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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 30 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Act on CO2 Advertising Campaign

*Motion, as amended, made [24 March 2009]:*

That this Assembly notes with concern the attempt by the Minister of the Environment to block the Department of Energy and Climate Change advertising campaign Act on CO2; further notes that the position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to remove his opposition to the Act on CO2 advertising campaign; and, mindful of the Environment Committee's vote of no confidence in the Minister of the Environment, calls on the Executive to launch a cross-departmental advertising campaign on climate change aimed at achieving the Programme for Government environmental protection targets.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind Members that on Tuesday 24 March 2009, a valid petition of concern was presented in respect of the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign that was debated on that day.

Under Standing Order 28, the vote could not be taken until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee has, therefore, agreed that the vote should be taken as the first item of business today.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 30.*

AYES

NATIONALIST:

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay,*

*Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

UNIONIST:

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Ms Purvis.*

OTHER:

*Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr Burns.*

NOES

UNIONIST:

*Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Moutray and Mr Storey.*

*Total votes 78 Total Ayes 48 [61.5%]*

*Nationalist Votes 32 Nationalist Ayes 32 [100.0%]*

*Unionist Votes 42 Unionist Ayes 12 [28.6%]*

*Other Votes 4 Other Ayes 4 [100.0%]*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

12.15 pm

## SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would like to inform the House that I will be absent tomorrow.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Recent Visit to the United States

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement on the First Minister and deputy First Minister's recent visit to the United States.

**The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):** A Cheann Comhairle, I apologise to Members for the late arrival of the statement in their pigeonholes, which was due to a delay in finalising the printing of the statement. I trust that all Members now have a copy.

I wish to make a statement on the visit to the United States of America that the First Minister and I made over the St Patrick's Day period. As Members are aware, the economy is the central focus of our Programme for Government as we seek to build a prosperous, fair and inclusive society. To that end, we have sought to maintain and deepen our special relationship with the United States of America in relation to inward investment, trade and tourism, and through political support for our institutions of government.

On inward investment, we had the twin aims of seeking to maintain and develop existing investment by American-based firms and to develop new business opportunities in the creative and information technology sectors. In the political sphere, we sought to develop a relationship with the new American Administration under President Obama, and with the United States Congress. We were determined to meet those aims and not to allow ourselves to be thrown off course by the futile and senseless attacks in Antrim and Craigavon. The future of our economy and our people is too important to be diverted by those actions, and we were pleased to receive the support of all party leaders for that approach when we met them on Tuesday 10 March.

In relation to our focus on investment, we were greatly encouraged by the positive welcome that we received and by the willingness of corporate America to look at inward investment opportunities here. We met a wide range of relevant people in Los Angeles and Washington DC, including those with an existing presence here. We met potential investors in order to highlight the opportunities that we can offer. Invest NI officials met representatives of Caterpillar and Seagate, and the First Minister met representatives of Allstate in Chicago. I am pleased to report that in even these difficult times, those companies remain committed to their investments here.

We jointly addressed a meeting of tour operators, members of the travel media and airline executives at a presentation that was organised by Tourism Ireland. We used that opportunity to promote here as a holiday

destination. That was the first time that the audience had been exposed to a specifically local message about the benefits of holidaying in this part of Ireland.

The First Minister and I also met industry leaders in the creative and information technology sectors, and we hope to make some positive announcements shortly. Furthermore, I can report that the Irish Technology Leadership Group — comprising businesses and investors based in Silicon Valley — has committed to host a conference to examine business opportunities here later this year. That is a significant boost, and we are delighted that the group has chosen Belfast as the location for its 2009 conference.

While the First Minister was in Chicago, I travelled to New York, where I met State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, who has committed \$30 million for here as part of a \$100 million European investment fund. I hope that that will be a spur for investments in local companies by providing another source of credit. In these times of global recession, business leaders and community enterprises have made it clear that access to credit is essential.

I was delighted last year to host a visit to Derry by Comptroller DiNapoli, who witnessed at first hand an area that has been the victim of a persistent pattern of deprivation. However, he also witnessed the enthusiasm, commitment and ingenuity of the people of my city. Given the historic lack of investment, it is an area pregnant with possibility and opportunity. It is an area in transition.

Those investment funds — and access to that capital — targeted towards those areas that are most in need, will deliver economic development, and harness the enthusiasm and ingenuity of local businesspeople. It will create and share wealth with communities in the North and investors across New York state.

We had a useful series of meetings with business leaders in corporate America, targeting not only key sectors that are already established here, such as information and communication technology (ICT) and manufacturing, but emerging sectors, such as life and health sciences and film production.

On the morning of St Patrick's Day, we addressed more than 400 guests at the bureau's annual business breakfast, where we promoted a strong corporate message, which was focused on a new mutually beneficial relationship with the United States. The audience included representatives of corporate America; members of Congress; the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward; Micheál Martin TD, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs; the Speaker and representatives of all the political parties in the Assembly, as well as the full Policing Board and Sir Hugh Orde.

Throughout our visit, the First Minister and I delivered a powerful message to corporate America

that we remain an excellent investment opportunity and that we are very much open for business. We have no doubt that more US-based companies will take up the opportunity to invest here, and we are also confident that other positive news will emerge as a result of our visit to the United States.

Within the political sphere, we sought to develop further our relationship with the American Administration and Congress in Washington. The First Minister and I met leading Congressmen and women; the National Security Adviser, General Jim Jones; the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton; and President Obama. The meeting with President Obama at the White House on St Patrick's Day was highly significant in demonstrating the President's continued commitment to the peace process and that of his entire Administration.

We had a useful and constructive meeting, and the President reiterated his commitment to helping us to improve the economy. He confirmed that he will continue to take a role in supporting the development here. He also advised that he hoped to be in a position to announce arrangements for the new special envoy, and we look forward to that appointment. President Obama congratulated us for the stand that we had taken in the face of the recent violence, and he underscored his Administration's support for the peace process and the rule of the law.

At the Speaker's lunch on Capitol Hill, the leaders of Congress and the Senate heard President Obama and the Taoiseach commit themselves to supporting the peace process in the face of recent attacks. That evening, the Taoiseach and President Obama repeated that message in the White House.

The First Minister and I also had a meeting with the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, which was followed by a joint press conference. Secretary Clinton is a long-time friend of all of us; we are incredibly fortunate that Hillary has been appointed as the new Secretary of State. For many years she has been a true friend of the peace process, contributing tremendously to the transformation that has taken place over the past number of years. She reiterated that the Obama Administration will remain engaged.

A key message throughout the visit was that we are moving forward and that despite the recent violence, the Executive and the Assembly have stood together in a partnership that has helped to solidify the political institutions. That was vital to us, and we were able to assure political leaders in the United States of the new determination of the Executive, the Assembly and our people that those opposed to the peace process will not succeed.

The community support for the peace process here was widely reported in the United States, and that helped to underscore our message that we had the

support of the vast majority of the electorate for our leadership and the institutions of Government. We were overwhelmed by the goodwill and support that we received in the United States and the commitment to work with us in support of the peace process, in building our economy and in furthering the special relationship, based on reciprocity and respect, between our two Administrations.

In the meantime, the First Minister and I are grateful to Ministers, the leaders from all parties and Members of this House for their support and we will, naturally, update the Assembly on progress in due course.

**Mr Shannon:** I congratulate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on a successful trip to the United States; it is obvious that contacts were made. Especially in light of what took place in Northern Ireland just before they were due to leave, when two soldiers and a policeman were brutally murdered, it is important that the concerns and worry of people back home were conveyed to the President and to all the people whom they met in America.

Bearing in mind all the measures that the deputy First Minister outlined in his statement and the people whom he met, I believe that the trip was very successful, as it secured the assurance of some \$30 million in support. Goodwill exists, and Northern Ireland is very settled. I commend the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their leadership.

The statement refers to tourism and how it will be advanced. Will the deputy First Minister give some indication of how he sees the potential for tourism increasing? In light of the tremendous visit to the United States, will he also confirm whether an invitation to visit Northern Ireland was extended to President Obama, who is the leader of the most powerful country in the world? Such a visit would be important for us in order that we can reciprocate his goodwill.

**The deputy First Minister:** I thank the Member for his support. The issue of tourism did come up, and as I explained in my statement, when we were in Los Angeles, the First Minister and I addressed an audience that was made up of people who are important in the tourism industry. We were in a position to articulate strongly that the North of Ireland is a very important destination for US tourists. Tourism opportunities exist, and Tourism Ireland is working very hard to promote this part of our country.

The attendance at that meeting showed clearly the enormous interest that exists in our situation. As I also said in the statement, that meeting was the first time that those representatives from the tourism industry were able to hear from our locally elected politicians about the huge benefits of coming to our shores. The dollar has strengthened recently, so in economic terms,

many Americans will consider this part of the world as a holiday destination.

The visit was of tremendous importance, and our discussion with President Obama showed clearly that he intends to continue the long tradition of giving the support that we have received from the United States.

We offered President Obama an invitation to visit the North, and he declared that he was keen to accept that at an appropriate time in the future. Given the hugely difficult situations that the President is dealing with — for example, the US economy and the situations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq — it is obvious that we will have to wait for the opportunity to present itself. The President also said that he was very keen to visit because he had heard that the quality of Guinness is better on the island of Ireland than it is anywhere else in the world. He was looking forward to tasting a pint of Guinness in Belfast, and no doubt we will provide an excellent pint for him when he comes.

**Mr Molloy:** A Cheann Comhairle, I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for making a very powerful statement on their visit. Hopefully, all the Guinness that the deputy First Minister mentioned will be drunk in Strangford, the constituency of the Member who spoke previously.

It is very important for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to have reported back on the effectiveness of the visit. Will the deputy First Minister give us a report on the meetings that he had with representatives of the film and creative industries and outline the opportunities for their development in the North?

**The deputy First Minister:** We took part in a number of engagements and decided, for reasons of confidentiality and at the request of a number of the companies that we met, not to name those involved. It is important that we keep our word. The situation with a number of those companies is at a sensitive stage, and we are optimistic about good news in the coming weeks and months. However, until things are signed, sealed and delivered, none of that investment is in the bag.

We have to continue to articulate the case that we have a tremendous business opportunity to offer. For example, the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter was the location for ‘City of Ember’, which caused a bit of a stir back in the United States, particularly against the backdrop of the economic downturn and the way in which film companies are looking at the different facilities that are available.

The fact that we have an English-speaking community here, who are easy to communicate with, that we have a lower-cost environment and that Invest NI can offer incentives has attracted people to the prospect of coming here.

The Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter, which is in four sections of approximately 16,000 sq ft, with 90-ft-high walls, is the ideal place for people to contemplate making a film or series of films. As a result of our discussions, we are very hopeful about the prospect that we will hear something in the not-too-distant future.

12.30 pm

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. There was quite a lot of discussion around the statement about the level of support that exists for the dissident republicans who carried out the attacks in Northern Ireland just before St Patrick’s Day. Did any of the discussions concern the link up and co-operation that exists between those dissident republicans and the mainstream Provisional IRA movement in the Province?

**The deputy First Minister:** I am not sure what that question has to do with our visit to the United States. However, it is quite clear that, in the course of the past number of years, we have seen a situation develop whereby, mainstream republicanism — for want of a better phrase — and the voters who support that mainstream republicanism, have accepted the peace process, in large numbers, as the best way forward.

We have to recognise that there will be people and tiny micro-organisations who are determined to destroy the peace process and to bring these institutions down. I am absolutely certain that they have no prospect whatsoever of success and that all of their actions are futile.

Many of these groups are divided among themselves: they talk about bringing about the reunification of Ireland when they cannot even unite themselves with regard to what they are involved or not involved in. Some of these groups are involved in very serious criminal activity, and when I spoke in the House last Monday, there had been a statement from the INLA distancing itself from the activities of the groups that were involved in the killing of the two soldiers and the policeman. That has not been denied. This is an organisation that was involved in the killing of three citizens in my city over the course of a 12-month period and is suspected of being involved in the killing of a sheep farmer in Claudy in County Derry.

Gerry Adams has spoken forthrightly about the individual acts of criminality that these groups are involved in, including extorting money from businesses in West Belfast and other parts of Belfast. I think that the lines have been drawn very clearly. There is absolutely no future for any of these groups. None of their activities will yield anything for them. We have to keep our nerve, stay united and continue to work to build the institutions that we know have the overwhelming support of the people that all of us in the Assembly represent.

**Mr P J Bradley:** I welcome the report of the St Patrick's Day events, and the events leading up to St Patrick's Day, in America. There is some good in the report. I notice that the tourism potential is referred to again. I have often said in the House that it has not been properly measured as it should be. The tourist potential for Northern Ireland in the southern States alone — from the Carolinas and that area — should be looked at more closely.

I want to make reference to another event that occurred in America on St Patrick's Day weekend, when a member of the Newry diaspora Dan Rooney was appointed American ambassador to Ireland. Dan has been very good to the Newry and Mourne area throughout the years, and his appointment is very welcome in my area.

I have one disappointment in that there is no reference at all in the 11-page statement to the undocumented number of young people from Ireland and Northern Ireland who are currently living illegally in the United States. There are an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 of them; the majority of whom are from County Fermanagh and County Tyrone. Did the deputy First Minister have any opportunity to raise the case of those undocumented people, either during the formal meetings or fringe meetings that the Ministers may have attended?

**The deputy First Minister:** The US is clearly an important market from which to attract tourists. From 2002-07, the number of US visitors to the island of Ireland grew by 27% to almost one million. In 2007, it was estimated that US visitors spent more than £536 million. In the same year, 118,000 US visitors came to the North — an increase in numbers of 13% and in revenue of 17% to £28 million.

The Member is right, Dan Rooney has been appointed by President Obama as the new US ambassador to Dublin. Dan Rooney is a huge supporter of our peace process, and has been over many years. Indeed, the First Minister and I met him and a group of his colleagues at Stormont Castle towards the end of last year. The fact that he has now been given such an important job will be a further boost to our efforts. Mr Rooney is hugely respected in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and throughout Irish America. His appointment is very important and clearly in our interest.

During one of the events, I told Dan Rooney that I sat up the night that the Steelers played in the Super Bowl. I also told him that I knew nothing about American football, but that I was delighted that his team won. At that, he put out his hand, shook mine, and pressed a Steelers badge into my hand, which I had to wear for the rest of the event.

The issue of the undocumented Irish came up consistently and persistently at many of the engagements in which we were involved. I believe that it is an issue

of concern to President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton not just in the context of the undocumented Irish; there are millions of other people — mostly Hispanics — who are in similar situations in the US.

There is no doubt that it is a matter with which the new Administration will grapple; however, yes, it came up at quite a number of our engagements. It is something that we would like to see resolved, because of the obvious pain and difficulty that it imposes, not just on people in the United States — whether from Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Belfast, Dublin, Mayo or Kerry — but also because family difficulties occur, such as people dying. Christenings and weddings also take place, and for people to be unable to come home for such events, and to face the constant threat of arrest and deportation, is very worrying. Hopefully, the new Administration will find a solution sooner rather than later.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for the work that he, the First Minister and other Members did over the St Patrick's Day period in order to market Northern Ireland, particularly for inward investment.

In the deputy First Minister's judgement, how does it affect our credibility in seeking inward investment in a global marketplace to have local Ministers wax lyrical about local jobs for local people? Does that not undermine our credibility and make us look rather insular at a time when we should be projecting ourselves as outward-looking and inclusive people who are open for, and welcoming to, business?

**The deputy First Minister:** I believe that we have a very outward-looking and inclusive Administration going forward. Business people and the Government in the United States welcomed us with open arms. There was tremendous support for the process in which we are engaged.

In our conversations, Secretary of State Clinton made it clear that the US envoy would be announced shortly, and that that may be accompanied by someone from the business community being appointed to work specifically on economic issues. If that happens, in effect, we will have not one envoy but two. That is a clear statement that the US Administration regard our process, and the development of our economy — which is the top priority in the Programme for Government — as very important.

There is recognition in the United States that, although we benefit from the presence of US companies through increased employment and support for the economy, many companies from this island also have businesses in the United States. In total, they employ as many people there as the American companies employ here on the island of Ireland. We can build on the strong links between the two countries. The engagement with

what happens here is not only political but intellectual and emotional.

In the past couple of days, and perhaps as long as a week after we left the United States, President Obama, when questioned about the situation in the Middle East, again brought the conversation back to what happened here and how other parts of the world can learn lessons from that process. I am not concerned about the situation in the business community, the Administration in the White House or other areas of the US Government because they are totally committed to helping us. They understand that what took place here was extremely important, and they are aware that the Executive have pledged to uphold equality by ensuring that people receive their full rights and entitlements, no matter who they are or from where they come.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I congratulate him and the First Minister on their trip to the United States. There appears to be some positive news about tourism and investment as a result.

I appreciate that the deputy First Minister cannot name any companies, but does he hope for, or expect, any announcements of investment in the not-too-distant future?

**The deputy First Minister:** All Members are aware that the first anniversary of the investment conference will be in May. At the time of the conference, Ian Paisley was the First Minister, and the Administration put much work into it. Invest NI also did a tremendous amount of work, and the conference was enormously successful in demonstrating to a huge number of senior executives of US companies how the situation here had changed, and wonderful progress had been made.

I am hopeful, optimistic — and I will go even further by saying that I am confident — of hearing some extremely important announcements in the next number of months. I will not name anyone with whom we have been working or to whom we have been speaking, but the First Minister and I have been personally involved with some of the people concerned. We met them recently, not only in the United States of America but here in the North. As a result of those discussions, we are confident that we will hear good news.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I add my congratulations and gratitude to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their work, and to other Assembly Members who were present, in various capacities, in the United States for the period around St Patrick's Day. The fact that everyone was on message has had a significant and profound effect.

In reply to an earlier question, the deputy First Minister said that not only would the special envoy have an interest

in economic matters but that a specialist in that area could also be appointed. That is highly significant.

If it is accepted that the message was powerfully delivered, is the opportunity being taken to ensure that other countries, particularly in Europe, recognise and support the efforts to consolidate the peace process — efforts that are in contrast to the actions of those who are attempting to plunge us back into conflict and division?

**The deputy First Minister:** I should specifically mention the announcement by Thomas DiNapoli, the New York State Comptroller, of a \$30 million investment project, because it was made in the aftermath of the killing of two soldiers and a policeman.

*12.45 pm*

When we arrived in the United States, it was very clear to us that there was initial shock at the killings, and people could not understand the reasons for them. The killings came out of the blue against a backdrop of 10 years wherein political developments had moved forward to create the Assembly and the Executive, and to continue to build the hopes and aspirations of the people whom we represent.

For Thomas DiNapoli to make that announcement in the aftermath of those incidents was a very clear statement of support from someone in authority in New York state and of the confidence that he had in our process.

Standing with us at that announcement was Christine Quinn, who is the Speaker of the New York City Council, and, on the other side of us was Kerry Kennedy, who is a daughter of Robert Kennedy. All of them spoke forcefully about the need to support the process and to support the politicians going forward. Therefore, the DiNapoli announcement is a major boost for the local economy, and it is a vote of confidence in the North as an investment location.

As I said, the New York State Comptroller's emerging Europe fund will provide a total of \$100 million, of which \$30 million has been initially earmarked for projects here that focus on tackling deprivation and generating wealth for investors and communities alike. The establishment of the fund is a clear endorsement of the peace process and a clear indicator of the strength of the continuing relationship with New York. Despite the current challenge and economic downturn, it reflects the confidence that the New York State Comptroller has in the North as an investment location, and that is very welcome news.

In a couple of days' time, the First Minister and I will travel to Brussels to meet President Barroso and President Pötinger to hand over our response to the Barroso economic task force report. We know that there is a strong commitment from Europe to assist us going forward, and we look forward very much to that

event and to meeting other influential people in Brussels, as we attempt to bring about a joined-up and co-ordinated approach to the development of our primary objective in the Programme for Government, which is the pursuance of our economy.

**Mr I McCrea:** I, too, welcome the statement. Continuing on the theme of European investment, does the deputy First Minister agree that more could be done through our Executive office in Europe to encourage more investment in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, I have no doubt that the deputy First Minister is aware that unemployment figures are on the rise, certainly in my constituency, did he or the First Minister take any opportunity to tout for investment in the west, and, specifically, in my constituency — and his constituency — of Mid Ulster?

**The deputy First Minister:** Europe has an important role to play, and we all know and understand that the priority that Europe has given to the North of Ireland over a quarter of a century has changed somewhat in that its efforts now are mostly geared towards developing support for the process of reconciliation. There is also a determined commitment to ensure that we have important access. Indeed, given the fact that we are represented by the British Government at European level, it is fairly unique for President Barroso and President Pötinger to have made visits, and for the First Minister and me to have the sort of access that we have had. Indeed, it clearly indicates an intellectual and emotional engagement with our process, particularly as they repeatedly talk about the way in which our process can be held up to others as an example of how conflict can be resolved.

The unemployment situation is of tremendous concern to us all. For example, on the island of Ireland, the unemployment level in the North is just over 5%, while in the South it is around 11%. Recently, I told the Assembly that during our last visit to Brussels, senior officials were predicting that the unemployment level in Spain will reach 20% by the end of 2009. Hopefully, we will not come close to that level, but that prediction clearly demonstrates how the economic downturn is dramatically affecting many people on a global scale.

We must weather that storm, and in the course of our conversations we have recognised that the west is a very important tourist destination. As we move forward, and as the situation before us unfolds, it is understandable that business people in Europe and America will make their own decisions on the location of their businesses. That obviously raises a challenge for us in relation to infrastructure, and how we can make access to the west as easy as possible.

Following the investment conference last year, Comptroller DiNapoli accepted an invitation from Martina Anderson to visit the north-west. During that

visit he went to Derry, saw the Ebrington site, took a tour of the city and walked Derry's walls —

**Mr Kennedy:** That is more than the Apprentice Boys can do. [*Laughter.*]

**The deputy First Minister:** The Apprentice Boys do that every year, thanks to the good work of the Bogside residents and the Speaker of the Assembly. They have done tremendous work over the course of recent years, and the issue of marching in the Derry area is one that has been dealt with very sensitively.

However, Mr Ian McCrea, a Member for Mid Ulster, is absolutely right, and I particularly share his concerns in relation to the downturn in the construction industry. Indeed, construction west of the Bann has been affected particularly badly by the current economic situation.

The Executive are doing everything in their power to weather the storm and attempt to reduce the number of people facing the dole queue. When potential investors come here, we do not speak to them specifically about one area: our responsibilities cover the whole of the North. It is our job to promote the east and west of the North, and we do that at every opportunity.

**Mr Burns:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for his and the First Minister's visit to the United States, particularly as it was against the backdrop of the terrible murders in Antrim and Craigavon. Will the deputy First Minister tell the Assembly a little more about the investment that might come from America, particularly in the area of biotechnology?

Furthermore, like my colleague PJ Bradley, I am concerned by the number of undocumented Irish people who are working in America illegally. Can we not create a better system of exchanging workers, rather than our people having to go there illegally?

**The deputy First Minister:** The work of the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership is, we believe, an excellent example of the strong and developing relationship with the United States in the advancement of scientific research. I am very pleased to note — and I am sure that the Member agrees — that a project on diabetes will be the first to be funded under the partnership, representing an investment of £4 million, or \$6 million. Furthermore, an additional two projects have been recommended for funding in the field of sensor technology. Taken together, those projects represent an overall investment of approximately \$9 million, which will be funded jointly by the US, the Executive and the Irish Government. That collaborative approach is vital in the current economic climate, and helps support research and development as a means of driving economic development. It also demonstrates the potential that exists here. By working together, we can pool our research expertise and secure additional investment. That will support projects that will benefit

each of our jurisdictions and make a significant contribution to the well-being of all our people.

Due to the changes to our programme, we were not able to visit Silicon Valley. However, it was interesting to note that the people of Silicon Valley came to visit us in Los Angeles, when we were there. That was a powerful statement, because, if people were not interested, why would they travel from Silicon Valley to Los Angeles? At that stage, John Hartnett was able to make it clear that the Irish Technology Leadership Group was going to hold its conference here in the North in the autumn. All of that news is very encouraging.

A tremendous amount of work has been done on the undocumented Irish. There were insurmountable difficulties in the United States Congress with regard to the vote that took place, and things fell a bit flat. For all sorts of, I suppose, electoral reasons, no one expected that that issue would be resolved easily at a time when the US was in the middle of a presidential campaign. Now, in the aftermath of the election, I am sure that we are dealing with a President who recognises the difficulties that exist for the undocumented Irish, and for many others. That is a challenge for his Administration. There was a lot of discussion about the issue when we were in the United States, and everyone is waiting to see how the new Administration will deal with it. However, the issue is certainly on the radar screen, and appropriately so.

**Mr G Robinson:** I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their visit to the United States, and the deputy First Minister for the positive tone with which he has spoken today. In light of the closure of Seagate's Limavady plant, which resulted in 1,100 job losses, how confident is the deputy First Minister that the company will retain its Londonderry operation? Since there have been many job losses in Limavady and East Londonderry in recent months, will those areas be given priority for any future inward investment?

**The deputy First Minister:** I thank the Member — and all the Members — for their support. Prior to my visit to the United States, I visited the Seagate plant in Derry. To be quite honest, I am content that the operation there is secure and that it is a major aspect of the overall Seagate company in the United States. I have talked with the most senior executive in the company, and he was at pains to reassure us that the future of Seagate in the north-west is secure.

The terrible job losses at Limavady were, obviously, a source of concern to us all. It was particularly disappointing to those of us who live in the north-west — and the Executive — that so many people were thrown onto the dole queues. That represents a challenge for the Executive as we try to develop our economy.

Given those serious job losses in the Limavady area, it is incumbent upon all of us to rise to the challenge of

how we can provide much-needed employment, for not just Limavady, but for many other areas that have been badly affected. Coleraine, for example, has been badly affected. As the Member for Mid Ulster Ian McCrea has just explained, the economic downturn with regard to the construction industry is hitting south Derry and east Tyrone particularly hard. The challenge, therefore, is to see what we can do to combat those unacceptable figures.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I welcome the report from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. My question relates to Mr DiNapoli's \$30 million investment fund.

Will the Minister explain how that fund will be managed locally; for example, will a local sub-agent manage it? What return will Mr DiNapoli expect? How or when can a constituent of mine access some of that funding? Will the Minister also explain the difference between that fund and the Emerald Fund?

*1.00 pm*

**The deputy First Minister:** As I said, the investment from New York State is a major boost for the local economy and is a vote of confidence in us as we develop as an investment location. In the course of our visit, the First Minister and I recognised the importance of outlining to the representatives of all the businesses whom we spoke to the very real opportunities that exist here, not just for us in employment, but for them in investments.

With respect to the DiNapoli fund, businesses may attempt to secure funding from the banks, but banks will not fund every project, or they may provide only part funding. All day last Friday, I was involved in discussions with people in my constituency, and I met a number of businesspeople who had been turned down by local banks for what I considered to be fairly small loans. That has to be a serious concern. That fund, which was announced by the New York State Comptroller, will provide an additional source of funding that will sit alongside other sources that may be available.

The Member also mentioned the Emerald Fund. Comptroller Bill Thompson announced that \$150 million fund, which is a very sizeable investment, thereby showing New York City's commitment. There is a challenge to increase that fund, and there is ongoing and consistent work to do so. The target was to reach around \$750 million, and that is a much more difficult challenge, given the backdrop of the economic downturn. However, the fund is clearly up for that challenge, and we have met some representatives of the fund in the course of the past number of weeks and months, and we know that their work is continuing. Therefore, we will have to wait and see the outcome of all that in the coming period.



**Dr Farry:** I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement. Will the deputy First Minister outline any lessons that he has learned from the experience of the United States in overcoming divisions and trying to build a shared, integrated society that could be applied to the divided society here in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, given the encouragement from the Obama Administration to spread the example of Northern Ireland elsewhere around the world, will the deputy First Minister sum up what lessons from our own experience he thinks that Northern Ireland has to share with the rest of the world?

**The deputy First Minister:** I do not know how many Members have read President Obama's book 'Dreams from my Father' — I have read it and found that the most interesting aspect of it is that it was written years before he was even mooted as a potential candidate for the United States presidency. That book provides a tremendous insight into President Obama's view on racial divisions in the United States. Quite clearly, we are dealing with someone who recognises the importance of leadership and of uniting the people of the United States of America. History will judge him; it is too soon to make any judgement on all this now, but in four — or possibly eight — years, people will make a judgement on him.

In the course of our conversations with President Obama, the First Minister and I got the very real sense that he is someone who recognises that something very powerful and important happened here in the North of Ireland in recent times, and he recognises the importance of supporting every single Member of this House, our Executive, but more importantly, the people whom we represent — that is, the people who are out there facing all sorts of difficulties, particularly economic, at this time. During all our conversations with nearly every politician on Capitol Hill, and certainly with President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, they referred to the fact that they believe that lessons relating to other conflict situations throughout the world could be learned by examining how conflict was resolved here.

We all know and understand that because we were involved in important negotiations at different stages of our process, we have come to our position. Some of that might have been too slow for many people, and many people may have been frustrated and annoyed at the slow pace of progress, but progress was made incrementally, and we now have the inclusive Executive, which have been formed out of a recognition by all parties in the Assembly that, at some stage, there had to be a meaningful dialogue among parties to set it all up. That is exactly what happened. At some stage in those other conflict situations, people must recognise the importance of moving forward in a way that unites as opposed to divides.

I said earlier that the First Minister and I have just been speaking to a large group of American graduates who are visiting us for a few days. I told them about my experience and that of Jeffrey Donaldson: we were accompanied by people such as Seán Farren from the SDLP and Billy Hutchinson, and many others from the political process and all the political parties here when we were involved in discussions with the Shias, the Kurds and the Sunnis in a forest in Finland on two occasions over the course of 18 months.

I told them about my visit to Baghdad in July 2008, and I made it clear that this was not because I was pushing myself on the Iraqis; it happened because the Iraqi politicians decided that the only negotiators to whom they were interested in talking — throughout the world — were those from the North of Ireland and South Africa. We were accompanied by Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, who were the chief negotiators for Nelson Mandela and F W de Klerk.

Clearly, the world is anxious to learn from our experiences, and all we can do is outline what we did. No two situations are the same. However, I believe that we have a duty and a responsibility — not least because we have been assisted by others ourselves — to outline our experiences, and people can then do what they want with them. We do not have a prescription for the resolution of their difficulties: all we can do is outline what we did, and they then have to reflect on that and decide whether they can benefit from it.

**Mr Dallat:** I join with other Members in thanking the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their trip to America. As someone who has gone in the past, I fully realise how difficult it is to attract inward investors while people are losing their lives at home.

I join with my colleague across the Floor and remind the Minister that six months before Seagate Technology Ltd in Limavady closed, there was contentment that everything in the garden was rosy. However, it did not turn out that way, and that constituency is totally devastated.

Although I understand that inward jobs are not attracted in just one day in the year, will the Minister — without letting everything out of the bag — convince people who have been waiting for two years, since the Assembly was up and running again, that, this time, it is for real, that the happenings of the past have gone and that our educated workforce can have the security of real jobs?

**The deputy First Minister:** The reaction of Members in the Assembly, and those in the Executive, to the events of the past couple of weeks will, I think, convince people in the community that this is for real. That sent a powerful message through the Senate and the Congress in the United States; it was a major talking point while we were there. People, from the

point of being really angry and annoyed that those killings took place, quickly gave way to the unity of purpose shown by all political parties in the Assembly. If it ever was for real, folks, it is for real now. The only way forward is the development of these institutions in the interests of the people whom we represent. That is why I said at that time that those involved in the killings needed to recognise the total and absolute futility of what they are trying to do.

They tried to destroy the peace process; to bring tens of thousands of British soldiers back onto the streets; to create mayhem in the political process and to bring about the destruction of the political institutions. They also tried to drive a wedge between the First Minister and me, and they tried to drive wedges among the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and the rest of us so that there would be fallout, recrimination and a collapse of the institutions.

The fact that they did not succeed is to the credit of every Member of this Assembly. Real leadership was shown. Those people tested us big time, but our answer was very clear: we will not be diverted, deflected or threatened by anybody. We know that we have the overwhelming support of the people of this island and of the North.

When such events occur, one reflects on what happened. I was in this Building about a week after we returned from the United States. Many people — most of whom were visitors, rather than Members or people associated with political parties — came to me and said that they had been too complacent and were shocked by what had happened, but that they were tremendously encouraged by the way in which the political parties had responded to the challenge.

I saw that a representative of one of the groups was involved in a press conference last week. Those people talk about bringing about an end to British rule and the reunification of Ireland, but they cannot even unite themselves. How they can ever hope to reunite Ireland is a mystery to me. The only thing that will bring about the type of development that is supported by the people of Ireland and of the North is the continued development and promotion of these institutions — simply because these institutions were overwhelmingly voted for by the people of this island and of the North.

As we stand here, we all recognise that we were seriously challenged and tested over the past short while. I believe that we passed the test, but we should never be complacent again. There may be other tests in the future, and the only response to those tests is to do what we did in the past — stand together, sure in the knowledge that we will prevail in the end.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Presumption of Death 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. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Presumption of Death Bill today. Members will, of course, 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.

## Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill

### Legislative Consent Motion

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill dealing with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and the entering into of arrangements with the Young People's Learning Agency for England and the Chief Executive of Skills Funding.

Although it is not included in the text of the legislative consent motion because it is purely a technical matter, the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill also has Northern Ireland provisions in respect of a very specific aspect of student loans. I will deal with each of the three areas of Northern Ireland provisions in turn.

The most significant provisions relate to the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland by the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, which is known as Ofqual.

*1.15 pm*

By way of introduction, I remind Members that on 29 January 2008, the Assembly approved an earlier legislative consent motion on the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The purpose of that legislative consent motion was, through the Westminster Education and Skills Bill, to empower the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to regulate all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

On that occasion, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) proposed, and the Executive and Assembly agreed, that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was best placed to take over the regulatory role for all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, having had a long-established role in regulating national vocational qualifications.

I also remind Members that that was necessary at the time because the review of public administration (RPA) concluded that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which regulated some vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, would be abolished and its functions transferred to the proposed education and skills authority (ESA). Although most of CCEA's functions will transfer to the education and skills authority, the Assembly agreed that it would not be appropriate for ESA to regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, hence the decision at the time to use the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as the regulator for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The full text of that Assembly debate is, of course, available in the Hansard report.

However, in December 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, published proposals for regulating and developing qualifications and assessment in England. One of the main proposals is that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is to be replaced by two bodies, each with distinct functions, all of which are currently carried out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

The first body, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, or Ofqual, will, effectively, become the regulator of vocational qualifications in England. The second body to be established is the qualifications and curriculum development agency, and it will be responsible, in England, for a range of non-regulatory functions that support the development of qualifications and curriculum. For Members' information, CCEA and, eventually, ESA, will carry out those non-regulatory functions in Northern Ireland for vocational qualifications.

That fundamental change in England required my Department to review the regulatory arrangements for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, effectively because the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will no longer exist as an organisation. In light of the new circumstances, and to ensure continuity in the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, the only practical way to proceed in the short to medium term is for Ofqual to regulate all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. That approach represents the closest possible equivalent to the regulatory arrangements agreed by the Assembly on 29 January 2008, to which I have referred. In fact, Ofqual would carry out the same type of regulatory functions that were envisaged originally for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

In addition, my Department conducted a public-consultation exercise on those proposed new regulatory arrangements for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The consultation ran from 11 August to 31 October 2008. There were 53 responses and strong support for the proposal that Ofqual should regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

At this stage, it is worth emphasising that under the proposals — and similar to the previous proposals — Ofqual would regulate vocational qualifications in only Northern Ireland. General qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels would continue to be regulated by CCEA and, eventually, by ESA. As was the case with the previous legislative consent motion to which I referred, this new arrangement does not in any way preclude future consideration of the regulation of vocational and general academic qualifications through a single regulator here in Northern Ireland. My Department and the Department of Education will conduct a

review of qualification regulation arrangements, probably during 2011.

However, it is important for the Assembly to agree to the proposed approach in the short to medium term, otherwise there is a real danger that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland will not be regulated, and that would be to the detriment of individual learners and employers.

The second area of Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill relates to the creation of two organisations to replace, in 2010, the Learning and Skills Council in England.

The new organisations are the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency. The powers that enable the Learning and Skills Council to make arrangements to provide services in Northern Ireland will be replicated for both the chief executive of the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency for England.

No substantive changes have been made to the existing Northern Ireland provisions, many of which have not been used. However, one key provision that has been used, and will continue to be used, is the provision for the Learning and Skills Council to provide a range of infrastructure services to support the implementation of the new qualifications and credit framework across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary for those existing Northern Ireland provisions to be replicated in the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill.

The third area of Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill concerns a very specific and technical aspect of student loans. These provisions relate to the treatment of student loans under insolvency legislation and, in particular, individual voluntary arrangements. Individual voluntary arrangements enable an individual to enter into an agreement with a creditor, whereby the creditor agrees to accept less than the full value of the debt as satisfaction for the whole amount. That legislation is being brought forward in England, through the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, to close the loophole that allows borrowers to write off or reduce student-loan debt by entering into individual voluntary arrangements, thereby bringing the legislation into line with how bankruptcy is treated in respect of student loans.

The provisions relate only to loans paid out of public funds in England. That is intended to prevent people who have English domiciles from writing off the loans under individual voluntary agreements while they are resident in Northern Ireland. I am considering similar proposals for people with Northern Ireland domiciles who are resident in England, but those

proposals will be brought forward through primary legislation for Northern Ireland.

The legal advice is that the Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill are so minor and technical that they did not need to be included in the text of the legislative consent motion. However, I am bringing them to Members' attention for the purpose of completeness. I hope that Members will support the motion that I have laid before the Assembly.

**Mr Easton:** Unfortunately, the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning are both ill, so I have agreed to speak on the motion in their stead. I thank the Minister for his explanation of the legislative consent motion and the background to the Bill. I do not plan to rehearse what Sir Reg has said; my purpose is to share with the Assembly the view of the Committee for Employment and Learning on the issue.

I commend the Minister on the willingness of his officials to come before the Committee to brief members on the workings of the Bill and the legislative consent motion. Officials appeared before the Committee on 19 March 2008, 2 July 2008, 19 November 2008 and 11 March 2009. The Committee also corresponded with the Minister a number of times with regard to the legislative consent motion and the Bill. The Committee agreed to support the legislative consent motion at its meeting on 11 March 2009, although that agreement is conditional.

As Members are aware, and as the Minister has outlined, a legislative consent motion is used when it is agreed that Westminster will legislate on an area that falls within the competence of the Assembly. On 8 December 2008, the Executive agreed to the inclusion of provisions for Northern Ireland in the Westminster Bill and for a legislative consent motion to be laid before the Assembly for Members' consideration. I want Members to understand that a robust process was followed. The Committee gave the matter careful consideration and did not agree to support the legislative consent motion lightly. Legislative consent motions should not be used in favour of producing legislation ourselves, except in particular circumstances where there is general consensus that they are necessary.

I have indicated that the Committee's support for the legislative consent motion is conditional, and I will now explain that. At an early stage of the Bill's development, the Committee highlighted its concerns about the provision for the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, the new regulator in England, to regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The Committee was unhappy that that regulation, which is a devolved matter, would not be formed on a local basis. Those concerns are shared by other Departments and Ministers.

However, having corresponded with the Minister and his officials and having learnt of commitments given by the Minister to his Executive colleagues that the situation will be reviewed at an appropriate stage, the Committee has agreed to support the legislative consent motion.

The Committee's view is that regulation by the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator is an adequate temporary measure but that the regulatory function should be performed locally as soon as possible. The Minister has agreed to consult his Executive colleagues in the longer term about the possibility that the regulatory functions might sit with the education and skills authority. The Committee understands that that discussion will run in parallel with an independent review of regulating arrangements for ESA. The Committee's preference is for a single regulator for Northern Ireland in the long term.

The second part of the motion relates to the dismantling of the Learning and Skills Council for England in 2010 and its replacement by the skills funding agency (SFA) and the young people's learning agency (YPLA). Northern Ireland Departments require access to the services of the SFA and the YPLA. The provisions of the Bill in respect of those organisations that relate to Northern Ireland and which are covered by the legislative consent motion are technical and practical.

The Committee noted that, as a result of the Bill, a number of Northern Ireland Departments will be able to access SFA and YPLA services without having to approach those bodies through the Department for Employment and Learning. Members will appreciate the practical advantages of that provision.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the motion. I appreciate that it arises from changes connected with the review of public administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority. A gap existed in the regulation of vocational qualifications, and the body that will address that is Ofqual.

I agree with Alex Easton: as reflected in the Committee's considerations, this is a short- to medium-term solution. Has the Minister proposals to establish a body in the North to regulate vocational qualifications locally?

The Learning and Skills Council for England is to be abolished and two new bodies will be set up: the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency. In Britain, most of the Learning and Skills Council's budget will be transferred to local education authorities. However, before the establishment of that body, there existed the Further Education Funding Council for England, and, before that, the training and enterprise councils. The machinery of Government has done away with the Learning and Skills Council and

produced the two new bodies. I am concerned at the establishment of two new bodies and I want to hear what the Minister has to say. Most Members agreed with the reduction in the number of public bodies and quangos recommended by the review of public administration, yet now two new bodies will be created. Those two new bodies are orientated towards what is happening in Britain — particularly in England — and I wonder how the North fits into the picture.

I appreciate that the education and skills authority will be established as a result of the review of public administration and that regulation of vocational qualifications is important. However, this is something that we must look at, and I hope that the Minister will tell us how he will consider, first, the regulation of qualifications as agreed by the Committee; and, secondly, how the North will fit in with the operation of the two new bodies. The Minister also mentioned student loans, and an anomaly existed in respect of them.

Apart from those reservations, we support this short- to medium-term measure that will deal with the regulation of vocational qualifications. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's statement; it makes good common sense — and it is good practice — to validate vocational qualifications.

The SDLP agrees to the legislative consent motion. The importance of DEL in the current economic conditions is crystal-clear. In the past, DEL did not seem to attract much interest; now, however, it has a crucial role in creating a base of skills to enhance skills in the community and to enable Northern Ireland to reposition itself on the island, in Europe and in the world economy. It needs to measure up to that and be seen to measure up to that.

1.30 pm

The Bill concerns the validation of qualifications, which is necessary. However, the validation body needs to be tuned in to the Northern Ireland experience and to the conditions that are relevant in our circumstances. The Bill enables funds to be paid for students who are studying and sitting exams in England. Clearly, that is necessary to enable student mobility and guarantee student choice. We agree with the approach taken by the Minister and with the consent motion.

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Minister for bringing forward the legislative consent motion, and I support it. I agree with the other Members who have spoken and with the Committee's concerns around the chopping and changing of the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. There is a great and urgent need. I am glad to hear that the Minister is going to bring forward a review which will bring all qualifications together under a single regulator. We should not separate academic and vocational qualifications. For a long time we have said that the promotion of vocational

training is important for Northern Ireland. It will encourage more people to take up vocational training and to become technicians, engineers and electricians, to fill the big skill gaps that there are in Northern Ireland.

There is another issue around individual voluntary agreements (IVAs). I very much welcome the fact that the Bill closes that loophole. Student loans can be excluded from bankruptcy but not from IVAs. Apparently, in England, there is now a trend for people to opt for an IVA in order to try to get out of paying back their student loans. That is unfair to the majority of students who are struggling to pay back their student loans, often from salaries as small as £15,000 a year. I know that my two sons have been paying back their student loans for some time and I am sure that they would not want to let other students get out of that.

I read that the Bill will put the Sure Start children's centres on a statutory footing. I understand that there are two Sure Start children's centres in Northern Ireland. If that is the case, it would be very welcome. However, I am afraid that most Sure Start organisations seem not to be aware of that. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I thank Members for their comments. First, I will deal with Mr Easton's response on behalf of the Committee. I pretty much agree with what he said. He is correct, as are other Members, that the legislative consent motion provides short- to medium-term measures, necessitated because of circumstances beyond our control.

I will clarify a point that Paul Butler a Member for Lagan Valley made. The two bodies to which he referred are based in England and are not being replicated here. We could have access to their services, but we do not intend to replicate those services here. What we do have, coming back to a point made by all Members who spoke, is the intention, with the Department of Education, to conduct a review. That review will take place, probably in 2011, with a view to considering a single body. The terms of reference for that review will be made available in due course — they are not yet drafted. However, it has been made clear that the two Departments are going to carry out a review. This is not a final solution to the problem and we recognise that fully.

I know that a number of Members are concerned at the proliferation of bodies. Members did not have to read the speech that I have just read, and, if any of them were able to memorise and repeat a paragraph of it, they would be doing well. That whole area of activity is dominated by a very complicated structure. Anything that can be done to simplify that is in everyone's interests. I am fully committed to the upcoming review, but we have to do something in the short- to medium term. A vacuum cannot be allowed to

exist in which qualifications that are given to students and others in Northern Ireland could be challenged as not being up to standard. That is the main thing that we must ensure does not happen.

I appreciate the work of the Committee. I know how it feels, and there will be little difference between it and the Department on the issue. As soon as the terms of reference are drafted, we will share them with colleagues in the Assembly so that Members can comment on them. They will probably go to the Committee as a matter of course.

Sure Start does not appear to be affected in any way by the draft Bill, but, if I have missed something, I shall write to the Member.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill dealing with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and the entering into of arrangements with the Young People's Learning Agency for England and the Chief Executive of Skills Funding.

## **Draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009**

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

That the draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule. Subject to the Assembly's approval, that rule will substitute:

"in Northern Ireland, the regional agency for public health and social well-being"

for:

"in Northern Ireland, Health and Social Services Boards"

in schedule 4(c) to the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001.

I shall explain why that amendment is needed. At present, article 42 of the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 requires midwives to give notice to the local supervising authority for the area in which they intend to practice. Schedule 4 to the Order currently defines the local supervising authority in Northern Ireland as meaning "Health and Social Services Boards".

The draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 provides that, in any legislation, references to "Health and Social Services Boards" will, after 1 April 2009, be construed as a reference to the health and social care board, except in relation to health improvement and health protection functions, where the reference will be construed as a reference to the public health agency.

Members will be aware that, when I announced my proposals for health and social care reform in the House on 18 February 2008, it triggered a major consultation exercise, which lasted until 12 May 2008. During that consultation process, the Department was actively involved in engaging with key stakeholders to discuss the proposals in greater detail and to canvass their views. Having listened carefully to the views of stakeholders and of interested parties, it was decided that the overall quality and safety agenda should come under the ownership of the public health agency.

As the provisions in the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 relate to the registration of midwives to practice in an area of work that clearly falls within the quality and safety agenda, it makes sense that the registration responsibility should rest with the public health agency, as that is where the director of nursing will be based.

Members will also be aware that the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 was

subject to rigorous scrutiny during its passage through the Assembly. It was very encouraging to see the widespread acceptance of the proposals in the legislation and the level of consensus that it enjoyed in the Health Committee and in the House. Given that midwives will now be required to provide notification of their intention to practice to the public health agency, it is necessary to amend schedule 4 to the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 to reflect that position.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister explained the purpose of the draft Order, which requires affirmation by the Assembly before it can come into operation. It is a short and straightforward Order that relates to the registration of midwives. From 1 April 2009, when the new health and social care bodies come into operation, midwives will be required to register with the new Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being.

On 5 February 2009, departmental officials briefed the Committee on the background to the proposal. The Committee was content that the Department prepare the draft Order. The Committee considered the draft Order at its meeting on 12 March 2009 and recommended that it be affirmed by the Assembly. I support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** As has been mentioned already, if the Order works to provide a first-class service for the nursing and midwifery profession — and I have no doubt that it will — that is the way that we intend to go. I, certainly, support the motion.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I thank briefly the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee, other members of the Health Committee, Mr McCarthy, and, indeed, other Assembly Members for their support in the passage of this important piece of consequential legislation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the House to take its ease for a few minutes before it proceeds to the next item of business.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Report of the Committee on Procedures on Inquiry into Assembly Questions

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on the report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into Assembly questions.

The Business Committee has allowed up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving a motion and making a winding-up speech on a Committee report, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures will be allowed up to 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make his winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak.

1.45 pm

#### **The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions.

The Committee on Procedures started its inquiry in September 2008 with the aim of investigating how to make Assembly questions more interesting, lively and topical. Given that the House is bulging at the seams, it seems that Members cannot wait for the report to be published.

I thank members of the Committee. The inquiry was lengthy, and the discussions and eventual agreement on each recommendation took place over several months. The individual and collective work of members has, I hope, resulted in a report and recommendations that will make some difference to Assembly questions in general and, in particular, to Question Time. The Committee began the inquiry by acknowledging that questions are a historic entitlement of democratic Parliaments worldwide. That entitlement allows Members to hold Ministers to account, to challenge policy decisions and to obtain information. Question Time is also seen as regulations, and all Members, Speakers and Ministers have a responsibility.

The report contains 10 recommendations, the first of which is that the number of listed questions should be reduced from 20 to 15. All Members will admit that 20 questions is a red herring, given that, in general, Ministers take five to six minutes to answer one question and the associated supplementaries. Each Minister would need nearly two hours to answer 20 questions. Fifteen questions may not be attainable, but it is a step in the right direction.

Our second recommendation proposes a change to the system for choosing questions. I will not describe

how the current system works, because Members are familiar with that. The Committee examined the statistical information contained on page 11 of the report. Those figures highlighted the fact that Members' questions ultimately had only a 1:6 chance of being answered. Therefore, over 80% of Members' work in writing and tabling questions amounted to wasted time. Although some Members might not support the reduction, we must remember that it is balanced by a reduction in the number of questions that they have to prepare.

Another proposal is that a Member from the same party should not ask the first question to the Minister. All members of the Committee agreed that questions to Ministers from his or her own party tended to be familiar and less challenging. Moreover, they agreed that such friendly fire did not enhance the experience and the theatre element of Question Time. The Committee considered that Ministers should expect Question Time to be challenging, and the recommendation attempts to ensure that the potential of real challenge exists from the beginning of Question Time. Members will accept the need to instil and inject such challenge into the House in order to ensure that Ministers are not given — or are not seen to be given — preference by any Member or any party.

A few moments ago, I mentioned questions on topical issues, and I want to explain the Committee's thinking on that matter. The junior Ministers presented some convincing evidence to the effect that, if the majority of questions covered only five broad areas, there was, perhaps, no need for fortnightly appearances. However, after considerable discussion, the Committee agreed that the public expects the First Minister and deputy First Minister to appear fortnightly.

Putting them on the same schedule, or rota, as other Ministers could be perceived as undermining their role. That outweighed any minor benefits that would have resulted from reducing their appearances at Question Time.

By the same token, the weight of evidence on the type and standard of questions for oral answer asked meant that the Committee could not justify a recommendation that the First Minister and deputy First Minister appear weekly. I would like to emphasise that point. If Members begin to ask questions covering all aspects of the work of the Department, then the Committee may have to reconsider that decision. Question Time will work only if Members have the will and the means to make it work: that means widening the time to Mondays and Tuesdays.

There were a number of reasons behind that recommendation — increased media coverage was just one of those reasons. The Committee was surprised at the viewing figures for 'Stormont Live', which regularly



gets audiences of more than 10,000 people: that is to be encouraged. We want to make the Assembly open and accessible, and the one way of doing that is through media coverage. After all, there is no way that we could get 10,000 people into the Public Gallery, even if they were pushing down the doors — and I do not think that that is taking place at the moment.

The second, and probably more telling, reason for the recommendation is that Members themselves admitted to losing interest in Question Time after around one hour. In its current format, with the level of prearranged questions and responses, sitting there for one and a half hours can be demanding. Splitting Question Time into one hour for two Ministers on Mondays and half an hour for one Minister on Tuesdays should help to ensure that there is, to some degree, a level playing field. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and the Committee is willing to look at the issue again as it becomes clear how it is, or is not, working.

Finally, two slots will increase the opportunity for visitors to the Assembly to see what could, or should, be one of the more lively procedures that we have. Some members of the public cannot attend on a Monday, and the recommendation will increase the opportunities for the public to watch at least one Minister being held accountable by use of questions for oral answer.

The Committee heard from Members that there was dissatisfaction with the number of questions being answered by Ministers, and many suggested that the Committee considers time limits, as long replies take up lots of time that could be spent on getting through more questions. However, although both the Irish Parliament and the Ontario Parliament have time limits for the initial question, the supplementary questions, and the ministerial reply, the final view of the Committee is that time limits would not make much — if any — difference to the number of questions answered.

However, the Committee welcomes the Speaker's ruling that Members should not read their supplementary questions and agrees with evidence that shows that, if a Member has to read the supplementary question, it is too long. All the same, the Committee wants to send a very clear message to Ministers. Long-winded replies are not helpful, and in fact can be perceived negatively by the public and the media. If Members can curb their instincts to ask long supplementary questions, we hope that Ministers can do the same and answer in a full and concise manner.

That covers the recommendation for questions for oral answer; I will now quickly discuss questions for written answer. The Committee has been informed of serious concerns about the extent to which Ministers were answering questions for written answer on time. During its investigation, the Committee was reassured

to note that considerable work has been done by the Departments to improve performance. Nevertheless, the Committee will periodically review and call the worst-performing Departments to account.

The Committee was also very concerned to note that, despite having no method to calculate costs, certain Departments were able to refuse to answer questions on the basis of cost. Although the Committee is broadly sympathetic to the concept of disproportionate cost, it wants to see that concept used properly. For that reason, the Committee has recommended that all Departments urgently introduce a system of costing responses, similar to that which must be in place for dealing with freedom of information responses. We will, therefore, be keeping a close eye on developments in that area.

Finally, the report contains two recommendations on priority written questions. Based on statistical analysis and evidence from Members, it was apparent that the priority written answer system was being overused by some Members. Frustrated by late replies and, sometimes, the lack of detail in ordinary written answers, some Members resorted to asking for priority written answers. It is to be hoped that the improved performance of Departments will help the situation, but there are two new recommendations for Members to consider. The first is that only one of the five written questions a day can be a priority; the second is that Members should not use priority written questions to ask for a large amount of statistical or historical data.

That covers the recommendations in the report; I am confident that there is something for everyone to like and to dislike in it. I remind Members that a successful Question Time relies on the willing and sincere participation of Members and Ministers.

The Committee set out to address some of the deficiencies in the system, but it cannot and will not try to regulate Members. The Committee asks Members to try the new procedures; if they do not work, either in whole or in part, the Committee will review them. On that understanding, the Committee has already started work on the Standing Orders for Assembly Questions, and expects to see the changes introduced sometime after the Easter recess. I commend the report and its recommendations to the Assembly.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son na tuarascála seo.

I thank the Chairperson for his work in taking the Committee through its inquiry and for tabling its report this afternoon; I also thank the Deputy Chairperson for proposing the motion. I also thank the Committee Clerk and her staff and all those who gave evidence to the inquiry for their part in producing the Committee's report.

Sinn Féin welcomes the inquiry and the main findings of the report. Throughout its work — and in tandem

with last week's changes to Standing Orders — the Committee set itself the target of making the work of the Assembly and the Executive more accountable and more open, and by “open”, I mean public accessibility as well. The measures that the Deputy Chairperson outlined this afternoon will make this place more accountable and more open. He highlighted some of the changes to the number of questions and how they would be set.

The changes with regard to supplementary questions will address one of the issues. At last week's Assembly roadshow in Derry, the Ceann Comhairle heard about trying to make questions more topical; the process in which we are involved will do that. Reducing 20 questions to 15 could be called good housekeeping, but it reflects the reality that, every Monday, we never get close even to 15 questions, never mind 20. Reduction will be a practical alternative. The evidence from some Departments and from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was that the proposed changes will allow them to be better equipped and better organised to answer questions.

The Deputy Chairperson mentioned the role of the junior Ministers and the fact that they answer questions on their areas of responsibility. People should welcome that, because the junior Ministers work in their Department on a daily basis and are more available and better equipped to be more spontaneous, particularly when answering supplementary questions, than those who have to read from prepared texts.

The Committee was greatly impressed by media representatives' suggestion of splitting Question Time into two sessions. It is well known that the third ministerial slot — from 3.30 pm to 4.00 pm — on Monday is seldom covered by ‘Stormont Live’, so a move to Tuesday afternoon will provide better access. At the roadshow in Derry, it was made clear that many people watch ‘Stormont Live’ and are interested in watching and listening to Question Time. It may be that the debates in the House on a Tuesday afternoon do not inspire people to watch the programme, whereas Question Time might. We must respond to that.

2.00 pm

The deputy Chairperson referred to the things that people may like and dislike, and that is fair enough. The survey that was carried out by the Assembly Research and Library Service gave MLAs the chance to express their views on the issue of Assembly Questions. The Committee welcomed that approach.

The Chairperson and deputy Chairperson said, on a number of occasions, that the recommendations are not written in stone. The recommendations are not being undertaken on a trial basis; however, if there are any gaps, I have no doubt that the Committee will fill them. The underlying reason for the report and the inquiry is

to ensure that people feel that Ministers are being held accountable at Question Time and that the Assembly, as a body, is accountable, open and transparent. The report points us in the right direction. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr B McCrea:** Obviously, this cross-party motion has been deliberated on by our colleagues in the Committee on Procedures, and we, therefore, welcome the publication of the report. As a Member of the Assembly, the most heartening thing that I heard from the deputy Chairperson was that if the proposals do not work, they will be reviewed. I understand that people have tried their level best to move things forward, and we just have to see where they go.

At the risk of being slightly controversial, I find Question Time to be a bit formulaic. There ought to be a wee bit more spontaneity, because Members have a lot to say. Committee Chairpersons and Ministers are now getting on top of their Ministries, and they have quite a command of their subjects. Therefore, we should take the opportunity to question them. No doubt we will consider that issue.

Mr McCartney said that the debates on Tuesday afternoons bore some people. Some of my finest performances have been on Tuesday afternoons, but perhaps that is what he meant — that they were not very good.

I am always struck by the number of people who watch the debates. Politics are still important to the people of Northern Ireland; they still like to see their representatives answering questions, participating in debate and doing the business of Government. That is an advantage that we have over other jurisdictions.

By way of stimulating other discussions, I was in Washington recently, together with the Speaker and various other Members, and I took the opportunity to watch the House of Representatives and the US Senate in operation. In particular, members of the House of Representatives went in, said their piece in three minutes, finished, sat down and moved on. It was like a conveyor belt. That was quite interesting. Somewhat surprisingly, only one Senator is in the Senate at any one time. He or she gives forth to a television camera, and there is no one else there to ask questions.

It seems that we want to keep the real essence of democracy, whereby locally elected representatives are able to question those who have authority and responsibility. I implore the Committee to take a real look at that issue as things evolve. Let us see how things move on: we will suck it and see.

It is appropriate that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, as the joint heads of our Government, come to the Chamber regularly to answer questions, because they are not the same as other Ministers. They effectively lead the country, so it is right that they have

a broader remit and that we should ask them about what is going on. In that regard, junior Ministers — although we like to hear about the areas for which they are specifically responsible — are not a substitute.

I note that Professor Wilford suggested that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should take part in Question Time more regularly, perhaps once a week. Again, we will just have to wait and see whether the recommendations work. A real point of engagement exists, whereby the people of Northern Ireland get a chance to hear the top people answer questions.

With regard to supplemental questions, I know that the Speaker tries valiantly to keep people on the topic of the original question, which is right and proper when dealing with specific ministries. However, it might be worth considering a relaxation of that so that people can expand on issues as happens in Prime Minister's Questions. I am sure that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister would have a problem coping with that.

We welcome the publishing of the report and thank our colleagues for looking at the matter in detail. I look forward to some improvements — I might even get to ask the odd supplemental.

**Mr O'Loan:** The inquiry is important and reflects a general concern that Question Time is not working properly. Indeed, I have heard a rumour that cardboard cut-outs of Members will be placed on Benches to provide some semblance of activity and interest.

**Mr Elliott:** I hope that the Member is referring to cardboard cut-outs and not to blow-up balloons.

**Mr O'Loan:** Each party can make its own decision on that.

Question Time is fundamental to the democratic process: it is about the accountability of the Assembly. If Question Time is not working, or cannot be made to work better, there is a question mark over how well our democratic system is serving the public need. As a devolved region, we are limited in what we can do, but we allow ourselves to be too constrained by that. We need to improve our political dynamic, which means breaking out of the straightjacket that we often impose on ourselves. We need to use every mechanism open to us; our North/South and east-west relationships, our membership of the EU and our relationship with the United States. We need to use all of those relationships to punch above our weight, and if we make our Assembly active and political, our Question Time will rapidly reflect that. That is why we need to take the inquiry very seriously — it is not just about procedures, it is also about the fundamental politics of Northern Ireland.

The report must not be seen as the last stage of the process — it is a tentative first step. We need to do a lot more to make our Question Time more lively and

challenging, and we need questions that are much more impromptu, topical and unscripted. That also means that we need answers that are impromptu, topical and unscripted. In the existing system, our Ministers could do a lot more for us in that regard, particularly when answering supplementary questions — it is time that they threw away the script. Our Ministers have been given a job to do and are supposed to be on top of their brief. It is perfectly appropriate, desirable and necessary that Ministers think for themselves and react to questions. Supplementary questions are the nearest we have to impromptu questions, so let our Ministers deal with them in an impromptu fashion.

I want to make a procedural point about how the Assembly addresses a report such as this. We are being asked to approve a report with 10 recommendations. It is conceivable that Members might like some of the recommendations and might not like others, yet we are being asked to accept or reject the whole report. I did not support one of the recommendations during Committee discussions, but I would not divide the House on it. However, as a general point about how the Assembly deals with such reports, there is an issue about how the Committee addresses the individual recommendations.

I will make a few comments on some of the recommendations, particularly those on oral questioning. I welcome recommendations 1, 2 and 3, the reduction in the number of questions to 15 and the selection of the Members ahead of the selection of the questions — a double shuffle. That will help, because it reduces a lot of the nugatory work and means that the questions will be placed nearer to the time that they are answered. I have some concern that the random process might lead to the SDLP, with 16 Members from the total 108, having no Member selected to ask a question to a particular Minister on some occasions. However, let us see how that works out in the random process.

I particularly welcome recommendation 4, which states that there is to be no change to the rota for the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I think that the First Minister and deputy First Minister overreached themselves by that attempt to reduce the number of occasions on which they come before the Assembly. I welcome the fact that Democratic Unionist members, in particular, spoke out strongly against that in the Committee. I do not recall Sinn Féin members expressing any significant view in relation to that, either publicly or in the Committee. The Committee was clear in its ultimate view that there should be no change there.

I have some concerns about recommendation 5, which will allow the junior Ministers to speak on behalf of their seniors. I see that recommendation as part of the same issue — an attempt to reduce the accountability of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I have concerns about that. We will see how it works out in

practice, but I hope that we do not have occasion to come back to express those concerns again.

**Mr Neeson:** I want to thank the Committee Clerk, her staff, the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures for the way in which they have steered the Committee through the inquiry.

The report is very timely. It is widely believed that Question Time, as it exists presently, is tedious, particularly compared with Question Time in other places. Mr Speaker, you may remember our experience at the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, and how Question Time was conducted there.

The Committee undertook a very wide and varied consultation on the issue. That consultation included members of the public, elected Members, and members of the media. As a member of the Assembly Commission, we are very committed to developing outreach for the Assembly to get greater participation of the community, and I believe that the report makes a major contribution towards that aim.

As a Committee, we recognised that the present timescale for submitting questions is too long. We also recognised that the tabling of 20 questions is too many and that the maximum number of questions answered in any one session is normally five or six. Under the proposed system, 15 Members' names would be drawn in a random shuffle, and questions would be drawn in the same manner, seven working days in advance of Question Time. By so doing, it is hoped to make the questions slightly more topical. The fact that questions were submitted so far in advance that they had lost their topicality was one of the big issues that the Committee considered.

The Committee felt strongly that the present rota for the First Minister and deputy First Minister should be retained. The proposal put forward by OFMDFM to reduce the number of appearances not only undermined the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister but would have undermined the role of the Assembly.

We also appreciated the role of junior Ministers, and in that respect, we have recommended that they could be called upon to answer questions that are relevant to their own portfolio, but not as a substitute for OFMDFM.

I am glad that the First Minister has joined us for this important debate.

The Committee also recognised the potential of Question Time in garnering public interest. For that reason, we have recommended that Question Time be split over two days. That will allow for the live televising of all ministerial Question Times.

These recommendations are, of course, open to review. When the devolution of policing and justice is brought forward, for example, that will be a point at which we would need to review Question Time.

2.15 pm

I have a very serious concern about questions for written answer. I believe that some Members of the Assembly abuse the system — they ask questions simply for the sake of asking questions. Members must consider not only the cost of carrying out that exercise, but also the time that is taken up by senior officials in devising answers. I ask Members seriously to realise the cost implications of that exercise.

The Committee spent considerable time going through the report, and I believe that there is now a major opportunity to make the Assembly even more relevant to the community at large, which is why I fully support all the report's recommendations.

**Mr Speaker:** Just before I call Lord Browne to speak, I know that some Members have individually raised the issue about what will be the procedure after today. After today, whether the motion is agreed or not, the individual new Standing Orders will come to the House, where every individual Standing Order will be voted on, or be grouped, as appropriate to the Standing Order. At that stage, Members can propose amendments to those Standing Orders. That is just to clarify the issue, because I know that Declan O'Loan raised the issue, as did other Members. That is just to clarify it once and for all.

**Lord Browne:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would, first, like to thank the Chairperson and Committee staff for their dedication and patience in the preparation of this very detailed report. The Committee has undertaken an extensive inquiry into questions to Ministers for oral and written answer, with a focus on evaluating the effectiveness of current procedures and making recommendations for improvements.

As the report states:

"The right to ask for information from and to hold Ministers to account is an essential and historic entitlement of parliaments the world over".

As in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, one way that MLAs can exercise that right is through ministerial questions, which do place a duty on Ministers to explain and defend their decisions and the actions of their Departments.

I think that many Members would agree that Assembly Question Time could be improved. In evidence to the Committee, Professor Wilford summed up the position by stating:

"It is undeniable that Oral Question Time, however it is styled, is a centrepiece of each sitting of the relevant House. Whilst it takes up a relatively small proportion of a House's time — in NI's case approximately 12% of the weekly plenary sessions are dedicated to Ministerial Question Time — it tends to attract a disproportionate amount of media and public attention."

Indeed, the Committee observed that there was a perception among MLAs that Question Time in the

Assembly had, sometimes, been less exciting than it should be, and that it lacked spontaneity.

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** I am grateful to my noble and learned friend for giving way, and I am grateful for the remarks that he is making, because they lead nicely to a marker that I wanted to put down in the Assembly.

First, the main purpose of Question Time should not be to entertain the press or, indeed, the public: it is for the imparting of information. However, there is a particular issue to which I want to refer. I understand from the Speaker's comments that, in general terms, the purpose of the debate is almost like a Second Reading debate in which we deal with the principle of the report, and I am content with that.

However, it is just when the next stage comes, to alert the Committee on Procedures, if it is drafting the specific Standing Orders, to give effect to the proposals contained in the report in relation to recommendation 5, which relates to the role of junior Ministers in answering questions.

For some reason — and I am not sure, because I have not followed the debate — although the report was leaked to the BBC, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister could not get a copy from even the Printed Paper Office in the House. So, it seems that the BBC is more relevant to these matters than OFMDFM. However, the report specifically indicates, in recommendation 5, that the junior Ministers could answer oral questions on the basis of having:

“specific responsibility... as outlined by the First Minister to the Assembly on 11 June 2007.”

Why on earth would the Assembly want to peg itself to the specific duties that the First Minister gave junior Ministers on 11 June 2007? The departmental duties of the junior Ministers have since changed. Therefore the recommendation should refer to duties that have been given to junior Ministers at any relevant time rather than specifying 11 June 2007. I am grateful to my colleague for accepting an intervention.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute to speak.

**Lord Browne:** I thank the First Minister for his intervention; I am sure that the Committee will take his wisdom on board.

A survey of MLAs showed that Question Time was fulfilling only part of its role. Before considering how Question Time could be improved, the Committee examined the reasons for its existence. We concluded that Question Time does more than simply hold Ministers to account: it challenges the ministerial function; it is a proving ground for Ministers; it highlights issues of public importance; it gives Back-Benchers an opportunity to raise their profile; it facilitates the underscoring of

certain party-political views; and it allows Members to raise vital constituency issues and concerns.

As noted in the report, the Committee agreed that the theatre element of Question Time, so evident in other Parliaments, was missing from the Assembly to some extent. Although it is acknowledged that the theatrical element must be carefully managed, it would create interest and appeal to the public and the media. It is a tool that can be used to engage with various groups, such as young people, that might otherwise prove difficult to reach.

The Committee acknowledged the important role of the Speaker in Assembly questions, particularly in Question Time. I thank the Speaker for his help and for his submission to the Committee, which proved extremely useful.

I do not intend to speak about every recommendation because each is designed to improve the business of the Assembly. However, I remind Members that the recommendations are not set in stone and can, after a reasonable period, be reviewed and, if necessary, altered.

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

**Lord Browne:** I support the report.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat. Ní raibh a fhios agam go raibh mé le labhairt. I was not aware that I was due to speak, but I am glad of the opportunity to do so. I have a brief anecdote that relates to a recommendation on asking questions in two languages. Some Members ask a question in Irish first, and the translation into English wastes some of Question Time.

Similarly, one Member likes to speak Ulster Scots. On a certain blog, a member of the public suggested that the Member be allowed some leeway because his Ulster Scots is more comprehensible than his English.

In general, questions should be short and concise. Some of the Ministers' answers —

**Mr B McCrea:** I am intervening to give the Member a chance to gather his thoughts. The Member is one of the more colourful characters in the Assembly, and I want him not to hold back but to give full throttle in demonstrating what an exciting opportunity Question Time could be.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute to speak.

**Mr Brolly:** I have little to add to what I said; I wish that I had. However, I could tell the story again. *[Laughter.]* Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Elliott:** I put on record my thanks to the Committee and its staff for their proposals. The review was necessary because some procedures were not working properly.

That is not to say that it will work properly after the proposals are implemented. Nevertheless, they are a huge improvement. I also appreciate the Speaker's clarification about what happens next in the process, because some Members were unaware of what will happen and expressed concern. Hopefully, the process will now take the form that was intended by the Committee.

I am interested in Mr Brolly's assertion about different languages. Sometimes I am quite pleased to hear other Members' speak in their Irish tongue, because then I do not know what they are talking about. That pleases me more than when I do know what they are talking about.

I am concerned that the whole procedure of submitting questions can be abused at times, in the sense that the questions are always repetitive. In fact, I feel privileged when I see how well Ministers deal with them. They do not simply refer back to a certain question, but give an answer in full again. They are not required to do that, but they are quite consistent in doing so.

Questions for priority written answer also need careful consideration, as the system is abused. Some are not, I believe, really questions for priority written answer. Furthermore, the responses require a range of information that cannot be gathered in one or two days. I do not believe that that system is being administered properly, but perhaps the Business Office can look at that. I hope that there is some progress on that issue.

The main issues relate to the earlier recommendations for Question Time. We have talked about the issue of drawing 15 Members' names, and of those Members posing a question seven days before the Minister appears before the Assembly for Question Time. That is good, and it is more efficient and effective for the Chamber and for the Assembly.

The First Minister, who has just left the Chamber, said that Question Time is not a stand-up show for the press but a way of getting information; however, it is not the only way. There are other ways, and it is not the only thing that Question Time is used for. This is a debating Chamber, and that is what we need to do. We need to be able to debate these issues and try to get that information out to the public.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member clarify that there seemed to be some difference between what the First Minister said and what Lord Browne said, in that there is an issue about showing people that we are at work and that there are plenty of ways of getting information, through questions for written answer and debates, among others? However, the real purpose of Question Time is to perform a bit of theatre, to show people what we are about, and to hold Ministers to account.

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

**Mr Elliott:** I have tried to touch on that. Question Time is about a series of issues. It is not simply about getting information, but it is obviously used by different Members and Ministers in different ways.

The issue of serious and significant current topics needs to be looked at when tabling questions for oral answer. If Members have to table their questions seven working days in advance, it does not allow for the option of posing a question that is important and current to that day. There should be an option to allow Members to table such questions for oral answer, and I hope that the Committee can look at that issue in the very near future.

The Deputy Speaker is looking at me, because my time is nearly up, so I will leave it at that.

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

2.30 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

#### Alcohol-Related Health Costs

1. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the average annual cost of alcohol-related illness, accidents and injuries.  
(AQO 2406/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** A 1998 report, undertaken by my Department, concluded that alcohol misuse cost Northern Ireland approximately £770 million per year. Of that, £25 million related to the alcohol-associated treatment costs to the Health Service, in relation to beds and general practice, and £64 million related to road-traffic accidents associated with alcohol. My Department intends to update those costs over the coming months.

**Mr McCausland:** I welcome the fact that the Minister intends to update those figures, as they are 10 years old. Furthermore, I am sure that the figure that he believes to be correct will be much higher today.

Does the Minister agree that in addition to the financial cost, there is a huge social cost in relation to the effects of antisocial behaviour — much of which is fuelled by alcohol? Does he also agree that there are many other contributing factors; not least in relation to the liberalising of the licensing laws, the cost of alcohol, advertising and the impact of the media? The problem must be addressed through a coherent and comprehensive strategy for alcohol. That strategy should not only deal with underage drinking or some other issue, but must embrace the problem in a holistic way.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I agree very much that that is the approach that must be taken. Indeed, that is the approach that the Department already takes through the ‘New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011’. That strategy was published in 2006, and I am continually examining and reviewing it.

The Member is also correct about the social costs of alcohol misuse. Indeed, there are strong correlations between it and domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual health, unintended pregnancies, and so on, in

addition to the more normal correlations with antisocial behaviour and traffic accidents.

It is not my view that alcohol should not be drunk, but there are clearly safe limits, and that is the message that the Department is continually trying to put across. That message is about safety and drinking alcohol safely. Tobacco cannot be smoked safely, but alcohol can be safely consumed. However, on the one hand, we have the alcohol industry trying to make profits by selling as much alcohol as possible, and on the other hand, we have the Health Service trying to forward key messages about safe drinking. One reason for the establishment of a public health agency is to take over the promotion of those key messages.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail how much his Department has spent on combating and reducing alcohol abuse and alcoholism? How does that compare with other countries in the European Union?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am happy to write to the Member on those points of detail.

**Mr McCallister:** Given the events in the Holylands area of South Belfast on St Patrick’s Day this year, does the Minister agree that alcohol misuse causes so much trouble? Furthermore, does he agree that the universities need to work very hard to address that issue? Moreover, will he agree to participate in the stakeholder forum that has been called for by his colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the issue swiftly?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I very much agree, and I am happy to participate in the stakeholder forum. Indeed, I already indicated as much to Reg Empey.

The Holylands area is in my constituency of South Belfast, and antisocial behaviour — fuelled largely by the unsafe consumption of alcohol — has been a perennial problem for residents who live in that area. However, despite many efforts, we seem to be unable to address the issue. The problem has been caused by a number of factors, including poor planning and the way that that planning has been implemented, the use of houses in multiple occupation and the huge increase in population as youngsters are crammed into the area cheek by jowl, effectively creating — as far as the universities are concerned — an unwelcome nuisance neighbour.

In other cities, universities are an advantage; however, often in South Belfast, Queen’s University is, frankly, a poor neighbour, and the university needs to address that.

**Mrs Hanna:** I know that the Minister shares our concerns about alcohol-related problems, especially

underage drinking. Will the Minister comment on the number of under 18-year-olds who have been admitted to hospital with alcohol-related illnesses?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** On average, there are approximately 7,000 alcohol-related admissions per annum, of which some 200 are under 18; however, those are conservative estimates. It is worrying that 286 people died as a direct result of alcohol in 2007; in the same year, there were 387 admissions with liver cirrhosis — an increase of 25% on the previous year. We have a serious and growing problem. Alcohol is 62% more affordable today than it was in 1980, so we have to look at demand, supply and treatment.

### Capital Budget Programme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his capital budget programme. (AQO 2407/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The outcome of the comprehensive spending review for my Department will allow me to progress a number of important capital projects, but there are many more much-needed projects, which, due to lack of funding, cannot proceed across primary and community care, hospitals and emergency services. Despite those constraints, I am pressing ahead to ensure that almost £700 million of capital funding is being invested during the comprehensive spending review period to deliver first-class facilities across the service. That investment will bring about the completion of a new state-of-the-art £64 million enhanced local hospital in Downpatrick; the £100 million first phase of the Ulster Hospital; the new £14 million regional adolescent psychiatric unit and family centre at Forster Green Hospital; health and care centres at Castlereagh, Shankill Road, Beech Hall and Portadown; and the progression of the £143 million development of the new critical-care building at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that a re-profiling of capital expenditure by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister would be helpful in providing better health facilities in Northern Ireland and enable further investment in new projects, such as health and care facilities that are needed in my constituency in Larne and Carrickfergus and the progression of the project in Whiteabbey? Other capital projects could be re-profiled to the benefit of public health throughout Northern Ireland.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In our review of capital needs, we identified that the Health Service requires £7.8 billion. Our allocation over the next 10 years is £3.3 billion, some of which has to be discounted due to the current difficulties in

making asset disposals. We are well short of the capital amounts that we need; in fact, the Health Service has less than half of what it requires. Members will have heard me say that the Health Service requires three key overarching strategies: investment, efficiency, and engagement on public health with the local population. Investment is so important because one cannot be efficient in old buildings or with equipment of poor quality. We need investment.

We require flexibility in how money is allocated in the capital programme. We are always searching for value for money, and there is a debate on whether we should have traditional procurement or PFI. To move from one to the other requires flexibility because all the money for a PFI deal comes in one year; whereas the money in traditional procurement exercises is spread over as many as three years, as is the case with the Omagh hospital. That is our dilemma. Not only do we have less than half the money that we need, but the profile of the money and the length of time over which it comes makes life even more difficult.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his response to the previous question. With regard to capital investment in the south-west for a new hospital — which is a PFI project — will the Minister confirm that, today, the four banks in the Northern Ireland health group have signed the contract for a new acute hospital in Enniskillen, or is the Department again facing difficulties in getting a final commitment from those banks, given the firestorm that has blown through the halls of financial institutions in recent months?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I will write to the Member with precise details about that situation. However, I can tell him that that hospital will be delivered on time and on the money, as I have previously assured. I am not aware of any current difficulties with the banks. One of them, the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, abandoned PFI funding in late 2008 and, I understand, paid off several thousand members of its workforce in London. That decision caught out the PFI hospital project in Enniskillen as it caught out many other PFI projects throughout the UK and Europe. We have found other banks to step in, and there is competition to get that business.

I am not concerned about obtaining support for that project, but I am concerned for the future — for next year, the following year and the year after that — in getting best value for money, whether that be determined by PFI or by traditional procurement. We need that flexibility because if traditional procurement is an option in the future, that is the direction in which we should be able to go rather than being forced to go in another direction because of the cash profile.



**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

When will the Minister be in a position to confirm the allocation of necessary capital funding for the building of new primary care centres in West Tyrone? Everyone knows that Omagh is now devoid of acute services, and it looks as if it will be that way for the future. Will the Minister prioritise the needs of Carrickmore and Fintona health centres? Primary care provision will be part of the healthcare solution in West Tyrone, so will the Minister confirm — as he has done for Castlereagh, the Shankill Road and Portadown — that those health and care centres will be completed sooner rather than later. When will the necessary money be allocated for Carrickmore and Fintona?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Mr McElduff is quite wrong when he talks about Omagh being devoid of acute services — that is completely untrue. Omagh's acute services will be delivered from Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The Erne Hospital will soon benefit from a £250 million investment, subject to the issues that I outlined in my response to the previous question, and there is ongoing major investment in Altnagelvin. Therefore, it is wrong to say that Omagh is devoid of acute services; that is scaremongering.

I have conducted a capital review of primary care investment. That continues to be a work in progress; it is not complete and is, in fact, a moving picture because of the way in which our capital is profiled and because need continually changes. Maternity services are an example of that, for which I had to announce extra investment; new priorities arise. Fintona and Carrickmore health centres are part of the future development programme, but I am not clear when work is scheduled to commence. I cannot see the information on my list, but that does not mean to say that it is not there; it merely means that I cannot find it while I am standing here. I will write to the Member with exact dates.

### Assaults on Health Workers

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in reducing the number of assaults on healthcare staff and emergency workers. (AQO 2408/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In June 2007, I launched a campaign to spell out clearly the message of zero tolerance. Since then, I have taken steps to reinforce the message that attacks on staff are unacceptable. Those steps include investing in additional training for front line staff; accountability for zero tolerance being placed at senior level in every trust; the passage of new legislation — specifically, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act

2008 — the relevant provisions of which are due to be commenced later in 2009 and will allow certain staff to remove people who create nuisance or disturbance from hospital premises, thereby ensuring a safer environment for staff and patients.

I have also initiated a high-level working group to examine the effectiveness of current legislation that protects healthcare workers from assault and to evaluate the support that is offered to staff. That working group has completed its report, and I am considering its recommendations.

2.45 pm

**Mr P J Bradley:** Will the new legislation make any attempt to recover from the perpetrators the costs of damage that is done to equipment and to people in hospitals?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The legislation relates more to damage to hospital premises. Of course, if one damages premises, whether they are hospital or other premises, one is subject to compensation claims if that damage can be proved. Trusts will be active in that direction.

As regards zero tolerance, I am primarily concerned with assaults against staff, whether they are physical or verbal. Physical assaults are running at just over 4,000 per annum and verbal assaults at 2,000 per annum. Although the increase has been arrested and we are looking at a fairly flat incidence rate, the number of continual physical and verbal — or both — attacks is still far too high for Health Service workers to have to deal with. I am looking at a further legislative step for the working group to consider that would follow the model that is being looked at in Scotland, where it will be a criminal offence to impede Health Service staff going about their business. I believe that that will be an important step. I have had discussions with the Northern Ireland Office and with Paul Goggins, given that the matter remains reserved. Nevertheless, it seems that that is the next step that we should take.

We will also enlist the general public's support through ongoing publicity campaigns. I have launched a leaflet that highlights the importance of the matter. That leaflet will go into every home in Northern Ireland over the next few weeks.

**Mr Craig:** Has the Minister looked into the possibility of getting a limited supply of anti-stab vests for those ambulance personnel who are perhaps working on night shifts and who have to deal with pubs and clubs emptying, which is when there is an increased level of attack on ambulance personnel? Unfortunately, from personal family circumstances, I speak with some experience on the issue.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have not looked specifically at such

equipment, but I am happy to do so. If the Ambulance Service comes forward with requests for that type of requirement, it will find me very receptive. Legislation has been passed that protects fire and police personnel specifically. However, and bearing in mind my answer to the previous question, I want to see legislation in place that will protect all Health Service staff, including ambulance personnel. It is an affront to consider that ambulance staff — and fire and police personnel — who are going out to support those members of the public who are in trouble are subject to assault.

**Mrs Long:** One aspect of monitoring the effectiveness of zero tolerance is monitoring prosecutions. Some trusts do that effectively and others do not. Has the Minister had any discussion with the Public Prosecution Service or the PSNI with regard to monitoring the prosecution of those who are charged with the offence of attacking Health Service workers?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** When I launched the next stage of the leaflet campaign last week in the Ulster Hospital, I spoke with Assistant Chief Constable Duncan McCausland. The Member will be aware that we have police support in the accident and emergency department of the City Hospital at the weekend. As the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 stands, it is up to individuals to take forward prosecutions, albeit that they are supported by the trusts. I am trying to move us beyond that, so that the initiative rests not necessarily with the individual employee, but with the employer. I think that that is a much better way to go forward.

The police are not slow to give us support. However, 80% of the people who are admitted to the accident and emergency department of the Belfast City Hospital each weekend are under the influence of alcohol.

### Hospital Staff Facilities

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when staff facilities, including changing facilities, for nurses will be mandatory in all hospitals. (AQO 2409/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In February 2008, I announced a regional dress-code policy that included the provision of changing facilities as part of a package of measures to improve patient safety and reduce the speed of healthcare-associated infection. All trusts were required to implement the dress-code policy with immediate effect. That policy includes the requirement to provide staff-changing facilities. It is being fully implemented in all new buildings such as the new Downe Hospital and the south-west hospital.

Existing facilities will have a phased implementation plan, with each trust determining a staff-changing

policy in the interim that reflects local circumstances and available accommodation. My officials will review the status of the implementation across the five trusts in April.

**Lord Browne:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It is important to recognise the invaluable work that all our nurses carry out with such dedication and commitment. It is only proper that they should be provided with modern, suitable staffing facilities.

However, my constituents have informed me that the staff of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's regional adolescent mental-health service inpatient unit at Knockbracken have to eat with the patients. There is also no staff kitchen, no showering facilities for staff, and no dedicated staff room. I would be grateful if the Minister undertook to address that matter and to ensure that suitable staff facilities are provided.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Lord Browne has highlighted one of the areas of poor investment over the past number of years. In fact, as part of our current work, I announced that we will build a new regional adolescent unit and a family unit at Knockbracken. That will specifically address the issue, because the unit will come complete with all the facilities required to support staff.

There are changing facilities in the acute-hospitals sector, but it is correct to say that changing facilities are more sporadic in the other parts of the Health Service. In comparatively recent times, investment was found to take staff-changing facilities out of those units. Now we have to find investment to put them back. That is easy to do when new units are being built — the facilities are simply included as part of the plan — but it is often difficult as part of refurbishment because it is about finding the space. However, that is something that we have to do, and I am very keen to ensure that staff have the proper facilities to allow them to do their jobs.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Changing rooms cannot be built on the site of the Royal Maternity Hospital, so will the Minister speed up the process of building the new regional women and children's hospital to ensure that all the health and safety facilities that he just outlined will be included in that new hospital? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The majority of the Royal Victoria Hospital's areas have staff-changing facilities. We are investing in its maternity unit because it badly needs upgrading and health and safety work to be carried out. That will have the effect of increasing the unit's capacity.

Instead of getting the £7.8 billion that I need to renew many of the facilities over 10 years, I will receive less than half that amount. That means that the women

and children's hospital cannot be completed as quickly as I would like it to be completed. In fact, the children's hospital is due to come into service around 2016, which is as quickly as it can be completed unless Members care to re-prioritise the capital spend and allocate more money to the Department of Health.

**Mr Burns:** Will the Minister give the Assembly a general update on the management of hospital-acquired infections? Are the numbers going down?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The measures that we introduced to change the culture in hospitals — including hand hygiene, uniforms, visiting, and so on — have all had some effect.

It is hard to quantify the effect each measure has had. However, there has certainly been an appreciable improvement as far as healthcare-acquired infections are concerned. For example, last year's outbreak in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has been over for many months.

I will announce, tomorrow or on Wednesday, the composition of the panel that will carry out the review into the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Trust, and that will be another piece of work that will be very valuable in informing our progress.

**Mr Gardiner:** I welcome the Minister's comments on an issue that affects many hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. What is the current position on staff-changing facilities in the trusts? What is being done to ensure that more staff use those facilities in the effort to boost the control of infection?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As I said, changing facilities in existing buildings are not adequate, and we are working to find the investment to address the issue. It will certainly be addressed in all newbuild. All acute hospitals have staff-changing facilities, although some areas in the Royal Victoria Hospital, the City Hospital and the Mater Hospital remain deficient in that regard. The current body of knowledge does not indicate clearly that uniforms are a significant source of cross-infection. However, I strongly believe that we must put those facilities in place because they will make a difference, albeit a small one.

## Substance-Misuse Services

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether staff working in substance-misuse services are trained to meet the mental-health needs of their patients. (AQO 2410/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Almost all staff in statutory addiction-treatment services have been trained in mental-health

issues, with the majority having a professional mental-health qualification. They are, therefore, competent in the assessment and treatment of the majority of mild to moderate mental-health problems associated with substance misuse. In addition, mental-health and risk assessments are carried out on all patients, and they are subsequently referred to the appropriate mental-health services as necessary.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What role does child psychiatry play in the treatment of substance abuse in younger people?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As part of our new strategic direction on drugs and alcohol, we have introduced a policy initiative called Hidden Harm, which focuses specifically on identifying and supporting children who live in a home in which one or both parents are addicted to either drugs or alcohol. That is one way in which we can move forward. Of course, that initiative brings into effect social services and all the resources that they have available to offer support. The Member is quite right to suggest that there is a strong correlation between poor mental health and drug and alcohol misuse.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier response. He will be aware of the wide range of mental-health facilities that are based in my constituency, particularly in Armagh city. Given last Thursday's decision by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, will the Minister undertake to meet me and a small delegation from Armagh to discuss concerns around the proposals, including access to mental-health services in the area and the future development of the St Luke's, Longstone and Mullinure hospital sites?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Yes, of course, I am happy to meet Mr Kennedy and a delegation about the matter. However, I must point out that the proposals by the Southern Trust are part of a set of proposals that have been subject to a long consultation period. That consultation has produced decisions, and I know that Members are happy about some of them, such as those on Skeagh House. The proposals must now come to me so that I can make a final decision on them. Therefore, nothing will, in fact, be decided until I get an opportunity to examine the proposals and determine the way forward.

As far as mental health and learning disability are concerned, I am governed by the Bamford Review and the cross-departmental action plan that we are putting in place. That will dictate the way forward for the next 10 to 15 years and how facilities work into that action plan to support the service.

3.00 pm

## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to fund all of the applications received under the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2426/09)

9. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the allocation of the farm modernisation scheme met with all the relevant EU legislation about the allocation of EU funds. (AQO 2434/09)

10. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the correspondence her Department received from the European Commission about the application process for the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2435/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 9 and 10 together.

Almost 10,000 applications for the programme have been received. Given that the budget for this tranche of funding is £6 million, it is not financially possible for the Department to fund all the applications. The total cost of funding all the applications would be in the region of £40 million, and it is anticipated that approximately 1,100 will receive grant aid.

The farm modernisation scheme is an integral part of the rural development programme, which was approved by the European Commission in July 2007. EU rules required us to establish selection criteria for the scheme, and those were finalised in October 2008. My officials considered that the scheme met all relevant EU legislation, and I remain of that opinion.

The Department received a letter from the European Commission — dated 12 February 2009 — on the afternoon of 17 February. That letter drew our attention to the need to have defined criteria for the selection of operations and projects and asked which selection criteria would be applied to the farm modernisation scheme. We responded to the Commission's letter on 19 March and explained the full set of criteria that were used in the scheme. My officials continue to work with Commission officials with a view to the first tranche of funding proceeding as planned.

The Department received a second letter from the European Commission on 12 March, which suspended the proposal to include additional national funding in the scheme. That suspension is linked to the Commission's comments on the selection process and will be revisited when the wider issue is resolved.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that it would be beneficial to the economy if all the farmers who applied to the scheme were approved and given match funding?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I fully concur with the Member, but we do not have £40 million in the Budget to approve all the applications. I made the point to my Executive colleagues that the scheme would be an excellent boost to the rural economy. Before Christmas, when we looked at ways to boost the economy, I had hoped that additional money would be allocated to the scheme. We were not successful in securing that additional funding, but we were successful in all our other bids.

We recognise the benefit that the farm modernisation scheme brings to the rural economy, and if possible, I still want to put more money into the programme. I hope that a lot of people will benefit from what is a good scheme and, ultimately, invest a lot of their money in the rural economy.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister seriously telling the House that there is no difference in opinion between her Department and the Commission in relation to the administration of the scheme? At the time that the scheme was enacted, the European Commission clearly expressed its displeasure about the first-come-first-served basis on which it was administered and distanced itself from that approach.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There is no difference; there was a misunderstanding, which led to an unfortunate sequence of events on 17 February. However, we are resolving the issue, and I am confident that it can be fully resolved in the not-too-distant future. The Commission had approved our approach, and Commission officials were present when it was discussed at the monitoring committee.

The Member can shake his head all he wants, but he is not going to win the European election on the basis of giving me a hard time. We fully discussed the matter with the Commission, and it was quite happy with what we had done. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I knew that mention of the European election would creep in at some stage.

**Mr O'Loan:** Does the Minister not accept that the long lines of farmers who queued through the night for modest grants say something about the state of farming? Given the predictability of that situation, was her

decision to proceed with that form of administering grants not a fundamental and tactical error on her part?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I do not believe that it was an error, either fundamental or tactical.

Until informal discussions began on 5 February, we were unaware of any potential problems with the selection criteria for the scheme. When we were made aware of some potential issues, we began to explain our position fully to the Commission. However, there was an issue in how the scheme was understood, and I think that it was felt that there were no selection criteria, but, clearly, there were. I said in the Chamber when I answered questions on the matter previously that I did not want farmers to queue overnight. The scheme was supposed to open in October, but we suspended it for a number of months in an attempt to try to find a scheme that would not involve farmers queuing.

Farmers had asked us for a scheme that was simple and unbureaucratic. Farming unions had worked closely with us on it, and they have supported me on the issue. It is difficult to design such a scheme, and if anyone in the Chamber has the wisdom to tell me a better way of doing so, I am more than happy to hear about it.

**Mr Kennedy:** It is small wonder I have a bad back, given that I am having to jump up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

I welcome the Minister's response. Given the huge uncertainty over the application process for the farm modernisation programme, does the Minister intend to review it? Clear confusion and ambiguities existed in the process, and farmers felt stress as a consequence. Will she carry out a review and publish the resulting report?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I said on the morning of 17 February, before comments were made at lunchtime, that we will review tranches 2 and 3 of the scheme. That has been my position throughout. I do not accept that there was either ambiguity or confusion. The scheme was very simple and straightforward. It was as heavily oversubscribed as it was because farmers understood exactly what it was and how simple and straightforward it was. As a result, they liked it and applied for it. We should look at the positive in that.

My answer to Mr McQuillan is that this is good thing, and if we get more money, we want to put it into farm modernisation so that more farmers can benefit from these grants and take the opportunity to modernise their farms. That is what it is all about.

**Mr McCarthy:** Like Danny Kennedy's back, mine is sore from jumping up and down, but I am here anyway.

Will the Minister explain the reason that a lucky dip, which was good enough for some applications that

were sent by post, could not have been used for all applications? That resulted in that the ridiculous long queues in our streets that we witnessed on television.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I thought that you were going to say that your back is sore from queuing, Kieran, but, obviously, that is not the case.

We had a number of criteria to satisfy. We had to meet equality considerations, and we needed to preserve an audit trail. That was why we were advised that a lucky dip would not work in this case. It was an option that we discussed and thought about, but we were advised not to go down that route.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Kennedy and Mr McCarthy, I hope that both your backs recover in time for the European elections.

### Little Acre Open Farm

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on action taken in relation to Little Acre Open Farm. (AQO 2427/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Since I updated the Assembly in November 2008, Little Acre Open Farm has been monitored every two weeks by Veterinary Service officials, and I am happy to advise that there has been a marked improvement in welfare conditions there.

Under regulation 11 of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000, my officials can serve an improvement notice to a keeper setting out what steps are necessary to improve the welfare of their animals. That is an effective tool for ensuring that animals' needs are met, and failure to comply with a notice can lead to prosecution. I confirm that the herd keeper has complied fully with the regulation 11 notice served on 9 January 2009, demonstrating the improvements that have been made on his farm.

Follow-up inspections will continue to take place as appropriate to ongoing findings and the outcome of the forthcoming PSNI prosecution case, which is still before the court.

An independent investigation report surrounding animal welfare issues at a farm in Katesbridge is in the final stages of completion. When that report is issued, I will consider a review of procedures which will take into account the events at Little Acre Open Farm.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that answer. Has she identified any immediate failures by her Department in the process leading up to the Little Acre Open Farm issue, especially given the fact that in the two years prior to that incident, officials from her Department visited the farm on nine occasions, the last of which was a very short period before the incident was discovered?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I must point out again that the primary responsibility for the welfare of an animal on a farm rests with the farmer. My Department's inspection procedures are checks, within the resources available, on the standards being achieved by farmers. Those inspections are led by professional and experienced veterinary surgeons working in the Veterinary Service. I believe that vets are the best judges of animal welfare. The inspection procedures have been audited by the Food and Veterinary Office of the European Commission. The most recent welfare audit of Britain, which included the North of Ireland, concluded that, overall, inspections were competently performed. As I have said previously, a review of procedures will be commissioned following the final report of the Katesbridge inquiry. However, I am not in a position to pre-empt that report. I cannot give the Member any more information until I get it myself.

**Mr Gallagher:** Does the Minister accept that problems in relation to animal cruelty will continue until better legislation is in place? Given that bodies such as the USPCA continue to be very frustrated about the delay in her Department bringing forward such legislation, can the Minister give us a timetable for it today?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That question is concerned with action that was taken in relation to the incident at Little Acre Open Farm. There is a later question, which I hope to get to, and I do not want to pre-empt the answer to another Member's question. I hope that Mr Gallagher can give me a certain amount of latitude on that.

## **Woodland Protection**

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will increase protection for ancient woodland. (AQO 2428/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Ancient woodland is already protected in a number of ways. The Planning Service takes account of woodland that is included in the ancient woodland inventory. That is a material consideration when responding to planning applications. A similar level of protection applies to woodland that is listed in the register of historic parks, gardens and demesnes, and its supplementary list. Permission for area plans will not be granted if an area of ancient woodland within that has been approved as a site of local nature conservation importance.

I plan to further increase the protection for ancient woodland through measures to be included in a new forestry Bill. That Bill will make provision for the protection of all woodland from unregulated felling, through the introduction of felling licences. The Bill

will include provisions to protect woodland from damage caused by wildlife, which can occur in woodland and on adjacent land.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Minister for that response and I welcome her assurances. I trust that that forestry Bill will soon be forthcoming. In the last round of the countryside management scheme (CMS), specific priority was given to areas designated as ASSIs. In future rounds of the CMS, will the Minister extend that to include all ancient woodland?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I will certainly look at that and will come back to the Member in writing, if that is OK.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response. She mentioned that she will be giving extra protection to ancient woodland through a new forestry Bill. Is it the Minister's intention to give people incentives, within that new Bill, to plant more broadleaf trees, which are so precious to the countryside? Presently, there are a number of area plans unfolding. What protection will be given to woodland within those area plans?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I do not have all the details of the countryside management scheme. However, we will be encouraging people to plant more broadleaf species in order to improve the cover.

The Programme for Government contains targets for increasing the level of forestry cover. Much of that will be taken up by alternative energy crops such as willow, but we want to encourage people to plant more broadleaf species to produce trees that will be around for future generations to enjoy.

3.15 pm

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh míle maith agat. When does the Minister think that the new forestry Bill will come into effect?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I hope that the draft Bill will be referred to the Executive in April 2009 and that agreement will be sought to introduce the Bill to the Assembly in May. That will happen in the not-too-distant future.

## **Animal Welfare Legislation**

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has completed her review of animal welfare legislation. (AQO 2429/09)

17. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to bring forward proposals for an animal welfare Bill. (AQO 2442/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** In my statement to the Assembly on 26 January 2009, I outlined the actions that I had taken to

date to review animal welfare legislation in the North. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, but, as that was carried out under direct rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider existing animal welfare legislation and the responses that were received to that consultation. I completed an initial review, and I met a range of key stakeholders from here, Britain and the South. Those meetings have been exceptionally informative. My review of animal welfare legislation is nearing completion, and I shall shortly examine all the evidence that is presented to me.

I have made it clear that a new animal welfare Bill is one of my key ministerial priorities. I already submitted a marker bid for an animal welfare Bill, and I expect to be in a position to seek Executive approval to bring forward the Bill shortly after the summer recess.

As I said previously in the Chamber, it is important that animal welfare legislation is broadly compatible across the island, and that view is shared by many of the welfare groups that I met. I welcome the fact that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South is continuing to progress its own legislative proposals on animal welfare, and I repeat that I will bring forward a Bill shortly after the summer recess. After the recent debate in the House, that will be welcome news.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Was that your answer to questions 4 and 17?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Yes.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Minister has a great way with her. *[Laughter.]* She does.

Will she listen to the public, to animal welfare groups and to the Assembly and lead the process? I understand that she wants to look at an all-Ireland agenda, but surely it would be OK for the Assembly to come in first, and the other agenda could follow us two or three years later.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The Member has a great way with him, too, but he did not listen to my answer. I said that I am looking at issues across the island, but we are bringing forward our own legislation.

In my statement to the Assembly in January, I said that one of my priorities was the regulation of puppy farms. I intend to deal with that by introducing legislation to mirror that of the legislation in Britain in order to end the intensive farming of puppies here.

My officials also raised the issue with colleagues and welfare groups in the South, because it is the Department's view that puppy farming is an all-island problem that must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis,

along with the issue of dangerous dogs and dogfighting. We do not want to push those problems a few miles down the road across the border; they need to be tackled holistically. We will bring forward legislation after the summer recess.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for her reply. It certainly has taken a long time to get to where we are. Has the Minister had any consultations with the authorities in the United Kingdom? Obviously, the issue is not totally new.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Yes, we talked to many groups from the North, the South and Britain. Britain's legislation was updated more recently than ours, and we wanted to see how that had worked out. We wanted to see whether we could improve on that and to learn from their experiences. As was the case with our consultation with all the groups, our consultation with groups in Britain has been very beneficial and informative. I have said repeatedly that I did not want a knee-jerk reaction to the proposed legislation, but that I wanted to take time to consider it, get it right and ensure that we had legislation that is fit for purpose and that will last for a considerable period.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Minister for her reply. Does she believe that penalties for people who are found guilty of animal abuse should be more severe?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** A person who is convicted of cruelty to animals under the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of £5,000 and/or imprisonment of up to three months. In addition, a court may also disqualify someone from keeping animals if he or she is found guilty of cruelty. I welcome the fact that current legislation includes both fines and custodial sentences. However, in bringing forward new legislation, I want to increase the maximum penalties for animal cruelty that are available to courts so that those penalties can act as a sufficient deterrent and can, therefore, provide adequate protection for animals.

**Mr O'Loan:** What specific cognisance will the Minister take of legislation that applies in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland when she is drawing up her proposals?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I want to take cognisance of that legislation. As I have already said, I want to ensure that the North's legislation includes the best of that which exists in other areas. We want to ensure that our legislation is fit for purpose.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

## Climate Change

6. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to adaptation to climate change and the potential impact that climate change will have on the farming community. (AQO 2431/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I have had no discussions with the Minister of the Environment on the matter. However, I have written to him and have expressed my concern about the potential impact that climate change will have on the farming community. I believe that it is vital that the impact of climate change on the farming community, and any impact of our efforts to combat it, is at the top of the agenda for those who have responsibility to lead the way on the issue.

Climate change adaptation — change in economic or social behaviour in response to the impacts of climate change — is increasingly seen as a crucial element of the response to man-made climate change. Most climate scientists accept that some degree of warming is inevitable and that, therefore, changes to how we live and work will be necessary. Local farming communities will need to be supported as they make those necessary changes.

**Mr McCallister:** The Minister has accepted that climate change will have a major impact on farming communities. Will she also accept that farming communities can play a role to help to redress some of that? Will she, therefore, offer more practical and financial support to farming communities in order to assist them with on-farm renewable energy sources?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That question has been put to me recently. My Department will want to examine that matter during further tranches of the farm modernisation programme, for example.

Under the countryside management scheme, my Department funds schemes that will help to alleviate some of the challenges that exist as a result of climate change. For the local agriculture industry, climate change offers opportunities as well as challenges. New crops may become feasible, although I am not sure that Mr McCallister will be growing grapes rather than dairy farming. The growing season for other crops may lengthen.

However, the challenges that are posed by climate change could be severe and could include: increased risks to crops and livestock of unpredictable and severe weather conditions, such as those that caused floods in 2008; increased risk of disease outbreaks in livestock in warmer and, possibly, wetter weather; and risk to coastal farms as sea levels rise. The Department,

therefore, recognises that significant challenges face the farming community.

**Mr T Clarke:** Surely the Minister and the author are not suggesting bringing more bureaucracy into farming? I thought that Mr McCallister would go as far as to suggest putting nappies on cows.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** You can respond to that if you wish to, Minister.

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Apparently, the other end of a cow does more damage, so nappies would not even work.

I am mindful of the need to reduce bureaucracy in the Department. Whatever plans we bring forward, we will try to reduce the bureaucratic risk to farmers.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her detailed advice and, indeed, answers. I am aware that she has bought into the idea of global warming and the implications of climate change for crops and animals. However, having listened to her earlier response, I am unsure as to whether she has, in fact, received any advice from the Department of the Environment on that matter. The Minister explained the need for action in order to deal with the worst excesses of climate change.

Has the Minister or the Department of the Environment — the host Department for such matters — initiated any wider cross-departmental action — including with the Executive — on the implications of climate change? Go raibh maith agat.

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The overwhelming scientific consensus is that the changes in the world's climate are the result of human activities and must be addressed through emissions reductions and adaptations to alter climatic conditions. I want to ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's response to climate change is economically and environmentally sustainable. In fact, I believe that we can take steps to reduce agricultural greenhouse-gas emissions for the benefit of farmers through, for example, efficiencies in energy and nutrient use rather than by imposing additional economic burdens.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister will be aware, the all-party working group on climate change discussed the issue with the Met Office last week. What contact has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had with the Met Office on the impact of climate change on the farming community?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The Rivers Agency is the drainage and flood-defence authority for the North, and in support of its functions it contacts the Met Office regularly about weather forecasting, weather radar and heavy-



rain warnings and, more recently, about the new flood warning centre in England. Furthermore, the agency is represented on the committee for climate impacts programme and seeks guidance on climate change from the UK climate impacts programme. Those contacts are essential to the delivery of the agency's flood-risk management programme for the wider community.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Lunn is not in his place. I call Mr Pat Ramsey.

### Badger Baiting

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to support attempts to address badger baiting in rural areas. (AQO 2433/09)

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, it is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, and it is a specific offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal by causing, procuring, assisting or spectating at the baiting of badgers or any animal. Any person found guilty of those offences is liable, on summary conviction, to up to three months' imprisonment, a fine of £5,000 or both. I understand that the Minister of the Environment intends to include in the Wildlife Order 1985 a custodial sentence for those engaged in that so-called sport. Until then, the penalties — which include imprisonment — in the Welfare of Animals Act can be applied.

The penalties that are available to the courts will form a significant part of my deliberations on new animal-welfare legislation. I intend to ensure that the penalties, whether fines or custodial sentences, are a sufficient deterrent. That will include offences that relate to badger baiting. Although the PSNI is responsible for enforcing animal-welfare legislation that relates to non-farmed animals such as badgers, my officials form part of a multi-agency body known as the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW), whose partners include representatives of organisations that are involved in the enforcement of wildlife law. PAW liaises closely with the PSNI wildlife officer and other key enforcement agencies. It aims to facilitate an exchange of information and to ensure public awareness of the key issues, including animal-welfare issues arising from badger persecution and the illegal hunting of wild deer.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Given the growing concern and alarm at the increase in badger baiting, will the Department introduce legislation that will definitively make badger baiting illegal in Northern Ireland?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** It is already illegal. The PSNI is

responsible for enforcing animal-welfare legislation that relates to non-farmed animals such as badgers. My officials continue to liaise closely with the PSNI on the enforcement of animal-welfare legislation. If the legislation is not strong enough, the Department will keep an eye on it and review it as necessary.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Two more Members want to speak. Mr Brady, if your question is brief, I can call both of them.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware of my interest in badgers. What powers exist to protect them?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am well aware of the Member's interest. In addition to the powers in the Welfare of Animals Act, badgers receive full protection under the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, which falls within the remit of the Department of the Environment. I understand that the Order makes it an offence to damage or disturb a badger's sett or to disturb a badger in its sett. I hope that Mr Brady will look after the badgers in his backyard.

3.30 pm

**Mr Armstrong:** What discussion has the Minister had with the Minister of the Environment regarding a selective cull to help to redress the high incidence of bovine TB in badgers in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister share that information with the House?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That supplementary question does not relate directly to the main question. However, as the Member will know, my Department is working through a three-strand approach to dealing with the problem of bovine TB that also addresses the wildlife factor. We are working with the Environment Minister and his officials to move that forward, but farmers have responsibilities also, as the Member will know. We want to be absolutely sure that wildlife is a contributory factor to TB, as that information can help us to eradicate the disease.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Urban Renewal Area Status

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Social Development why there has been a delay in bringing forward the urban renewal area status for the upper long streets in North Belfast. (AQO 2446/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** Regeneration proposals for the upper long streets were under consideration long before I became Minister for Social Development. In that respect I can

fully understand the frustration of the community, which has continued to wait patiently for that consideration to be concluded. I have visited the upper long streets on two separate occasions at the request of my colleague Mr Alban Maginness, and I have seen at first hand the decline into which some of the houses there have fallen.

However, the dilemma is in identifying exactly what sort of regeneration is needed and is deliverable. For example, I have already seen plans that would have involved the demolition of 178 homes, many of which are still occupied. Indeed, 78% of residents think that their accommodation is suitable for their needs. Had I agreed to demolish those 178 homes, the maximum number of units built to replace them would have been only 98. Even allowing for existing voids and those seeking a move, it was estimated that that would have resulted in almost 50 families being required to move away from the area, as we would not have been able to accommodate them after regeneration had been completed.

The Member will be well aware of the acute housing need in that area, and in North Belfast generally. Is it right to carry out a major redevelopment that, although resulting in better housing, results in substantially less housing?

The Housing Executive is now working on new proposals for a major refurbishment project that would update and refresh those homes in greatest need, with demolition only of those homes that are beyond repair. I expect that work to be carried out shortly, and I assure the Member, other Members in North Belfast, and the wider community of the upper long streets that I will take a personal interest in the issue to make sure that the best possible solution is found.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Minister for her response. She is right; the situation has been going on since 2002. Given what the Minister has said, is she prepared, because of her personal interest, to go and speak to all the residents of the upper long streets, who have been told that their refurbished homes will be refurbished again, rather than given the full redevelopment that was promised?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Member for her question. I have listened to various delegations and heard at first hand their concerns in relation to the upper long streets. I want to await the report from the Housing Executive, which I hope to receive shortly. If I do not receive it shortly, I will pursue the matter through my officials and through the Housing Executive. I want to see the best possible solution for all of the residents of the long streets.

**Mrs Hanna:** I thank the Minister for that very detailed response. What are the principal features of the current proposals?

**The Minister for Social Development:** My overall objectives are to reduce the physical decline in the area by preventing blight caused by vacant and blocked-up houses, to significantly improve the housing stock and to create a secure, attractive residential and physical environment.

All that can be achieved in a number of ways, from re-improvement of existing stock, with selected demolition and infill, where appropriate, to wholesale demolition and regeneration.

In the long streets, the wholesale demolition option would have involved, as I said earlier, demolishing 178 of 211 homes, and put-back would have been 98 new homes, meaning that about 50 families would have had no choice but to move away from the area. That is not how I want to proceed, because I do not want anyone to be without a home in an area of high housing need. I believe that the area can be regenerated with more emphasis on refurbishment, and that is why I have asked the Housing Executive to examine the options further. However, I want to await its report in order to see how we can proceed.

**Mr Cobain:** I am sure that many Members will be disappointed with that answer. Many of us who witnessed the refurbishment phases in the early 1970s and 1980s know that they proved to be an absolute disaster for the people who had to live in those conditions. Most commentators would say that we need between 2,000 and 2,500 new homes each year in order to meet housing need. It was deeply disappointing that in the Programme for Government that target was reduced to 1,500 new social and affordable homes. Does the Minister agree with me that any further reductions in the provision of new homes would be a betrayal of the thousands of working families and individuals who rely on the state for their housing needs, particularly in North Belfast, where we have some of the worst areas of social and economic deprivation in western Europe?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Cobain for his question. The Housing Executive's needs analysis has shown quite clearly that there is a requirement for 3,000 social houses each year. Therefore, there is a need for a financial stimulus for the social housing development programme. I have been trying to persuade my Executive colleagues to ensure that more funding is put into the social housing development programme, and that that programme is put on a surer financial footing. I have also commissioned a piece of work in that regard.

I cannot disagree with the Member: there is a need for social housing throughout Northern Ireland, and I am particularly aware of the acute housing need in North Belfast. In fact, I am aware that the Member met one of my officials before Question Time to discuss an urban renewal project in the Rosebank/Ohio area. We

are still examining the best possible solution, bearing in mind the acute housing need in that part of North Belfast.

### Mortgage-Relief Scheme

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how she will introduce a mortgage-relief scheme and whether she has contacted any of her ministerial colleagues to gain their support for this action. (AQO 2447/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** During the Assembly debate on the mortgage-rescue scheme on 10 March 2009, I announced my intention to provide an additional £100,000 to launch the advice element of the scheme during April. Unfortunately, however, I do not have the funding to allow me to launch the financial-rescue element of the scheme.

My Department consulted every Member about the proposed scheme at the end of last year. In addition, the Committee for Social Development has been briefed on the proposals. Therefore, all the consultation has been done, as has all the work. However, I will not raise the expectations of people who are struggling to stay on the housing ladder when I simply do not have the budget to provide the kind of financial assistance that is required.

I will, however, continue to bid for additional funding. I have already made bids for a mortgage-rescue plan in three successive monitoring rounds in June, September and December 2008. However, as Members will know, none of those bids has been met.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response and I welcome her efforts. Some £50 million was taken from the social security capital grant at one stage. Would there have been an opportunity there to have used some of that money to address the issue of mortgage relief? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**The Minister for Social Development:** As the member is aware, I made a request to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive for reallocations in my Department's budget to be approved, as I am required and obliged to do. I was given approval for some of that money; however, I was not given approval for the rest of it — and that is history. Had that money been approved, it would have been useful in dealing with pressures in the housing budget. One of those pressures was a mortgage-rescue scheme for which I had a bid for £5 million.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response: as always she gives plenty of detail in her answers. The Minister will be aware that the Minister for Finance and Personnel indicated his concern about house repossessions during last week's Question Time,

and I know that she is aware of the concerns that we in the Chamber have about the issue. The Minister mentioned the mortgage-rescue scheme, which would at least give partial relief — a 13-week breathing period — to those facing repossession. That is not a long-lasting exercise, but it does give some short-term relief. Has the Minister had the chance to discuss, or look at, the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments to see how that can be progressed? Has she had any discussions with people in other parts of the United Kingdom about house repossessions to see whether we can learn something from them?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Shannon for his questions, which I will answer in reverse order. On 11 February 2009, I met Margaret Beckett, the Minister for Housing and Planning in Britain, to discuss a range of issues, one of which was the mortgage-rescue scheme. In November 2008, I met the Council of Mortgage Lenders in London and heard, at first hand, how it was implementing such a scheme in Britain.

As regards Mr Shannon's first question, I have read the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments. I repeat what I said earlier, I bid for a mortgage-rescue scheme in three separate monitoring rounds in June, September and December of last year. I did not receive the funding; however, I will continue to bid for additional funding. The scheme is ready to roll: the only thing that I need is the money.

**Mr Armstrong:** In light of the growing crisis in the Minister's budgetary position, will she list her top priorities for the coming financial year?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Member will be aware that I outlined my Department's whole budget to the Committee for Social Development on 26 March 2009, and the House will be aware that the Social Development budget is divided into three discrete areas.

The first area deals with the Social Security Agency and the child maintenance and enforcement division, the second area deals specifically with urban regeneration and community development, and the third area deals with the one that I am most concerned about, namely housing.

I outlined quite clearly that there are certain pressures on the housing budget. Again, I go back to the principal issue, which was that I was left with two choices; either to carry out planned maintenance or to provide homes to those in greatest need. When I am faced with such a pressure, I am duty bound to provide for people in housing need throughout Northern Ireland, and the numbers on the waiting list are testament to that.

## Housing: Upper Bann

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development how many new social housing properties the Housing Executive will build and how many derelict properties it will refurbish in the Upper Bann constituency, in the coming financial year.

(AQO 2448/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There is a slight difficulty in the wording of the question. Notwithstanding that, I know that Mr Savage is a member of the board of Gosford Housing Association. Therefore, he will be well aware that the Housing Executive itself no longer actually builds social housing and that since 1996 that is now the role of the registered housing associations, which can attract private finance to support the delivery of more housing for, in effect, less public subsidy.

In respect of our plans for this year, the social housing development programme is currently being finalised and, when that is available, it will outline the new housing provision that will be delivered across Northern Ireland and, indeed, in Upper Bann over the next five years.

I will place a copy of the programme in the Assembly Library when it is available, because many Members, including Mr Savage, have asked me about it.

3.45 pm

With regard to derelict properties, the Member will be aware that I set up an empty-homes unit in the Housing Executive specifically to look at how more empty homes can be brought back into use. A lot of very good preparatory work has already taken place to identify how many homes are vacant and what scope there is to bring them back into use. The level of vacant properties across the public sector continues to fall year on year. Many properties in the private sector have been successfully refurbished and maintained through the award of a private-sector grant. Therefore, I give a cautionary warning that the number of empty homes available for re-use is much lower than earlier estimates suggested.

**Mr Savage:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The second part of my question was about the number of empty homes. When driving through Banbridge this morning, it was drawn to my attention that four houses in one street were boarded up. Especially in an area where there is a great demand for social housing, is there any way that the refurbishment process can be speeded up to alleviate the housing problem?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Savage asked a particular question about Banbridge. I will ensure that officials investigate that issue directly with the Housing Executive, because there could be various

reasons for those houses being vacant — they may be used for decant purposes to relocate people during a refurbishment scheme, or there may be other reasons. However, we need to get to the bottom of it, and I assure the Member that I will do that.

With regard to the general issue of empty homes: there are many empty homes, or void properties, throughout Northern Ireland, but the earlier estimates would have suggested a greater number. Further investigations and exploratory work demonstrated that some of those houses were not really empty when they were matched against rating records. The other interesting factor is that if houses that are vacant could be brought back into use, I have no doubt that they could be used to alleviate the social housing waiting list. Of course, that is all predicated on where the housing need lies, and the housing need needs to lie in areas where the waiting lists are longest. Again, that is subject to review, because people will apply to only those areas where there is available property.

**Mr Bresland:** Does the Minister have any plans to refurbish properties in the Strabane District Council area, because every time that one gets dates about refurbishment, they are going backwards instead of forward?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Member for his question. I do not have to hand the information to answer his question, but, as soon as Question Time is over, I will ensure that my officials examine that matter directly with the Housing Executive, and I will reply to the Member by letter as quickly as possible.

**Mr D Bradley:** What is the Minister doing to ensure that funds available for the social housing development programme deliver the maximum number of homes?

**The Minister for Social Development:** That was one of the issues that taxed me last week and in the previous weeks in the run-up to the determination on the Budget. I was anxious to ensure that those in housing need were accommodated. As a result, through a determination on the Budget, I hope that we will be able to meet a target of 1,750 houses in the new financial year.

The Member will understand that because of the economic downturn, the downturn in the level of capital receipts and the reduction in the number of social houses sold by the Housing Executive, less money is available. Therefore, the assumptions upon which that Budget was based are no longer valid and, as a result, we are 400 houses shy of the target for this year. Notwithstanding that, I am still determined to deliver 10,000 social and affordable houses over the next five years. However, the most important thing is to ensure that the social housing development programme is put on a sound financial footing once and for all. I

have already presented a paper to my Executive colleagues on the matter, and I have commissioned a piece of work in that respect.

From all of the research that has been carried out, and from independent analysis that many people, including well-known Northern Ireland economists, have undertaken, it is clear that investment in the social housing development programme not only acts as a stimulus to the local economy and has a multiplier effect — because it is a labour-intensive industry — but provides a valuable asset and ensures that we are addressing the wider issue of housing need across Northern Ireland.

### Warm Homes Scheme

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the revised criteria for the new warm homes scheme. (AQO 2449/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In recent weeks, I have been contacted by a number of Members seeking clarification of the warm homes scheme and, in particular, the award of the new management contract.

The warm homes scheme is the main programme to alleviate fuel poverty through improving the energy efficiency of private-sector homes. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report, and subsequent Public Accounts Committee report, recommended certain changes to the scheme. I have agreed with those recommendations, and will introduce a number of changes in order to maintain the effectiveness of the scheme and ensure that all available resources are targeted at those most in need of help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

My officials recently completed a consultation exercise on the proposed changes. Over 90% of respondents supported the changing of the eligibility criteria. The main changes to the scheme are the removal of the 60-plus age restriction, which will allow heating measures to be made available to all eligible applicants of any age; the opening of the scheme to the working fuel poor and young families in receipt of working tax credits; ensuring that all applicants to the scheme receive a benefit-entitlement check; and funding these changes by focusing the heating element of the scheme on those fuel poor households with no central heating, or with solid fuel, Economy 7 or liquid petroleum gas heating.

We have a growing renewable energy industry in Northern Ireland, and I want to see that industry continue to prosper. I am keen to introduce renewable technologies to the warm homes scheme, particularly in hard-to-treat rural homes. I am convinced that renewable technologies — such as wood-pellet boilers — could prove a viable alternative to oil and gas.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I should declare an interest: I am a member of the board of Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency. First, is the Minister aware that already, quite a large number of people across Northern Ireland who have been involved in the installation of home insulation have been made redundant because of the changes in the warm homes scheme? Will the Minister assure me that she will intervene in that? Secondly, is the Minister aware of a parliamentary inquiry at Westminster in relation to the warm homes scheme in Great Britain?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am aware of the parliamentary inquiry at Westminster: when that has been completed, I will undoubtedly receive a report about it. Regarding the first part of the Member's question, he has already written to me on that issue several weeks ago.

New managers for the scheme will be appointed shortly, following a competitive tendering procedure. I have increased the warm homes budget for the next financial year, starting later this week, and that — together with the fact that the scheme has been refocused — should mean, if anything, that there will be more work to be carried out than in the previous year.

I am fully conscious of the issues that the Member has raised with me about contractors, but until the new managers have been appointed, I cannot get involved.

**Miss McIlveen:** Will the Minister explain how she intends to deal with those who are vulnerable, have been on the waiting list for a long time and will not meet the new criteria?

**The Minister for Social Development:** It is well known that the warm homes scheme has been hugely popular and oversubscribed and that its budget for this financial year has been exhausted. The Department will meet its target to assist 9,000 homes. At present, there are 5,858 expressions of interest from people who are waiting for help from the warm homes scheme, of whom 3,167 should receive insulation measures when the new scheme managers are appointed and the new scheme is introduced.

My officials have also been working with the current scheme manager, Eaga, to identify people on the waiting list whose heating systems have broken down beyond repair, and I am pleased to confirm that all those households — about 34 — will have heating installed in April. The remaining applicants have functioning heating systems; they may be inefficient, but they are still working. However, if those people believe that they meet the new criteria, they are welcome to apply to the new scheme when it opens later this year.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If an elderly person in their 90s has hitherto been unaware of the warm homes scheme, will

their application be processed quickly on the grounds of age and objective need? When will funding become available to meet the requirements of new applicants? Can something be done to raise the scheme's profile in isolated rural areas to which the message has not yet got through?

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are several parts to that question, which I will take in reverse order.

The last part deals with promotion and enhancement of the scheme in the wider media, which is an issue that could be taken up. My simple advice to the elderly person is to apply to the scheme. We are not here as determiners — that is a matter for scheme managers, who will assess a particular scheme.

The warm homes scheme has been particularly popular, not only with those who have benefited from it but with those who seek to benefit from it and with the wider Assembly. That is why it has exhausted its budget this year. In energy-efficiency terms, the scheme has proved most effective. In fact, during this financial year, I also received funding from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to deal with hard-to-heat rural homes. Therefore, much joint working can continue to be done on warm homes.

### New York/Washington Visit

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of her recent visit to New York and Washington. (AQO 2450/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I had a very productive visit to the United States from 12 March to 18 March. My programme included engagements in New York City; in the state of Maryland; and in Washington DC. The timing of the visit also allowed me to participate in the St Patrick's Day programme in Washington DC, including President Obama's White House reception.

The US visit enabled me to further develop links with the new Administration and with a wide range of senior political representatives and officials at federal, state and city-government levels. I also had discussions with significant organisations in the US not-for-profit sector. Many of those individuals, institutions and organisations can contribute to furthering work across my Department, particularly on housing, urban regeneration and on the development of an effective shared-future agenda for action to tackle the legacy of division, disadvantage and deprivation that still plagues our community.

**Mr A Maginness:** Did the Minister get any ideas or did she receive an agenda, particularly for housing, from those with whom she discussed shared-future issues?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The delivery of a shared future is a major challenge for us all. Most people in Northern Ireland want to live in mixed communities; however, we still largely live in divided communities. That is why I put a shared future — as Mr Maginness knows — at the heart of the new housing agenda and why I am developing more shared-future housing in new developments and on existing estates.

However, I do not underestimate how difficult that will be. Some people still want to live in the divided past and not embrace the new future.

4.00 pm

I welcomed the opportunity to visit the United States to hear at first hand about the experience of Washington, DC and New York in tackling division and racism, particularly in areas of the south Bronx, Newark and Harlem. I heard about how people worked together on mixed housing developments, and some mixed residential areas have been successfully established in the US. The work was largely driven by attempts to establish affordable housing in mixed-income communities. I welcomed the opportunity to hear directly about their difficulties and successes. I am determined to deliver housing that will bring people together, rather than continue to keep them apart.

I thought it important, politically, to ensure that Irish America remains engaged with Northern Ireland. I want to make sure that Irish America extends the same level of support to building reconciliation and a shared future as it did to ending the violence and providing support, encouragement and solidarity during the establishment of the political institutions under the Good Friday Agreement. I am confident that Irish America will remain with us for the long haul and will help us to deal with issues of reconciliation and healing.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, but the Minister's time is up. You have been pipped at the post, Mr Kennedy. We must now return to the earlier debate.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Report of the Committee on Procedures on Inquiry into Assembly Questions

#### *Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions. — [*The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey).*]

**Mr P Ramsey:** I support the report of the Committee on Procedures. The SDLP supports the report's proposals and hopes that they succeed, particularly in moving Question Time to a new place. In time, perhaps soon, Question Time might be further, and potentially radically, restructured.

For the public, Question Time in the House of Commons, the Dáil and the Scottish Parliament is an occasion on which the character and quality of the Members and Ministers are tested and conclusions are drawn. Issues of public interest or concern can be explored, probed and expanded, although, too often, none of that happens. Question Time is when the vigour, challenge and dynamic of the life of an Assembly and the nature of democracy can be expressed, or otherwise.

If Members are honest, Question Time in the Assembly only occasionally achieves those standards; too often it is a bit damp and soggy. Question Time could, therefore, soon undergo further radical restructuring to take it beyond the practice and conventions of other Assemblies and Parliaments.

A radically restructured Question Time could have several new features. The practice of putting diary questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister could be introduced, as during Prime Minister's questions at Westminster. Here, the practice would enable Members to probe the First Minister and deputy First Minister, without going through the ritual of providing specific questions in advance to which answers can be prepared. That could clearly liberate Question Time by testing the mettle of Ministers and Members.

The Assembly could adopt Westminster's practice of asking topical questions as part of questions to a Minister. Each Minister answers topical questions that have emerged after questions for oral answer have been tabled. Topical questions relate to fairly recent events that are of public interest or concern, and their relevance here is self-evident.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that today's Question Time provided evidence of the problems that he has described? Between four and six questions were put to each Minister, who rambled to such an extent that Members could not ask supplementary questions. Time is being wasted by Ministers making long, rambling speeches.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Members and Ministers could improve in that respect.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr P Ramsey:** A mechanism could be created to permit a Member to ask a series of supplementary questions. That would enable Members to probe Ministers more effectively than the current set-piece questions and answers permit.

US Congress and Senate members often remark that the model used during Prime Minister's Questions at Westminster is a feature and a theatre that is missing from their democratic system.

That model could be adopted here, without being prescriptive. One method would be to permit each Assembly group, on a rota basis, to name a Member who would be given an opportunity to ask a series of supplementary questions to a Minister. That would require detailed logistical consideration, but the acceptance of such a principle would help to liberate Question Time.

An easier model would involve leaving the opportunity to ask supplementary questions to the call of the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, enabling a series of supplementary questions to be asked by a Member when the Speaker judges a matter to be of heightened public interest or concern, or, as the Member who intervened said, when the Minister is not answering questions in the appropriate way.

Those suggestions are indicative of what could be done. In my view, beyond the report, there are things that may need to be done soon. We have worked long to create a shared democracy. We have agreed, with various degrees of enthusiasm, particular models of Government to make our democracy work. We live in a parliamentary system, which has been crafted to our conditions. Therefore, why not create, in the conduct of Question Time, a model that stretches Ministers and Members in order to ensure that community and democracy are better served?

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Members for participating in the debate. I also thank the Deputy Chairperson for stepping in for me in my absence; I appreciate it. During my winding-up speech, I will try to address some of the issues that were raised by Members. However, first, I will make my own observations, and then I will come to the issues that Members would like to see addressed.

In general, it is true to say that most Members have been complimentary of most, if not all, of the report, and they have been generally happy with the whole thrust of it.

We all have an interest in Assembly Questions. They are a tool that every Member uses to a greater or lesser extent. Every Member has his or her opinion on

questions, as the Committee found out when it conducted its survey of Members. Therefore, trying to find ways to tackle the issues around questions was not always an easy task.

There are two types of questions — those for oral or written answer — and it seemed to us that questions for oral answer cause the most disgruntlement among Members. It will come as no surprise that the issues identified as causing problems included the length and content of ministerial responses, which have just been referred to. Members described how frequently they felt that the answer did not address the question. The issue of precooked replies was also raised. Sometimes, it seems as though Ministers have prepared a reply that they are going to read out, irrespective of the question that has been posed. They have a prepared answer in front of them, and they just trot it out.

The Committee did not single out any particular Minister as being the biggest culprit, but there is no guarantee that we will not name him or her in the next report, because the Committee is very focused on the issue. All Committee members are very robust in dealing with the issues, and if we feel that someone is worthy of being named, we will name them. That is not a threat — it is a promise. After all, the longer Ministers take to answer questions, the fewer questions they will get through.

The Committee looked at the issue in some depth and spent considerable time debating imposing time limits. Members will find information on time limits at pages 17 to 19 of the report. However, in the end, it would have made little difference, as roughly the same number of questions would have been answered anyway. In fact, the only way to increase the number of questions being answered is to reduce the number of supplementary questions or to increase the time from 30 to 35 or 40 minutes.

The Committee is not recommending either of those options at the moment. It is during supplementary questions that the Minister is most tested and Members have the best opportunity to probe for information. Reducing the number of supplementary questions allowed would, in the opinion of the Committee, be detrimental.

Reducing the number of questions listed to 15 simply recognises what everyone already knows: that a target of 20 questions is totally unrealistic and unachievable. The Committee, in recommending a change to 15 questions, also took into account the work and effort put in by Departments in preparing for each listed question.

Some Members may think that there is nothing wrong with listing 20 questions and that, if a question is not reached by a Minister, then at least a written reply will be provided. However, written replies are not the point of questions for oral answer. Questions

for oral answer are one of the few face-to-face opportunities for Members to interact with Ministers, and hoping for a written reply really misses the point.

The change to the current shuffle system will also hopefully reduce the amount of nugatory work that is currently undertaken by Members. The mechanics of the new proposal have already been outlined by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, and I will address the rationale behind it. Members have always said that the most valuable resource that they have is time. Therefore, any system that saw 80% of their work wasted needed to be examined. Now, only 15 Members per Minister will need to prepare a question, and will have plenty of notice that their name be selected.

All of that should hopefully provide for more topical questions, or at least allow an opportunity for current issues to be addressed. The Committee believes that the reduction in notice to the Minister is workable, because it is matched by a reduction in the number of questions they must prepare for.

One of the major recommendations of the report is a change to having Question Time on both Mondays and Tuesdays. The Committee suggests that Members try that and see what happens. There are many reasons for that change, not least the difficulty of having to sit through an hour and a half of questions and answers. Having one hour on a Monday followed by a further half hour on a Tuesday should make that process easier. The Committee feels that the change is worth trying, and as was said earlier, the new process is not set in stone.

Furthermore, the Committee hopes that the division over two days will facilitate visitors and members of the public. If anything could be called the jewel in the crown in relation to Assembly procedures, then Question Time is it — or at least it should be. Introducing time slots on both Mondays and Tuesdays will broaden opportunities for public access, which is something that we all want to encourage.

The Committee also tackled the issue of friendly fire or partisanship. All Members know that it happens and that parties can load the shuffle when their Minister is up, but this can have a negative consequence. Although friendly fire can be a useful tool to allow a Minister to announce a decision or a party to state its position, it can be and is viewed by the public in a different light. Indeed, the short-term gain of giving a Minister an easier time can come across very negatively to viewers in the Public Gallery and to those watching on TV.

Therefore, the Committee's recommendation is that the first question should not come from a Member of the same party as the Minister. It is recognised that that will have a limited effect, but it would have been totally unfair to apply that to more than one question. As has been witnessed today, normally only five to six



questions are answered, so limiting more than one question would be unfair. However, at least that recommendation would send a clear signal to the public that we, as elected representatives, are serious about holding Ministers to account. The operation of that particular recommendation has been left with the Speaker.

The rota and schedule of Ministers appearing before the Assembly for questions for oral answer was also examined in some depth by the Committee. As it stands, the rota allows for Ministers to appear every four weeks and for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to appear every two weeks. The Committee found that there was no issue with the rota for Ministers; it did not arise as an issue in our gathering of evidence, and we are content to leave it at that.

I am personally very disappointed that a member of the Committee felt compelled to release the report to the press before it could come before the Assembly. I suspect that the Member who brought it to the press would be the first on their feet if a Minister divulged something without coming to the House first. That is regrettable, but those are the parameters within which we have to work, and we will just get on with the job.

#### 4.15 pm

As Members will have heard, however, the issue of the frequency of appearance of the First Minister and deputy First Minister created substantial interest. The fortnightly appearance started in the Assembly's first mandate, and it was based on the belief that, as heads of the Executive, the First Minister and deputy First Minister would be answering questions on a range of Executive issues that cut across all Departments. In reality, however, that is not the case. The First Minister and deputy First Minister do not answer questions that are more properly within the remit of other Ministers, and I do not think that any Members would want them to answer for other Ministers.

If, as the evidence suggests, the First Minister and deputy First Minister answer questions on only five broad areas, one might ask whether there is any need for them to come to the Assembly fortnightly. Well, the answer from the Committee is yes. After much discussion, there was agreement that their role — and the public's perception of that role — was so important that a reduction of their scheduled appearances would be seen as undermining that role.

A similar discussion was held on whether the junior Ministers should be allowed to answer questions on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee wanted to ensure that there was no erosion — perceived or real — of the unique and special role of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We do not believe that allowing the juniors to answer questions on those areas for which they have specific responsibility would be an erosion of that role.

I will try to respond to the issues on questions for written answer. The Committee was aware of unease and disquiet from Members on the poor performance by Ministers in answering questions for written answer. The Committee looked at the figures from May 2007 and was alarmed that the performance was worse than expected. We took evidence in that area and received assurances that improvements were being made. However, the Committee will keep a watchful eye, and will call to account any Department that shows a tendency to let its performance drop.

There are also two recommendations on questions for priority written answer, with which some Members may not be happy. The first is that only one per day of the five questions for written answer can be a priority. Unfortunately, that recommendation has come about because of the overuse and, indeed, the abuse of the facility. I think that most Members will recognise that.

Questions for priority written answer create considerable resource problems for Departments, and the Committee on Procedures has some sympathy with that. We would rather that staff were doing their jobs and delivering front line services than scrambling around to get a reply to a question for priority written answer. Furthermore, we know that the overuse of the facility is something for which the Departments have to take responsibility. Their poor performance in answering ordinary questions for written answer drove Members to try the priority route. We hope that recommendations 8 and 9 will encourage Members to use the facility sparingly and only when really required.

Mr McCartney welcomed the report and its findings, and he noted that the reduction in the number of questions for oral answer is practical. He is a member of the Committee and is conversant with the debate that took place in the Committee as the report was discussed.

Basil McCrea, too, welcomed the report and raised the issue of supplementary questions. He said that he would like to see some relaxation in the Speaker's ruling on supplementary questions keeping to the topic. Well, that cuts both ways, and although it is an important point and a good point to raise, that is a responsibility of all Members.

Mr O'Loan spoke about Ministers stepping out of their straitjackets and answering questions. Good advice, but could I also give the advice to Members — if they are interested in taking it — that maybe we, too, could step out of our straitjackets.

This matter relates not only to Ministers wearing those straitjackets; it relates to other Members. I will later provide some interesting statistics that may be of interest to Members about what happened in the Chamber today.

Mr O'Loan raised concerns about the junior Ministers answering questions on behalf of the First Minister and

the deputy First Minister. Mr O'Loan was also part of the Committee's discussion, so he knows exactly what the deliberations were on that issue. It has to be said that no grouping came out strongly in favour of a change. Therefore, it is fairly clear that the Committee was happy that the situation should continue as it is. However, as we keep emphasising, none of this is set in stone; it all can be revisited and reviewed when Members feel that that is necessary.

Mr Neeson welcomed splitting Question Time over two days, and he noted how some Members abuse questions for written answer. He raised an important point about the cost of replying to questions for written answer, which was a matter that the Committee looked at. We discovered that, for instance, an answer from the Department of Education costs twice as much as an answer from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which is run by the same party. That is most interesting, and it is something that the Committee will continue to look at.

Lord Browne welcomed the report, and he noted the importance of Question Time in Parliaments the world over, including the House of Lords. In his short contribution, Mr Brolly stated that Ministers should follow his example and provide short and concise replies. They might take his advice, but I am not quite sure. Mr Elliott stated that he believes that the proposed recommendations will improve questions for oral answer. He also believes that some Members abuse the facility of questions for written answer, and he asked the Committee to consider introducing a procedure that allows questions to be asked on more topical or current issues. I noted what the First Minister said. We will take note of all the issues that were raised here today, and the Committee will revisit them.

If we look at attendance in the House at Question Time, the best that we could get today was less than one third of Members. Ministers cannot be blamed for that. If Members take Question Time seriously, it is their responsibility to be in their places. The most Members that were in the Chamber at any given time today was 38, but at one point, there were as few as 28.

My time has run out. I would like to have said many other things about what Mr Ramsey said, but we have noted his points, and the Committee will look at all the issues again.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Financial Pressures on Householders

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

**Mr Hamilton:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the difficult economic conditions as a result of the global economic downturn; notes the impact on household bills; notes the increase in the regional rate during the period of devolution between 1999 and 2002, and again under direct rule between 2002 and 2007; notes the freeze in the domestic regional rate; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that every possible step is taken to reduce pressure on the bills of householders.

As is the case for so many of the debates that we now have in the Assembly, the context of this debate is the ongoing economic downturn, which is putting tremendous and unprecedented pressures on many people and their financial capabilities. We have all seen the impact that it is having on individuals and on companies and businesses in our own areas. All across Northern Ireland we see job losses; indeed, some disturbing news is coming out of Nortel in Newtownabbey today, but there is even worse than that in what we hear about company closures. There is an overall crisis in confidence among consumers right across Northern Ireland, and that reflects problems that are worldwide in their nature.

That is putting serious pressure on people's ability to spend what money or disposable income they have. Members should be mindful of what steps we are taking to assist those people and to ensure that we are not taking steps that would put additional unwanted and unnecessary pressures on difficult household budgets.

If possible, I want to sketch out the situation that the Minister, and the Minister's colleague Mr Robinson, the former Finance Minister and now First Minister, inherited in respect of rates in Northern Ireland. When they took office, it was universally recognised that there was an unfair rating system as the result of a move away from rental values to capital values on properties, which, if Members can cast their minds back, led to the phrase "asset rich, income poor". Realistically, about 40% of people saw an increase and, in some cases, a doubling of their rates bills overnight.

A norm of high rates bills in Northern Ireland was also inherited; people and businesses were being well

and truly walloped by the rating system. Between 1999 and 2000, when devolution was put in place under the Belfast Agreement, to 2007, which was when the new system was put in place, there was an 85% increase in the domestic regional rate — a crazy amount of money over an eight-year period. In 1999-2000, the domestic regional rate was 107·13p, and in 2002-03, which was the end of devolution, it was 132·47p — an increase of nearly 25%. However, during direct rule in 2006-07, it rose to 198·17p — an increase of 49%. Overall, that represents an 85% increase. We can all remember the 19% rise in 2006-07, and in the two previous years the increases were about 9%. The recent historical picture of rates in Northern Ireland has been one of massive increases, which severely affected householders and businesses in Northern Ireland.

It is worth paying attention to how businesses in Northern Ireland were bashed. Members can recall how we opposed the escalation of industrial rates in Northern Ireland to a position where 100% rates would have been the case in a couple of years from now. Of course, at that time there were all manner of warnings from those in the manufacturing sector that up to 30,000 jobs could be lost in that vital sector.

Inheriting that situation was difficult. The people of Northern Ireland had put in a great deal of money over that period — some 85% more in their rates bills — but were not necessarily getting 85% better services. When we took control of the rating system, we had a duty to behave much better with it. People had expected 19% and 9% increases — which would have been the way it was in Northern Ireland. However, there was an onus on the new Administration to behave much more prudently and to be much more fiscally responsible. I am glad to say that that is how the Executive have behaved.

The Minister of Finance and his predecessor have set out on a course of action that has, if not entirely relieved the pain that people are feeling, has certainly done some good in ensuring that people are no longer being bludgeoned by the rating system, and has also stopped bashing people with very high rates bills. The Minister has used the rating system as a means of helping people through their pain.

I outlined some problems earlier, such as the unfairness of the system. The introduction of a rates cap of £500,000, which was recently reduced to £400,000, has ensured that some of those who were deemed to be asset rich but income poor — those who had big properties but not necessarily much income — are being better protected by the rating system than previously.

Reducing the cap to £400,000 also ensured that our highest bills were in line with those in the highest band of council tax in England and Wales.

4.30 pm

Even better than that was the introduction of changes to some of the reliefs in the rating system. When we consider some of the measures that have been introduced during this first period of devolution in Northern Ireland, one of the Finance Minister's finest achievements has been the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance, which is an automatic 20% reduction in rates bills for those who are over 70 and live alone. In the very short time that that mechanism has been in existence, it has helped 17,000 people who are over 70 and live alone in Northern Ireland. That is worth a total of £2·6 million, which is an average saving of £156 for every one of those 17,000 individuals who have availed themselves of that relief. That is a very positive measure in which we can all take pride.

There have also been changes to the level of savings that qualify for rates relief. It had been £15,000, but that has now increased to £60,000, which assists a greater number of people than had been the case in the past.

We had all become used to the historically high rates in Northern Ireland, but that situation has been radically changed courtesy of the decision of DUP Finance Ministers to freeze the domestic regional rate for a three-year period. Compared to even an inflationary rate increase of around 2·7% over that period, that is saving ratepayers in Northern Ireland some £7·8 million each year. When that is coupled with the deferral of water charges for two years, it saves the average household well in excess of £1,000 each year.

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

When that is considered with some of the measures that other Executive Ministers have introduced — such as free prescriptions, which is worth £13 million; and the extension of free transport for the elderly to those who are over 60, which is worth £18 million — one can see real and meaningful ways in which Executive Ministers are taking action to help people at these difficult times. I could also mention the £8 million rates assistance package that the Minister recently announced in order to help local district councils to ease some of the pain that their ratepayers are enduring.

We could also consider the help that has been on offer to businesses. The capping of the industrial rate at 30% has undoubtedly helped businesses in these difficult times. A business regional rate freeze, which the Minister announced before Christmas 2008, is worth £8 million to businesses in Northern Ireland. The small business rates-relief scheme that the Minister intends to bring forward is worth another £8 million to commerce in Northern Ireland. Those are all positive steps that are being taken to help businesses and, therefore, to help the individuals who work for those companies to keep their jobs in place.

I would not, for a second, say that our rating system in Northern Ireland is in any way perfect. I am minded to paraphrase Winston Churchill by saying that rates are the worst form of local taxation except for all the rest. However, compared to the inherited position in 2007, the rating system in Northern Ireland is much improved. It has the explicit aim of assisting householders and businesses; especially through these very difficult and challenging times. It not only tries to ensure that people have a bit more money; it also encourages people who are entitled to those reliefs to take those up. I am very encouraged by the cross-departmental working group that is in place. It is working with the A2B group to try to get more people to take up the reliefs that are available to them.

We have no difficulty with the amendment because helping those who are in the worst-possible position — those who are on very low incomes — is something that we all support. Some of the measures that have been brought forward — not just through the rating system — such as free transport for the elderly and free prescriptions will certainly help those who are on very low incomes. It is my pleasure to move the motion, and I ask the House to support it.

**Dr Farry:** I beg to move the following amendment:  
At end insert

“in particular through targeting measures at those householders on low incomes.”

I am surprised by the motion because it has a certain air of self-congratulation about it, particularly bearing mind that there is very little that is new in the way of proposals to improve the current situation. The motion very much looks backwards. Complacency can be a dangerous thing at the best of times, but it is particularly so in the context of a recession.

The Alliance Party cannot support the motion as it appears in the Order Paper — it is somewhat motherhood and apple pie. However, that is purely on a stand-alone basis.

In the wider context of the recession, we have other comments to make about the Executive's policy. It is logical in a recession to protect household income — indeed, to boost it to generate additional economic activity. However, the focus should be on those on lower incomes, and that is the logic behind the Alliance Party's amendment. I must say that the Executive's record in that regard is mixed.

The Alliance Party has reservations about the thrust of the motion and the comments that have been made. In part, that is because they come across as the Executive's giving themselves a pat on the back for their response to the recession. It is a bit early to be giving ourselves a pat on the back.

It is interesting to note that when Ministers — particularly those from the DUP — are asked what

they are doing to combat the recession, the knee-jerk reaction is to fall back on the freeze on the regional rate. In a sense, they are deluding themselves if they think that that amounts to a credible economic policy, let alone a coherent response to an economic crisis. In a recession Governments should, at the very least, seek to avoid raising taxes; indeed, there is a good argument for lowering them. The argument behind that approach is that it gives people additional spending power that, in turn, will boost economic activity.

**Mr Kennedy:** Can the Member say whether he and his party are still in favour of tax-raising powers for the Assembly?

**Dr Farry:** Absolutely; there is a groundswell of opinion that the Assembly needs more power to make a bigger impact rather than slavishly follow policies elsewhere. Moreover, tax-varying powers do not mean higher taxes; they mean different taxes and a different way of doing things. We have a strong record on corporation tax in that respect.

There are two dangers to the approach that I outlined. The first is that people will simply save the money rather than spend it, particularly given economic uncertainties. Those who are most likely to spend money are those on lower incomes who do not have the luxury of making the choice between saving and spending.

The second danger is that too much emphasis is placed on consumption for today rather than on investment for tomorrow. If money has to be spent, it is sometimes better if Government spend it because one can rely on them to spend the money rather than simply save it.

Coming on top of the existing distortions in our public expenditure profile, not least from the costs of managing a divided society, the populist approach taken by the Executive has further restrained our ability to invest in recovery. Just look at our disappointing commitment to the green economy when all other regions are moving in that direction. There has been a massive failure to identify and invest what could be seen as Northern Ireland's new competitive advantage. Consider our inability to respond to the investment strategy, which was knocked off course through capital realisation not going ahead as planned. The way to respond would have been through transferring resources from revenue to pick up the shortfall in capital investment. Industry is crying out for that capital investment to be followed through. Perhaps that will answer the Minister's bemusement about why people are so disappointed that the Executive cannot even meet their own target of £1.8 billion for capital investment for this year, let alone trying to take it further as other jurisdictions are seeking to do.

Having taken account of our economy and the powers that we have available to us, and having put

them into a proper context, we still conclude that Northern Ireland is not getting a fiscal stimulus on the scale of our competitors.

The DUP understands some of the logic and points that we are making about the dangers of people saving money rather than spending it — consider their spokespersons' response to the UK Government's decision to cut VAT by 2.5%. Therefore, it is even more disappointing when they feel compelled to play the populist tune at home, given that they seem to understand the point that we are making.

The freeze in the regional rate has perhaps been the most celebrated aspect of the Executive's policies, but let us not forget that not every household pays rates; some people, particularly those on low incomes, pay none. Therefore, those who benefit most from the rates freeze tend to be the better off who are more likely to save than to spend.

By contrast, those on lower incomes tend to depend proportionately more on quality public services. There are clear opportunity costs for the lost revenue from the Executive's policy on rates. Most Members are acutely aware of the serious underfunding of some of our public services, including the Health Service, a point to be noted by my colleagues on the left — or on the right, depending on which way one looks at them.

There are also opportunity costs in respect of business, growing our economy, reinvesting resources and incentivising certain economic activities. It is worth noting the criticism that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and others levelled against the regional rate freeze; it is there in the CBI's response to the draft Budget in December 2007. The DUP has graduated to lambasting economists in their ivory towers, rather than engaging in serious arguments about what it is doing.

On rates in general, the system of property values is a blunt instrument for measuring ability to pay; a local income tax, as a replacement rather than a top-up of the rates, would be fairer. I acknowledge the various rates reliefs that have been offered by the Executive. However, rate-capping is a blunt instrument and has a considerable dead weight in economic terms.

**Mr Hamilton:** Before he moves on to rates-capping — his position on which he has outlined to the House many times — the Member has set out such opposition to the regional rates freeze that I would like him to confirm to the House whether he and his party are, indeed, opposed to it, as I detect from his tone. Whatever he might say, he must acknowledge that the rates freeze is helping people in Northern Ireland during these very difficult times. Is his party opposed to the regional rates freeze?

**Dr Farry:** The Member knows well that we did not oppose the proposal for a rates freeze this year. In the

context of a recession, we felt that the Executive had stumbled into doing the right thing for the wrong reason. However, the long-term strategy is flawed.

Returning to the rates cap, the DUP may argue that it had nothing to do with the £500,000 cap, but it certainly brought forward the £400,000 cap. There is transitional relief for district councils, but it is only a two-year stay of execution. The impact across Northern Ireland may be fairly minimal, but, just to put that in perspective, the net effect of the rates cap in particular localities and district council areas will be in excess of an inflation rise in the regional rate. The Executive's policy will cause a rates hike in excess of an inflationary rise in the regional rate. Therefore, they are patting themselves on the back with one hand and putting the other hand into people's pockets.

The Executive had the potential to do something worthwhile in respect of the financial assistance payments. However, it must be stressed that the supposed £150 winter fuel payments have not yet been made. According to DSD, those payments will be out in April, so they will, in fact, be spring fuel payments. It can be argued that people on low incomes —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** Sorry, I am running out of time.

It can be argued that people on low incomes were told that those fuel payments would come. However, the payments will only be of assistance if people have confidence in the Executive to follow through on them and the cash flow to spend the money on fuel during the winter in the knowledge that their money will be replenished in the spring. Where people — often pensioners — live a hand-to-mouth existence, that is rarely the case.

In England and Wales, measures were coming through in September 2008. However, it was only in December that we decided what we were going to do, and we then had to go through the process of introducing the necessary legislation. In a broader context, we have to acknowledge that there is a problem of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and that businesses' energy costs are greater here than elsewhere. That is an argument for investing to deal with energy efficiency and investing in renewables.

I will make two further points, one of which is our relationship with the UK Treasury. There are a number of important issues, including the new efficiency savings, the possible review of the Barnett formula, and the package for the devolution of policing and justice. The rates burden in Northern Ireland is less than that in the rest of the UK. However, our incomes are lower overall, so there are very good reasons for that, and I would be wary about pushing that point. I was rather surprised to see the Finance Minister patting himself on the back and saying how low our rates are

compared with the rest of the UK. I trust that that will not be his opening line in the next stage of delicate negotiations with the Treasury.

The other argument —

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

**Dr Farry:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Kennedy:** Dr Farry might get that big job.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr McLaughlin:** The last Member queried what the motion is about, and I must say that I have the same question. I am not as inclined as others to suggest that it has anything to do with forthcoming elections.

4.45 pm

There is no particular fault with the restatement of the measures that have been taken to alleviate the impact of the financial downturn, and, for that reason, I hope that the proposers of the motion and those of the amendment can find an accommodation. One complements the other.

**Mr B McCrea:** Consensus.

**Mr McLaughlin:** I am glad to hear the Ulster Unionist Party advocating that approach. That is a good idea — it should try it some time.

Having taken the motion at face value, I should outline one caveat. I find it surprising, in view of who proposed the motion, that it focuses on the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As I have stated during previous debates in the Assembly, there is a shared responsibility, and every Minister can make a contribution. Each Minister should approach this matter on the basis of both individual and collective responsibility. There are limitations on what the Executive can bring forward. The measures that are identified and listed in the motion — and that were referred to by the two Members who spoke last — indicate that those issues have been addressed.

In wider society, some may think that we have not been sufficiently challenging or creative in our thinking. We have not challenged the rules of engagement as dictated by the Treasury or the limitations on fiscal powers that are available to Assemblies such as this.

We attended an interesting meeting with members of a House of Lords Committee that is looking at the Barnett formula. That has significant implications, not only for this Assembly, but for devolved Assemblies in the future. It was reported to us that there is a feeling in Westminster that current arrangements under the Barnett formula are too generous to the North. We should take that signal seriously.

Gordon Brown's stated objective of driving forward so-called efficiency savings will take money from the

North. In effect, that will mean cuts to front line services, and it will significantly circumscribe the ability of the Executive to alleviate the financial pressures felt by households.

The motion focuses on households because we have previously debated the impacts on industry and commerce — the drivers of our economy. However, at grassroots level, many are facing extreme difficulty in staving off the rising cost of living and the threats to their ability to stay afloat economically. That is particularly the case in areas that have lived for generations with the stark reality of social and economic deprivation.

The Assembly needs to consider whether we have sufficient tools to do more than we have done already to address those issues.

**Mr B McCrea:** I understand that the Member is talking mainly about people, but rates also affect businesses. The huge increase in rates that has taken place in recent years puts many businesses at risk. If the businesses go bust, we will have no jobs, no community — nothing. If we do not get our rates take, and we do not get our Barnett consequentials, how can we raise the money?

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

**Mr McLaughlin:** That intervention goes to the heart of the matter. A number of issues were addressed by the Committee, including free transport and support for both domestic and industrial rates. The Treasury interprets those matters in a particular way — it assumes that we have sufficient spare capacity in the block grant to enable us to do those things because they cannot be universally applied.

It becomes a double-edged sword. I would be very cautious about going too far down that particular road. Prior to restitution, the agreed position of all the parties in the negotiations with the Treasury was that the Barnett formula did not serve our economy well. The long-standing issue of underinvestment in infrastructure was a legacy issue for which the Executive and the Assembly were being asked to accept responsibility. Other pressures emerged within the existing arrangement, such as the equal-pay arrangements for civil servants and, on top of that, the economic tsunami.

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

**Mr McLaughlin:** I think that we have to be careful. We will support the motion, but be cautious about its implications.

**Mr McNarry:** Even with this morning's trailer in the 'News Letter', members of the public are still wondering what the motion is about. Let us do our best to enlighten them. Recently, in 'The Sunday Times', Liam Clarke wrote a clinical observation of those

handling our finances. It went something like this: first there is denial, followed by a crisis, and then there is panic. The DUP, I think, is still at the denial stage.

Like the bemused public, I, too, was mystified over the purpose of the motion. Then it struck me: it is a present from Mr Dodds to Mrs Dodds. The motion is Mr Dodds's way of giving Diane something for her campaign. It is his way of saying: "Yes dear, of course you can trust me. I know I've promised things before — I know I said I wouldn't sit in Government with Irish republicans, but then didn't we all? And, OK, yes I did say we wouldn't go into Government unless we got the £1 billion package, but look how I've turned that around, haven't I? And, yes dear, I know I promised lots of things and failed to deliver, but the voters didn't catch on." However, the voters have caught on. The game is up for Mr Dodds.

The "Hobbits" motion will pass. They will snipe and snigger, just as they have done. They will jump up and down and make interventions. Let them get on with it. We could vote on the motion now. Its purpose has been exposed for what it is — a silly stunt unworthy of the House. Populism is fine, especially if the DUP had brought home the bacon and delivered a £1 billion peace dividend. However, it did not. Now the DUP is, quite rightly, unpopular for breaking its promises.

A while ago, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury told us to expect a £180 million cut in our Budget as part of the United Kingdom-wide efficiency savings. That is on top of the £1 billion black hole — about which the DUP is in denial — in the public finances, and the DUP has the temerity to put this motion in front of the Assembly. It is nothing short of a stunt.

The householders referred to in the motion are part of the 42,000 people now on the dole. The DUP is fixed on driving a Programme for Government, fashioned when it has no backside left in its financial trousers. People who are already on the dole, or those fearing that they might become unemployed, are more worried about putting bread on the table, getting a job, or staying in the job that they have.

The private sector is being clobbered and will recoil with incredulity at such a crass motion. Thankfully, the public sector has cushioned us against the worst of the crisis. Without it, we would be in dire straits. That helps explain why our unemployment rate stands at 5.5%, which is better than the UK average. Given that the First Minister has already issued serious warnings about possible cuts in public-sector employment, it is stupefying in its utter crassness to watch his Finance Minister mishandle the crisis. "What crisis?", the DUP would say — ask the 42,000 people on the dole, "What crisis?"

Six months ago, I asked that priorities be reordered to focus on job protection and job creation. Six months

later, the Minister admits that there is a need to revisit the economic actions and targets outlined in the Programme for Government. In October, when I raised the issue in the House, unemployment stood at 30,000. The most recent figure, for February 2009, is 42,000.

Let us have real action to reduce pressure on householders, and none of the nonsense to raise the expectations of householders when the money is not available to deliver. The 42,000 people who are unemployed do not want to hear the DUP telling them what they already know. As I said, the game is up, Mr Dodds. Do something about it.

**Mr O'Loan:** Obviously, I support the sentiments behind the motion and the amendment. My only concern is, as has been expressed by others, about the value of such a debate. The public will see that action is needed, not words. It is a private Member's motion, of which there have been many in the Assembly, particularly recently. Such motions are in place to fill the time that is not filled with Executive business. Recently, a full week passed in the Assembly in which no Executive business took place at all. That is being noticed by the public and by commentators.

The Assembly was elected to achieve Executive business and to hold the Executive to account on that business. We want to see action, not words. The best way to deal with such important issues is not to have a motion to debate them, but to see the Executive's response coming forward.

Given that the motion is being debated, I shall make a few remarks on the practical steps that the Executive can take. First, I express my real understanding and sympathy with the many families who are faced with real hardship. Many working families never thought that they would find themselves in a situation of financial distress, and many families do find themselves in that position.

Loss of incomes is the major issue, so our first focus should be on the maintaining of incomes as far as possible. I shall refer to some of the ways in which policy can be adjusted to do that. More can be done to protect the jobs of people who are under threat but who will be vital to their firms for the upturn when it happens. In countries such as Wales, Holland and Canada, specific measures have been taken on that issue, which I wish to see introduced here. That would provide support for firms to enable them to take advantage of the upturn and to support the incomes of households.

We have talked many times about the construction sector, and we know of the drastic effect of job losses to that industry. Recently, I spoke to a professional firm that is associated with the construction industry and which has cut all salaries by 20%. Such measures will not appear in the official statistics, but they cause a serious burden to the households of those families.

An opportunity exists to stimulate the economy through further contribution to the housing sector. Given that sector's high-labour content and its encouragement of apprenticeships and training, that would make a specific contribution to the economy that is unique, so there is a sound basis for saying that. I ask the Minister to give further consideration to that.

The depreciation in sterling provides an opportunity for tourism, and money should be diverted for the marketing of the tourism sector. That would bring a real likelihood of rapid payback.

Recently, a separate debate took place on the issue of dealing with debt. I acknowledge and welcome the action of DETI on that. Expenditure on debt advice has been doubled, and a specific budget has been created for telephone debt advice. I express particular appreciation to the Ulster Bank for its contribution of £300,000.

Every bank and financial institution, including every building society, that is implicitly involved in that area ought to follow the Ulster Bank's lead. I ask the Minister to do what he can in his contact with those banks. He can exercise significant political leverage, and I ask him to do so.

5.00 pm

Finally, let us not get bogged down in the short term. I refer briefly to what the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, said when he addressed the Confederation of British Industry Northern Ireland recently — *[Interruption.]*

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

**Mr O'Loan:** He promised to take a long-term strategic approach on the all-island economy and North/South co-operation.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must resume his seat.

**Mr O'Loan:** He also pledged commitment to the roads programme. Let us be as courageous and strategic in the long term.

**Mr McQuillan:** At the outset, I thank my party colleagues for bringing the motion to the House and for the opportunity to speak in the debate. As Members are well aware, we live in a challenging time. However, there is no doubt in my mind that we would face even more difficulties had the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive not taken the steps that they have in the Programme for Government.

We are well aware of the constraints on all household budgets. However, I believe that the Minister is committed to ensuring that the Northern Ireland public will pay only the bare minimum for services. The Minister has frozen regional rates and has followed that up with an announcement, which was made prior to Christmas, that he will make £8 million available to

the 26 district-council areas in order to ensure that the district rate will be kept at a minimum that is affordable to householders throughout Northern Ireland.

It is also important that the older generation is looked after, because elderly people will become more vulnerable during these difficult times. It must be ensured that older people apply for and receive all the benefits to which they are entitled, such as that which gives homeowners in receipt of pensions the ability to defer payments on their rates bills and relief for those who have invested in energy-saving methods. Free travel for the older generation has also been implemented at a cost of £4 million each year.

Prescription charges have been reduced, and free prescriptions will be available from 2010-11. It is also welcome news that the Minister has given further consideration to extending the fuel credit scheme to another 50,000 low-income homes, which will mean that 150,000 homes in total will receive a one-off £150 payment.

I also wish to record my thanks to the Minister for the negotiation of £100 million from Treasury for Civil Service back-pay claims that the Executive have inherited from the direct rule Administration. It is hoped that the matter will reach a satisfactory conclusion as soon as possible.

My party realises that during these difficult times, the Finance Minister and the Executive have taken their collective responsibility seriously and have listened to the true concerns that affect local people. My party also realises that there are no unlimited funds available to address all issues. Resources must be carefully managed in order to ensure that the best value for money is achieved for what is spent. By contrast, direct rule Ministers were too far removed from the local communities that are now served by the Assembly.

I support the motion and recommend that other Members do likewise.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. As other Members have said, the House should, perhaps, question the timing of the motion and this debate. However, it is a take-note debate.

Simon Hamilton certainly referred to action that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has taken to freeze rates. He did not say much about the last part of his motion, which calls on the Minister to ensure that pressure on household bills is kept to a minimum, or is reduced, if at all possible. Other Members have mentioned ways that that could be done. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says in response to that. On other occasions, the Minister has pointed out that he does not distribute money — the Executive do. I wish to ask him what discussions are taking place



in the Executive at present on measures to help ordinary people.

Certainly, much has been made of the rates freeze. I accept that. I am concerned about the economic impact in places such as Strabane and Omagh in my constituency of West Tyrone. The figures were outlined in response to a question from Mr Hamilton. Despite what Dr Farry said, we cannot ignore that matter. I am keen to hear the Minister's comments about ordinary people — and I do not use that term pejoratively — and ordinary households.

The warm homes scheme's attempts to alleviate fuel poverty are welcome. During Question Time, a Member on the opposite Benches pressed Minister Ritchie about the scheme's new criteria. I have encountered a situation where they apply. I have had a great deal of concern with one constituent — an elderly person in her 80s — who would have qualified under the previous criteria. However, since the report on and the review of the warm homes scheme, she does not qualify for changes to her heating system. I have asked the Minister for Social Development about that. Although what has been done is welcome, there is room for further improvement. My party colleague Mitchel McLaughlin referred to possible creative measures that the Executive could develop or use in their — or in the Assembly's — dealings with the Treasury.

Members received some information before the debate, including a report from ERINI. *[Interruption.]* I said ERINI, and I was particular about how I pronounced it; I think that I got it correct. ERINI (Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland) mentioned end-year flexibility. I am not particularly well versed in financial matters, but I know that when Peter Robinson was Minister of Finance and Personnel, during one of the Budget debates, he emphasised that Departments should do something about the matter in question. I asked several months ago whether there is an opportunity to use end-year flexibility to help those households that are on low incomes, as mentioned in the Alliance Party amendment. Finally, I ask the Minister comment on the anti-poverty strategy's current position in the Executive. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and similar to the Member who moved the motion, I support the amendment.

We have heard a lot from the mainland about how the VAT rate has been cut in order to encourage spending and about how other initiatives are in play. In the past year, the average wage increase has resulted in the average working couple being £556 better off. However, given the tax increases, in some circumstances, the same couple might pay an extra £610 in tax — that demonstrates an anomaly. That fact has not been so well publicised.

The cost of living was increasing, and some conservative measures estimated it to be 23% in real terms when the increase in food costs in stores was considered. Given the increase in the price of basic foods such as potatoes, bread and rice, it is clear how and why families across the Province are struggling to make ends meet. It is also clear, therefore, that governmental aid must be offered. That aid has been coming through; for example, the Minister of Finance and Personnel pledged to deliver £1.4 billion in construction projects in this financial year, compared with £676 million five years ago. That will put wages into the pockets of people in the Province, and they can spend that money here. That money is helping schools, roads, hospitals and many other areas.

Over the next 10 years, the Department of Finance and Personnel will work closely with small and medium-sized enterprises to deliver £20 billion of capital projects through the investment strategy.

That delivery of projects to help construction and all supplementary businesses, such as suppliers and haulage firms, is a must if we are to bring ourselves out of the dip that we are in.

There is no doubt that when the Minister is summing up he will mention that taking the Conservative line to cut public spending would further increase unemployment, and people would struggle more. People who are struggling look to the Department of Finance and Personnel to implement changes, and at this time there are a lot more people looking to us to help improve their lives. Many middle-class families are struggling, losing their businesses, facing losing their homes and at this time are hoping for some kind of intervention.

Thus far the Minister has stepped up with an extra £400 million to defer water charges, and a further £100 million to tackle a range of issues, including the backdating of Civil Service pay. Again, those are positive measures. Let us recognise the positive measures that he has put forward. The Titanic signature project, with £43.5 million of investment as part of its own economic package, has been backed by the Executive, and the Finance Minister has expressed his determination that Ministers will do whatever they can to help families, companies and the economy.

He has acknowledged that we are operating with the constraints of a block allocation of money and do not have freedom of manoeuvre, but that does not stop the Minister and the Executive taking positive steps to help the people of the Province.

Ivryboadie knaws about the record tae noo, an' the bag decisions tuk, laike houldin' the regional rate fae 2008-2011; cappin' industrial rates aa 30%; an' freezin' business rates i real terms. Free prescriptions an' free public transport fer fowk owre 60 hes bein brocht in forebye, an' we ken the pressure this hes tuk awa' fae

hames wi' seekness aroun' the Province. Hit bes undooted at the Finance Department an' hits Meenester hae tuk steps tae mak' this hairsd tim' a wee thing easier an' wul cairry oan daein this.

We are all aware of the record to date, and of the major decisions that have been taken, such as freezing the regional rate from 2008-2011; capping industrial rates at 30%; and freezing business rates in real terms. Free public transport for the over 60s and free prescriptions have also been introduced, and those measures have been met with relief in homes throughout the Province, especially by people who are suffering from illnesses. There is no doubt that the Department of Finance and the Minister have taken steps towards making this hard time a little easier, and will continue to do so.

Although I support the motion, I ask the Minister to do all that he can. I do so safe in the knowledge that he is making a difference, and that the steps that he is taking are practical by nature and will make a noticeable difference.

More houses are being sold this month than were sold last month, which is positive. Businesses are able to get bigger and better contracts, but that will take time to filter through to the people on the street to enable them to see the tangible differences that are clearly being made.

I know that the Minister is doing all in his power, and I, for one, place my wholehearted trust and support in him and the job that he is doing. It is not an easy job, and he needs support to do it. I urge Members in the Chamber to back the Minister and the Executive, to play their part in the Assembly, and thereby make lives better in the homes of the people whom we support and represent. I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Beggs:** Despite what the DUP thinks, Northern Ireland is actually part of the United Kingdom, and we are, therefore, subject to the United Kingdom's overall budgetary constraints. At the same time, of course, we receive the benefits of being part of one of the world's largest economies. Although in principle I strongly support low taxes and rates, we must remain fiscally responsible. There are no free lunches, and rates cuts or freezes must not be tax time bombs for households in the future.

Was it wise for the DUP to recently boast about the lower rates of tax in Northern Ireland, particularly when the House of Lords Barnett Formula Select Committee was here examining that formula? How will that boast be viewed by the Labour peers who were here? Do we risk having aggravated them, and perhaps risk the balance of the current Barnett formula and the funding that it allocates to Northern Ireland?

As elected politicians, we have been trusted by the public to deliver improvements in this region, particularly to the economy and public services. In many respects, the Minister of Finance should be the gatekeeper for that success. There is little point in making the economy the centre point of the Programme for Government if there is not enough money left over in the Budget and no effective means of evaluating how, and if, we are meeting those targets.

I have concerns about the situation in which we find ourselves; however, the DUP has blatantly ignored the mounting crisis faced by our Budget, particularly with regard to the capital expenditure programme.

5.15 pm

My colleagues and I have highlighted a range of pressures that have arisen, such as the inflated valuation of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute site at Crossnacreevy, the present levels of rate arrears, the failure of Workplace 2010 and ever-diminishing capital receipts — all of which are having a serious impact on the ability of the Executive to deliver. In many respects, the Programme for Government is becoming less meaningful by the day. It must be remembered that much of that capital expenditure can enable new investment and new efficiencies to occur; the Executive are making those aimed-for efficiencies more difficult to achieve.

I agree with the proposer of the amendment, who highlighted the self-congratulatory nature of the motion and, therefore, its weakness. This is schoolboy politics, which is designed to distract the public and the media from the real issues that we, as a region of the United Kingdom, are facing and hiding the embarrassment. Where is the £1 billion package? I recall that, at one stage, it was a £2 billion package. Was it not simply allowing us to reinvest our own assets to put better public provision in place? Nevertheless, with the reduction in property values, even that promised money — which was ours in the first place — appears to have disappeared, with huge implications for our capital expenditure plans.

Serious discussions should be taking place on how to address such weaknesses in our current Budget. However, that is not what we are doing; we are here, patting ourselves on the back. We should expect little else from a party that has continually aligned itself to the bankrupt "buy now, pay later" fiscal policies of the Labour Government. That is the message that the DUP and the Labour Party have espoused.

The governor of the Bank of England had to intervene recently in order to stop the Prime Minister making further giveaways that we cannot afford in the next Budget. There are concerns that public debt in the United Kingdom will reach £1 trillion. Yet what does the DUP do? It tables a motion that completely ignores

the problem and that will give the people of Northern Ireland a false sense of security.

Make no mistake: recovery from this recession is going to be tough and slow, but the quicker we acknowledge that and get to grips with the scale of the problem, the sooner we will really be able to address it. The Ulster Unionist Party supports low rates and is committed to providing as much support as possible for households. However, we also support sustainable government that can balance its books and deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland in the long term.

The DUP could do much more to help our economy. It could start by making progress on the planning reforms that appear to be delayed and by publishing draft PPS 5, which seems to be locked in the system; that would have an effect on business. A recent article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' highlighted that two thirds of the people want the Government to live within their means. We must reflect the views of those people in our actions.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank the proposers of the motion. Some have suggested that they may have an ulterior motive, but I take it on face value that they are well intentioned.

The global economic downturn is having an impact on every single household in Northern Ireland, one way or another. It is unfortunate that the financial and corporate greed in the City of London and in New York has brought us all to our knees. Although that reckless, irresponsible and unethical financial behaviour on the part of the finance houses has been rewarded, in some cases with obscene bonuses, thousands of people across Northern Ireland in all our communities, through no fault of their own, are joining ever-lengthening dole queues as each month passes.

I am mystified why household bills only ever go one way, which is upwards. We saw last year, when electricity and gas prices went up, that they did not come back down to previous levels; they are still 30% to 35% higher than they used to be. It is not only electricity and gas prices that are rising but rates; I do not recall rates ever going down. I welcome rates being frozen, but they have never dropped.

Petrol and diesel prices — as people try to travel about — have also gone up, and, again, they are much higher than they were a couple of years ago. Regardless of what happened, the oil companies seem to be making more and more profit. Last, but not least, food prices have gone up and stayed up.

Unfortunately, income — which we usually expect to creep up slowly in parallel with those rises — has not increased in recent times. As other Members have said, for many people income has gone down. People have had their pay cut or are working short time — some companies are putting people on three- or four-day

weeks. For the majority of families in Northern Ireland, paying household bills is very difficult. Trying to pay those bills when one or more of the breadwinners in the household is unemployed is extremely difficult, if not near impossible. That is the reality that hundreds of people face.

Although it is useful for us to ventilate this issue here today — to talk about it and to draw attention to it — people are looking to the Assembly and the Executive for action, and less hot air. The level of the regional rates is perhaps the most straightforward and direct influence that the Executive have over keeping household bills down. The SDLP and I welcome the freeze on regional rates at a time of increasing financial pressure on all the households across the community.

We also welcome the fact that the DUP has seen sense and is following our lead on ensuring that vulnerable householders are targeted for support by keeping them warm through the warm homes scheme, which not only helps keep fuel bills down but creates a degree of employment. Although that scheme in itself is useful, honestly, I would rather see better grants for insulation and heat conservation — which would save the money in the first place — than the stable door being shut with a £150 grant after the horse has bolted and the energy is spent.

Without taxation powers, the Executive are limited in their access to the economic levers of power. That does not mean that they can sit on their hands and do nothing outside setting the regional rate. When the Budget was cobbled together, we said clearly that it failed to meet the needs of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland. Now, in today's vastly changing and unprecedented economic circumstances, the need to revise the Budget and to help households and small businesses has never been more urgent.

Politics aside — I am not trying to score points here — today's circumstances are vastly different from those of two years ago, and our priorities have to change rapidly to meet those changing circumstances. A revision of the Budget would allow the Executive to redirect spending to easily identified areas of greatest need. It would give the Executive the real opportunity to provide targeted and effective assistance to households that are seriously struggling to make ends meet, and to help local businesses that are fighting to survive and avoid laying staff off or, worse still, closing altogether.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Dr McDonnell:** Thank you.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** We face a global recession like no other that we have experienced in a generation or more, directly affecting households, businesses and Government. We

are living in challenging times and so there will be greater demands made on the Assembly and Executive to assist the needy, whether they be failing businesses or the householder facing mounting bills or limited income. We need to demonstrate that all of us are focused on that.

Unfortunately, what we heard from some quarters today is petty, party-political point-scoring of the worst kind, which will not be lost on the people who choose to follow this debate and who are concerned about their jobs and incomes. Most Members actually addressed the issue in a sensible way, but unfortunately, as usual, one or two Members who live in a world of their own did not. Those Members live in a fantasy world in which they make their points and then scuttle out, so that they are not here to answer the responses when those come. We will come to that in a minute.

We need to keep our feet on the ground in offering help. No new money is coming our way, so we need to get the balance right between what is reasonable and fair to ask people to pay for rates, while raising sufficient funds to meet our spending requirements.

That is a sensible and balanced approach. The balancing act also extends to individual Departments, which should live within their means and get on with the job of delivering on the agreed Budget and on the agreed Programme for Government.

Therefore, those who stood in the Chamber today and lambasted the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel need to realise that Mr Empey, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Ritchie, the Sinn Féin Ministers and the DUP Ministers all agreed to the Programme for Government, the Budget and the statement on 15 December 2008. Unfortunately, Mr McNarry is once again absent when it comes to hearing the rebuttal to his points; any Member who takes part in a debate, no matter what party he or she is in, should have the decency to hang around to hear the response. Otherwise, it is clear that that Member is engaging in party-political stuntery.

The point is that the Ministers from Mr McNarry's party agreed to the Programme for Government and to the Budget. So, if he has an issue with either of those policies, let him first cry to Mr Empey and Mr McGimpsey and decide what their stance is, instead of coming in here and pretending that everyone but himself and his party are to blame.

The debate is about the help that households across Northern Ireland can get in the current global recession. It is important to differentiate between the long-term policies presented in the Programme for Government and the imperative for short-run immediate interventions. There is a need to focus on both. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has looked at the issue and said that there is a need to not recycle the long-term objectives,

but also a need for immediate interventions. If we were not taking those immediate interventions, people would be in here asking what devolution is about.

Freezing the domestic regional rate will provide help for every ratepayer, and I am glad about the welcome that the measure received in the House today. When comparing that policy with the previous position under direct rule, when there were annual increases in the regional rate well above inflation — as high as 19% — the Executive can be proud of what they have done. This year's domestic regional rate has been frozen, and that will be maintained for the next two years. That will save households around £7 million this year. The non-domestic regional rate will also be frozen next year, which will save businesses around £8 million, and reference has been made to the cap on industrial rates.

I take pride in pointing out that local-taxation bills in Northern Ireland are much lower than they are elsewhere in the United Kingdom and that rises in unemployment have not been as high. I am not saying that we should be complacent, but those are the facts. For example, last week in Whitehall, people were boasting that the average council-tax bill for band D — the mid-range band — will be £1,414 from next month, which compares with an average rates bill in Northern Ireland of £736.

The Treasury is well aware of those figures. Some Members are running around asking if I mention the difference in figures to the Treasury, which says a lot about their approach to such matters — they would tug their forelock to our masters at the Treasury. Of course the Treasury is well aware of the figures, but Northern Ireland is a devolved region in which the Assembly and the Executive are able to set their own policies. The Treasury respects that; we have arguments with each other, and I will come on to one of the main arguments that we are having with it. We must not forget that water charges are paid by all households in Great Britain and that the Executive have not gone down that road in Northern Ireland.

A wide range of measures have been introduced that will provide additional help to many hard-pressed households, particularly those on low incomes. Early-payment discount schemes and rates relief for those on lower incomes have been introduced, saving households considerable amounts of money. The rates-relief scheme is targeted at those who are on low incomes and just outside the housing benefit threshold, and it provides assistance to around 20,000 of our most vulnerable households. Together with the housing benefit system, around 200,000 people get help with their rates. In addition, the transitional rates-relief scheme has provided £20 million to households over the past two years.

Since devolution was restored, better and increased targeting of rating relief has been achieved through the lifting of the pensioner savings threshold, which applies to the low-income rates-relief scheme, from £16,000 to £50,000; the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance; and the retention of the early-payment discount. The lone pensioner allowance has been widely welcomed by senior citizens and their representatives.

Reference has also been made to the council package introduced before Christmas, which has also played its part in helping keep district rate increases as low as possible in all 26 district council areas. That has reduced the overall rates bill for every rate-paying household.

5.30 pm

Those are all measures, which are already in place, that will help people in need through this recession. Members will be aware of some of the other measures that have emerged as a result of the review of the rating system and that are due to be introduced shortly. They include giving home-owning pensioners the ability to defer payments of their rates bills, as well as rebates for those who own their own homes and invest in energy efficiency measures.

Households that are dependent on the survival and success of smaller businesses will also be helped, through the small business rates-relief scheme, as well as the freezing of non-domestic rates in the coming year.

We also need to focus — as we are doing — on the take up of rates-relief schemes and rebates, so that hard-pressed families and pensioners receive all their entitlements. That is particularly important in these difficult days. I want to ensure that people are aware of what is due to them, and that the application process is made as easy as possible, and we have already taken steps to address that.

Some Members may pooh-pooh all that: they may say that it is not the right thing to do, and that we should be doing less of this kind of activity. I do not believe that that is right. A balance must be struck, but I believe that it is important that we are shown to be trying to do what is necessary to help people who have been facing very considerable challenges.

In the December monitoring round statement, we announced a number of schemes to assist those most in need. Reference has been made to the £150 fuel poverty payment, which will be made and which will be extended to a further 50,000 low-income households, allowing 150,000 households to benefit.

As usual in a debate such as this, comments have ranged far and wide. The debate crosses a wide range of issues. For instance, the Programme for Government, capital investment and wider Budget issues have been mentioned, which do not necessarily relate to the

debate on household bills. Again, I hear this nonsense about there being a black hole in the Budget. Mr McNarry and others have referred to a black hole in the Budget and are telling us that there is a black hole in this year's Budget. We are about to end the financial year, and there will not be a black hole in the Budget, just as there will not be any black hole in the Budget in future years.

Members have suggested that some kind of hole has been blown in our plans on net capital investment. Net capital investment will be around one third higher this year than it was in 2007-08. Comparing that with other areas — as some Members have suggested — it is a considerable level of net investment in the economy of Northern Ireland.

As regards capital receipts, nobody in their right mind is going to sell off property — not least the Government. Along with every Member of the House, I would be asking questions if Departments were flogging off assets at this moment, during a downturn in the property cycle, rather than holding on to them until it becomes more sensible and profitable to sell them off in the future. Of course, the assets are being retained for that purpose: however, the net investment in the capital infrastructure of Northern Ireland is £1.5 billion this year — £1.6 billion gross — and we could have done more had capital assets been realised. However, they could not be realised because of the points that I have made. They can still be realised and are, therefore, available for future investment.

There is no question of there being any significant issue as far as the capital investment programme is concerned. Members have mentioned the money that has been lost from the sale of the Crossnacreevy plant-testing station. Of course, that is an issue as far as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is concerned, but there will be projects coming up in 2009-2010 and 2010-11 that will not proceed, which will make up for that money not being realised through Crossnacreevy.

These are the sensible ways of approaching the situation, and we know that these things will happen because they have already been indicated — for instance, by the Department of the Environment in relation to water infrastructure issues. If Members were to take the time to look, listen and learn, they might not be coming out with some of the nonsense that they have done.

Concerns have also been expressed about the implications of the £5 billion savings — the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel raised that issue — that the Treasury is seeking from all UK Departments in 2010-11. The exact implications will only become known when the Budget is announced, and we will be watching that carefully.

However, to have the audacity of Mr McNarry and Mr Beggs to come in here and lecture the Assembly about the finances of Northern Ireland, when they are part and parcel of a party that is proposing severe and swingeing capital expenditure cuts in Northern Ireland of well over £100 million, which they would implement from April — from Wednesday onwards — if they had their way. How they can stand here and lecture everyone else about the finances of Northern Ireland, when they are involved with a party — of which, we heard today, their current party leader might have been treasurer if things had gone according to plan — which would actually propose such cuts.

I hope that the Ulster Unionists stick to that policy, if that is what they really believe in, and that they will be going through the Lobbies in support of it in the Assembly, and that they will stand by those sorts of policy commitments. We oppose the imposition of such cuts as part of the settlement for Northern Ireland, whether from a Labour Government or a Conservative Government. Unfortunately, that is not where the Ulster Unionists stand. They might have stood there once, but they stand there no longer.

With regard to the issues that were raised about the financial package: of course, the financial package was an issue that no one ever raised when devolution was agreed in 1998. There was no demand by the Ulster Unionists or anyone else for any kind of financial package, at any point. They ignored it, there was silence, they never asked for anything. Of course, what we have achieved in that respect has been considerable. Not least, the Ulster Unionists choose to ignore the fact that only a few months ago we managed to get £800 million to ensure that the Treasury would not be levying non-cash costs on the Northern Ireland Executive — money that would have to be found as a result of the deferral of water charges.

At no time do I expect any of the Members who raise those issues to take those matters on board. I do not know whether that is a question of financial literacy or just a pure decision not to take those matters on board, but either way they need to face up to reality. The Ulster Unionists, of course, is a party that came up with a crackpot idea just before Christmas about how to deal with the financial situation of Northern Ireland.

The party's spokesman, Mr McNarry, came up with the crackpot idea that what they should do is go to the Treasury with a list of all the Government assets in Northern Ireland, borrow all the money against them — which is, of course, totally at odds with Treasury policy; if he knew anything at all about Treasury policy, he would know that the idea was nonsense — then we take all that money, wait a few years, then sell off all the assets at a higher price, give the Treasury back its money, and pocket the rest.

That was the crackpot idea from a crackpot politician about the finances of Northern Ireland. Yet, he talks about the DUP, about the Executive — in which two of his Members are Ministers — and about financial responsibility. That is the standard of financial responsibility from the Ulster Unionist Party, which is now allied with the Tories in seeking to cut the budget of Northern Ireland. That is the reality to which the Ulster Unionists have to face up, and no amount of windbaggery, bluster and fantasy-world economics or politics will divorce them from the fact that they have been exposed on those issues.

They now have to answer, in the real world of grown-up politics, how they can ally themselves with a party that is now going to propose severe and stringent cuts to the public expenditure position of Northern Ireland. That means cuts to health, education, schools, housing, environment and all the rest of it — let them answer.

**Mr Ford:** I hope that the final challenge from the Minister was not directed at this corner of the House. Anyway, we will let others answer for themselves at a different time.

As Stephen Farry said when he proposed the amendment, the Alliance Party had some concerns about the original motion: it is just a tad self-congratulatory; not, of course, that anyone else in the House has ever engaged in such a thing. We believe that the motion has been improved significantly by the proposer's willingness to accept the amendment, which at least emphasises the fact that it is not simply a matter of saying that untargeted benefits to everyone is of most help in a time of recession, but to recognise the need to target measures at households on low income. That is, clearly, where we now stand, and that has been the bulk of the contributions from different corners of the House; except, of course, from the two unionist parties, which seem to spend most of their time attacking each other.

As Stephen Farry did not quite say, I believe that we are all now at least neo-Keynesians. On behalf of the Keynesians in this corner, we welcome the conversion of some Members, although, sadly, not yet the entire House.

I will not go over the whole issue of the capital budget. The Minister referred to the lack of money that we currently face because there is no point in selling assets whose value has diminished. However, the case could be made that spending on infrastructure is the best way of dealing with the recession; it would create long-term benefits and provide incomes for people who are out of work, particularly in the construction industry.

Although I welcome the reduction in the rates burden in a region of low income, I recognise that it has implications for when the Treasury imposes the so-called efficiency savings. Mitchel McLaughlin highlighted that point when referring to the Barnett

formula and efficiency savings. My problem is that I see little benefit in suggesting the sacking of a few front line workers, such as classroom assistants or nurses, describing the money saved as “efficiency” and giving a bonus to the relevant permanent secretary. In no way is that a justifiable use of public expenditure, but we seem to be facing that.

Mr McNarry, in his elegant and erudite contribution, suggested that the motion is a silly stunt that is unworthy of the House. Most of private Members’ business appears to constitute stunts, and I have seen many that are worse than this one. Through contributions from elsewhere in the House, the Assembly has at least had a serious discussion on economic policy, albeit tangential to the original motion. That has been good for all of us. Immediately after Mr McNarry, Declan O’Loan, for example, engaged more positively with concerns about unemployment. He highlighted issues on which greater expenditure and investment are necessary, which is the kind of thing that we should be looking at.

Sadly, Mr McQuillan and Mr Shannon merely played the role of sucking up to the Minister. However, they do it so well that they deserve a mention.

Claire McGill talked about the opportunity for end-year funding and looking at an anti-poverty strategy monitoring. There is serious engagement, therefore, elsewhere in the House on this issue. The Assembly will not solve the capital budget problems in one afternoon, and there are wider public expenditure issues. However, having referred to our all being at least neo-Keynesians, I was pleased that the Tories on my left — geographically — have proved that they are not yet Keynesians, even if the rest of us have got there. The Minister, therefore, still has an education role in getting those points across.

Alasdair McDonnell made some points that should be noted. He rightly made the point that household bills tend to go up but never down. He also said that people look to the Assembly for action, not hot air. If the debate has been solely about the words of the motion, or even the amendment, I fear that it has been simply hot air. However, if the debate is a measure of how Members are starting to look, in detail, at the proposals being made from around the House, and if every Minister and Department demonstrates a similar level of engagement, we will have more to go on.

The Minister talked about the need to balance expenditure, and I believe that he is right. The Alliance Party does not consider the Minister’s balance of expenditure to be quite right. However, the discussion must continue. The Assembly should have had a proper Budget process this year, but in-year monitoring at least ensures that we can continue to seek to achieve the correct balance. The concern of the Alliance Party, which we put into the amendment, is that generalised

benefits would replace benefits targeted at those who are most in need. That came through in much of what the Minister said.

The debate has usefully covered many issues, and the motion, as amended, will be a positive statement calling on Ministers to move forward.

**Mr Weir:** At the risk of being accused of sucking up to the Minister, I will try to summarise the valuable debate. As Jim Shannon pointed out, the financial pressures on households are at the top of the agenda, and that applies even to “ordinary households”, as Claire McGill described them. Those pressures are at the heart of the debate.

In case there is any lack of clarity, the DUP is happy to support the Alliance Party amendment, possibly despite, rather than because of, Mr Farry’s speech. Nevertheless, as I point out to Stephen, a win is a win.

Simon Hamilton proposed the motion and highlighted the ongoing economic context and the position that the Assembly inherited. Our approach to rates contrasts strongly with that taken in the years before the Assembly was re-established in 2007, during which there was an increase of 85% in the regional rate.

We were faced with a situation whereby industrial rates were bit by bit heading towards 100%, but we put a freeze on that, and we have been able to hold them at their current level. Mr Hamilton highlighted a range of issues with regard to district council rates relief, rates-relief savings, and the lone pensioner allowance. In the spirit of the amendment, 17,000 pensioners have benefited from that allowance, and, in my constituency, about 1,500 pensioners have benefited. That is not to be sneezed at.

5.45 pm

We got mixed messages from the Member who moved the amendment, but we sometimes get those messages from the Alliance Party on the issue. Dr Farry rightly spoke of the logic in protecting household income and said that it was sensible in avoiding raising taxes. Yet, at one stage, it was slightly unclear whether he actually supported the freeze in the regional rate. Indeed, he somewhat begrudgingly said that he felt that the Executive might have stumbled across doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. However, I will correct him on one small point. The fuel payments that people are receiving were not described as winter fuel payments. They were actually — *[Interruption.]*

At the end of the day, people will benefit, and we all welcome that.

Mitchel McLaughlin made the valid point that every Minister must make a contribution, and he put it in the wider context of the broader economic sphere. Against that, as well as the point that the Ulster Unionists missed, he highlighted the pressures that may come from the

Labour Government. However, the Minister made the point that if the Conservatives were in Government, drastic and swingeing cuts would be put in place.

I do not know whether Mr McNarry could be described as the Patrick Moore of the Northern Ireland Assembly — constantly gazing trying to find black holes — or as the Scarlet Pimpernel, because he delivered his speech and then disappeared. He gave us an analysis that was about as dodgy as an expense return from the Home Secretary, and he accused us of stuntery. It would perhaps be wrong to draw too many conclusions from that, but the words “pot” and “kettle” come to mind when referring to Mr McNarry.

A number of Members highlighted the £1 billion package. That package was delivered through the deferment of water charges, the renegotiation of the reinvestment and reform initiative, and by digging ourselves out of the mess that the previous Administration left. The Member made a valid point, as did Mr O’Loan, when they said that where we can protect jobs, we should do so. However, we must realise that there is a limitation on that, as state aid rules will limit what we can do.

Mr O’Loan made a fairly positive contribution, but, not surprisingly, he mentioned the old chestnut of the housing sector being top of the agenda. One would be disappointed if he did not mention the Housing Executive.

**Mr Hamilton:** It took him three minutes and 20 seconds to mention it.

**Mr Weir:** That was quite surprising. Our focus needs to be on action. Indeed, among the range of issues that I have mentioned, the delivery of money to households that are on low incomes, as well as the help that is forthcoming for small businesses, is real, positive action.

Mr McQuillan highlighted a number of measures that are in place to help the elderly. Claire McGill, not surprisingly perhaps, referred to Strabane and Omagh. As with the SDLP on housing issues, that is a familiar theme. However, she highlighted the important need to keep pressure on household bills to a minimum, and she said that there is a need to help “ordinary households”, as she put it. That is what we believe we are doing, and that is why we support the amendment.

Addressing fuel poverty through the warm homes scheme, as well as the additional money that is being decided on by the Executive, will provide a solid basis. However, we need to ensure that we keep it under review to make sure that it is moving forward.

Jim Shannon, while discussing the concern of rural households, highlighted the positive steps that have been taken. We have more support for construction projects than we have had at any time in the history of Northern Ireland.

He highlighted a range of issues such as water charges, and the money that has been secured in that respect. Those factors would be under threat if our friends in UCUNF (Ulster Conservative and Unionist — New Force) or NICUP (Northern Ireland Conservative and Unionist Party) — or whatever else they want to call themselves nowadays — got into power.

Then we had the contribution of Mr Beggs, whose spirit of statesmanship and oratory was reminiscent of Churchill. Unfortunately, it was not Churchill of the Second World War, but the dog from the TV adverts —

**A Member:** Oh yes.

**Mr Weir:** Oh yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs voiced his concern that the DUP was boasting about low rates and taxes, and was deeply concerned about the House of Lords Committee. I would be very surprised if Mr Beggs did not place his full trust in one member of that House of Lords Committee — Lord Trimble — to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, but then again —

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** No. The Member did not give way on a number of occasions when he was asked to. Therefore, I do not see why I should extend that courtesy to him.

Mr Beggs clearly does not have a great deal of faith in Mr Trimble. Perhaps that is the one point on which he is correct. Mr Beggs also castigated the Executive, saying that the Programme for Government was becoming less meaningful by the day. However, I participated in a TV programme with his party leader some months ago, and when asked if the Programme for Government should be renegotiated or recasted, he said that it should not. He said that it was as sound as when it was drawn up, and that the basics remained the same.

Alasdair McDonnell, in a very worthy contribution, highlighted the universal nature of the problems facing us. He highlighted the inflationary, and sometimes above inflationary, effects on electricity, gas, petrol and food prices. He indicated — and I would agree that it is undoubtedly the case — that there is a limitation on what the Executive can do. That is because many factors are international in nature, and are therefore outside of our control. Furthermore, he highlighted that one of the levers at our hand is the regional rate, and the DUP and the Executive have worked hard to keep that regional rate at a frozen level. He also highlighted the valuable contribution of the warm homes scheme and winter fuel payments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel rightly talked about getting the balance right. He spoke of the expansion of the rates-relief scheme, and of the important message that we need to send to our constituents that rates relief is not always taken up. He also spoke of fuel payments, intervention in the early payment of rates and



some movement in small-businesses rates relief, which will be of use in protecting our indigenous businesses.

The Minister also spoke of the need to avoid imprudent use of assets, which those like Mr McNarry, who is keen to sell off the assets at every available opportunity, should perhaps take heed of. Indeed, at times, Mr McNarry displays a degree of economic illiteracy that is really quite frightening.

I am not quite willing to be labelled as holding to Keynesian economics —

**Dr Farry:** Neo —

**Mr Weir:** Or neo-Keynesian. I just wonder how “neo” Dr Farry is being when he refers to it in such terms.

As Mr Ford highlighted, it is important that efficiency savings are not used as code for sacking people who provide front line services. Indeed, if that is the case, it would be a sign of mismanagement in Departments. Efficiencies should genuinely mean efficiencies.

I welcome the debate, and I urge Members to support both the motion and the amendment.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the difficult economic conditions as a result of the global economic downturn; notes the impact on household bills; notes the increase in the regional rate during the period of devolution between 1999 and 2002, and again under direct rule between 2002 and 2007; notes the freeze in the domestic regional rate; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that every possible step is taken to reduce pressure on the bills of householders in particular through targeting measures at those householders on low incomes.

*Adjourned at 5.54 pm*

