots terminology, in that they met in Hopetoun House in Edinburgh. It is good news for those of us who are trying to promote the Ulster-Scots language that the Scots people have caught on to it.

I have a couple of questions for the First Minister about the statement. Since migration affects us all in the Province, is there any intention to encourage some of those who left the shores of the Province and went to Scotland, Wales or the UK mainland to return home?

The First Minister mentioned energy, and there was some talk about how we could work with our Scottish counterparts to provide energy. Has any thought been given to wind-farm energy, particularly along the east coast of Antrim? Has consideration been given to how that would affect the fishing industry?

Although there has been an indication that the British-Irish Council will not meet until 20 February 2009, is it fair to assume that the present economic crisis will be discussed before then? Issues unfold every day and change within a week, and it is important to be reassured that meetings will take place, even though the Council will not officially meet until 20 February.

The First Minister: There is something of a contradiction in the Member's question. He is right to point out our long-standing cultural links with Scotland; indeed, I was in Scotland on Saturday night and described myself as being at home there. The Member mentioned people from Northern Ireland who went to universities in Scotland and decided to stay. However, if one is a true Ulster Scot, is one not still at home there?

The issue was discussed; looking at the patterns that have developed is part of the demography work stream. Many young people from Northern Ireland went to Scottish universities and have not returned. I put it to the Member that, as much as anything else, that has to do with the potential for high-quality jobs in Northern Ireland and the standard of life that existed during the period euphemistically described as the Troubles.

I believe that we have turned that corner. Northern Ireland is now a much more attractive place for young people to live, work and grow up in. I believe that we will start to see those who went elsewhere for education drift back to Northern Ireland. We must encourage people, where possible, to remain in universities in

Northern Ireland, and those universities must be suitably equipped for that.

11.15 am

Wind farm energy was discussed, and if the sectoral meetings on energy take place, they will, no doubt, involve considerably more discussion on the subject. We examined various forms of renewable energy, of which onshore and offshore wind farms form important elements, and proposals exist in Northern Ireland on how to advance in that direction. Those are the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Planning Service.

The Member is correct that the next BIC summit is likely to be held in Wales in February 2009, when we can revisit the subject of the economic crisis, which is unlikely to have been resolved before then. BIC demonstrated that it is sufficiently flexible to include that subject on the agenda because of its significance, and I have no doubt that it will do so again.

However, it is not a question of having to wait until February before holding further discussions. Further contacts between the Finance and Economy Ministers of the various Administrations have taken place, and papers have been exchanged. That demonstrates the benefits that can be derived from collaboration among the Administrations. That collaboration is now focused on an important issue.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the First Minister's statement and the encouraging progress made by the BIC.

The First Minister's reply to a question from Mr Attwood included an admission that BIC is playing catch-up. Implicit in that is further admission that the new streams of work of the North/South Ministerial Council are being stymied somehow. That catch-up approach should not prevent work on new North/South areas being explored.

I particularly welcome the emphasis on renewable energy and the lead that Scotland will take on that. When will that give rise to specific proposals, and will those have a particular bearing on Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: It is probably impossible to answer that because the speed depends on the sectoral meetings and the considerations of several Administrations, and it would, therefore, be wrong for me to try to timetable it. As a general rule, it is better not to set deadlines or work out timetables but to travel positively towards the attainment of goals, and I commend that approach to the Member.

I assure him that there was nothing implicit, or otherwise, in my comments on BIC process having to catch up on North/South issues. My comments did not point to a brake being applied to the North/South sector. We want to make progress on all fronts, and it benefits all the people of Northern Ireland that we collaborate to progress issues of practical co-operation.

The greater the extent to which those relationships can exist without political implications, the more progress can be made and the more at ease people will be with those institutions. All those institutions are moving in the right direction. My colleagues and I have worked positively in the North/South institutions and see genuine value in that work. The nationalist Ministers who attend BIC summits equally appreciate the benefit to be gained from exploring with Ministers in other Administrations the work that they do and the mutual learning of lessons that that facilitates.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the First Minister's statement and the fact that at least one institution is working to its full potential. I hope that soon that will be the case for all institutions, including the Executive.

The First Minister has acknowledged that some of the Government's work is being stifled by the lack of Executive meetings. However, I trust that that hurdle will be overcome soon. During the meeting in Scotland, some Ministers must have had red cheeks because the Executive are not fully operational.

Will the First Minister assure the House that work is being conducted to deal with sex offenders? How should we police sex offenders whose despicable actions know no boundaries? Although I understand that that matter was not on the agenda in Scotland, will the First Minister or the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensure that it is a substantive issue on the agenda of the BIC summit meeting in Wales? The Assembly can learn from how other jurisdictions deal with such predators and eradicate instances where there has been a lack of co-operation among jurisdictions in sharing the information and expertise that is necessary to ensure that we police, track and trace those offenders appropriately.

The First Minister: The Member for North Antrim makes an important point with which few Members will disagree. The Northern Ireland Administration — led by the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey — will make a proposal at the Welsh summit to establish a new work stream to consider child protection. To some extent, that proposal will cover a large and sensitive area — albeit not the complete area — of how we tackle sex offenders. I hope that the other Administrations will adopt our proposal.

All Members want to present the Northern Ireland Administration and its work in the best possible light. We want to demonstrate that all our institutions are working. That will increase confidence among the population in Northern Ireland and will enhance our reputation worldwide. The Assembly must work hard to ensure that all institutions are operating positively and at full tilt. None of us achieves any credit when meetings do not take place, especially at a time when the wider community is experiencing real hardship.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Review into Publicly Funded Fertility Treatment in Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the review of publicly funded fertility treatment in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): After an Assembly debate on 25 October 2007, my Department conducted a review of fertility services. The motion called on me to initiate a comprehensive review of the criteria used to assess eligibility, including the age-weighting criteria, the ongoing waiting list problem and the number of IVF treatments available on the NHS, with a view to establishing a more equitable and accessible policy.

A stakeholder group, which included representatives from user groups, the boards and trusts, was established to conduct the review. That group's input, as well as a 2007 Health Service review, formed the basis of my proposals to improve access to publicly funded fertility services. I am grateful for the stakeholder group's input.

Infertility has a devastating impact on couples who want to complete their family by having a child, and it is important that the Health Service does everything that it can to help and support couples in that unfortunate position. However, as Members know, my limited resources are subject to competing demands. Publicly funded fertility treatment has been available in Northern Ireland — initially on an interim basis — since 2001. In September 2006, after a consultation process during which a wide range of views was expressed, arrangements for a publicly funded specialist fertility service were announced. That consultation resulted in the clear message that access to fertility services should be widened, and, therefore, a set of criteria was published.

That included raising the upper age limit for women using their own eggs to receive treatment from 37 to 39, allowing people with dependant children to access the service and allowing people who have been sterilised to access the service at the discretion of their clinician.

By widening the criteria, more couples were able to access fertility services. In particular, the raising of the age limit from 37 to 39 was aimed at helping those women who did not join the waiting list until their mid-30s. Often, couples trying to have a child will wait for a number of years before turning to fertility treatment. Women who are approaching the age limit when they join the waiting list for publicly funded IVF treatment can find themselves in the heartbreaking situation of breaching the upper age limit before they are called for treatment.

I encourage couples who are having difficulty conceiving to seek timely advice from their general practitioner who may be able to offer some simple diagnostic tests that may help to provide reassurance or to identify an underlying medical problem.

It was important to ensure that counselling services were made more accessible to couples who were considering fertility treatment. The decision as to whether to use fertility treatment can be difficult for some couples. Added to that, the treatment itself can be emotionally stressful, particularly if it is unsuccessful. It is a time at which the best advice and support should be available to help couples to make the decision that is right for them. Funding limitations mean that access is limited to one cycle of treatment per patient, which is in line with the majority of areas in the UK.

Following a year of operation under the 2006 criteria, the four health and social services boards and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust reviewed the situation. That review showed that the relaxation of the age and the dependant children criteria had allowed an additional 233 couples, who would previously have been ineligible, to access fertility treatment — a 55% increase in eligible patients, which is significant. However, the evaluation also highlighted that the increasing demand for treatment exceeded the available resources with the result that waiting times had increased. During the October 2007 debate, Members raised concerns about the length of waiting times for treatment, and the fact that it could lead to some couples in their 30s breaching the upper age limit before being called for treatment.

The review conducted by my Department addressed a number of areas, namely, the appropriateness of the existing criteria for accessing the service, the management of the waiting list and how any available extra funding could best be used to improve the service.

I emphasise that the stakeholder group that provided valuable input during the review process was supportive of the existing access criteria, and did not see the need for significant changes. In particular, it recognised that existing criteria provided fair and equitable access to services.

A couple of minor amendments have been suggested. Existing criteria allow for a very small number of women, using donated eggs, to access services up to the age of 49. Stakeholders felt strongly that, whereas only a small number of women are affected, it nevertheless introduces inequity into the system. It is, therefore, proposed that the upper age limit for a female partner using donated eggs should be reduced from 49 to 39, which is in line with the criterion for women using their own eggs.

An existing criterion also requires that couples receiving treatment are in a stable relationship. From discussions with stakeholders, it became clear that that

criterion is impossible to apply and may run counter to equality legislation in Northern Ireland. It is proposed that the criterion restricting treatment to those in a stable relationship should be removed. That proposal is made on the understanding that treatment should be limited to those with a diagnosed medical problem with fertility, and that the child's welfare — and, specifically, his or her parenting needs — are considered in line with legislation. Those proposed amendments will form part of a public consultation, and I encourage everyone to respond and make known their views.

Waiting times for treatment is an important matter. Currently, waiting times can vary depending on where a person lives.

11.30 am

The current system of separate waiting times for each board area was introduced with the positive intention of allowing each board to match supply and demand in its own area. However, that has led to an unacceptable situation in which waiting times can vary depending on where a person lives.

In considering waiting-list management, my aim has been to ensure equitable access for all by providing a clear and transparent system that allows those who access the service to know when they can expect to be treated. I propose, therefore, to change the current system of separate waiting lists for each health and social services board area by introducing a regional list. That new system will be introduced, along with any other changes that result from the consultation.

As I have previously stated, my Department faces many competing priorities. However, I am pleased to announce that I have managed to secure extra funding for fertility services that will make a real difference to reducing waiting times over the next six months. I will invest £800,000, which, commissioners advise me, will allow up to 200 extra women to be treated before the end of the financial year. I expect the waiting time to be reduced to a maximum of 12 months shortly afterwards.

In the longer term, I aspire to meet guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which recommends that three cycles of treatment should be offered to those who seek fertility treatment. However, just as in the rest of the UK, the lack of funding makes that extremely difficult to achieve. As a first step, I want to ensure that we make the best use of any additional recurrent funding that I am able to secure. Therefore, as part of the consultation, I will ask whether couples want access to a second treatment opportunity or whether they would prefer to further reduce waiting times in the first instance. The question of which of those options best meets the priorities of service users will form an important part of the consultation.

The additional funding is good news for fertility services and couples who desperately want to have a child. The aim of the review has been to ensure fair and equitable access to that service and to ensure that we make the best possible use of the resources at our disposal. I am therefore pleased to announce the launch of a public consultation on publicly funded fertility treatment in Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing the views of the public and of Assembly Members, which will help inform the way forward.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement on this very important subject. I particularly welcome the proposal to introduce a regional waiting list, which will ensure that women are treated equally, irrespective of where they live. I also welcome the provision of additional funding, which should allow more couples to receive treatment and should go some way towards improving the current position.

In the past, I have made the case for women who are approaching the upper end of the age limit to be given priority so that they do not end up being discharged from the system before they are able to receive treatment. That is an issue that still needs to be addressed. When we debated this issue in the Assembly in October 2007, the Minister indicated that approximately 590 patients were waiting for IVF treatment, and that approximately 420 cycles were provided each year. Will the Minister provide an update on those numbers, the current waiting times, and whether there have been any improvements since the debate in October 2007? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current waiting list comprises just over 600 people, and the current treatment cycles are running at just over 440 a year. With the investment providing an extra 200 treatments, it is anticipated that that will allow the waiting list to come down to around 400 people, which almost matches the current number of available treatments. That means that no one will wait longer than one year for treatment, which is a positive step.

The issue of age weighting has arisen time and again. Stakeholders studied that issue and strongly feel that age weighting should not occur because it is not equitable. If women at the upper end of the age scale were age-weighted, women lower down would suffer because there are only so many cycles available. Age-weighting one group of women would effectively deny others treatment. Therefore, the way to deal with that is by attacking the waiting lists, which I will do using extra investment.

Mr Easton: I broadly welcome the Minister's announcement, and I am especially pleased with his

proposals to introduce a regional waiting list, treat an additional 200 women and invest extra finance, and with his aim to allow three treatment cycles.

Nevertheless, I have some concerns. First, will the £800,000 be new money or money arising from efficiency savings? Secondly, I am concerned that the age limit for the use of donated eggs will be reduced from 49 to 39. Will the Minister estimate how many women that measure will affect? Obviously, some women will lose out.

Finally, I am concerned that, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee said, circumstances might arise in which the appointments of women who intend to use their own eggs and who are already on the waiting list are cancelled through no fault of their own — due to their doctor being on leave or for some other reason — and, subsequently, those women may go beyond the age limit and lose out. Will the Minister tell Members how he intends to address that inadequacy in the system?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member asked several questions, and I will attempt to remember and answer them all. His first question was about waiting lists. The key to ensuring that no one must wait for longer than 12 months is to invest money, and that is what I am doing. Given that the waiting list is currently 600 treatments and we manage to carry out 440 treatments per annum, if we invest money to conduct a further 200 treatments, the waiting list will fall below the annual required provision. That allows us to say that no one will wait for longer than 12 months.

The stakeholders considered age weighting to be inequitable; it has resulted in younger women being disadvantaged. Moreover, fertility-treatment success rates drop dramatically as women get older. Therefore, it is essential that women go to their GPs and access services earlier. The NICE guidelines recommend three cycles, which, although seldom reached due to funding limitations, is an aspiration throughout the UK. Of course, funding limits what we can do, so we must prioritise spending.

Concerning the extra £800,000, the Member will be aware that I negotiated flexibility within my budget, and that allows me to move funds around, which is what I am doing in this case. I will not be taking money from anyone else; money will be available because other funds have been underspent or spent more efficiently, thus allowing me to redirect them.

Mr McCallister: It is excellent to see a Minister responding to a debate in the House, and I congratulate and thank him for that.

The Minister's announcement is good news for couples. The regional list is welcome because it will eliminate the postcode lottery. The time that couples

spend undergoing fertility treatment is difficult, and they will be greatly encouraged to hear about the extra funding that is to be invested in such services. Will the Minister pledge to work with stakeholder groups in order to keep this matter high on the agenda and, if he manages to find more resources, will he invest them in those services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Colleagues are well aware of the funding situation for health services and, at Budget time, when I negotiated extra resources, I made it clear that, although not enough, the amount of funding that was allocated was as good as it would get.

There is a gap in provision between Northern Ireland and England of approximately £300 million, which will double over the next three years. Everyone is aware of that situation, so we must ensure that the service remains efficient. However, we also must prioritise, and that leads to tough decisions having to be made. I am aware of the need and of the problems that exist in this area, and, after careful consideration, I have decided that the best way forward is to invest and to ensure that waiting lists are reduced to being within 12 months. That is a reasonable position.

I aspire to having a situation in which patients receive three cycles of treatment, and I also aspire to having no waiting lists. However, funding does not allow for those situations.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that he has taken action following the Assembly's debate on fertility treatment in October 2007. Despite the scepticism of some in the value of tabling motions, this is another instance where the Minister has listened and is dealing with a problem. I hope that the end result will be to the satisfaction of many people.

I also welcome the public consultation that is outlined in the statement. Will the Minister tell us when the closing date for that consultation will be? Furthermore, following that consultation, when does the Minister expect that a decision will be made?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I cannot be specific on the date, but I anticipate the consultation to last around 12 weeks. A decision will then be made as quickly as possible.

One always looks for consensus during a consultation. Only when that cannot be found do I have to make a decision. I anticipate that a decision will be made as quickly as possible, certainly by next year. I will publish a timetable as soon as I can.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members who have spoken today, I feel that there are several action points in the Minister's statement, and I thank him for those. In a

previous answer, the Minister touched on how he aspires to implement the NICE guidelines of offering three cycles of treatment to patients. Will the Minister tell us when that important aspiration will become a reality? He has stated already that he has the flexibility in his budget to move the necessary funds around in the event of an underspend.

Furthermore, does the Minister believe that the new regional hospital for women and children will have a part to play?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Clearly, the success of fertility services will add to the demand on services in the new hospital, and that is to be welcomed. As I said previously, I aspire to having that hospital built as quickly as possible. However, there are funding limitations, and the Member is as aware of those as I am.

The Member is correct to say that implementing the NICE guidelines is an aspiration. However, funding and providing three cycles of treatment would mean taking money away from other areas. Therefore, it is a matter of balancing priorities. In my view, ensuring that waiting lists are kept within 12 months is a reasonable approach, given the available resources.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like all other Members, I welcome most of the aspirations and details of the Minister's statement.

I am delighted that the Minister has clarified the situation as regards stable relationships — that issue has created a great deal of inequality. Paramount to a stable family is ensuring that the welfare of the child is raised. Therefore, I am glad that those criteria have been changed.

However, I want to highlight the issue of counselling and support. Anyone who has dealt with families contemplating, going through or on a waiting list for IVF treatment will know that such experiences are very traumatic.

That was talked about at last October's Assembly debate on IVF fertility waiting lists, at which the Members who spoke made valuable contributions. However, I am working with families who are still going through that trauma. Will additional funding or resources be made available for counselling and the provision of emotional support to couples who are attending their GP and, subsequently, referred for treatment?

11.45 am

I assume that many people feed into the consultation. However, if the feedback from the consultation conflicts with the views of the stakeholder group, what will the Minister do?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We hope to find consensus through

consultation, but I do not want to pre-empt my position. The consultation will end on 13 January, and, as soon as possible after that, I will present its conclusions. Counselling is important, and it is an area in which we have invested. It is important, as in so many areas, to provide the necessary emotional support and advice to couples and individuals who are involved in fertility treatment.

I welcome Ms Ní Chuilín's comments on the removal of the criterion restricting treatment to those in a stable relationship. It is impossible for fertility services to determine whether a relationship is stable. However, the overarching principles must be the requirements of the child and his or her parenting needs, and they have been protected in the proposals in the review.

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the beginning of the Minister's statement; I was at a Committee meeting. I join other Members in welcoming the review and its outcomes, particularly the decisions relating to the availability of more money and the regional list.

Before Mr McGimpsey came into office, I had to wait many months before departmental officials were able to confirm to me how many people were on waiting lists in the North. That long wait — six months — did not fill my constituents or me with confidence. At that time, however, officials confirmed that there were approximately 500 people on a waiting list.

I return to the issue of women who turn 40 when they are on the waiting list. The Minister knows that I was dealing with a case in which a woman turned 40 when she was twelfth on a waiting list of more than 500. As soon as she turned 40, she was no longer entitled to treatment. Some Members will have similar examples.

According to the Minister, the review group said that it would not be equitable to favour those who are about to turn 40 and that to do so would discriminate against younger women.

I have said to the Minister before and I say to him again: the Department is applying the wrong test. If a woman who is about to reach the age of 40 is being treated, the test should be based on whether there is a disproportionate disadvantage to younger women. It should not be on whether there is disadvantage but on whether there is disproportionate disadvantage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr Attwood: Did the stakeholder group take legal advice on favouring the older woman over the younger? If the stakeholder group did not take legal advice, will the Minister do so now? Was a computer program used to determine the effect on young women if those who are approaching 40 were treated early? If a computer

program was not used, the review — welcome as it is — has missed important features.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Attwood raised a lot of questions, and I will respond as best I can.

NICE guidelines state that the limit is 39 years of age — up to the woman's fortieth birthday — and that advice is based on scientific evidence. The success rate shows a dramatic difference between women in their twenties or early thirties and older women, and the Department is aware of that fact. The stakeholder group took the view that it could not make an exception, because to do so would be to deprive women in their thirties who have been on the waiting list for the same length of time. My approach is to attack the waiting list to ensure that no one waits longer than one year.

Mr Attwood referred to legal advice. The Department is carrying out a consultation process that will end in mid-January. That information will have to be equality proofed and, therefore, there will be legal advice. I presume that the stakeholder group review will have examined how that advice will be determined, although I cannot be specific. The whole consultation process will be legally proofed — as one would expect.

As regards running a computer program, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has strict and tightly controlled guidelines. It is difficult to tell who is at that upper age limit without breaching confidentiality. However, that is the view of the stakeholder group, and the Member has a different view. We are carrying out a consultation, and those with different views can come forward. However, in advantaging a woman of 39 years of age, one would be disadvantaging a woman of 29 years of age.

I am not sure that I have covered all of Mr Attwood's points. However, I will read the Hansard report and reply to him in writing.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I beg to move

That the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The purpose of the statutory rule is to revoke the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999, which prescribed the functions that may be undertaken by traffic wardens. Until October 2006, parking offences were treated as criminal offences and, therefore, the responsibility of the PSNI. Traffic wardens were employed by the PSNI to enforce parking restrictions, and the 1999 Order established the functions of the traffic warden.

In October 2006, parking enforcement was decriminalised by the Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, and became the responsibility of my Department. As part of the new decriminalised parking enforcement regime, traffic wardens transferred to the NCP as traffic attendants to enforce parking on behalf of the Department. As there are no longer any traffic wardens, the 1999 Order is now obsolete. The Department has consulted with the PSNI, which has confirmed that it is content for the 1999 Order to be revoked.

I am grateful for the consideration given to the proposal by my Executive colleagues and by the Committee for Regional Development. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has also considered the Order and is content. That has allowed the Order to proceed to today's debate to seek affirmation. As a result, I am recommending that the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed by the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Regional Development considered the proposal for this statutory rule on 30 April and indicated on 7 May that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal on. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 10 September and resolved on 24 September that it be affirmed. The Committee for Regional Development is content that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr G Robinson: It is encouraging to see the legislation being amended, as it brings clarification to a difficult area.

The Committee's view was that it should support the changes, and I concur with that. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I totally agree with the recommendation. I want, however, to raise one issue. In the past, traffic wardens could be called on to divert traffic in emergencies. The new traffic attendants do not have that power. Does the Minister have any ideas about how to cope with the emergencies that unfortunately happen?

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee members for their support of the motion. Regarding Mr Dallat's question: in 2001, the police stated that they no longer considered parking enforcement to be a core policing function. The Department then considered a business case to take on decriminalised parking enforcement, and that was discussed in detail with all the key stakeholders, including the police. It was agreed that only parking enforcement duties would be decriminalised, and that all other duties, including directing traffic, would remain the responsibility of the police. That proposal was reflected in a policy consultation document, published in August 2003, that related solely to parking enforcement. Therefore, to answer Mr Dallat's question, the police will remain responsible for directing traffic and all other traffic functions, apart from parking enforcement.

I am confident that the statutory rule that is before the Assembly will clarify the position as regards traffic attendants and their functions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I beg to move

That the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

The purpose of this statutory rule is to amend the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 to clarify that the maximum speed limits prescribed in those regulations are subservient to any lesser speed limit applying to the same length of road by virtue of other specified statutory provision. The Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 authorise the maximum speed for different classes of vehicles on motorways, dual carriageways and other roads. For example, in the case of a car, the maximum speed on a dual carriageway is 70 mph.

In addition to those overarching speed limit regulations, specific speed limits may apply to individual roads, or lengths of roads, by virtue of other statutory provisions. In such circumstances, the relevant legislation is silent as to which speed limit has precedence. The statutory rule is intended to remove that potential anomaly by providing that, in such circumstances, the lower of the two speed limits always applies.

I am grateful for the consideration given to the proposal by my Executive colleagues and the Committee for Regional Development. Furthermore, the Examiner of Statutory Rules has considered the statutory rule and is content. That has allowed the statutory rule to proceed for affirmation today.

I therefore recommend that the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): As the Minister said, the purpose of the statutory rule is to clear up an anomaly that came to light in December 2006, when a member of the public contested a speeding fine that was incurred while driving along the A55 outer ring road. When the case came before the Magistrates' Court in October 2006, the magistrate dismissed it. The Departmental Solicitor's Office was consulted, and its view was that, as the legislation stands, two speed limits could apply to that stretch of road. Each speed limit is authorised by different statutory legislation and neither piece of legislation has precedence over the other. Therefore, the current situation is unsatisfactory.

The road safety implications are noteworthy. It is understood that the PSNI has suspended enforcement of the speed limits on that particular stretch of the A55. A recent poll of UK drivers found that drivers in Northern Ireland were the most likely to speed, and the Department has indicated that such ambiguity about speed limits may apply to other roads. The obvious solution — the

addition of a 30 mph sign at the relevant point on the A55, where the single carriageway becomes a dual carriageway — does not appear to address the issue satisfactorily.

12.00 noon

Leaving aside the Department's policy of not providing repeater 30-mph signs because of the environmental impact and sign clutter, Roads Service indicated that there may be other roads on which the ambiguity applies. Putting an additional sign, or signs, on the A55 would provide only a local solution.

The motion seeks to clarify the legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure that speed limits in the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 take precedence over the speed limits authorised by the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989.

The Committee for Regional Development considered the proposal as a statutory rule on 16 January 2008, and indicated that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal on 23 January 2008. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 10 September, and, on 24 September 2008, it resolved that the statutory rule be affirmed. The Committee for Regional Development is content for the statutory rule to be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Dallat: In Northern Ireland, measurements are made in both miles and kilometres. If my car breaks down on the M2, the signs instruct me to walk so many metres to the nearest telephone, but the speed of my driving is measured in miles per hour. The Minister lives in South Armagh, so he will be aware that his driving speed is measured in both miles per hour and kilometres per hour within a few miles of his home. What progress has been made to standardise speed limits here with those in the rest of Europe?

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The point that Mr Dallat made has been raised on several occasions in discussions on road safety. Those discussions are primarily undertaken by the Minister of the Environment and his Department at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format. It is primarily a road safety issue and is dealt with by the Department of the Environment, but I will endeavour to find out what progress is being made.

I am grateful for the Chairperson's comments and for the Committee's consideration. I am confident that the statutory rule will clarify the position and help to prevent future ambiguity on the maximum speed limit that drivers must observe. In turn, that will help to improve road safety. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Bain Report on the location of public sector jobs and welcomes its recommendations; calls on the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to pursue its recommendations with an active policy of decentralisation with the full co-operation of all departments; and further calls on relevant Ministers to address the access problems of inadequate infrastructure and poor public transport identified at Enniskillen, Cookstown and Downpatrick so that, to achieve better balanced economic growth, these towns can be considered for the further location of public sector jobs.

Reforms in the public sector and advances in technology offer new possibilities for how people work and deliver services. Therefore, the Bain Report's exploration of implications and new possibilities is timely.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The clocks in the Chamber seem to have frozen in time. Although Members are keen to listen to Mr Gallagher all day long, that may make it difficult for him to know how long he has left in which to propose the motion.

Mr Dallat: That was a timely intervention. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gallagher: The motion welcomes the recommendations in the Bain Report to roll out some Civil Service jobs to the six towns that are identified. That will include around 4,000 jobs, and although that is a small fraction of the total workforce in the public service, it is, nevertheless, encouraging news.

The motion also welcomes and supports Bain's attempts to promote economic development and to reduce social deprivation. It calls for access problems at Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen, which the report identifies, to be addressed. The report states that those towns could benefit from possible future waves of decentralisation. Poor roads and poor public transport were given as the reasons that those towns were not considered at this stage. Consequently, they have not been included in the current list of towns that will, I hope, benefit from the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. Therefore, it is essential that those three towns are given the necessary attention and support to put them on an equal footing with the other six towns.

The amendment is weak, because it contains nothing to oblige the Executive, or any Department, to address the problems. When the issue of disadvantaged areas — particularly those in the west or on the periphery — comes up for debate in the Assembly, there is always an outpouring of concern. However, nothing has been done, particularly for Enniskillen and Fermanagh. As the report shows, that area is trapped in a chicken-and-egg situation; it is a vicious circle. It cannot be considered for investment because its roads are not good enough, and the roads cannot be improved because funding is not provided to do that. Therefore, I urge Members to reject the amendment.

I welcome the report. The SDLP has long argued for the benefits of the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. The implementation of the report's recommendations will be a step on the road to creating a better regional economic balance.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. The Member will speak to the amendment, and when he does so, he will have an adequate opportunity to have an input.

The introduction to the report reminds us of the need for regional economic balance, and in order to ensure that economic benefits are accessible to a wider group, it sets out the importance of reducing the disparities in economic growth in Northern Ireland and of tackling the social deprivation that exists in parts of Northern Ireland. That was a primary consideration of Bain's work in compiling the report, and it would be difficult for any Member to disagree with the objective of reducing disparities and inequalities.

The report states that the infrastructure in the receiving locations must be sufficiently robust to absorb and sustain public-sector employment over time. It recommends six locations to which public-sector jobs should be located: Derry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. The report suggests that the scale of relocation should be commensurate with the infrastructural capability of each of those centres, and we welcome the proposed job relocations to those towns.

The report, as I said, identifies three other towns with particular problems that can only be considered as relocation centres if limits in relation to infrastructure and access are addressed. In the interest of equality of economic opportunity, I demand that those infrastructural and access limitations be addressed now. If reducing social deprivation and economic disparities is to be taken seriously, rather than be paid lip service, those problems must be addressed immediately. Invest NI's usual circular argument, which uses the lack of infrastructure as an excuse for a failure to attract investment to the area, has left many people in the west feeling quite sick and tired.

Now that Enniskillen has been named along with two other towns in the Bain Report as having accessibility problems, the Government have a duty and responsibility to address those issues in the interests of equality, fairness and economic opportunity. Everyone knows that lack of economic opportunity is directly linked to social inequalities and deprivation. The Executive have the task of implementing the report's recommendations; to move from rhetoric to real and concrete benefits on the ground for people across Northern Ireland.

The important point is that the Executive can hardly do that work if they cannot agree to meet. It is not surprising that many people wonder whose interests the Executive hold uppermost. Therefore, people in the west do not want to be again told that they should be grateful that a new road extension is being built from Dungannon to Ballygawley. Yes, that is helpful; however, upgrading roads in another county is not good enough, and it certainly does not amount to upgrading roads in Fermanagh, which must be done.

Professor Bain directs his comments at the problems in Enniskillen thus:

"The town is poorly served by its transport networks."

That is not news to anyone who has tried to get through that town. A bypass is needed, and must be made a priority. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) has been asked to approve a bypass for the past 20 years, but nothing has been done. The people of the area, meanwhile, continue to wait while, as the report states, job opportunities pass by their area. I hope that the review that has been announced by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will lead Invest NI to rethink its current strategy of directing investment to Derry and to Belfast, because that strategy must change.

The Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland aim to create:

"economically competitive and socially cohesive cities and towns and thriving and sustainable rural communities".

In order to create "sustainable rural communities" there must be a review of the present policy of closing rural schools.

Mr McGlone: I, in common with Mr Gallagher and other Members who represent areas west of the River Bann, do not see much compatibility between the recommendations of the Bain Report and what is happening at present. A cursory glance at last week's local press revealed that Northern Ireland Water wants to close more of its local offices in towns west of the Bann. Those towns have already been denuded of rates offices and roads offices.

That said, if there were a functioning Executive that were fit to bring forward projects and to promote industry —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Gallagher's time is up. There will be no extra time for the intervention.

Mr McGlone: Does the Member agree that those projects would benefit the area west of the Bann? I am thinking, in particular, of the policing college in Cookstown, which would help the construction industry.

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

Mr Gallagher: That turned out to be a timely intervention —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No extra time is allowed for a 10-minute speech.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Simon Hamilton to move the amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Give way to Tommy.

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not let Tommy finish — he has had enough time.

I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "its" in line 2 and insert

"contents and conclusions as an important contribution to the ongoing debate on this issue, and calls upon the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report to the Executive and the Assembly in a timely manner, having carefully considered the various consequences, including value for money, of the Report's recommendations, with views on how this matter may be addressed."

I want to make two points clear on moving the amendment standing in my name and in that of the clock-watcher in chief, Mr Weir. First, the DUP supports the concept of relocating public-sector jobs. That is evident, as a DUP Finance Minister initiated the process that led to the report that we are discussing today.

Secondly, I do not disagree with many of the conclusions of the Bain Report — in fact, I agree with the vast majority of them. The report contains many sensible proposals. For instance, the towns outside greater Belfast that have been named as possible locations for relocating public-sector jobs are sensible suggestions, as is the idea of a phased approach to their relocation.

The pursuance of the relocation of public-sector jobs from Great Britain to Northern Ireland is a sound objective. The recommendation that we should avoid grand, dramatic proposals and that we should proceed in a modest and prudent manner is very much the basis of my contribution, and I will move to that shortly. However, I have some issues with the report; hence my unwillingness to give it blanket support at this stage. I will also be requesting an examination of the consequences of the report.

First, I want to touch on the report's complete exclusion of the greater Belfast area as an option for the relocation of public-sector jobs. Indeed, the report goes a little further than that, in that it recommends that there should be "a presumption against locating in Belfast".

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, briefly.

Mr McCarthy: Northern Ireland Water, which is a Government-owned company, announced only last week that it is closing offices in Conlig, Lisburn and Downpatrick and relocating them to the centre of Belfast. Does that action not completely contradict the wishes of Bain and our Government?

Mr Hamilton: I understand the point that the Member makes. He will also be aware of the consultation on DARD Direct's equality impact assessment on the relocation of jobs from the constituency that we share. However, it is inconceivable that there is no opportunity to shift public-sector jobs in the greater Belfast area as defined in the report. In fact, there are some arguments in favour of the idea.

There are already low levels of public-sector jobs in some district council areas surrounding Belfast. Many people from those areas are employed in public-sector jobs in Belfast, but the job location itself does not tend to be in those district council areas. The appendices of the report show that Larne, Carrick and my own area of Ards have low levels of full-time employment in the public sector per 100 of the working population, compared with all the towns that have been named as locations for relocating public-sector jobs.

Regional economic balance may not be a consideration for relocating in the greater Belfast area, but there are benefits to moving outside Belfast, not least environmental benefits. Furthermore, traffic congestion would be alleviated if people did not have to commute to Belfast every day.

It is inconceivable, even on the regional economic balance argument, that there are no areas in Belfast where public-sector jobs could be moved to encourage economic development.

In introducing any such programme, we must also examine the consequences of the impact that it might have on the necessary scale and size of Belfast and the greater Belfast area as an economic driver for the whole of Northern Ireland.

The amendment also mentions value for money. If we are going to embark on any programme of relocation of public-sector jobs, we would be foolish to do so without considering cost and value for money. It is unfortunate that Sir George Bain's report is being published at a time when finances are limited and there are obvious constraints on our budgetary position. That is where we are, and if anyone requires evidence of the need to make cost and value for money the foremost consideration, they only have to look to our neighbours south of the border. Only last week, they halted their relocation programme because of value-for-money

considerations at this difficult budgetary time that they, we and other Governments are experiencing.

There are other consequences that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Executive colleagues should consider carefully when moving this programme forward. Not all the agencies that are listed as possible candidates for moving will be as easy to relocate as they might first appear. Northern Ireland Water, which other Members mentioned, and Land and Property Services are possible candidates for relocation, because they occupy several offices across Belfast. It has been suggested that those bodies and their employees should be lifted out of Belfast, but that process is neither simple nor straightforward. Some would argue that operational difficulties exist within those organisations, to put it mildly. Would lifting Northern Ireland Water or Land and Property Services wholly out of Belfast help them to do their jobs?

The under-representation of Protestant males in lower grades in the Civil Service is also a well-recognised problem. That begs the question: would moving public-sector jobs from Belfast to some of the towns that have been mentioned assist or hinder the resolution of that problem?

Overall, however, the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly should adopt a sensible, sure-footed and steady approach to the subject. Such an approach should be phased, and not too ambitious, as Sir George Bain recommends in his report. The success, or rather, the failures of others who have gone before us in other regions of the UK, and in the Republic, provide us with a note of caution; an examination of those experiences is essential in moving forward.

We should consider the Scottish experience. The most significant problem highlighted by the experiences of other jurisdictions is staffing. The unions in Northern Ireland support, in principle, the relocation of public-sector jobs, but the experiences of Scotland and Ireland show that when hardy comes to hardy, staff are not always as supportive as their unions or political representatives might be.

If the Minister decides to proceed with relocation, it will be interesting to see whether staff will come complaining to those Members who urge us to be impetuous in the relocation of jobs. The Scottish example has shown that, according to an Audit Scotland report:

“most current staff did not transfer from the original location.”

Of those surveyed in Scotland, fewer than a quarter moved.

A recent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report recognised the massive challenge that relocation of jobs posed for the Irish Government. It states:

“indications were that in some areas, turnover of staff who were opting not to relocate with their departments or offices could be as high as 90%.”

It is clear that such a problem poses considerable challenges for public service delivery in Northern Ireland as well. If that situation were to be replicated here, what effect would the loss of expertise and knowledge that staff would not take with them have on the continued quality of service that would be provided? What additional training costs would be bound up in all of that?

Even in relation to that small element of what can happen, and what has already happened in other jurisdictions, the lesson is that we must take a cautious approach to the whole subject matter.

The motion is not as steady and sure-footed as it should be, and the lesson that must be learned when formulating any policy on the relocation of public-sector jobs is that we must be steady, sensible and sure-footed. We must learn the lessons and heed the examples that have been experienced elsewhere in these islands.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I welcome the motion, and thank the Members for tabling it. The motion refers to three specific towns that are mentioned in the Bain Report, and I agree that we need to address the issues of regional disparity and objective need. I will take this opportunity to speak in a parochial manner, and I make no apologies for that. Although the report at least acknowledged those towns, I was disappointed that Armagh City was not mentioned at all in the report, as were all other MLAs who represent the constituency of Newry and Armagh.

Armagh is a unique city, and is historically renowned as the city of saints and scholars. It has developed as a centre of religion and administration over the years. In recent times, Armagh City and District Council has been at the forefront of promoting the city as a destination for tourism, shopping, arts and culture — although, the shopping that I refer to is of the niche kind, and does not involve big retail developments and substantial numbers of jobs. However, it is true to say that the city's special characteristics — the listed buildings, conservation areas and narrow streets — have constrained the growth of private-sector investment. Armagh totally relies on public-sector jobs to sustain its local economy.

The major employers in the city and the surrounding area are the Health Service, the education and library board and the district council, which are responsible for some 985 jobs — some 40% of employees in the city. The properties in which those jobs are housed, many of which are historically significant buildings of unique architectural value, account for approximately £400,000 of rates contribution. I dread to think what

would happen to those buildings if those jobs were moved out of the area.

Armagh has no major private business that caters for hundreds of employees. Small firms that have fewer than 50 employees account for 99.1% of all employment. There is no major retail development compared to those of our near neighbours in Newry and Craigavon, nor is there any major foreign investment strategy. Failure to retain or replace public-sector jobs in Armagh would be a disaster for the city and district. The motion mentions the need for infrastructure; I remind Members that the Minister for Regional Development recently announced the proposal for a link road in the city, which will allow welcome relief and ease of movement and transportation in and around the city.

The Bain Report is to be welcomed. There is a need to relocate a number of public-sector jobs outside of Belfast, but not with the result of job losses elsewhere. It would defeat the purpose to relocate jobs from towns and cities such as Armagh when the local economy is so dependent on those jobs. Recently, all the MLAs who represent the constituency of Newry and Armagh, from all parties, signed a letter to be sent to the Minister, asking that special consideration be given to including Armagh in the Bain Report. That demonstrates how serious the situation would be were Armagh to be stripped completely of all public-sector jobs.

I can understand the Members who proposed the motion wishing to fight the corner for their local constituencies — I am fighting the corner for Armagh city. Those Members have given me the opportunity to highlight a potentially serious problem, and I hope that the Members in the Chamber will agree, as their colleagues in the constituency agreed, that this is an issue that deserves to be acknowledged and addressed. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the first Member called to speak will be Mr Danny Kennedy.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Kennedy: The Bain Report on the relocation of public-sector jobs was always going to create winners and losers. At the outset of the debate, it is important to recognise that Bain's scope is relatively modest. A total of 3,000 to 4,000 public-sector jobs are involved in the first pilot projects, which amounts to some 2% of the total.

Bain had to find some kind of formula for the relocation of public-sector jobs to provincial centres as opposed to Belfast, and that formula had to be rationally defensible. Ultimately, Bain has based his findings on travel-to-work areas, and, when the other factors on which the report touches are stripped away, the travel-to-work areas largely determine the location of the provincial centres that are to receive an influx of public-sector jobs. The trouble with using travel-to-work areas as the basis for change is the widely varying size of those areas. The Belfast travel-to-work area, for instance, stretches from Larne to Newcastle. Consideration must also be given to the amount of time that it takes to travel at peak times in those areas.

Although consideration of travel-to-work areas may, at first, appear to be a rational way in which to approach the issue, it is not necessarily the correct way to do so. Admittedly, Bain tempers that approach with other infrastructural, sustainability and community considerations, but the fact remains that historic patterns of public-sector job distribution are so important to the towns, cities and areas in which they are located — and the economy of those areas — that any undermining of that situation could seriously damage local economies. Nowhere is that more true than in the great city of Armagh, and that is the flaw of the Bain Report.

Public-sector employment is a vital part of the local economy in Armagh, and it is essential that the Executive do all in their power to retain that situation. Median gross weekly earnings in Armagh are below £350, compared with the Northern Ireland average of £405. The downside of Armagh's public-sector dependence is that it has resulted in a potential for job generation that is only 68% of the regional average. As a result of being a centre for public-sector employment, Armagh has experienced employment growth of only 2.5%, compared with the regional average of 3.7%. At the very least, Armagh has the right to expect the Executive to protect its public-sector jobs base.

I welcome the Minister to his place; he is aware that I have written to him on behalf of other Members from my constituency to request an urgent meeting to discuss the Bain proposals. Already, there are significant threats to public-sector employment in Armagh, with important relocations having taken place.

Although those relocations have been described as temporary, considerable misgivings have been expressed in Armagh about them. The headquarters function of the health and social care trust has been moved from Armagh to Craigavon Area Hospital, and the headquarters function of the regional further education college from Armagh to Newry. The creation of the education and skills authority casts some doubt on the long-term existence of the headquarters function of the Southern Education and Library Board. In addition to those concerns, doubts have been cast on the survival of Armagh as a council headquarters, following the merging of Armagh City and District Council with Craigavon District Council and Banbridge District Council.

Before we run with Bain, let us walk with common sense. We cannot, as an Assembly, agree to the asset-stripping of public-sector functions from places such as Armagh. If we are not careful, that will lead to the unravelling of the economy of one of Northern Ireland's premier locations — a very old and respected place, and the principal seat of our two main religious denominations. That is why I support the amendment; it sets Bain as only one marker on the road to progress and does not make it the final word on public-sector job relocation. This is a road that will have many turnings.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party welcomes the debate and prefers the less-specific nature of the DUP amendment, which we will support.

There is plenty in the Bain Report with which we agree, and we agree with Mr Hamilton's point that there is potential to transfer jobs from the UK to outlying areas of the Province. However, we are not so sure about the thinking behind moving existing jobs from Belfast to west of the Bann. There is a need to examine the problem, but that will not simply be a matter of relocation, as suggested by either the motion or the report.

The relocation of significant numbers of public-sector jobs can be prohibitively expensive, as evidenced by the experience in the Republic where decentralisation has, apparently, come to a grinding halt because of the costs that are involved. We should take note and learn from our neighbour's experience, because a similar process is now being suggested for the North.

The Alliance Party recognises the underlying rationale of decentralising away from greater Belfast. However, we must be cautious in our approach and ensure that a full cost-benefit analysis is completed for each proposal. The city of Belfast has a relatively high gross value added (GVA) figure that is the third highest in the UK behind London and Edinburgh. Indeed, the way that things are going, it might soon be the highest, because financial-services jobs are evaporating in those two cities.

By contrast, the rest of Northern Ireland has a very low GVA compared with the UK average. However, we should be wary of drawing the wrong conclusions from that. There is a temptation to assume that Belfast is overheating and that economic activity can be better balanced across the Province and that the easy way to do that is by relocating public-sector jobs. However, that cannot be a substitute for private-sector-led genuine economic growth.

Belfast's GVA is high in only relative terms, and a large proportion of it is public-sector based. These days, international competition is not necessarily about states, but about cities and city regions. The Belfast region needs to have sufficient critical mass in order to be a regional economic driver and to punch its weight internationally, which it cannot do at present. Indeed, it is regrettable that Belfast has been deemed to lack the critical mass that is required to sustain a proper rail-based rapid transit system.

Therefore, the problem may be not that the public sector in Belfast is too large, but that it is too small. That argues against the principle of moving jobs to outlying areas of the Province. We should be thinking in terms of a greater Belfast, or a Belfast city region, and considering siting jobs in the greater Belfast area — and, at the risk of sounding parochial, including Bangor, Carrickfergus, Lisburn and areas that are close to where existing and potential staff live.

Mr McNarry: Newtownards.

Mr Lunn: Newtownards and Strangford. There should not be a presumption against locating new jobs in greater Belfast.

Although labour-market mobility is important, there are strong economic and environmental arguments for providing non-market-sensitive public-sector jobs in the areas where people live. Siting more jobs in the places that I mentioned and examining locating jobs in the Belfast city area would help to reduce the number of residents who commute, and it would help to lessen the strain on the local infrastructure.

The Alliance Party feels, therefore, that the report — as always with anything that Professor Bain produces — is a valuable contribution and a great starting point. However, the subject requires careful consideration, and we agree to proceed with caution on the matter. Therefore, we support the DUP amendment.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I, too, support the amendment tabled in the name of my colleagues Mr Hamilton and Mr Weir.

However, it is important that we place on record our thanks to George Bain for his work. It was an immense task to outline and, indeed, to start the important thought process of how we achieve a more equitable distribution of public-sector jobs across the Province.

We should remember that it was the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, who first commissioned that task, and his successor, Nigel Dodds, who continues to carry that out, both of whom are Belfast representatives. The commencement of that process indicated that there must be new, fresh thinking about where public-sector jobs ought to be located.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Danny Kennedy is absolutely right to say that the report is a modest step. The proposals contained in the report can in no way be described as bold steps. That is because the sort and number of jobs represented account for about only 2% of total public-sector employment in the Province. To relocate 2% of current Civil Service posts is not the most significant or bold step to be taken. The proposals are modest, and their implementation ought not to be seen as a significant burden on any Department, or to be misinterpreted as the silver bullet and an answer to all the problems regarding the share and distribution of public-sector employment.

People who live in the areas that have been deliberately targeted in Mr Bain's report — Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena, and Coleraine — have good reason to want them to be identified as places where there should be employment. It is important that we scotch the rumour that Mr Bain has been offered the freedom of the borough in each of those areas. I know that he has accepted only one of them. It is important that people read about why those areas have been identified.

In recommendation 18 of the report, George Bain goes to some length to identify 13 bodies that should be candidates for relocation to those areas. The Department should examine those bodies and size them up with the various towns and cities mentioned in recommendation 12 to see where they best fit, and to try to achieve a pattern of distribution of new on-stream jobs, as they come about. That does not diminish the fact that when other bodies come online, under the redistribution of local government, they should also be considered in that way. That would be one way in which to implement that proposal and to see some of the opportunities, which have been quite rightly identified in the report, realised and delivered. The Assembly ought to be in the business of delivery; it should deliver a fair share of jobs in a more equitable way for the many people who live outside the greater Belfast area. That can be an endorsed achievement of the Assembly, provided that the report is handled in the appropriate way.

I agree that the report should not be seen as a constituency grab. That is why I am opposed to the initial motion. It is so selfish; it focuses only on certain areas as if they were the only ones that mattered. The report should be viewed from a strategic point of view. Northern Ireland must be viewed in its entirety to see

how best to distribute jobs across the Province. I hope that we can get to that point. I hope that Members do not view the issue, purely and simply, in a parochial way and say that the report is about jobs for one particular constituency over another. It must be seen in a much more strategic way.

The Minister and the Department will view and develop the report in that way, and they will deliver on that basis. Job redistribution and creation must be about helping localities, addressing travel-to-work issues, and ensuring that those who work in the public sector are given a fair say on, and share of, those jobs.

2.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The location and decentralisation of public-sector jobs has been a long-standing issue on which I think we would all agree that progress has been slow. The Bain Report, however, presents an important and substantive contribution to driving forward that agenda.

In July 2007, my Committee set out its initial thinking on the debate over the location of public-sector jobs as part of a wider report which also examined the direction of Workplace 2010, the accommodation project for the public service. The Bain Review arose directly from the Committee's report, and the terms of reference for the review reflected many of the Committee's recommendations, including: a strategic approach; an affirmative dispersal policy; sustainability; lessons to be learned from international experience of decentralisation; taking account of the regional economic strategy; and tackling economic disparities.

In terms of the economic and social imperative, the Committee noted that the regional economic strategy concluded that, even on a modest scale, dispersal could bring significant local economic benefits, support town-centre revitalisation and underpin and encourage private-sector investment. In its report, the Committee acknowledged the importance of the various guiding principles for public-sector jobs location, including: improving service delivery; taking account of staff interests; achieving value for money; and promoting equality and sustainable development.

The Committee placed particular emphasis on maximising social and economic benefits, although it was keenly aware, and acknowledged, that tensions could arise between some of the guiding principles. The core recommendation from the Committee was that, although the costs of dispersal are important — including the immediate investment requirements and shorter-term value-for-money considerations — the Department should give appropriate weighting to the longer-term strategic gains, including the potential of

dispersal as a tool for supporting the development of the regional economic hubs, and thereby closing the significant regional economic and prosperity gaps within Northern Ireland.

Following publication of Bain's report, the Committee was briefed by Professor Bain on 1 October. During the briefing, he emphasised that the key driver underpinning the review findings was regional economic balance — in other words, reducing the disparities in economic growth and social deprivation between areas. In selecting that as its key criterion, the review therefore aligned closely with the initial recommendations from the Finance and Personnel Committee. Professor Bain also issued a very explicit health warning and explained the limitations of the indicative cost modelling undertaken as part of his review. He pointed out that significant political will is required to implement relocation, because accurate cost-benefit forecasts for relocation will be difficult as the short-term costs are easier to quantify than the longer-term social and economic benefits. That is a very important point and a key consideration addressed by my Committee.

The Bain Report recommends that, in assessing the business case for each relocation proposal, the longer-term costs and benefits should receive primary consideration. We should recognise from the start that that would be a significant departure from the conventional approach to business-case appraisal, which follows the processes laid out in the Treasury's green book.

In terms of the overall number of Civil Service posts, the report proposes a modest and phased approach to relocation, as has been pointed out. The candidates proposed for relocation comprise approximately 5,500 posts, representing only 5% of the public-sector jobs currently based in the Belfast travel-to-work area alone; and 2% — as Ian Paisley Jnr pointed out — of the overall public sector. It is, however, a first step, and it is noteworthy that Bain has emphasised that the list of proposed relocation candidates is not exhaustive, and that a critical evaluation of the full range of public-sector organisations would identify other suitable candidates. The Finance and Personnel Committee will examine the response from the Minister and the Executive to the Bain recommendations and will monitor any subsequent implementation.

Sinn Féin supports the proposal from the SDLP, as it correctly and precisely identifies the consequences and reality of regional disparity and the necessary policy-driven actions that will address these inequities. We do not support the amendment, because it identifies the particular argument that opponents of change will rely on, which is the short-term approach. It also fails to

acknowledge the needs of the wider regional economy. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McQuillan: I am pleased to speak in the debate on an issue that is of direct significance to my constituency of East Londonderry. One of its major towns is Coleraine, which the Bain Report suggests could benefit from the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. That would be of tremendous benefit to many in my constituency, including those in Garvagh, Limavady and Kilrea, who commute to Belfast to work.

There are many people who live in other areas outside Belfast who are also forced to commute long distances each day because their jobs in the Civil Service are based in Belfast. Therefore, moving public-sector jobs to locations outside Belfast could reduce many of those journeys and alleviate the traffic problems that we encounter on the roads daily.

There are, however, many more details in the proposals that must be investigated. At a time when economic pressures are at the forefront of everyone's mind a scheme that could cost upwards of £50 million cannot be entered into lightly. A value-for-money principle must be uppermost in all our minds — we cannot throw our precious financial resources at the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs without being sure that there will be a good return for that investment. There are a huge number of issues in places such as Coleraine and Limavady, which would benefit from the investment of a tiny proportion of that money.

Other areas, such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, have already entered into a programme of decentralisation of public-sector jobs. We must learn from the problems those programmes faced; there is no point in blindly following the proposals. We must scrutinise the examples in other countries, learn about the problems that they encountered and ensure that we do not repeat their mistakes. The reason for comparing examples is to evaluate their benefits and pitfalls.

The greatest potential lies in the locating of new bodies in areas outside Belfast, which is what we should focus on. The decentralisation of other public-sector jobs can then be examined in the future, which is important as we have to take into account the current financial situation and the need for caution and value for money in every penny that we spend.

I welcome the Bain Report and the aims that it sets out for Northern Ireland. The decentralisation of public-sector jobs has the potential to kick-start the local economy and encourage inward investment in those areas that receive the jobs. Coleraine and Limavady could do with such investment, as could many areas in Northern Ireland. I urge caution in implementing any of the recommendations in the report. I support the amendment.

Mr K Robinson: I take the opportunity to apprise Members of the injustice that has been done to my East Antrim constituency over a considerable period. The Bain Report is only the latest example of how the East Antrim boroughs of Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne have been neglected, which may continue if the proposals in the report are implemented.

The underlying travel-to-work methodology used by Bain almost predetermines the outcome of the report. It also obscures the low level of public-sector employment in East Antrim by burying it in the Belfast travel-to-work area. Out of more than 219,000 public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland, East Antrim has only 5,171. In contrast the constituencies of North Belfast, South Antrim and North Antrim, which are immediately adjacent to East Antrim, have 15,000, 13,000 and 10,000 public-sector jobs respectively. That is only part of the story. The comparison between East Antrim and South Belfast reveals a staggering difference — South Belfast has 32,000 public-sector jobs, which is nearly six times the number in East Antrim.

It is also worth noting that, when the figures are analysed, all the constituencies that are west of the Bann have higher levels of public-sector employment than East Antrim — how else did East Antrim end up with the lowest level of public-sector jobs out of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland?

In East Antrim, the public sector represents only 10% of the workforce, compared with 62% in South Belfast, 45% in West Belfast, 42% in North Belfast and 30% in Foyle. The average percentage for constituencies across the UK is just over 20%, so how did East Antrim end up with only 10%? That is further evidence that, for decades, there has been a direct rule regime policy of preventing public-sector jobs going to East Antrim.

The massive underinvestment in public-sector jobs in East Antrim must be addressed by the Executive in the interests of equity and fair play. Surely, the Executive cannot preside over such ongoing discrimination against the area, which has the lowest level of public-sector employees out of Northern Ireland's 18 parliamentary constituencies.

The centres to which Bain proposes Government jobs are to be transferred already have high percentages of public-sector employment: Craigavon has 22%; Newry has 27%; and Omagh has 21.5%.

I want to examine the report's implications. The cost of job relocation has already been mentioned. Recommendation 19 suggests that 3,000 to 4,000 jobs be relocated, at an estimated cost of £10,000 per job. That totals £40 million. I ask Members who favour that suggestion to tell us from where that £40 million will come? Who will stand up and be prepared to take

that money from the education, housing or health budgets? That is the cost of relocation.

Examine the precedent that has been set with enforced relocations in Scotland. That situation is now being reviewed. In the Republic, where more than 11,000 people indicated initially that they might be willing to move, facts did not prove that. It turned out to be a glorious and expensive failure.

From an economic point of view, the public-service jobs that are currently held by residents, particularly in towns west of the Bann, already contribute to local economies — the so-called "hometown effect" that is referred to on page 92 of the report.

As a previous Member has noted, the presumption, in recommendation 14, against locating jobs in Belfast, is extremely short-sighted. The lack of experience that is available to proposed receiving locations, which was obvious when previous, small-scale relocations took place some time ago, would be replicated on a larger scale. That, together with staff's unwillingness to uproot their families during uncertain economic times, means that the inflow of experienced personnel would be limited, which would have a detrimental effect on the quality and service that is available to the public.

Although I have no problem with jobs moving to the best and most suitable locations for operational reasons, I have deep-seated reservations about the process of social engineering; especially because it would compound the injustice of the location of public-service jobs that has been inflicted upon my East Antrim constituency during the past 30 years.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad to take the opportunity to participate in the debate. I thank my colleague for bringing forward the motion.

I welcome the publication of Bain's 'Independent Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs'. In particular, I welcome the inclusion of Newry city as one of those locations. The relocation of public-sector jobs can, and must, signal that times have changed and that the Assembly and Executive are living up to their commitments to decentralise jobs from Belfast to towns and cities throughout the North. Newry has the infrastructure necessary to support the location of public-sector jobs. The political will is now needed to deliver on the report and to get on with implementing its recommendations.

Although I welcome the report's publication, I must also express reservations. I want to add Armagh city to the towns listed in the motion. I agree with much of what my fellow Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Kennedy said.

We are approaching 2011 and the completion of the review of public administration. Many towns and cities

face challenges as Government strive to reform the public sector. Many organisations will be merged or slimmed down as Government move to make the public sector more efficient.

Armagh's biggest employers are the Department of Education; the Southern Education and Library Board, whose headquarters is situated on the Mall; and the teachers' centre on the Newry Road. Other public services based in Armagh are Northern Ireland Water; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Between them, those organisations make up around 40% of all employment in the Armagh City and District Council area.

Indeed, Armagh was identified in the regional development strategy as a city that occupies a strategic location in the south of the region and embraces a significant cross-border dimension with good connections to the Irish midlands, Galway and Dublin. It is also within easy travelling time of regional ports and airports and the major urban centres of Belfast, Newry, Lisburn and Craigavon.

2.30 pm

Armagh city has the potential to develop further by utilising its city status, and building on its strengths as a centre of tourism, culture and public administration. However, unlike Derry, Newry, Omagh, Coleraine and Ballymena, all of which have a thriving private sector, Armagh has for many decades been a centre of public administration and depends heavily on public-sector jobs. I fear what the Bain Report could mean for Armagh if it is not challenged, and I am disappointed that Armagh has been overlooked by Sir George Bain and his team as a location for public-sector jobs.

Armagh is, and has been for many years, a subregional centre of administration — and that has not been reflected in the report. There is a possible double whammy for Armagh if no further investment is received and jobs leak out of the city. For example, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has been temporarily moved to Craigavon, but for over 30 years, the majority of those jobs had been based in Armagh. The decision on where to permanently locate those jobs may be influenced by the Bain Report, even though, essentially, that review was concerned with decentralising jobs out of Belfast. I think that it would be an irony, if not a tragedy, if Armagh lost jobs as a result of the review.

I have another concern about the availability of office accommodation for jobs that are being relocated. It would be a matter of huge hypocrisy — and a huge waste of public funds — if, in relocating public-sector jobs, the Executive did not utilise the office accommodation in the public sector. That office accommodation is available in Armagh. The Southern

Health and Social Services Board accommodation at the St Luke's and Longstone hospital sites are largely vacated, and could be redeployed in the relocation of public-sector jobs. The accommodation for that is there, and for a large element of the education and skills authority. I ask the Minister to meet us in Armagh to further discuss this issue.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Sinn Féin welcomes the recommendations of the Bain Report and hopes that all Departments will show the same enthusiasm as those with Ministers who are Sinn Féin members. Concrete proposals have been made by those three Departments in respect of NI Water, the education and skills authority, and the implementation of a policy of decentralisation in the Department of Agriculture.

The motion should not be limited to the problems faced by the three towns that it mentions — many areas of the North continue to suffer because of ongoing patterns of inequality and disadvantage. That reality was recognised by the Programme for Government, which pledged all Departments and Government agencies:

“to develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in objective need.”

The relocation of public-sector jobs must be seen in the context of those commitments. The organised statistical data demonstrates where the areas of disadvantage are and, hence, where public-sector jobs should be located. For instance, if Members wish to examine that for themselves, the NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) measure of multiple deprivation for 2005 demonstrates that the most deprived areas of the Six Counties are predominantly within north and west Belfast and the greater Derry city area. Going into further detail, the NISRA statistics show that 19 of the top 100 most deprived wards are in Derry.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No; I do not have time.

The 2006 'Labour Force Survey Religion Report' reaffirms the persistent structural reality of geographical and regional inequalities, which have been inflicted on those citizens who live, in particular, in north and west Belfast, and west of the Bann. The relocation of public-sector jobs is an opportunity to begin redressing those inequalities.

Bearing all that in mind, I am not sure of the wisdom of limiting the remit of the motion to three towns. That is why I tabled an amendment calling for resources and efforts to be targeted at those with the greatest needs. I was disappointed that that amendment was not selected, as such an approach would have benefited not just Enniskillen, Cookstown and

Downpatrick, but all areas where objective need can be demonstrated.

Nevertheless, the substance of the motion recognises the genuine regional disparities in the North. As I said in the Chamber last week, Sinn Féin's firm view is that the reasons behind those inequalities are structural and systemic. Only when those inequalities have been addressed, in line with the Programme for Government's commitments, will all areas, including those named in the motion, begin to benefit.

Not everyone will agree with that analysis, but the harsh reality of life in some communities, as borne out by the statistics of deprivation, cannot be denied. It was recognised in Professor Bain's report and recently articulated by the regional director of the First Trust Bank when he outlined the dire economic position west of the Bann. I sincerely hope that all parties in the Assembly will also recognise that genuine deprivation and work with Sinn Féin in its efforts to build a modern economic agenda that recognises the interdependencies of sustainable economic growth and sustainable social improvement.

The relocation of public-sector jobs must play a pivotal role in that process. The DUP's amendment calls for the "consequences, including value for money" to be considered. One dictionary definition of consequence is a "penalty or cost". That portrays the DUP's negative mindset on the issue. A massive opportunity exists to make a genuinely meaningful impact on people's lives; it is not something to be feared. However, it seems that the DUP would rather hide behind the Treasury's green book and adopt the restrictive value-for-money approach. On its own, that approach will never allow for the type of innovative measures that are needed and were envisaged in the Programme for Government.

The location of public-sector jobs should be about more than value for money in the short term. Members must do what will be most advantageous in the long term to the economy and to the people whom they represent.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Anderson: I support the motion, but Sinn Féin does not support the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I thank the Members who took part in the debate, which confirmed the old saying that "all politics is local" and highlighted the range of views on the subject and its complexities. The location of public-sector jobs is not a straightforward matter; nor is there a straightforward solution, as is evident from Sir George's report, and he said that there is no right or wrong answer.

I take this opportunity to thank Sir George and his team for their thorough, detailed examination of a difficult and complex issue. I congratulate him on his highly professional approach and on the way in which he was able to distil the wide-ranging terms of reference into a manageable and focused piece of work. He provided an independent view of location that will inform the considerations of Government and Ministers. In doing so, he created a useful framework that will help to inform future decision-making. His report also facilitates a more focused discussion, as it sets out specific proposals and, importantly, evidence on which decisions can be made.

There is some interesting statistical evidence on the distribution of employment in Northern Ireland and the spread of public-sector jobs. Few would have believed, for example, that the number of public-sector jobs per 100 of the working-age population in the Omagh travel-to-work area is higher than in Belfast.

It is also interesting to reflect on the varying degrees of success and, in some cases, failure of attempted relocation elsewhere. Several Members, including Mr Hamilton, referred to the Irish Republic, which appears to provide a good case study in how not to go about it. The experience there led Sir George to conclude — extremely diplomatically — that caution must be exercised when proceeding with relocation. If one point stood out in the debate, it was the need to proceed with caution and common sense, and several Members wisely picked up on that. As Mr Kennedy said:

"Before we run with Bain, let us walk with common sense."

That is the approach that should be taken. Given what is happening, or, rather, not happening, in the Republic, it would be foolish to ignore Sir George's advice on that point.

The use of evidence to support the report's findings uncovers several issues that we must consider carefully. The report is comprehensive, except that it is missing any hard evidence of the long-term socio-economic benefits that relocation is expected to generate. That is not a criticism — no such evidence exists, and the report states that. Much has been said about how an injection of jobs can boost local economies and can lead to spillover effects such as increased confidence, reduced unemployment, improved work-life balance, and so on.

Sir George mentioned investing up to £40 million up front in the hope that we can realise longer-term benefits that may or may not materialise in 10 to 15 years' time. I am not suggesting that we do not aim to reduce economic disparity in Northern Ireland, and I have no problem with there being better regional balance. However, as several Members have indicated, we must consider the matter in the context of the

current difficult economic and financial circumstances. Difficult times require difficult choices. We must discuss affordability and the deployment of resources, and consider what priority to attach to the value-for-money case.

Northern Ireland is in the midst of a tight financial settlement that is likely to get tighter. Therefore, it is important to consider where the location of jobs fits with other priorities. Ken Robinson questioned where we will find the money for relocation. That is a legitimate question, not only in that context. It must be asked every time that a Member — from any party or any constituency — talks in the Chamber about new initiatives, new proposals and new expenditure. Northern Ireland is not like Whitehall or the Irish Republic. Unlike a sovereign country, our Budget is finite. Furthermore, as is the case in any devolved region, we have no borrowing requirements.

Therefore, when we propose new expenditure — as in this case — we must decide from where to access that money and whether the entire Budget has been allocated. That said, the Executive and the Assembly may decide to reprioritise and allocate the Budget to other projects. Moreover, we must decide which areas lose funding. No one in Northern Ireland is printing money.

Mr Kennedy: Not legally, anyway. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If Members are aware of individuals who are printing money, they should pass that information to the police immediately. *[Laughter.]* No one in my Department or in the rest of Government is printing money. That point is crucial to this debate and to all other debates on public expenditure.

We must consider how to proceed with some of the pilot projects. The report helpfully identifies locations to which we should consider relocating jobs. Furthermore, Sir George has earmarked several organisations that might be suitable candidates for relocation. Although I will not enter into a debate about the location of those jobs, the selection of those locations will, undoubtedly, be good news for some areas and disappointing news for others. That disappointment has been mentioned today.

However, the report's recommendations do not intend to locate public-sector jobs in every town and village in Northern Ireland. For every city and town that has been mentioned during the debate, dozens of areas have not been mentioned, and some representatives will question those omissions. Moreover, the report's recommendations do not intend to boost the local economy in the immediate vicinity of the six towns and cities that it mentions. Sir George has emphasised the ripple effect in the wider catchment areas, and he believes that to cluster jobs in a few areas will, potentially, encourage wider economic growth.

2.45 pm

The issue of who might move leads one to ask whether we are discussing "location" or "relocation". Several Members, including Mr McQuillan, made that point. Two distinct aspects must be considered. The first aspect is the location of public-sector jobs in the establishment of a new body. That includes the location of, for example, the administrative headquarters of institutions related to the review of public administration: indeed, the need for decisions on the RPA-related bodies was the catalyst for the review in the first place.

The second aspect is the relocation of established organisations, and that has the potential to introduce a new set of variables, including costs and disruption that may be caused to people and services. Although the report is not explicit on that point, I suspect that it may be at the heart of many of the difficulties that have been encountered by other relocation initiatives, which is why Sir George discussed the importance of phasing, human resources and industrial relations.

In making decisions, careful thought must be given to the way in which we proceed and with which projects. Those sorts of discussions must now take place. I must involve other Ministers, and so I have written to each of my Executive colleagues during the past week, asking them for their initial views on the report, including the principle of relocation; the implications for the early decisions that are needed on newly formed bodies and the RPA-related institutions; and the value-for-money case — because that is important. Ministers who wish to proceed will want to know where the money will come from. I understand that Sir George Bain has appeared before the Finance Committee.

I will put together the Ministers' replies, the views of the Finance Committee, and the points raised in the debate. I will then be in a better position to assess the degree of consensus on the proposals and to consider how best to develop a policy on location. That is why it is useful to have this debate, and I am grateful to the Members who tabled it for the opportunity to discuss the issues.

Several issues were raised, and I am unable to deal with them all. However, they will inform the discussion and consideration of the report. I stress that Sir George Bain and his panel have reported independently, and I am grateful to them. It now falls to the Executive and locally elected Members to make the decision.

Tommy Gallagher, who introduced the debate, mentioned that it was important that the Executive should meet. I totally agree with him. It is vital that the Executive should meet to discuss these matters. Although we do not meet, we can write to one another, but there will come a point at which we must discuss

things. Sinn Féin makes these points to the Assembly; it would do better to stop the blockade of the Executive and to make its points to the Executive.

Mr Hamilton made several important points and urged caution in approaching this matter. He spoke of the greater Belfast area, as did Mr Ken Robinson and Mr Lunn. The report indicates that the number of public-sector jobs recommended for relocation is sufficiently modest to ensure that Belfast will not be destabilised. However, the points made about the greater Belfast area are important and must be taken on board. The report does not fail to notice that 18 of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland are in Belfast — that point was made by Martina Anderson. As Members know, Belfast is the fourth most-deprived council area in Northern Ireland. That fact — together with the high number of public-sector jobs per 100 of the working-age population, for example, in Omagh — must be put into perspective.

We need to take out of the equation the mythology about what goes on in Northern Ireland and instil some hard facts. Evidence and facts are stubborn, but they are in the report, and that is why it is such a useful piece of work with regard to evidence gathering and the recommendations that it has made. However, the report is not the final say; the Executive will have the final say.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of the impact of relocation on population groups that are under-represented in the public sector — young, Protestant males, for example. Policy formulation is subject to various impact assessments, including equality proofing. When the Executive initially commissioned the work, it was agreed that the appropriate equality proofing processes would be adhered to.

Cathal Boylan, Danny Kennedy and Dominic Bradley talked about Armagh city, so that argument was well and truly aired. In fact, some Members talked about Armagh city to the exclusion of any mention of Newry city. Not all Members from that constituency did that, but I was so moved by the eloquence of the Members who advocated Armagh city that I now think that there may be merit in completely dropping Newry city from the proposals. That illustrates that it is very difficult to accommodate every town and city.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that the Newry and Armagh constituency is uniquely served by the two wonderful cities of Armagh and Newry?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I could not agree more. Having heard all the contributions from representatives of other constituencies, I am sure that the Member does not suggest that two locations for public-sector jobs should be situated in his constituency. It is already planned that one location will be situated in the Newry and Armagh constituency.

In all seriousness, this is a complicated and difficult issue. It is not possible to relocate public-sector jobs to every single town and city — it is a matter of achieving the best possible balance.

Ian Paisley Jnr believes that the proposals are modest. They are; and that is a fact that Sir George very openly acknowledges. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel talked about giving weight to longer-term gains — a point that was also made by Martina Anderson, and I accept that. Sir George said that those gains will be difficult to quantify, but, nevertheless, it is an issue of importance.

Adrian McQuillan stated that the proposals should represent value for money, which was a recurring theme in the debate. Ken Robinson — quite rightly — talked about his own constituency of East Antrim. The proximity of that constituency to Belfast has a bearing on the issues that he raised. He also referred to the matter of where the money would come from to implement the proposals. I already dealt with that point at considerable length.

In closing, the points about Enniskillen, Cookstown and Downpatrick were well aired. The issues about infrastructure are the responsibilities of another Minister, but I look forward to considering all those issues in due course as we reach our final decisions.

Mr Weir: I am delighted to contribute to this very important motion. Listening to some of the passionate arguments that were made, one wondered whether the issue was about the relocation of public-sector jobs from Belfast, or whether the focus was on the relocation of public-sector jobs from Armagh. That seemed to be where the focus of the debate was.

With a debate of this nature, there was the danger that Members would engage in a degree of constituency self-interest. At the outset, I stress that that is a trap that I am also very determined to fall into, as I will advocate the advantage of locating public-sector jobs in the North Down area.

As indicated in the amendment, the DUP believes that the Bain Report has made a very valuable contribution to this debate, so we are not critical of the report itself. However, Mr Paisley Jnr indicated that the report was not a silver bullet that would solve all our problems. Indeed, that was something that Sir George also indicated when he said that there were no right or wrong answers to this issue. It is important that we weigh up the issues with a degree of seriousness and caution.

I have three main criticisms of the original motion. First, it argues for the immediate relocation of public-sector jobs without any real consideration of what needs to be done, so the motion lacks the necessary financial prudence. Secondly, it narrowly focuses on three towns — an argument that other Members also

made. Thirdly, if taken at face value, the motion will perpetuate the vicious cycle that the proposer spoke about, because there is a very real danger that the well will be dry by the time that improvements are made to the road networks around those towns. Therefore, the motion is rather self-defeating.

Mr Hamilton, Mr Lunn and George Robinson spoke about the report's failure to consider relocation within greater Belfast. I come from Bangor, and I see traffic congestion in towns such as Bangor and Newtownards and in greater Belfast, and there are social and, indeed, environmental benefits to be gained from ensuring that some jobs are relocated along the spokes of the Belfast wheel.

Mr Hamilton mentioned value for money and, despite Ms Anderson's and other Members' attempts to dismiss the matter, if, at a time when front-line services are under pressure, we proceed headlong to spend £40 million on relocating those jobs without conducting any cost-benefit analysis, people will consider us to be mad. We must concentrate on the cost of implementing the proposals.

George Robinson and Mr Kennedy rightly said that travel-to-work areas form a poor basis from which to judge where to locate jobs. Furthermore, several Members mentioned the fact that, although there can be a presumption in favour of certain towns when deciding where to locate new public-sector jobs, job relocation poses major problems. We are not talking about shifting money between different bank accounts; we are talking about moving human beings. When considering the relocation of jobs, we must bear in mind the fact that some people may lose their jobs or have to move to a different area, and that has not been adequately considered by many Members.

I take on board Mr Kennedy's point that we must walk with common sense before we run with Bain, so we must proceed with caution.

Ms Anderson said that we must tackle inequality and disadvantage, and I could not agree more. However — this point has already been made — if we focus on that rather than on relocating jobs, there is a strong argument for more jobs being located in certain parts of Belfast, because those areas suffer from the greatest levels of disadvantage. In addition, the greatest area of under-representation in the Civil Service is among young Protestant males. We must bear in mind that, by tackling one regional inequality, we might be in danger of worsening another inequality in the system. Consequently, we must get this right.

Mr McQuillan, Mr Paisley Jnr and others mentioned the mistakes that have been made in the Irish Republic and in Scotland, and we must learn from those mistakes and approach this matter with some caution.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Weir: We must get this right, and, consequently, I support the amendment.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Kennedy: Let Tommy finish. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Perhaps, Mr Speaker, you will allow me some additional time because of that intervention. *[Laughter.]*

I support the motion. I listened intently to the debate, and I noted several points that were made. Mr Hamilton did not disagree with many of the Bain Report's conclusions. In fact, he advocated a phased approach to proceeding in a modest and prudent manner, which is exactly what the report suggests, and the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel elucidated on that point.

Although adopting the SDLP motion would result in major benefits, I agree with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that there are economic concerns that are difficult to tabulate and discern. Relocating public-sector jobs would, however, generate environmental benefits.

Much has been made of other economies, and Mr Hamilton referred to the situation south of the border, where the fact that public servants' jobs and homes were relocated to places where they did not particularly wish to go was a major concern.

Some Members sought to articulate such opinions about where Mr Gallagher and I come from. Yet day and daily, hundreds — if not thousands — of people travel from there, up and down the motorways, at a cost to themselves, society and, if it were to be investigated, the environment.

Mr Hamilton spoke about a conversation that he had had with a constituent concerning Northern Ireland Water. In my experience, Northern Ireland Water has closed one local office after another, and, where I come from, the local press has drawn attention to the fact that it may shed a further 200 jobs.

Those issues must be examined; however, we must examine them factually, not through others' perceptions.

3.00 pm

Mr Boylan was the first person to make the case for the relocation of public-sector jobs to Armagh city. However, as his party colleague, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr McLaughlin, said, the list of proposed relocation candidates is not exhaustive — as Mr Kennedy agreed. There could be some reconsideration.

Mr Kennedy argued for the adoption of the Bain Report. Certain elements are not in the report that may yet be included in it, so we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I really cannot.

Mr McLaughlin: He has to leave room for Tommy — *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: I have to leave room for Tommy, indeed.

I listened carefully to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. He said that the Committee was briefed by the authors of the report on 1 October 2008 and that the report aligned closely with the initial recommendations of the Committee.

I am not sure where those members of the Committee now stand who at first aligned themselves with the recommendations of the report but who now oppose its merits. That is politics, I suppose.

The Bain Report was seen as the first step in a modest and phased approach to the relocation of public-sector jobs, and the list of possible locations was not exhaustive. That has been amply covered.

Mr McQuillan referred to the decentralisation of jobs to Coleraine; in fact, he and other Members articulated the case for the decentralisation of jobs and for the Bain recommendations.

Mr Ken Robinson made an excellent case for the decentralisation of jobs to the East Antrim constituency; he had made a very good argument, only to say that a financial case could be used against it. Members must consider whether they are in favour of Bain's proposals to extend the list of locations for the benefit of their constituencies or whether they are making an argument to contain the effects of the report.

My colleague Dominic Bradley mentioned the case for the cities of Newry and Armagh, which, of course the SDLP fully supports —

Mr Kennedy: They are not in your motion —

Mr McGlone: They are not in the motion, but they are in the spirit of it.

I also listened carefully to the Minister, who told us that the report was thorough and detailed and that it would be foolish of us to ignore Sir George's advice. The Minister also dealt with the socio-economic benefits of relocating public-sector jobs and the investment of £40 million upfront.

We are all aware of the present difficult economic circumstances, so where will the new money come from? The Minister referred to financial constraints; however, potential investment or political creativity should never be inhibited by what an accountant says. *[Interruption.]* There are different ways of looking at investment and potentials and what they may realise down the line.

Mr Weir referred to the danger of focusing on three towns; however, that is not what the motion is about. The motion focuses on the recommendations of the Bain Report and, in that context, those three towns west of the Bann. Surely, we do not want to perpetuate a vicious cycle of no investment, no roads and no jobs.

That is precisely why the Bain Report is before us today; it is why I am making this point, and it is why the motion is being debated today. There has been endemic neglect of those areas, and this is one way of trying to provide reinvestment and make best use of the properties that have been left vacant by the removal of public-sector jobs from such towns as Enniskillen, Cookstown, Maghera and Magherafelt.

Ms Ritchie: What about Downpatrick?

Mr McGlone: Downpatrick also, as the Minister has reminded me.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: No — well, just briefly.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that, under the proposals, East Antrim is in danger of being left with health centres and job centres?

Mr McGlone: I realise that, and I welcome Mr Beggs's comments, which articulate amply my argument for the motion and my support for the Bain Report and its recommendations. We must look at relocation, the decentralisation of services and why people have to travel to their work in Belfast everyday. One must not think that everybody who works in Belfast lives in Belfast; that is a false notion. Many Members are visited daily by constituents who, due to economic and family circumstances, want to be transferred closer to home.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member agree that his comments in relation to the problem being more accentuated in the greater Belfast area — outside the city — supports what some Members, including myself, said earlier about the omission of greater Belfast and movement within that area being a flaw in the report?

Mr McGlone: I hear what the Member is saying, but, ultimately, the basis of the report is the relocation of public-sector jobs, the vast majority of which are located centrally in Belfast. I am not saying that asking for relocation means that everybody who works in Belfast must be moved out. There may well be Departments and jobs that would be best served by having a Belfast location. That consideration must not be ignored, and it would be foolish to do so.

I accept what Mr McLaughlin said about the report proposing a modest and phased approach: that is what the report is concerned with. We must get to the position in which the needs of the community are

being accommodated and where its economic and social needs and environmental concerns are being met, through a modest and phased approach, which forms the basis of the report.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 29.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hamilton and Mr McQuillan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dallat and Mrs D Kelly.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Bain Report on the location of public sector jobs and welcomes its contents and conclusions as an important contribution to the ongoing debate on this issue, and calls upon the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report to the Executive and the Assembly in a timely manner, having carefully considered the various consequences, including value for money, of the Report's recommendations, with views on how this matter may be addressed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Supporting People Fund

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

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.

The Supporting People programme was introduced in Northern Ireland in April 2003 as a UK-wide reform to separate support services from housing benefits and to centralise several funding streams into a single budget. Supporting People aims to provide housing-support services to enable vulnerable people to access and maintain accommodation that is suitable to their needs and to help them to fulfil their capacity to live as independently as possible. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers the programme and works in partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four health and social services boards and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to commission housing-related support services.

In Northern Ireland, there are 121 providers that deliver services in more than 900 accommodation schemes. There are also 84 floating-support-service schemes throughout the Province. Those services provide some 23,000 of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable people with advocacy and practical and emotional support, such as providing wardens in a sheltered-housing scheme as well as housing-related advice services.

Supporting People funding is available to people in hostels and to those in short-term, move-on or temporary accommodation. It is also available to people in their own homes, sheltered dwellings, houses of multiple occupation, and clustered housing. The programme helps client groups with learning disabilities, mental ill health, physical and sensory disabilities, addictions, criminal convictions, and those who suffer from domestic violence or who are homeless. Many schemes also work with older people, vulnerable young people, young people leaving care, black and minority ethnic communities, refugees and asylum seekers, and lesbian and gay people.

One of the principles of Supporting People stipulates that its services must represent value for money. It is clear that Supporting People's services —

which are provided mainly by the voluntary sector — are cost-effective in that they keep people out of institutions such as hospitals, residential homes and prisons. The organisation's schemes have been accredited for good governance and quality assurance by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Since the establishment of the programme, its services have expanded and its budget has grown from an initial £44 million to £61 million for the 2008-09 financial year.

An annual inflationary uplift has been awarded to most supported-housing services over the years. However, in April 2008, the Housing Executive announced that the Supporting People budget would receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-2011. As a result, the budget has been set at a baseline of £61 million per annum for those three years. The Housing Executive's justification for that decision was that there were underspends in the programme in the previous three years.

However, the Housing Executive admitted that those underspends were largely due to delays in the completion of housing association newbuild schemes, for which Supporting People had budgeted revenue costs that could not be drawn down for expenditure. Given the escalating costs of overheads and of salary increases faced by supported-housing providers, the freezing of Supporting People funding amounts to net cuts. Organisations are asked to deliver services under existing contractual agreements with the Housing Executive for less money against a rising tide of costs. That flies in the face of Positive Steps — a policy to promote partnership-working between the Government and the voluntary sector.

Organisations in the voluntary sector stated that they had already absorbed above-inflation cost rises in the past few years; that further financial constraints would jeopardise the quality of their services and, ultimately, put at risk the most vulnerable. A survey conducted in September 2008 by the Council for the Homeless and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, regarding the likely effect of reductions in Supporting People funding, indicated serious concerns in the sector over the sustainability of current schemes.

The findings show that by 2010-11 an estimated 73% of respondents' schemes will be in deficit. Of those, at least 50% will be in deficit due directly to shortfalls in Supporting People funding. By the end of 2011, respondents estimated that 14% of the schemes would be at risk and that the organisations involved would seek to withdraw from their Supporting People contracts. The survey also found that 39% of respondents thought that there would be a decline by 2010-11 in the proportion of the Supporting People budget spent in relation to the number of hours of housing support delivered. That will have direct implications for performance quality and safety.

It is also difficult to envisage how further cuts can be made by organisations that are committed to minimum standards. Some 59% of those surveyed believe that staffing levels will probably decrease. At the moment, about 75% of organisations' budgets pay support workers' salaries. Organisations committed to NJC scales and to incremental salary increases fear that they will have to choose between increasing wages and employing fewer staff or maintaining wage levels and losing well-trained staff. Undoubtedly, both options will have a detrimental effect on tenants. Furthermore, the survey shows that most organisations anticipate a reduction in the training and development of staff, which will have long-term negative consequences for the future quality and development of schemes. Overall, larger organisations may have more flexibility in sharing resources, but, for smaller providers, cross-subsidising or pooling courses may not be possible.

In conclusion, the flatlining of Supporting People funding will damage the quality of services to the most vulnerable. We urge the Minister to find the means to defrost the freeze on the ban on allowing inflationary increases for such valuable services. In the medium term, the sector would benefit from departmental approval of any inflationary uplift for 2008-09. If that is not an option, the Minister must ring-fence for uplift any additional funds realised as part of the in-year monitoring rounds.

Supporting People funding for existing schemes must be increased by at least the rate of inflation in 2009-10 and 2010-11. We suggest to the Minister that, in future years, any unavoidable underspends in the Supporting People budget should either be spent on relevant non-recurring items of expenditure, such as staff training, or should be carried into following years. It would seem prudent for the Supporting People budget to be agreed on a three-year rolling cycle to enable long-term financial planning and projections. That would provide some stability for the sector, which has been a valuable resource to the community.

3.30 pm

Miss McIlveen: As Members have already heard, Supporting People plays a vital role in enabling some of the most vulnerable adults and young people to live in the community. It is a crucial link in delivering community care and in enabling those at risk of homelessness to access supported housing. As such, the voluntary agencies that are involved in delivering the Supporting People programme provide the kind of care and housing support that allow many of our most vulnerable citizens to be more fully included in our community.

A substantial number of the young people who access Supporting People come from a care background and require focused and intensive support to enable them to

gain the skills of independent living. I had the privilege of visiting a voluntary provider of such services and meeting a group of young people living in accommodation provided under Supporting People. I listened to their stories and saw for myself how important it is that such care and support is available in a housing setting. Most of those people were without family support, and many had experienced very difficult and sometimes traumatic childhoods. However, most of them were in work or training, and, with the help available from services provided under the Supporting People fund — in conjunction with health and social care trust schemes — they were trying to improve their lives. When young people work extremely hard to overcome the difficulties that they have faced, it is imperative that we support essential front-line services.

Structural funding issues around Supporting People were identified in the Semple Review, and providers have indicated that they continue to be problematic. In particular, the review identified wrangling between Supporting People and housing benefit over reapportionment of costs. Providers have indicated that decisions regarding who funds the care and Supporting People costs for young people were causing difficulty. There is a need for greater clarity about the interface between care and housing, and how costs can be allocated in a way that supports the best interests of young people.

On several occasions, we have debated the issue of young adults in Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their right to live and be supported in the community. We have debated the Bamford Review and endorsed its call for a reduction in the number of adults with learning difficulties living in hospitals. However, we cannot achieve that without the correct support and without ensuring that we are willing to provide adequate and appropriate funding. If we do not address the need for additional supported housing services now, we will find ourselves still discussing the needs of adults with learning difficulties in five years' time without having made any real difference.

It is impossible for voluntary providers of services to continue, year on year, without any inflationary uplift, as, in effect, we are asking them to continue with a reduction in funding. No cost-of-living increase was awarded to service providers this year, and, as we have heard, many providers are considering reductions in front-line services to extremely vulnerable people if additional funding does not become available. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, the Committee for Social Development had a presentation at one of its informal receptions from the Triangle Housing Association, which indicated just that.

It seems somewhat contradictory that the Minister has indicated that some of the Supporting People budget was handed back in previous years, yet

providers say that they have faced difficulties in securing funding for new projects or in extending current projects. Some of the difficulties seem to be attributable to the lack of facilities for carrying forward expenditure and little ability to reallocate within the existing year's expenditure. Surely that is a practical issue that must be addressed. My understanding is that a review of the five-year social housing development programme shows that the overall number of supported housing schemes is in decline.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that there are not enough schemes to meet existing need, let alone address the additional needs that would be generated by the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

Failure to address the legitimate concerns of providers about the need for an inflationary increase — and for more funding overall — will lead to the closure or retraction of some schemes at a time when more provision is clearly required. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are given priority and are addressed.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In my experience, when it comes to cutting budgets, the services that provide for the people who are most in need in society are, invariably, the first to be axed. In the case of the Supporting People fund, we are told that what is being proposed is merely a freeze on inflationary increases, which will not affect programmes that are already up and running. Furthermore, we are told, service providers can draw on reserves to make up any shortfall. That is utter rubbish. Those with responsibility for managing budgets must consider the impact that cuts will have on those people who rely on services provided by the Supporting People fund. Those services can provide a lifeline for people who totally depend on those resources to survive.

It is understandable that at a time such as this, when the credit crunch is having a detrimental effect on all in society, everyone should tighten their belts. However, how can people who are lying in the street with nowhere to go, or those suffering from mental illness, tighten their belts?

The Supporting People fund was introduced by the Housing Executive in the North of Ireland in 2003 in order to provide a lifeline for vulnerable people in our communities. The fund's objectives sought to enable vulnerable people to live independently, to promote their inclusion in wider society and to develop a partnership with statutory agencies, service users and providers.

Many networks have been built over the years to deliver services under the Supporting People banner. Those organisations have now been informed that they will suffer inflationary freezes for the next three years. None of those organisations were prepared for that

announcement, and many of them now believe that their ability to deliver services will be seriously affected. Much-needed programmes and valuable staff will be lost, which will ultimately have an impact on vulnerable groups of people, such as those who are homeless or mentally ill, elderly people and young people.

Several months ago, I was told that efficiency savings would not affect essential community programmes. I took the opportunity to raise the issue of the Supporting People fund at last week's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I asked whether it was intended that efficiency cuts would affect those people who are most in need in society, and I was told that that was not the case. I was informed that it was up to the Minister of the relevant Department to decide where savings would be made.

I raised the issue again at last week's meeting of the Committee for Social Development, and asked that the Simon Community, among others, be invited to give evidence to the Committee on how those efficiency cuts will affect their ability to deliver services to the wider community. One of the reasons given as the rationale for the cuts was the underspend in the Supporting People fund's budget between 2004-05 and 2006-07. However, the officials failed to say that most of that was due to programme slippage in the housing associations' newbuild programme, which affected the ability of Supporting People schemes to draw down funding.

The Welcome Centre, which is in my constituency, relies heavily on the Supporting People fund. It provides a place of security where homeless people can gain access to essential basic services, and provides hot meals and bedding for people who are sleeping rough in Belfast. Those projects could become victims of cuts to inflationary increases. If that is the case, what will become of those people who rely on such an excellent and vital service?

Those are only two of at least 900 schemes that provide services under the Supporting People fund for an estimated 23,000 people. Other programmes cater for individuals suffering from substance and drug abuse or provide staff who facilitate the programmes that are necessary to stimulate activity for elderly people who live in sheltered dwellings.

Many Members are familiar with the work of the Simon Community and the huge role that it plays in provision for the homeless. The proposed freeze on inflationary increases over the next three years will seriously affect the Simon Community's ability to cover salary increases, which will then result in greater financial pressure on the organisation to raise funds.

That will particularly affect its ability to function effectively in years two and three. In addition, the homelessness sector is currently subject to a major review and modernisation agenda through the

publication of the Housing Executive's homelessness strategy, which will include a review of supported accommodation. It is imperative that the underlying financial stability exists to support the sector to negotiate any change agenda.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr F McCann: When all is said and done, a serious mistake has been made by the Departments involved in the resourcing of the Supporting People programme, and their actions have caused panic in the sector.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate. In our response to the Budget in January 2008, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced support for the Supporting People scheme, and raised concerns that the budget allocated for the scheme would be inadequate. The Supporting People scheme, which was established in 2003, and is implemented locally by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, is a progressive way of delivering housing support services for vulnerable sections of society through the use of the voluntary and private sectors, and is more cost-effective than relying on statutory services.

The programme funds a range of supported housing services in over 900 schemes, which assist approximately 23,000 people to improve their quality of life and attain independence by living in their community, rather than facing the prospect of spending years shut away in care homes. There are 11 main client populations, including those with a learning disability or mental-health problems, victims of domestic violence, older people and vulnerable young people. It is crystal clear that those are the very people who are least able to look after themselves, and who should receive assistance from society.

In our response to the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced particular concerns regarding the need to develop a new sheltered housing pilot scheme for adults with learning difficulties, many of whom are being cared for by ageing parents who maintain that role with increasing difficulty.

Supporting People programmes cut across departmental lines — I know that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been involved in various projects, and the health and social care trusts have been involved in resettling long-stay patients from mental-health and learning-disability hospitals into appropriate places in the community.

The sums involved are considerable. Between 2004 and 2007, some £10.6 million was allocated to accommodation and supporting services for victims of domestic violence, and the total amount allocated to the Supporting People programme in 2004-05 was nearly £49 million. It is absolutely crucial that the Supporting People budget for the financial years

2008-11 is increased in line with inflation. Failure to achieve that has caused fears relating to staff retention and staff recruitment, as 75% of Supporting People funding goes towards the salaries of housing support workers.

Mr A Maginness: I have great respect for Ms Lo, and I understand the points that she raised. However, I think that some of the worries that she expressed are misplaced. The current position is that £61 million has been granted for each of the next three financial years, amounting to £183 million. That represents an increase of £3 million on the budget for last year — determined under direct rule — which was £58 million. Given that uplift, it seems that her concerns are misplaced, or premature.

The Department and the Minister are committed to maintaining this vital service for the most vulnerable people in society. At least 23,000 people benefit from the scheme, and it is a scheme that all of us in this House fully support. I reiterate what other Members already said about the scheme and its importance for vulnerable people in the community.

3.45 pm

Mr F McCann: Is the Member saying that the Simon Community, and the many other groups that deal with Supporting People, have nothing to worry about?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional one minute in which to speak.

Mr A Maginness: I am not saying that any group has nothing to worry about; I am simply pointing out that Supporting People has received a substantial uplift in funding. When Mr Fra McCann spoke earlier, he may have confused efficiency savings with what he termed as inflationary cuts. The Supporting People scheme has been exempt from any efficiency cuts; they do not apply to that scheme. Efficiency cuts of 3% apply uniformly throughout many other schemes in the budget of the Department for Social Development, and of other Departments. That helpful element is inbuilt into the Supporting People programme, exempting it from any cuts. That should, in itself, be a sufficient safeguard.

Ms Lo is quite right to say that Supporting People will be subject to rising costs. It is important that the Department monitors those and ensures that the net value of the programme is maintained so that the services that it presently supports are not put in danger. In fact, if there were any risk of that, one would hope that the Department and the Minister would avail themselves of in-year monitoring in order to assist the scheme if necessary.

The programme has not been affected by efficiency-savings cuts, which has allowed flexibility. Funding for the programme has, in fact, been substantially increased. That will safeguard the future of the scheme,

and I hope that that will satisfy and reassure those organisations that are genuinely concerned about the situation.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to the comments of Mr Maginness on the additional money for the Supporting People fund. The Simon Community and other organisations have spoken to me and other members of the Committee for Social Development. Figures can be bandied about, but those organisations have genuine fears that their funding has, according to them, been capped. Only the Minister knows whether that is a true reflection of the situation.

Those voluntary organisations face the problem of high staffing levels. They rely heavily on their staff, and wage increases this year will become a severe problem. Anna Lo has a valid point in that the real problem is that the sector cannot be expected to live without inflationary increases and still maintain the levels of support that it has provided to the community. Civil servants from the Department for Social Development have told the Committee that the Housing Executive is unable to deliver the housing programme under the Supporting People fund.

What was not made clear at those Committee meetings were the reasons behind the programme's lack of delivery. The reasons were not attributable to the Housing Executive. If anyone was to blame, it was the Planning Service, and there was a classic example of that in my constituency, where Trinity Housing was building five special-needs houses. The project kicked off approximately three years ago with the full support of the community and me. The project took five years to deliver — and one would question why it took five years to deliver six houses — because the Planning Service argued for two years about the size of kitchens.

That shows how ridiculous the system is in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it led to slippages in the programme, and that is what the Housing Executive has been up against for the past two or three years: when it allocates bills, planning causes severe troubles, and the programme slips.

What happens to the money that slips in that year? Is it put into the following year's funding? I do not believe that to be the case, but perhaps the Minister will be able to clarify that. Therefore, there is a knock-on effect that gathers pace each year, and it is a difficulty for the Housing Executive in delivering the programme that it hoped to deliver. However, the failing is not the fault of the Housing Executive. It is, unfortunately, attributable to other Departments.

A number of months ago, the House heard the Minister of Health deliver his report on the Bamford Review, towards which he allocated £44 million for community-based services. That is all about getting people out of institutionalised care and back into the

community. However, therein lies the conundrum: how can those people be returned into the community if the housing build for those special-needs people is continually slipping? Perhaps the Minister needs to examine that situation, provide additional support to the project, and speak to the Planning Service in order to try to expedite that housing build.

However, there is a situation out there among those bodies whereby they believe that they are facing problems and cuts in services. Perhaps that is an issue that the Minister needs to re-address with those groups. I commend the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When the direct rule Social Development Minister, David Hanson, launched the Supporting People strategy, he said:

“Supported housing services have an important role to play in helping vulnerable people live independent lives in the community and reducing homelessness. In the past, services available were determined by the requirements of the funder rather than the needs of the individual. The Supporting People Strategy, which is underpinned by significant Government funding, is a clear indication of how we have moved to a situation whereby the provision of support services is determined by the needs of individuals and not by the requirements of funding sources.”

Let me tell the Assembly about the experience of one group who believe that the Supporting People strategy is not working for them. At Muckamore Abbey Hospital, there is a group of patients called “Tell it like it is”. They started a training course to learn how to speak to the public and politicians in order to communicate about their lives and their hopes for the future. Each member of the group has been told that they are ready to be discharged from hospital. However, they, and many more patients like them at Muckamore, have been unable to set up home in the community because the right level of support is not available.

I met Sammy, who has been waiting for two years to be discharged, and Richard, who has been waiting for six years. However, for various reasons, they have not been able to be safely placed and supported in the community. As a result, they are, effectively, prisoners in the hospital.

The Health Committee visited Muckamore in order to see at first hand the situation for those who have experienced serious delay in being discharged. It was clear to Committee members that we must have a cross-departmental approach in order to ensure that those who are ready for discharge are given every support to live independently in the community.

The people at Muckamore are not the only section of society that is affected. There are, as Members have said, numerous vulnerable people who are being let down by the Supporting People fund. Among the groups who benefit from the fund are women who need support as a result of, perhaps, domestic violence,

or who need a safe and secure environment to be available when necessary. Withheld or inadequate financial support will lead to a reduction in services and put those women in a more vulnerable position.

My colleague Carál Ní Chuilín and I visited some young women in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre who hoped to find a place in society and to be supported on their release. I also have concerns that those women's hopes will not be realised. We must ensure that we develop services, in line with service users' aspirations, to help those women settle back into society and to get the support that they need.

I support the motion, because many sections of society require the help of the Supporting People fund. I urge the Minister for Social Development not to let those people down.

Mr Beggs: The Supporting People fund, which is a UK-wide programme, has reformed the way in which housing support services have been commissioned and funded. Before 2003, services were deployed largely on an ad hoc basis, sometimes commissioned by statutory agencies, but mostly arising as a result of lobbying, and no small amount of innovation, by the voluntary sector.

The Supporting People fund has given strategic direction, stability and sustainability to housing support in Northern Ireland. That has resulted in significant benefits to vulnerable individuals, as well as cost benefits to Government services such as the Health Service. The fund has also helped to prevent some young people from entering the criminal-justice system. Without the help, support and guidance provided through the fund, those people may have gone down that route.

In April 2008, the announcement that the Supporting People fund was to receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-11 has put the fund in serious jeopardy, the cost of which may be significant to individuals and the Government. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the current situation of financial constraint; however, in this instance, there is a danger of being penny wise and pound foolish. The voluntary sector, in particular, adds to the fund from its own resources. Often, volunteers' contributions go far beyond that for which they are contracted. Why should we put that sector at risk?

The Supporting People fund, through strategic housing support that various organisations administer, improves the quality of life for vulnerable families, children and young people, and the elderly, and enables them to interact with, and often to reintegrate into, the wider community.

The fund is particularly geared towards people who are in danger of becoming homeless. I have an interest in the issue of children and young people. Early

support can often assist vulnerable young people, such as those leaving care, to integrate into and contribute fully to society. Those people need additional support during that critical period in their lives when they leave a stable institutional setting and go out into the world on their own.

The ability to maintain tenancy or to remain at one's own home can also stop people from becoming a burden on other parts of health and social services. That service is critical for young people who are leaving care, or who have learning difficulties, poor health or mental-health problems, and who want to live independently from their parents, many of whom may also be in poor health.

Young people who have been through the criminal-justice system must be reintegrated into society. The adaptability of the service to meet individuals' needs is crucial if we are to break the cycle of criminality. That is something that we want to succeed.

I accept that, when there have been no inflationary pressures, the fund has not been subject to efficiency cuts, as the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said. However, it is obvious that actual costs will be passed on to service providers, for which they cannot pay.

The decision not to give an inflationary increase in real terms is a cut to funding. Real concerns exist that that will have a destabilising effect on the sector as it faces those significant inflationary pressures. Voluntary organisations have entered into contracts with the Department for service-provision standards, and enhanced regulatory compliance, but they are then often put in a legally difficult position as they face what is effectively reduced funding.

Many staff in that sector are tied to the NJC pay scales. Savings may be possible only, therefore, through job cuts and, effectively, loss of support.

4.00 pm

I urge the Minister to liaise carefully with service providers so that the implications of what effectively represents a cut do not put services at risk. There is a danger that organisations will start to tailor their provisions to funding requirements, instead of individuals' needs. The programme is progressive, and it is vital that it continue. We should not make short-term investments in this area. I urge the Minister to liaise with the Finance Minister to ensure that the inflationary increases can subsequently be met in budgetary considerations.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP was founded on the principles of equality and social justice. Many people across the community will agree with me when I say that, in Margaret Ritchie, we have a Minister who genuinely listens to the concerns of people from all sections of our society — particularly the community

and voluntary sector, which is under particular stress at a challenging time for all sectors of our community.

Not many people foresaw the extent of the current economic crisis as it has developed in recent weeks. It is, therefore, commendable that the Minister, despite the advice that she received from Mr Fra McCann to accept her lot in the Budget debate of October 2007, was successful in drawing an additional £3 million into a budget that was underspent. Many of us would ask why we are adding money to an underspent budget.

The Minister knows that Supporting People is a matter of social justice. There are many vulnerable people in our community, and the SDLP is serious about ensuring a greater access to wealth and better health outcomes for those living in poverty. It is most unfortunate that, due to the failure of the Executive to meet, we do not have an anti-poverty strategy that the Minister for Social Development could work within to tackle the real issues facing the most vulnerable in our society.

It is also true that, although the Housing Executive is the main administrator of Supporting People, the commissioning of services generally falls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As someone who worked in health and social services for 22 years, I believe that there is disjointedness — a crack in the pavement — in the integration of services.

At least under devolution there is an opportunity for Ministers to work together and with officials to ensure that everything works smoothly. It is interesting to note that, when there was a great debate in 2006 about whether Supporting People should be transferred to local councils along with housing powers, the Housing Council chairperson, Dineen Walker, said that her organisation thought it:

“difficult to justify the transfer of this critical function to new councils who have no previous expertise. It will cause confusion and disruption to an otherwise well-administered service to the public.”

The key words are “well-administered service to the public”, and bearing in mind that the Department for Social Development administers that service, that is praise indeed. As Members are aware, all parties are represented on the Housing Council, and the chairperson would not have issued such a press statement if she did not have the support of her fellow members on the Housing Council.

I am sure that, in her reply to the debate, the Minister will take on board the concerns that Members have expressed, and will reflect on the challenging times in which we live, and the issues that the community and voluntary sectors have raised in relation to the retention of skilled staff — not to mention service delivery. There is widespread

recognition that all businesses, services and agencies are facing increased overhead costs because of rising fuel and energy costs. No doubt the Minister will examine that issue.

Mrs O'Neill correctly highlighted the difficulties with delayed discharges at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. That is not just a problem for residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital but one for patients in other psychiatric hospitals who have been there for far too long. Rather than it being down to a lack of funding for the Supporting People initiative, those delayed discharges occur because not enough staff are employed in the health and social services sector. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that there was a shortfall of 400 mental-health nurses. Mental-health nurses are vital professionals when it comes to the process of discharging patients and former clients into the community. Therefore, interdepartmental work is required, and I have every confidence that Minister Ritchie will deliver.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I commend Anna Lo and Kieran McCarthy for tabling it. I also thank Anna Lo for giving me a briefing paper published in April 2008 from the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Service Providers (CRISPP) and CHNI (Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland), which is titled, 'A joint response by CRISSP and CHNI on the impact of the 'Programme for Government' on the Supporting People budget for financial years 2008-2011'.

Although Mr Maginness said that there is no need to be concerned, the briefing paper is worth examining. It states that the Supporting People budget has been baselined at £61 million for 2008-2011 as a result of the Programme for Government. Mr Maginness referred to that figure, but the paper goes on to state that that represents a net cut in funding. It also states that there are serious concerns about the destabilising effect that that is likely to have on the sector.

I am not saying that Members should accept such papers without casting a critical eye over them, but those comments come directly from the sector and are important should people not be convinced that a problem exists.

Mr A Maginness: First, the Member has not taken into consideration that there are no efficiency savings in the scheme, which represent 3%. Secondly, as Mrs Dolores Kelly said, there was underspend in the programme. Thirdly, if there are problems in future, in-year monitoring can always be performed.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mrs McGill: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept his point about

the 3% efficiency savings — I had it in my notes to comment on.

In response to a question for written answer, the Minister said that she had not touched the fund or made efficiency savings, which, I was going to say, is welcome. I note that Mr Maginness did not say that he would look at the briefing paper, so I recommend again that he does — I can give it to him on the way out of the Chamber.

Michelle O'Neill gave an example from her constituency, so I will refer to two groups in my constituency to which I spoke today — the Strabane Association for the Temporary Homeless (SATH) and the Open Doors Housing Association in Dillon Court, also in Strabane. Those two groups gave us definite examples of where they would struggle. Although those groups do great work, are content and appreciate the funding that they receive, they feel that the rising costs will affect them. The Open Doors Housing Association has flats for a range of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, those with mental-health issues, the homeless and single parents. SATH deals with many crisis situations and is concerned about its funding.

SATH provides a floating support service. It must travel and, therefore, pay increased fuel costs, and so on. For example, a child whose parent is a service user had to visit a hospital that was not in the locality; SATH funded the hospital visit for the child's appointment. The organisation is concerned that such services will be lost.

I commend those two facilities in my area, and I have spoken to people who are involved with them. Contrary to some of the contributions that have been made, there is concern that because there is no inflationary increase in funding, that will, as the briefing paper states, amount to a cut.

I do not wish to pick on Mr Maginness; it is just that he mentioned a recommendation to which I have also referred in my notes. The briefing paper also makes two or three recommendations. It suggests that the Minister could apply for funding through the in-year monitoring round. My party welcomes that. One of the paper's other recommendations is that in the immediate term, members would benefit from departmental approval of an inflationary uplift for 2008-2011 that is no less than the retail price index.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to take part in it and to respond to the motion. I am aware that Anna Lo has been concerned about the matter, and I hope that I can provide her with some reassurance. The debate gives me the opportunity to clarify some of the issues that have been raised. Of course, I will try to deal with all Members'

concerns. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will read the Hansard report, and if I have left any question unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

Perhaps I should provide Members with some background information on the Supporting People fund that may help to put the debate in context. It is a policy and funding framework that provides support to enable people to live as independently as possible in their own homes. That can be done through the provision of temporary shelter — for example, for women who have fled domestic violence — or through somewhere for vulnerable adults to develop the skills that are necessary for them to live independently in their own communities.

During the past year, I visited many of those facilities throughout the North of Ireland to talk to young people who have gained skills and expertise that hitherto they would not have been able to gain. They have been able to live in a stabilising environment that has provided them with a great degree of security of tenure. I strongly support those programmes.

The Supporting People programme was introduced in 2003. As many Members said, the fund targets and supports the most vulnerable. We must never lose sight of that. The programme is designed to give more choice in how and where those vulnerable people live, which has opened up more opportunities than previously possible. The number of people who are supported has almost doubled since the programme's introduction in 2003. At the outset, its target was to support 12,000 people into independent living; at present, more than 23,000 people benefit from that support. Therefore, it has been hugely successful.

I am determined to continue to reach out and support even more people who may need it. At present, 120 providers deliver services to 23,000 people in more than 800 schemes throughout Northern Ireland. Providers, such as Mencap, Women's Aid, Homefirst, Age Concern, and the wider housing association movement deliver support service to the most vulnerable in the community.

All providers deserve our deepest respect and gratitude for working tirelessly towards making a significant difference to the lives of all those people.

4.15 pm

Let us get down to the money. In 2003, the allocation for Supporting People was £40 million. That figure jumped to £48 million the next year, then to £52 million, then to £55 million, then to £58 million. The current allocation is £183 million over the next three years. The budget stands at £61 million for this year, and that underlines the growing success of, and increasing support for, the programme, and my commitment to it. Given that increase, I am a little surprised to hear

concerns that funding for the programme is insufficient — or worse, that it is under threat. That is not the case; the facts speak for themselves.

In the last year of direct rule, only £58 million was made available for the fund. Members will recognise that I have increased — not reduced — the resources available for Supporting People, at a time when my Department is under pressure, year on year, to find efficiency savings of 3% right across the board. I remind Members that the Executive made that decision. The Executive are made up of the parties represented in the House; some members of those parties spoke today, and they were the very people who promoted those 3% efficiency savings, against the wishes of others in the Executive. Some in this Chamber have a short memory; I do not.

That further underlines how determined I am to support the most vulnerable in society through the Supporting People fund. I might add that I take that approach right across DSD, squeezing out savings in bureaucracy and administration to free up resources to enhance services to people. Millions of pounds of neighbourhood renewal funding have been refocused towards services, and the same will be done in relation to housing and tackling fuel poverty.

When I launched the new housing agenda earlier this year, I made it clear that I wanted to increase the supply of housing, including the supply of supported and sheltered housing. I assure Members that, in addressing the housing need, I will continue to give priority to those who are most vulnerable.

I further reassure Members that I am by no means drawing a line under that funding, as Mr Maginness and Mrs Kelly indicated. If the case for more funding is made, then more must be done, and that can be delivered. I will avail myself of the opportunities that arise to bid for more resources. I will work closely with service providers to continue to deliver high-quality, cost-effective and reliable housing-related support services. My Department already works with the Housing Executive, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four area health and social services boards, the Probation Board, and not least of all, the service providers to help inform its future work, and I assure the House that it will continue to do that.

I shall deal with some of the issues raised by Members. Anna Lo referred to an inflationary increase. I will continue to seek additional funds to deliver that very important service. Michelle McIlveen raised the issue of the number of people working in the Supporting People programme. I recognise the important work undertaken by all those people who provide Supporting People's service. Indeed, some 4,500 people provide that valuable service — an increase on three to four

years ago, when approximately 2,500 people were employed.

Let us move on. Fra McCann is continuously in a state of confusion. He is having difficulty with his sums and somebody should tell him what is new. As Minister, I have protected the fund by ensuring that cuts were not applied to the budget.

When I took responsibility for the budget, it was at £58 million.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: No, I will not take any interventions.

I ensured that the budget was increased to £61 million. In October 2007, when Sinn Féin said that I should stop whingeing and accept my lot, I fought a hard, but successful, battle with DFP to ensure that the funding for subsequent years would not be affected. I wish that Fra McCann would listen, rather than repeat the same old, tired message. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must speak through the Chair. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister for Social Development: On Friday, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is due to meet representatives from the Welcome Centre to consider its ongoing funding requirements.

Fra McCann's colleague Claire McGill mentioned two groups in Strabane. If she could possibly provide me with the details of those groups, I will ensure that the issues involved are investigated.

I agree with Alban Maginness that there is no efficiency cut. By taking action to ensure that no such cuts were applied, I ensured that £6 million will be available to direct to Supporting People over the next three-year period.

Jonathan Craig raised several issues, and I assure him that any underspend will be carried forward to future years to meet recurring commitments. I bid for additional funding to implement elements of the Bamford Review, but DFP did not approve it. I wonder who the Minister of that Department is. Perhaps Mr Craig should direct his funding queries to DFP, and I also advise him to put any queries on planning and housing programmes to the Minister of the Environment.

Michelle O'Neill talked about Muckamore Abbey Hospital, and my Department will develop 38 new units, at a cost of £4.6 million, for the resettlement of that hospital's patients.

I emphasise my continuing commitment to the Supporting People programme, and I underline my assurance to Members that I will continue to bid for additional funds during the in-year monitoring rounds, if and when they are required.

Mr McCarthy: I am not sure that I need 10 minutes for my winding-up speech.

Supporting People has made a welcome contribution to the provision of warm and comfortable homes for the most vulnerable people. The initiative was introduced to give people who are less fortunate than us the option to live independently. The programme has performed an excellent function since its foundation in 2003.

However, it appears that threats to its progress now exist. All Members who spoke raised the genuine concern that, from now until 2011, no inflationary increase will be applied to the funding of the programme.

My colleague Anna Lo, and most of the other Members who spoke, talked about the fears that result from the static funding arrangements.

Michelle McIlveen spoke out — rightly — for the needs of young people. Supporting People has been an essential element in giving young folk a decent life. There must be no question of handing back any unspent money. A genuine need exists, and it is essential that the Department seeks out that need and uses all the available resources to meet it.

Mr F McCann: Most of the groups under the Supporting People programme briefed Members of various parties. All say that due to the lack of an inflationary increase, some of the services and jobs that they provide will be affected. Those who listened to the Minister today may agree that the confusion lies not with me or those groups, but with her and the Department.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for drawing that to the Assembly's attention. I will move on and perhaps return to what he said in my closing remarks.

Mr McCann spoke passionately about his worries about any shortfall in funding for Supporting People. He talked about the good work that is carried out by local organisations such as the Simon Community. The Minister must listen to those concerns, and I think that she probably is.

Billy Armstrong outlined that the programme helps more than 23,000 people, and the Minister referred to that. Those people must not be abandoned. Furthermore, Mr Armstrong spoke of Minister McGimpsey's effort in that regard. I thank all Members who attended today's rally at Stormont to support people with learning disabilities.

I am glad that Alban Maginness has confidence in the future. Members would be disappointed if he did not support all the Minister's work. All Members would do the same.

Mr A Maginness: It is the "supporting Minister" programme.

Mr McCarthy: He explained that some concerns are misplaced or premature, and it is good news that the Minister is committed.

Jonathan Craig is worried — as all Members are — about the future of housing for vulnerable people. He presented a strong case for the Planning Service to work with the housing associations. That notion is worth considering. The Planning Service moved slowly, and, therefore, the building of the homes was not completed on time. That could have — and may have — resulted in money not being used where it should have been. Moreover, Jonathan expressed concern about the provision of housing for people with learning difficulties.

Michelle O'Neill outlined that the Supporting People fund was not working in Muckamore Abbey. It is a pity that housing need is not being met in that facility. Further provision for victims of domestic violence would be useful, and the Minister responded —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. However, I remind him of the Minister's concluding remarks in which she outlined that an additional 38 units will be commissioned and built to facilitate the discharge of patients from Muckamore. Does the Member agree that, to a large extent, the progress of those discharges is the responsibility of the Health Service?

Mr McCarthy: I agree.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Hurry up.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to the Minister's statement, and I commend her work on efficiency savings. Although I accept that there have been no cutbacks, there has been no additional money — that is why we face those issues daily.

The situation at Muckamore is not solely a health issue. There is a lack of houses and supported accommodation for people leaving Muckamore. The issue must not be clouded.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for her intervention. I accept the point, and I will comment on that later if I have enough time.

I agree with Dolores Kelly's assertion that the Minister listens to people's concerns. However, the Minister must prove that that is true more often. *[Laughter.]*

She will be judged on whether or not she delivers a good continuous service to our most vulnerable people. Dolores mentioned that skilled staff will be required to deliver a well-administered service to the public. That matter is of concern to all Members.

I wrote in my notes that it was good to see agreement between Alban Maginness and Claire McGill. *[Laughter.]*

I had written that before the disagreement between Alban and Claire.

Claire mentioned the future of two groups from Strabane. All Members are concerned about that matter, and it gives the Minister good reason to convince the House that our people are not threatened.

During her speech, the Minister blew her own trumpet — and why not. We welcome the fact that the Minister is visiting communities. In fact, she will, I hope, visit my constituency next week. It is important that other Ministers do likewise.

I am pleased about that. The Minister pointed out that, at the start of the programme, 12,000 people were seeking independent living: that figure has now risen to 23,000. That is good, that is progress.

4.30 pm

I come to the crux of the matter: the Minister gave us her Department's annual budget figures from 2002 to 2008. Since 2003, her budget has increased annually by £3 million, and, by 2008, it had reached £61 million. I am worried that, next year, the year after and the year after that, the budget will remain fixed at £61 million. That means that, over those three years, her budget will lose out on nine million quid that could be used to provide more housing or services to the most vulnerable people.

I was interested in the Minister's assertion that she had asked for more money but that the Minister of Finance and Personnel had refused. I do not know who the Finance Minister was at that time. However, I call on Michelle McIlveen and Jonathan Craig to use whatever influence they may have on the DUP Minister to get him to cough up when it is necessary.

All Members agree that the Supporting People fund has been very useful. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Financial Advice for Older People

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people.

An alarming number of pensioners are experiencing debt and financial difficulties in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom. The cost of living is escalating at a much higher rate for senior citizens than for the rest of the population. Rising inflation and commodity prices can be much more damaging to a pensioner whose income has dropped to a limited, fixed rate. In stark contrast to the rapid rise in the prices of food and energy — the two items on which pensioners are most likely to spend their money — state pensions have increased by only £3.40 since last year: that is, from £87.30 to £90.70 per week.

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

An additional 5,000 pensioners have been forced into poverty in Northern Ireland in the last 12 months. Twenty-eight per cent of pensioners must survive below the poverty line, and one older person in seven lives in severe poverty in Northern Ireland. Those figures alone make a mockery of the Executive's target of eradicating poverty.

Changes in financial services and markets over the last decade have also greatly affected pensioners and those reaching retirement age. Many people's private pensions have been substantially reduced due to the volatility of the stock market.

Historically, older people have avoided, or have had more limited levels of, debt. As people reach retirement age, they are often approaching the end of their mortgage and loan repayments. However, reports to older people's organisations suggest that the problem of debt, far from diminishing, is escalating. It becomes evident that more and more older people enter retirement age with debts outstanding or are forced to supplement their incomes with credit-card expenditure or loans.

At present, 33% of individuals over 60 years of age in Northern Ireland have at least one credit card. One in six retirees in the United Kingdom still has a mortgage to pay. One in three of those who have a mortgage owes more than £50,000, and one in 10 owes over £100,000. Help the Aged points out that, in 2005, credit users in

their late 50s and early 60s owed, on average, four times as much their counterparts did in 1995. Many people agree that there is the potential for a debt crisis in the coming decade.

Research has highlighted that the first year of retirement is often crucial, as retirees find it extremely difficult to adjust to a limited income and a more limited lifestyle. With more than half of those aged between 55 and 65 still paying a mortgage, it is vital that they are prepared to meet their financial commitments with a reduced income. Once those people are forced into debt, they find it extremely difficult to remove themselves from it due to their fixed income. It is extremely important that interventions are made to help individuals already in debt, and — more importantly — to prevent others from getting into debt.

The increase in utility bills has forced many older people into debt and has added to their existing debt. The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland estimated that oil customers are paying £346 more this year than they did last year. Although prices are finally coming down, the effect of the increase has put many additional pensioners into debt. Furthermore, Northern Ireland Electricity confirmed that household electricity bills have increased by a staggering 33% since 1 October 2008, and Phoenix Natural Gas increased its prices by almost 20%, which is 113% higher than this time last year.

As research by the Equality Commission highlighted, many older people live alone, have limited support and have a more limited understanding of modern financial services, methods of managing money and paying for goods. Chip and PIN, Internet banking and direct-debit payments are often an enigma to many pensioners. That means that many older people cannot avail of the cheaper online deals or cheaper direct-debit payments.

Many older people use cash only, do not have a bank account and cannot access the Internet. In addition, the post office closures mean that pensioners' choices in that area are limited. Utility providers often offer cheaper prices for people who pay by direct debit. Therefore, they often make greater profits from those people who are the least able to pay. A greater understanding of the modern financial mechanisms for payment and moving money are a must for all members of society, but especially for the elderly. Any financial-education plans must meet the needs of older people.

The voluntary sector that provides advice for older people in Northern Ireland has recorded an increasing number of people who request debt advice. Age Concern has experienced an increase in its debt caseload — the organisation currently deals with more than £700,000 of debt, despite being a service that has never been advertised formally. Its debt load has increased by

more than 50% from this time last year and by more than £120,000 from May last year.

It is crucial that the Department for Social Development and the voluntary and community sector deliver greater levels of advice to older people. It is also crucial that that advice is accessible and simple. The Equality Commission's research shows that many older people do not like using complicated phone services. They trust local services and personal contacts, and do not like to ask for help. It is therefore crucial that the advice is accessible and appropriate.

I recognise that the Minister has instigated a strategy for supporting the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community through the Opening Doors programme. There is little doubt that the voluntary and community sector is often best-placed to identify and work with those who need help. However, it is considered that there is a lack of in-depth research regarding debt among older people in Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister to clarify what information about debt levels and advice to older people is being used in that process. Will initiatives be implemented that will singly address the problem of debt for older people?

There is another way in which improved financial advice could improve the financial situations of older people in Northern Ireland. Each year, at least £50 million in pension credit goes unclaimed by people aged 60 or over in Northern Ireland. It is crucial that elderly people avail of the benefits to which they are completely entitled, especially in the current and continuing economic downturn.

I recognise the excellent work carried out by many community and voluntary groups. The inter-agency approach that has been implemented by Access to Benefits is especially good. Its trained outreach workers engage with elderly people in a meaningful and productive manner, advising them in their own terms, and it is crucial that such strategies are widened and implemented on a more far-reaching basis.

Although I recognise the fact that the Minister for Social Development has made some progress in that area, more must be done. A significant, well-advertised campaign that includes simple mechanisms to address people's needs in an easy-to-utilise and engaging way must be implemented.

The United Kingdom economy is now in recession, and, although the banking system has increased liquidity due to taxpayer's assistance, individual loans — whether unsecured credit cards, overdrafts, bank loans or mortgages — must still be paid. At a time of rising inflation and commodity prices, people on fixed incomes — particularly pensioners — are in a much more difficult position.

Elderly people are often less able to engage and participate in the modern financial system. Therefore,

it is crucial that the Minister introduce a strategy for improving the quality of access to financial services for older people. I support the motion.

Mr Craig: I thank the proposer of the motion for securing the debate. If one analyses the financial crisis that everyone is facing, it is not difficult to see that elderly people are suffering disproportionately, which is why the Assembly must consider how to alleviate some of the financial stress on that group.

It is only right that, before going any further, I point out something that is obvious. Despite older people's massive needs, the Chamber's unanimous support for action to be taken to help those people and the fact that many Ministers have made public statements about having the finances and plans to ease the pressures on them, older people in Northern Ireland are being held to ransom by Sinn Féin. That party's refusal to allow the Executive to meet has not helped the situation, and it has not helped pensioners to find their way out of hardship.

Returning to the motion, if one considers the increased pressures on pensioners, one realises that they face some basic concerns, some of which Alban Maginness mentioned. Will pensioners and older people have enough money to heat their homes or to put food on the table this winter? Will the cutbacks that they are being forced to make have an adverse effect on their health? Matters have reached that stage. Furthermore, although oil costs two thirds of what it did a month ago, it costs twice as much to fill an oil tank as it did two years ago. Consequently, elderly people are facing huge problems.

Some surprising statistics were mentioned earlier: one in six retirees in the UK still has a mortgage, and one in ten retirees has a mortgage of more than £100,000, which is absolutely astonishing. The mortgage credit crunch is putting those elderly people under even greater stress. Another factor — as reported by the Consumer Credit Counselling Service in 2007 — is that elderly people have the highest debt-to-income ratio. When one retires, unfortunately, one's debt level remains unchanged but one's income falls drastically.

4.45 pm

However, some of the problems in the sector are not due to a lack of available financial help for elderly people; the problem is getting the message out to those people that help is available. Worse still, a huge percentage of our elderly population believes that all Government handouts are exactly that — handouts. Financial assistance is not a handout; it is something that elderly people have toiled for throughout their working lives and which they deserve.

That is why we need to send the message out loud and clear that financial assistance is available for

elderly people. Help can be obtained through Citizens Advice and other services, and our elderly people need to find the information and assistance that the system can afford them. That is why I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat. I also commend the proposers for tabling the motion. However, I am surprised that Jonathan Craig did not blame Sinn Féin for the credit crunch, because it seems to be responsible for everything else.

It is somewhat ironic that we are dealing with the issue of finances for older people and the problems that those people have with income, when legislation is about to be introduced that will reduce the backdating of pension credit from one year to three months. The rationale from the Department is that older people will find such a system easier to deal with. I am sure that pensioners who are waiting for nine months' extra benefit would be prepared to wait a wee bit longer rather than receiving just three months' benefit within a shorter time frame.

Financial education and debt-management services have usually been targeted at younger people. In general, younger people have higher levels of debt, but they may be better able to handle their debt. By contrast, older people may not be in such a position. As Mr Cobain said, historically, older people have avoided debt. As people become older, they face changes in their circumstances that can impact on their financial situation and their ability to manage money. Initially in retirement, pensioners experience a sudden drop in income, for which they are often unprepared and find difficult to adjust to.

An issue that has caused an increase in the need for debt management among older people is the increased cost of living. According to recent statistics, the cost of a shopping basket of staple goods has risen by almost 29% in one year. Furthermore, there has been a dramatic increase in energy prices, with electricity prices rising by approximately 33% and gas prices by 19% from 1 October, and customers buying oil are now paying approximately £346 more compared with this time last year. Older people are more exposed to inflationary pressures than any other age group because of higher usage and lower income. One in five pensioners in the North is now living in poverty.

Increases to benefits are based on official inflation rates and are, therefore, worth less now than they were a year ago. Older people who had previously avoided credit are being forced into debt to maintain a basic standard of living, and they are more likely to use credit for essentials such as food and heating. The problem of debt in old age is escalating. We must work alongside organisations for older people in order to identify the best means of alleviating the problem. Proper, focused

research into older age and indebtedness must be undertaken, and the scale of the problem must be identified.

Debt and money-management initiatives for older people must be supported and promoted. Financial education — specifically targeting older people — is fundamental in preventing debt. Financial advice for individuals who have already retired is vital, and consideration must be given to the particular needs of that group when attempting to improve financial capability.

Choices are limited for the many older people who use only cash and who cannot access the Internet. There are also literacy and numeracy problems — I believe that the most recent survey in relation to that issue was undertaken in 1996, and people over 65 were not surveyed.

Rising utility costs have created new debt, and we must ensure that incomes increase in line with rising costs. We have one of the meanest pensions in Europe. It is imperative that state pensions be linked to earnings now. Entitlement to such means-tested entitlements as pension credits depends on the individual who makes the claim.

The Minister has talked about benefit uptake and the targeting of 90,000 people, in conjunction with voluntary organisations, but only 687 claims have been processed so far.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that pensioners and senior citizens are turned off by the bulk of the form that they receive in the post? Rather than making an attempt to fill in the form, they leave it aside and choose not to complete it. That is where the system fails, despite the Minister's good efforts.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree that the complexity of forms is a huge problem for older people in particular. It is now possible to make benefit claims by telephone, and that service is being used for pension credits in particular. However, that causes problems for many older people as they attempt to articulate their details and needs.

With respect to fuel poverty, we should work with energy suppliers to explore the setting up of a utility trust, which could provide grants to clear arrears. Such a trust has been considered in other regions of Britain. Many older people are not aware of the social fund, for instance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Brady: The social fund must be promoted widely and advertised among older people. Older people are fed up with rhetoric; they want results. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the motion in so far as it highlights the grave situation that faces many elderly people in our community. Mr Cobain was right to bring this important motion before the House. People, particularly the elderly, are feeling vulnerable as a result of the financial pressures in their lives.

I have a concern that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, might consider. The motion:

“calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people”.

However, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) holds primary responsibility for debt counselling; it is not the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. That does not take away from Mr Cobain's good intentions in tabling the motion. However, it is important that the Minister with the primary responsibility for the substance of a motion be in the Chamber when it is debated. That must be looked into. I do not know whether that is the responsibility of the Business Committee or the Executive, but it ought to be considered.

Mr Cobain: Does the Member agree that the Minister for Social Development is responsible for advice-giving services? Advice-giving services provide advice for everyone, including pensioners. This is not an issue for any Department in particular. The Minister has a role, in that her Department provides advice-giving services.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Cobain is absolutely right. The Minister and her Department are responsible for advice-giving services. However, the Department for Social Development does not have the primary responsibility for the specific service of debt advice. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has that responsibility — and it carries out that responsibility. I make the point not to be smart, but to highlight the problems that can arise on the Floor of the House in relation to departmental functions.

The Department for Social Development has taken a vigorous approach to benefit take-up, and part of that approach is an advice-giving service. For people to benefit, they must be advised. Citizens Advice, in conjunction with the Department and as a result of a contract with the Department, carries out that function. An additional £15 million in benefits has been raised through that advice service. That is important and it must be built on. I note that the Minister and the Department, through the Opening Doors strategy, is pursuing the uptake of benefit.

The contract with Citizens Advice has been extended, and that will be of great benefit to our elderly population. Effectively, Citizens Advice offers an MOT to elderly people. They can go along and see, comprehensively, what benefits they can access. It is a

great service, available to the community at large, and there are 289,000 people of pensionable age —

Mr Brady: Will the Member explain how the reduction of pension credit advisers in local offices has contributed to helping older people with their finances and accessing benefit?

Mr A Maginness: I understand that the Department for Social Development has put great emphasis on people accessing pension credit, and there has been an increase in take-up by older people in the community. I do not have the precise figures in front of me, but I am aware that when people reach pensionable age the Department makes strenuous efforts to reach out to them to ensure that they take up their full benefit entitlement to pension credit. That is an important aspect of the Department's function.

I support the motion, and I give credit to Mr Cobain for raising the issue.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the motion — it would be hard not to. As the fifth Member to speak in the debate, it is difficult not to repeat all the quotations from ‘Debt and Older People’, the Help the Aged document that other Members have referred to. However, I shall try and speak for five minutes without referring to it.

The motion will draw attention to the gathering storm that surrounds the over-60s and their increasing difficulties with debt and money management. There is no doubt that today's pensioners — if I can still call them pensioners — are being changed gradually from a generation of reasonably well-prepared, thrifty people able to live largely within their means with the aid of state benefits, to a generation who are now carrying increasing amounts of debt into their retirement years. That has been caused by a gradual combination of events: the ease of obtaining credit; state benefits that do not keep pace with the cost of living; the inability to clear mortgage debt before retirement; endowment returns that fall short of promises and projections; and a natural temptation to draw on the equity of one's house when things get tough.

5.00 pm

Fuel prices — gas, oil and coal — are now going through the roof. There has been a bit of a fall in prices recently, but I fear that that drop is only temporary. People are taking on debt to pay for the necessities of life, and the figures that Age Concern and Help the Aged are now presenting are extremely worrying.

I will repeat some figures that others quoted earlier. In 2006, the Scottish Widows Bank reported that over 50% of pre-retirees aged 55 to 65 have an average mortgage debt of over £60,000. That fact is astonishing, and the figure is probably even higher now. The bank also reported that around half of all workers lack an

adequate pension, and market conditions are exacerbating that situation, too. Pension funds have been drastically reduced and will take years to recover. All those statistics point to a developing crisis for the older section of our population. That crisis has occurred in part because of economic factors and market conditions, but also because of a lack of quality advice and ignorance of benefit availability, as the motion suggests.

I note that Help the Aged advocates the more active promotion of the social fund, to which Mr Brady referred. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. Money-management skills — including the use of modern banking methods and Internet facilities — must be better promoted to the over-60s. It seems incredible that half of entitled older people fail to claim their pension credit and that £160 million goes unclaimed every year. I note that the Help the Aged document 'Debt and Older People' poses the question: do the Government not hold sufficient data on state pensions to identify and pay pension credit to those who are entitled to it? I do not know the answer to that question, but I would like to find out.

I applaud the efforts of Citizens Advice and the many other voluntary bodies to provide the necessary services. However, the Department has a role to play, too, beyond its promotion of the benefits uptake campaign, which I understand has had limited success. More needs to be done. The Alliance Party favours the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group's recommendation that we should copy the example of British Gas in the UK, which has established a utilities trust. There may be other ways to provide relief and help with winter fuel payments on the basis of voluntary action on the part of energy suppliers. Indeed, I made that suggestion recently, and I should like to talk to the Minister about it, if I can get ever get an audience with her.

The thrust of the motion is about the provision of quality financial advice, and that should be the starting point of any initiative. I applaud the proposer of the motion for bringing it before the Assembly, and the Alliance Party will certainly support it.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion; to steal a phrase from the Minister of Education, "we are where we are" in relation to who is responding to the debate today. We welcome the attendance of the Minister for Social Development, and I am sure that she will agree that this debate is timely and important. I agree with Mr Lunn that Members will repeat much of what has been said already in the debate. I must apologise in advance, because I may do just that.

The motion calls on us to note the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties. My fear is that we are aware of only a small number of the pensioners who are

experiencing difficulties. Many of those about whom we are most concerned are in their 70s and 80s or older. That generation lived through the war years and the subsequent hardships; they are the generation who make do and are often too proud to ask for help.

In my constituency office, I meet so many pensioners who see any form of benefit, such as DLA or Motability allowance, as some kind of charity. Those pensioners do not see benefit uptake as a right; rather, they see benefits as something to be avoided. They feel that they should be given to others who they perceive as being in greater need than they are. Even when they are told that they are entitled to such benefits, they simply are not interested in availing themselves of them.

Although I see much merit in the motion, it assumes that all older people will look for financial advice, and we should not forget those who do not want to be — in their opinion — a burden on society. However, I am also aware that a section of pensioners are very vocal about their belief that there is not enough financial provision for the elderly. In my role as a public representative, some of the issues about which I am often asked, other than education issues, involve pensioner care.

Issues that pensioners have mentioned to me include: more payments for pensioners; the tackling of pensioner poverty; pensioner heating; pensioner welfare; pensioner loneliness; pensioner activities; free care for the elderly; enhanced subsidies for nursing-home care; water meters for pensioners; better pensions; and more concessions for the elderly. The common theme of their concerns is a fear that they will be unable to manage their meagre resources adequately to make ends meet.

The Equality Commission's report, 'Older People's Access to Financial Services', contains several sensible suggestions on how to improve the situation. The report by Help the Aged, 'Debt and Older People: How Age Affects Attitudes to Borrowing', provides some stark statistics. Those reports recognise that elderly people face a number of hurdles in accessing financial services. Such hurdles include direct and indirect discrimination; the fact that many older people do not have bank accounts or credit cards; reluctance to ask for help; unfamiliarity with modern forms of managing money; lack of access to cheaper Internet deals; and poor literacy levels.

As Mr Cobain and other Members stated, many older people do not have bank accounts, let alone the ability to use online banking. They cannot use direct-debit payments if they do not have bank accounts, and many utilities offer better deals to customers who use pay by direct debit. Elderly people are not generally regarded as representing a good borrowing or credit market. Therefore, they often rely on more expensive,

less regulated sources. Furthermore, there has been a rise in the phenomenon of equity release, which is shamelessly marketed and can lead to huge problems regarding tax and benefits. Therefore, elderly people can end up badly off.

Older people need access to properly independent and non-discriminatory information and to be made aware of their entitlements. I appreciate that the benefit uptake programme and pension advisers carry out a great deal of work in that regard. However, more work is required to educate the elderly in proper money management. The reports that I mentioned were drafted before the current financial turmoil, so the hardships that they identify are now even worse. Indeed, pensioners will find it even harder to obtain credit and will be even more reluctant to entrust their money to banks.

I support the motion as it may provide tangible benefits and genuine assistance for older people.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the Minister's presence at the debate. There is an opportunity for the Assembly to unite on the matter. I look forward to the Minister's response — especially regarding the financial advice aspect — and to the House's agreement on the motion.

We are living in a climate of great financial pressure on Governments, business and industry. Every day, we read headlines about summit meetings and commitments of trillions of pounds to establish emergency budgets to bail out the banking and financial sector. Indeed, in many instances, it is the culprits who are being bailed out of the financial crisis. It is in the context of those media headlines that we must consider the pressures, anxieties and uncertainties being experienced by the older members of our society, such as incomes that are falling in real terms because of the increasing costs of food, heating and accommodation.

The motion seeks to identify an appropriate response to the myriad financial challenges that are confronting older people and to give them advice that will make a practical difference to the pressures that are affecting them.

Older people face problems in accessing financial services, and Miss McIlveen — who is not in her place now — adequately identified those problems. I do not wish to patronise any older members of our society. However, there is a capacity problem and older people's experience of managing finance is different from that of younger members of the modern society. That creates pressures and difficulties, particularly for people who, culturally, are not inclined to seek assistance or who may not even know where to go for such help.

In that context, everyone can acknowledge from their own experience the issues that arise from the

sheer complexity of engaging with modern financial institutions. All of that has been exacerbated because older people will describe their positive experience of local post office counter staff — people whom they knew personally and who understood the older person's concerns and difficulties. The continued closures simply add to the mounting difficulties. Health problems that come with advancing age also make existing problems more difficult to manage.

The Assembly is keen, indeed anxious, to recognise and to address those issues. I will use my remaining time to address repeated references to the current difficulties that prevent the Executive from meeting. The main obstacle from a Sinn Féin perspective — other parties will have their own — is the perverse insistence by the DUP that its mandate entitles it to a veto over the mandates or the priorities of other partners in the power-sharing Executive. The DUP argues that that arrangement is mandatory. The only thing that was mandatory was the requirement to achieve a necessary mandate. After that, a party could choose whether or not to be in the Executive. It is not mandatory that the DUP takes its place in the Executive — it volunteered to be there. Therefore opportunities should be sought to share responsibility among equal partners in the Executive.

I hope that the DUP comes to accept that it created the conditions for the impasse by putting obstacles in the way of other parties achieving their priorities. The solution should be equally obvious: deal with their partners in the Executive on the basis of equality and parity of esteem. That is the solution that will open up a way for the Executive to function. However, in the meantime, Ministers are seen to be introducing initiatives within their budgets and the Programme for Government. I strongly welcome that and, in particular, I welcome the debate and the opportunity for the Minister for Social Development, who is in the Chamber, to demonstrate how she will respond to the need that has been identified. I support the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I am shocked by some of the statistics that have been quoted on the plight faced by older people this winter. Everything possible must be done to lessen their burden.

Thair ir differ things at ir thaire tae heft thae aulder fowk wha wul hae hannlins owre the wunther — tae naima a when thair's lone-pensioner allowance, wairm hame scheme, wunther fuel allowance — an it cannae bae dooted at thae things ir a bag heft. Hooiniver, the hannlin bes at in maist cases it be sap tae the boadie tae leuk fer thae things an' maist auld fowk dinnae know what they ir entitlet tae an sae cannae leuk fer hit.

The help available for older people who will struggle this winter includes the lone-pensioner allowance, the warm homes scheme and the winter fuel allowance. However, the problem is that in most cases it is up to the individual to apply for that help, and since most older people are unaware of what they are entitled to they do not apply.

I will give a supreme example of a case in which the system failed. Some time ago my colleague Gregory Campbell made me aware of some ladies who may have been entitled to extra pension payments that they had not claimed. In a country where people often complain about being taxed, sometimes to the brink of survival, the DUP is a low-tax party. That is why, once I was aware of the case, I brought it to the attention of the public in my constituency. There was a possibility of getting some money repaid at a time when many people would welcome that extra boost.

Gregory Campbell supplied me with the fact that usually a person must work for 39 years to have sufficient National Insurance contributions to qualify for a full state pension.

5.15 pm

Over the years, thousands of ladies have given up work to raise their families. On 6 April 1978, the Government introduced the home responsibilities protection scheme, which meant that for every year that a woman claimed child benefit for a child under 16 — and was not working or being credited with National Insurance contributions — a year would be reduced from the 39 years required to qualify for a full state pension. In real terms, if a woman took 15 years off work to stay at home with her child, she would only have to work a further 24 years before she would be entitled to her full state pension. However, there was a problem: a change in departmental records meant that many women have not been recorded as qualifying for the home responsibilities protection scheme to which they were entitled. It could mean a pension increase of £2 per week for a maximum of 19 years, which is quite significant. Therefore, if a woman took 15 years off work, she could be £30 per week worse off unless her claim was made and accepted.

One does not have to be a mathematician to work out that £30 a week amounts to £1,560 a year. That could pay for a tank of oil or it could help towards buying groceries. That illustrates how the money could help people, and it could mean the difference between a healthy winter and a fraught one. My colleague informed me about that scheme, not the Department that has responsibility for it.

Many pensioners could be entitled to more money than they receive, but if my colleague had not made me aware of that scheme, I would know nothing about

it. Surely, the relevant Department needs to highlight the existence of such schemes and benefits.

The Equality Commission stated that there should be legislative protection for older people. I agree, but I will go further and say that advisers should be available in every constituency to help older people with their day-to-day finances. The Department employs pension advisers who do a grand job, and we work with them regularly.

A nice elderly gentleman comes into my constituency office at least once a month with his mail. His wife handled all his correspondence, but she has passed on, and he simply does not understand any of the communications that he receives. The girls in the office sort through his insurance and pension papers and try to help him. How many other people are in the same boat and need similar assistance?

I know that the Minister is a lady of conviction and a compassionate woman. With that in mind, I ask her to make changes in her Department that will make people's lives just that wee bit better and to ensure that, as the hard winter looms, the Minister will provide help to older people when they need it. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: On that lovely note, I call the Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Alban Maginness has just said that I should await my bouquet of flowers.

I welcome the opportunity to inform the Assembly of my Department's involvement in providing financial advice for older people. However, I must deal with a process point first, and I hope that the relevant Members are listening. My Department has responsibility for general advice, and it also provides benefits services to older people. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has the policy lead on older people and poverty; however, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for advice relating to debt. DETI has commissioned Citizens Advice specifically to dispense debt-related advice, and the Department is in the process of introducing a debt relief Bill. In fact, at the request of my colleague, the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I briefed the Committee last week on that piece of legislation. Therefore, I think that DETI should have taken the lead on the motion, and that point has already been acknowledged by my colleague Alban Maginness.

The motion refers to me, but that is not sufficient to make it mine only. For example, if a Member were to propose a motion asking me to comment on the new Narrow Water bridge project, I would be happy to do so, as it is a wonderful project and it should be

prioritised. However, it would be wrong for me to do so, because it would be a motion for the Minister for Regional Development, and he should respond to it. Anyhow, that is enough on that point about process.

I am content to talk about the work that Department for Social Development (DSD) is doing to give advice and assistance to older people. The past year has brought great global change, and today, as all Members who contributed to the debate acknowledged, we face a difficult financial climate. Rising energy and food costs and the well-documented credit crunch have had an enormous knock-on effect on everyone. We all know that, as always, it will be the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society who will be the worst affected. The protection of those vulnerable groups is also the mainstream business of DSD, and the current economic climate points up the seriousness and importance of that work.

My Department has carried out proactive work through the Social Security Agency and through the launch and implementation of a strategy for voluntary advice services. Both will have a direct impact on older people, their financial circumstances and their access to financial advice. DSD is leading on many actions to improve circumstances for older people. The Social Security Agency commenced an advertising campaign recently to increase awareness of the winter-fuel payment — which is available to people who are over 60 years of age — for newly eligible customers. The first series of advertisements was published in the daily press in August, with further press coverage planned for November.

The increasing cost of fuel has meant that some older people will, undoubtedly, have difficulty budgeting this year. I want to make sure that people can afford to heat their homes this winter. I acknowledged the crisis earlier on; I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force, and on receipt of its proposals, I brought a paper to the Executive. However, sadly, three meetings of the Executive have lapsed and have not taken place. I ask those parties who are blockading the Executive to stop doing so in order to ensure that a full-blown debate can take place and that decisions can be made on the multifaceted approach to fuel poverty that is required. If we are to help people in January, that work must begin now.

I will not take lectures from anyone on that matter, because it has been raised in the Chamber today already. I have done my part; it is up to other Ministers to step up to the plate. They must stop blockading the Executive and get on with business: that is what the people of Northern Ireland expect us to do.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I will not take any interventions.

I will now move on to the issue of benefit uptake, which is one of the Social Security Agency's key priorities. Experience has taught us that sometimes we must reach out to the public in order to ensure that they receive all that they are entitled to. Since 2005, a targeted approach has been adopted to increasing benefit uptake. The Social Security Agency has been working with Citizens Advice to offer vulnerable clients a comprehensive assessment of all benefit entitlement. That has generated an additional £15 million of benefits going into the pockets of those who are most in need. Members will agree that that is no small sum.

Building on that success, I launched the benefit uptake programme in May 2008. That will target some of the most vulnerable groups in society: older people; people with a disability; and families. A total of 115,000 people across Northern Ireland will be contacted directly in order to ensure that they are not missing out on benefits. Less than six months into the programme and in conjunction with Citizens Advice, more than 90,000 people have been written to, and I wrote to some of those people myself. Pension credit, at an average of more than £46 a week, has been paid to those who have submitted applications already and had them approved. That amounts to more than £1.5 million a year in extra benefit. It is worth making the point that that money has been paid directly to those who need it.

Lest anyone in the House forgets, each one of us has a duty and a responsibility to help people. That is what we are elected to do. We have a responsibility to give advice, and we must ensure that older people in the community fill out their forms and have their benefit entitlement assessed and paid where appropriate. Do not let us shirk our responsibilities. Too often, we want to pass the blame on to other people — let us not do that.

Mr Brady made reference to social security regulations. He will be well aware of the need to comply with parity legislation, but his party colleagues gave the ability to amend that legislation — if only they were to take their seats at Westminster, they would be able to fulfil their full responsibilities in respect of this matter. Do not give me lectures about these matters.

I will continue to push forward all practical steps, because I believe that they will make a real difference to people's lives at a very difficult time. I have been proactive in my approach to voluntary advice services. Last year, my Department made a significant contribution of almost £2 million to front-line advice provision, and over £1.5 million to regional advice offices. I also launched the Opening Doors advice strategy last year — which Mr Cobain acknowledged — the purpose of which is to ensure that good-quality generalist advice is available to all people in Northern Ireland, particularly vulnerable groups such as older

people and those in most need. I am sure that Mr Cobain is already aware that officials from my Department work closely with Help the Aged and Age Concern in order to ensure that those people who need advice get it in the most timely manner possible. I want to ensure that that continues.

In fact, Northern Ireland is the only area in these islands that has developed a strategy for voluntary advice services, and, as a result, I have secured an additional £1 million per year, ring-fenced specifically for local advice services. To ensure that it is fully inclusive and that particular needs groups, such as older people, are not overlooked, a specialist advisory panel has been formed, which represents the interests of the specialist organisations; Help the Aged, Age Concern and A2B are represented on that panel. That will ensure that all client groups, including older people, are able to access the best independent advice services throughout Northern Ireland.

I consider good-quality advice in the voluntary sector to be extremely important, as it makes a huge difference to people's lives. As an MLA I receive a lot of feedback in my constituency office and am well aware of the hardships faced by many older people, and other people in need. My purpose in this ministry is to ensure that money and resources are focused on those in need. The most important thing that we can all do is to ensure that those in need get the help they require.

In summary, my Department is taking a number of important steps to ensure that the most vulnerable in society are protected, today and in the future. I am serious about my commitment to meet the needs of older people. A great deal of work is under way on the benefit-uptake programme and the Opening Doors advice strategy to support local voluntary advice provision. I will continue to work with other government Departments, local government and the voluntary sector to realise the vision of a comprehensive, accessible advice service for all those in need throughout Northern Ireland. I want to provide reassurance to all Members of the House that my work and that of my officials will continue. If there are any particular issues that I have not addressed, I am happy to look at the Hansard report and provide answers to Members.

Mr McCallister: I thank Members and the Minister for their participation in this important debate.

Mr Cobain opened the debate by detailing the reasons behind it, and throughout the debate many Members have reinforced those reasons with statistics and other information from their own constituencies. Of course, the reasons are rising food and fuel prices, reduced income, and the fact that people are now retiring with much higher levels of debt than ever before.

As Mr Cobain pointed out, we are heading towards a debt crisis over the next decade as people retire with greater debt, with mortgages still hanging over them and with a reduced income.

5.30 pm

Several Members, including Mr Cobain, mentioned the closure of post offices. That issue is most keenly felt in rural constituencies, one of which I represent. Mr Cobain also said that the quality of access to financial services for older people must be improved.

Mr Craig blamed Sinn Féin for not allowing the Executive to meet, and the Minister for Social Development also touched on that. Mr Craig mentioned how much the cost of oil has risen in just over a year, and that the debt-to-income ratio of pensioner families is higher than that of other groups.

Listening to Mr Brady, I was not sure whether he wanted Sinn Féin to be blamed for the credit crunch; if he does, I am happy to agree. He mentioned financial education and debt-management advice. That is predominantly aimed at young people and it should be maintained, but it must be focused more heavily on older people and pensioner families. He said that the price of food has risen by 29% in a year, but that we have the meanest pension in Europe.

Mr Alban Maginness welcomed the motion, but he questioned whether it should have been directed to the Minister for Social Development. The motion calls for a strategy for:

“improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people.”

The debate has been much broader than simply focusing on debt advice, and I note that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has entered the Chamber. Mr Maginness accepted that additional benefits have resulted from the good work done by Citizens Advice.

Mr Lunn said that he was anxious not to repeat everyone, but he then did exactly that. *[Laughter.]* He spoke of debt, money management, lower and below-expectation endowment returns, average mortgage debt of £60,000, and the fact that half of all workers do not have an adequate pension. The problem will not go away; it will become more serious as more people retire with inadequate provision.

Miss McIlveen and other Members feared that we are only aware of a small number of pensioners who are in severe difficulty. Pensioners are a particularly hard-to-reach group, who, for many years, have prided themselves on making do with limited resources and generally knuckling down and getting on with life. That group is owed much better service and advice. Miss McIlveen mentioned some of the issues that affect her constituency; they also affect my constituency and Mr Cobain's. They include poverty,

loneliness, free personal care and water, the last of which is definitely a debate for another Minister. Those issues affect all constituencies, and hardship is now worse than before.

Mr McLaughlin accepted that older people face great hardship, and he reiterated the benefits of local post offices in providing help, advice and guidance.

He went on to mention health problems of the elderly. I am acutely aware, through even my involvement with the Health Committee, that health is closely linked to a person's financial situation. Issues such as social inclusion have a huge impact on the older population.

Mr McLaughlin then veered off into why the Executive were not meeting, and sort of begged us not to attack Sinn Féin over that. However, someone has to get a grip on the issues. People expect leadership from the Assembly, and at the minute we are not getting that from the Executive branch of Government.

Mr Shannon spoke about the winter fuel payment, the warm homes scheme and the lone pensioner allowance. I noted those items down even when he was speaking in Ulster Scots — *[Interruption.]*

I have just been told that I am bi-lingual.

Mr Shannon gave good examples, and I believe it was pointed out that he failed to declare an interest. *[Laughter.]* However, he is justified in asking why the Department is not campaigning more actively in getting advice to older people.

The Minister, who may still be awaiting the arrival of the flowers, may have to wait for some time yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: And champagne —

Mr McCallister: There will definitely be no champagne. The Minister drew attention to the fact that debt management was an issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. If the Department for Social Development was so concerned about that, it could have spoken to the Business Office when the motion was being drafted initially and sorted it out. The motion is much broader than debt management: it is about financial advice for senior citizens.

I was not sure how we got from that point to the Narrow Water bridge. *[Laughter.]* Debt relief for pensioners would be a much better investment than the Narrow Water bridge. As regards who is responsible for the complexity of form-filling, I was not sure which was more complex — the Minister's initial remarks about Narrow Water bridge or the form itself.

There are issues with the Social Security Agency's advertising of the winter fuel allowance and the difficulties that pensioners face with fuel bills. The Minister spoke about the Executive not meeting, and

there is an increasing public demand that something be done. If it is coming straight from a Government Minister that the Executive not meeting is blocking business and delivery of services to people, the public will want to see action. The matter is rapidly turning not just the Executive branch of Government, but also the legislative branch, into a laughing stock.

Valuable work is being carried out on benefits uptake, with targeted approaches to people; working closely with citizens advice bureaux; drawing down an extra £15 million for those who are most in need, and with 90,000 people having been contacted.

I agree with the Minister that there is a responsibility not only on us all to ensure that the work is done by the Department for Social Development — and, indeed, other Government Departments — on debt management, but on Members to help and advise their constituents. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, flowers or no flowers for the Minister, the Question is that the motion on the Order Paper be agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Tourist Potential of Lough Neagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I will not use the full 15 minutes that I have been allotted, in order to allow more Members to participate in the debate. By so doing, we might hear from a wider spectrum around Lough Neagh.

I thank the Business Committee for the opportunity to debate the topic. The development of Lough Neagh is an important subject. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, for attending the debate, and I look forward to hearing her response.

I declare an interest as a council representative on Lough Neagh Partnership and the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committee. Lough Neagh has great potential as a tourist attraction. It has not been developed to its full extent, and its potential has not been exploited properly to date. Lough Neagh can be clearly identified on any map of Ireland or the North; therefore, we should give it central focus as a tourist attraction.

Lough Neagh is within easy reach from all our airports and ports. It is also easily accessible from the main roads infrastructure of the M2 or M1, and it lies in a central position on the North/South axis. It is in a key position to be developed as a tourist centre. Lough Neagh can be reached using that infrastructure, which should be expanded in every way possible to ensure that the lough is accessible to all.

If Lough Neagh were located in any other part of the island of Ireland, it would be exploited to its full potential. The Minister is from Fermanagh, which has a couple of lakes, so she will know that Lough Neagh's potential has not been fully explored.

The River Shannon and the lakes into which it expands have been fully exploited as a tourist destination, as is evidenced by the many people who visit it. Similarly, everybody knows about the lakes of Killarney. However, no one knows about Lough Neagh and its tourism potential. The tourism potential of those areas has been developed, but why has Lough Neagh's not?

Lough Neagh could be the hub of the North, if one considers the development of the Ulster Canal, and how that links with the River Lagan, the River Bann and the River Blackwater. It could become a roundabout for the North's waterways. The reopening of the Ulster Canal will help to develop Lough Neagh's potential.

Why is Lough Neagh's tourism potential not being developed and exploited in full? First, the lough is in the private ownership of Shaftesbury Estates, which must be paid rent for every post that is put up around the lough and for everything that floats on it. Therefore, the development of the lough is curtailed. Shaftesbury Estates must be paid royalties for it for anything that rests on the bed of the lough. It can also claim royalties for the water from Lough Neagh. The lough should be put in public ownership so that its potential can be fully exploited for the benefit of the citizens who live around it and for the benefit of the tourist industry. Were that to happen, it would also help the Executive to plan ahead so that Lough Neagh's full resources can be fully utilised.

Secondly, Lough Neagh's tourism potential has not been fully developed because the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has never promoted it. Lough Neagh is not one of the Tourist Board's signature projects. One must ask, why? If one looks at any publication that bears a map of Ireland, one will see a blue spot to illustrate Lough Neagh. That had to be explained to some direct rule Ministers when they tried to work out where the orange and green areas were. It had to be pointed out to them that the blue area was not a Conservative area but Lough Neagh.

Forgive me for using a demonstration model, but 'The View', a tourism-promotion magazine that is sent to every MLA, does not even mention Lough Neagh once. It is important that we start to explore the reasons why Lough Neagh has not been developed to its full potential.

Thirdly, Lough Neagh's tourism potential has not been fully developed because it has not been properly funded by public money. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has not promoted the lough for water sports and other activities. In fact, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is the only Department that has directly funded Lough Neagh.

The Tourist Board has not used Lough Neagh as a signature project, or put funding into it, other than into small schemes that the different councils may be using. Invest NI has not used Lough Neagh to its full potential either; it should be trying to attract industry associated with water sports into the area so that facilities can be developed there.

5.45 pm

There is great potential for development not only on the lough but in the surrounding areas and along the rivers that flow into it. That has only been realised due to the Lough Neagh Partnership, which is funded through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The partnership has had good success in promoting Lough Neagh, and it has spent over £200,000 in the past five years on promotion and marketing. However, with the very limited resources that it has, and the potential for local co-operation between the different councils in putting together this partnership, it is very important to get mainstream funding to carry out the marketing of Lough Neagh.

The seven councils around the Lough have been very supportive, both in funding, co-operation and in developing their resources around the area. Craigavon Borough Council, for instance, has done some very good work in relation to the marinas. Other councils have used the same kind of resources to develop the potential of Lough Neagh, although mainly on the outskirts. It is very important to develop the schemes around the lough and to get mainstream funding to do that.

Funding for the next few years is very uncertain and will have to be exploited using the local area groups in the different council areas — and that funding is by no means secure. The Lough Neagh Partnership has no direct funding in the foreseeable future, which is why we need to ensure that the funding is mainstreamed and that it will continue.

The Planning Service points out the need for planning for tourism around camping sites, holiday homes, signage, protection of visitors and tourism assets in its regional policy. We must keep that in mind. The Magherafelt area plan states:

“Realising the tourism potential of the District will continue to require investment in marketing, product development and physical facilities in terms of visitor infrastructure”.

Those issues have been identified both by the Planning Service and by others, and that is what needs to happen if we are to exploit the full potential of Lough Neagh.

Mr McElduff: It is of great interest to me that there are seven constituencies represented in the Adjournment debate today. We are all interested in the tourist potential of Lough Neagh. I invite the Member to join with me in calling on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is in the House today — it is good that she is — to address the issue of job retention in the area. The Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister is often requested to be supportive of the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative in stocking the lough with elvers to sustain the rural industry. I invite the Member to reflect on that and to join with me in asking the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to consult with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister by way of

supporting the co-operative in its campaign to have the lough stocked properly with elvers.

Mr Molloy: I support the Member’s remarks. If we achieve the full tourism potential for Lough Neagh, then many jobs could be retained and exploited.

There must be a strategy to bring Lough Neagh into public ownership, both to protect the water resource that is the lough itself, and to exploit its full potential as a tourist attraction. The Tourist Board must put Lough Neagh on the map as a tourist location and add it to its list of signature projects.

Departments must ensure that they are doing their bit to support the tourist potential of Lough Neagh — the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in particular needs to develop activities on Lough Neagh, such as water sports, angling, boating, and outdoor activities and adventures. Mainstream funding must be put in place to ensure that the full potential of Lough Neagh is realised. I hope that the Minister will give us a favourable reply.

Mr Moutray: I thank the proposer of the topic for the Adjournment debate for bringing this important issue to the House. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee.

Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles, covering an area of 383 square kilometres. It is the third largest in Europe after Lake Geneva and Lake Constance. The shoreline touches five of the six counties of Northern Ireland.

The tourism potential is immense and is not being fully exploited. Lough Neagh has been, and will continue to be, a central feature in Craigavon borough. It has played, and will continue to play, a dominant role in the development of the Craigavon region.

There is a lot for tourists to see in Craigavon. Craigavon Borough Council has utilised Lough Neagh as best it can with the resources available, and that has brought much tourism to the borough. Kinnego Marina, which is adjacent to the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve, started with only three boat berths in 1983. Now, there are 190 berths and the potential for more. There are also facilities for camping and caravanning.

With 216,000 visitors, the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve was ranked fifth in the top 10 visitor attractions in a 2007 survey by the Northern Ireland Tourism Board. Lough Neagh Sailing Club has grown significantly recently, as has jet-skiing and waterskiing. Other water sports are also growing in popularity, and a canoe trail has been developed in association with the Countryside Access and Activities Network.

However, existing tourist attractions must be improved, and it is important that we do not let them

get stagnant. To make those improvements, there are strategic issues that must be addressed urgently. Lough Neagh requires a navigation authority; old navigation markers still exist, and they can lead to dangerous conditions. In addition, commercial sand dredging and eel fishing take place in the lough as well as leisure facilities. A navigation authority is also required to take account of night-time conditions on the lough. The absence of such an authority increases the danger for those who use the lough, which is inhibiting.

There is also a history of poor water quality. During high-water conditions and after heavy rain, raw sewage often enters the lough at several points around its shores. Therefore, it is important that Northern Ireland Water upgrades all the sewerage outlets into the lough to ensure that the water quality meets EU directives, which will help to improve tourism.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) policy on shore-based development is also inhibiting tourism potential. I said earlier that Kinnego Marina had 190 boats moored there and that there was potential for more boats. However, the EHS is inhibiting development because of its view on the replacement of an old jetty with a new one, and the opportunity to grow the facility is being hampered.

Movement on the regeneration of the Ulster Canal would also help to improve tourism. A longer-term recreational/economic link with the Erne-Shannon waterway would enable boats to traverse Lough Neagh, enter the Lower Bann at Coleraine and reach the sea.

A joined-up approach is required in all areas to improve the tourism potential of Lough Neagh. The lough is a natural resource and is the jewel in Ulster's crown. Its facilities must be improved. A few weeks ago, I attended the launch of a book by a local author, Mr Brian Cassells, who was born and reared on the shores of the lough. His excellent book, 'By the Shores of Lough Neagh', is testament to the beauty and splendour of the lough and further highlights its tourism potential. Lough Neagh is uniquely positioned in our Province, and we must work together to fully utilise it as an asset now and for future generations.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion and declare an interest as a director of Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network, which works along the shore of Lough Neagh and has funded many projects in and around the lough since 1998.

Lough Neagh, at 383 square kilometres, is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles and it lies in the heart of Northern Ireland. The Mid Ulster constituency, which I am proud to represent, is well named as it comprises the bulk of the western shores of Lough Neagh and the Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council areas. I have long

believed that Lough Neagh's tourism potential has never really been realised.

That was hardly surprising during the Troubles, when the Mid Ulster area suffered greatly from IRA terrorism. However, even during those bad days, other parts of the Province that suffered still managed to retain a degree of tourism than was greater than that of my constituency.

Fortunately, the past decade has brought great changes for the better in Northern Ireland as a whole. The tourism industry is one of the main beneficiaries of that. Between 1998 and 2005, tourist numbers rose from 1.4 million, worth £217 million, to almost 2 million, which generated revenue of over £357 million. The north coast, the Fermanagh lakelands and the kingdom of Mourne have all successfully cashed in on the tourist boom, and rightly so. The city of Belfast has also been rejuvenated. In 2007, the Lonely Planet tourism guide described it as one of the top 10 cities to visit.

It is time that a serious and concerted effort was made to develop and market Lough Neagh as a major leisure destination to the benefit of tourists and locals alike. Having lived all of my life on the western shores of Lough Neagh, I am in no doubt that its natural beauty compares well to any that the rest of Northern Ireland has to offer.

Mid Ulster already has lough-shore facilities, such as the Loughshore Trail cycle route and the Ballyronan Marina. Those, together with similar facilities on the northern, eastern and southern shores of the lough, such as Kinnego Marina, Craigavon Watersports Centre, and pleasure boats, such as the Maid of Antrim, must be upgraded and enhanced in order to benefit tourists and locals alike.

There is great potential for water sports, such as sailing, canoeing, waterskiing and jet-skiing on the lough. There is also the prospect that the Ulster Canal will be reopened in order to link Lough Neagh with Lough Erne and the entire Erne-Shannon Waterway.

Of course, there are also several nature reserves on Oxford Island. I urge the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to enter into partnerships with the councils that border the lough and explore initiatives to improve the area's infrastructure — particularly waterfront hotels and restaurant facilities — in order to promote the lough as a tourist destination in its own right.

There is no doubt that the lough and the natural beauty of its surrounding area provide the necessary raw material. The friendliness of the area's people is also an asset. They have a good story to tell. All that the area needs is investment and the vision to market the idea. Lough Neagh is a wonderful place. The locals have had it to themselves for too long. The time has come to share it, and we are willing to do so.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, must declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and, perhaps, more importantly, as a lifelong resident of the southern shores of Lough Neagh. I was reared literally across the road from the lough. I currently live a quarter of a mile from the shore.

I am the eldest of eight children in my family. Every single one of us learned how to swim in Lough Neagh. Swimming lessons consisted mainly of my father throwing us into the water and telling us to swim. Indeed, it was a quick way to pick up the technique.

Lighters used to sail on the lough. Some Members have referred to the sand-dredging and commercial barges that sailed on it. The downside of that is that in 1982 I lost a friend who got caught in one of the sand holes, as they were called. There are navigational problems on the lough. Certainly, great gaps in boating safety occur when people do not know their way around the lough. That must be examined. The Lough Neagh Partnership has commissioned work on that, although I am not sure how far it has progressed.

In certain places, such as the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre at Oxford Island, the lough's assets have been promoted and money has been spent. The discovery centre has won several green awards for conservation as well as awards for tourism and for its information and interpretive facilities.

Of course, Lough Neagh cannot be promoted in isolation. That must be tied in with the Ulster Canal project. Portmore Lough is also in my constituency, and it has one of the largest Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserves in the North. The loughs are beside each other. It is most unfortunate that the Tourist Board does not consider Craigavon as a tourist destination. As a result, there is a great shortage of accommodation in the area.

I understand that there has been growth in the tourism industry in areas such as hill walking and activity holidays, but very often there is nowhere for people to stay around the lough shore itself.

6.00 pm

A neighbour of mine has an equestrian centre beside Portmore Lough, an area that has great development potential. I was a founding member of the Gawley's Gate Quay Company, which took advantage of LEADER+ and Lough Neagh Partnership money, and installed a quay at the back of a restaurant. As a consequence of that, planning permission has been approved for holiday homes. A wee bit of money to pump-prime investment provides a huge advantage, and there is a great deal of interest in the future of that type of holiday accommodation.

It is true to say that Lough Neagh is not solely the responsibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment. It is, as we all know, one of the major reserves of drinking water. It is most unfortunate, therefore, that the water quality is below European standards. We must look to the Minister of Agriculture to determine how water courses are managed. I remember seeing the ministry men, years ago, out cleaning the drains and the water courses all the time; I no longer see that. As Mr Moutray mentioned, there are many concerns about sewage treatment. That is something that we must get right. Local people no longer swim in the lough. I spent whole summers on the shores of Lough Neagh, but my children rarely spend time there because of the pollution. A large part of that is due to the sewerage infrastructure.

I was reared beside local fishermen, but fishermen nowadays have huge concerns about the quality of the water. They report that, in the centre of the lough, many fish are found floating dead on top of the water. Lough Neagh has sustained a vibrant rural community, not only the farmers and dairy farmers on the lough shores, but the small fishing companies, which are fairly unique to Northern Ireland because, I think, freshwater eel is not found anywhere else. According to the archaic laws under which people used to live, those eels were only for export.

I congratulate Mr Molloy for bringing this debate to the Chamber. It is opportune that we look at the advantages that Lough Neagh presents us with. He is right to say that the ownership of Lough Neagh's bed and soil remaining with Shaftesbury Estate of Lough Neagh Ltd is untenable. I understand that all political parties, if not all councils that have access to the shoreline, want to have that ownership returned to the people who live around the lough shore.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. All the Members who spoke outlined the historic and scenic significance of Lough Neagh and its hinterland. It is a very ancient place of settlement of the island of Ireland, and it has a long history. The communities that live around Lough Neagh are long established, and some of them are entitled to be called historic — historic because they have existed for a long time, not necessarily because of the age of the people.

Lough Neagh has always been a dominant feature on the map of Ireland. The role played by the communities on its shores has been assured in the history of Ireland. Therefore, one must question why Lough Neagh qualifies as one of the best kept secrets in Ireland. That question is implicit in the debate that my colleague has initiated. Why is there an absence of a structured and properly resourced tourism strategy? Economic investment in tourism would pay for itself. A tourism initiative would be a self-financing initiative that would add significantly to the regional economy and potential.

I welcome the Minister's attendance at the debate. She is the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I look forward to hearing her say, as an enterprising Minister, that the failure of the Tourist Board to market Lough Neagh and its historic and beautiful landscape properly will be rectified.

I could repeat what other Members said, but that is unnecessary in the circumstances. The case is irrefutable; such a gap in the Tourist Board's presentation of its product should not exist. The board's failure must be challenged and corrected. I hope that today's debate marks the beginning of that process.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest, not as a member of Cookstown District Council but as a resident of the shores of Lough Neagh. I was brought up within 500 yards of the lough, as was my colleague Dolores, and my family history there goes back a long way. Earlier generations included fishermen from Tyrone on my maternal side and from the south Derry side, where I grew up.

As I speak to the debate, the area is nearest and dearest to my heart. I compliment and thank Mr Molloy for securing today's important debate.

Through my council work, I have been involved with several projects to improve the infrastructure and general tourism potential of Lough Neagh. Before 2003, all the local council projects to develop tourism along the shores were valuable and praiseworthy. They were worthwhile and laudable community projects but somewhat piecemeal, and a strategic approach was sadly lacking.

The Lough Neagh Partnership was established in 2003. Its remit included sustainable development and the promotion of the entire Lough Neagh area through the management of a £3.2 million development fund, which was part of the rural development programme. Over the past five years, over 130 projects have been given funding assistance: the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre was refurbished; the new Kinnego marina was built; and in an area that I know well, Ballyronan marina was improved and Battery harbour marina was refurbished. New jetties were built at Antrim and Cranfield, and the Maid of Antrim was refurbished.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member listed several developments that are in keeping with Lough Neagh. However, does he share my view that the application by Rose Energy to install an incinerator on the shores of Lough Neagh is entirely at odds with the area's tourism strategy? Lough Neagh is the wrong location for that incinerator.

Mr McGlone: I agree, and, wearing a different hat now, I know that concerned residents have raised that issue. It will remain an issue for several Departments

for some time; DOE is responsible for planning, DETI for grant aid and DARD for rural development.

That brings me to DARD's rural development programme. The local councils have been the only investors in Lough Neagh; DCAL has offered them virtually no investment or partnership. That Department has responsibility for the development of inland waterways. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which is responsible for developing tourism infrastructure and the promotion of the North of Ireland, has not provided any investment. There is a real need for further investment in, and focus on, the lough from those bodies, and I hope that that message is loud and clear.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, formerly the Environment and Heritage Service, invested a small amount in the lough, but it was mostly for the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees. The potential duplication of roles in the partnership and the advisory body must be resolved.

The new rural development programme is to be allocated to the new local action groups and joint councils. That may result in piecemeal investment around the entire lough and even in the demise of the Lough Neagh Partnership.

The future tourism priorities for the lough include a navigation and dredging service for the lough and rivers; a warden to implement water directives; a recreational management strategy; the development of recreational angling; a marina facility at Antrim; the marketing and promotion of the lough and the hosting of quality events; the maintenance of the Lough Neagh cycle trail; the development of a heritage trail around the lough; and the retention of the Lough Neagh Partnership as an overall implementation and development body. Those measures help to protect water resources and exploit tourism potential.

I have outlined my major concerns, and Members could probably discuss those all evening. The lough's beauty and heritage must be shared with others, and support for the debate will help to achieve that aim. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the start of the debate. I have listened carefully to Members' comments, and it is clear that the Adjournment debate is supported by all sides of the Chamber. People recognise that Lough Neagh is a potential tourist destination, and there is potential for economic development of areas around the lough, many of which are socio-economically deprived.

As Dolores Kelly said, the Tourist Board does not recognise Craigavon's tourist potential. I challenge any Tourist Board representative to drive down the Bay Rampart, Skelton's Rampart or Byrne's Rampart onto

the Ardmore Road in Derrytrasna and along the edge of Lough Neagh — especially at this time of year — and argue that it is not a tourist destination. The autumn colours and the sight of birds arriving at, and leaving, the lough are beautiful. That tourist potential should be investigated. Furthermore, we must not overlook the ancient settlements around Mrs Kelly's area in Derrymore near Lough Neagh. Although I am not implying that Mrs Kelly is ancient, I am sure that the tourist potential was good when her father was throwing her into the lough.

We must not exploit Lough Neagh, rather develop its tourist potential to protect the environment for future generations. As well as sightseeing, that area offers many activities that appeal to tourists, such as fishing, speedboating, canoeing, and so on. Lough Neagh can facilitate all those activities, and it is a nice destination for family drives at the weekend.

However, there are hazards in the lough, as well as potential hazards to the lough's future. The navigation authority must consider Lough Neagh, and I understand that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is examining a report on navigation in Lough Neagh. I hope that that report is processed as quickly as possible.

Sewage — particularly in the rivers that flow into the lough — is another potential hazard to the lough's future. The Closet River, which is polluted beyond belief, flows into the lough only half a mile from where water is extracted for drinking. All those dangers must be examined.

Moreover, the eutrophication of the lough — whereby nitrogen from farmland causes pollution — and the pollution from domestic washing products entering the lough through the sewerage system, are hazards. We must adopt a cross-departmental approach to secure its future. I hope that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will consider how the lough's tourist potential can be promoted.

Some things came to mind as I listened to the debate. For example, it is impossible to cycle the whole way around Lough Neagh, and a bridge must be installed at the Bannfoot at Derrytrasna to enable people to do so. The tourist potential of the Maghera area has not been fully realised and must be examined. Lurgan offers excellent facilities, such as the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve and Kinnego Marina.

Other parts of my constituency have tourist development potential that can be realised, perhaps through cottage accommodation or through the installation of more marinas or piers. For instance, the old pier at the Pier Rampart in Derrytrasna has fallen into disrepair. A small investment would enable people to dock at that site, come ashore and explore the surrounding countryside. Small sums of money could make a major difference to the rural community who

live on the lough's edge. Furthermore, that small investment could make a major difference to the future growth of Lough Neagh's tourist potential.

Mr Shannon: As I represent the Strangford constituency, Members may ask what on earth I have to contribute to this debate. I will speak on a topic that has not yet been touched on — birds. I am sorry; in fairness to John O'Dowd, he mentioned birds in passing.

I consider that a particular aspect of the tourist potential of Lough Neagh has yet to be realised. Shooting sports are worth £45 million to the Northern Ireland economy; furthermore, shooting contributes £10 million towards conservation through wildfowling clubs and conservation bodies. That totals £55 million. The sport employs 2,100 people in a full-time capacity. No other Member is aware of what wildfowling clubs do around Lough Neagh. That is why I am speaking —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, will you allow me extra time if I give way? I will give way on that condition.

Mr McGlone: I intervene only to say that perhaps I am aware of what those clubs do.

Mr Shannon: I know that that is the case, and I am surprised that the Member did not mention it. Now that he has referred to it, it can be recorded.

6.15 pm.

Lough Neagh has great winter-tourism potential. Members may ask what on earth can be done between 1 September and 31 January, when the weather is so poor. However, that is the wildfowling season. For wildfowling, the harder the wind blows, the harder the rain falls, and the colder it is, the more attractive the conditions. Wildfowling comes from all over the United Kingdom, particularly from Northern Ireland, to the Lough Neagh wildfowling clubs. Therefore, the potential for attracting wildfowling from across the water is immense.

I participate in the sport in the Strangford Lough area, and it is a tremendous experience to face into a gale, when one can hardly see because the wind blows into one's eyes — despite one's glasses — with geese and ducks flying overhead. It is an experience that one should not miss.

The potential for winter tourism has not been realised in Northern Ireland, and no Member has drawn attention to that point.

Lough Neagh is important for several reasons. It is a major migratory route for wildfowl, including wigeon, mallard, teal and geese. That potential has not yet been realised, and it should be in order to benefit the area.

I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to my points. In considering how to increase the tourism

potential of Lough Neagh, I hope that wildfowling will have its proper place.

There are many spin-offs to be exploited. Obviously, there is great enjoyment to be had by the shooting fraternity itself — the wildfowling. However, there are also economic spin-offs for those who run bed-and-breakfast accommodation, restaurants, cafes, petrol stations, and those who manage boating businesses on Lough Neagh. Individuals and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) clubs make a major investment. I declare an interest, as I am a member of BASC and the Countryside Alliance Northern Ireland. Both organisations have done excellent work in Lough Neagh.

The connection with Strangford Lough is that Strangford Lough Wildfowling and Conservation Association owns an island in Lough Neagh and runs it as a conservation project. That demonstrates that body's commitment to the area.

As the Member who proposed the topic for debate said, Lough Neagh is owned by Shaftesbury Estates of Lough Neagh Ltd. Leases are handed out to the wildfowling clubs on the shores of Lough Neagh. I believe that the activities of those clubs, along with those of environmentalists and others, are the reason that wildfowl return to Lough Neagh each year. The potential that the sport could create must be considered. Permits for shooting may be bought by wildfowling from overseas or from the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, that aspect of winter tourism should be taken advantage of in much the same way as is done on Lough Erne and on the waterways of the River Shannon down below.

I am beginning to wonder how far my constituency will extend — will it go as far as Lough Erne, Lough Neagh or the waterways of the River Shannon in the Republic of Ireland? By the way, I am descended from the Stewarts of the Lowlands of Scotland, and the name Shannon is derived from them.

I am aware that my time is running out, but I should say that we have very high-quality gun-tackle and clothing shops in the area, both for live-quarry and clay-target shooting.

Donal McCloy, whom Patsy McGlone knows well, runs the largest sporting-gun dealership not just in Northern Ireland, but the whole of Ireland. Charlie Keenan supplies hunting and shooting gear, and is also involved in film production — that is another area that could be explored.

Conservation must also be borne in mind. Let us take all the issues on board and make things work for Lough Neagh. I support that aim, even though I live on the edge of Strangford Lough. I want to see progress made for the benefit of the wildfowling clubs around

Lough Neagh, because there is a potential that has yet to be realised.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon, I remind you that shooting was once promoted in County Mayo. Not only were all the birds shot, but all the branches off the trees. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Representatives from five of Northern Ireland's counties have talked about Lough Neagh during this debate, so I will add my voice from Fermanagh. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the tourism potential of Lough Neagh. As has been mentioned, it is the biggest freshwater lough in the British Isles. It has a number of unique characteristics, and, depending on one's perspective — although it is not the perspective of the Members who are present in the House — it is either perceived as a barrier in the heart of Northern Ireland or as something that bonds together five of the six counties of the Province and six of our local authorities.

I prefer to think of it in the latter way, and there are strong opportunities to maximise the benefits that tourism can bring — including the wigeon. I used to have a dog named Wigeon, but I do not think that that was the wigeon to which Mr Shannon referred.

Mr Shannon: Are you a wildfowler?

The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: He was a cocker spaniel. *[Laughter.]*

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's 'Strategic Framework for Action' took the lead in identifying where the tourism sector needed to prioritise efforts. I am aware that some people believe that there is too much focus on those projects, at the expense of other equally deserving parts of Northern Ireland. However, it is important that the five signature projects, which are central to that strategic framework, be completed as planned. The Executive have provided the money for those projects and, ultimately, they will benefit all the people of Northern Ireland.

I say that in the full knowledge that Members who are present would have liked Lough Neagh to have been the basis for a signature project. I certainly would have liked the Fermanagh Lakelands to have been the basis for a signature project, but we are where we are. I readily agree that the signature projects are not the only show in town — I am very clear about that, and Mr Molloy made that comment at the start of this debate.

We need a good-quality tourism product to sell in the local and international marketplaces. The Tourist Board's draft corporate plan identified product portfolios, including culture and heritage, about which we heard from Members opposite, sports tourism, waterways, and business tourism, which is becoming a big part of what the Tourist Board is trying to achieve.

All those portfolios can be of considerable benefit to the Lough Neagh area.

The Tourist Board provides assistance for non-accommodation projects, and Invest Northern Ireland provides accommodation-related support. The level and distribution of that assistance is governed by project appraisal and the number and scale of applications received. In a recent call for applications under its tourism-development scheme, the Tourist Board received 28 applications from within the six council areas that border the lough. Those applications are at various stages of appraisal.

It is important to remember — and this is a comment that Members made — that not all of the tourism-development money, or money that can benefit tourism, sits within my Department and its agencies. Many other Departments were referred to during the debate, including DARD, with its rural development programme; and DSD and DCAL, which both have funds that benefit tourism in a number of ways. Local councils also have sources of funds, and the private sector has a key role to play in product development.

Comments were made in relation to DCAL, and although I am not aware of all the issues that concern that Department, it continues to work with local authorities and agencies to make progress on recreational and tourism facilities at Lough Neagh. During an intervention, Mr McElduff made a point about the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society. I will pass on those comments to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

A good range of visitor accommodation is a prerequisite for success. I heard the comments that were made about bed-and-breakfast accommodation around the lough, and the fact that more is needed. We all want to see visitors staying in our areas, rather than passing through to somewhere else.

I want, and look forward to, the further development of the accommodation sector, which is a key area of opportunity for the private sector. Nevertheless, I hear what Members are saying about it.

I know that Mr Molloy is a member of the Lough Neagh Partnership, and I shall say a few words about its work. The partnership is an excellent example of what can be achieved when everyone pulls together. It has produced the 'Lough Neagh: Discover it for Yourself' brochure and the Discover Lough Neagh website, both of which demonstrate that there is a wealth of things to do in, around and, indeed, on the lough.

Although Lough Neagh and its products are promoted by the Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, the Countryside Access and Activities Network — the Lough Neagh canoe trail, to which Mr Moutray and other Members referred, was also supported by Sport

NI — the regional tourism partnership, and, of course, the local authorities, the Lough Neagh Partnership provides a focus for visitors and its work brings the area to life.

It is a challenge for local people to secure economic benefits for their areas by identifying and creating opportunities for visitors to spend money, Lough Neagh is well positioned for local people to do that, and the Lough Neagh Partnership is playing a key role.

Mr McLaughlin spoke about the Tourist Board, and other Members spoke about other Departments, playing a role in attracting tourism to the lough. In common with the Strangford Lough Management Committee — with which Mr Shannon familiarised me — the Lough Neagh Partnership is greatly strengthened by local input, because local people are able to lobby the statutory authorities to produce the measures that are required for their particular area. The strength of local advocacy has been clearly demonstrated in the Chamber today, and I believe that it will continue to be demonstrated through the partnership.

Members will say that that is all very well, but what about the partnership's funding? Recently, the Lough Neagh Partnership secured nearly £500,000 of funding, and the Department will review that in the future. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that local people are the best tourism advocates for their areas — obviously, working with the statutory agencies, such as the Tourist Board — and that is something that the Department must consider.

However, it would be remiss of me to say that we are living in a land of milk and honey. We are living in difficult economic times, and the Executive have set ambitious targets for the tourism sector, including increasing revenue by 40% and visitor numbers by 25% by 2011. Tourism, like other sectors, relies on consumer confidence and discretionary spending, and, following a decade of solid growth, there will be challenges ahead. As consumer spending power reduces, the competition between destinations intensifies. The Lough Neagh area has much to offer, and the fact that Belfast International Airport is on its doorstep adds to its advantages.

A quality experience is the key to success, and the Tourist Board will be focusing its efforts on developing programmes to support the tourism sector's ability to compete internationally. When people are persuaded to come to Northern Ireland, they must have a choice of places to go — whether through the signature projects or through other destination projects, such as Fermanagh and, indeed, Lough Neagh. Although overseas pure-holiday visitor numbers have performed strongly in the past decade, our close-to-home markets still deliver almost 80% of the visitors to Northern Ireland, and the Tourist Board must reflect, and is reflecting, deeply on that.

The Tourist Board is delivering a strong programme of themed campaigns in the Republic of Ireland, and, recently, it ran a successful campaign to encourage visitors to the island of Ireland to consider a trip to Northern Ireland. Feedback suggests that visitors were impressed by what there is to see and do, and that is why the multiplicity of activities around Lough Neagh will be a strong selling point.

Lough Neagh has much to offer visitors — I believe that Mr McLaughlin spoke about hill walking in the area — and much has been done to attract them. It will be a job of work to further develop those attractions, and it is essential that, while taking advantage of the opportunities that are available to us now, we address the challenges that lie ahead. I look forward to continuing to work with the Lough Neagh Partnership, which, given that Lough Neagh touches five counties and six local authority areas, is the key to developing tourism, and I hope to welcome many more visitors to the area and beyond to Fermanagh.

Adjourned at 6.29 pm.

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