

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 2 March 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Buchanan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain to the House the decision that has today seen acute services stripped from Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, which has provided life-saving services to the community in that area for more than 100 years. Mr Speaker, is it in order for those cuts to be implemented —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: — despite a promise from this Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: — and previous Ministers to retain services at Tyrone County Hospital until —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is certainly not a point of order. That said, I am sure that the Minister, who is in the Chamber, has noted your comments.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to clarify whether you have received any notification from the Ulster Unionist Party that, since its demise, it is to be redesignated as UCUNF — Ulster Conservatives and Unionists - New Force — in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: The Member knows well that that is not a point of order.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it the case that these people used to have the word “Ulster” in their party name but now no longer use it? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have already warned all sides of the House not to misuse points of order. That goes for all sides of the House.

Mr Durkan: We can go off them for Lent. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNarry: It would be a 40-day wonder. *[Laughter.]*

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments that are tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

Before dealing with the statutory rule, I will set out the rationale behind the measure and its underpinning context. As Members are aware, a maximum capital value was established on the introduction of the new rating system in April 2007. It was brought forward as a result of the political discussions that took place prior to the restoration of devolution, to ameliorate some of the excesses of the new system being introduced under direct rule. However, the debate is not about whether we should approve regulations to have a cap or not to have a cap, but rather at what level it should be set.

The capital value threshold is set at £500,000, limiting the rates liability for people living in properties above that threshold. That converts the highest bills facing Northern Ireland's ratepayers to the absolute maximum council tax bill in England. The regulations before us today are part of the outworkings of the Executive's review of the domestic rating system. In November 2007, the Executive mandated that change, reducing the cap from £500,000 to £400,000, subject to further consultation and an impact assessment being undertaken. The change will ensure that, in future, ratepayers locally will pay no more than the average bill in the highest council tax band in England. It is only fair and right that ratepayers locally should not be disadvantaged when compared with the general position in other parts of the United Kingdom.

In light of the Executive's commitment, a consultation was undertaken last year on reducing the maximum capital value to £400,000, with views also sought on compensating payments to councils adversely

affected. More than three quarters of consultation responses were in favour of the lower cap, with some even suggesting a lower threshold of £300,000. The remaining responses were split between those opposed and those providing some general comments.

Having considered the consultation responses, as well as the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Executive have agreed that, on balance, a maximum capital value of £400,000 is appropriate. That will ensure that ratepayers locally pay no more than the average bill in the highest council tax band across the water. Setting the threshold any lower would adversely impact on revenue levels or on service provision. The £400,000 threshold can further address concerns about the excesses of the rating system. It also recognises that there are limits to the benefits that individuals receive from regional and local services.

Before turning to the statutory rule, I will address some concerns that were previously raised about the impact of the measure on other ratepayers and councils, and also from an equality perspective. It is wrong to say that the reduced cap will hit the pockets of other ratepayers. The regional rate has been frozen until March 2011, meaning that there will be no increase for other ratepayers as a result of the measure.

We are also taking steps to moderate the effect that the measure could have on district rates, by putting compensating arrangements in place. In the longer term, even if revenue losses were recovered from other ratepayers, it would add about 8p a week to the average rates bill. However, I do not think that that situation is envisaged, as additional revenue will be raised through the rating of empty homes.

Turning to the equality impact of the measure, an integrated impact assessment was undertaken and consulted on. The analysis, which is published in full, did not raise any concerns that there may be any differential impact between the different section 75 groups. Nevertheless, the impact will continue to be monitored and evaluated as new data become available. I hope that that reassures Members.

Finally, concerns have been expressed about the impact on councils, and I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its attention to the matter. In taking decisions on the issue of compensating payments, I have had to balance how the reduced cap will affect councils, with the impact that compensating payments may have on overall revenue levels and revenue foregone. In light of that, I will shortly bring forward, as previously announced, a draft rates amendment Bill, which will include provision for compensating payments to councils.

That will relate to the reduced cap only and will apply for the next two rating years. As a transitional measure, the proposal is to set compensation at 100% and 50%

respectively for the next two years, and that will take us to the point when local government will be reorganised.

The statutory rule provides for the reduction of the maximum capital value to £400,000. It also provides that where a property — such as a manse — is partially exempt from rates, the level of the maximum capital value can vary between £200,000 and £400,000. Members of the Executive and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have already been advised of our intention to make the statutory rule. No substantive comments were received, and the Committee has approved the regulations. Therefore, I commend the draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 to the Assembly and ask that they be approved.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) proposal for this subordinate legislation at its meeting on 28 January 2009, at which the majority of members who voted agreed that they were content with the policy implications of the proposed legislation.

The legislation facilitates a reduction in the maximum capital value from the £500,000 limit, set in April 2007, to £400,000 from April 2009, as the Minister has explained. The Committee previously considered the potential impact of a change to the level of the cap in its response, published in November 2007, to the Executive's review of the domestic rating system. Having taken substantial evidence on that and other areas of domestic rating policy, the Committee recognised in its report that there was no clear consensus as to the merits of a change to the cap, and it recommended that DFP consider the options further, in the wider context of decisions on rating reform and overall affordability and fairness.

DFP consulted widely on the Executive's subsequent decision to reduce the cap, and officials have briefed the Committee on the outcome of the consultation. The Committee subsequently considered the statutory rule on 18 February 2009, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to recommend to the Assembly that the draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. However, one member voiced concerns at what he considered to be the regressive nature of the regulations and asked that those be recorded in the minutes of proceedings. The Committee agreed to that.

On behalf of my Committee, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: My party is not sympathetic to this proposal to reduce the cap. However, it is not our intention to divide the House on the matter. We lack sympathy for the measure because we see it as regressive. It lifts the burden of taxation from those who can afford to pay it and, therefore, increases it on those who cannot.

Rates contain two elements: they are both a charge for services and a method of taxation. The regional rate is more a form of taxation than a charge for services, and that raises the question of how good the rates system is as a form of taxation in relation to the ability to pay. We have discussed that many times, and we know that a system of rates based on the capital value of houses is not a perfect measure of ability to pay. The valuation of a person's house is, at best, a crude measure of ability to pay. That is why we have developed a substantial system of reliefs in the rating system.

The SDLP supported the concept of a cap on rates. We considered that the cap, originally placed at £500,000, gave reasonable protection against unreasonably high rates. We have not seen convincing arguments for reducing it, and it is not clear from where the pressure to reduce the cap has come.

The only argument put forward has been to make the maximum level of rates comparable with the maximum council tax in England. That is not an argument that I find particularly convincing.

12.15 pm

We are conscious that there are persons who are asset rich and cash poor. As I have discussed, a rates system is not perfect. However, looking at the situation in the round, we felt that no sound or solid argument had been raised against the original cap of £500,000. Therefore, we would have left the cap alone. That is our position. However, we are not going to force a division on it.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

The Alliance Party is opposed to the move, and has been consistent on that issue. Unfortunately, I missed the final vote in Committee. However, I have consistently made my concerns known in that forum.

At times, we have criticised a lot of the populism that comes out of the Executive; populism rather than prudence. The rates cap takes that a step further. Essentially, it is a redistribution of the tax burden from those in society who are better off, to those in the middle of society — the middle classes. I think that there is a major issue of fairness that must be pointed out in relation to what we are doing. What we said about a £400,000 cap are the same points that we made about a £500,000 cap and about the wider principle of rates capping in general.

Certainly, there is a problem for the asset rich and income poor in society, who have problems when faced with steep rates bills. However, there are other ways in which those people can find some degree of relief; for example, through extending the current scheme to take into account widows, widowers, or double pensioners. Indeed, we could go further and advocate a local income tax as the fairest and best measure of one's ability to pay. However, perhaps that is a debate for another day.

The rates cap is a blanket subsidy that assists a wide range of people, including those who can quite readily pay their fair share to society. In economic terms, there is a considerable deadweight to what is being proposed. Although a retired couple, who are pensioners, may benefit a little from what is being suggested, the millionaire who lives in the mansion will benefit, I would argue, considerably more than those whom we are trying to assist.

The people in the middle, those who are paying rates on middle-value properties, will have to fund the subsidy. It is worth pointing out that the average capital valuation — going back to the January 2005 figures — is in the region of £150,000. An awful lot of people in the middle are going to be subsidising those who are better off.

Ms Purvis: Does the Member agree that those on middle incomes are the worst affected in the economic downturn and that, therefore, the rates burden will add to those burdens in the long run?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for her intervention, and I fully agree with her. It is worth stressing that, particularly in the current climate, the people in the middle tend to suffer the most. The better off in society have a cushion that allows them to adjust to different economic circumstances, whether that is through savings or through something else. However, there are a lot of people who are living from hand to mouth based upon a pay cheque coming in every month, and in some circumstances, that pay cheque has disappeared. Those are the people who are in the difficult situation of trying to pay their rates bills.

The combined effect of the two caps — £500,000 and £400,000 — will be a loss in revenue of around £5 million. Currently, the Finance Minister argues that that has been funded centrally and is not being passed on to the regional rate. It will be in the future. Today, it is seen only in the context of district rates, and it is important to bear that in mind.

Some may say that the financial side of the redistribution is marginal; I think that the Minister talked about 8p. However, two points need to be made. First, there is an important principle at stake regarding fairness, and the signals that the Assembly sends to society as to what its priorities are. To date, we are

sending out the signal that it is the better off who have our ear, rather than those who are not so well off. Secondly, although the overall redistribution may be fairly minimal at a Northern Ireland-wide level, in those district council areas that have the greatest concentration of qualifying properties, the effect of the redistribution will be much more substantial.

Rates capping cuts a significant slice off the local tax base of district councils, and if a council maintains its existing spending plans, the rates burden has to be passed on within the narrow confines of that council area. To put that into context, the net effect of a rates cap in the North Down council area would mean, all other things being equal, a rise of 2.5% on the rates. That is more than the level of inflation. For all the propaganda around the freeze of the regional rate, the fact that an Executive policy will lead to a 2.5% rise in rates for local people at the district level has to be taken in its proper perspective.

I note that transitional relief is being given to councils for the £400,000 cap for the first two years. Although that is welcome and provides some immediate assistance to the most affected councils, it is only a short-term deferral of the challenges to come. In two years' time, the full effect of the cap will be felt in the system. I certainly hope that the economic situation then will be better than it is today, but that is a danger in the system.

The argument has been made that rates capping brings Northern Ireland into line with the highest council tax bands in England. Frankly, that is a weak argument. In the early 1990s, the banding approach to council tax was rushed in during the clamour to get away from the poll tax. The banding process, which caps the highest rates, is regressive in nature. In England, that has led to situations in which millionaires are paying the same level of rates as people who are working hard and living from hand to mouth. Therefore, in that sense, we should not be aspiring to the council tax model in England. The overall effect would be a tax hike on the middle class.

Mr Hamilton: Issues concerning the rating system are of pivotal importance, and they are among the few areas whereby the Assembly can raise income. The high turnout in the Assembly for this debate bears testimony to that. I am sure that the high turnout has everything to do with the debate on the maximum cap and nothing to do with the class photograph. I welcome the increased interest, and the handful of four or five of us who usually debate such issues are glad to see everyone else here this morning.

I support the proposed reduction of the cap from £500,000 to £400,000. In the not-too-distant past, at the time of the introduction of the capital value rating system, much clamour was made for the introduction

of a cap. Direct rule Ministers accepted the principle that there should be a cap, and the figure of £500,000 was adopted. As the Minister said, the principle has been accepted and agreed by all parties in the Chamber, and, indeed, all parties have lobbied in favour of that.

The debate and discussion is now about the level of the cap. I think that £400,000 is a sensible level for the maximum capital value. As the Minister and other Members have said, reducing the cap from £500,000 to £400,000 will ensure that Northern Ireland ratepayers will now pay no more than the highest council tax bill in the highest band in England. That is a valid reason for reducing the cap; it was unfair and wrong that ratepayers at the highest level in Northern Ireland were paying in excess of what would be paid in the highest council tax band across the water.

I know that there is no direct equivalence between what is paid for by council tax and rates, but given that, in many respects, they are as close as to make no difference, it is sensible to reduce the cap for that reason.

A cap of £400,000 is not a permanent measure, and any impact of future revaluations of property will have to be borne in mind. The cap could change. The argument has been put that this measure will assist millionaires on the one hand and will punish middle-income groups on the other. That is to forget that many people in Northern Ireland whose properties are valued towards the upper end of the cap of £500,000 are — to use a phrase coined at the time of the lobbying for the introduction of a cap — deemed to be asset rich but income poor.

Tremendous benefits can be received, not only from the original introduction of the cap, but from the reduction of that cap to £400,000. Those people must be borne in mind.

The fact that the regional rate was frozen last year, will, hopefully, be frozen next year if the Assembly votes in favour of the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which is next to be debated, and, indeed, will be frozen the following year, means that the people in the middle, as they have been referred to, are not paying for that at all because the rate has been frozen. Had the regional rate been increased, a valid argument could have been made that a great number of people in the middle had to pay for the cap. However, the fact that the regional rate has been frozen proves that they do not. As the Minister said earlier, even if that were recouped from that group of other ratepayers, it would cost only 8p per household. That must also be borne in mind.

Dr Farry raised the issue of how that impacts negatively on councils. I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council. Although my council would not have been affected as adversely as Dr Farry's council

in North Down, it would, certainly, have been one of the top three or four councils that would have been negatively impacted by the introduction of a maximum cap. That is why my colleague from North Down Borough Council Mr Weir and I lobbied the previous Finance Minister and asked him to include in the consultation the idea of a transitional relief. I am glad that his successor, my friend and colleague the current Finance Minister, has introduced that transitional relief of 100% in the first year and 50% in the second year. That is of some benefit to councils in those areas.

The aim of all that, and, indeed, the next piece of legislation that will come before the House for debate, is to create a fairer rating system. The Executive inherited a rating system that was branded universally as unfair and unfit for purpose. I have set out many pieces of work that are to be roundly welcomed in the Chamber and outside of this place, such as the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance, which has helped thousands of people who are aged over 70 years and who live alone — to the tune of over £2 million. I believe that the average benefit to those individuals is approximately £150 per person.

The Assembly can discuss those who are worst affected and those who are on middle incomes and are badly affected by the rating system. However, there is an opportunity after the debate and when the motion is — hopefully — passed to freeze the domestic regional rate, which will also provide greater assistance to those individuals. The attempt to achieve a fairer rating system for Northern Ireland is a noble cause. It is now being better achieved by measures that are being taken by the Finance Minister. I welcome greatly the reduction in the maximum capital value to £400,000. It will benefit a great many people in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Members who have taken part in the debate. I welcome the Committee Chairperson's comments and the Committee's support for the proposal. I have noted what other Members have said.

The proposal is a good-news story for ratepayers in Northern Ireland because it aims to ensure that there is greater fairness in the rating system. It is wrong to ask any local ratepayer to pay rates bills that are equivalent to the highest absolute council tax bill in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the position from which I approach the matter, and it is the right approach. Measures that have been taken in that particular Statutory Instrument, allied with that which is about to be introduced, mean that ratepayers in Northern Ireland will not pay as much as they would otherwise have paid under direct rule, and that there is greater fairness in the rating system.

I have noted a number of comments that have been made about the Order's impact on other people and

about its being a regressive measure. In case Members did not listen to what I said during the debate, I must re-emphasise that — as was pointed out by Mr Hamilton — the regional rate has been frozen until March 2011, which means that there will be no increase for other ratepayers as a result of the measure. Members must remember that in the future, measures will be taken that relate to empty properties, which will raise additional revenue. Therefore, there need not be any further impact thereafter.

Anyone who suggests that that good-news story, which introduced fairness into the rating system, is a rates hike must not have considered the matter with sufficient care and listened carefully to what we are saying.

12.30 pm

It is important to note that the transitional relief that we have introduced for councils will also ensure that the adverse effect in certain areas is not passed on to ratepayers through the district council rate. That measure has been widely welcomed, including by Mr Farry. I noticed that when he mentioned that issue in the context of relief in his council area, he did not attach all the caveats and concerns that he did when he spoke of relief for others. I suppose that all politics is local, yet I note that although he is prepared to accept that benefit for his council, he is not prepared —

Dr Farry: For two years.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is two years more than he would have got under any other Minister. He carped over some other reliefs. I believe in fairness for everybody, not only for people in one locality.

The measures on transitional relief were followed by a package that we introduced in January to provide £8 million to help councils across Northern Ireland. As a result of issues around the revaluation of certain Ministry of Defence and British Telecom properties, and other factors, councils faced the prospect of having to increase district council rates considerably. As a result of the £8 million package, those rates have not increased by the extent that they would otherwise have done. That is good news for ratepayers, and the announcement was widely welcomed at the time, including by Mr Farry.

The measure is about fairness in rating, and we have introduced other measures that will benefit ratepayers right across the board, about whom we are all concerned. We have introduced measures such as the lone-pensioner allowance. We have increased the maximum amount of savings that can be held on to, and we are introducing measures to allow people to defer rate payments and measures to offer green rebates.

The freeze on the business and domestic regional rates will benefit households, hard-working families and businesses considerably. Moreover, we introduced relief for councils on council tax a short time ago. Ratepayers will be better off as a result of those measures, and the rating system will become fairer. I commend the good-news measure to the Assembly and hope that it is passed unanimously.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

I think that people across Northern Ireland will widely welcome the introduction of this measure. The Order translates the money that we plan to raise from the ratings system, which was agreed as part of the Budget process, into precise pence in the pound, in order to allow individual bills to be prepared. It fixes a regional rate for domestic and non-domestic ratepayers. The other element of a rates bill is the district rate, which is each council's responsibility.

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

The Order is routine in nature and is an annual event. It is, however, the means by which the Assembly sets the rates that households, businesses and organisations must pay from April and provides the revenues that are needed to help to fund key public services. It does no harm to remind ourselves that in the final three years of direct rule, domestic regional rates increased by 9%, 19% and 6% respectively.

It was in that context that my predecessor announced during the Budget debate in January 2008, that there should be a freeze on the domestic regional rate for the next three years. Similarly for the business regional rate, he announced that it would be held for the next three years at the rate of inflation, which at that time was 2.7%. That was to ensure that no increase would take place in real terms over that period. That was good news, and another example of devolution making a difference.

However, I do not need to remind Members that a lot has happened in the world since January last year, and Members will be aware that as a result of the changing context, I announced in the Assembly on 15 December 2008 that the non-domestic regional rate would be frozen in cash terms for 2009-2010. That is a measure worth some £8 million to the benefit of Northern Ireland businesses. Therefore, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates will be pegged for the coming year, assisting households and businesses alike. That means that the total projected revenue that will be raised from the regional rates in 2009-2010 is estimated at £543.3 million.

When devolution was restored in 2007, the Assembly and Executive agreed unanimously to set economic growth as a priority. That remains our goal in these difficult times of global recession and severe pressures bearing down on all employment sectors. We have already held on to industrial de-rating — which, with

hindsight, was a particularly wise move — and I trust that this measure, which gives effect to a rates freeze for all sectors of business, demonstrates our continuing commitment to the business community. Likewise, for our householders. There has been criticism in recent days about help given to householders, and I reject that criticism. Householders are facing considerable financial pressures, and we need to demonstrate that the Assembly is not imposing even greater strains on household budgets that cannot be afforded.

Although we can already point to the deferment of water charges, freezing the domestic regional rate will provide further help for every rate-paying householder. Therefore, the legislation represents delivery of promises made to all hard-pressed businesses and households in Northern Ireland that we would do what we can within our limited means to ease the burden of the problems that are facing us as a result of the global recession. No other region of the United Kingdom can claim to have responded so decisively to the worsening economic outlook. It will, of course, require belt-tightening for those who deliver our essential public services, but I know that they are up to the serious challenge of putting efficiency first, working within their budgets, and achieving the savings needed to make the rates freeze work.

I will now briefly describe each of the articles of the Order. The rule specifies the regional-rate poundages for the financial year 2009-2010. Article 1 provides the title of the Order, and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides for the duration of the Order, which will apply until 31 March 2010. Article 3 specifies 29·89p in the pound as the commercial regional-rate poundage, and 0·3608p in the pound as the domestic regional-rate poundage. I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for the subordinate legislation at its meeting on 28 January 2009, and was, with one abstention, content with the policy implications of the Department's proposals at that time. The statutory rule comes before the Committee for Finance and Personnel — and, subsequently, the Assembly — on an annual basis, and represents the outworkings of the Executive's decisions on the level of domestic and non-domestic regional rates each year, as the Minister has described.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel announced the Executive's proposal to freeze the domestic regional rate for three years, from April 2008 to 2011, as part of his draft Budget announcement in October 2007, and the levels were subsequently confirmed in the final Budget approved by the Assembly in January of last year. An announcement that the increase in the

non-domestic rate would be pegged at the rate of inflation was superseded by the Executive's response to the economic downturn. The Minister of Finance and Personnel subsequently announced in the Assembly on 15 December last that as an interim measure, the non-domestic regional rate would be frozen in cash terms for 2009-2010, and that that would be worth around £8 million to Northern Ireland businesses in 2009-2010.

At its meeting on 18 February 2009, the Committee for Finance and Personnel considered this statutory rule, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion, which seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order.

Mr Hamilton: It is a pleasure to speak in support of the freezing of the domestic and the non-domestic regional rates for the incoming year. We often hear others ask us what the Assembly is doing to help people. These are trying and testing economic times; pressure is being felt across the country on household and company budgets, and people are asking us what the Assembly and the Executive are doing to make life a little bit better. What we are doing today is a prime example of where the Executive are offering help and assistance, where it can be offered, on an ongoing basis.

The domestic regional rate is being frozen for yet another year, and this is the first year of a freeze on the non-domestic regional rate, which, I understand, is worth approximately £8 million for local businesses. That saving alone will provide significant assistance, particularly cash-flow support, for some businesses that are finding the current economic climate extremely testing.

We must also view today's measure in the context of historical regional rate rises that the people of Northern Ireland faced and that were at times, quite frankly, obscene. In the last four years of direct rule, there were regional rate rises of 8·8%, 9%, a staggering 19%, and finally, 6% in 2007-08. The non-domestic regional rate rose by 3·3% in each year over that same period. The amounts that people in Northern Ireland were being charged for services in their domestic regional rates bills were well over the odds and were well in excess of inflation in each of those years; indeed, they were ridiculously high amounts.

In the current difficult economic circumstances, in which there is a strain on household budgets, it is only right and proper that the Assembly approves a freeze, not just on the domestic regional rate, but on the non-domestic rate. When the new measure for freezing the non-domestic regional rate is viewed in the context

of the, hopefully, imminent introduction of a small-business rates relief scheme, one can see the commitment of the Assembly to making businesses and economic growth our number one priority.

By and large, whenever they have been striking their rates, most district councils have been respectful of the 0% increase in the domestic regional rate and have not used it as an opportunity to jack up their half of the rate unnecessarily. That has resulted in fairly good news stories from across the country, where the combined rate is quite favourable in comparison to that of the recent past. Newtownards, in my constituency, had by no means the lowest district rate increase this year at just under 5%, but the average ratepayer in the borough was paying an increase of only £1.32 a month. Unfortunately, however, I have to admit that that was by no means the best rate in Northern Ireland — some other councils struck a much better rate. In many areas, however, the impact of such action, coupled with the freeze that will be achieved by the 2009 Order, will be of great benefit to people in managing their budgets.

Given where we are and where the country finds itself, the Minister of Finance and Personnel's predecessor showed great foresight in freezing the domestic regional rate over the three years. He showed great wisdom in extending that freeze to non-domestic regional rates. Had the Executive not already set that policy, there would be a clamour to introduce something exactly like it. It is great to be ahead of the game and to show great foresight and wisdom by introducing such policies. I am pleased to support the motion, which I will vote in favour of later.

12.45 pm

Mr O'Loan: As the Minister of Finance and Personnel said, the effect of the measure will be to freeze the domestic and non-domestic regional rate in the next financial year. The essential change since the proposals were made in the original three-year Budget has been to move from pegging the non-domestic rate to inflation to freezing the non-domestic rate, the effect of which will be to confer an £8 million benefit on the business sector. Obviously, our businesses are under considerable pressure, and that sector will certainly very much welcome that measure.

The Order is, obviously, a broad-brush and untargeted measure of support. That means that it will benefit businesses that could have well afforded to pay the non-domestic regional rate had it increased in line with inflation, as well as benefiting those businesses that very much need that support at present, and there is that weakness in the measure. Nonetheless, it is a meaningful measure of support to businesses at a time when they are under immense pressure, particularly those businesses whose order books are declining,

which is a huge reality for many businesses throughout Northern Ireland. For that reason, I support the Order.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party is not minded to divide the House on this issue today. However, we have considerable reservations about the Executive's approach to rates, including their decision to freeze the regional rate.

In the current situation, the Executive may have stumbled into doing the right thing for two reasons, but their longer-term rates strategy is fundamentally flawed. The first reason is that of the current economic situation and the difficulty that people are having in making ends meet, and not adding to that burden. That challenge is particularly acute for businesses, in particular small businesses. In that respect, the Order will, obviously, provide some assistance.

As Mr O'Loan suggested, we need to be careful not to overstate that argument. In difficult economic situations, Governments should seek to avoid raising taxes. Indeed, a body that has full fiscal and borrowing powers will be tempted to borrow. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there has been scepticism about some measures to cut taxation as a means to stimulate the economy. Even DUP members have joined others in criticising the British Government's cut in VAT on the grounds that it is an unfocused measure of assistance and that it might not be effective in encouraging people to consume more, because people might decide to save their money given the economic uncertainty. Therefore, although I recognise the economic situation in which we find ourselves, there is a danger of overstating the relevance of that argument in addressing the situation.

The second reason — which is justifiable in the current year — is the situation with the district rate. Many councils face difficult situations, a point to which Mr Hamilton alluded, and have done a lot of work to try to bring their rates down. Nevertheless, those rates are still considerably above the level of inflation. Government — and Government here — have contributed to that situation facing councils, not least the situation with rates capping, about which we just spoke. Although the £400,000 cap has been delayed for two years, the £500,000 cap is a real and present issue facing local ratepayers.

It is important to avoid making direct comparisons between the district rate and the regional rate, because it is not as easy for councils to freeze a district rate as it is for the Executive to freeze the regional rate. For councils, the district rate may form more than 90% of their income; for the Executive, it is less than 10%. The Executive have, therefore, much more room for manoeuvre. Ideally, one would want to see the regional rate and the district rate rising in and around the rate of inflation. I would join Mr Hamilton in condemning the

large hikes in rates that took place under direct rule in recent years. However, perhaps we are now going to the other extreme.

In the current climate, the rate of inflation is very low, and we may even see deflation at some stage in 2009. Therefore, the practical difference between a rates freeze and the rate of inflation will be fairly marginal. There is a wider point to be made about trying to avoid a boom-and-bust situation with rates and about, over time, having a steady situation — we will see whether freezing the regional rate is something that the Executive can stand over and deliver.

It is worth making the point that no distinction is made in people's rates bills between the regional rate and the district rate — the two do not appear on a bill separately. If the Executive are contributing to the difficult situations in which councils find themselves and freezing the regional rate at the same time, the latter will have a minimal effect on householders' perceptions. Therefore, many of the Executive's actions, for which they are patting themselves on the back, may be missing the point.

I have no doubt that to freeze the regional rate will be a popular move, but it is also a very populist one. We have an Executive that places populism ahead of prudence. The danger of that is that it deflects analysis of failings elsewhere in the system. In some respects, the opposition have been more realistic than the Government at times and have avoided beating the populist drum. A freeze in the regional rate is a cut in real terms, because a freeze is below the rate of inflation. To put that into perspective, the difference between a 0% and a 1% rates rise for an average household is only about 6p a week.

I want to highlight a number of different problems and consequences of freezing the regional rate. First, it will result in a loss of revenue, which will have opportunity costs for other investments. We are already suffering from the distortions that are caused by trying to manage expenditure in a divided society, and the Executive are making that tight financial situation even worse. There has been no evidence of any analysis on how to address competing priorities — the Executive's knee-jerk reaction was to take the populist option. No doubt, we are all mindful of the funding crisis that faces a large range of public services in Northern Ireland. The Health Service is one area in which concerns have been raised, not just over the approach that has been taken to efficiency savings but over the amount of money that is being made available for the services that it provides. Therefore, there is a cost and a consequence to the Executive's actions.

Secondly, the measure is regressive — those who are better off will benefit disproportionately from a freeze in rates. Not every household in Northern

Ireland pays rates. Indeed, many of the worse-off in society depend disproportionately on the public services that the Executive are underfunding.

Thirdly, when it comes to our having a serious economic development strategy, we are in danger of becoming deluded. When Ministers are asked by journalists what they are doing to assist the economy, in their answers they routinely trot out as the major aspects of the Executive's economic policy the freezing of the regional rate and their action on industrial rating. Such self-congratulation has continued well into the economic downturn. It is worth making the point that those strategies pre-date the downturn and are not new policies to deal with the current economic situation.

Presumably, the logic of freezing the regional rate during a recession is to do with household expenditure. The hope is that people will spend their money and, therefore, stimulate economic activity. However, in a recession, people, owing to uncertainty, can be tempted to save their money. Even if people do spend, that spending may not be particularly well targeted at what our society needs — emphasis has been placed on consumption rather than on investment. Investment means modernising and rebalancing our economy to put us on a much surer footing so that we can take advantage of a recovery when it comes. The Executive's policy is all about today and contains nothing about tomorrow.

Indeed, one could make the point that opportunity costs arising from lost revenue could be better employed in stimulating the economy. It is worth noting that the policy of freezing the regional rate, which has been championed as the Executive's response to the economic downturn, does not have the Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) support.

Also, members of the Institute of Directors (IOD) largely oppose that measure. I hear the Minister of Finance and Personnel, from a sedentary position, heckling me on that point, but he should review the submissions made by organisations to the Programme for Government and the Budget. The CBI's position was clear, and I have attended various meetings with that organisation in recent months. The CBI highlighted the major concern about the Executive's adopting a populist approach to public expenditure rather than making serious investments in the economy. It is important for the Assembly to be clear about what it does and how, in practice, it helps the economy.

My fourth concern is about the Assembly's future relationship with the UK Treasury. The tax burden per head in Northern Ireland, for income tax and council tax, is lower than the UK average, and it could be argued that that gap is widening. There are good reasons for that, such as people in Northern Ireland being less affluent than those in most other regions of

the UK. However, the relationship with the Treasury is sensitive, and it is important to retain a balance and not to push the boundaries too far.

The Assembly is arguing for, and trying to protect, the Barnett formula. It gives money to the Assembly to enable it to provide a level of service in Northern Ireland. If the Assembly sends out the message that it will give more tax breaks to local people rather than investing that money in services, one must wonder what the Treasury's reaction to that will be and whether that move from the Executive serves the longer-term interests of Northern Ireland. It may be popular for a few days, weeks or months, but in the long run, if that move backfires, Northern Ireland may suffer the consequences for some time.

Similarly, the Assembly asked the Treasury for the Varney Review II, which produced a 120-page report. I do not agree with every aspect of that report, but I recognise it as a serious piece of work from a serious organisation. Some eight months after the report was published, the Executive sent a one-page letter in response. What will the Treasury's reaction be to that, particularly at such a sensitive time?

My fifth concern is about feeding into unrealistic expectations. Will the Executive be able to maintain the freeze on regional rates at 0% into the future? They have committed to doing so for three years. At some time in the future, they will have to face up to that issue. That applies equally to the deferment of water charges. Will the Executive maintain that situation indefinitely, or will there be a day of reckoning on which they will have to face up to that challenge? When that day comes, and having fed the expectations of the public, it may be much more difficult for the Executive to address the needs of society. Perhaps that is another short-term benefit that will create a long-term problem.

I approach the issue not from the left of society but from a liberal economic perspective. Serious concerns have been raised by respected voices in society, including many from the business community. A recent report from the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland has, essentially, been sidelined by the Executive.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member clarify the point that he has made for a second time? Is he suggesting that representatives of the business community — he mentioned the CBI and the IOD — oppose the freeze in the non-domestic regional rate, which is, effectively, the business rate?

Dr Farry: The business organisations were commenting on the household rates, and I draw a distinction between freezing those and providing assistance to businesses, for which rates are a concern, particularly for small businesses. The Executive's policy on household rates creates a considerable

economic deadweight. Some people may be in a position to pay increased rates that would fund services, whereas others may be suffering difficulties.

However, there are other ways to help those who are suffering, among which there may be a more economically effective option. It is important for the Executive to take on board the concerns that are being raised in society by serious voices. I am somewhat disappointed that only the Alliance Party has the courage to voice such criticisms, as opposed to hiding behind populism.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that you have the courage to —

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

Mr Weir: The Member said that his party has the courage to oppose the motion. However, at the beginning of his contribution, he also said that the Alliance Party would not divide the House on the issue. At times, the courage of the Alliance Party seems to compare with that of the Italian Army. *[Laughter.]*

1.00 pm

Dr Farry: If the Member had listened to what I said at the start of the debate, he would know that I made it perfectly clear that the Executive have stumbled into doing more or less the right thing in the context of the economic downturn and large increases in the district rate. However, let us not delude ourselves. This is not a response of the Executive to the current economic downturn: this is a longer-term economic strategy from the Executive, one which I believe to be fundamentally flawed. It causes real harm to a serious economic response from the Executive, and to our public finances.

I say with some disappointment that it is only the Alliance Party that is raising any substantive concerns about the approach. I am speaking as a liberal. There are other people in this Chamber who call themselves socialists. I wonder where they have gone.

We will not force a division on the motion today. It may well be the right thing to do, but there are fundamental flaws. For the benefit of Mr Kennedy, I take it as read that the Tories are in favour of this type of thing.

Mr Ford: I had not anticipated that a topic of such concern would attract such little notice around the Chamber as to mean that two Alliance Members would be called to speak in immediate succession. It is an indication of the lack of seriousness with which this matter is being taken.

It will be interesting to hear a response. Perhaps we can expect the Minister to give a substantive response to some of the points that have been made by my colleague Stephen Farry. It is clear to me that his

concluding remarks were correct: the Executive have stumbled into doing the right thing this year. Mr Hamilton suggested, however, that this was a key long-term strategy that had been running since last year. There was no strategy last year other than cheap populism. The fact that the Executive are doing the right thing — in the short term — in a time of economic recession is not something that they should be claiming credit for as a long-term strategy. It is something that the Executive have merely stumbled into.

The real questions for the Minister are how he will face this in the future; how he will acknowledge the reality of what is required in the provision of funds for public services; and whether he will accept that giving a bonus to the best off in this society — in two debates in succession — at the expense of public services that benefit the poorest in this society, presents the kind of strategy that he claims to be the way forward.

It would be most interesting if we could hear some substantive answers from the Minister to the points that have been made so eloquently by Dr Farry.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am delighted to have the opportunity to defend a measure that will introduce rates relief to ordinary ratepayers in Northern Ireland and to businesses as well. It is something that has been widely welcomed by all parties, except for the tax-raising Alliance Party which, once again, has spent its time in this debate, at a time of economic hardship and difficulty in Northern Ireland, putting forwards all sorts of reasons why it knows that capping rates is the right thing to do, but then lists five or six reasons why it effectively opposes it.

It will not be lost on people in Northern Ireland — those who follow these debates and the wider public — that consistently, when there are measures, whatever form they take, that lessen the burden on households and businesses in Northern Ireland in these difficult times, when devolution is shown to make a difference for Northern Ireland, that it is Members from the Alliance Party and one or two others who consistently oppose those measures. They give all sorts of reasons why we should either maintain or increase costs on households at a difficult time.

I have heard the arguments about regressive taxation and so on with regard to the rates burden. By that same argument, I take it that the Alliance Party and Mr Ford are against the universal payment of child benefits since that, according to his logic, benefits the better off. Let us hear it now: child benefits are not targeted at those who are less well off; everyone gets those payments. Is the Alliance Party now saying that when it puts its principles forward with such eloquence, as it has been said, that it opposes universal child benefits? No, there is silence. Here is populism in action now from the Alliance Party.

That party is for things when it suits it and against things when it does not suit it. The Alliance Party seeks to take cheap shots at any measure that my party, this Executive or this Assembly introduce that might help people in Northern Ireland.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: You had plenty of time to make your points. Unfortunately, you did not make them well enough. You asked me to respond, so I am responding. The fact that you do not like that response obviously makes the point that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is well aware that all remarks should be made through the Chair. Therefore, I ask him to do so.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am always happy to follow the example that you and others set whenever addressing points directly to me as Minister. Furthermore, I am always happy to look people in the eye when I respond.

This measure has been discussed in terms that suggest that the right decision has been stumbled into. Members who speak in such terms appear not to realise that we have a Programme for Government, the strategy of which is to put the economy first. Growing a dynamic and innovative economy was the first priority to be agreed unanimously by the Executive and, indeed, by the Assembly.

Consequently, in line with that strategy, the Executive decided last year to do away with direct rate plans for industrial derating, for instance. We stuck to the position that industrial derating should be retained. I do not remember whether the Alliance Party was for or against the measure at that time. Perhaps it said that it was for retaining industrial derating, but, having given lots of reasons why it should oppose it, it chose not to force the matter to a vote in case somebody attempted to use the measure for unknown purposes.

Dr Farry: We opposed it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member says that the Alliance Party opposed the measure, and that is consistent with its wish to raise business and household taxes. Even then, the Alliance Party was opposed to the measures set out in the Programme for Government. If nothing else, the message going out is that the Alliance Party is consistently in favour of raising the tax burden on households and businesses in Northern Ireland.

Of course, when it comes to populism, no one can outdo some members of the Alliance Party who consistently propose all sorts of initiatives and projects that would entail greater public expenditure. However, I never hear any of them suggest where the money for such measures should come from. I am sorry — I take

that back; obviously, the money should come from hard-working families and businesses through tax rises.

The rest of us should get on with passing this important statutory instrument, which will be welcomed widely. The Confederation of British Industry and others are in favour of a regional rates freeze for businesses, and the fact that, as Mr Farry indicated, the Alliance Party is not in favour of a household rates freeze does not carry great weight with me because householders, hard-working families, individuals and communities who have suffered under direct rule deserve to share in the relief that businesses receive. That is good for communities, households and businesses. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before proceeding to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):
I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] dealing with marine planning, marine licensing, the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments, and enforcement.

I see that I am emptying the House with this motion. *[Laughter.]* Nevertheless, the issue is important.

The UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] was introduced to the House of Lords on 4 December 2008. The Bill is in Committee, and it is expected that the final amendments will be completed at the end of March or the beginning of April.

The Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] contains certain provisions that deal with transferred matters of the Northern Ireland Assembly or which alter the executive functions of my Department. The purpose of today's motion is to seek the Assembly's endorsement to the principle of those provisions extending to Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleagues in the Executive for their support in bringing the motion to the Assembly, and the Committee for the Environment, which has stated that it is content with the Bill's terms.

The level of activities in Northern Ireland's marine waters is still relatively low and is mainly traditional: shipping, fishing and leisure activities. However, Members will appreciate the growing importance of the marine environment. This morning, Gaelectric announced its plans for the construction of a wind farm on the coast at Larne and its intention to use the salt caverns for storing compressed air. That illustrates the type of developments that may affect the marine environment in the future and which, therefore, will necessitate wider planning.

The need for recognition of the growing importance of the marine environment is particularly true at a time when we are beginning to see new activities emerge alongside the traditional ones that I mentioned. There is no doubt that that will lead to increased competition for the limited space that is available. One can appreciate the difficulties that can — and do — arise when there is a need to balance competing interests and to reconcile and integrate conservation goals.

Nevertheless, I want to ensure that opportunities continue to exist for those who wish to exploit the marine environment, but I want to ensure that that is done in a sustainable manner, because Northern Ireland has a valuable marine environment that must be protected.

It is for those reasons that I intend to put in place a framework to deliver that approach to marine management in Northern Ireland. Such an approach will mean that we are well placed to respond to future demands. That is a view that is shared by other Administrations in the rest of UK, and it is in line with wider thinking across Europe.

In considering how to proceed, I have sought to strike a balance between the need to stay in the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] for those matters in which legislative competence is reserved, or where I feel it is appropriate to do so, and to legislate by means of a separate Northern Ireland Bill, which I will introduce in due course for transferred or reserved matters, but where it would be appropriate to legislate in the Assembly with the Secretary of State's consent.

On that basis, I have agreed that the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] should extend to Northern Ireland in respect of the UK-wide marine policy statement. I have also agreed to marine planning in the offshore part only of the Northern Ireland zone — from the 12-nautical-mile limit to the boundary of the zone — and to certain marine-licensing reforms, particularly the replacement of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 and its enforcement.

Furthermore, the Bill will extend the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments to Northern Ireland — specifically, section 13 of the Fisheries Act 1891, which no longer has any meaning because of a series of amendments over the years, and the North Sea Fisheries Act 1893, which dealt with offences for supplying “spirituous liquors” to fishermen in offshore waters in the North Sea, which is now obsolete.

Mr Wells: Hear, hear.

The Minister of the Environment: I hear that the Member for South Down Jim Wells supports that. The responsibility for that lies with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I am not saying that she was supplying the spirituous liquors or that, somehow or other, poteen from Fermanagh found its way to the North Sea, but those are Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) responsibilities. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development agreed that I bring that matter to the attention of the Assembly.

1.15 pm

I hope that Members will have an opportunity to read through the associated memorandum that was prepared for this debate. In practice, the extension of the provisions means that Northern Ireland will play a key role in helping to shape the framework for the UK seas by balancing our conservation, energy and resource needs; streamlining our regulatory regimes where it is appropriate to do so; and maintaining and protecting the marine area, so that the best value from its many uses can be achieved.

Some will say that legislation and regulation to manage and protect the marine environment is in place already, and that is true. However, it is complex, has been developed piecemeal over the years and is sectoral in nature. The sustainable approach to managing our marine environment that is outlined in the Bill has the potential to deliver real benefits for everyone; therefore, I want everyone to be closely involved in its development.

Already, representatives from Northern Ireland have been involved in three rounds of consultation, which has brought us to where we are now on the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. The Executive and the Assembly's Committee for the Environment have also been consulted at key points, and I look forward to that positive engagement continuing.

Indeed, I want that positive engagement to continue into the work that will be starting shortly on a separate Northern Ireland marine Bill. In that context, I will want to engage with as many of the marine stakeholders as possible, including representatives of the renewables sector, environmental interest groups, the fishing industry, port authorities, those concerned with tourist interests and recreational users, to name but a few. I want to hear their views. Given the impact that the legislation will have, it is important that we get warnings and the views of the stakeholders at an early stage, so that there will be no surprises later on. We do not want to get complaints once the legislation has gone through and people see the impact that it has on their particular area.

However, that is for the future. Today is about seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the principle of certain provisions in the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] being extended to Northern Ireland. In doing so, we will be making the first important step towards developing an effective, joined-up approach to the management of the Northern Ireland marine environment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for introducing the legislative consent motion to the House. The Minister's proposals for the development of new policies and legislation relating to the management of the marine environment in the North first came before the Committee for the Environment back in December 2007. Members of the Committee were advised that the proposals would be similar to, and would complement, those being developed in the UK Government's marine Bill, but that they would be delivered in a way that would respect the devolution settlement and meet local needs.

The Environment Committee confirmed its broad support for the principles of the Bill last May. In October, the Committee noted the final policy clearance

and proposed timetable for the introduction of the Bill. In December, the Committee was asked by the Department to consider the terms of the legislative consent motion that is before us today. Members agreed the terms but sought further information on how the Department would liaise with the Republic on the issues that will be legislated for by Westminster in the delivery of the Bill.

The Committee is aware from previous experience that a legislative consent motion agrees in principle for Westminster to legislate in the area concerned, as opposed to agreeing the specific provisions of the Bill in so far as they extend to Northern Ireland. That means that there is an element of trust in the process, and there must be willingness in the Department to be proactive in its work with the UK Government and the other devolved Administrations to ensure the future protection of our marine waters. Pressures on marine space are continually increasing, and there is a need to allow development to take place and for people to benefit from the natural resources of the seas in a sustainable way, if conflict between marine activities is to be avoided in the future.

The Committee's understanding of the purpose of the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] is that it will establish a strategic system of marine planning and will balance and conserve energy use and resource needs.

It is designed to offer an opportunity for the sustainable development of the marine environment in addressing the use and protection of marine resources with sustainable economic and social benefit. However, some marine functions are reserved for the UK Government, while others are devolved and left for the regional Administrations to decide on the need to bring forward new legislation for the management of local terrestrial waters. Therefore, we must not be complacent and think that in giving legislative consent to Westminster today Northern Ireland is absolved from its responsibilities towards the marine environment.

As the Minister said, existing regulations for managing marine activities in the North have evolved over the years rather than being strategically planned, and it would be fair to say that the waters are, indeed, muddy when it comes to legislation for protecting the marine environment. To help clarify the situation, during 2008, the Committee sought further information from the Department, the Marine Task Force, and the Assembly's Research and Library Services. Members were informed that the provisions of the Bill that extend to Northern Ireland relate to planning, licensing, conservation, a marine policy statement and some implications for fisheries.

The Committee was warned by conservation organisations that the UK Bill, in itself, will not protect

local waters. It will set a framework for better management, but a lot will still need to be done at local level to ensure proper marine protection. For example, in planning, the UK Bill requires a UK-wide marine policy statement agreed jointly between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, but unless marine plans to implement the policy statement are introduced here in the North, the objectives of the UK Bill's joint vision for Northern Ireland will simply not be met.

Another concern presented to the Committee is that the actions taken at Westminster to implement the Bill will replace existing legislation that currently operates UK-wide with legislation applicable in England only. The Marine Task Force warned the Committee that there is a big risk of that happening in the area of marine licensing, and care must be taken to avoid leaving gaps in the legislation that leave us and our local seas unprotected until new legislation catches up, with the introduction of our own Northern Ireland marine Bill.

The Committee was advised that good legislation to protect our seas and to establish sustainable planning and development will not only benefit nature and conservation, but also help developers and those trying to harness the sea's natural resources for the benefit of all — and the Minister gave us an example of that. The existing regulations are very fragmented and dispersed across Departments and agencies, resulting in delays, greater inefficiencies and higher costs. A proper framework will lead to clearer guidelines and quicker assessments.

Further advice to the Committee pointed to the need for a more structured approach to interdepartmental co-ordination, and the UK Bill puts in place extensive statutory requirements for consultation and agreement with relevant Departments and agencies. To date, arrangements have been made on an ad hoc basis as and when issues emerge, and the Committee saw evidence of that as preparations were made by the Department for the legislative consent motion last year.

In closing, the Committee recognises the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] as a good start to protecting our seas and marine environment, and supports the terms of the legislative consent motion. However, passing responsibility to Westminster to legislate in this general area across the UK does not remove the need or the urgency for local action. The Committee looks forward to working with the Department sooner rather than later on local legislation to protect our seas. On behalf of the Environment Committee, I support the motion.

In conclusion, as an MLA, I emphasise once again our island needs. The need for North/South co-ordination is paramount to ensuring the protection of our seas and

marine environment as we develop a policy for that marine environment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Wells: I welcome this consent motion. As Members will know, half of Northern Ireland's biodiversity can be found in our marine habitats, and there is increasing pressure on those species. Up to now, there has not been much in the way of development of our coastal regions. However, things are moving on rapidly; for instance, we see the move towards alternative energy sources, such as wind and tidal power. Clearly, we will have to address the issue of how to deal with those.

There is also the issue of balancing the interests of aquaculture and fishing. Many Members are aware of the dreadful plight of Rathlin Island's seabird population, which has crashed due — it is widely believed — to the overfishing of sand eels. Over the past few years, very worryingly, there has been an almost total nest failure for species such as the kittiwake and the razorbill. There was a partial improvement in 2008, but the previous two seasons were an almost complete wipeout.

The difficulty at the moment is that around 100 different laws impact on the management of our coastal regions and of our maritime environment. As the Member for Mid Ulster Mr McGlone said, the approach has been very much piecemeal, with various strands of legislation brought together without any co-ordination.

I was interested to hear that legislation barring the sale of liquor to mariners is to be repealed. That law should be retained. I do not want anybody the worse for wear in a trawler or tanker going around the coast of south Down. I am slightly worried that a consequence of the legislative consent motion will be to end the ban on drink on boats. However, apart from that, this is a very important piece of legislation.

We urgently need a system of integrated marine spatial planning. What the Minister has announced will not have a huge impact on Northern Ireland, because it involves high-level policy issues that affect areas that extend further out to sea, beyond our 12-mile jurisdiction. Nonetheless, it is a step in the right direction, particularly when the other devolved Administrations — in Scotland and Wales — have indicated that they will comply with the UK-wide legislation.

However, none of that will achieve anything unless we have our own Northern Ireland marine Bill, because we are behind the rest of the UK in protecting our seas and coastal habitats. England, Scotland and Wales, for instance, will soon have their own powers for the spatial development of activities in their territorial waters. They will also be able to designate networks of marine conservation zones, which are important for the

protection of fisheries. I regard that not as a threat but as a benefit to the fishing industry. All the evidence indicates that the fish population increases when marine conservation zones are set up, and the total catch rises proportionately. Therefore, marine conservation zones are welcome, but we do not yet have the power to introduce them.

England, Scotland and Wales will also have the ability to set up single management bodies to reduce bureaucracy and conflict. We are a long way off that, while other UK nations are almost up and running. We urgently need clarification of when the Northern Ireland marine Bill will come before us. It slightly worries me that we in Northern Ireland always seem to be several steps behind the rest of the United Kingdom in every area of legislation. For instance, after the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 was introduced, we did not have the equivalent legislation until the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Similarly, on animal welfare legislation, we have had two years of the new Animal Welfare Act 2006 in GB. Unfortunately, our legislation is languishing far behind. Some day, perhaps, we in Northern Ireland should go it on our own and set an example to the rest of the UK, rather than always come in behind, late on in the day. Will the Minister indicate when the Northern Ireland marine Bill will be introduced? What issues will it address? More importantly, when does the Minister expect to see it on the statute book?

There will be a difficulty if the other parts of the United Kingdom have their legislation up and running and we do not, because issues will arise — the obvious one is alternative energy sources — that involve more than one jurisdiction. Without legislation to deal with that, where will we stand if an issue arises with Scotland or Wales? Apart from that, the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] is good news. It is good news for the environment and for our marine habitats. I hope that it is a step in the right direction towards protecting an enormously valuable economic and environmental asset for the community.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the legislative consent motion. Sinn Féin wants to see a marine Bill that protects the North's marine life and develops sustainable uses of Irish seas.

1.30 pm

Ireland's seas are vital to the structure of the nation, and it is essential that a new marine Bill will protect them sufficiently. However, the implications of the Bill as regards the all-Ireland dimension must be considered. As has been outlined, the Bill has been designed for England and the devolved institutions, but there must be an all-Ireland dimension to any marine

planning in the Irish Sea. What mechanism will be in place to ensure that that will happen? Other Members have asked the same question.

Not only is it necessary to create feasible systems for managing marine activities, it is also vital to help protect and restore marine life and build flexibility to help our seas cope with future stresses, such as those posed by climate change. I know that that subject is very close to the Minister's heart.

I understand that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is reviewing the need to legislate locally for the fisheries measures contained in the Bill. Perhaps the Minister will expand on those aspects. The Bill refers to greater access, the mapping of our sea and more sustainable management of our marine life. It will provide better regulations to protect inshore fisheries and sea-fish nurseries, which will also be done through the proposed fisheries Bill. In addition, that will help the inshore pot fisheries and the long-term sustainability of sea angling, which has a potential economic benefit for our rural tourism industry.

In relation to our ports, I want more clarification about the process of new arrangements for simplifying and streamlining the licensing of dredging, which is a big issue. Will the Minister also outline the position as regards aggregates and clarify who has responsibility for the removal of aggregates from the seabed? I understand that that is the responsibility of DARD — will that remain the case?

A key focus for Sinn Féin is to ensure that coastal plans provide natural heritage and landscape values, protect and enhance public access, and contain objectives on the sustainable management of the seas. The content of the plans appears to be broad, including land use, planning, coastal space for aquaculture, and offshore planning for fisheries and renewable energy. As the Minister mentioned, Ireland benefits from some of Europe's strongest, sustained wind regimes, along with some of the world's best wave and tidal systems. Those present huge opportunities — for example, the tidal project in Strangford Lough — to grow the renewable-energy sector.

There needs to be a more cohesive regulatory regime for the marine environment and a forum for developers and conservationists to work together so that issues of conflict can be identified and resolved at a very early stage.

Recreational sea angling is a selective, environmentally friendly and low-impact fishing activity. It is a sport of great social and economic importance. The North of Ireland — and Ireland in general — should be a major centre for sea angling that is based around species that are not readily available elsewhere. To deliver that, the introduction of artificial reefs will help the sustainability of stocks. Perhaps the Minister will also touch on that.

It is widely recognised that a live fish on the deck of a boat is worth many times more than a dead one on the fishmonger's slab — it provides the option for release and re-catch in the future. The sport of sea angling falls between too many stools and does not get the support it truly deserves. We have an opportunity to turn the North into a world-class sport fishing destination. The Bill will go some way towards that because it will generate huge economic and social benefits for coastal communities and will generally increase revenue in the North. I would like to see that developed and taken seriously, particularly given the damage that has been done to inshore fisheries. That needs to be addressed, and the Bill will, hopefully, do that.

Sinn Féin hopes that the Bill will co-ordinate the sectoral interests — such as tourism, aquaculture, renewable energy and fishing — with the bigger, strategic picture. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the legislative consent motion. As a society, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need to protect our environment so that those who come after us can enjoy its benefits. The UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] proposes to confer powers to the Department of the Environment (DOE) as a maritime planning authority and to prepare maritime plans for offshore areas adjacent to Northern Ireland — as is the case with other parts of the United Kingdom. I support that.

Just as plans are developed for land regional areas, so, too, there is a need to manage the development of our marine environment. There are conflicting pressures on that environment, and as the Minister has said, we need to make a balanced judgement. Once again, in my constituency of East Antrim, we are becoming increasingly aware of pressures to develop energy resources in the area. An announcement was made this morning, and there have been previous announcements about offshore wind interests. Then, of course, there is the expanding concept of wave-generated power. As my constituency has a large coastal area, that is clearly of interest to me and my constituents.

So, energy production, both wind and wave, is an issue, yet there is also a need to maintain and protect the maritime ecosystem. Rather than deal with applications for development on an ad hoc basis, surely it makes sense for all concerned that maritime area plans be developed to give a greater understanding of where protection is needed. Moreover, that would give those who wish to develop renewable energy resources a greater understanding of the issues involved.

The Bill also states that there will be increased fisheries management and enforcement powers. That must be welcomed, because we must ensure that our fishing stocks can be conserved and regenerated and

can reach a sustainable level so that fishing will be profitable in the future.

The Bill indicates that any regional maritime plan that Northern Ireland would develop would have to be agreed by the UK Government before it could be adopted. That appears to be reasonable. We in Northern Ireland are close to regions such as Scotland and the Isle of Man, so what they do might impact adversely on our area. It is, therefore, important that the regional plans work with one another so that proposals in one area do not adversely affect those of neighbours in other areas. There would have to be an understanding that our plans should tie in with those of our close UK neighbours.

In the background paper — the legislative consent memorandum — that the Minister provided, it is stated that the Bill will:

“Introduce a streamlined, transparent and consistent marine licensing system — making it faster, cheaper and simpler to license marine developments.”

If that system is to be developed in the future, while, at the same time, our marine environment is to be protected, surely we must support those efforts. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: For some of us who sit on the Committee for the Environment, it is a pleasure to be able to agree with the Minister. Of course, that pleasure is enhanced by its rarity. On this occasion at least, we seem to have reached agreement.

I welcome the publication of the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] and its progress so far in Westminster. Therefore, I also welcome the legislative consent motion that is before the House today. It is clear that there has been a long-standing need for this kind of legislation, not just in Northern Ireland, but across the UK as a whole. Indeed, during the previous Assembly, I received support and approval for bringing forward a private Member’s Bill to deal with marine conservation. That fell with the suspension of the Assembly in 2002, at about the same time that a similar Bill fell in Westminster because, I believe, of difficulties in the House of Lords.

It is long past the time when the Bill’s measures were introduced. As others have said, whether or not we agree with every single word in the Bill, it is important that Northern Ireland can benefit from the protection that it offers as soon as possible.

There are several issues that the Bill clearly impinges on. I noticed with some amusement that the Minister mentioned the word “renewables” in his list of issues of concern but managed to skate past it fairly rapidly. Nevertheless, it is clear that when we look at the issues of wave, tide and wind power off our coasts, we need to have a measure of regulation that will deal with them appropriately and quickly.

The issue of fisheries falls largely within the responsibility of DARD. In recent years, it has presented a huge management issue in every part of these islands and in much of European waters, and that must be addressed. Furthermore, the whole problem of coastal developments not being properly catered for under planning provisions — whether it relates to tourism or to sewage, or to the unfortunate way in which sometimes those two issues come rather too close together — is an issue that requires attention. We need to ensure that we meet the economic needs of today while protecting the environment of tomorrow. In other words, we need to ensure sustainable development across all our coastal waters.

I welcome the way in which the Minister introduced the legislative consent motion, and I welcome his support for the principles behind the Bill. However, when he was talking about further responsibilities in Northern Ireland, unfortunately, he was a little less than specific.

I endorse the comments, particularly from Jim Wells, about the need for an early and detailed timetable as to when legislation will proceed in Northern Ireland, because there is no point in saying at this stage that we simply consent to the UK Bill. There is much that we have to do locally. I endorse the comments that the Chairperson made in that respect, and the support that the Committee received from the marine task force in looking at some of the details of where work is needed.

There are many points, but I will highlight only a few of them. There is a huge issue around the marine planning process for Northern Ireland, which is not yet addressed in the Bill, but for which we need legislation. There are major issues around habitat protection, not just around fisheries conservation zones, which were mentioned earlier, but around other aspects of our habitat. For instance, the variety of sponges on the north coast and around Rathlin has recently come to light.

Ideally, we need to have a single marine management organisation to deal with licensing and planning matters in coastal waters and to ensure proper co-ordination across the plethora of departmental regulations. The licensing process certainly needs to be streamlined, even if it cannot be done through a single marine management organisation, although that would be the best option.

The Minister has accepted those concerns, and he has talked about the need for legislation. However, the key issue now is when the legislation will be implemented. We have already seen difficulties with regard to the Department of the Environment’s resourcing some of what needs to be done by way of legislation in the review of public administration. A number of Bills from the Department are already in the queue for Assembly time and for legislative drafting time.

However, if we are to make any sense of the legislative consent motion, it must be on the basis that the Minister will tell us today how soon we will be able to progress the Northern Ireland marine Bill and its necessary subsequent regulations.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the motion. The previous Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, looked at the issue and had meetings with the fishing organisations. By and large, what Members have before them is helpful in that the fishing organisations can, at least, feel part of the process. Nonetheless, will the Minister assure the House that there will be continuing contact with those organisations, that is, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Association, the Irish Fish Producers' Organisation and the Northern Ireland Trawlermen's Trading Company, as they are the three local bodies that have responsibility for the fishing industry?

During meetings with the Minister's predecessor, Arlene Foster, we raised their concerns, as part of the process. Therefore, it is reassuring to know that we have a process that gives those bodies some peace of mind, because the fishing industry is very much under threat financially and physically. For that reason, we seek that assurance. Will there be continued meetings with the fishing organisations throughout the process?

I read through the paperwork that we received, and I am keen to find out what effect the Bill will have on the Isle of Man fishing territories, which have traditionally been fished by Northern Ireland fishermen. Therefore, it is of some concern to them.

1.45 pm

Last week, I met company owners who want to take advantage of natural energy resources, whether wind turbines or sea turbines. I believe that they are meeting members of political parties and those who expressed interest in this subject in the past. In Strangford Lough, SeaGen provides a good example in showing that such technology can work without, ultimately, affecting local fishermen.

However, there is probably a middle road, if that is the way to describe it, and perhaps the Assembly often has to travel such a middle road. However, there are those who are very much in the green lobby and those who are very much in the lobby of taking resources from the sea.

Annex A of the paper that we have referred to marine nature conservation and, in particular, to the Secretary of State being responsible for designating marine conservation zones. Perhaps that poses the question: if it is the Secretary of State who does the designating, is there a system in place whereby if a conflict arises between the Secretary of State and the Assembly, a way forward can be found? It is important to ensure that a conflict will not arise, and that those involved in renewable energy can take advantage of

opportunities, while, at the same time, the interests of those who fish traditional fisheries, for shellfish as well as for fish, are considered.

By and large, we welcome the fact that, at long last, potential exists for a marine Bill, and it is important that we catch up in that respect with our counterparts in Scotland and elsewhere.

I welcome the report, but I would greatly appreciate answers to those questions.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and thank the Minister for tabling it.

Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the Bill and the spirit of co-operation across the islands in order to develop systems for managing the marine and coastal environments sustainably. The North has its own unique and diverse marine ecosystems, and the Assembly must develop further complementary legislation for the planning and protection of our marine environment in order to safeguard those ecosystems.

Therefore, it will come as no surprise to the Minister that I am concerned that there is no provision for North/South collaboration on the issue of marine protection. There must be a consistent approach taken across all these islands. The Minister is all too aware that marine wildlife and habitats do not recognise political boundaries, and the full realisation of the overarching aims of the Bill cannot be achieved without co-operation with the South.

We, therefore, need legislation for the North, establishing links with our counterparts in the South to protect and sustain marine life in all our coastal waters. That legislation would enable us to designate a network of marine-protected areas, streamline licensing across the Departments and establish a delivery mechanism or a marine management organisation for marine licensing and planning in our waters.

Will the Minister, therefore, indicate when he expects new complementary legislation to come into effect, and does he plan to introduce or establish a marine management organisation to deliver that? Furthermore, will he elucidate whether he will consider marine legislation for the North, with specific provision for North/South co-operation? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Weir: I support the motion.

I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, which, as everyone knows, is the premier maritime borough in Northern Ireland. As a representative of a coastal constituency, I think that the importance of the legislation should be obvious to us all.

This issue has, I believe, attracted a strong level of consensus and support, from not just all the parties in the Chamber — though that is welcome — but from the various organisations involved in maritime conservation. The purpose of any marine Bill, whether on a UK-wide basis or more locally based, should be to strike a complementary note between necessary conservation of the maritime ecosystem while recognising practical implications and protecting the rights of those who draw their livelihoods from the sea — particularly those in the fishing industry.

As a number of Members indicated, maritime policy is a complex issue that crosses jurisdictions, regional and national issues, and departmental issues. From a jurisdictional point of view, it is clear that what happens in Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland and in the other parts of the United Kingdom is interconnected. There has to be a degree of co-operation across the board. We should be careful that we do not get too narrowly focused on purely North/South co-operation. What is happening in the Republic, the Isle of Man, Scotland, England and Wales is relevant. Given the commonality of interest, this is probably an area that the various jurisdictions can work together on through the British-Irish Council.

In Northern Ireland, there seems to be a good spirit of co-operation on the issue. Clearly, there are areas that fall within the jurisdiction of the DOE and others that fall within the jurisdiction of DARD. From what the Minister said, good co-operation is ongoing to ensure that we get a joined-up approach.

Undoubtedly, the background to marine protection consists of various pieces of legislation and jurisdictions that are piecemeal in their nature. A Member made reference to muddy waters; this is an attempt to “unmuddy” the waters and to try to provide a common sense and joined-up approach. There are a range of issues that are meshed between transferred and reserved matters. The motion is a clear attempt to try to “unmesh” those issues in a sensible manner that allows for a two-stage process around marine protection. In particular, the motion looks at reserved matters, which, I think, are best dealt with on a UK-wide basis.

When setting overall policy, it is important that we are in step with the rest of the United Kingdom. The purpose of the Bill is to take the necessary first step toward proper marine protection. However, as the Minister and others indicated, the actions that we are taking, although a necessary first step, are very clearly not the final step. The Minister acknowledged that what we need is a local Bill that can deal with a range of issues, including marine wildlife; the streamlining of licensing; and inland fisheries management — a one-stop shop for the wide range of issues that the UK-wide Bill will not cover, or will not cover in a

sufficient level of detail. That will mean that local input will have to be provided through local legislation.

In common with other Members, I am impatient to see such legislation put in place. However, the need for a timely piece of legislation has to be balanced against ensuring that the legislation that does come forward covers all issues and provides the right solutions. I understand the frustration at the fact that we do not have local legislation at present; however, it is important that the proper consultation is completed with all the organisations involved to try to ensure that we provide holistic solutions that will benefit Northern Ireland. In that context, we can ensure that there will be sustainability of the marine environment.

The step that we are taking today — in backing the legislative consent motion, which has support from around the House — together with a commitment to future steps toward a Northern Ireland-wide Bill, will, I think, mesh together the jigsaw in a common sense fashion and allow us to preserve the best of the marine environment while recognising the practical implications that face Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the motion and the Minister’s comments about the growing importance of the marine environment and the need to provide better protection of it through legislation in Northern Ireland.

As Members know, the seas around our island and around the neighbouring islands are among our greatest assets; they support some of the world’s most important species of sea birds. Northern Ireland supports, for example, about 10% of the UK’s population of the sandwich tern, the common tern and the razorbill, yet protection of the environment is very poor. Seabirds face many threats to their survival from fishing, climate change, and from oil, chemicals and heavy metal pollution. The better protection of our seas is essential for all who use them and for the birds and wildlife that depend on them.

The SDLP will support the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] as a co-ordinated response to many of the marine issues. However, we want an even more effective response at local level, as the UK Bill does not deal adequately with marine planning or with wildlife or habitat protection. The SDLP wants an additional marine Bill to be introduced urgently for Northern Ireland.

Other Members made the point that given that we now have a key role in legislation, there should be clarity in the timetable for that legislation. It is also essential that the Northern Ireland Bill provide for an all-Ireland dimension, because wildlife and habitats protection and the protection of important ecology systems and spawning grounds cannot be dealt with in isolation. Protection of habitats around our shores can

be effective only if our efforts are co-ordinated with those of the Irish Government.

The fact that Departments in Northern Ireland have not worked together in the past has been a feature of the failure to protect marine life properly. Decisions about permitted levels of commercial fishing here have failed to take food chains and other implications for our marine species into account. Therefore, any Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly must address such failures and require the streamlining of licensing arrangements, particularly between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Minister of the Environment: Despite the fact that the consent motion is a technical piece of legislation, a wide-ranging debate has taken place and many points were raised. I suspect that many of those are more likely to be addressed by the Northern Ireland marine Bill when it is introduced, and today's motion is the first step towards that. Many of the provisions in the Northern Ireland Bill will have to be taken within the framework of the marine policy statements, which will be agreed on a UK-wide basis. I seek consent that the provisions of the UK Bill, with the marine policy statement, should apply to Northern Ireland and should form that broad framework.

Since several Members made similar points, I will not mention all Members who spoke to the debate. The Chairman of the Committee raised points on the planning arrangement; he wanted to ensure that there would be no gaps and that a joined-up approach would be taken. He also discussed the need for local action and input, and he raised the issue of input from the Republic of Ireland.

2.00 pm

As regards gaps, the Bill requires Administrations that plan for waters on the borders of the marine region to notify one another of their intention to plan and to take all reasonable steps to achieve compatibility. It is not, therefore, the case that everybody works in isolation, or that different Administrations ignore the policies that others follow. There is a requirement on all of them to plan for the areas that are near borders. There is nothing in the Bill that prevents Administrations from working together to plan for an area. That should help to avoid the gaps to which the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment referred.

Liaison has already taken place through preliminary discussion on marine issues between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic. As regards the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL], the marine policy statement will be a UK-wide document that will set out the key priorities for the UK's entire marine waters. Arrangements will be made for trans-boundary

consultation with other member states on the areas where boundaries meet.

Part of Northern Ireland's offshore region does not actually lie adjacent to the Irish Republic, and the trans-boundary arrangements will be carried out through the UK Government. However, there will be issues in the marine Bill on which they will want to liaise with the Irish Republic.

I must point out, because a number of Members raised the matter, that it is in our interests to ensure that there is continuity in such legislation. If I have any complaint about arrangements with the Republic — and the Committee Chairman will be aware of the matter, as it concerns other legislation that his Committee has dealt with — it is that problems have arisen when we wanted to introduce legislation that required a joint approach, as it has usually been the Republic that has been found wanting. That can make it difficult for legislation that we want to introduce to be effective. Where those considerations exist, it is important that we ensure that we get the message to the Republic that we want to co-operate as good neighbours across the border to ensure that legislation is effective.

The Department has established an interdepartmental steering group to develop and take forward policy on local input and action. I have already given a commitment that external stakeholders will be consulted to ensure that there is as wide a spectrum of views as possible on the proposals. Indeed, during the coming year, officials plan to hold a number of public events to get local opinion.

I want to deal with points that Jim Wells raised in his usual impassioned way. Members are, of course, aware of his interest in the protection of the environment and, in particular, of bird life in Northern Ireland. A number of Members asked how quickly the Northern Ireland marine Bill will be introduced. The Northern Ireland marine Bill will be shaped by marine policy statements and plans that will be developed for the whole United Kingdom. Therefore, the motion can be considered as a starting point on the road towards putting effective legislation in place.

In the past, and in the debate, I have given a commitment that the Northern Ireland marine Bill, which will contain provisions for marine planning and marine-nature conservation, will consider the further streamlining of the licensing of devolved activities in Northern Ireland's territorial waters.

Do not forget that the Bill refers to what happens within the 12-mile limit off Northern Ireland's coast. I will consider all those matters with the relevant ministerial colleagues.

I intend to bring the proposals to the Executive for their agreement in early 2010, after which there will be

opportunities for stakeholder engagement during the policy development and the public consultation process. Given how long it takes for legislation to pass through the Assembly, I suspect that the Bill will be introduced by 2012. Some people say that the Assembly lags behind other Administrations. There are sometimes advantages in such a position, in so far as it helps us to learn from the mistakes of others and to see what provisions should be included.

Roy Beggs asked about a holistic approach. The marine planning process, which starts from the mean high-water spring tide, intends, for the first time, to take a holistic view of the marine area and to manage and regulate marine activity within environmental limits. That will minimise the impact of human activity and should have a beneficial effect on the environment.

Willie Clarke mentioned a number of points that I have already addressed, such as the role of the Irish Republic. I hope that I have made it clear that there will be, and has been, consultation, which I hope will prove more fruitful than such work in the past. He asked what effect dredging will have on ports. Given the fact that Warrenpoint harbour is in his own constituency, he was representing that constituency interest. However, the marine licensing should not result in any change for harbour authorities. The common activity that most harbour authorities undertake is the maintenance of the navigation channel. They will still be empowered to do that under harbour legislation, and marine licensing will not apply to that activity.

The extraction of marine aggregates is currently regulated by the Environmental Impact Assessment and Natural Habitats (Extraction of Minerals by Marine Dredging) (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2007. That activity will come within the scope of the new marine licensing regime, which, in reaching a decision, will take into account all the relevant social, economic and environmental factors.

Willie Clarke asked what impact the Bill will have on new technologies, such as natural-gas storage, wave power, and so on. Those technologies will be licensed in Northern Ireland's territorial waters by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), they will also require a marine licence until we are satisfied that DECC is operating a robust regulatory scheme. Once that is established, the marine licence will no longer be required. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will license our activities in sea loughs, and the marine license will be required there, too.

Willie Clarke also mentioned sea angling. The plan is to develop, through the new marine legislation, a sustainable marine environment and to have a planning process in place that will take account of all sectors. When we bring forward the Bill, there will be consultation with all those interests in order to ensure that they still

have the ability to carry out those activities, and carry them out within a framework, which, as I have indicated time and again, will be sustainable.

Mr Clarke and others asked about the plans for fisheries, and particularly about support for inshore fisheries. That is a matter for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and during 2009 she will bring forward local primary legislation for fisheries.

Mr Clarke also asked about the effect of the legislation on planning for wind farms. As I said at the start of my speech, that will be one of the big issues for the marine areas around Northern Ireland because of the potential for wind farms in them. The Bill will streamline the application process, and the extent of that streamlining will become clear in time. I think that those are all the issues raised by Mr Clarke to which I wanted to reply.

Mr Ford, who, I am glad to see, is back in his seat, said that it was rare for him to find himself in agreement with me. Given how often the Alliance Party gets things wrong, I am glad that it is a rare occasion on which I find myself in agreement with him. Of course, the ultimate test of how often the Alliance Party gets things wrong is the electoral test, which shows clearly that, as far as the people of Northern Ireland are concerned, the Alliance Party usually gets it wrong, and the electorate does not vote for it.

I am happy to find myself agreeing with Mr Ford only the odd time. The problem is that, even when one is in agreement with him, he never fails to find something to complain about. It must be terrible being married to him: "Lovely dinner, dear, but..." followed by a list of complaints.

He raised several issues, and said that I had been less than specific about the marine Bill — I accept that. However, the legislative consent motion is not about the Northern Ireland marine Bill; it is about seeking consent to allow certain matters that relate to Northern Ireland to be included in the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. Those matters will shape the framework within which the marine Bill is formulated. Given that, it would have been wrong for me — and probably confusing as well — to have given a host of detail about the marine Bill, as that is not the subject of today's debate.

Mr Ford: I take the Minister's point. I am, however, grateful that he provided a date and said that the local Bill should be introduced by 2012. I appreciate that he answered my question, even if he now suggests that he did not want to.

The Minister of the Environment: I am always happy to answer Mr Ford's questions, but sometimes I cannot do so fully. He said that I was being less than specific about the marine Bill, but I have been as specific as I can. The consultation should start in 2010,

and the Bill should be in place by 2012. Its contents will be decided with reference to the outcome of the examination and consultation period on the policy.

Mr Wells: I fully understand why the honourable Member for East Antrim does not want to be too specific about the contents of the marine Bill, but I am slightly disappointed that it will be 2012 before it is placed on the statute books.

2.15 pm

My understanding is that this was all foreseen; we knew that it was coming. Is there any mechanism whereby the process can be speeded up? I have noticed that when something is politically popular or provides a way of raising revenue, some Departments — not the Minister's Department — find the time to bring in legislation almost instantly. This is an important issue. Is there any mechanism that can be used to ensure that the consultation happens this year rather than next year so that the programme can be brought forward?

The Minister of the Environment: I hope that the Member appreciates that the legislative burden on the Department of the Environment is a heavy one at present. If the Member takes into consideration all the legislation concerning the review of public administration, the review of councils and the extensive programme of planning reform legislation, he will appreciate that there is a considerable burden, not just on the draftsmen, but on departmental staff, and, consequently, on the Committee, because it must rigorously examine all that legislation. For reasons of logistics and resources, and because there are statutory requirements for consultation, which are, perhaps, more rigorous in Northern Ireland than they are in other parts, the legislative process will extend over the period that I mentioned. Marine policy statements and marine plans will form a framework, and part of the initial work will be done through what we agree to today.

Mr Ford also raised the issue of the marine management organisation and how we will co-ordinate all of this work. I accept his point that since the issue concerns a number of Departments, there must be an organisation that is outside the remit of any one particular Department. Otherwise, it might be seen that it had a bias towards one side of the issue rather than another. We will continue to look at the delivery mechanism, and we will consult with stakeholders on that issue before the marine Bill is introduced, so that we can determine how the policy should be overseen and what kind of organisation should do that.

Mr Shannon raised the issue of marine conservation zones and of what would happen if there were conflicts. Since he is not here, perhaps I should not answer his question. However, I will show him the courtesy of answering, even though he has not stayed to hear my response. My officials will develop proposals for

marine nature conservation in the context of Northern Ireland legislation. It is likely that the proposals will be similar to those that are contained in the UK Bill, which provide for a flexible designation regime for the needs of habitats and species that require protection.

The UK Bill also requires that any proposal for a marine conservation zone must take account of social and economic factors as well as environmental concerns. It is not a prerequisite that the marine conservation zones should attach a greater importance to any one of those interests; they will be considered in a balanced fashion. It is to be hoped that conflicts of interest will be addressed by way of consultation with all the interested parties. Mr Shannon also mentioned the Isle of Man. However, since it is a Crown dependency, it is not included in the UK Bill.

Peter Weir emphasised the importance of the east-west dimension. Of course, there is a UK-wide dimension. The whole point of Northern Ireland having an input into the marine planning statement is to recognise that there is a UK and east-west dimension.

Mr Weir also asked that I ensure that there is a joined-up approach with other Departments. My Department has been closely involved with other Departments, and, in fact, that will be central to the success of the process.

The Department of the Environment, as the policy authority for the adoption of the marine policy statement, must consult with other Government Departments that have functions in the area of marine management, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Of course, when we come to develop a marine plan for the Northern Ireland offshore region, we will undertake a similar consultation process with other Departments.

I hope that I have addressed all the issues that Members raised. No doubt there will be a lively discussion in the House when we debate the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. From the interest that Members showed today, there should be a close examination of it. We have an opportunity to build a secure future for Northern Ireland's marine environment — one that will deliver better regulation and will ensure that everyone, with an interest in the marine environment, is more closely involved in the decision-making process.

I notice that during this debate Members such as Mr Gallagher, who has now left the Chamber, and whose constituency does not even touch an inch of coastline, showed an interest in the issue. That shows that Members from across the Assembly have a wide interest in protecting our marine environment. Most importantly, I am determined to see that a more

sustainable approach to the marine environment is taken, so that Northern Ireland can continue to benefit environmentally, economically and socially from the resources that the sea has to offer. For that reason, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] dealing with marine planning, marine licensing, the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments, and enforcement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I propose to suspend the sitting until that time.

The sitting was suspended at 2.22 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Farm Modernisation Scheme

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the farm modernisation scheme was raised at Executive level or approved by the Executive. (AQO 2166/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development did not bring the farm modernisation programme to the Executive for their consideration. However, she provided the Executive with an update on recent developments at their most recent meeting on 26 February 2009.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that queues forming outside agricultural offices was a most unusual and unprecedented occurrence, will the decision on procedures for future funding rounds be for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development alone to take?

The First Minister: That question has two aspects. First, the European Union is keen to ensure that the methods used for the distribution of such funds include a selection process. Therefore, the Executive are reviewing the mechanism. The Minister has brought the issue to the Executive and said that she wants to consider how improvements can be made in future. Everyone has heard farmers' reaction — they felt that the process was demeaning. We must have a system that ensures that the people who need the money get the money.

However, the farm modernisation programme is a positive story, to the extent that so many applicants came forward. Approximately 9,000 applicants were prepared to invest a significant amount of their own money in improving farms and modernising their farm base. The Executive will, however, examine not only the method of distribution but the means of allocation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. As he and Mr Gallagher said, there has been much concern about the funding for the programme, and legal issues are part of the problem. However, is it not the case that, politically, a Minister who has secured

the agreement of the Executive is in a much stronger position than a Minister who acts as an individual?

The First Minister: That is so, and, as the Member knows, I am a champion of collective responsibility and of bringing as many issues as necessary to the Executive. However, we must recognise that were every Minister to bring all his or her departmental decisions to the Executive, we would spend most of our time in Executive meetings.

When such decisions involve policy or relate to major issues that require an interface with the community, there is a strong argument for a Minister's bringing those matters to the Executive to secure a collective decision. The Assembly should recognise that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development sought a process that would make the application for funding as simple as possible, rather than one that required a form that ran to dozens of pages, and there was merit in that element of her approach. The aim is to achieve that merit and remove some other facets that contributed to the downside of the methodology that was used.

Mr K Robinson: I listened carefully to the Minister's responses. Does he agree that a centralised approach to relations with the European Union, to include, perhaps, the formation of a dedicated EU relations Committee in the Assembly, would help to avoid the unfortunate scenes that we all witnessed? Farmers were forced to queue overnight because of the unique approach that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her officials took to European grant aid.

The First Minister: The Executive, and the Minister, will be happy to consider all available options. There will be two further tranches of funding, and, therefore, we will consider every option. I will draw the Member's suggestion to the Minister's attention.

It is important to recognise that funding for farm modernisation can be used quickly; in fact, its use is time limited. Therefore, it helps to boost the Northern Ireland economy. The money must be distributed and used as quickly as possible, but in a manner that is transparently fair. A system in which whoever can arrange to queue for the longest period gets the money has serious downsides.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a more positive note, and the First Minister has already touched on this point, can he update the Assembly on the economic benefits of the farm modernisation scheme?

The First Minister: I never thought in the early part of my career in east Belfast that I would be answering questions on agriculture; the longer I speak, the more quickly I might use up all my available knowledge on the subject.

As I understand it, the modernisation scheme flows out of voluntary modulation, and there are three tranches of available money. My understanding is that the funding is used as a part payment to encourage the modernisation of farms, either through technologies or machinery on the farm. It encourages a farmer to use a significant portion of his own money in order to draw down that funding. A significant improvement can be made across Northern Ireland by boosting farms, which helps the economy as well as farmers.

Question Time

2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to outline its proposals to allow junior Ministers to respond to oral questions from Members at Question Time. (AQO 2167/09)

The First Minister: I am back on safer ground, Mr Speaker.

In response to the Committee on Procedures inquiry into Assembly questions, we made a written submission reflecting the Executive's view on the current procedures for all Assembly questions to Ministers. Given that all procedures should be reviewed to evaluate their effectiveness in securing their aims, the Executive welcomed the opportunity to put proposals to the Committee, drawing on their experience of Assembly questions since May 2007.

As the Assembly is aware, the Executive's proposals were made public before the Committee on Procedures had received them in a deliberate attempt to generate controversy and to question our commitment to the exercise of accountability to the Assembly. That is far from the truth.

The deputy First Minister and I appointed the junior Ministers under a determination approved by the Assembly, which states that their role will be to assist us in the exercise of our functions in relation to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The junior Ministers in particular have assumed dedicated responsibility for progressing work in relation to children and young people and older people, and the scheduling of Executive business in the Assembly.

The Executive propose that junior Ministers should be able to support the deputy First Minister and me during questions for oral answer. That arrangement would be similar to that adopted by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and indeed other Secretaries of State, when they answer questions in the House of Commons and pass questions to members of their ministerial team. It would allow junior Ministers to answer questions on matters for which they have assumed responsibility and on which they would be able to speak with knowledge and authority.

The deputy First Minister and I fully acknowledge the importance of Assembly questions as one of the ways — together with evidence to Committees, private Members' motions and Adjournment debates — in which we are held accountable to the Assembly for our policies and actions. We do not believe that the proposal would dilute our accountability, and given that we will also be in the Chamber at that time, it would be difficult to construe that as neglect of our responsibilities.

We look forward to the report of the Committee's inquiry. It would be inappropriate to anticipate its conclusions, but I assure you, Mr Speaker, and Members of this House, that we will co-operate fully in implementing whatever arrangements the Assembly determines following their consideration of the report.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister for his response, and remind him that the determination was approved by a previous Assembly. If the proposal is not to have junior Ministers substitute entirely for Question Time for the First or the deputy First Minister but to assist by way of assigned questions, is it his intention that either or both junior Ministers could be available to assist him when he appears at Question Time or only his party colleague?

The First Minister: I enjoy Question Time, so the two junior Ministers are only required to answer questions on the matters specifically delegated to them. Furthermore, they are equally responsible for those matters. Therefore, when I am scheduled to answer questions, my junior Minister can answer on my behalf, and when the deputy First Minister is designated to answer questions, his junior Minister can answer in his place.

In the past several months, junior Ministers have answered probably only four or five questions that fall into the category to which the Member referred.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the First Minister's replies. Has the practice of answering questions here been compared with those in the other Administrations in Scotland, Wales and London?

The First Minister: Precisely the same system operates in the House of Commons, and I recall from an earlier debate that it was the Member who wanted British parliamentary procedures to be adopted here, so I assume that he will support the proposal.

With respect to the other Administrations, we should remember that we have a very different system of Government here. For instance, in Scotland, the First Minister is directly responsible for all Departments; whereas, each of our Ministers answers questions within his or her own bailiwick. I do not have access to the information that they use to answer such questions.

Although we are always happy to answer a wide range of questions; without being too flippant, I must point out that Members have been having problems with finding questions for OFMDFM to answer at Question Time. In the past six months to a year, questions have been asked on only five broad themes. During the last Question Time, three Members asked, and subsequently withdrew, precisely the same question, and, in another place, a further two Members asked that question. Week after week, we are being asked broadly the same questions. Our proposals to the Committee are an attempt to ensure that Members', and, through them, the public's, experience of Question Time is worthwhile and produces the best answers.

Mr Ford: I am sure that the First Minister will wish to join me in extending condolences to my good friend, and his constituency colleague, Naomi Long, whose mother died this morning.

In light of what the First Minister said about accountability and the importance of making Question Time a positive experience for all, does he agree that the issue is not so much about who answers questions, but, rather, about the quality of the answers given?

The First Minister: Of course, I join with the leader of the Alliance Party — and I know that I speak for the whole House — in expressing my sympathy to Naomi and her family circle on the sad death of her mother. I understand that Mrs Johnston had a long period of struggle, and those of us who have walked through the dark valley of having lost our mother will know how difficult a time it is. Naomi can be assured of the thoughts and prayers of everyone in the House.

With respect to the second part of the Member's question, he is, of course, right; the quality and completeness of answers are most important. Nevertheless, if people continue to ask the same questions, it is hard to give anything other than the same answers.

Mr Weir: In light of the First Minister's comments about the repetitious nature of questions to OFMDFM, does he believe that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should be required to answer questions twice as often as any other Ministers?

The First Minister: That is the issue. A test that one might apply to determine the popularity of asking questions to various Departments is what Members do when they have a completely free hand — when they submit questions for written answers.

Compared with other Departments, OFMDFM receives very few questions for written answer. In fact, some Departments receive ten times the number of natural questions that OFMDFM receives. In those circumstances, it is hard to justify why the Ministers of such Departments should appear at Question Time half as many times as those from OFMDFM.

2.45 pm

However, I know that the deputy First Minister feels the same as I do on this issue. We are relaxed and happy to abide by whatever the Committee recommends to the House and by whatever the House approves. When time is set aside for questions for oral answer, it is important that Members get the best value out of that time rather than feeling that they have to ask the same questions to fill the space available.

US Special Envoy

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the Executive have been consulted about the appointment of a US special envoy. (AQO 2168/09)

The First Minister: The Executive have not been consulted about the appointment of a special envoy. The Obama Administration have made clear that they recognise the importance of appointing someone to take over the role that Ambassador Paula Dobriansky filled until the inauguration of the new President on 20 January this year.

I record my sincere thanks and appreciation to Dr Dobriansky for the commitment that she made to Northern Ireland during the two years in which she was President Bush's special envoy here. Despite having a wide-ranging and challenging portfolio, which included climate change, human trafficking and human rights, she still devoted a significant amount of her time to supporting political and economic development in Northern Ireland. I want to record our particular thanks for her support for the investment conference in May of last year, when she led a presidential delegation of senior American executives to Northern Ireland.

Returning to the question about the appointment of a special envoy for Northern Ireland, I would emphasise that such a decision falls entirely within the discretion of the President in consultation with the US Secretary of State. The decision on who is appointed is, therefore, entirely a matter for the American Government.

Mr G Robinson: Are there any plans for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to meet the President? How does the First Minister believe that the positive relationship with the US can be built upon? I realise that I might be jumping the gun with those questions.

The First Minister: I hope that all the guns are decommissioned and that there are none to jump. *[Laughter.]* The deputy First Minister and I intend to travel to the United States soon. We will be involved in a serious tour in which we will meet representatives of companies that are engaged in Northern Ireland, talk to some that, we hope, will become engaged in Northern

Ireland, and we will have a number of meetings with political leaders. We hope to be on the east coast of America during the St Patrick's Day period. We have been invited to the White House, and we would hope, God willing, that we will be able to meet the President during that period.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With the election of Barack Obama, the new President of the United States, it is hoped that there will be a new approach by the United States to international affairs — although I have to say that its approach to Ireland has been positive. Would the Minister welcome the appointment of a US envoy to the North, and does he have any thoughts on who that envoy should be?

The First Minister: The Member has raised the second part of the question from my colleague George Robinson, which I had not answered. We have a very positive relationship with the United States, and the number of United States companies that have come to Northern Ireland and are prepared to look at Northern Ireland as a base for future business is much more significant than almost any other part of the world outside these islands. I believe, therefore, that we all recognise that there is a significant and special relationship with the United States.

Many people from different sections of our community have emigrated to the United States, so we have deep roots in that country. I am not in the business of picking either football teams or envoys — if I were to suggest someone, it might be the surest way of ensuring that they would never get the job.

Mr Gardiner: Has OFMDFM raised with the Department of State and the new US Administration the likely impact that President Obama's keep the jobs at home strategy will have on inward investment from the US to Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: On a previous visit, the deputy First Minister and I spoke about the issue of protectionism, and we were encouraged by what we heard. I am pretty sure that the direction that the new President will take in relation to encouraging investment in Northern Ireland will be just as strong and committed as that of his predecessors.

Mr Speaker: Question No 4 has been withdrawn.

Shared Future

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the action it has taken in creating a shared future since devolution. (AQO 2170/09)

The First Minister: Improving relationships between and within communities in Northern Ireland

and building a shared and better future remains a top priority for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive. We believe that our work — at ministerial level and throughout the Department at all levels — has demonstrated our commitment to building cohesive, inclusive communities. In a recent debate, we challenged our critics to judge us on our track record — that is, our actions and achievements over the past two years.

The fact that we have been delivering substantial additional funding that was secured in the Executive's Budget is just one of our achievements. We have increased funding by one third for the period 2008-2011 — from £21 million in the previous comprehensive spending review period to almost £30 million in the current one. That means that vital work on the ground and with both existing and new communities is better resourced than ever. We also want to ensure that the resources are used in an effective way; therefore, we have been assessing existing programmes and considering new approaches to ensure tangible outcomes from the funding and action.

We have increased funding to minority ethnic groups by two thirds and have increased funding for youth and interface workers by one quarter. Statistics show that the work that we fund and resource is delivering real and meaningful outcomes. Between 2006-07 and 2007-08, there was a 12% drop in racist hate crime. Likewise, there was a reduction in sectarian-motivated crimes from 1,217 in 2006-07 to 1,056 in 2007-08. In 2007, three out of five young people reported that relationships between Protestants and Catholics were getting better. However, there is no good reason to be complacent. We are leading and driving change in our society and through our work — in the Department and the Executive — so that we can deliver a shared and better future for all our people.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his reply. There is no greater problem facing this community than that of sectarianism and the division that it brings about. I acknowledge the funding that the First Minister mentioned in his answer; however, from a political perspective, the real question is what effort is being made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to eradicate sectarianism. When will they publish a strategy that really tackles the whole problem of sectarianism and division in our society?

The First Minister: When I was Minister of Finance and Personnel, I received delegations and met individual Members who spoke to me about increasing the funding for activity relating to the shared future proposals. I am fully committed to that. It was on that basis that I supported the proposal from the then First Minister and deputy First Minister for increasing the funds available. At a time when there were massive

demands on the Budget, an increase of between 30% and 33% was substantial and shows a commitment.

Although we are still working on that strategy, there is an existing strategy. We are working on the ground to obtain the best benefits. What matters is whether the indices are showing an improvement, and there are clear indications that improvements are being made in almost all areas. However, there is one unfortunate exception in relation to symbolic premises — GAA halls, Orange Halls, and so forth — where figures have increased. There is much work to be done, and we will continue with our endeavours. We take it seriously, regard it as a significant priority and look forward to the introduction of a strategy fairly soon.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his answer. How encouraged is he that the good relations indicators are showing movement in the right direction?

The First Minister: I would be greatly discouraged if the reverse were the case. Although the indices are showing improvement, if any one of us takes our foot off the pedal, those improvements can quickly go into reverse. However, most of us know from our own experiences that the mood is better. Indeed, many polls indicate a reduction in interface tensions and community divisions, and we want to keep it that way.

In many ways, however, it is down to us to lead by example, whether as Members or as Ministers. It is a matter of respecting one another's position, recognising rights and liberties, and enjoying our own culture and way of life without any harassment, let or hindrance.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister accept that increased funding and individual actions are less effective in the absence of an overall strategy? To that end, will he explain what factors are holding up the strategy on cohesion, sharing and integration, given that a promise was made to publish a draft strategy in October 2008?

The First Minister: My view is quite contrary. The strategy is not the most important issue; the most important issue is to continue to get money down on the ground, ensure that work continues and that improvements are made. While we do that, we are working on the existing principles, so that one is never without a strategy. The fact that work continues in all those areas is, in itself, a strategy. I approve of the new strategy, and I want it come to fruition as soon as possible. I will not do anything to delay its coming before the Committee and the House.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister express his concern at the recent statements by Minister Sammy Wilson promoting discrimination based on race? Does that run contrary to his Department's equality agenda, which tackles discrimination and racism?

The First Minister: There are a number of different ways in which one could answer that question. However, people should closely examine precisely what the Minister said. He did not suggest that any individual would be discriminated against because of his or her ethnic background. He made it clear that, in difficult economic times, if everything else were equal and a decision had to be taken, the best economic decision for our country would be to ensure that our own people obtained employment. It is the duty of every Minister to ensure that equality, fairness and merit are the basis on which jobs are offered.

3.00 pm

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

1. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the success of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in international rescue competitions. (AQO 2186/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am pleased to say that teams from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have enjoyed regular success in the past few years in the World Rescue Organisation's rescue challenge. They were fourth in the 2006 competition, which was held in Capetown. In 2007, they again secured fourth place in Barcelona. In 2008, the competition took place in Cardiff, where the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service achieved third place overall and was first in the complex-scenario category.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer. I suggest that the success that he has outlined is, in major part, due to the initiative of seven fire officers who took it upon themselves to develop the relevant skills and then to train other firefighters and officers. Their success is shown not only in the vast number of trophies that they have won, but in the lives that they have saved.

Does the Minister know whether anyone at a strategic management level in the Fire and Rescue Service is examining why six of those seven firefighters have declined appointments to the new road rescue team? Furthermore, does he know why one of those officers, after 30 years of experience, has resigned from the Fire and Rescue Service? Is that a matter in which the Minister believes he should take a direct and personal interest?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the first instance, it is a matter for the trust to manage its own affairs, including its

workforce. What I can say, and it is well-known, is that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service provides a very good service for the people of Northern Ireland. It is considered to be one of the best — if not the best — units in the UK.

The recruitment and selection process for the road rescue team would have complied with fair employment legislation, it would have followed codes of conduct, and it would have given everybody in the Fire and Rescue Service an equal opportunity to apply and to be selected. I understand that eight secondments to the road rescue team were advertised. There was a three-stage application process. Eight personnel were offered positions on the road rescue team. The offer was declined by five people and accepted by four. Consequently, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is recruiting in order to fill the four outstanding seconded places in the road rescue team.

This is the first suggestion that that I have heard that, somehow or other, the Fire and Rescue Service is not adhering to its own codes of conduct, to fair employment legislation or to following the required procedures.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister, but to follow on from his answer, will he inform the House why the leader of that highly successful team from Crescent Link fire station — who, for the past six years, has been instrumental in all matters pertaining to road traffic collisions in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service — has, despite his expertise, knowledge and skill, been deemed unsuitable for the position of team leader in the road rescue team?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That appointment is a matter for the Fire and Rescue Service. If people have complaints about how they are treated, the organisation has clearly laid-down complaints procedures. As I said, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is exemplary. It is, rightly, considered to be one of the best, if not the best, rescue services anywhere in the UK.

I have no knowledge of individuals who are team leaders or anyone else. I can say that the road rescue team has a wide remit; it does not simply follow normal practice, and there are outstanding requirements to become a member of that team. I am not casting aspersions on anyone. I cannot comment on individual cases. If individuals have a complaint, they must raise it with the organisation, its chief executive and its board.

Mr McClarty: I join the Minister in paying tribute to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

The Minister will be aware of the deep concern in the East Londonderry constituency regarding the proposal to remove one appliance from Portstewart fire station. I ask the Minister to consider the implications

of such a proposal. Is he prepared to meet me to discuss the issue further?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member will be aware that the proposal to remove the second appliance from Portstewart fire station came from a consultation recommendation. I have not yet had a chance to consider that proposal, so the position stands that Portstewart still has its second appliance. That is a matter for me to consider, and I am happy to discuss the issue with Mr McClarty as I work my way through the proposals. The Member will be aware that there are proposals from the Fire and Rescue Service and from all the other trusts. I have a great number of matters to consider, but I will certainly not allow that fire appliance to be removed without all the issues being properly weighed up.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Tommy Gallagher, who is next on the list to ask a question, I remind Members of the new procedures in the House: Members must clearly rise in their places if they want to ask a supplementary question. Some Members stand halfway up, and others nod at the Table. I know that some Members have experience of how this is done in another House, but in this House, they must clearly rise in their places if they want to be called to ask a supplementary question.

It must be pointed out also that Members who rise in their places may not be called to ask a supplementary question. However, we have a problem because some Members stand halfway up rather than standing up fully in their places, so we do not know whether they want to ask a supplementary question.

Enniskillen Hospital: Financial Arrangements

2. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the revised financial arrangements for the new hospital at Enniskillen will be in place. (AQO 2187/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The successful tenderer for the new acute hospital at Enniskillen, the Northern Ireland Health Group, has put in place the necessary funding arrangements to progress the project, which will reach financial close in spring 2009 — subject to the normal Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety approvals. The hospital will be completed in 2012.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that answer. As everybody in the Chamber knows, there is a mood of despondency in Omagh today. Many people in the Omagh area understand that the reasons for the service cuts are linked to the previous devolved Government, particularly to Bairbre de Brún, the former Health Minister. Will

the Minister assure the people of Omagh and Enniskillen that their new hospitals will be built on time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Gallagher is right to say that the strategy that the Department is following — Developing Better Services — has a historical origin. It allows for an acute hospital at Enniskillen, which I have announced and is the subject of this question. It also allows for a local, enhanced hospital at Omagh, which will cost an estimated £190 million. We anticipate that that will be ready for business in 2013.

The Enniskillen hospital will cost £260 million and will be ready for business in 2012. All things being equal, I am confident that we will meet those targets. The Tyrone County Hospital will remain open until the new hospital is ready. I have set up a liaison group in Omagh with the trust and the council so that information can be shared as we move from the old hospital to the new site.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What assurances can the Minister give to the people of Fermanagh and Omagh today — especially considering that this is a dark day for the people of Omagh as acute services were withdrawn last night — about the level of service that they will receive in the interim until the new hospitals are built?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a workforce of around 600 in the current hospital in Omagh, and there are no plans to change that. There are 300 nurses and about 50 doctors, plus all the other hospital staff. That will be the approximate number of staff required for the new hospital.

At the weekend, the acute ward was closed — and that was flagged up; people were well warned — but the rest of the hospital services will continue. The services include a 24/7 doctor-led urgent care and treatment centre; an outpatient department; 66 inpatient beds; 15 day-case beds; a health and care centre; a diagnostic department; palliative care; chronic disease management; a day-procedure unit and day-case surgery; renal dialysis; an ambulatory care service; and an acute inpatient mental-health facility. In addition, there is the chest pain clinic, the heart failure clinic and day-case cardiology. Those services supply approximately 70% to 80% of all the hospital needs of the area.

Dr Deeny: I want to ask about the funding of the two hospital projects in Enniskillen and Omagh. First, are they financed 100% through private finance initiatives (PFI)? If not, what percentages of the projects are funded in that way?

Secondly, does the Minister not have some concerns about funding such major projects through PFI, given the weight of evidence from across the water? Similar

projects in places such as Edinburgh, Coventry and Manchester have had very negative outcomes. Indeed, in London —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to ask his question.

Dr Deeny: Indeed, in London, one hospital spent £10 million buying itself out of a PFI contract.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As regards value for money and affordability, the PFI project at Enniskillen has been recorded as being the best value for money, which is why it is being taken forward. The hospital will be built in 2012, and we will then have to pay a unitary charge each year until such time as the hospital fully becomes the property of the Health Service.

We are moving forward with the procurement process for the hospital in Omagh, and I am considering whether PFI or a traditional procurement route will offer the best value for money. I am required by the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide best value for money, and that is the route that I will take.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer not only on the progress being made with the new south-west hospital in Enniskillen but on the new enhanced local hospital in Omagh. What discussions has he had with the Minister for Regional Development about upgrading the A32 road between Omagh and Enniskillen?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have had one meeting with the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, which was specifically about the upgrade of the road between Omagh and Enniskillen. That meeting was held approximately a year ago, and, at that time, I had asked Omagh District Council to come along to give me its support, but it was not able to do so. However, I understand that Omagh District Council is now prepared to take up the cause. It is important that the road between Omagh and Enniskillen is upgraded in time for the two new hospitals to be completed.

Neuromuscular Service

3. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the findings in the report published by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign in relation to the need for a specialist neuromuscular service. (AQO 2188/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am fully committed to providing appropriate care for people with muscular dystrophy and other neurological conditions that contribute to disability. I welcome the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign report, which, I understand, sets out a number of

measures to improve the care and management of people with muscular dystrophy. I wish to consider the report in detail to ensure that its findings are taken into account as my Department continues to develop services, particularly for those who need specialist neuromuscular care.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his response. I assume that the Minister has taken on board the fact that people want a specialist neuromuscular service. As the Minister will be aware, muscular dystrophy is a progressive wasting disease, and, as yet, there is no specialist paediatrician in Northern Ireland. I have outlined the two main requests in that regard, so I certainly hope that the Minister takes them on board. No doubt, I will ask him to comment on the matter again.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The report informs us, and it is very helpful. My next step is to draw up a strategy on physical and sensory disabilities, and muscular dystrophy is one of several physical and sensory disabilities that we are dealing with. The strategy will be drawn up in 2009-2010, and it will be informed by the report, among other things. I expect the report to be wide-ranging, addressing muscular dystrophy and conditions such as acquired brain injury, cerebral palsy, Huntington's disease, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, among others. There are many conditions, and the report will help us to draw up a strategy to address them.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is he aware that there has been no paediatric neuromuscular consultant in Northern Ireland since last August, and, as a result, the care of children with muscular dystrophy is being severely compromised? Will he, therefore, meet representatives from the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign and me to discuss that much-needed service?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recognise the challenges; that is why I said that the report is welcome and our strategy will move forward. I have announced funding of £10 million for physical and sensory disabilities, £9 million for children with complex needs, and £220,000 for neurological services, all of which is geared towards providing a service. There is also recurrent funding of £4 million for multidisciplinary teams of allied health professionals. They will all mesh together to give support for conditions such as muscular dystrophy, as well as for the other conditions that I mentioned, to get a service that meets the need. The number is large: almost 600 adults and 280 children. I am anxious that we take those issues forward. That is why I put the funding and the strategy in place. I am happy to

discuss issues with the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, with Mrs Hanna, and with anyone else who has something to contribute.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for accepting the report, which was launched last week in the Long Gallery. Does the Minister agree that adults and children with varying degrees of muscular disability would benefit from the input of a clinical psychologist to help families to develop management strategies? What action will the Minister take to ensure that psychological support is part of a multidisciplinary approach to care for people in Northern Ireland with muscular diseases?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, I have put recurring money in place for multidisciplinary teams of allied health professionals. As far as psychologists are concerned, it is a matter for the strategy to inform what we need to put in place, and then we will look to put it in place. We have identified a need, and we have to work out how to address it. That is the next step for the strategy, and I am pinning my hopes on that. If the strategy indicates that such provision is required or that an increase in provision is required, we will consider how to address that.

Cherry Lodge

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place for delivery of respite care in Randalstown, in light of the proposed closure of Cherry Lodge. (AQO 2189/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust is still consulting on the equality implications of the proposals to reform and modernise respite services. The process, which includes the proposals for Cherry Lodge, will not be completed until 6 March 2009. At that stage, the trust will examine and take into account the responses in determining what respite services will be most appropriate to meet the needs of children and adults in the Randalstown area. As the plans are not finalised and the public consultation process is still ongoing, the Member will understand that it is not appropriate for me to comment at this stage. Final decisions on any changes to respite services will not be made before the end of that process.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister not agree that his plans to reform respite care, especially with respect to Cherry Lodge — a respite home for children with learning disabilities — is seen as nothing more than pure cuts?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Let me inform Mr Burns, and anyone else who cares to listen, that these are not my

proposals: they are the proposals of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. I am required to find £700 million in efficiency savings over the next three years. The trusts must bear a proportion of that responsibility, and so they bring forward proposals. I will weigh those proposals seriously, including in terms of impact on the strategies that are in place; for example, the Bamford Review and Caring for Carers, our strategy for looking after carers. They will have an effect on how the implementation group rolls out that strategy.

If Mr Burns has a better idea, he should avail himself of the consultation process. I presume that he has put practical proposals to the Northern Trust to allow it to go in a different direction, if that is what he wants.

Dr McCrea: The Minister rightly says that the proposals are not his. However, the final decision will be his. Can he assure me that the very strong opposition of parents and families — not only in Randalstown or South Antrim, but over a very wide area — who will suffer the effects of such a closure, will be fully taken into consideration by him in his determination? What they say must not be dismissed in a paper exercise.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the consultation is genuine. This is by no means a done deal, and no decision has been taken.

My criteria are as follows: I must be satisfied that the service delivered to patients will be either maintained or enhanced. That includes the patients who are looked after in Cherry Lodge. I must point out, however, that that is a very old building that requires substantial investment. The process has yet to be completed, and I am still some way from reaching a decision. The trust has yet to come to a conclusion, and its board will not meet until the end of the month.

Everyone must understand that I must find the money. If Members do not want me to find it — if they do not want the trust to find it here — they must present alternatives. They have to be able to tell me how I can find the money otherwise. To date, no one has come forward with practical suggestions about other ways in which I can find the £700 million. These are efficiency savings.

Members know the sort of battle that I had to fight over the Budget. That £700 million must come out of my budget in efficiency savings. It should go back into providing new services for health, but only £300 million can do that. The other £400 million is required to keep the Health Service going, the light bulbs on, buildings maintained and existing services going. I am required to go through this process by the Executive and by this House. Members, including Mr McCrea, voted for that. If Members have other ideas, I will listen.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that proposals to close residential homes that offer respite facilities are nothing more than proposals, and that no final decision has been taken? Does he agree that attempts by some Members to play politics with the efficiency savings process are appalling and that all final decisions are his as Minister of Health?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Gardiner reinforces what I have just said. There is a consultation process. The trusts, in common with other parts of the service, must come up with proposals for efficiency savings. There is no other way to do it. If the savings are not contentious and there is no disagreement, I have no decision to make. However, if they are contentious and cause disagreement, I do.

I will examine closely the alternatives, because, very often, the alternatives are as unpalatable as the proposals. However, we are some way off that.

The Member made the point about playing politics with health, and, recently, we have seen plenty of that. That is absolutely disgraceful, because it amounts to waving shrouds and scaring people, and there is no need for that. All the proposals, by which I mean proposals around residential homes and other proposals, are just that — proposals.

Rapid-Response Vehicles

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of proposals to replace ambulances with rapid-response vehicles. (AQO 2190/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposal to replace a small number of traditional A&E ambulances with an increased number of rapid-response vehicles (RRVs) is central to our plans to deliver first-rate, twenty-first century pre-hospital emergency care to the people of Northern Ireland. RRVs have been safely in use in Northern Ireland since 2003, and the introduction of more will improve the Ambulance Service's response to the most serious life-threatening emergencies.

Research evidence shows that response time is crucial. For every minute that elapses between cardiac arrest and the start of resuscitation, survival rates reduce by 10%. Therefore, the use of faster RRVs, a tried and tested model of service delivery that is common in the rest of the UK, has the real potential to save lives. Better response times mean better outcomes for patients, and on that basis, my assessment of the introduction of more RRVs is positive.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his reply. I very much appreciate the new investment that is going into the Ambulance Service. However, I am concerned

about the form of service that will be provided in some areas of my constituency, such as Glenarm and Carnlough — in fact, throughout the glens of Antrim — which are some considerable distance from the nearest hospital. Will the Minister tell me how decisions will be made on the type of vehicle to be used for call-outs in such areas?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process is that on receipt of a 999 life-threatening call, an ambulance is sent out. If an RRV is dispatched, an A&E ambulance is sent out immediately afterwards. The A&E ambulance follows on from the RRV. The RRV will not be at an ambulance station but out on the road. The proposal means that more vehicles and, consequently, considerably more paramedics, who are the key personnel, will be on the road.

In any A&E ambulance, there is a medical technician, who drives the vehicle, and a paramedic. In an RRV, there is a paramedic. All the equipment in an A&E ambulance and in an RRV is exactly the same. However, an RRV will not take people to hospital — it will rely on an A&E ambulance to do that. That is the process. There is strong evidence to show that an RRV can answer a call more quickly. The whole proposition is to get paramedic support quickly to the patient, and, after that, to stabilise the patient and give them support.

Mr Craig: Can the Minister confirm or deny that there are plans to remove day-cover ambulances in Lagan Valley in the 2009-2010 financial year? That appeared on the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service website but was quickly removed. Can the Minister confirm that as part of the drive to make efficiency savings, doctors' urgent calls are no longer being responded to by emergency ambulance staff?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer Mr Craig to my previous answer. Ambulance Service proposals went out to consultation. The consultation period is over, and the service is now considering, and deliberating on, the responses received. When that is done, and a board meeting has taken place to firm up proposals, the Ambulance Service will come to me. I will then be in a position to make a decision. I must say that I do not think that speculation, one way or the other, is entirely helpful.

Mr Molloy: Can the Minister explain whether the proposal will mean a reduction in Ambulance Service personnel? Is it a proposal to improve the quality of the Ambulance Service, or is it a proposal to meet the 3% reductions?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I missed the last part of that, but I heard at least one of the questions. Paramedic hours will rise from 538,000 in 2007-08 to 600,000 in 2010-11. That is a 12% rise. The number of paramedics

who are employed will rise from 362 to 422, which is a considerable increase in the workforce.

The budget of £57 million is an increase, and the capital budget is at a record level. I have announced £100 million over 10 years, including £17.4 million over the current three-year comprehensive spending review period. In the next three years, that will allow the Ambulance Service to buy 60 accident and emergency ambulances, 60 patient care ambulances and 26 RRVs. That is an unprecedented investment in the Ambulance Service. Demand for the Ambulance Service is rising all the time and is rising very quickly. Investment must be made and new ways must be found of addressing the issues that the Ambulance Service faces.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing: Resource Allocation

1. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals she has brought forward to the Executive for greater resources to be allocated to housing. (AQO 2206/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): On 27 November 2008, I submitted a paper to the Executive that described how investing in social and affordable housing could provide a necessary stimulus to the Northern Ireland economy. Increased investment in social housing can have a profoundly beneficial effect on the economy in a relatively short period of time. Increasing the building of social housing can create many new jobs and sustain many new ones in the construction industry.

The circumstances do exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild as sites now cost less and construction work is increasingly keenly priced. The collapse in house and land sales has left the Northern Ireland Housing Executive facing a serious shortfall of a magnitude of £100 million in each of the next two years. That could have a devastating effect on the newbuild programme. My belief is that we should build more homes than were originally planned. As things stand, we are set to build substantially fewer. That is unacceptable to me.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister on her answer. Will she elaborate further on that? Does she share my view that the additional investment in social housing can help to counter the impact of the economic downturn?

The Minister for Social Development: I share the Member's concern and analysis. Increased building of social housing can create many new jobs and sustain existing jobs in the construction sector and ancillary service industries. As we all know, house building is

labour intensive and is a consumer of considerable quantities of locally sourced materials. House building offers a higher multiplier than larger infrastructural projects, which tend to be more capital intensive. As social housing is dispersed all over Northern Ireland, the consequent boost to employment is spread geographically. As social housing is targeted at areas of greatest housing need, the newbuild tends to occur in areas of relatively high unemployment where the jobs that are created have most impact.

In a falling market, the circumstances exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild. Housing associations, for example, were priced out of the market in many instances prior to the correction. Sites are costing less, and construction work is increasingly keenly priced. For the sake of jobs, the construction sector and the economy, before we even consider the needs of those in housing stress, there is a pressing need to build more houses.

Mr K Robinson: I see that the Minister is on her hobby horse. All Members would agree that that is where she should be. *[Laughter.]* That was a compliment.

Can the Minister detail the effect of current fiscal constraints on her Department's maintenance programme, with particular regard to the impact on elderly and disabled people? Can I remind the Minister — not that she needs to be reminded after that last speech — about the important social housing scheme in Monkstown in my constituency, which requires pushing forward?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Robinson for his question and remind him gently that decisions will be taken shortly on the social house-building programme for the next year, notwithstanding funding difficulties. As regards the first part of his question, the matter is part of the pot that is due to be considered during the next few days in relation to the Housing Executive's programme for planned maintenance schemes.

Last week, at my colleague Mr O'Loan's request, I was pleased to meet a group of seven or eight "Egan" contractors, who deal specifically with kitchen replacements, heating contracts, and so on. I sympathise fully with all of those people who currently face the downturn in the market. There must be no doubt that I will consider all of those issues.

I await the house condition survey, which will tell me the impact of all of those maintenance schemes during the past number of years; the value of investing in planned maintenance; and the actual capacity and need for that in future years. Notwithstanding that, I take on board Mr Robinson's point about investing in planned maintenance.

Mr F McCann: Can the Minister tell the House how much of her overall budget is spent on the provision of social newbuild?

The Minister for Social Development: As Mr McCann is a member of the Social Development Committee and has, therefore, had many briefings on that particular issue, he will be adequately aware of the amount of money that has been invested in the social house-building programme.

Mr Easton: As regards the Minister's comments on maintenance schemes, even minor schemes to repair windows and doors in my constituency of North Down are not being carried out because, according to people in the area, there is a lack of money in the budget. Indeed, pensioners who live in the Ballyree Drive area of the Bloomfield estate in Bangor have had their scheme put back for the past two years. Those pensioners, many of whom have disabilities, are living in damp conditions. What does the Minister intend to do to try to help those people?

The Minister for Social Development: First, I suggest to Mr Easton that if he gives me particular details of that case, I will be happy to look at it.

The issue lies with the housing budget, about which a debate must take place. I say clearly — and make no apology for doing so — that there must be a re-profiling of the Budget, because the assumptions that underlaid the original Budget are no longer valid. Why is that? Because there is now an economic downturn and a credit crunch. Those conditions were not foreseen — neither their breadth nor depth — at the time of the Budget in January 2008. Therefore, it must be re-profiled.

The Assembly must also ensure that social house-building programmes, including planned maintenance, are put on a sound financial footing and that my Department is no longer reliant on a hand-to-mouth existence that depends on its being able to obtain money through quarterly monitoring rounds.

Therefore, once and for all, I ask Mr Easton's party to ensure that the Minister of Finance and the wider Executive put housing on a more stable financial footing. I have made that case and will continue to do so.

Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Social Development if all previously approved warm homes schemes will still go ahead as planned. (AQO 2207/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Members will be aware that the warm homes scheme has been successful in recent years and is popular. The budget that is available for the scheme has been fully committed for the current financial year.

My Department is on track to meet its public service agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures. I am sure that the Member, and other Members in the House, will recognise that the scheme has made a significant contribution to the alleviation of fuel poverty.

During the June and December monitoring rounds, I submitted a bid for additional resources in order to clear the waiting list. Unfortunately, neither bid was met. Some of the outstanding referrals for assistance will be carried forward and assessed under the new criteria, and I expect the majority of outstanding referrals under the warm homes scheme to receive assistance under the new scheme. However, I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on waiting lists for a long time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. The Member has written to me about several constituents who have had problems with the warm homes scheme.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response, in which she mentioned the delays. I wrote to the Minister, and I thank her for a full and frank response. However, the delay in rolling out the warm homes scheme is causing problems, and she referred to how she will deal with that matter in her response. I welcome that. The Minister can add her comments.

The Minister for Social Development: I fully appreciate what the Member is saying, and other Members have written to me about the delays. I want to reassure Members — particularly Mrs McGill — that I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on waiting lists for a long time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. As Members will know, the scheme has been very popular since it was introduced in 2003. In fact, it has impacted favourably and positively on many households.

Mr Speaker: Before I call a Member to ask a supplementary question, it is important that Members, if possible, ask the Minister questions, rather than make statements.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister has answered my question. I am happy enough. *[Laughter.]*

Dr W McCrea: It is correct to state that the warm homes scheme is, and has been, very popular. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that as many people as possible across Northern Ireland are able to enjoy its benefits. Will the Minister assure the House that, if those applicants who have expectations — because they have been on the waiting list for a long time — are

forced to reapply, they will not be forced to endure long waiting lists before the warm homes scheme is implemented in their homes?

The Minister for Social Development: Naturally, I do not want to raise particular people's expectations, but I assure the House that I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on the waiting list for a long period of time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. I emphasise that the warm homes scheme has been a huge success and has kept many households out of fuel poverty. However, as it accumulated quick wins, we actively considered how to refocus the scheme so that it would target those in greatest need as well as those for whom the biggest energy efficiency gain could be captured.

Mr Burns: I congratulate the Minister on the huge success of the warm homes scheme. *[Laughter.]*

In what ways, and for what reasons, is the warm homes scheme being refocused?

The Minister for Social Development: Despite fear of repeating myself, I will do it anyway. The scheme has been a huge success, and all Members from all parties can catalogue and document the numbers of people in our constituencies who have benefited from it and who, if it had not been introduced, would not have received such benefit.

As I said, it accumulated quick wins — we have already been considering how to refocus the scheme so that it targets those in greatest need, as well as those areas where the biggest energy efficiency gains can be captured.

The Department for Social Development is not the only one to take that view. The Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, although recognising the success of the scheme, agreed that the existing eligibility criteria provided assistance for some people who were not in fuel poverty while excluding others who were. Change was therefore needed to refocus the scheme. For that reason, from spring of this year the eligibility criteria will be changed to include families in receipt of working tax credit, who will now qualify for assistance to improve heating in their home. That is another measure to reduce and alleviate fuel poverty.

My Department has accepted all the Audit Office recommendations, and had already proposed changes to the present scheme. We recently finished a consultation exercise on the proposed changes, and more than 90% of respondents supported changing the eligibility criteria. In changing the criteria, lone parents and low-income families will qualify not only for insulation measures but for heating measures, thus improving what we all want to see: the energy efficiency of their homes.

3.45 pm

Employment and Support Allowance

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for the new employment and support allowance have been processed since it replaced incapacity benefits.

(AQO 2208/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Employment and support allowance (ESA) replaced incapacity benefit and income support paid on the grounds of incapacity for new applicants from 27 October 2008. By 27 February — Friday of last week — 4,725 new claims had been processed. Overall, the introduction of employment and support allowance has gone well, and I commend staff for the progress made to date. They have coped well with the new benefits systems and procedures, and are clearing claims more quickly than the time taken for the old incapacity benefit.

That achievement is despite much higher levels of telephony interest than anticipated at the development stage, which necessitated the rapid deployment of additional staff. There was a similar experience in other parts of GB and, as a result, the number of calls answered by the employment and support allowance centre has increased dramatically. In the week ending 23 January, the employment and support allowance centre answered 2,226 calls; last week, it answered 4,117 calls.

In addition, at the request of the honourable Member Mr Shannon, and of other Members, I have ensured that Members of the Assembly, MPs and their offices have access to a dedicated enquiry line to enable Members to make timely representations on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Shannon: Thank you very much, Minister. From this side of the Chamber I also congratulate you, and hope that that sincerity can be accepted by everyone, including Tommy Burns. I congratulate the Minister on putting resources and officers in place, as that helped to alleviate people's concerns.

One of the reasons that the issue was brought to the Minister's attention was that people had to wait 54 minutes or 52 minutes to get through to the main desk — those were the two examples that I mentioned. The Minister told us how many people have been responded to. Can she confirm that the waiting times for those involved has decreased, that the number of days taken for the application to be processed has also decreased, and that those who have had problems with the new scheme are now more satisfied?

The Minister for Social Development: I hope that claimants and potential claimants are now more

satisfied than they probably were when the scheme began. Many Members contacted me about the time that it took to get through to employment-and-support-allowance office personnel via the telephony system. I acted quickly on that, and recruited and appointed 18 new members of staff.

I am pleased to say that, although the average clearance time for an ESA claim in January was approximately 10 days, it is now somewhat less than that. The average waiting time to get through to the ESA centre has now reduced considerably. That compares favourably with performance in mid-January, when the average waiting time was obviously a great deal longer. People are now being dealt with in a beneficial way, and their enquiries are being answered. Applications are being processed, but, most importantly, money is flowing to those who have applied for it.

I am happy to listen to issues that Members raise concerning individual constituents, or on general policy matters. The important thing is that we have proved that the telephony system works; that people like using the system; and that they can have their applications processed without having to fill in a form themselves.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister plan to extend the freephone service that is currently enjoyed by BT landline callers to mobile phone users?

The Minister for Social Development: I am sure that the Member is fully aware of the benefits of telephony in the same way in which, in his past, he was aware of the benefits of face-to-face contact. It takes a combination of various means of accessing a service to produce benefits for people.

The Member asked about extending the freephone service to mobile phone users. Customers who access the service from a BT landline or a mobile phone may be charged by their network provider for the connection to the BT number. It is important to point out that there is nothing to prevent a person who uses a mobile phone from getting through to the service and having an enquiry dealt with.

If Mr Brady or any other Member wishes to raise —

Mr Brady: It is about the cost of using a mobile phone.

The Minister for Social Development: I take on board what Mr Brady said about the cost of using the service. My Department will evaluate the system, but if he or any other Member wishes to raise any issues, documented evidence must be produced. It is only on that basis that we can make changes — if, indeed, changes are required. I am sure that the Member will provide that if necessary.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure people who have long-term

disabilities and special needs, and the families who care for them, that the new assessment process for the employment and support allowance will not result in those people having to participate in work or training that they cannot do?

The Minister for Social Development: That goes back to the debates that we had in the Chamber on the Welfare Reform Bill. At that time, I gave assurances, following much research and investigation, that anyone who had particular difficulties would not be forced into work-type situations. If the Member has any evidence to the contrary, or has evidence to suggest that any of his constituents is experiencing certain difficulties, I ask him to let me know. I assure him that any such instances will be investigated fully and dealt with.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Dwellings for Pensioners/Disabled People

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development what impact the current economic climate is having on the provision of dwellings for pensioners and disabled people in East Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 2210/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is too early in the review of the Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that may be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget, because of the virtual collapse of house and land sales. However, there is no doubt that the huge hole in the housing budget will affect newbuild across Northern Ireland. If Members want me to deliver the housing improvements in their constituencies for which they continue to lobby me, the Executive must find additional resources.

With projected shortfalls in capital receipts of approximately £100 million in each of the next two years, it is clear that I cannot meet all demands with such a gap in my Department's budget.

I was more than happy to visit housing in East Derry with George Robinson last year. I know that he has a genuine concern for his elderly and disabled constituents, but the provision of more housing is about money. As I said to Members earlier, I believe that we should allocate resources to build more houses than planned, not fewer.

Mr G Robinson: When the Budget is eventually sorted out, can the Minister give assurances that the refurbishment of pensioner and disabled dwellings will be given priority?

The Minister for Social Development: I am glad that the Member acknowledged that the Budget needs to be sorted out. Shortly, I will announce the social

housing development programme for the next year. Inherent in that will be the programme of work that the Housing Executive will undertake in respect of planned improvements and maintenance. Again, that work is predicated and contingent on the amount of resources that will be available.

Suffice to say, it is important that we put social housing, in all its aspects and formats, on a sound financial footing by ensuring that it is not reliant on quarterly monitoring rounds. That means that the Budget needs to be re-profiled, because the assumptions that underlay the original Budget are no longer valid. Conditions are now prevailing — namely the economic downturn and the credit crunch — over which neither the Assembly nor the Executive have any control.

Mr McClarty: What guarantee can the Minister give that supported housing will receive adequate funding, particularly in view of the current economic climate?

The Minister for Social Development: Over the past couple of years, I have had the opportunity to visit many supported housing projects, and I know that there are many more in the pipeline. The bottom line is that I would love dearly to support and fund supported housing projects. However, in order to do that, I require an adequate budget and the support of the Assembly, Members and, in particular, my colleagues in the Executive. I require that support to ensure that social housing — including the important element of supported housing — is put on a secure financial footing, because that will enable us to help people who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or disabled.

It is important that my budget is given that sound financial footing and that it is re-profiled to make housing the number one priority, because that will provide much-needed stimulus to the economy by enhancing a valuable housing asset, providing a new valuable asset and providing much-needed jobs in this economic downturn.

Mrs M Bradley: What innovative approaches does the Minister have for the provision of social housing in general?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mrs Bradley for her question. Many innovative solutions are available to us. Recently, I held discussions with representatives from the Emerald Fund. We also had representatives from the European Investment Bank come to Parliament Buildings.

There has been a broad range of innovations in housing. First, equity sharing has been introduced for Housing Executive tenants. Secondly, the housing association grant has been stretched by 10%. Thirdly, Co-ownership Housing has, for the first time, raised private finance through the Bank of Ireland and, quite recently, through the Ulster Bank. Fourthly, my Department recently announced the purchase of 112

ex-military houses at Pond Park, Lisburn, with the least cost to the public purse. Fifthly, we have developed a procurement strategy for housing associations.

Sixthly, my Department has developed a consultation document for the introduction of a mortgage rescue scheme. Seventhly, I am negotiating relaxations for social housing newbuilds in rural areas with representatives from the Emerald Fund. Eighthly, we have spoken to developers about large-scale leasing. Ninthly, my Department has introduced developer contributions for when we enter the economic recovery phase. Tenthly, we have undertaken a major stock condition survey in order to lower maintenance costs. All those measures are aimed at bringing innovation to social house-building.

Social Housing

6. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the anticipated increase in home repossessions in 2009, what impact this is likely to have on the demand for social housing.

(AQO 2211/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of people on the waiting list for social housing has increased by 50% in the past six years to more than 40,000. During the last quarter of 2008, the courts issued 939 writs and originating summonses.

That is a 73% increase in the number of mortgage cases received compared with the same period in 2007. I recognise the threat posed for people who live here, which is why I announced my desire to develop a mortgage-rescue scheme to help people stay in their own homes. I have done the work that I said I would do; my Department developed detailed proposals, which we put out for consultation.

4.00 pm

Following consideration of the consultation responses, we had a fully tested scheme ready to go by 21 November 2008. Unfortunately, I am not prepared to launch that innovative scheme without funding. I do not want to raise expectations until I know that I am in a position to help. I have made bids in year during the monitoring rounds, but they have not been successful. When the funds are made available, the scheme will be launched.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you make a ruling on whether the Minister for Social Development treated my party colleague Fra McCann with disrespect when she refused to answer his supplementary question because he is a member of the Social Development Committee?

Mr Speaker: I have said continually in this House that it is up to Ministers how they answer questions. I

have made it clear that I will not sit in judgement on how a Minister answers a question. To get involved in that would be a minefield, and I do not intend to do it. As I have also said continually, I am happy to talk to Members outside the Chamber if they are not clear about rulings in the House. I am happy to take up the Member's point of view if he comes and talks to me outside the Chamber.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's arrangement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and winding up a motion on a Committee report, up to 15 minutes will be allowed to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on the Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy is about people; people who live in some of the poorest neighbourhoods throughout Northern Ireland. Such areas are generally characterised by high unemployment, poor educational attainment, poor health, shorter life expectancy, low economic activity, higher crime levels and infrastructural problems. That is a long, long list of the problems that affect the people of those areas, who, incidentally, come from all sections of our community.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was meant to be a new beginning for those particularly deprived areas. It was to be a break from the project-led interventions that typically focused on a single issue and for which funding was only secured in the short term.

Neighbourhood renewal started with great fanfare and much expectation. There were to be floor targets, which would establish a deprivation baseline for each of the identified areas. There were plans for concerted action involving partnership between key Departments. With the Department for Social Development (DSD) firmly in the lead and making a long-term commitment to the strategy, there was also enthusiastic buy-in among community groups from the target neighbourhoods.

That sounds like the preamble to a great success story; I only wish that it was. I wish that we were here to congratulate the Minister and her Department, and to list the successes and hard-won achievements of a well-delivered strategy. Unfortunately, the Committee is not here to do that, but to advise on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy and to make useful recommendations that we hope will salvage this important piece of work.

The Committee accepts, as I expect the Minister to say, that neighbourhood renewal is not yet finished. She may argue that now is not the right time to review and judge the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Perhaps the Minister will suggest that the debate should take place in a year's time or when the review of public administration (RPA) is complete. The Committee believes that now is the time to review the implementation of that strategy.

The Committee has devised helpful suggestions that, if adopted, could rescue the strategy for neighbourhood renewal now and deliver the outcomes that everyone wants in the not-too-distant future. The Committee's report is fairly lengthy, and I thank the Committee staff for their painstaking work in recording the evidence and producing the report. Rather than covering the entire report, I intend merely to highlight a few points.

I mentioned success, and anyone who is in business, or who has managed a project or been involved in politics, knows that the key to success is to know what one wants to do. In the case of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, that means setting meaningful area-specific targets. The strategy was supposed to set local targets based on individual areas' specific problems. Indeed, the Committee found that similar projects in the rest of the United Kingdom had set such targets.

It is wrong to suggest that all neighbourhood renewal areas are the same, because, as Members will attest, they do not all have the same problems and requirements. It is therefore wrong to produce a set of one-size-fits-all targets for neighbourhood renewal. Whether those targets refer to reducing antisocial behaviour, dealing with low educational attainment, or tackling poor economic activity, each area has its own character and will, therefore, require a customised solution driven by an area-specific target. The Committee recommends that the Department think again about setting area-specific targets that have meaning and resonance in neighbourhood renewal areas. Such targets will be the key to monitoring progress and ensuring that scarce resources are well spent.

As I said, success is based on knowing what one wants to do, but it is also dependent on money. Everyone knows, and is tired of hearing, about the credit crunch and the limitations of the Budget. The Chamber frequently echoes to the sound of Members' sincere appeals for money to fund truly vital projects. The Committee accepts that the Department for Social Development and other Departments must meet their PSA targets. The Committee acknowledges the stringent limits to Departmental budgets and, therefore, recommends that funding Departments refocus their spending on neighbourhood renewal areas.

Why should they do that? The answer is simple: Departments will get more for their money in those

areas, which, based on certain key deprivation measures, lag substantially behind the rest of Northern Ireland. If, with DSD in the lead, Departments focus on those areas, they will make a substantial difference to those measures of deprivation. The upshot of focused investment will be a significant and positive impact on related departmental public service agreements (PSA) targets. The Committee firmly believes that if funds are ring-fenced for neighbourhood renewal, those on the ground will get the measure of the Assembly's commitment to improving the lives of ordinary people. I suggest that people want devolved Government to correct what they may regard as the errors of direct rule, and to make a measurable difference to those most in need.

Another component of the successful business or good administration is appropriate governance. Having a plan and having money is great, but to ensure success, one must make sure that everyone knows what they are doing and what is expected of them. In order to deliver neighbourhood renewal, the Committee requests that the Department needs a better governance model.

As it stands, the Minister cannot compel partner Departments to spend any money on neighbourhood renewal. Other Departments can choose to leave neighbourhood renewal projects without any funding at all. The experience of departmental caprice, where funding is unexpectedly withdrawn, does nothing for confidence in the Assembly. Clearly, that is not a good way to manage an important strategy.

The Committee recommends that a new governance model is adopted. A model that includes Executive Ministers exists for other strategies. If a similar approach were adopted for neighbourhood renewal, the Committee believes that it would reinforce the Minister's role as leader of neighbourhood renewal. Good governance would also secure some much-needed stability for the funding of the strategy.

The Committee has made a sincere attempt to make helpful recommendations on the neighbourhood renewal strategy, and hopes that the Minister will consider the report in that light. The Committee is pleased to note that the Minister appears to have adopted, at least in part, its final recommendation in respect of the so-called category-two projects. I take that as a positive sign, and am, therefore, hopeful that the Minister will adopt all or most of the Committee's other recommendations.

On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I commend the report to the Assembly. I look forward to hearing the views of Members and of the Minister on the Committee's recommendations.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht an thabhairt don tuarascáil seo. I support the report. In keeping with the

remarks of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development Committee, I pay tribute to the current and former staff of the Committee, who provided excellent support, guidance and skill in producing what Members would agree is a very substantive report. I also record my gratitude, and that of my party, to the many individuals who appeared before the Committee in preparation for this report. Their evidence certainly speaks for itself.

Sinn Féin has been, and will continue to be, a strong advocate for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal, which is fundamentally about addressing social deprivation through a range of services and support.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was launched in 2003. Central to that strategy is the overall objective to improve the quality of life for residents in some of the most deprived areas across the North. It is about providing services through a joined-up approach, with the Department for Social Development taking the lead. The four core objectives of the strategy included community renewal, economic renewal, physical renewal and social renewal. In short, those objectives dealt with improving the quality of life, economic activity in urban areas, the creation of safe and attractive communities, and better co-ordination of public services.

Woven throughout the report, and its 16 recommendations, are six areas for consideration. Those are in the executive summary, and I think that they make very interesting reading, even for people who do not sit on the Committee for Social Development but who have an interest in how joined-up delivery can work.

As the Deputy Chairperson pointed out, there are issues relating to targets, particularly how they are progressed, and how they are measured against, and directly linked to, specific deprivation indicators. That has proven to be very important, and groups have continually argued that the targets need to match the links with deprivation. Indeed, the action plans that all neighbourhood renewal partnerships have developed need to be central in addressing such deprivation.

The Deputy Chairperson has mentioned that deprivation is not the same across all our communities. Where it exists, however, we need to tackle and address it. There was a constant theme of a need for quick wins when this project was progressed. That is central in developing community confidence and the commitment to neighbourhood renewal.

DSD has committed funds to neighbourhood renewal, and there is growing concern that other Departments have not committed to that strategy.

4.15 pm

The entire neighbourhood renewal budget must be ring-fenced. The Committee concluded that the Department for Social Development has lacked ownership and understanding of that point, which must be pursued with more vigour by officials at every stage of the Budget process.

Governance is another area in which the Committee identified many weaknesses. Since devolution, only two interdepartmental meetings have taken place. That record must change radically. DSD has the lead role, and it must lead by example and pursue other Departments' officials to ensure that their Departments meet their ongoing obligations to the overall neighbourhood renewal project.

In preparation for the transfer of responsibilities to local councils, it is important that a community planning framework be made available to deal with wide-ranging consultation before the transfer.

In November 2008, in Minister Margaret Ritchie's presentation to the Committee for Social Development, she stated that she was considering how resources would be transferred and the equality mechanisms that could be devised before transfer. Ensuring that the budgets to be transferred are equality proofed in order to address deprivation has been a key consideration for Sinn Féin.

Furthermore, the Committee was concerned that all the years of work by partnerships in bringing people to the table should be reflected, and incorporated, in any new transfer procedure. Local people, having worked on the development of the action plans, must not be ignored when the plans go to the councils. It is critical that the work undertaken by communities is integral to any new administrative arrangements for neighbourhood renewal.

Once again, I thank the other members of the Committee for Social Development, even those from the Minister's party, who, at times, must have felt a bit tetchy. We want to ensure that the resources are reviewed — the time is right to do so — and that they go to those most in need. I support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to speak. The neighbourhood renewal strategy is underpinned by a desire to improve the quality of life of residents in the most deprived 10% of wards in Northern Ireland, affecting 280,000 people.

There is no question that that laudable aim should be the role of Government. The only question is how we should measure deprivation in order to determine whether the strategy is succeeding and how partnerships should be set up to achieve the desired outcomes.

The four main objectives for neighbourhood renewal projects are: community renewal; economic renewal; social renewal; and physical renewal. It is clear from the report that the situation is not working out as was intended, which is why it must be reviewed and modified accordingly.

At a time when every penny spent by the Government is coming under increasing scrutiny, it is more important than ever that scarce resources are spent on areas with the greatest need where they can do the most good. It is vital that those resources are seen to achieve outcomes and that they make a real difference to the lives of the people whom they are intended to help.

A key aspect that must be grasped generally is that neighbourhood renewal is not just a problem for the Department for Social Development. Too often, we have heard fine words about joined-up government, only to discover that, after those fine words, the good intentions are lost in turf wars between various agencies and Departments, some of which are keen to guard their powers and functions. Others seek to avoid problems by passing them off as someone else's. If ever there were an argument for joined-up government, surely it is this one. If we are serious about tackling deprivation and building up communities that are in difficulty, it is a job for Government as a whole.

The Department for Social Development, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning — to name a few — and local councils must play a role. A concerted, sympathetic effort and genuine commitment are required, or we will never be able to help those communities to succeed.

The rapid economic downturn and the rate of job losses mean that even more individuals, families and neighbourhoods are living in poverty and deprivation. No one is saying that the Assembly has all the answers, or that it can easily solve the problems, but the point is that these are our people, and we must try to help them.

It is imperative that the Assembly does not lose sight of why we are here: to work together for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland. The report and its recommendations can help us to perform that task. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Committee staff for their work in compiling the report and for reflecting the views of the Committee throughout its proceedings. This helpful report will assist the Department and the Minister in their important work on neighbourhood renewal. The Committee takes the view that neighbourhood renewal is an important task.

The decision to transfer the implementation of neighbourhood renewal to local councils is an important development. It has the support of the whole Committee, although some — particularly Sinn Féin members

— were reluctant to support it at its early stages. Nonetheless, there has been an important change in their policy, and now they support the transfer of the implementation of neighbourhood renewal.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. Any resident worth his or her salt who is listening to this debate will have supported us for not supporting the transfer to local councils without a budget. Does the Member agree that to expect otherwise is like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: I am sure that Members will judge Sinn Féin's position for themselves. At the Committee meetings, however, that party's initial stance was antipathetic to the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local councils. Whatever the reason, the Member has said that her party expressed that view for budgetary considerations.

Nobody, including Members from my party, suggested that the transfer of neighbourhood renewal should happen without adequate budgeting; therefore the Member's explanation is not an adequate justification for the Sinn Féin position. However, as happens in so many areas, Sinn Féin changes its position and argues that, in fact, that was its original position. I cannot fathom that. On this occasion, it is clear that there has been a change of policy, and I welcome that. It is sensible that neighbourhood renewal be implemented locally. Councillors — collectively and individually — know the best way to deal with neighbourhood problems.

However, it is important that overall responsibility for the strategy remain with the Department and the Minister. The central issue, particularly in relation to governance, which colleagues in the Committee for Social Development highlighted in the report, relates to how one can join up government with regard to tackling neighbourhood renewal and local problems.

The report will not provide a foolproof system of achieving joined-up government at a local level — there is no unique recipe to guarantee that — however, it is the best approach. Governance forms an important part of the report, and it attempts to get a memorandum of understanding between neighbourhood renewal partnerships, funding Departments and other statutory partners to ensure attendance at meetings and so forth so that everybody is brought into the local strategy.

One cannot legislate for that; it depends on the active participation of those statutory bodies and all the Departments.

Government Departments must participate in a collective fashion, in co-operation with their local manifestations — that is, statutory bodies — and they must co-operate with the Department for Social

Development, which has overriding responsibility. It is important that the report highlights that particular issue and that the Minister, the Department and the Executive should take cognisance of it.

I am running out of time, but the report very thoroughly goes through the issues of targets, budgets, communication and support, and, of course, the re-categorisation of neighbourhood renewal projects. I do not have enough time to spend discussing all those issues, but it is important that targets are realistic and suited to the problems that exist in communities. I hope that all Members in the House take the report seriously and endorse it, and I hope that the Department takes the report into consideration and deals with it seriously.

Ms Lo: As others have done, I thank the Committee staff and those who have participated in the review. I very much endorse the report. The review is very timely, given that there are so many concerns and uncertainties in communities in relation to neighbourhood renewal. I congratulate the Minister for extending the projects under category two as well, as that means that people can continue with all the good work that they have done on those projects. It is important that all the funding Departments in category two now start to meet up with the projects to see how those projects can be mainstreamed into the Departments' work.

I was on the South Belfast Partnership Board when the neighbourhood renewal strategy was introduced. The organisation that I worked with, the Chinese Welfare Association, was a beneficiary of the neighbourhood renewal capital programme. If one passes the Ormeau Road, one can see that beautiful building that has now been completed and is about to be used by the wider community as well as the Chinese community. That is a success story of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I recall the enthusiasm at the time when the action plans were produced, when all the community groups carried out local surveys and worked with consultants. People were very excited and felt that, for the first time, a long-term and holistic strategy was being adopted to tackle the complex, multifaceted nature of deprivation in their areas.

The report has found that neighbourhood renewal has raised a lot of expectations in communities. However, with so many difficulties being experienced over the last few years in the implementation of the strategy, many people now feel disillusioned about the strategy and whether their communities have benefited from it or seen any tangible, positive changes as a result of it.

I commend the recommendations, particularly recommendations 1 to 4, which deal with clarifying targets and charting progress on agreed targets to avoid unrealistic or unachievable objectives. It might be

important to have more quick wins in order to gain the confidence of the community so that it will stay on and work towards implementing this 10-year strategy.

4.30 pm

A big issue reported by communities during the survey was lack of commitment from other Departments, and that they paid lip service only and did not come up with funding. Recommendations 5, 9 and 10 ably set out requests for additional service provision commitments with all funding Departments to be supported by ring-fenced targets, which is important if we are to have partnership-working among Departments. People cited representatives not attending meetings and not being in a position to influence decisions within their respective agencies. It is hoped that the recommendations will deal with those issues.

I am glad to see that recommendation 6 deals with the lack of clarity in relation to setting budgets in some neighbourhood renewal areas. So often, those budgets were set only by the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) with no input from the partnerships; therefore, recommendation 6 is useful.

The process for the application for funding —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Lo: — indicated by many projects as being too bureaucratic, so recommendation 7 is very important in calling for a review.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I welcome the report and warmly congratulate the staff for the amount of work that they put into it. However, it is almost six years since the launch of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, and I am sure that many Members share my doubts as to how effective the programme has been in raising living standards in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

I apologise for not referring to one of those areas. Twinbrook and Poleglass were in my constituency of Lagan Valley, but were removed at the last boundary change. I will, therefore, refer to areas such as Twinbrook, Poleglass and Blackstaff, which are in the South Belfast constituency. When those areas are looked at closely, in all honesty, one struggles to see the major improvements that the strategy was supposed to deliver. Bearing all that in mind, I welcome the Committee's decision to investigate the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Mr F McCann: Over the past few years, we have had major debates on the delivery of neighbourhood renewal and where the problems lie. Obviously, today's debate is a result of the Committee's report. However, does the Member agree that the concept of neighbourhood renewal is excellent, but that it was

delivery, and how that was approached, that caused most of the problems?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Craig: Yes. I concur with the Member's remarks, and that was what I was leading on to.

What the Committee looked at in the report was vital. It was broken into six areas: targets, budgets, governance, communication, support, and the thorny issue of transfer to local councils. Of course, I can remain totally ambivalent on that issue, because my new council area will not have one of those areas.

I want to relate my remarks to a couple of areas. First, I want to address targets — one of the major issues highlighted in the report. Ask anyone who is seeking to improve a business, and he or she will say that it is vital to set realistic targets that one can try to achieve and targets that can be aimed for and delivered on. The same is true of neighbourhood renewal schemes. It is vital to set targets that are realistic and achievable and that are specifically linked to areas, and to the deprivation factors of those areas.

In my opinion, it would be a great help if we could set targets in those areas, given that we must take local areas into account. The one thing that the report makes abundantly clear is that when it comes to targets, one size does not fit all. There are 36 neighbourhood renewal areas in Northern Ireland, and every single one of them has its own unique difficulties and problems. Ultimately, that means that there could be 36 or 360 specific targets, which is one of the headaches that must be addressed.

We must look very carefully at how those targets are set. I know that later in the debate, one of our colleagues will highlight an area in which targets were set, but, from day one, they were completely unrealistic. There was no hope of achieving them. Such a situation is not good for the whole neighbourhood renewal strategy, but it is even worse for the individuals on the ground who are trying to achieve those targets.

If someone starts on day one with the belief that their targets are unrealistic, that does nothing for the morale of the groups or people who are trying to achieve those targets. In fact, they lose momentum and motivation, and the targets just become totally visionary and unachievable. However, setting realistic and achievable targets would be the greatest motivator for the people who take part in such schemes and who want to see changes brought about in their community.

Commenting on governance in neighbourhood renewal, the report may have come from the Committee for Social Development, but we recognise that Departments other than the Department for Social Development must play a major role in delivering neighbourhood

renewal. For neighbourhood renewal to succeed, the other Departments must tie in with the strategy as a whole. The big difficulty is that although the Department for Social Development may play its part, we must ask whether the Housing Executive, health trusts and others will tie in and realistically try to deliver on neighbourhood renewal. That is a huge issue, with which I think everyone will have a difficulty. However, I commend the report to the House.

Mr F McCann: A Leas Cheann Comhairle agus a chairde. Alban Maginness discussed responsibility for neighbourhood renewal being given to councils. During a number of debates at Committee, Sinn Féin members and those from other parties had genuine concerns about neighbourhood renewal being handed to councils.

In fact, Alban Maginness was at Committee meetings in which I — and others who are councillors — raised the difficulties of possible revenue trails emerging. Therefore, he knows that that debate has taken place at local government level. He talks about original plans, but at least Sinn Féin has original plans for change. The SDLP is bankrupt of them, which is one of its problems.

I thank the Committee Clerk and staff of the Social Development Committee, who organised the consultation sessions and supplied information during the compilation of this report in order to make it a reality.

At the beginning of the neighbourhood renewal process in 2003, officials from the Department for Social Development held a number of briefings with local elected representatives in order to sell the concept of neighbourhood renewal. We were asked to use our influence to ensure community buy-in of the new strategy.

After many hours of debate, we in Sinn Féin decided to give the new strategy our support, and we said so publicly in our communities. We did that for several reasons: first, because of the promise of full community participation in the decision-making process; and secondly, because for the first time, communities would have a say in the money and resources that are spent in their areas.

Also for the first time, the establishment of new partnership boards would mean that a broad spectrum of civic life would be represented, including community leaders, business interests, educationalists, Government Departments and other stakeholders. They would come together to develop local strategies that would, hopefully, tackle the serious social deprivation that exists in many parts of the North.

Sinn Féin argued that everyone had to play their part if the strategy was to work, but difficulties arose from the outset because many Departments refused to engage seriously with the strategy, which led to the belief that it was not being taken seriously. However, I

commend the work of DSD officials, who provided great assistance in the establishment of local partnerships.

There is no doubt that neighbourhood renewal is an excellent concept. All the major players would be involved in the development of master plans to lay out the strategies dictating how social deprivation would be challenged. I also commend the excellent work of the community sector, and its commitment and dedication to those in the most deprived areas. It works at the coalface of service delivery, but it also bears the brunt of cuts when Departments are under budgetary pressures and seek easy targets. Inevitably, it is communities that suffer and bear the brunt of poor housing, drugs and alcohol abuse, low educational attainment and poor health.

When the notion of re-categorising projects was first floated, local groups were alarmed because it appeared that many of them would lose out due to funding responsibility being spread among Departments other than DSD. Although that has been temporarily resolved, we will come back to that point in 2011 unless serious negotiations about the resourcing of neighbourhood renewal take place among Departments.

The report highlights the major problems that face neighbourhood-renewal partnerships. It lays out what has gone wrong, but it also advises how problems can be overcome. We all say that social deprivation is an evil that needs to be tackled, and we all recognise that the best way of dealing with deprivation is through a partnership approach. If we agree on that, we need to support fully the implementation of the master plans that have been developed by all the partnership boards.

The Department for Social Development needs to spell out its commitment to the report's recommendations. Does the Minister know when the last meeting of her interdepartmental group took place? That was a major concern to many groups, and it is believed that the last meeting took place only because of the pressure that was brought to bear by the Committee and local partnership boards. There was also criticism that some of those from the statutory agencies who attended local partnership board meetings made no input nor gave any feedback at subsequent meetings.

The recommendations on governance are crucial if partnership boards are to have confidence in the Government's approach to promoting neighbourhood renewal. Specific designated roles and responsibilities must be agreed for the recommendations to be implemented. Recommendations 13, 14 and 15 — which deal with the community planning framework — are essential.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr F McCann: The Department needs to spell out clearly that neighbourhood renewal will be the designated

resource strategy for tackling social deprivation when transferred to local government.

Mr Newton: I declare an interest as a member of the East Belfast Partnership. I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, so I will speak as an East Belfast representative. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for proposing the motion, and I thank the Committee staff for preparing the report.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was warmly welcomed in east Belfast as it offered a coherent way of addressing problems that face the most disadvantaged communities. In response, the two neighbourhood partnerships in east Belfast — Tullycarnet and inner east — were among the first to deliver their action plans to DSD in 2005. Those plans were predicated on new relationships emerging between the community and voluntary sector and key statutory agencies.

I can safely say that the Belfast Regeneration Office recognised that the plans that were produced in east Belfast were strategic in nature and were thoughtfully put together, with the best interests of the community and key local agencies at their centre. To my great disappointment — and that of members of the East Belfast Partnership — the targets that were set out were not achieved. As a process, it has been almost impossible to determine what would happen when existing funding commitments that were made by the BRO across Belfast took precedence.

Although many of the projects that received funding from the BRO — by which I mean category one and, latterly, category-two posts — are important to the communities that they serve, the process — or lack of it — has made a mockery of the action-plan process.

The new relationships that were required have only developed in spite of the process, often in areas where the relationship between the community and statutory organisations existed prior to the neighbourhood renewal programme. BRO is now aware of its commitments up until March 2011; it appears that there is no additional funding available for the action plans and, indeed, no process for making any new applications for funding.

4.45 pm

For example, in August 2007, Inner East Neighbourhood Partnership secured 50% match funding from the Housing Executive to support a new post of urban regeneration officer to oversee the roll-out of the inner-east regeneration framework. That clearly represented an opportunity for the statutory sector and the community sector to work together. An application was completed and has been considered by BRO on several occasions. The application has been given approval in principle, but it is now March 2009 and there appears to be little likelihood that the project will be funded.

That sends out a very negative message to all who have been involved in the neighbourhood partnerships — community organisations, representatives from the statutory agency and the politicians in the east of the city. We need movement and investment soon, as we will even more reliant on the community sector and volunteers as the recession bites, particularly in places where the problems are extremely complex.

I fully welcome the report and the motion, and I look forward to the implementation of the report. I believe that that will benefit my constituents who live in areas of deprivation, provided that the problems that I have outlined are tackled.

Mr Brady: Go raibh míle maith agat. As has been said, the neighbourhood renewal strategy has four main objectives: renewing communities, economic renewal, social renewal, and physical renewal. In essence, the purpose of the whole neighbourhood renewal strategy was to target those areas that were most socially deprived. With the advent of devolved Government, public service agreements were revised and set. Thus, DSD, in conjunction with other Departments, agencies and public bodies, was required by 2010 to implement the neighbourhood renewal strategy, the objective being to improve the quality of life of those people living in deprived and marginalised areas. Unfortunately, the expectations contained in the strategy have largely remained unmet.

The review of the implementation of the strategy would not have been undertaken if the concerns of the neighbourhood renewal partnerships had not been raised. In its report, the Committee has taken a very sensible and pragmatic approach. Any targets for the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy should cover the main social, economic, physical and community objectives covered at the launch of the strategy. There must be a commitment of resources across a number of Departments if the strategy's objectives are to be achieved. There should also be a commitment to ring-fence funding. The current procedures are not effective in delivering the strategy.

The Committee for Social Development considered that although some targets address some of the strategy's social and economic renewal objectives, they do not address the physical or community renewal objectives as set out in the original document.

The Committee's report makes 16 recommendations, all of which are designed to improve and enhance the delivery of the strategy. I will mention three of the recommendations in particular: numbers 5, 13 and 14. There must be an agreement with all the funding Departments for additional service provision commitments for neighbourhood renewal areas. That has to be supported by ring-fenced budgets. The Department has to set out the community planning

framework that is to be used by the enlarged councils to deliver neighbourhood renewal and to ensure that there is cross-departmental buy-in.

The existing relationships between statutory partners and the voluntary and community sector organisations involved in neighbourhood renewal must be valued. DSD must set out the resources that it and funding Departments will ring-fence for the enlarged councils in support of the community planning framework and the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. Other Committee members, not just those in Sinn Féin, raised some concerns about responsibility for neighbourhood renewal being given to local councils under RPA.

Maybe Mr Maginness was not listening at that particular time. I know that he has lost his moustache, but I did not think that that would impact on his hearing. Perhaps his hearing will improve if he grows it again.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Perhaps the Member should follow suit.

Mr Brady: With respect, it has taken me 30 years to grow it, so I am not going to give it up now, but point taken. Touché.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome the work undertaken by the Committee for Social Development in preparing the report on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy and the opportunity that it presents to discuss the issue in the Chamber today. I thank Members for their contributions, and I am sure that they will appreciate that although I have read the report, I have had little time in which to consider fully its recommendations. Therefore, I do not intend to comment in detail on the recommendations today, but I will respond to the Committee in detail in due course. Nevertheless, I wish to say a few words on neighbourhood renewal and to reflect on some of the broad issues raised in the report.

Despite improvements in general prosperity and social conditions, it is estimated that 327,000 people, including 102,000 children and 54,000 pensioners, remain in poverty in Northern Ireland today, and 280,000 of those people live in neighbourhood renewal areas. Behind those statistics lie individual stories of unfulfilled potential, isolation or a lifetime of struggle just to get by. That is not acceptable to me or to the Executive, and I am sure that it is not acceptable to the Assembly as a whole.

The concentration of multiple deprivation, such as high unemployment, health problems, antisocial behaviour and low educational attainment in mainly

urban areas poses particular problems for Government. Tackling the deprivation that has persisted in many areas for decades is both a necessity and a challenge, which we must face collectively.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy is the Executive's main programme for addressing disadvantage in urban areas. The strategy, which was launched in June 2003, is an area-based approach that targets 36 of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. For the people who live in those areas, there is a much greater risk of poverty, poor health — both physical and mental — and despair, which comes from having no apparent prospect of improvement.

At the core of the neighbourhood renewal concept is the unique partnership comprising Government, local people, elected representatives and the private sector. All Departments and statutory agencies have a big part to play, and I am grateful for this opportunity to remind Executive colleagues of our collective responsibility for delivering neighbourhood renewal.

It is no secret that securing the active engagement of public-sector bodies in neighbourhood renewal has been difficult to date. I know that, and the Committee knows that, and it has acknowledged that in its report. I welcome the recommendations in the report regarding the participation and commitment from other service providers. Securing the buy-in was always going to be difficult, and although good engagement has been obtained in some areas, we have not had the same levels of success in others. My real expectation is that all of Government and their agencies play a full and active part in neighbourhood renewal for the future.

I want to be clear that neighbourhood renewal is a process requiring all parts of Government to place the needs of the most deprived people and places at the heart of their work. Although individual Departments have their own priorities and budgets, they need to take account fully of the contribution that they can make at a neighbourhood level.

We need to learn the lessons from recent attempts to address deprivation. An evaluation of New TSN is contained in OFMDFM's Lifetime Opportunities strategy. It states:

“From the evaluation it was evident that policy to tackle poverty and social exclusion was being driven through largely separate departmental programmes with little evidence of a joined-up approach at departmental level being reflected in co-ordination of services at a local level. Strategic objectives were missing and those objectives which were set, reflected departmental priorities rather than any overall government commitment to reducing poverty.”

Almost a year ago to the day, I said:

“this isn't just about direct funding from my Department. ... Neighbourhood Renewal requires that all Departments support renewed efforts to improve the delivery of better services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including health, education and training.

My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments to reach agreement on funding for those Neighbourhood Renewal activities which fall under their statutory responsibility.”

To date, my Department has led the development and implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Assembling 36 representative partnerships and facilitating the production of 36 agreed action plans was not a simple task. We have endeavoured to work closely with other providers to reach agreement on long-term funding and delivery models for the provision of services. Real progress has been made in relation to a variety of new projects and service developments. However, despite some constructive discussions, limited progress has been made in reaching agreement on some important legacy projects, primarily in Belfast.

I intervened in March 2008 with an additional year of funding to save services that were at risk, build on progress and allow discussions to continue to a conclusion. I recently announced a funding package to sustain those services for a further two-year period. I have also written to my Executive colleagues, requesting their co-operation over the coming months on reaching agreement on both the priority need for the services and on delivery arrangements.

Two weeks ago, I provided funding, particularly in neighbourhood renewal areas, for 2,000 childcare places. That is also an important matter. However, a co-ordinated cross-departmental children's strategy to deal with that in the longer term is required.

My foremost priority is not about process, more discussions and more meetings: it is about delivery, bringing about improvement and making a difference to people's lives and bridging the gap between those who have and those who have not. Surely, that should be the desired objective of everyone in the Chamber.

I welcome the fact that St Paul met Sinn Féin along the way as part of its Damascene conversion to wanting neighbourhood renewal to be devolved to local councils. Did that party not think that, when I indicated that neighbourhood renewal would be devolved, it would be the operational side of neighbourhood renewal that would be devolved; that policy would remain with the Department, and that, naturally, funds would remain with operational delivery? A little more thought could have been applied in respect of that matter.

The Committee for Social Development's report makes 16 recommendations. My Department will study them all carefully and provide a full response. The recommendations relate to targets, budget, governance, communication and support, transfer to councils and the re-categorisation of neighbourhood renewal projects. I continue to challenge other Departments to put alleviation of poverty at the top of their agendas. All of the recommendations will be studied and

responded to in detail, but there are areas in which my Department has made much progress. I have secured agreements from other Departments to a range of targets for neighbourhood renewal areas: they focus on achieving improvements in health, education, employment, investment and antisocial behaviour.

5.00 pm

Work is under way to draw up a detailed evaluation framework against which progress will be measured. Investment has been made in developing a comprehensive neighbourhood-statistics website. My Department has commissioned surveys to gather feedback from the residents who live in the areas involved, and whom I want — whom I think every Member in the Chamber wants — to benefit from the implementation of neighbourhood-renewal policies and from funding that works. All that work will feed into the midterm evaluation of neighbourhood renewal, which is due to take place this year.

My Department has committed considerable financial resources to neighbourhood renewal — £60 million over the current CSR period. Although that can, and does, make a difference to the quality of life of the residents in those areas, it represents only a small fraction of public expenditure there. I firmly believe that we will make a real and lasting impact only when we develop better ways in which to mainstream services that are tailored to addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged areas.

My views on transferring the responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal closer to local government are on the record. Local councillors are best placed to identify the issues and to ensure that programmes are implemented. It is about local delivery, and about local people doing that job. The alignment of neighbourhood renewal with community planning is potentially very powerful, as that will ground key economic developments in the wider borough with the needs of the people in neighbourhood-renewal areas.

Mr Shannon: I apologise to the Minister for not being here for all her comments, but I was meeting Minister Sammy Wilson. The Minister has visited the Ards borough and the Strangford area, and she has seen at first hand the issues that affect the Glen estate, the West Winds estate, the Scrabo estate and the Bowtown estate. Does she agree that it is vital that that deprivation, which is unequalled in other parts of the Province — although I suspect that other Members may disagree — is addressed?

The Minister for Social Development: I agree with Mr Shannon that many areas throughout Northern Ireland reflect levels of disadvantage and deprivation. My Department deals with disadvantage and deprivation in three different ways: first, through neighbourhood renewal, where we consider 10% of the most disadvan-

taged areas, and the 36 neighbourhood-renewal areas were defined from within that; secondly, areas at risk are identified, and, over the past few years, three different sets of announcements have been made; and, thirdly, small pockets of deprivation (SPODs), which surround affluent areas, are identified. Later this week, I am due to make an announcement on SPODs, in which we will define a number of areas throughout Northern Ireland. I take on board what the Member said about the Glen estate. I saw very clearly its needs and requirements.

Some Members raised particular issues. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, and time permitting, I will address those. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Hilditch, raised the issue of governance. I cannot compel other Departments to act, but I will continue to aim to persuade them, and I need the Committee to help me do that. Its report illustrates that the Committee sees a need for that to happen.

Carál Ní Chuilín asked how we can ensure that the work of the neighbourhood-renewal partnerships is not lost on the transfer of functions to councils. Again, I emphasise that policy responsibility for neighbourhood renewal will remain with the Department. With the transition to community planning, we have an opportunity to build on the progress that has been made on neighbourhood renewal. Neighbourhood renewal has given us a firm foundation for taking forward community planning.

There are community-planning pilot schemes. If councils want to, they can engage in those; if councils do not want to, that is fine. Those pilots will provide councils with an opportunity to validate the process, and they will provide us with an opportunity to evaluate the work that has been done.

Billy Armstrong raised several issues. I agree that neighbourhood renewal must address deprivation, because it is about delivery on the ground. A joined-up approach must be taken, because deprivation is not just a DSD problem. I have consistently been trying to get across the argument that there must be buy-in from all Departments.

In fact, my colleague Alban Maginness illustrated that very point when he said that neighbourhood renewal is an Executive responsibility for which DSD takes the lead.

Anna Lo mentioned the need for Departments to meet up in order to mainstream category-two projects. I completely agree about the need to work with other statutory agencies to ensure that vital services are safeguarded. It remains to be determined how that is to be done, but it may not happen via existing projects. Ms Lo and others, including Mickey Brady, mentioned the need to ring-fence budgets. However, it is not for

DSD to decide how other Departments should allocate their budgets.

In a thoughtful contribution, Jonathan Craig discussed the need to set targets. Targets have been agreed with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Northern Ireland Office. Targets are expressed at neighbourhood level, but the key document for any of the 36 areas is the action plan, which highlights issues of particular local concern. I recall Jonathan saying in his presentation that the 36 areas are unique. I could not agree more; they have distinct and particular requirements, which the action plans detail.

Fra McCann, who I notice is not in his place, raised the issue of the funding of legacy projects after 2011. Work has already started to determine how those services will be provided. Some existing projects will continue to 2011, but others will be replaced by mainstream programmes or by key statutory agencies' new initiatives. That process will free up further neighbourhood renewal investment fund money.

Robin Newton, who is also not in his place, raised the issue of there being no money left for new projects in Belfast. In Belfast, a considerable amount is spent on legacy projects, but even with that, money is available now. If he or any other Member has a particular issue with the operation and delivery of neighbourhood renewal in their area, they should let me know. I would be content to have my officials investigate such matters.

I thank the Committee and its officials for producing the report. I shall provide a full response to its recommendations in due course. I also thank my beleaguered officials who have had to help the 36 partnerships across Northern Ireland in the delivery of the process. They have had to work and engage with other Departments and obtain their buy-in, which has been a particularly difficult process for them. Although DSD is the lead Department, the issue is the responsibility of the Executive.

Finally, I wish to see delivery and improvement on the ground through the implementation of the projects. It is not about process, meetings or more reports; it is about people doing work for the benefit of their communities in order to bridge the gap between those who have not and those who have, bringing improvement, and ultimately ensuring that those areas will not require dedicated funding on a long-term basis.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank all the Members who spoke on this important subject, and I thank the Minister for her answers.

As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development said, neighbourhood renewal is not just about partnerships, targets, budgets, governance and outcomes. Let anyone forget, neighbourhood renewal is really about people. It is about the people who live in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland and who represent all sections of the community. The Committee agreed that, in principle, it supported the proposed post-RPA transfer of some neighbourhood renewal responsibilities to the enlarged councils.

The strategy, after all, requires local focus. Who better than councils to deliver that? The Committee was clear that although it supported that principle, it wanted reassurance in respect of the practice. It asked for, in the first place, the Minister to set out the findings of her pilot council transfer schemes. It also asked for assurance on the transfer of resources from DSD to local councils with regard to neighbourhood renewal.

Rumours abound about how much money and how many staff will transfer under RPA for the delivery of the strategy. The Committee believes that the Minister should, as soon as the RPA timetable allows, provide clarity and begin a consultation on the matter with all stakeholders. The report also refers to decision-making paralysis on the strategy, which is particularly evident when area master plans are being produced. The Committee has recommended that the Department reviews its practices in that regard and ensures that communities' goodwill and enthusiasm is not wasted through unnecessary delay by the Department.

The question could be asked as to whether neighbourhood renewal has failed. I do not believe that the Committee is saying that, because those neighbourhood renewal partnerships that have managed to secure funding have done some good work in their areas. However, the Committee believes that the Department should take on board its recommendation so that everyone who lives in neighbourhood renewal areas will see an improvement to their lives.

The Committee's key recommendations are based on five points: refocusing of services and budgets on neighbourhood renewal areas; better governance for the delivery of the strategy; proper and relevant local targets for the strategy; extensive consultation on the proposed transfer of neighbourhood renewal to the enlarged councils; and clarity and certainty in respect of the funding for all neighbourhood renewal projects.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I will give way. I half expected that I would have to do so.

Mr Shannon: Perhaps, he did. I am sure that the Minister — sorry — the Member, would agree —

Mr A Maginness: Not yet.

Mr Shannon: He is on his way to becoming a Minister.

I am sure that he would agree that a great number of residents and community groups wish to make a difference to where they live. All that they need is encouragement from councils — as he said — Assembly Members and DSD. With the necessary financial support, they can make a difference in their communities. Does the Member agree that those people should be encouraged?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I certainly do agree with the Member. The matter is all about encouragement. Quick wins were mentioned earlier. That is important, because if communities could see progress happen on the ground, they would be encouraged to buy into neighbourhood renewal schemes.

The Committee has consulted on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy with key stakeholders over a long period. As the Deputy Chairperson has done, I want to thank Committee staff for assembling the evidence and producing the report. Many Members have spoken in the debate on various aspects of the report. If I can read the Committee Clerk's written notes, I will outline some of Members' comments.

Cáral Ní Chuilín highlighted the importance of local targets and the need for quick wins. She also stressed the critical importance of safeguarding community groups' effort and enthusiasm when the strategy is transferred to local councils.

Billy Armstrong stressed the need to ensure that there is co-ordinated action between funding Departments so that that action benefits deprived communities.

5.15 pm

It says in my notes that Alban Maginness "waffled", but I cannot say that. *[Laughter.]* I apologise. Alban Maginness mentioned the transfer to councils and the need for good governance in relation to co-operation among Departments. Anna Lo spoke of her experience of neighbourhood renewal in community groups. She highlighted some success stories but mentioned the need for realistic targets and better commitment from the funding Departments.

Jonathan Craig, who seems to be the Minister's favourite, identified target setting as a key step in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal and a crucial motivator to community participation. Fra McCann praised the Minister. *[Laughter.]* Fra McCann praised aspects of the Department's delivery of the strategy. Moreover, he urged the Department to improve its engagement with partnerships and to revise its governance procedures.

Robin Newton criticised the process among neighbourhood renewal stakeholders. He highlighted

his surprise and concern at the repeated delays in the funding for category-one projects that is needed to support action plans. Mickey Brady stressed that additional service provision must be supported by ring-fenced funding in neighbourhood renewal areas.

The Minister outlined the concentration of poverty in neighbourhood renewal areas and highlighted the challenges that the strategy faces. She reminded the House of the difficulty in securing the support of other Departments. That is a key factor, because if we hand the issue down to councils, we must ensure departmental buy-in across the board. If it does not work here, what assurances will we get that it will work at the coalface? It is vital that that happens. That was one of the Committee's main concerns. It was also mentioned that there had been only one or two interdepartmental meetings. That is concerning, and I hope that the Minister takes that fact on board.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way again? I beg his indulgence.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: The Member is begging, but I will give way.

Mr Shannon: The Minister mentioned the SPOD scheme, which is a new initiative that provides an opportunity to reach out to areas that, perhaps, we have not reached before. Does the Member agree that the SPOD scheme must cover areas of deprivation that have gone unnoticed in the past?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I agree, and I am glad that the Minister mentioned that matter. It is important to consider that issue.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank all Members who contributed to this important debate. I assure the House that, in producing the report, the Committee intends to provide helpful direction to the Department on the improvement of the delivery of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I trust, therefore, that the Minister will take proper account of the Committee's recommendations, and I look forward to receiving a detailed response on how she will address those recommendations. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on the Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

Adjourned at 5.19 pm.

