
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 5 May 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During the sitting on Tuesday 28 April, Mr Poots, Dr McCrea and Mr Paul Maskey raised points of order that related to the convention on questions following ministerial statements. Before I refer to that convention, I will address a number of issues.

I have considered the remarks that were made to the Deputy Speaker by the Members concerned, and I must tell the House that I am disappointed by the manner and the nature of the challenges to which the Deputy Speaker was subjected. Let the House be in no doubt — I place a clear warning on the record today — that challenges to the authority and impartiality of the Chair will not be tolerated under any circumstances. If Members have any doubt about the seriousness of the matter, I refer them to page 220 of 'Erskine May'.

On the matter of calling Members to speak, the authority of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers is as clear in this House as it is in other places. Members must be in no doubt that the Speaker's decision to call or decline to call a Member to speak is not open to challenge. Those matters are also dealt with on page 220 of 'Erskine May' and could not be any clearer. Points of order of that nature will be considered a direct challenge to the authority of the Chair and will not be permitted.

On 26 January this year, I reminded the House that references should not be made to the Clerks of the Assembly. In relation to the remarks in question that were made by Mr Poots and Dr McCrea, I again remind the House of that ruling.

Turning to the convention on questions following ministerial statements, I would simply draw Members' attention to pages 34 and 35 of the 'Assembly Companion', where it is set out in very clear terms. Those terms should address the points raised by Members last Tuesday. I ask Members to study the companion, to reflect on all my remarks made today in

the House, and, in particular, to bear in mind that the decision on whether or not to call a Member to speak rests at all times with the Chair.

I caution the House that I do not intend to take points of order on any of the matters on which I have ruled this morning. If Members wish to raise points of order on any of the rulings that I made this morning, I will be extremely happy to talk to them outside the Chamber. If Members want to raise other points of order on the rulings that I made this morning, I will be happy to talk to them outside the Chamber as well. I hope that this morning I have made myself absolutely clear on the authority and impartiality of the Chair.

Dr W McCrea: Mr Speaker, on a point of order —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have made it absolutely clear that I am not taking any points of order on the issue on which I ruled this morning. If a Member has a genuine point of order on another issue, I am happy to take it.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council Environment Sectoral Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) environment sectoral format meeting.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I am tempted to ask for a point of order, Mr Speaker, on your last ruling before I make this statement, but I will desist.

Mr Speaker, in compliance with the requirements of section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and on behalf of Minister Murphy and myself, I wish to make the following report on the ninth meeting of the British-Irish Council environment sectoral format meeting that was hosted by the Jersey Government in Mont Orgueil castle, Jersey, on 17 April 2009. The report has been agreed with Minister Conor Murphy, who also attended.

The UK Government were represented by Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Minister for Sustainable Development and Energy Innovation and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords, who chaired the meeting. I was accompanied by Conor Murphy MP MLA, Minister for Regional Development, to represent the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Michael Kitt TD, Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Jersey was represented by Senator Freddie Cohen, Minister for Planning and Environment. Guernsey was represented by Deputy Peter Sirett, Minister for the Environment Department. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by Jane Davidson, AM, Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing. Scottish Ministers were represented by Stewart Stevenson MSP, Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change; and the Isle of Man by John Shimmin MHK, Minister for Local Government and Environment.

Ministers reflected briefly on the creation of a new BIC work stream, which will focus on energy. Ministers understood the need to ensure that the two work streams remained separate entities — marine energy and grid infrastructure — but recognised the need for each work stream to be kept abreast of developments in the other so that impacts and synergies could be identified. Professor John Mitchell from the Met Office Hadley Centre gave a presentation updating the group on current climate change science.

The group was also given an update on the UK climate projections ahead of this summer's launch of the sixth generation of climate scenarios. The

remainder of the discussion focused on what the group could do collectively to support the adaptation programme and how Administrations could best use the data to support their own programmes on adaptation. Member Administrations agreed that there should be a workshop on climate change in the autumn.

Ireland indicated that officials from the Irish and Manx Governments are close to completing a revised joint paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste. That paper will address current operations at Sellafield, their safety, the final disposal of radioactive waste and the control of environmental discharges. It is expected that the paper will be ready for discussion at the next ministerial-level meeting.

Members considered update papers on the Fishing for Litter initiative and from the subgroup on integrated coastal zone management. It was agreed that marine will be the theme for the 2010 ministerial meeting. To that end, Ministers were provided with a paper setting out where Administrations were able to work together on marine issues in the past. The paper put marine issues into context and reflected on the mechanisms for outputs. The group discussed how best to work together over the next 12 months and agreed a set of actions that will be reviewed in 2010 as part of the work plan for that ministerial meeting. Ministers also discussed and agreed the themes for the 2011 and 2012 meetings, which will be waste and biodiversity respectively.

The meeting concluded that the adaptation work programme will continue and that further updates will be given next year. There will be a review of the work programme on marine to include a progress report on Fishing for Litter. Ireland will submit the joint discussion paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste, and there will be a paper on waste that will outline areas for co-operation in preparation for a waste-themed event in 2011.

Finally, Ministers welcomed and noted the tenth ministerial meeting of the BIC, which will take place in London in 2010.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he clarify whether MLAs, particularly those from the east coast, will have an opportunity to provide input into the discussion document on Sellafield?

The Minister of the Environment: As the Member will know, power stations and the disposal of nuclear waste are reserved matters. However, the Department of the Environment provides input into the monitoring of radioactive waste and is responsible for legislating and regulating on matters relating to the management of radioactive waste, which includes participation in the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely programme. Therefore, MLAs have opportunities to provide input through questions and debates in the Assembly and

through issues raised at the Committee for the Environment, where departmental officials are brought along to talk about the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely programme. The programme was initiated by the UK Government in 2001. I appreciate what the Member is saying because I know that this is an issue in his constituency. The Department's participation in the programme recognises Northern Ireland's interests in ensuring that the most appropriate and safest way forward to deal with the UK's legacy of higher activity and long-lived nuclear waste is identified.

The Department has an input into the Radioactivity in Food and the Environment report, which is published annually and contains input from all of the environment agencies across the United Kingdom. In order to produce that report, the eating habits of 800 people who live in Northern Ireland are monitored and the level of radioactivity in their food is measured. To date, those surveys have shown that less than 0.5% of the radioactivity that people receive comes from sources in the Irish Sea. In fact, 50% of the radioactivity to which we are subjected comes from household items. Extensive monitoring, to which the Department has input, is ongoing, and, of course, Members can contribute to that input through activities in the Assembly

10.45 am

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister referred to the new work programme that will focus primarily on energy. In light of the UK Government's target that all energy — the main uses of which are electricity, space heating and transport — should come from renewable sources by 2020, will the Minister outline any plans that his Department has to increase radically the amount of renewable energy generation to be used for space heating and transport by then?

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is not responsible for either transport or space heating, and I do not wish to delve into matters for which the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development are responsible. However, there are two elements in the Department of the Environment's role in meeting our renewable energy obligations.

First, the Department has a role to play in planning for wind energy generation. Given the planning applications that we have already received under PPS 18, we are well ahead of our target, and the applications that have already been granted will enable us to meet the targets that have been set for 2012.

Secondly, and this matter was touched on in the BIC meeting, the Department has a role to play in offshore energy generation, whether through wind or tidal power. The Member will be aware that under the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill and the Northern Ireland marine Bill, which will be brought forward to

the Assembly [*Interruption.*] we will consider how planning policies can be put in place to ensure that there is a framework that allows the development of those sources of renewable energy. Although it is not my Department's responsibility — it is DETI's responsibility here — there is considerable scope for harnessing the power of the sea and offshore wind, and my Department is responsible for developing the planning policies that will enable that to happen.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to check that their mobile phones are switched off or are at least in silent mode.

Mr Ford: I continue the point on climate change. The Minister's statement referred to the fact that much of the discussion at the BIC meeting focused on support for the adaptation programme. Can he inform the House whether the other Administrations mentioned remediation and cutting carbon emissions, or was that his viewpoint on the matter?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member had listened to my statement, he would have heard that it was agreed by me and the Minister for Regional Development; it is not my personal take on the BIC meeting. Furthermore, I do not think that the Member would expect any statement from me to the Assembly simply to reflect my personal opinion. Indeed, at the end of my statement, I summarised the points made and agreed by Ministers: the meeting concluded that the adaptation programme will continue and that further updates will be given next year. There will be a review of the work programme on marine, as agreed at the meeting. Ireland will submit a paper for joint discussion on Sellafield, and there will be a paper on waste that outlines areas for co-operation. Those were the issues that were discussed and the agreements that were made.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire.

I welcome the Minister's statement. In the light of the announcement that there will be a workshop on climate change in the autumn, what input will the Minister commit to make on behalf of the North of Ireland and the Assembly? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: The terms under which the workshop will work have not yet been agreed. However, I will receive relevant briefings and papers from my departmental officials. Given that it is a workshop, I am not sure whether there will be any requirement for the Executive to agree those papers — I think that it is only the papers for the British-Irish Council meeting that the Executive agree. Considering that we are not yet aware of the agenda for that workshop, I cannot give a conclusive answer to the Member as to what Northern Ireland's input will be.

Mr Beggs: In his statement, the Minister mentioned different forms of energy and the importance of having a suitable infrastructure. During the discussion, was there wide recognition of the importance of developing an electricity infrastructure so that renewable energy generation could be developed? Was electricity production, which is a significant issue, discussed in detail and recognised? Furthermore, were the opportunities for tidal power that exist around the Northern Ireland coastline discussed?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member is right. All Administrations — not only those in the United Kingdom, but that in the Irish Republic — need to look at the importance of having a suitable infrastructure. That matter was discussed. This is another area in which there is probably an overlap between the Department of the Environment and DETI, but discussions were held on the key issue of having a grid infrastructure that could link up the various renewable energy projects — tidal projects in Scotland or wind-power projects off the coast of England and Wales or, eventually, that of Northern Ireland — so that we could have better opportunities to use renewable energy.

The Member will know that one of my concerns about the reliance on wind energy has been and continues to be its requirement for a considerable back-up of conventional energy. That is because the wind may be blowing in one place but not where the energy is needed. Therefore, a strong grid infrastructure is required so that we can tap into renewable energy that might have been generated in other parts of the United Kingdom, including offshore in other parts of the United Kingdom.

During the discussion on the issue, the point was made that such an infrastructure will not come cheaply. The investment in the grid infrastructure will be quite expensive, and that will be reflected in energy prices.

Mr Dallat: Given that the Minister's statement is light in content and considering that the meeting took place on the beautiful island of Jersey, did he have an opportunity to wander around the island and pick up some good ideas on how we can clean up our environment and protect our listed buildings — that is, buildings of architectural merit that get knocked down?

The Minister of the Environment: I am not sure what relevance that question has to the statement. However, we had an opportunity to see round the island. I am glad that the Member asked that question, because it gives me the opportunity to put on record that the Jersey Government were hospitable and that they treated us well. One morning, we left the hotel to go to the castle where the meeting was being held.

Mr Kennedy: As one does.

The Minister of the Environment: As one does, of course. We were driven in Daimler motor cars around the perimeter of the island. I enjoyed that part.

I always like to exchange views on climate change and global warming, so I sought out the professor from the Met Office, who is originally from Downpatrick. I had the good fortune to travel in the car with him and the Environment Minister from the Welsh Assembly Government, and we had an extensive discussion on the impact of carbon on climate change. I must say that the irony of driving around Jersey in a car that does about eight miles to the gallon talking about carbon output and climate change seemed to be lost on my two travelling companions. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable experience.

The Member may be interested to know that one of the issues that we discussed was what could be done to address the big problem of sea litter. The Welsh Minister contends that it is a bigger problem for her than it is for us because the tidal movements are such that a great deal of sea litter is carried onto Welsh beaches. The beaches in Jersey were impeccable, although I must emphasise that I saw them from afar; I did not get the opportunity to walk on them. Of course, although we try to deal with sea litter, once it comes ashore it becomes the responsibility of local councils. Indeed, in some places, it can be a considerable problem.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the position of the swine flu outbreak.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I will provide a further update on the influenza AH1N1 virus, or swine flu as it is more commonly known. Since my statement to the Assembly last week, there has been a number of new developments of which I would like to make Members aware. Many countries have confirmed cases of the swine flu virus, but outside Mexico and the United States the numbers of affected individuals remain low. As a consequence, the World Health Organization pandemic alert level remains at level 5. That indicates the increasing likelihood of a pandemic, but does not indicate, I must stress, that one is inevitable.

In the UK, 27 cases have now been confirmed, and in the Republic of Ireland one case has been confirmed. In Northern Ireland, there are no confirmed cases, and test results are pending for four individuals.

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

The lack of information and the uncertainty about the situation in Mexico makes it difficult to establish exactly what the impact of the virus will be. During previous pandemics, such as the Spanish flu in 1918, it appears that the rate of infection abated over the summer, with an increase in cases over the winter. The lower summer rate of infection was also true of the Asian flu and Hong Kong flu in the 1950s and 1960s. We must, therefore, be on our guard and prepare for a potential further wave of the swine flu virus in the autumn, which may be more widespread.

It is also important that we use our stock of antiviral drugs carefully so that the public will be protected during the winter months. Preparations are under way, for example, to increase our stockpiles of antiviral drugs, and I will return to that issue in a moment.

We must take some reassurance from the fact that, to date, anyone who has contracted the virus outside Mexico has had a relatively mild flu, similar to the seasonal flu. In addition, it appears that swine flu responds well to treatment with antiviral drugs, and, in fact, some patients have recovered without antiviral treatment.

That does not mean that we will be complacent. No one can say for certain how the virus may change or if the situation will worsen. We have been planning for a potential pandemic for a number of years, and this country remains among one of the best prepared in the world.

My officials and staff in the Public Health Agency and the health and social care sector have been working tirelessly over the past week to ensure that there is robust surveillance and appropriate testing of individuals at risk. They have also put measures in place to ensure the immediate availability of antiviral medications to those who may need them. However, I reassure Members that we have no confirmed cases and are well prepared for any cases that may emerge.

11.00 am

I will now set out some of the measures that I have put in place. With regard to the production of a vaccine, the four UK Health Departments have sleeping contracts in place with manufacturers. That arrangement reserves our place in the global queue should production of a pandemic-specific vaccine become necessary. The contracts ensure that manufacturers reserve production capacity for the UK should a vaccine be needed. Given that it will take several months before a vaccine becomes available, we will, in the interim, need to ensure that we have adequate supplies of the antiviral medication that is proving effective in treating the virus.

We have a stock of antiviral drugs that will cover half the population, and steps are in place to increase that stock so that there will be sufficient antivirals to treat up to 80% of the population. No previous pandemic has been known to affect more than one third of the population. We have placed supplies of the antiviral medications in hospitals and in GP out-of-hours centres. In addition, measures are in place to ensure that an adequate supply of antiviral medication will be available in community pharmacies.

We know that the complications of influenza, particularly pneumonia, may require treatment with antibiotics. Although it is expected that antibiotics will be needed for only a small proportion of individuals who may develop swine flu, it is important that there are adequate supplies, and work is, therefore, under way to increase supplies of antibiotics.

The helpline that we set up in Northern Ireland has played a most important role in providing advice to anyone who has concerns. Since it was established last Thursday, around 800 people have called the helpline on 0800 0514 142. Information on swine flu is also available from the UK swine flu information line on 0800 1 513 513.

In addition to the range of measures that I have outlined, I emphasise once again the most important message, which is that members of the Northern Ireland public should follow good hygiene practices. Those include regular hand washing, using a clean tissue to cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and remaining at home if people develop flu-like symptoms. Those are simple, highly effective

steps that every individual can take and that will make a difference. That is why those messages have been reinforced in advertisements running on television and radio. A leaflet providing further advice and information for the public will be delivered to homes across Northern Ireland from the end of this week.

I continue to receive full and detailed briefings on the situation as it develops. I also have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues in other UK Administrations and in the Republic of Ireland. That has included daily meetings of COBRA, which is activated only in cases of national emergency or crisis, or during events abroad that have major implications for the UK. Those meetings, which I attend, are chaired by Alan Johnston, Secretary of State for Health in England, and the Health Ministers for Wales and Scotland participate also.

I assure Members that this issue is being taken seriously by Governments, not just in Northern Ireland but across the world. Internationally, the World Health Organization is taking the lead in providing advice and information on the ever-changing situation. At national level, the situation is being managed through COBRA and the four home countries. Locally, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Public Health Agency and the health and social care service are in the lead. Daily updates on the situation are issued to the media and to all Assembly Members. I will, of course, report again to the Assembly if there are significant changes in the current situation. In the meantime, Members can remain assured that we have the necessary capability to respond to the swine flu virus. The Health Service is well prepared, and I thank staff in the service for the commitment, support and dedication that they have demonstrated in the face of a potential pandemic.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement to the House and for coming to the Committee last Thursday to brief members. The Minister referred to four cases here and said that the results of those are pending. When are those test results due?

I would also like to ask the Minister about the use of the antiviral drug Tamiflu. In a previous statement, and at the Committee, the Minister told us that the flu is susceptible to treatment by that drug. He said that we have a sufficient stock of the drug and referred to the need to use that stock very carefully.

I had understood that the drug was given only to people who have flu-like symptoms and who may have been in contact with an infected person. However, over the weekend, there were media reports about a confirmed case of the flu at a school in London. The school was

closed as a result, and reports suggested that the 1,200 children at the school had all been treated with the Tamiflu antiviral drug as a precaution. Will the Minister clarify whether that drug has preventative qualities or whether it can be used only to treat symptoms?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The preventative measure comes from a vaccine that is yet to be developed. Isolation of the virus seed will allow the manufacturers to proceed with the development of that vaccine. Discussions in that regard are ongoing between COBRA and the manufacturers.

It is true that we need to be careful with our stocks of Tamiflu and other antiviral drugs. The stock is enough to cover 50% of the population, and that will rise to 80% cover. However, we are still using the regular supply of antiviral drugs and are not yet dipping into the stock. If an individual tests positive for the flu, all the contacts that that individual might have made are treated with the antiviral drugs. That is done in an effort to contain the spread of the virus, because the UK is in a containment phase.

Four tests are being run in Northern Ireland, and such tests have been negative to date. The first response has been to issue Tamiflu to those people suspected of carrying the flu and to take specimens for testing. I cannot give an exact time frame for when the results of the four tests will come through, but it will be as soon as possible.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. I note that he is giving daily updates to the media. The public will also be kept informed by the leaflets that will be delivered to every household, by adverts in newspapers, and so forth. Can the Minister assure the House that there is a co-ordinated and clearly recognised link between his Department and local media outlets so that accurate, up-to-date and factual information will be readily available to the general public in Northern Ireland? That will ensure that needless anxiety is avoided and that the focused response to the threat is clearly understood by everyone.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes; I can give that assurance. We have made every effort to keep everyone as well informed as possible. Public awareness and knowledge is a key defence in this situation. There are messages about hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene: people are being told to keep washing their hands, to use a tissue if they cough or sneeze, and to cough it, bin it and destroy it. Those messages are a very effective part of the containment phase. We will continue to brief the media on a daily basis and to share those briefings

with Assembly Members. I continually seek to provide updates when we have specific information to provide.

The battle is ongoing. The Spanish flu outbreak arrived during the spring in the form of mild flu symptoms. It abated during the summer and returned at its most destructive in the winter; that was its pattern. I am not saying that it will be the same with swine flu. Spanish flu was an avian virus, and swine flu is a mixture of avian, human and swine elements. However, it could follow the same pattern, and we are planning for that eventuality. We plan for the worst and hope for the best. We must do that, because come the autumn, we may be facing the second wave of the virus.

Mrs Hanna: I also thank the Minister for his update on the situation — it is much appreciated. I also thank him for all his hard work and that of colleagues in anticipation of the arrival of swine flu. The work on the vaccine is also very welcome. As the Minister said, who knows what will happen? The vaccine may be needed later.

What is the reaction of the Minister and his colleagues to the World Health Organization's statement that it is not, at present, considering a move to level 6, which is pandemic status?

The Minister of Health, Social Security and Public Safety: The response is international, national and local. The World Health Organization is responsible for the international response. It took us from level 3 to level 5 rapidly, and we have set responses as each of those levels is reached.

The important message that the World Health Organization gave is that, as yet, there will be no move to the pandemic level, which is level 6. However, that should not be interpreted to mean that we should be complacent. We must continue our preparations and be on our guard. Level 5 means that a pandemic is likely, but not inevitable. That is the current situation. The world's best expert scientists and virologists cannot be certain in their predictions. We deal only with probabilities and likelihoods.

Mr McCarthy: I also thank the Minister for his update to the Assembly on the situation with swine flu.

I have heard that we may be able to improve upon measures that were taken at our seaports and airports with the distribution of information leaflets and precautions. Will the Minister respond to that, so that visitors, on arrival in Northern Ireland, may be reminded of the dangers?

The Minister of Health, Social Security and Public Safety: I take Kieran McCarthy's point, and we have been responding to those concerns since early last week. For example, I was with Public Health Agency staff at Belfast International Airport who leafleted the passengers who were coming off planes. That is a

standard practice that also happens at George Best Belfast City Airport. I thank the management of both airports for their help and co-operation.

The same precaution is taken at seaports, where leaflets are distributed. It is an important precaution to take, just in case folk who arrive here do not understand the situation.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The precautions against swine flu carry serious financial implications. Has the Minister discussed them with the Executive to secure the necessary resources? What is the shelf life of the vaccine?

The Minister of Health, Social Security and Public Safety: The shelf life of the vaccine is limited to one year because the virus mutates annually. That is certainly the case with the annual flu vaccine. Every year, we distribute hundreds of thousands of units of the flu vaccine. Any that are not used are destroyed, because the virus mutates. Viruses are very intelligent organisms and they mutate constantly and, therefore, vaccines must change.

As to the financial implications, the cost of purchasing the vaccine — when it is available — will be considerable for Northern Ireland. I do not want to put a figure on that today. Stockpiling antiviral drugs and antibiotics will also cost a great deal. Furthermore, the effort that we put into leafleting and expanding public awareness through advertising and the provision of information will result in extraordinary expenditure that has not been anticipated.

However, none of that matters as long as we are prepared properly and are ready for a pandemic, should it hit us. It is important that we do everything possible to ensure that the population does not come to harm.

11.15 am

Mr Gardiner: Like other Members, I thank the Minister for his swift action in bringing the issue to the House and to the Health Committee. In fact, he has moved so fast that he might quickly earn a reputation as the 'Action Man' for the health, welfare and good of the community in Northern Ireland.

Given that we are facing an epidemic, because people in other parts of the world are already suffering from swine flu, how will the Budget be affected if extra expenditure is being used to protect people?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Preparations are well under way. I do not want to put a figure on it; however, our share of the national budget for vaccines will have to be met. I have seen the figures, and considerable sums of money are involved in preparing a vaccine for UK-wide distribution. Our Barnett formula share will be considerable. The costs for the other measures are only

estimates at the moment. There will be budget implications, but I do not want to get into that. My officials are having ongoing discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials.

Mr Dallat: I also congratulate the Minister. I am sure that his performance in respect of the swine flu outbreak must have accounted for his high rating in the 'Rate Your Minister' feature in today's 'The Irish News'.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that complacency is a problem. Even this morning, I note that the DUP has not asked one question in the Assembly. What does the Minister propose to do over the next few months to ensure that complacency does not creep in and that, in fact, we reap the rewards in the autumn, as some people have predicted?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Complacency is one of our enemies in this process. There is a sudden scare, then nothing appears to be of serious consequence and people get complacent. However, we are always warning people not to be complacent about this issue. I have outlined the simple measures that the general public can take, such as hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and self isolation at home if one has flu-like symptoms. Those are the key messages, and it is important to repeat those messages. I have to make sure that the health and social care system in Northern Ireland, for which I am responsible, is not complacent and that I keep this threat uppermost in our minds, because of the inherent danger of the population coming to harm if this outbreak of swine flu follows a Spanish-flu-type pattern.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I thank the Minister for his statement. I also take this opportunity to commend the Minister and his officials for their handling of the issue to date and their daily updates to MLAs. It is useful that the Minister's Department can use Members as a conduit for providing information.

The Minister said that there may be an increase in the number of swine flu cases over the winter, given the recent patterns of major outbreaks of flu. Has the Minister considered increasing the number of people who are entitled to get the normal flu jab this winter to ensure that at least normal flu viruses are kept at bay and to prevent confusion between normal flu and swine flu? Given that cases of swine flu have been confirmed in England and Scotland and that one case has been confirmed on this island, is it inevitable that swine flu will hit here, and are we prepared for that?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The vaccine for the normal annual flu viruses will be issued again this autumn. Sometimes, the uptake by people for whom the vaccine is procured is disappointing. I expect, and hope, that the uptake this year will show a gain and be much stronger.

Looking ahead, I think that there is a threat of complacency and as is often the case, of appearing to wait for something to happen. Swine flu contains the inherent threat that it may follow the pattern of other viruses. If it does so, I hope that the benefits of all the measures that we have put in place will be demonstrated to everyone.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not have a question. However, as I have the Floor, I commend the Minister and his officials on their actions. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his statement. Today marks his third appearance in the House within a week, and he also attended a meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Will the Minister pledge that he, the Department and staff throughout the Health Service will continue to make swine flu their number one priority and not allow themselves to be distracted by others in the House who may wish to sidetrack them? Will the focus remain on keeping people in Northern Ireland safe and on the work in which the Minister is involved nationally?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I assure the Member that swine flu is the number one priority. Whatever I may wish, the response of the World Health Organization means that I have no choice but to make it so and to work as one of the four home nations through COBRA. Swine flu is regarded as a national challenge, a national peril and a national threat. I will ensure that Northern Ireland is fully engaged and locked into the response.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Employment and Support Allowance

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

Mr Brady: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to make access to employment and support allowance easier for vulnerable claimants who have difficulty in understanding the complexities of the benefit and are unable to obtain the relevant information required to claim.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that I explain employment and support allowance to give the House a flavour of the complexities of the benefit.

Employment and support allowance could be described as a pre-emptive strike for the rest of the welfare reform Bill that is due to be introduced soon. It is a benefit for people who are incapable of work because of ill health and/or disability. From 27 October 2008, employment and support allowance replaced incapacity benefit for new claimants and the severe disability allowance and income support paid on the basis of an incapacity for work.

The two types of employment and support allowance are contributory and income related. Many of the rules of entitlement to the contributory employment and support allowance are similar to those that applied to incapacity benefit. The income-related employment and support allowance is paid to people who meet the general conditions of entitlement to employment and support allowance but do not meet those for the contributory allowance. The income-related allowance is also paid to people who are entitled to the contributory employment and support allowance and are on a low income. Such people are, therefore, entitled to both contributory and income-related employment and support allowance.

The means test for the income-related employment and support allowance is similar to that for income support. A person who claims employment and support allowance will receive it for an initial 13-week period, during which a work capability assessment will be carried out to determine what should happen subsequently. That has replaced the personal capability assessment as the method of assessing eligibility for incapacity benefit.

A doctor from medical support services will carry out the work capability assessment. I have spoken to a number of people already who have gone through that assessment. They found it to be even more humiliating

than the previous assessment. I spoke to one lady who told me that when she went to the examination, she was asked to undress and told to put on a gown. However, the only things that were tested were her reflexes. That is hardly a comprehensive assessment of her condition, which she has had for many years.

The work capability assessment is supposed to be made up of three separate assessments. The first is the limited capability for work assessment. One aspect of that is that those who are entitled to the high-rate care component of disability living allowance (DLA) are not automatically exempt. However, it is generally accepted, as it was in the past, by the Social Security Agency that those particular people are quite disabled, otherwise — and presumably — they would not be getting high-rate disability living allowance.

The second assessment is the limited capability for work-related activity assessment. People in that category will be identified as taking part in some form of work-related activity. The third assessment is the work-focused health-related assessment. Through that assessment, additional information is collected about the things that a person can do, despite their condition.

Following the three assessments is the ubiquitous work-focused interview. Unless a person is terminally ill or has a serious medical condition, they are expected to participate in an initial work-focused interview at which a personal adviser will discuss work prospects.

I will ask this question, just as I have asked it several times before without getting an adequate answer: what type of training will those personal advisers have received to allow them to deal with vulnerable people with particular medical conditions and, in many cases, complex mental-health issues? In the North, 43.3% of incapacity benefit claimants suffer from a mental or behavioural disorder. Yet, with the introduction of employment and support allowance, along with its complexities, those people are targeted, and they are the ones who are finding the benefit most difficult to access.

I have been dealing with benefits for approximately 35 years, and I have heard all the platitudes that Governments issue when they introduce changes. We are told continually that claimants will be better off and better treated and that everything will be simplified. To date, that has never happened. Benefits get more complex, sanctions are introduced, and money saving appears to be the main objective.

For people to claim employment and support allowance, they have to complete a form that is approximately 60 pages long. It is almost impossible to access the employment and support allowance branch within a reasonable time. I once spent over 30 minutes trying to get in touch with people in that branch.

Indeed, if someone is lucky enough to make contact, staff do not seem able to explain what the benefit is about. In one case, someone who had £20 credit on their mobile phone rang the branch, ended up paying £17 for the call, and was left with £3 credit on their phone.

By definition, people who claim employment and support allowance are vulnerable already because of physical and mental-health issues. The Minister must address the administration of employment and support allowance. Obviously, it is parity legislation; we cannot necessarily change the law, but we can certainly change how it is administered and improve on that. The Minister needs to send out the message to people that we are on their side. The benefit must become user friendly and not be just another cynical attempt to dissuade people who are entitled to the benefit from claiming. The introduction of one universal benefit seems inevitable. If that happens, we can only hope that it will be easier to understand — and much easier to access — than the employment and support allowance. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: As Mickey Brady said, and as Members know, employment and support allowance was introduced in October 2008 as a replacement for incapacity benefit. It is a good idea in theory. People with an illness or a disability and who want to work should be given as much support as possible in getting a job. People are better off when they are employed, and not just financially; their health, general well-being and self confidence are better.

However, no one can dispute the fact that employment and support allowance is, as Mickey Brady said, a complex benefit. I am concerned that vulnerable people may not be receiving employment and support allowance or other benefits to which they are entitled.

11.30 am

It is fair to say that there have been a few teething problems with the system, especially with the call centres and the availability of forms. Those problems have not been unique to Northern Ireland; Britain has faced the same problems. The main reason for the problems in the system is the fact that the number of enquiries about employment and support allowance has been much higher than had been expected.

Those issues have not been ignored by the Minister; the opposite has been the case. As soon as the Social Security Agency became aware of the problems with the forms, many new forms were sent out to the employment and support allowance centre and social security offices. People can also now download the necessary paperwork from the Department's website. Furthermore, many new call centre staff have been recruited and trained, and the whole telephone process

has been reviewed. Things have got much better, and we expect performances to continue to improve.

The Minister cannot be accused of ignoring the problem. In fact, she has done her best to solve the problem, and the situation with the call centres and the forms really is getting better. Of course, not everyone is comfortable using the phone or the Internet. Claimants for employment and support allowance get access to a trained personal adviser, a person who they can meet face to face. They can also bring someone with them to act on their behalf. If they need personal advice, they can get it from a real person. Vulnerable people need that, and they must get it.

I shall finish with a few words of support for the employment and support allowance call centre staff and social security staff in general. The introduction of employment and support allowance was a difficult time for them. They were often snowed under with their amount of work. It was not easy, and they did their best under the circumstances. It is clear that more staff and more training are needed, and, if that is what is required to get the benefit to the people who need it, the Minister will provide that. As those measures are rolled out, I have no doubt that the situation will continue to improve in the near future.

Mr Armstrong: I am fully aware that there have been some teething problems with the implementation of employment and support allowance. I have some sympathy with those who believe the process to be too lengthy and over-complicated, particularly when one reads about a 50-page ESA1 application form.

We must not lose sight of the reasons why the new allowance was introduced, and we must not give in to knee-jerk reactions because all is not working out perfectly from day one. Employment and support allowance is a step in the right direction. It is designed to enable those who want and are able to work to get back into work. That will benefit not only individuals, but the economy as a whole.

In Northern Ireland, we have to be responsible to our fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom and to play fair. In comparison with Great Britain, Northern Ireland has a large proportion of people who are in receipt of incapacity benefit, and our economic productivity is relatively poor. That partially explains why our average regional income is among the lowest of the UK regions. According to an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph', even when the local economy was doing well a year ago, a further 40,000 people would have been in the labour force if we had had parity with Great Britain.

There is clearly a problem with regard to the number of people who are in receipt of incapacity benefit, and the suspicion has to be that too many people are receiving benefits to which they are not entitled.

It would be irresponsible of me not to mention the ongoing problem of benefit fraud. Although it is important that people who are entitled to benefits receive their full entitlement in as straightforward a manner as possible, the fact cannot be ignored that certain members of society seek to cheat the system. Adequate checks and balances must be put in place to ensure that it is as difficult as possible for those people who wish to defraud taxpayers to do so, while ensuring that people who are genuinely entitled to benefits are not deterred from applying for them.

It is thanks to unscrupulous and deceitful people that checks and balances are necessary. If the benefits system is too lightly regulated, the likelihood is that scarce resources will be taken up by people who are not entitled to them. On the other hand, if the system is too complicated, there is danger that people who are genuinely entitled to benefits, particularly the most vulnerable, may be discouraged from applying. Obviously, a balance must be struck, particularly during the current economic climate when the number of job losses has meant that increasing numbers of people require benefits.

Finally, as employment and support allowance is a UK-wide benefit, any changes that are implemented in Northern Ireland would have implications for parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Such a move, however well-intentioned it might be, would lead Northern Ireland down a dangerous road. The Ulster Unionist Party is extremely reluctant to support any measure that might turn out to be the thin end of the wedge in respect of disadvantaging Northern Ireland's people.

Ms Lo: With 2.6 million of the UK population on incapacity benefit, I agree that reform of the system is needed. However, it is important to bear in mind that the emphasis of change should be to enable people to return to work and to provide adequate support and help for them to do so.

Recent research shows clearly that work is beneficial for disabled people, the majority of whom want to work. Work raises disabled people's self-esteem, offers discipline and makes them less isolated and better integrated into society.

During the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of people were put on incapacity benefit in order to keep unemployment figures down. Many of them got caught in the benefit trap and have become dependent on the state, which is not what they want. Of people who receive incapacity benefit and employment and support allowance, 40% have mental-health problems. Their conditions fluctuate; they have good days and bad days.

It is important, therefore, that they receive the right level of support and are not forced to attend interviews or to go to work. Their personal advisers need adequate training. I am aware that the Minister is looking at that

issue. It is important that advisers have the right level of understanding and sensitivity to work with individuals who have mental-health problems.

Lack of skills, rather than disability alone, is often the barrier to people's return to work. Adequate training is, therefore, extremely important to enable them to gain new skills and qualifications and to become employable. Recently, the Committee visited the Cedar Foundation and saw the good work that it does to train or retrain people, to help them to overcome their disabilities, and to break down barriers so that they can obtain meaningful jobs in society.

The entire benefits system is complicated, not just employment and support allowance. Older people and young people, not only those with disabilities, miss out on claiming. Therefore, it is important that information is available at the right time. A straightforward application process is the key to helping people obtain work and leave the benefits system. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to raise some issues that have been brought to my attention by my constituents. Several Members have already mentioned the issue of phones, and a number of Assembly questions relate to the cost of phone calls and the length of time taken to answer them. I have spoken to someone who knows about those matters. The equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the strategic business review contains evidence of attempts to address those problems, and I commend the Minister and her officials for that. However, it is important to see how those attempts work out.

The EQIA mentions that it is difficult for people from rural locations to travel to Belfast, where the administration of employment and support allowance is centralised. Those people travel to their local office, but what happens when they arrive there? Can they use the phone? Is there a dedicated employee to whom they can speak? I have been told that people who use phones in those offices do not have adequate privacy. Who takes time to attend to the "vulnerable claimants" to whom the motion refers? Can employees leave their own work to help them?

In a question for oral answer, Jim Shannon said that, in his experience, it took approximately 52 minutes for someone to answer the phone. The EQIA attempts to address some, but not all, of those issues. Moreover, Mr Molloy asked a question for written answer about unanswered calls, and I was surprised at the Minister for Social Development's response. Approximately 15,000 calls were unanswered between October 2008 and January 2009. Has that issue been addressed? If not, it is important to do so, given that the motion calls on the Minister to improve access to benefits for vulnerable claimants who have difficulty understanding the complexities of the matter.

Another issue that has been raised with me is the duplication of sick certificates or, as they are known, sick notes. What is happening with that situation? Do the certificates go somewhere? Are they not being properly logged? Why have vulnerable people been asked to submit a second certificate? That issue must be addressed.

It has been brought to my attention that, when a phone is answered, the person who answers does not always know what he or she is talking about. Training may be required. I have been told that it sounds as though the employee is reading from a computer screen. Although we have to move on, and modernisation is the name of the game at this stage, where face-to-face engagement does not exist, training is, perhaps, necessary in order to help vulnerable claimants. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the motion. Claire McGill and other Members have talked about vulnerable people. Anybody who has worked in the benefits system over the years will know that it can be confusing and that changes can be difficult to understand. Therefore, claimants, at times, become traumatised and distressed when a new system is introduced.

Employment and support allowance is a new benefit with a new access system, and, as with any new benefit and system, there will be teething problems.

11.45 am

Mr Brady: When pension credits were introduced, there were teething problems, and it took the Social Security Agency in Derry, in the Member's own constituency, at least three years to get its act together. Does the Member accept that that is a reasonable time frame in which to fix teething problems?

Mr P Ramsey: I know only too well what happened in Derry when pension credits were introduced, and we hope that that will not be the case with the introduction of employment and support allowance. I am sure that the Minister will ensure that that does not happen.

During discussions with groups representing people with disabilities in my constituency, it became clear that there has been a positive engagement between the Social Security Agency and representative groups about problems in accessing employment and support allowance and that the agency is now dealing appropriately and effectively with many of those problems. That interaction and co-operation is needed and is most welcome.

I will outline some of the current concerns that were brought to my attention, which centre on clients with learning disabilities. The first concern is about the use of the telephone system, because people with comprehension or communication difficulties are at a disadvantage when using the telephone. Such people should be clearly directed to advocacy organisations or

properly trained Social Security Agency representatives who can deal with their cases in the most effective and diligent way. That course of action requires a high level of insight and sensitivity from Social Security Agency staff. It is important that correct guidance and help is given in every case.

The second concern that was raised with me is that people with learning disabilities are not necessarily sick and may not have, or need, a medical report; indeed, they may not even be able to obtain a medical report. The form solicits information about physical or mental-health problems, not learning disabilities. Perhaps the form should have a section that deals specifically with learning disabilities, where supporting information could be requested from education or social work sources rather than medical sources.

The third concern is that there is a problem for people with disabilities who want to work but are worried that they will be transferred from employment and support allowance to jobseeker's allowance. In many cases, people with disabilities are at a disadvantage when it comes to finding a job, particularly in the current economic climate, and they should not be put through the rigours of the jobseeker's allowance system. I do not think that the Department or agency intends that they should be disadvantaged, but claimants, particularly those with disabilities, who want to enter employment through the Pathways to Work route need to be reassured that they will not be placed on the jobseeker's allowance route. That route is appropriate for non-disabled people but inappropriate for people with disabilities.

As some Members mentioned, people have encountered problems with phone lines. In recent weeks, however, the problems seem to have been solved. Will the Minister outline the reasons for the initial problems and what actions have been taken to solve them?

Members referred to several problems, and Mr Brady raised the issue of pension credits. I sincerely hope that those people with a range of disabilities across a wide spectrum — whether mental-health problems, physical problems or learning disabilities — will not have to face the crisis that occurred in the city of Derry. Although the office or agency may be based in the city, it must represent every constituent across Northern Ireland who needs access to employment and support allowance. I am sure that the Minister will deal with that effectively.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion was tabled because of Members' ongoing experiences of speaking to people who have made claims for this new benefit. Sinn Féin Members, and Members from all political parties, have asked questions about the introduction of employment

and support allowance and the impact that it will have, and is already having, on the most vulnerable people in society who receive social security benefits.

The British Government have proclaimed that the new benefit is a major step forward that will shape the payment of benefits in the future. However, that raises many questions about why it has been introduced in the first place. We have been told that there will be winners, but we have not been told how many losers there will be when the new benefit is introduced.

In fact, many people believe that this is just the beginning of what will become a universal benefit, replacing most, if not all, benefits. It is a matter of great concern that most people believe that the introduction of employment and support allowance has more to do with reducing the number of people who receive incapacity benefit — some 100,000 people across the North — rather than providing a better service, which was the stated reason for its introduction.

Neither has the impact of 30 years of conflict on communities in the North been taken into consideration. As a result, large numbers of people are still suffering from various levels of mental illness, severe stress and depression. In the past, we have highlighted the question of the ability of a customer's personal adviser to be able to deal with different degrees of mental illness. We have argued that those advisers are not equipped to handle people who fall into that category.

I also understand that people who claim this benefit will be asked to attend medical centres for a 75-minute to 90-minute assessment of what type of work they may be able to carry out. Mickey Brady dealt with some of those issues. Such assessments will be carried out by specially trained medical doctors, according to the available information. However, most GPs do not have the necessary training to assess people who are suffering from mental illness. It takes someone with psychiatric training to deal with such cases.

The Parkinson's Disease Society has also voiced concern that, as is the case with people who have mental-health problems, people with visible impairments or with fluctuating conditions that are not recognised are likely to be worst affected by the proposals. If an assessor incorrectly classes a person as having the more manageable symptoms of Parkinson's disease, the stress of attending work-focused interviews can exacerbate the illness and can result in the condition being misunderstood and wrongly classed as manageable.

The Parkinson's Disease Society, along with the Autistic Society and Macmillan Cancer Support, have expressed a number of concerns and difficulties that they believe can have an impact on claimants. In March 2008 my colleague Mickey Brady asked the Minister for Social Development:

“to detail the training programmes that have been put in place for staff involved in interviewing people with mental health problems”.

In a written answer on 11 April 2008, the Minister responded, stating:

“A two-day training programme will be delivered to all staff who will deal with Employment and Support Allowance customers”.

She went on to state that that would include:

“a session on health and disability.”

If that is the level of training that staff will receive, it calls into question their ability to deal with people who have mental-health problems. I must ask the Minister whether she has taken those concerns on board, and if so, what steps her Department has taken to implement the necessary safeguards to ensure that people are not penalised because of their disabilities or different forms of mental illness.

It has been stated that eight out of 10 people who were questioned about attitudes to work said that they would prefer to work rather than be on benefits.

Mr Brady: In view of some of Mr Armstrong's disparaging remarks about people who claim benefit, does the Member accept that the Social Security Agency lost more money last year as a result of clerical errors than it did from alleged fraud?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr F McCann: The Member is right. He has raised the issue on more than one occasion during meetings of the Committee for Social Development.

People have said that they prefer to work rather than being on benefit — of course they would say that. If a benefits office official asks a claimant whether he or she wants to work, the answer must be yes, or the claimant risks losing the benefit. If a claimant is asked whether he or she is able or capable to work, the answer will be different. The Minister told us that there had been a few teething problems, but that the Department is on course to rectify them. Perhaps that is what her senior officials are telling her, but it does not reflect what is happening. Staff morale is low because they are not equipped to deal with the changes.

Several people came to my constituency surgery last Friday seeking assistance with claims for employment and support allowance, having been advised to go to their local Sinn Féin office by Social Security Agency (SSA) staff. The explanation for that was that the Social Security Agency office did not have the phones to allow them to make a claim. Two people were on the phone in my constituency office for 45 minutes trying to make a claim for employment and support allowance. That is becoming a regular occurrence, because no free phones exist in the local SSA offices and people have nowhere else to go.

Furthermore, many people can apply for employment and support allowance only after their eligibility for income support ceases and it can take between three and four weeks to finalise a claim. The only option left to those people is to apply to their local Social Security Agency office for a crisis loan. That can be very distressing, especially when people are ill or are suffering from mental illness and given that they are only applying for the benefit in the first place due to illness.

On 12 December 2008, I asked a question about the British Telecom (BT) telephone line that people are being asked to use to make their claims. I raised my concern that many people are not connected to BT and use either another provider or their mobile phones. When those people ring the claim line, they are kept waiting for upwards of 45 minutes.

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

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank the Members who have contributed to today's discussion. I welcome the opportunity to update Members on the progress made in introducing employment and support allowance and to explain the service that the employment and support allowance centre is providing to all customers, particularly vulnerable customers.

The Social Security Agency introduced the new allowance at the end of October 2008. Employment and support allowance is an integrated contributory and income-related allowance for anyone who is claiming benefit on the basis of a health condition or disability that affects their ability to work. It provides a financial and work-related support structure, and it replaced incapacity benefits for new claimants from 27 October 2008.

Employment and support allowance focuses on how people can be helped into work. The allowance does not assume automatically that a person who has a significant health condition or disability is incapable of working. Entitlement is based on the effects that a condition has on a person's capacity to work rather than on diagnosis.

It is estimated that over £15 million more will be paid to people receiving employment and support allowance in the next five years compared with what has been paid in Northern Ireland through incapacity benefits. This is not about saving money, as some Members have said. Many of those who will benefit from the additional money are the most vulnerable customers, who will be almost £17 a week better off under employment and support allowance than they would have been under incapacity benefit.

The principle of employment and support allowance is that everyone should have the opportunity to work and that disabled people and people with a health condition should get the help they need to engage in

appropriate work if they are able to do so. The allowance focuses on what people can do rather than what they cannot do.

It is clear that Members are passionate about protecting those who are most vulnerable in society. I share those concerns and recognise the need to ensure that those people receive the necessary support to access services, and that they are dealt with sensitively. I assure Members that I recognise the need for the vulnerable in our society to access services, including advice on employment and support allowance, and that those people are dealt with in a sensitive manner regardless of their condition.

It is clear that many who claim benefits are vulnerable people, and that includes those with learning disabilities or mental health conditions. It is important to give them the support, advice and guidance that they need. When Social Security Agency officials were planning to introduce employment and support allowance to Northern Ireland, paramount in their thinking was that vulnerable customers would require additional assistance. Therefore, although the most efficient method for making a claim for employment and support allowance is via the telephone, it was recognised that some vulnerable customers may require the support and reassurance that can be provided by face-to-face contact.

Prior to the introduction of employment and support allowance, officials consulted widely with stakeholders, including political parties, customer representative advice groups and those representing section 75 minority groups. Feedback showed the overwhelming consensus to be that customers should be provided with choices as to which method of claiming best met their individual needs. Although the provision of a telephone-based claims service is undoubtedly an improvement to our services, it does not suit everyone. I instructed officials to ensure that claim forms were available in jobs and benefits offices, social security offices, and in the wider voluntary and political-advice sector.

12.00 noon

Therefore a range of those forms was circulated to advice centres and to all MP and MLA constituency offices, if they wanted them. In addition, a dedicated telephone line is available for MPs and MLAs who have cases that they want addressed immediately. For the more technically minded, claim forms can be downloaded from the Department's website.

The outcome is that employment and support allowance customers have more application channels than were available to those who claimed the old incapacity benefit. In March this year, 79% of callers to the employment and support allowance centre who were seeking to make a claim chose to use the

telephony route rather than to request a form. It is clear, therefore, that the telephony channel has proved to be very popular with many people.

However, recognising that using the telephone is not suitable for everyone, the Social Security Agency has alternative arrangements in place. Customers can receive assistance to complete a claim form in their local jobs and benefits social security office or at advice centres across Northern Ireland. When employment and support allowance telephony agents become aware that a customer needs help to make a claim — for example, someone who may have a learning disability — they can arrange for an urgent appointment with staff at the customer's nearest jobs and benefits social security office. Customers can also appoint a representative to act on their behalf when applying by telephone or clerically.

Customers can arrange for employment and support allowance staff to telephone them at a convenient time. The member of staff will then assist them over the telephone as they complete a clerical claim form in their own home. A textphone service is available for customers who have speech or hearing difficulties, and an interpreter service is available on the telephone or at face-to-face appointments for those whose first language is not English.

I understand the concerns that some Members have, particularly where the most vulnerable in society are concerned. The Social Security Agency has recognised the need for the employment and support allowance centre staff to be trained in how best to handle their contact with vulnerable customers. At the request of the agency, Disability Action provided awareness training for employment and support allowance staff, which helped them to see the process from the perspective of a vulnerable customer. The training also helped to identify ways in which the benefit's complexity could be explained and how staff could best assist customers who may require additional support.

In order to provide further assistance to make access to employment and support allowance easier and to improve understanding of the new benefit, my Department has implemented an outreach programme to promote the services that the employment and support allowance centre provides and to educate audiences on the telephone claim-taking process. Through that programme, the employment and support allowance centre has supported customer representatives further on the claim-taking process. That ensures that representative groups for vulnerable customers are kept informed fully of all information that is relevant to their client groups. In addition, material is tailored to cater for the particular needs of individual groups.

The Department also has a facility to ensure that vulnerable customers who have mental health issues or learning difficulties have fully understood the requirement to take part in a medical examination and work-focused interview. Those issues were raised by Pat Ramsey and Fra McCann. I should explain that, in normal circumstances, when customers do not attend their medical examinations or work-focused interviews, their benefits may be reduced or discontinued. However, in the case of vulnerable customers who have mental health issues or learning difficulties, a member of the agency's staff will visit them at home to explain their rights and obligations and to ensure that they understand the implications of non-attendance. If Members have specific cases that they feel have not been investigated fully, perhaps they will let me know, and I will ensure that officials attend to them as quickly as possible. However, the facility safeguards those customers from being unnecessarily penalised, and none of us wants that to happen.

The new employment and support allowance telephony service is part of the Department's commitment to ensuring that customers experience the most accurate and efficient claims process. The facility to make an application by telephone helps customers to get their money sooner by cutting out postal and processing delays.

There is no doubt that such a major change to the benefits system has been challenging. When I visited the centre in January, I saw at first hand the dedication and commitment of managers and staff to supporting people through the employment and support allowance claim-making process, and I was very impressed by what I saw. As is the position in Britain, the call volumes for employment and support allowance in Northern Ireland have been significantly higher than anticipated at the initial planning stage. Pat Ramsey asked about the reason for that. To address that issue, the Social Security Agency has implemented a telephony-management and process-management plan. Some 18 additional staff were recruited in January and February, and I can further advise the House that another 46 staff joined the employment and support allowance centre between February and April.

Mickey Brady, Fra McCann and Pat Ramsey mentioned the approach to people with learning disabilities. The arrangements for people with learning disabilities are similar to those for other benefits. In the majority of cases, their claims are made via third-party advocates. Social Security Agency staff do not prejudge callers. If difficulties arise during a telephone call, staff will advise that it may be appropriate to have a face-to-face meeting in a local office or to arrange a home visit. It is worth noting that staff at the employment and support allowance centre have had no complaints in respect of customers with learning disabilities. Any

possible transfer of customers with learning disabilities from employment and support allowance to jobseeker's allowance is a matter for the Department for Employment and Learning. People who are assessed as having severe disabilities will fall into the support group and be exempt from the work capability assessment.

Mickey Brady said that people feel humiliated by the medical examination and consider it worse than previous medical examinations. The agency's disability analysts, who perform the work capability assessments, are experienced medical practitioners who have a background in general practice, so they are medically qualified to carry out those assessments. Mr Brady also raised the issue of the cost to customers who use mobile phones. Staff at the employment and support allowance centre always offer callers the opportunity of being phoned back, which prevents customers from running up large phone bills. If Members know of any instances when customers have not been offered that opportunity, I ask them to let me know.

Claire McGill raised the issue of unanswered calls. In a very thoughtful contribution, she differed from her colleagues by thanking employment and support allowance staff for their very good work in recent months. Their level of performance has improved substantially, and it is set to improve further as new staff who are currently being trained return and consolidate their skills.

I wish to praise employment and support allowance centre staff for the progress that they have made. I reassure Members that the SSA has in place robust processes and systems to meet the needs of all but particularly those of our most vulnerable customers. Our overriding aim is to ensure that those customers are supported in understanding the complexities of employment and support allowance, and that they are provided with the relevant information, including the number of ways to claim employment and support allowance, so that no vulnerable customer is prevented from receiving the support to which they are rightfully entitled.

I like to think that two of the Sinn Féin Members who spoke during the debate — Fra McCann and Mr Brady — are not trying to sacrifice the vulnerability of certain people through political point-scoring, because that serves no purpose, and it definitely does not assist people who are suffering from disabilities, who are vulnerable and need all our help and assistance at this time.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mickey Brady for proposing the motion. I remind the Minister that she is not that important in comparison with the needs of people who are disabled or vulnerable. Every Member has the prerogative to raise concerns. For accuracy's sake, the Hansard report should be checked. I heard Mickey Brady say clearly that the introduction of the employment

and support allowance was extremely complex and very challenging to staff. On the basis of his experience, which, he assured Members, amounted to more than 30 years, he detailed the efforts that have been made to smooth the transition and pointed out that, to date, they have failed.

Mr Brady's concerns were reflected by a few other Members. Issues about the work-focused interview were also raised by Pat Ramsey and Fra McCann. It is worth noting that, as Anna Lo explained at length, many vulnerable people who have disabilities and who face ill-health challenges want to work. However, their physical, emotional and mental capacity renders them unable to do so. To that end, everyone — apart from Billy Armstrong, whose remarks I will come to later — recognises that there is a difference between people who want to work and those who cannot. The motion provides the opportunity to outline our concerns about how to make the transition to employment and support allowance smoother.

There have been difficulties in that transition. For example, the many questions that have been asked and points that have been made in the debate indicate that there were not enough staff. Time will tell whether that has been corrected. There were massive problems with the provision of phone lines. Thomas Burns has assured Members that the form has been reduced from 60 pages to something much smaller —

Mr Burns: Fifty-nine.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK, Thomas, to 59 pages. However, the new approach adopted by the Minister after she listened to people will make the claims process smoother and less stressful. That is something that most Members who spoke in the debate want too.

Billy Armstrong's remarks were nothing short of disgraceful. It may be every Member's prerogative to say what he or she wants to say, and many Members have exercised that right since May 2007, but Mr Armstrong's Thatcherite approach — to regard people on benefits as spongers — is remarkable. I am more convinced than ever that Billy and perhaps the rest of the Ulster Unionist Party would not know a vulnerable person from a dipped soda. I will say no more about what Mr Armstrong said in the debate. We will check the Hansard report for the accuracy of his remarks.

Mr Brady intervened to point out that more money was lost through clerical error than in benefit fraud. That is something to which we should all pay attention.

Claire McGill spoke about the issue of the phones. Claire, Anna Lo, Fra McCann, Pat Ramsey, Thomas Burns and Mickey Brady voiced their concern for vulnerable people presenting themselves at a benefits office. I urge Members to walk through that whole journey. Those people may not be able to use e-mail; they may have numeracy and literacy issues that

prevent them from filling in forms or explaining their problems to already-overstretched staff in a local office; and maybe they cannot take up the offer to use a phone.

I am delighted that disability awareness training has been given to support staff who process claims. That is not a slight on staff. We know the stress that staff have experienced and continue to experience. We also know the stress that the independent advice sector has experienced as a result of the introduction of this benefit. From chatting to other Members, I know that people who cannot get an appointment quickly enough are coming into constituency offices.

I invite the Minister to circulate those figures again, because that would be helpful. I do not know enough about such cases myself; I must lift the phone and make two or three calls to find out what the craic is.

The issue is that some claimants are being offered crisis loans. However, the very term "crisis loan" creates a crisis because people feel that they are getting into debt. That is particularly the case for older people. When people imagine a crisis and debt, they walk away. What happens as a result? People go without benefit.

12.15 pm

The work-focused interview was another issue that was raised. Many of us have enough experience, albeit at different levels, to know about certain issues, and I know from my experience that a lot of months ago, a wee veiled threat was made against people who have mental health problems in particular and who have missed their hospital appointments to see consultants. No one in this place made that threat, because, despite what I said about Billy earlier, a lot more sense than that is spoken here. People on programmes such as 'The Stephen Nolan Show' suggested that those who miss their interview should be struck off. That is ridiculous, because the people concerned are very vulnerable.

The same is happening in this instance by default. People who miss their work-focused interview may lose their benefit. They are penalised automatically until the reason that the interview did not take place is established. Sometimes that can happen a week or so later, with the result that there will be a gap in benefit. The benefit will be backdated because that is the law, but we need to take on board the journey of stress that has occurred.

I am glad that the Minister has taken on board some of the concerns that all members of the Committee for Social Development raised. Indeed, the volume of questions about the introduction of the benefit indicated that Members across the North have had clients — perhaps people who work in the independent advice sector — come to them and tell them of their experiences. I am also glad that the Minister now supports the employment and support allowance, despite having

voted against it in the Hain Assembly. However, that was then, and this is now.

The reason for the motion is that anything additional that can be done to help vulnerable people should be done. We are really interested in seeing the smooth transition of this benefit. We are also really keen to ensure that staff who work in the offices and in the independent advice sector receive additional support. The process should be made simpler and easier for people who try to access the benefit because the baseline is that people who are ill or are dependent on benefits are caught in the poverty trap and may be experiencing physical, emotional and mental difficulties. The last thing that those people need is additional pressure.

I thank Mickey Brady and my colleagues for proposing the motion. I assume that the House will give the motion its full support. I commend the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to make access to employment and support allowance easier for vulnerable claimants who have difficulty in understanding the complexities of the benefit and are unable to obtain the relevant information required to claim.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. Rather than begin the next item of business, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.18 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Costs of Division

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

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

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly regrets that the Deloitte Report 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide', commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in 2006 has not been acted upon; and calls on the Executive to ensure that the potential to tackle both the direct and embedded costs of division are addressed within the current, and future, spending frameworks, and that the opportunities to provide shared and integrated goods, services and facilities are fully realised.

At this time of economic recession, many MLAs and Ministers are rightly seized with the need to find efficiency savings in Government and throughout public expenditure. Indeed, it is interesting to note the increased speculation about the potential for savings from changes to the institutions, whether from rationalising the number of Departments or from cutting back on the number of MLAs. Those measures are, of course, worthy, and the Alliance Party has long been committed to reforms in those areas.

The claimed potential savings of £50 million only really scratch the surface of the inefficiencies in our society, and, even then, the scale of what is claimed will emerge not only through direct savings, but through more efficient and effective joined-up government that must address the underlying costs that people incur when engaging with the Government. Anyone who is serious about finding efficiency savings in Northern Ireland cannot afford to avoid addressing the huge costs involved with the fallacious attempt to manage a divided society, rather than attempting to build a genuine shared future.

The Alliance Party has regularly talked about the cost of division to Northern Ireland, which is in the region of £1 billion each year. Those costs are apparent in at least four respects. First, there are the direct costs

of policing riots, other civil disturbances and parades; the policing resources that are required as a result of security threats; and the costs to a wide range of agencies of repairing damaged buildings and facilities.

Secondly, there are the indirect costs of providing duplicate goods, facilities and services, either explicitly or implicitly, for separate sections of the community. Those include schools, GP surgeries, job centres, community centres, leisure centres, and even bus stops. Indeed, those costs are not just borne by the public sector, but by the private sector.

Thirdly, and related to the second aspect, there are many hidden factors associated with division that impact on the cost environment to which Departments and agencies must respond.

Finally, there are the lost-opportunity costs to inward investment and tourism. Although the Northern Ireland economy has performed better in recent years, it is still performing well below its potential capacity. Division also has implications for our labour market.

The figure of £1 billion a year and the wider theme of the costs of division have not just been made up by the Alliance Party. It is a major structural problem that has been recognised by academics and many other commentators in our society.

Mrs Long: Perhaps the Member would agree that the First Minister acknowledged the problem when he said that the task is large, but that that is no reason for us not to try to tackle it and that it is important to do so?

Dr Farry: Indeed, and I acknowledge the fact that the First Minister recognised the problem when he was the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but, sadly, that has not been reflected in formal Government policy, whether that be in the Programme for Government or the Budget.

Within Government circles, the theme was perhaps first explored, in January 2002, by Jeremy Harbison in the background paper that he provided to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), which was intended to be the precursor for the new policy on community relations and which, in effect, became 'A Shared Future'. In March 2005, 'A Shared Future' was finally published under direct rule, and we must ask ourselves why every progressive community-relations action has happened under direct rule, rather than devolution. Perhaps that debate is for another day.

However, that document recognised that there was a strong financial and economic imperative to building a shared future, and it declared that the notion of "separate but equal" was unsustainable. Subsequently, within the first of the triennial action plans that arose from 'A Shared Future', OFMDFM commissioned a piece of research into the cost of the divide, and that

led to the Deloitte report, which was finalised in April 2007 — just before the restoration of devolution.

I do not want to spend too much time looking backwards, but it is a matter of regret that, under devolution, OFMDFM has disowned the Deloitte report. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister dragged its feet over the publication of the report, and it took a freedom of information request from the Alliance Party to force OFMDFM's hand on it becoming public.

The big headline that came out of the Deloitte report was that the cost of division was, potentially, as high as £1.5 billion each year. Regardless of whether the cost is £1 billion, £1.5 billion or something smaller, it is a major distortion in Northern Ireland's Budget. When we talk about the departmental expenditure limits of the Budget, we are talking of only £8 billion, so one can see that this is a massive distortion. It is not a theme in the Programme for Government or the Budget. That type of situation would not be sustainable at the best of times, but in the worst of times, such as in this recession, and with the Treasury's financial tightening looming, there is a major imperative to get on and to start tackling the problem.

I am the first to accept that the Deloitte report is not perfect, but, at the least, it should be used to inform the conversation and to signpost further work on the road ahead. Deloitte worked out its figure of £1.5 billion on a crude comparison between public expenditure on social and economic needs in Northern Ireland and that of Wales. On a policy-by-policy area, the individual analysis did not add up to £1.5 billion. The report was good at identifying the direct costs of dealing with a divided society and the opportunity costs in lost investment and tourism. However, it was weaker in calculating the costs associated with the duplication of goods, facilities and services, and the cost pressures that build up from divisions.

No one will argue that £1 billion can be released in one spending round or across several rounds. The distortions may well take a generation to be unravelled fully, but it is critical that we make a start, and it is critical that we do so today. Considering the enormity of the current economic and financial pressures, that start needs to be within the current Budget framework as well as within the forthcoming comprehensive spending review.

I want to highlight a few examples of where work can begin. Over the next two years, the Northern Ireland Executive have to produce another £123 million in efficiency savings. It may be tempting for the Executive to use the additional £116 million that they will receive as consequential of the Barnett formula arising out of last month's Budget. However, those additional resources are supposed to be used for

boosting our economy through investing in training and employment, the green economy and social housing. The Alliance Party believes that the Executive now have the opportunity to seek to address that £123 million in efficiency savings by beginning to address the cost of division.

Next week, the Alliance Party will publish its own paper on how savings can be generated by tackling division and segregation in our society. It will not be easy, and, at times, we will have to invest in order to save. We will have to invest in new shared services and facilities before we can wind up the old ways of doing things, but, again, we must make a start. It may not be a case merely of cutting out expenditure, but of addressing the underlying cost pressures that many Departments and agencies are facing up to.

The biggest cost pressure arising from duplication arises in education. Northern Ireland pays a premium of as much as £300 million each year to have a sector-based education system. No one is suggesting that we move to a one-size-fits-all system, but difficult decisions will have to be made with respect to the rationalisation of the school estate. Sharing and collaboration between schools and sectors will have to be pursued more rigorously. Integrated education should be viewed at the apex of a range of options for sharing rather than, as now, as a further fragmentation of an already fragmented system. Integrated education is the financially sustainable way forward for schools.

Issues of duplication must be faced up to by the Departments of Health, Social Development and Employment and Learning. With regard to pressures on Departments' cost environments, DSD faces problems with dealing with the inefficiencies of a segregated social housing system and the opportunity costs of blighted land. DETI faces pressures in having to invest in selective financial assistance which is disproportionate with those of neighbouring jurisdictions in order to attract inward investment.

The Alliance Party recognises that a significant element of the cost of division that was identified by the Deloitte report comes from policing and justice. There are perfectly rational reasons for that, given the present circumstances. In the longer term, however, those differentials will have to be narrowed, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. At the moment, additional cost pressures will first have to be met and addressed as we move — I hope — to a devolved system.

The SDLP amendment deletes the motion's reference to addressing the "direct and embedded" costs of division. Although the amendment mentions investment in new shared facilities, which we welcome, it ducks the structural problems that exist in the system at present. That issue was not addressed in the SDLP's recent discussion document, in which that party

claimed that a potential £400 million of new money could be found. Therefore, I am not sure exactly what that party hopes to achieve, but I will be interested to hear what its Members have to say.

I urge the Assembly to support the motion, which deals with an extremely serious topic. Northern Ireland can no longer afford to live with the current distortion of public expenditure, and we must make a start on sorting that out.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Executive” and insert

“to ensure that the opportunity to provide shared and integrated goods, services and facilities is fully realised to promote a shared and better future; calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to revise the Programme for Government to take account of these matters and to publish without further delay the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the Budget accordingly.”

I welcome the attendance of junior Minister Donaldson. The cost of division cannot be measured solely in social and economic terms. As we in Northern Ireland know only too well, the cost of division has been lost and broken lives, so building a shared and better future for all our people must be a priority for the Assembly and its Executive. Indeed, the Programme for Government 2008-2011 states:

“Working together we can build a shared and better future for all — a society which is at ease with itself and where everyone shares and enjoys the benefits of this new opportunity. This is our commitment to you.”

Two years on from the restoration of devolution, how have the Executive measured up? The Deloitte report on the cost of division was effectively binned by Sinn Féin, whose Members refused to allow it to be discussed at the OFMDFM Committee for the flimsiest of excuses — that it was commissioned under direct rule and, therefore, has no standing today. The lifetime opportunities strategy was adopted somewhat belatedly by OFMDFM in December 2008, after several months of rubbishing it. Despite the existence of their eight special advisers, neither the DUP nor Sinn Féin could come up with any new creative thinking, so the strategy was adopted.

In proposing the motion, Dr Farry outlined the costs of division, and those segregation costs are huge. Opportunities have been lost. The Deloitte report stated that the financial cost of what was described as a “major structural problem” was almost £1 billion. The SDLP amendment calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the Budget and the Programme for Government, not only to look at the cost of division in building a shared and better future, but to take account of the global economic constraints and financial difficulties that we all face.

Elsewhere, Governments are bringing forward emergency Budgets and revised Programmes for Government, but not this Executive. The Finance Minister obstinately refuses to bring forward a new Budget or to have a debate on the Programme for Government, which was developed in very different economic circumstances to those in which we are living.

We already know the fate of the land sales upon which much of the Budget was predicated. We also know that Workplace 2010 has been put on hold, if not binned. Therefore, the financial circumstances are quite different now. It is right that a Budget should be revisited and a new Programme for Government developed at a time when the health, education and housing budgets are under pressure to meet the needs of those who are most disadvantaged and marginalised in our community.

Dr Farry spoke about the cost of division in respect of education, and he mentioned integrated education in particular. Although integrated education has its supporters, any suggestion that it might cure all ills is either touchingly naive or indicates a lack of ideas. Teaching our children that we should not hate one community because it is seen to come from the other side and that we should not be sectarian does not fall only on the shoulders of teachers; it is a parental responsibility. Education starts in the home and must be continued throughout the community and society.

2.15 pm

Tackling the root cause of division — sectarianism — needs leadership from the top. At different times over the past two years, we have been told by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that it would be bringing forward a strategy on cohesion, sharing and integration. In late 2008, junior Minister Kelly told the House that such a strategy would be brought forward before the Halloween recess, but that did not happen. Perhaps junior Minister Donaldson will have better news for us today. We have been told that it will be published shortly, it is on the timetable and the shared and better future strategy is in the Programme for Government, but we are not being told how it will be delivered.

The SDLP amendment calls for leadership, a revised Budget, and for the Executive to give that leadership in publishing the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. We are told that that strategy not only deals with sectarianism but with all forms of hate crime, and race crime in particular. In Belfast in recent weeks, we have seen the outworkings of those who attack people who have come to Northern Ireland to build a better future for their families. Many of those families have had their windows broken and have been forced out of some areas. Surely we all want to condemn and tackle such activities.

The SDLP's Minister, Margaret Ritchie, has stated on every occasion on which she has had the opportunity that it is the SDLP's desire, and her mission, to tackle and improve living conditions for all and, in particular, to build a better and shared future through shared housing and through the means at her disposal in the community and voluntary unit. One can contrast only what Margaret Ritchie has said and done with what has been said by junior Minister Kelly and by the First Minister and deputy first Minister: very fine words but very little action.

I will refer to another Margaret, one who is not often praised — if ever — by members of the nationalist community. Margaret Thatcher once said:

“If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.”

Perhaps that is the critical difference between Margaret Ritchie and other members of the Executive.

[Interruption.]

Listen to the words; do not shoot the messenger. Perhaps that is a message that Sinn Féin and others would do well to listen to. Just because someone for whom they have little regard or respect delivers a message does not make that message any less valid. Margaret Ritchie has shown that she is able to tackle the SDLP's aspirations in working for a better society and community for all.

I am somewhat disappointed by the attendance across the Chamber. No doubt those Members are engaged in other activities, perhaps promoting a message for the European election. I have carefully read the messages that some parties are publishing in their election literature: we will fight for the unionist people; we are going to Europe for a unionist voice. I am telling Members that the SDLP will go to Europe for all the people of Northern Ireland because when the party is in Europe, everybody wins.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht inniu.

I welcome the debate because it is about time that we had a conversation in the Chamber about the division of Ireland. The Deloitte report refers to costs incurred due to the unnecessary provision of services for communities that live side by side but do not integrate. What about the cost of dividing our country? What about the cost of duplicating almost every public service on a small island containing fewer than seven million people? What about the cost of running two health services? What about the cost of running two education systems? What about the cost of running two police services?

What about the human cost to cancer patients in the South's border counties who have to make daily trips to Dublin because the cruelty of partition prevents them from receiving treatment a few miles up the road

in the North? What about the victim of domestic violence in Letterkenny who was unable to get a bed in her local refuge and was prevented from accessing one in Derry because a legal anomaly of partition meant that her ex-partner could prevent her from crossing what is called the border? Those are the real costs of division in Ireland.

The Alliance Party calls on the Executive to ensure that the potential to address both the direct and embedded cost of division is fully realised in the current and future spending frameworks. I ask the Alliance Party to clarify whether it recognises the cost of partition as one of those embedded costs of division that need to be dealt with.

Dr Farry: Although I do not recognise the relevance of what the Member is saying in the context of the debate, I assure her that my party has always been clear in recognising that the division of Ireland creates inefficiencies in social and economic issues. That is why there are North/South structures in place, which are trying to find solutions that meet the needs of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Does the Member accept that even if there were a united Ireland, there would still be a divided society in what we call Northern Ireland and what she calls the Six Counties, and that there would still be the need for a community relations policy to deal with divisions between people of different identities?

Ms Anderson: It is typical of you to say that you do not recognise the relevance of what I am saying. Indeed, the nationalist and republican people believe that you do not care about their views. Perhaps you do not recognise the division that was so carefully fostered by an alien Government either.

Although we support partition being resolved, we do not believe that the Deloitte report will assist in that. The report on the cost of division, referred to in the motion, was commissioned under direct rule. It is not an OFMDFM report — it is a Peter Hain report — and in 2007, OFMDFM said that it would:

“not form the basis of future policy development”. *[Official Report, Bound Volume 25, pWA189, col 2].*

The Deloitte report is everything that it was expected to be. It was commissioned as part of a calculated campaign to dilute the equality agenda, which is something to which the Alliance Party seldom refers. The people responsible for delivering equality have attempted to frustrate, delay and, ultimately, overturn it. The report was designed to elevate community relations to a position above the Government's primary obligation to fulfil its equality agenda, and its conclusions were expected to validate the Northern Ireland Office's flawed policy document, 'A Shared Future'. We all want a shared and better future that is based on equality and human rights.

The Deloitte report was aimed at framing future policy on a different basis than is set out in the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews review and enshrined in law. The report fails in every way. It fails to disentangle any cost of division from the cost of the conflict or the cost of partition, discrimination and disadvantage. The report's claim that division costs up to £1.5 billion simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Indeed, even the authors of the report admit that they cannot stand over that final figure. Partition costs more than £3 billion if one counts the costs of duplicating all the services that I have mentioned.

The report's political commentary is partisan throughout and fails to acknowledge the British state's role as central protagonist in the conflict. It refuses to acknowledge that, for generations, structural discrimination and inequality were the benchmarks against which Government policy was framed and administered by British direct rule and unionist elites. However, that is the part of the motion that the SDLP seeks to retain along with the call for a revised Programme for Government and Budget.

To start off by calling for such a revision in the context of a flawed report is wrong-headed, and, therefore, Sinn Féin will not support the amendment. Mrs Kelly, who moved the amendment, called on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the Budget because it was predicated on receipts from land sales. However, the leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, when he spoke about the £400 million that could be redistributed among Executive Ministers, said that there should be land sales to raise that sum. Sinn Féin will not support the motion or the amendment.

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

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm. I suggest that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Playboard

1. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it has taken to secure childcare places provided by Playboard.

(AQO 2586/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):

We recognise the importance of good childcare provision and have been working closely with other Departments to seek a long-term resolution to the current difficulties. In the interim, we intend to seek Executive approval for the reallocation of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) resources in the June monitoring round. Subject to Executive agreement, we will provide funding to Playboard to allow after-school clubs to continue to operate until August 2009.

The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people identified childcare as an urgent priority and established a cross-departmental subgroup to produce a report that will identify options for further provision to the ministerial subcommittee. The initial report of the subgroup will be presented to relevant Ministers shortly. Continued funding for the Playboard projects is an interim approach pending a longer-term outcome from the work of the subgroup.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his useful answer. I take on board the facts that initial funding is available to secure some childcare places in 2009, that that is only an interim arrangement and that there will be further options.

The deputy First Minister mentioned the issue of the availability of affordable childcare places. Does he agree that, were those places to be made available, they would have a major impact on addressing child poverty? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned research to examine childcare and child poverty. Although it is not a simple matter to project the effect that childcare improvements could have on reducing child poverty, the data suggest that

childcare reforms could play a useful role in moving a substantial number of children out of poverty. The upper-bound estimates suggest that childcare reforms could lift out of poverty as many as half of the children who are in it today. The lower-bound estimates suggest that childcare reforms could move out of poverty one sixth of the children in it.

Those estimates are based on the current British model of childcare, which is more advanced than ours. Therefore, the reforms might have an even greater impact here. Combating child poverty is a complex undertaking, and childcare is only one of many essential elements in an anti-poverty strategy. However, we agree that it is critically important.

Mrs M Bradley: Has the level of investment that is needed for the number of childcare places that are required been assessed, and what plans does OFMDFM have to meet those needs? I was disappointed to hear the deputy First Minister's reply that the ministerial subgroup report will be presented shortly. I want to know a definite date for that.

The deputy First Minister: As I stated, we intend to seek Executive approval for the reallocation of OFMDFM resources in the June monitoring round. Subject to Executive agreement, we will provide funding to Playboard to allow after-school clubs to continue to operate until August 2009. Obviously, work is ongoing to identify whether further moneys will be available. We are very committed to doing whatever we can to deal with the issue, because Playboard does important work for the development of children and young people's play here.

Since Playboard's inception in 1985, it has campaigned, lobbied, raised awareness and developed partnerships to put play on the agenda of policymakers and resource providers. Therefore, Playboard has particular expertise in the provision of play and childcare for school-age children.

At present, Playboard funds 52 after-schools projects, 23 of which are in areas classified as rural. The remaining 29 projects are in urban areas. Seventeen of the projects are based in neighbourhood renewal areas. The projects are capable of offering 1,300 registered places, and, therefore, they account for 20% of the provision of after-school club places here. A total of 196 staff are employed in those projects.

The play and leisure policy, which received Executive approval at the end of 2008, will help to deliver the aims of the 10-year strategy for children and young people. Our aim is to improve the play and leisure provision for all children and young people of nought-to-18 years of age. We are drafting the implementation plans. In doing so, we work closely with our many partners in the voluntary and community sector and the

statutory sector, and we draw on their expertise and experience in the field.

In recognition of the diverse needs of different age groups, we plan to implement separate plans for nought- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 18-year-olds. Work on those plans has just begun, with a view to the implementation plans being agreed by autumn 2009. The development of the plans will inform the future level of required funding. All that will have to be studied before any decisions can be taken.

Ms Lo: The funding for PlayBoard is a short-term measure. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must work with the Department of Education to resolve the issue of funding for after-school activities for school-age children. Has any progress been made on that issue?

The deputy First Minister: The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has carried out work that is a vital part of facing up to the issues that the Member identified. In September 2008, at a meeting of that subcommittee, it was agreed to undertake a specific exercise to consider the potential for increasing childcare provision. It was further agreed that such work should be linked to that of the subgroup on child poverty. A report that identifies various options has been submitted to the ministerial subcommittee, and I understand that a meeting of relevant Ministers has been arranged for 28 May 2009 to discuss it.

Pledge of Office

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with the Minister of Education in relation to a possible failure to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office. (AQO 2587/09)

The deputy First Minister: No such discussions have taken place, as there is no acceptance of a breach of the Pledge of Office. The Member will be aware that, if he genuinely believes that a failure to observe the terms of the Pledge of Office has occurred, it is open to him to seek the support of at least 29 other Members in tabling a motion to be considered and resolved by the Assembly.

Mr McCallister: Does the deputy First Minister not agree that the Minister of Education has failed to adhere to the Pledge of Office, which requires her:

“to support, and to act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly”?

Specifically, the Assembly passed an Ulster Unionist Party motion on the extension of the 11-plus for three years until a replacement could be introduced. Does the deputy First Minister not agree that the

Minister's failure to support that motion constitutes a breach of the Pledge of Office?

The deputy First Minister: As I made clear in my answer, I do not consider that the Minister of Education has breached the Pledge of Office.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the Executive's consideration of any proposals by the Minister of Education on post-primary transfer?

The deputy First Minister: It is a matter of public record that, at a meeting of the Executive on 17 January 2008, the Minister of Education submitted a draft Executive paper on post-primary transfer arrangements. It was agreed to defer the consideration of that paper and schedule a dedicated meeting of the Executive to address it. The arrangements for the Executive's consideration of the paper were raised at a number of subsequent meetings. The Minister of Education submitted a draft Executive paper on post-primary transfer reform to a meeting of the Executive on 15 May 2008, at which there was a detailed discussion of a process that could be put in place to consider that paper. However, the Executive did not consider the content of the paper.

On 27 January 2009, the Minister of Education circulated a draft Executive paper on the arrangements for post-primary transfer, but it was not discussed at an Executive meeting on 29 January 2009. On 2 February 2009, the Minister of Education made a statement to the Assembly, in which she announced that guidelines for post-primary transfer would be out for public consultation until 27 April 2009. We await the Minister's response to that consultation, which has now ended. The Assembly will, undoubtedly, hear her views shortly.

Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA)

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it has had any discussions with the Northern Ireland Childminding Association in relation to its initiative to provide childcare.

(AQO 2588/09)

The deputy First Minister: As part of work that was commissioned by the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people on the future of childcare provision, the head of research in OFMDFM and the director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association have met on two occasions. They discussed the work of the association and the relevance of its research to the development of future policy. Those meetings proved helpful in highlighting issues that are of concern to the association, including, as highlighted by its research, the falling numbers of childminders, workforce planning

and professionalism. The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people will be considering those issues at its next meeting, as it takes forward work on child-minding. As I have said, that meeting will take place on 28 May.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. Obviously, the issues that the Northern Ireland Childminding Association has brought to the attention of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have been acknowledged. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the childminder start-up package is vitally important to provide extra childcare facilities with childminders who have public liability insurance and a first-aid certificate? Does he agree that there must be a promotion and recruitment campaign, more accessible training opportunities, and, therefore, more childminders?

Can the deputy First Minister assure the Assembly that all those issues will be taken on board in the meetings that are taking place? Does he agree that the Northern Ireland Childminding Association needs to be commended for its initiative?

The deputy First Minister: I agree with the Member, and I commend the child-minding group. It is not for me to pre-empt the decision of the Executive. However, the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people is aware of the potential of the proposal to improve the situation, and will be considering how best to support its objectives of improving access to child-minding services. The association's literature on the subject does not include a figure. However, it suggests that there needs to be five childminder advisers, the administrative support necessary for the provision of start-up grants to new childminders, and the promotion of that initiative. The association proposed that each start-up grant be £400. Potentially, depending on the cost of the advisers and administrative support, that could add around 350 childminders to the association's existing pool of 3,500 members.

Mr Attwood: I want to push the Minister a bit further. He said that there is meant to be a report to the subcommittee by 28 May. Can he say definitively when the subcommittee will conclude its deliberations, when Ministers will take decisions, and when the Executive will sign off on whatever proposals might be forthcoming? Mr Shannon made some very good points about NICMA's proposals. If the deputy First Minister has not had the opportunity to read that association's documentation, I ask him to do so. Its budget line of £300,000 a year for three years would create many new child-minding places at a time when there is a severe reduction in places.

The deputy First Minister: I am very sympathetic to the case put by the Member. The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has tasked

the child poverty subgroup with producing a paper outlining the historical policy context and research evidence, and to set out a range of policy options on the delivery of childcare provision.

The working group met periodically between November 2008 and March 2009. Its terms of reference for a strategic business case on childcare were to set out the background of childcare; to set out the key strategic policies and how they relate to the childcare agenda; to establish the need for childcare provision; to define objectives for future childcare provision and set out any constraints; to identify a suitable range of policy options on the delivery of childcare provision; to assess the monetary costs and benefits of each shortlisted option; to assess the risks associated with each shortlisted option; to weigh up any non-monetary costs and benefits; to assess the balance between options and present the prepared option; and to consider the arrangements for funding, management, monitoring and post-implementation evaluation.

As the Member indicated, a paper on the background of strategic policy, the needs and objectives for childcare provision, and a range of policy options for the delivery of childcare provision will be considered at the ministerial subcommittee's next meeting. That will happen on 28 May, and we will be as anxious as anyone else to see the issue progressed in a fashion that will please the Childminding Association.

2.45 pm

Mr McNarry: Does the deputy First Minister accept that, although some welcome action has been taken on the support of childcare facilities, the general lack of sufficient childcare facilities seriously hampers mothers who are seeking employment and who wish to get back to work? Does he agree that the matter, therefore, embraces issues of equality and anti-poverty?

The deputy First Minister: I concede that we must all do more and that the challenges are obvious. Through the establishment of the Executive ministerial committee and the subgroup, we have shown that we are seriously tackling those issues, which are a concern to the community. It is vital that we liberate people in households to ensure that they can access employment, particularly during the economic downturn. I agree with the Member; there are huge challenges. We can do more, and we are striving to do more. We will see what the discussions on 28 May produce.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire.

I thank the Minister for his answers, and I thank Members, including my colleague Sue Ramsey and also Mr Shannon, for the focus that they have placed on childcare provision.

Will the deputy First Minister clear up exactly where after-school provision fits into the equation? I know that the meeting on 28 May will look at the general issues, but organisations such as the Camowen Partnership in mid-Tyrone, which has excellent provision in Carrickmore, Sixmilocross and Loughmacrory, are anxious and uncertain about their future and are not sure where they fit in. Should they turn to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education or the Department for Employment and Learning? Therefore, OFMDFM is challenged to provide an answer about who is responsible for provision.

The deputy First Minister: I am sure that that group will be very pleased to have been mentioned on the Floor of the Assembly.

I have no doubt that the discussions on 28 May will deal with all those issues. There has been a historical context to the issue, and, in many ways, people could allege that there has been a great deal of buck passing. The challenge for the subgroup and the Executive subcommittee is to remove any ambiguity about which Department will deal with that important area in future.

Pledge of Office

4. **Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to a possible failure to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office. (AQO 2589/09)

The deputy First Minister: I refer the Member to the answer that I gave earlier to the Member for South Down Mr McCallister. My comments then are equally applicable to this question.

Mr Savage: Do the deputy First Minister's views on climate change most closely resemble those of the Minister of the Environment? Furthermore, is he satisfied that his Department has taken all reasonable steps —

Mr Speaker: Order. The convention in the House has been that, as far as possible, a Member should not read out a supplementary question.

Mr Savage: Is the deputy First Minister satisfied that his Department has taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the commitments of the Programme for Government are being met by the Department of the Environment?

The deputy First Minister: The issue of breaching the ministerial code has been raised in the past. The First Minister and I have no power to determine whether the ministerial code has been breached. It is open to Members, including the Member who asked

the question, to move a motion on the grounds that a Minister has failed to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office. Such a motion can be brought to exclude a Minister from office, to reduce a Minister's salary or to censure a Minister. It is for the Assembly to consider and, where it agrees, to pass a resolution. That is the only way to deal with the matter. Breaches of the ministerial code, which is a statutory document, could also be determined as a matter of law.

My attitude on the causes of climate change is probably more in tune with the First Minister's than it is with the Minister of the Environment's. However, the Environment Minister is entitled to his opinion and to express it. He has expressed his opinion on climate change, and queries about that opinion should be taken up with him. He is responsible for climate change policy. His Department has established the Climate Change Impacts Partnership with business, non-governmental organisations, the voluntary sector and other parts of Government, and it continues to work with other Administrations to inform public policy.

Therefore, although people contemplate citing the Environment Minister's view that stronger evidence of climate change must be established, it is clear that the commitments, actions and targets to tackle the problem of climate change in the Programme for Government are supported by all Departments, including the Department of the Environment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The deputy First Minister has already answered part of my question. Will he clarify the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's powers and, indeed, procedures relating to perceived breaches of the ministerial code and the Pledge of Office?

The deputy First Minister: I have made it clear that the power to sanction or deal with any Minister whom the Assembly believes to have breached the ministerial code resides in the House. On that matter, the House is all powerful. Every Member knows and understands the procedure that must be carried out: principally, that any Member who seeks to exclude or sanction a Minister must have the support of 29 other Members in order to bring the matter to the Floor of the House for debate, discussion and decision. That is the process. It is the Assembly, and not the Executive, that is all powerful in that regard.

Mr Speaker: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Victims

7. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any discussions it has had in relation to the definition of a "victim of the troubles". (AQO 2592/09)

The deputy First Minister: As we stated in 2008, during the debate on the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill, it is our intention that any alteration to the legislative definition of a victim should be discussed by victims and survivors first. They will be able to do so in the victims' forum when it is established. That remains our intention. We understand that the Commission for Victims and Survivors is developing its work on the establishment of the forum and should be in a position to say more about it soon.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. However, will he confirm that he disagrees with my party's position that combatants and terrorists, whether they are traitors or not, cannot be treated in the same way as real victims? Has he reached a joint decision on the matter with the First Minister?

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I are in agreement on the next step regarding victims. When the victims' forum, which will be made up of relevant people, is established it will have its own discussion on the matter and will, undoubtedly, inform us of the outcome of its deliberations. It will then be a matter for the First Minister and me to consider that outcome.

I understand that there is a risk and a danger that political parties will attempt to use victims for political point scoring over one another, particularly in the context of an upcoming election. That is a big mistake; it does a grave disservice to all victims, and it does nothing to allay people's concerns about what is laid out in legislation. Of course, it is based on clear legislation that was put in place by direct rule Ministers.

The establishment of the victims' commissioners has created a changing and evolving situation. Those people are charged with the responsibility to carry out important work on behalf of victims, and they are doing an excellent job at the moment. Part of their work is to establish a victims' forum, which the Department has asked to offer its views on the matter that the Member raised. Thereafter, we will consider those views and attempt to take the process forward.

I challenge everybody in the House to recognise the importance of not using the issue as a political football. We all know and understand that there is a lot of hurt on all sides of the community. Nearly 4,000 people lost their lives in the conflict. They came from all sections of the community — the British Army, the IRA, loyalist groups and innocent civilians. Any attempt to create a circumstance that further exacerbates existing difficulties is a big mistake.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response, which has, to some extent, answered my question. Does he agree that those who lost loved ones, or were injured,

in the conflict share the same sense of loss and pain regardless of the circumstances? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: Every person who was lost as a result of the conflict represented a huge loss to their family and created huge pain and trauma for those families. All those families suffered. Regardless of what label people attempt to place on them, the fact is that all those people were hurt.

For example, Gerard Donaghy was a member of the junior IRA, Fianna Éireann, who was murdered on Bloody Sunday by the British Parachute Regiment. Where does he fit into the process? I use him as only one example. Did his family even know that he was a member of the junior IRA? He was very young at the time. Do we tell those people that they will not be treated with respect and that they are regarded as not worthy? This process represents a real challenge for us all.

At the weekend, Mickey Bradley, who was shot by the British Army on Bloody Sunday, died suddenly. He lived all his life with pain and disability, hobbling around the streets of Derry on crutches and sticks. For a long time, he campaigned for justice for those who lost their lives. His approach included the fact that Gerard Donaghy, along with all the other people who lost their lives, was an innocent marcher on the day. This is a difficult issue, and there is a lot of pain out there. We must be sensible about how we go forward. I appeal to people not to use the issue, particularly in the context of an election, as a point scoring exercise, because that does a grave disservice to all victims.

Mrs D Kelly: I notice that the deputy First Minister used very selective examples of victims. People outside the Chamber are listening carefully to what he has to say on this matter, none less than the families of Patsy Gillespie and Frank O’Hegarty. One of them was made into a human bomb, and the other was promised a safe passage on his return to Derry only to be found dead within a short time frame, much to the regret of his mother and father.

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mrs D Kelly: The First Minister and deputy First Minister are determined that the forum, once it is established, will provide the definition of “victim”. If that is the case, and if they are determined that the issue will not become a political football, why is the DUP introducing amending legislation on the definition of “victim”?

The deputy First Minister: Before the Member contemplates asking another question on such matters, she should get her facts right. Some of her “facts” are absolutely wrong. Before she asks a question, she needs to know what she is talking about. What she has said is totally wrong.

Mrs D Kelly: It is in the election literature.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The deputy First Minister: No; she obviously read those stories in newspapers. However, the reality is that she is wrong. I selected Gerard Donaghy as an example because the Ulster Unionist Party asked whether someone such as him, someone who was marching with citizens on the streets of Derry and who was shot dead by the British Army, should be considered an innocent victim.

The decision on the outcome of the work of the forum will fall to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. We will obviously have to and are quite willing to listen to views expressed by the members of the forum. However, the final decision will be taken by us, and, I hope, it will be taken in agreement.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Non-Governmental Organisations

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what correspondence he has had with Friends of the Earth and other environmental NGOs, and if he has any plans to meet with them.

(AQO 2606/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I have corresponded with Friends of the Earth on one occasion since I came into office. The subject of that correspondence was human rights issues and third-party rights of appeal in connection with my Department’s planning reform proposals. I have no plans to meet representatives of Friends of the Earth. I have also corresponded with a number of other NGOs that represent the environment and heritage sectors. I have met some of those organisations and have attended many events to which I have been invited. I have meetings planned with the Quarry Products Association, the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the RSPB, and Northern Ireland Environment Link. I will be happy to provide a breakdown of that information should the Member wish to see it.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as a fhreagra. I wonder whether the Minister might think it useful to meet groups such as Friends of the Earth about his position, which he has stated with much confidence. I am sure that that group would perhaps help to enlighten him. Perhaps at the end of that meeting — we never know — they could call themselves “Friends of Sammy Wilson”. Last week, I heard the First Minister respond to a question on climate change. Perhaps the

Minister should meet the First Minister, who might give him some ideas on climate change.

The Minister of the Environment: Friends of the Earth has never asked to meet me. It has written to me on one occasion, and I replied. However, I held a reception for NGOs at Stormont, which went down very well with about 30 different groups that attended. However, I was snubbed by Friends of the Earth. That group was invited but refused to attend. If the Member is so concerned about my meeting Friends of the Earth, my door is always open. I have even invited that group to sup with me in this Building, but it refused to do so. Therefore, if we have not had an exchange of views, it has only itself to blame.

Mr Ross: The Minister has referred to some of the events that he has hosted for NGOs. Although Friends of the Earth did not turn up to those events, the Minister detail to the House the purpose of those events and what came out of them?

The Minister of the Environment: The purpose of the event to which I invited Friends of the Earth and other NGOs was simply to meet them and to explain the work, issues and challenges that the Department faces. That was a very profitable meeting, which took place at the beginning of my period as Minister. As a result, I received many invitations to meet NGOs on site and to see the work that they are doing.

If the Speaker would indulge me, I could go through the scores of opportunities that I have had to meet on site with NGOs. However, I am not going to do that, because I realise that a lot of Members want to ask questions. Only last week I was in the Member for Foyle's constituency with one of the NGOs to plant a tree as part of work that the Woodland Trust is doing at Ervey Wood.

Mr P Robinson: Did you hug it?

The Minister of the Environment: I did not hug the tree, but I dug the hole for it and I planted it. I will go back to ensure that it is growing well. That was a very interesting experience, because the Woodland Trust has been given a substantial sum of money from the Department to purchase land to extend the forest, and it is now in line to obtain a huge lottery grant, which will, I hope, enable the whole of the Faughan Valley eventually to be planted with woodland species. That will help towards achieving the target of increasing biodiversity and extending woodland cover in Northern Ireland.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister list the NGOs he has met that support his views on climate change?

The Minister of the Environment: I am amazed at the obsession that people in the Assembly have with climate change. When I meet the RSPB, the Mourne Heritage Trust, the Woodland Trust or the Ulster

Wildlife Trust, I speak to them about the work that is important to them. I do not seek to impose my views on climate change on those groups, and I do not find that they share some Members' obsession with climate change. The groups want to speak to me about the practical projects that they are undertaking on the ground and of which they are, quite rightly, proud.

On all occasions I have found the meetings to be very instructive and the people I have met to be very courteous in the way in which they have received me. I see how much good work is being done by many of those groups, supported, in many instances, by my Department and by other Departments in the Executive.

Planning Service

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the current level of human resources in the Planning Service.

(AQO 2607/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The agency has 867 staff, of whom 489 are professional planners, and there are 63 vacancies. The economic downturn has resulted in reductions in the number of planning applications and income to the Planning Service. The agency continues to closely monitor its staffing in relation to its workload.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for a very interesting response. I declare that, although other Members have been reported as having an obsession with the Minister, I am not one of them.

The Minister advised me in January that work on a character study for the Sandy Bay area of Larne had been shelved because of competing priorities and resource problems. Given the downturn in the number of planning applications that divisional planning offices have to process at the moment and the continuing threats to the character of that area of Larne, will the Minister redeploy staff and instruct his officials to finalise that study and use it to inform decisions on the ground?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister speaks, I must say to Members — it has been the case at Question Time for some time — that they should not read out supplementary questions. If it happens in the future, I intend to move on.

The Minister of the Environment: I will not read out the answer in case you give me the same instructions, Mr Speaker. First, although there has been an economic downturn, the Planning Service is committed to doing a number of things: reducing processing times, which, of course, requires more staff; and reducing the backlog of planning applications, which stood at around 18,000 and has been reduced to around 14,000, although I could be corrected on that. Of course, there are other

competing priorities, including work on planning policy statements, area plans, etc.

I will bear in mind what the Member has said. I recall that I made a commitment that we would try to resolve some of those issues, and we will see what can be done. Given the economic downturn, I have left a large number of vacancies unfilled, because it is important to live within the budget that has been allocated to the Department. The economic downturn could cost the Planning Service up to £7.7 million, which would create a huge hole in the resources available.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. I hope that the “Friends of Sammy Wilson” will not be another NGO that we have to look forward to.

In light of the media speculation last week about a 20% increase in fees for planning applications, is it not appropriate to redirect some staff? I know that we have to try to keep the skilled and experienced staff who work in the Planning Service. However, in the light of the proposed increases over the next couple of weeks, will there be any opportunities to redirect staff to areas of the Department where there are gaps, such as enforcement and area planning or where junior case officers are currently being employed? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: Members from all sides of the House ask me why staff are not being used for all sorts of purposes, but I will address some of the issues that the Member mentioned. He has lobbied me, for example, to ensure that PPS 21 applications are processed. In that instance, there was a huge backlog of approximately 1,800 planning applications to deal with, and resources had to go into that. Other Members have lobbied me about the backlog of general applications in some divisional offices, of which Craigavon is a good example. We put extra resources into those divisional offices and brought the backlog down very quickly in response to the issues that the Member mentioned.

We are currently unable to carry out strategic environmental assessments because of challenges that have been made against area plans. Planning will have to be devolved to councils before we have a mechanism that allows us to proceed with judicial reviews. Given the challenges to area plans, work on them, although it may be useful, may not be the best use of resources. We are targeting additional resources at enforcement, at reducing the backlog of applications and at meeting the Programme for Government requirements for processing times, and we are making good progress on those fronts. The Planning Service moves resources around when matters have to be addressed, and, when it does so, it has proved that it can get results.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Service delivery is a theme that has been raised today. Will the Minister assure me that the Planning

Service is taking positive action to ensure that staffing shortfalls do not affect service delivery?

The Minister of the Environment: That is exactly what we have been doing. There has been some criticism, but one reason that we increased planning fees was to ensure that resources are available to us.

I will take this opportunity to assure the House about those increases, because some Members have been unfairly critical. The Department has looked for efficiencies, such as reducing overtime and leaving vacancies in promotion programmes. It has also sought, through the first increase in planning fees for four years, to obtain additional resources. All that is designed to ensure that we have a Planning Service that can deliver on planning applications, which are essential for economic growth in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, as several concerned Members said, we must ensure that we do not hand over to councils, if we get to that point in 2011, a Planning Service that is under-resourced.

Mr Speaker: Mr Ford is not in his place to ask question 3.

Planning: Enforcement Procedures

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of the Environment what proposals he will bring forward to expedite planning enforcement procedures, particularly where residents have to suffer detrimental circumstances while an issue is being addressed over a lengthy period.

(AQO 2609/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans at present to introduce new legislative procedures on enforcement. In 2003 and 2006, changes to legislation introduced new powers and strengthened the Department’s existing enforcement powers in line with the remainder of the UK. New measures included increases in the level of fines for offences; the ability to serve a breach-of-condition notice to streamline enforcement procedures for breaches of conditions; and temporary stand-alone stop powers to halt a breach of planning control for up to 28 days as soon as a breach is identified without first having to issue an enforcement notice. However, enforcement by its very nature can often be a lengthy and complex process. Although the Planning Service can work to internal timescales, it is largely at the final stages that delays occur. It is largely outside the control of the Department because, when there is an appeal against an enforcement notice, the timescale for the hearing of the appeal and reporting on it might be lengthy. That is an issue for the Planning Appeals Commission, not the Planning Service. Similarly, when court action has been taken, the Department depends on the courts to bring cases forward and make judgements on them.

3.15 pm

The current legislation does not allow offenders to reopen arguments in court on the planning merits of the case. When those arguments have been dealt with by an enforcement appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission and when an appeal is pending, it is not possible to proceed with summons action.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his very thorough answer. I understand that he is bringing forward planning reform proposals. Will he consider making it a criminal offence for people to proceed with a development before receiving planning permission to do so?

The Minister of the Environment: I am glad that the Member has raised the issue. I would love to have the planning reform proposals out in the open. Had I been able to do that, I think that she would have been pleasantly surprised.

I will give away some secrets. One of the planning reform proposals is to consult about the criminalisation of breaches of planning applications. It is one thing for people to take a chance, but, if they think that they are going to get a criminal record, they may not take that chance.

In certain circumstances, criminalisation will not apply; rather, it will depend on how serious the breach was. That is one of the proposals that is coming forward in the planning reform. Once the party opposite finally gets its head round those proposals, they can then go out for consultation. The information that I am getting from all those involved in the planning process — applicants, objectors and various groups — is that they wish to see those proposals out for consultation and implemented as quickly as possible.

Mr McClarty: Is the Minister aware of the perception among the general public that planning enforcement in Northern Ireland is weak and inconsistently applied? Will he assure the House that the review of the Planning Service will strengthen the powers of the enforcement officers? Finally, has the Minister seen the BBC1 programme 'The Planners are Coming', which paints a picture of much stricter enforcement of planning laws in England?

The Minister of the Environment: Unlike the Member, I unfortunately do not have the time to sit and watch television, so I have not seen the programme to which he referred. I am sure that since the Member has the time to watch television — I do not know if it is daytime, night-time or what kind of television programme that is — he can inform me what actions are taken by planners.

I am aware that there are criticisms about enforcement. Some of them are occasionally unfair, but I take enforcement seriously. There is no point in having planning laws if people feel that they can breach them with impunity. An enforcement strategy has been

drafted and will be published in the near future. I look forward to the response to that.

The strategy will identify revised enforcement priorities so that resources are put into resolving the most serious breaches in which rules and regulations are flouted, and it will limit resources used in pursuing minor breaches, thereby causing no harm to immunity. For example, a high-priority case will involve the demolition of a listed building or a comprised development that may adversely affect or destroy a site of nature conservation. We will, therefore, be seeking ways to establish priorities. However, I repeat the point that I made to the Member for South Belfast Ms Lo: the ineffective part of enforcement is very often when it leaves the hands of the Planning Service. When people make an appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission, enforcement has to stop, of course, for the duration of that appeal. That can take some time, and then it appears as if someone has been able to get away with breaching planning law without any immediate action being taken. Also, if a case goes to court, again, enforcement action has to stop.

Therefore, yes, there are occasions when the Planning Service could, perhaps, be more proactive. However, Members must also understand that the divisional planning offices sometimes feel frustrated, because they cannot make progress when matters are taken out of their hands.

Mr Moutray: In that case, will the Minister indicate whether there are priorities for enforcement in the Planning Service?

The Minister of the Environment: There are priorities at present. Where there is an immediate threat to a building or where there is a development that will have a disproportionate impact on an area, one would expect enforcement officers to act fairly quickly. I have seen instances and Members have drawn instances to my attention in which enforcement action has been quickly taken.

It is a case, first of all, of the planning breach being identified, and, secondly, of deciding what resources are available to deal with it. Breaches can sometimes occur, for example, at holiday times, when it is not immediately possible to bring the Planning Service into the picture and take action. That is one of the reasons why, in my answer to the Member for South Belfast, Ms Lo, I indicated that on such occasions criminalising the offence might be the ultimate deterrent in order that people do not feel that they can chance their arm in a holiday period to get away with a breach of planning control.

Dr McDonnell: I urge the Minister to take whatever action is necessary, including criminalisation of those who ride roughshod through planning. I also raise the possibility of third-party appeals, about which people scream at me day and daily. There was a blatant, high-

profile case in Newcastle during the summer. I thank my colleague from South Belfast, Ms Lo, for raising the issue of planning enforcement procedures, because day and daily in south Belfast there are planning breaches. The conservation area there has almost become a bit of a joke, because only the decent, honest people observe it. I urge the Minister that not only developers who breach planning controls but architects who draw up false plans in order to get around —

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

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the Minister has got my point.

The Minister of the Environment: I think that I got about three questions out of that, so the Member got good value. The first question I have already answered: the planning reform proposals will contain a proposal to make breach of planning control a criminal offence.

I am not so sure that even the example that the Member gave would have been dealt with by a third-party appeal. However, one thing that I want to achieve through the planning reform proposals is to speed up the planning process, while not losing the accountability and local input that should exist. The planning reform proposals have a better way of getting the views of local people, which is by front-loading the consultation process so that, when a developer goes into a community and before they submit a planning application, they must first show who they have consulted, what they have consulted on, the responses to those consultations and what action they have taken. A lot of controversial development proposals could be defused if all of that was done first of all. Once the planning application is submitted with that type of information, then and only then will it be processed, and it should be processed much more quickly. That is a much better remedy than third-party appeals, which are legalistic, tend to favour those who can spend money on consultants and barristers and do not necessarily give the outcome at the end of the day but only slow the process.

Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006

5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the effectiveness of Statutory Rule No.482 Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 which came into operation on 1 February 2007.
(AQO 2610/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations provide an effective risk-based authorisation process to

control and regulate water abstraction and impoundment activities. That is quite a mouthful.

Since the introduction of the regulations in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has issued licences to control more than 90% of water abstracted from the natural environment. That is making a valuable contribution to the protection of our natural water resources.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer, but he should be aware that I have tabled a number of questions for written answer on the matter. Will he outline in detail the difference between his Department giving authorisation and his Department issuing a licence for the abstraction of water? Does he have any plans to amend the legislation, as it strikes me that it is toothless?

The Minister of the Environment: The regulations are there to meet the water framework directive and the habitats directive. We are considering plans to introduce a charging scheme for the issue of licences, and we are considering who will be subject to the regulations. The regulations will deal with people who abstract large amounts of water from aquifers. Those people will be public and private abstractors who take more than 20 cubic metres of water per day. They will be subject to the regulations, and they will require a licence.

Mr McKay: Does the Minister believe that enforcement of the regulations will be effective, and is it being given the appropriate resources? What is the level of compliance with the regulations from the various stakeholders?

The Minister of the Environment: As I said, more than 90% of people who extract water are controlled by licensing. Therefore, the licensing regime covers the vast majority of people who extract water. When people apply for a licence, we become aware of who is extracting the water and of any breaches of the regulations. If breaches are reported, we can readily identify who is involved and take action accordingly.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister accept that, if water extraction were unregulated, it could endanger fish life and other ecosystems and natural habitats that he spoke about, particularly during dry summers?

The Minister of the Environment: Some people think that it is just water, but the water framework directive ensures that the examples that the Member outlined are protected. As he pointed out, the extraction of water, especially from aquifers, can have an impact on the environment. The whole idea was to try to ensure that there was no unregulated abstraction to the point where there was damage to the environment.

Department of the Environment: Vehicles

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration his Department gives to fuel economy and the road tax bracket when purchasing new vehicles. (AQO 2611/09)

The Minister of the Environment: When purchasing new vehicles, my Department considers what vehicles meet the demand of the businesses for which they are required. If several vehicles are identified as being suitable, the Department will consider and take into account, as one would expect, the fuel economy of those vehicles.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer, but, in a previous answer, he indicated that his Department had 10 vehicles in tax band F, including eight Shogun Sports no less, which are not renowned for their fuel economy. Has the Minister of the Environment set an example by disposing of his own 4x4, which is an environmentally unfriendly vehicle?

The Minister of the Environment: I am glad that we have got to this question. I was hoping that we would get to it. The Member continually goes on about the vehicles that the Department uses, but, if he had actually thought about his question, he might have considered that it might not have been a wise question to ask. Is the Member really suggesting that the Department of the Environment and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which usually purchases vehicles to take people over rough terrain into mountains to follow river courses, should employ electric cars or solar-powered cars?

The Department uses 4x4 vehicles because they are most suitable for the terrain in which the officers must work. Indeed, when I look across the valley from my house to the Member's farm, I do not see electric tractors driving up and down the fields. I do not see environmentally friendly, small vehicles. That is because, in order to spray fertiliser on fields and to go through muddy fields, he needs a big, diesel tractor with a huge engine, which emits lots of CO₂. Therefore, if Mr Beggs can choose a suitable vehicle for those jobs, my Department is equally entitled to choose a vehicle that is suitable for its purposes. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

3.30 pm

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

2012 Olympic Games

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the procurement opportunities for firms in Northern Ireland in relation to contracts associated with the 2012 Olympic Games in London. (AQO 2626/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): After the Minister of the Environment's answers, I am tempted just to say, "Try to follow that", but I will proceed with the answer to this question.

I visited the Olympic Park site last month to see at first hand the procurement opportunities available to Northern Ireland firms to bid for contracts associated with the London 2012 Olympic Games. Those games give our local companies a tremendous opportunity to bid for valuable contracts.

I met John Armitt, the chairman of the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA), who confirmed that many opportunities are available from contractors that have already been appointed by the ODA and from its supply chains. I strongly urge all local firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises to bid for supply-chain contracts by using the CompeteFor web portal that was launched in Northern Ireland by Invest Northern Ireland.

In addition to bidding for contracts using the CompeteFor service, local companies can use the eSourcing NI tendering system that was launched by my Department's Central Procurement Directorate. Three Northern Ireland companies have already won work with the ODA, which proves that local firms have the expertise and capability to challenge for and win work beyond Northern Ireland's shores.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that the Minister agrees that opportunities, some of which he outlined, exist for businesses in Northern Ireland to benefit from any procurement that comes from the 2012 Olympics. Will he tell the House the extent to which Invest Northern Ireland has been involved in promoting procurement opportunities connected with the Olympics?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The CompeteFor web portal was launched by Invest NI, the trade division of which has carried out activities with local companies. In my former capacity as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I attended a conference in 2008 about work that was being done through Invest Northern Ireland to encourage local companies to investigate Olympics-related procurement opportunities.

Invest Northern Ireland also organised five seminars in October and November 2008 at which training was

provided that enabled 96 companies to develop a professional tendering approach for 2012 contracts. I understand that 27 companies were taken to the Olympic Park to receive presentations from main contractors and supply-chain specialists. I know that Invest NI planned to launch a dedicated, Olympics-related page on its website.

Therefore, a lot of work is being done in relation to opportunities available through the Olympic project in London. It is important to ensure our local companies are given whatever support is available so that they can take advantage of that tremendous expenditure.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he inform the House whether indigenous businesses now enjoy more success because of the steps that he and other Ministers have introduced to open up the procurement process? Will he set out some of the details?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I presume that the Member's question relates to the overall situation, not just the Olympic Games. As he will be aware, work has been done through the procurement task group, which was set up recently and has met regularly. I think that a report will come forward this week at the procurement board meeting. That very significant piece of work has been undertaken by Central Procurement Directorate and by representatives from industry and small and medium-sized enterprises. It has resulted in a great deal of consensus about how procurement should move forward. The Construction Employers Federation and representatives of industry and business have engaged positively in that work and are optimistic about its outcomes, and they confirmed that when I met them recently.

Since our announcement, in December 2008, about efforts to ensure that no money would be lost as a result of legal issues in relation to frameworks, we have been able to ensure that £400 million worth of contracts came to market without being held up in legal disputes.

As I have said to the House previously, it is important to note the measures to assist local firms to avail themselves of procurement opportunities, including the introduction of the electronic procurement portal, eSourcing NI, and other work. Over 95% of public-sector construction works in Northern Ireland are now awarded to local firms, the majority of which are small and medium-sized enterprises. Historically, that figure is about 60% in Scotland and about 50% in Wales. That is very positive news for small and medium-sized enterprises and for the construction industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to the Minister's answer, does he agree that a huge opportunity was missed — in relation to legacy issues as well as the construction

industry and the creation of jobs — by not going ahead with the multi-sports stadium at the Maze site? Will the Minister explain what direct benefit will come to Northern Ireland as a result of the Olympic Games in London?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have already indicated the tremendous amount of significant work that has been done to provide local companies and firms with opportunities to bid for work in relation to the Olympic Games. As I mentioned, a number of companies have already won work. I hope that other companies will win more contracts as a result of that work.

The Member referred to one particular project. He should bear it in mind that, as part of the delivery of the investment strategy, 30% more was spent in the last financial year on helping and supporting the construction industry in Northern Ireland than was spent in the previous year. That is £1.6 million in gross expenditure. Despite the downturn, that is a very significant increase in the amount of activity in relation to capital expenditure in Northern Ireland. It provides much-needed support to large and small construction companies. That is a major improvement on the situation the year before.

Senior Civil Service: Bonus Scheme

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, in light of financial pressures on Government Departments, he will abolish the Senior Civil Service Bonus Scheme. (AQO 2627/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My officials are currently preparing options for this year's Senior Civil Service pay award for consideration. Therefore, I have not yet made any decisions regarding any element of the Senior Civil Service pay award for 2009, including non-consolidated bonus payments.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the news that options are under preparation. This issue has had a high profile for some time.

Bearing in mind that permanent secretaries in England no longer receive bonuses, that the Minister's own permanent secretary recently gave evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel to the effect that he is largely in agreement with arguments for the removal of Senior Civil Service bonus payments, and that, in a meeting on 22 April 2009, the head of the Civil Service advised the SDLP that he largely disagrees with those arguments, what is the Minister's opinion on bonus payments to senior civil servants?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Options are under consideration, and we will make decisions in due course. The Member mentioned the fact that permanent secretaries in Whitehall are voluntarily waiving bonus payments for 2009. Due to grading

differences between permanent secretaries in Great Britain and those in Northern Ireland, the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service is the only person at an equivalent grade to that group. Bonus payments will remain part of the Senior Civil Service pay award for 2009 in England, Scotland and Wales. Nevertheless, the Member raised a number of points, and I will certainly consider all those matters in due course. It should be said that the overall Senior Civil Service pay bill in Northern Ireland is falling as a result of its reduced size, from a peak of 237 senior civil servants in 2005 to the present figure of 209. Nevertheless, this is a subject for discussion and debate, and, in the coming weeks, I will look carefully at all options.

Mr Hamilton: Understandably and rightly, there is a focus on the cost of the Civil Service, particularly the cost of bonuses to senior civil servants. Given that there is much talk about that matter, will the Minister outline the actual cost of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and, more importantly, how that cost compares with other regions in the United Kingdom?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is important to view bonuses and the Civil Service pay bill in perspective. In fact, the Senior Civil Service in Northern Ireland is proportionally smaller than that in England, Scotland or Wales. I had some research carried out on the subject and, in the past 12 years, the size of the Senior Civil Service in Britain has generally increased, whereas its size in Northern Ireland has gone down. However, we must investigate what more we can do to achieve efficiencies and value for money.

In March 2008, the total Senior Civil Service pay bill was approximately £13.2 million. In 2006, that bill was £14 million. There is an issue not only with bonuses but with respect to the generally high public-sector wages that are paid at a senior level, and we must consider that matter carefully as we go forward.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As the Minister said, there is public concern about the high level of pay for senior civil servants. In line with the Committee for Finance and Personnel's suggestion, will the Minister consider a comprehensive review of the salary structure, including bonuses, of the Senior Civil Service, which comprises some 200 people?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said, the figure is 209. Options for 2009 are being prepared, and I will carefully consider the submissions when they are made. However, it would be wrong of me to pre-empt that work today. Nevertheless, I am aware of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's and Members' views on those matters and, in the days to come, we will carefully consider them before reaching a decision.

Northern Ireland Block Grant

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of how the Chancellor's efficiency savings of £5 billion in 2009-2010 and further efficiency savings of an additional £10 billion from 2011-2012 will impact on the Northern Ireland block grant. (AQO 2628/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has not announced plans for efficiency savings of £5 billion in 2009-2010.

3.45 pm

Mr McNarry: I have written in my notes that I will thank the Minister for his answer, so I suppose that I had better see that through and thank him for whatever it was that he said. Perhaps I will try to ask the question in another way. Given the recent national Budget announcement, will the Minister indicate what additional impact the decrease in GDP from 3.1% to only 1.3% by 2013-14 will have here? Can he say that the steps that he is taking now will ensure that by 2013-14, when he is no longer in office, there will be a viable strategy in place to cope with the severe financial restraints and cutbacks that will be kicking in for some time in the future, as I hope he recognises?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I answered the main question as I did because the Member asked me for my assessment of how the Chancellor's efficiency savings of £5 billion in 2009-2010 and further efficiency savings of an additional £10 billion will impact on the Northern Ireland block grant. I simply said that the Chancellor did not announce efficiency savings in 2009-2010; the Member was wrong. Furthermore, the Chancellor did not announce additional savings of £10 billion for 2011-12.

Mr McNarry: Just answer the question.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am entitled to point out inaccuracies. Perhaps that is a fault of putting down a question — *[Interruption.]*

The Member asked a question, and now he does not want to hear the answer. That is part of the problem, because the Member submitted his question before the Chancellor announced his Budget.

The Chancellor announced efficiency savings for 2010-11, and they were offset by additional Barnett formula consequentials of £116 million over this year and next year. The Executive will not receive a funding allocation for the period beyond 2010-11 until after the next UK spending review. Therefore, we do not yet know what the block grant position will be, and we can only make those decisions in the context of the outcome of the UK comprehensive spending review. I know that

that fact will not impact too greatly on some Members, but it is a fact.

As the Chancellor announced and as we know, there is a downward trend in public expenditure growth. The Member will be all too aware of that because, I suspect, his party colleagues at Westminster will have told him that their plans for public expenditure in Northern Ireland are draconian. I did some research, and I found out where the £5 billion —

Mr McNarry: What about answering the supplementary?

Mr Speaker: Order. I warn the Member not to speak from a seated position.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I discovered from where the £5 billion in 2009-2010 came. It did not come from the Chancellor; it was proposed by the spokesman of the Member's party in Westminster.

Mr McNarry: The Minister did not answer my supplementary question, so what is the point of asking one?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will not get involved in the toing and froing over what figures in the British Budget are correct or incorrect, but it is clear that we are facing a major economic downturn. The figures that were published by the EU are actually worse than those forecast by the British and Irish Governments. I accept that the next comprehensive spending review has not been set out, but, as part of our forward planning and financial and fiscal planning, will the Minister examine the possibility of the Executive taking on more fiscal freedom?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I recognise the code. The call for more fiscal freedom is, usually, a call for tax-raising powers. The Member should spell out in more detail what he means by fiscal freedom. Our position as an open, regional economy that is part of the United Kingdom can barely be compared with the Irish Republic, for instance, in the euro zone. There is no doubt that being part of the United Kingdom in the current situation has proved to be immeasurably beneficial and helpful to Northern Ireland. These days, we do not hear any talk about the Celtic tiger, and we do not hear anyone say that Northern Ireland should be linked to the Irish Republic as a member of the euro zone — or in any other sense. Therefore, those who talk about fiscal freedom from the United Kingdom must be honest and admit that they are really saying that people in Northern Ireland should have to pay more in tax and charges than they currently pay under the British Exchequer.

Mr O'Loan: I think that everyone accepts that from 2011 onwards there will be heavy cuts in the Northern Ireland block grant. What adjustment will the Minister make to budgetary allocations in the current CSR period to align with present needs and prepare for the future?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member talks about what might happen from 2011 onwards. We must wait to find out the outcome of the UK spending review to know what the block grant will be. As far as the current CSR is concerned, we know the position up until 2011. Despite predictions that there were to be £600 million in efficiency cuts over the current CSR period, we now know the figure for Northern Ireland for the next two years: £123 million, offset by £116 million in extra Barnett consequentials.

What happens after that will depend on the outcome of the UK-wide comprehensive spending review, and we do not know what the figures will be. Indeed, nobody knows what they will be; Whitehall Departments do not know what they will be. As I said, we know that both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party at Westminster are saying that public expenditure will generally be very constrained. However, until we know what the block grant will be, we cannot set out our spending plans.

Mr Ross: Does the Minister agree that, rather than make savings that impact adversely on front line services, savings would best be made by cutting back on unnecessary bureaucracy? Mr McNarry's time might be better spent having a word in the Health Minister's ear about that.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. There is a need for efficiency savings to ensure that front line services are protected and improved at the cost of bureaucracy. That is why I and a number of colleagues welcome the efficiency review that has now been set up to look at the structures of government. Suggestions have been made, not least by us, about cutting the number of Government Departments, which would release £50 million a year into front line services. Those suggestions should be considered immediately. We could do that during the current CSR period, if parties are willing to consider what could be done with less bureaucracy, less government and fewer Departments in Northern Ireland.

Senior Civil Service: Women

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will take steps to combat the under-representation of women in the senior Civil Service and in professional and specialist grades.

(AQO 2629/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Steps have been taken and will continue to be taken to address

identified under-representation in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Across the NICS as a whole, the percentage of female staff at grade 5 and above has increased steadily from 16.8% in 2003 to 27.4% in 2008. To attract as wide an applicant pool as possible, the Civil Service makes extensive use of open recruitment to fill senior posts and those at professional and specialist grades. Where appropriate, job vacancies are advertised in specialist and professional publications and promoted at careers events in universities and at job fairs. Again, where appropriate, recruitment advertisements include a statement welcoming applications from under-represented groups, including females. However, appointments are, of course, based on merit.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the decentralisation of departmental offices and functions will assist women who wish to advance their careers while having a work/life balance? Obviously, I have a particular interest in the decentralisation of functions to Foyle and the north-west.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The decentralisation of Government services and departmental staff is the subject of the Bain Report, and there is a paper on that before the Executive that, I hope, will be discussed shortly.

I am not convinced that providing enhanced opportunities for females will significantly help to combat the under-representation. However, it is important to stress that the Civil Service is committed to balanced employment across genders, and, as I cited in my previous answer, significant improvements have been made with regard to the figures from 2003 to the present day. Officials are undertaking an in-depth analysis of the gender composition of all grades and disciplines across the service, and it is hoped that the results of that analysis will be available in the next few months. We will then be in a position to consider further what action can be taken to address areas of under-representation in general.

Mr K Robinson: What steps has the Minister taken in manpower, or womenpower, planning for the next decade to ensure that the Civil Service will have a pool of specialist expertise, thereby negating the need to employ consultants, especially those who have retired recently from the Civil Service?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand where the Member is coming from, especially his reference to consultants. However, in every case where consultancy projects are required, they are subject to a value-for-money assessment, and consultants are used only if suitably qualified staff are unavailable in Departments.

The Member raised the point about ensuring that suitable expertise is available, and it is important that

we ensure that people of appropriate quality are recruited to the Civil Service. As the Member will be aware, a view exists in many circles that, in some senses, we should be looking at downscaling, as opposed to the other perspective. However, the Member has made an important point, and I will bear it in mind.

Building Regulations

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the development of new building regulations. (AQO 2630/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Building Regulations (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 received Royal Assent on 2 March 2009. Work has now commenced on a revision of the suite of building regulations subordinate legislation to incorporate the new and amended provisions of the Act. Officials will use that opportunity to provide a technical uplift to four parts of the building regulations, namely: Part C, "Site preparation and resistance to moisture"; Part F, "Conservation of fuel and power"; Part G, "Sound insulation of dwellings"; and Part K, "Ventilation". It is anticipated that that will take between 20 and 24 months to complete.

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

In addition, officials are preparing amendments to the current regulations that will amend Part A, "Interpretation and general"; Part D, "Structure"; and Part J, "Solid waste in buildings". It is anticipated that those amendments will be made in November.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister have any plans to introduce into Northern Ireland the code for sustainable homes targets for all newbuild homes to be zero-carbon rated by 2016?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The UK Government recently issued a policy statement, 'Building a Greener Future', in which they announced that all new homes would be zero-carbon rated from 2016, a target that has also been adopted in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The setting of that target and the progression towards its achievement were designed to inform the construction and manufacturing industry and to give it time to ensure that it would be in a position to meet those targets. I have already advised Members that, to ensure that changes to Northern Ireland's standards keep pace with changes in the other jurisdictions, officials will work with their counterparts in other jurisdictions to introduce energy efficiency amendments that will maintain Northern Ireland building regulations at the same standards and at similar timescales as have been established in other Great Britain jurisdictions.

Mr Shannon: The Minister is well aware that the construction industry is under tremendous pressure across all constituencies in Northern Ireland. The building regulations could add more financial pressure. Will the Minister assure us that the building regulations will not add significant financial pressures on to the already depressed construction industry?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand the Member's point; it is a valid one that people in the construction industry are, no doubt, concerned about. It will take some 20 to 24 months to make the amendments that are proposed, and there will also be a period between the making of the regulations and their coming into operation. The proposed timescale will be identified in the public-consultation exercise, and consultees will be given the opportunity to comment on it. I offer an assurance to the honourable Member that my officials will continue to liaise with stakeholders as the work progresses.

4.00 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answers. What measures are in place to ensure that there is uniformity of practice between councils in matters of building regulation, and how does the Department oversee that uniformity?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department's role in this matter is to propose regulations, which are passed by the Assembly in subordinate legislation. They set out the context and framework within which all the work has to happen. It is then up to councils and others who are charged with enforcement and regulation to interpret them.

The Member raised the importance of consistency between councils across the board, and the review of public administration should make that work easier and more consistent across Northern Ireland. However, I will make sure that the important issue that the Member raised about consistency of application is drawn to the attention of the appropriate officials in my Department.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Travel Abroad

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Assembly Commission to outline how much money has been spent since devolution on trips abroad by MLAs on behalf of the Assembly Commission, the Assembly Business Trust and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. (AQO 2646/09)

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Since devolution, a total of £45,299.45 has been spent on visits by MLAs on behalf of the Assembly Commission, the Assembly Business Trust and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Mr Lunn: I am pleasantly surprised by that low figure. Does the Member agree that it is important that we keep a tight grip on that kind of expenditure, particularly in the current economic climate?

Mr Butler: Yes. All trips by Members on behalf of the Assembly, whether within these islands or to another part of the world, go before board committees to be assessed for value for money and to establish what benefit they will bring to the Assembly. I agree with the Member that we need to keep a keen eye on what trips Members make and what money the Assembly spends, particularly in the current economic climate.

Car Parking

2. **Mr Molloy** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what steps it is taking to address the problem of car parking for staff and visitors to the Assembly. (AQO 2647/09)

Mr Neeson: The Assembly Commission acknowledges the growing problem with car parking on the estate, particularly on sitting days. The Assembly Commission has responsibility for the management of the upper-east and upper-west car parks at Parliament Buildings. All other car parking on the Stormont estate, including the lower-east car park, is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Staff from the Assembly regularly co-ordinate and communicate with DFP colleagues on all car-parking issues. DFP recently granted the use of limited spaces in a small overflow car park south of the lower-east car park for staff and visitors to Parliament Buildings.

During the summer recess of 2008, a programme of work was carried out in the upper car parks to address drainage problems. The opportunity was also taken to modify the car park layouts to maximise the number of available spaces. There are no plans for any further adjustments to be made to those car parks.

The Assembly Commission, in conjunction with Departments, recently signed up to a workplace travel plan that aims to encourage the use of public transport and initiatives such as car sharing in a bid to reduce the number of cars that come into the Stormont estate.

Mr Molloy: The Commission must know that support staff cannot find parking spaces. Staff find that very disruptive, and they have to carry heavy baggage and structures into the Building. In addition, vehicles are parked along the roadways in the estate, which is

unsafe. It may be healthy for people to walk, but for those carrying baggage and materials, it is inconvenient. What will the Assembly Commission do about that? It is a difficulty that must be resolved.

Mr Neeson: I know what the Member means. Other MLAs have spoken to me about this recently and it is an issue that we will keep under review, but it is a difficult one to resolve. One of the most important things is to encourage staff to use public transport. I know that there are issues related to the public transport facilities and the Commission will address them.

Mr K Robinson: Further to Mr Molloy's point, office and party staff have to come to and from the Building in a variety of guises. They must travel out to constituency and party offices, and so forth. That means that they must come back and forth all the time. As has been said, they sometimes have to carry bulky items. Is there no short-term measure that the Commission can consider to alleviate the problem for staff going about their lawful business, communicating with Members and parties?

Mr Neeson: We do not need a short-term response; we must consider long-term issues. The number of MPs for which the Building was intended is much smaller than the 108 Members that we have at present. Clearly, we must consider whether we can provide a further facility for car parking on the Stormont estate. As I said to Mr Molloy, the important thing is to encourage people to use public transport.

Mr Shannon: It has been brought to my attention, and we are probably all aware of it, that taxis and buses must often leave passengers at the bottom of the hill, away from the security gates. Has the Commission considered the possibility of a providing a turning circle for taxis and buses?

Last Friday, the Older People's Policy Forum attended the Assembly. Many old people had to walk 100 yards. Some of them are healthy, but some are not. I thought it unfair to ask them to walk that distance. We have already asked that this matter be considered. I ask the Member again to direct the Commission to address the issue. A turning circle might not be pleasing, aesthetically or visually, but it is something that we must have on grounds of health and safety.

Mr Neeson: I take on board the issue Mr Shannon has raised. However, elderly people and those with disabilities can be disembarked at the east car park gate. We are mindful of the needs of those people, and we will consider the Member's point about a turning circle.

Assembly Website

3. **Mr Brolly** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to provide an Irish-language version of the

Assembly's website, and its other publications.

(AQO 2648/09)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: On 3 March 2009, the Assembly debated a Commission motion relating to a new engagement strategy aimed at improving public engagement with the Assembly, its Committees and MLAs. As a part of the strategy, and included in the recently devised corporate plan, the Assembly Commission has committed itself to a full and effective review of the Assembly website. The Commission will invest in the complete redevelopment of the website over the next 18 months.

The Assembly Commission's information leaflet, 'Your Assembly — Working for You', is available in 10 languages, including Irish. All versions are available on the Assembly website. The Assembly Commission is also considering the development of a languages policy. As part of the development of that policy, the Assembly Commission will initiate a full consultation exercise on its content and will consider any implications for the redevelopment of the website and future use of Assembly publications.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In general, what is the Commission doing to fulfil its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: At present, the Assembly Commission recognises its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in respect of Irish and Ulster Scots, and is represented on the interdepartmental charter implementation group. The Assembly Commission will consider any further guidance that arises from the work of that group. In addition to English, many other languages are used in Northern Ireland, including indigenous minority languages, Irish, Ulster Scots, minority ethnic languages, British sign language and Irish sign language.

The Assembly Commission has a number of statutory and other obligations to consider when dealing with correspondence, requests for information, etc, in languages other than English. For example, under the Assembly Commission's equality scheme, which was drawn up in accordance with section 75, we undertake to make the information that we hold available in different formats and in all languages on request.

Mr McNarry: I might have a better chance of getting an answer to my supplementary question under the auspices of the proficient and well-mannered Dr Coulter. His answer will at least be better than the one that the Finance Minister provided the last time.

How much money does the Assembly spend on Irish translation services? How much taxpayers' money is being spent on this latest piece of mischief-making, and how many members of the public request Irish-only documents?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. To date, £1,270.38 has been spent on the translation of Assembly publications into the Irish language through our existing print contract. As far as future costs are concerned, the print contract for the Assembly is out to tender and is due to be awarded during the summer recess.

Allied to the main printing requirements that are covered by the contract, there will be a requirement for a number of associated services, of which written translation will be one. I cannot give the Member any definitive costs at present as those will be based on the demand for such a facility.

Parliament Buildings: Emblems

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Assembly Commission what steps it is taking to ensure that emblems and symbols, inside and outside Parliament Buildings, reflect the culture and ethos of both traditions.

(AQO 2649/09)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Assembly Commission recognises the importance of providing an environment in and around Parliament Buildings that is welcoming, harmonious and enjoyed by all sections of the community.

The Assembly Commission is responsible for Parliament Buildings and its immediate curtilage. The Assembly Commission is working on the development of a good relations policy and strategy. Indeed, at a meeting of the Commission on 2 April 2009, members agreed that an internal working group will be established to take forward and make recommendations on an appropriate strategy for the Assembly Commission.

To inform that work, the Assembly Commission has also agreed to arrange a consultation event that includes key stakeholders. It is hoped that that first event will inform the Commission of the main issues surrounding the development of a good relations strategy. Emblems and symbols will be one of the issues that the group will consider. It is hoped that Members and parties will engage fully in those deliberations. We recognise that that will be a significant undertaking for the Commission. I assure the Member that we have given and will continue to give our full commitment to addressing the issue over the coming months.

4.15 pm

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an fhreagra sin.

I thank the Member for his answer, and I welcome the establishment of a working group. Does the Commission know when that group will complete its work? In the interim, does the Member have any examples of where in the Building steps have been taken to reflect the many other cultures?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: At present, there is no indication of when the work will be completed. The Commission is due to go on two away-days, during which those issues and their cost, among other things, will be considered. The Commission will provide an answer to the Member's question at an appropriate time.

Assembly Roadshows

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of the series of Assembly roadshows and to outline the main issues and concerns raised by the public at the roadshows. (AQO 2650/09)

Mr Moutray: The Assembly Commission is convinced of the need to increase the public's understanding of the Assembly. Members will be aware of the work that the Commission has undertaken to develop an engagement strategy. In addition to that important work, the Commission decided to hold a series of roadshows across Northern Ireland. However, the Commission was conscious that roadshows were a new concept that had not previously been trialled by the Assembly. Moreover, the level of public interest was unclear.

As Members know, more than 600 people attended the nine roadshows that the Commission organised across Northern Ireland. At each roadshow, the main concerns raised were similar and included health matters, such as autism; spending on health; post-primary transfer; student tuition fees; the devolution of policing and justice; and the future of the Maze project.

The consensus of Members who sat on the panels was that the roadshows were useful in increasing the public's understanding of the Assembly.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta fosta.

I thank Mr Moutray for his answer, and I agree with much of what he said. I seek a commitment from the Assembly Commission to repeating the exercise annually —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. To seek a commitment is not to ask a question. You must ask a question, Mr McElduff.

Mr McElduff: In light of your comment, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will reword what I said. Does tone or intonation count? Is there a commitment from the Assembly Commission to repeat the exercise annually — question mark?

Similarly, will the Assembly Commission also consider using venues in the heart of communities to ensure that local people are able to have their say? Perhaps the Commission could review the location of venues.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. After studying the report that will evaluate the exercise, the Commission will consider the potential for holding further roadshows in the remaining 10 constituencies. To date, the feedback has been positive.

Lord Browne: How much did the roadshows cost, and were they value for money?

Mr Moutray: The costs have not yet been fully finalised, but I can give the Member some estimates: the hire of the venues cost £4,000; advertising costs were £25,000; £1,000 was spent on printing; and materials and labour came to £13,000.

Every Member has an obligation to ensure that the public understand the role of the Assembly. In addition to the roadshows, there was a major publicity campaign on the work of the Assembly. I also highlight that through hiring venues across Northern Ireland and placing advertisements in local papers, the roadshows injected expenditure into the economy. Given the current economic climate, that is important, and I have no doubt that the roadshows were good value for money.

Mr Kennedy: I thank Mr Moutray for his earlier answers. Will he confirm that no Member who participated in the roadshows was paid to do so but that all Members contributed voluntarily from a sense of public service and duty?

Mr Moutray: I am happy to confirm what Mr Kennedy said. It is true that no Members received any remuneration for taking part in the roadshows.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Costs of Division

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the Deloitte Report 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide', commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and calls on the Executive to ensure that the potential to address both the direct and embedded costs of division, and the opportunity to provide shared and integrated goods, services and facilities, are fully realised within the next Programme for Government and the Comprehensive Spending Review. — [*Dr Farry*]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Executive" and insert

"to ensure that the opportunity to provide shared and integrated goods, services and facilities is fully realised to promote a shared and better future; calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to revise the Programme for Government to take account of these matters and to publish without further delay the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the Budget accordingly." — [*Mrs D Kelly*]

Mr Kennedy: I am not sure that I am being paid for this one either.

It is quite clear that the cataclysmic nature of the financial and economic situation that Governments across the globe find themselves in will dictate significant changes to every Government's plans and policies. Things that were affordable before the recession clearly may no longer be affordable. The motion, therefore, is framed by a very different set of circumstances than those that prevailed when the Deloitte report was devised. If, as we hear, the Democratic Unionist Party is already talking about major structural change in the numbers of Departments and Assembly Members, it is a comparatively small thing to reconsider the cost of division as being too great to support in the changed financial climate.

When you mention the cost of division to the man on the street — certainly the man on the streets on which I walk — he immediately thinks of the cost of things such as the Irish language, the Equality Commission and a range of similar issues. There is a lot of information in the public domain, especially from the Deloitte report, which I believe needs a great deal more scrutiny than it has received to date. Although the report broadly identifies a cost to the public of £1.5 billion per annum, a careful reading of it suggests that that figure is incredibly misleading.

The report includes, for instance, the cost of policing riots and civil disorder, which, of course, are not unique to Northern Ireland. It includes support for the victims of past terrorist violence. However, put simply, victims cannot and must not be abandoned to satisfy accountants. It includes the costs associated

with certain administrative changes under the RPA — changes that have been broadly welcomed across Northern Ireland as a means of saving money in the long term. It includes the cost of community relations programmes. Given the hard and vital work undertaken across Northern Ireland to promote better relations in our society, it is, to say the least, slightly strange that the cost of such efforts is implied to be a waste of public money.

The Deloitte report does not factor in the danger from republican dissidents and the additional costs that that demands. It does not factor in the fact that Northern Ireland is the back door to the United Kingdom for dangerous criminal activities, such as the drugs trade. It does not factor in the additional policing costs associated with having a land border with another state. Although the report may point the way to what we should be thinking, it is only a first attempt at a true evaluation of the costs of real division. More has to be taken into account.

The estimated saving for education, at almost £80 million per annum, is based on a guess that savings between 1% and 5% could be made in school provision. That is an unproven figure; it is an estimate.

Experience has shown that savings made from Government reorganisations are never as great as claimed. I sound a note of caution about the wild assumption that £50 million can be saved by cutting the number of Departments. The bulk of the costs will remain as long as the function remains. Departments may be reorganised into fewer units, but that will only save the salaries of a few permanent secretaries and deputy secretaries. As a rule, costs are only saved as functions are shed. The only way to make significant savings is to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of all the functions of Government. The question is: should we really do that?

Although I give broad support to the idea behind the motion, I caution wisdom and prudence in applying such generalised and sweeping principles to cut the costs of our division or to save a huge sum at a stroke. In particular, I caution Ministers against sacking large numbers of public servants or civil servants.

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

Mr Kennedy: That is the only way that £50 million could be saved.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion and the amendment are somewhat predictable. In saying that, I do not mean to be offensive to the Members who tabled them. In fairness, the Alliance Party has addressed the issue of the cost of division on a number of occasions in the Assembly. However, it is obvious that that party's reliance on the report takes no cognisance of its

authors' repeated health warnings that they could not substantiate their calculations. Indeed, they admit in the report that the headline-grabbing figure of £1.5 billion could be considered to be the upper limit of the cost of division. That is a guesstimate at best, and the report makes no mention of an estimate of the lower limit.

However, there are costs of division in this region. As Martina Anderson pointed out, the costs are enormous when the island-wide context is considered. The Alliance Party asked a series of questions to Ministers and can have been left in no doubt that the report would not determine policy in that area. It was not authorised by this Assembly but by a previous Administration. Therefore, it is not relevant to the Assembly.

The report is dated in that by the time of its publication, the issues that it addresses had already been affected fundamentally by the decision to set up the Assembly. The existence of the Assembly has made a significant impact on the traditional divisions and fault lines in society. It is a matter of regret that, like Sisyphus, the Alliance Party used the motion to attempt to push the rock up the hill no matter how often it rolls back down over the top of it.

The SDLP amendment once again demonstrates the single-transferable sound-bite approach that so characterises the party's approach to any and all motions in the Assembly. Notwithstanding the issue, the SDLP sticks in an amendment so that it has an extra 10 minutes in which to speak and considers it to be all the better if it can intervene when other Members are speaking. It is a question of never mind the quality, feel the width. It is genuinely difficult to take such transparent gimmickry seriously.

The amendment makes the usual token reference to reopening the Programme for Government and the Budget process, so there is no surprise with that either. The SDLP contributed a paper to the economic debate in which it promised an elephant and produced a mouse. I admit that it was a glossy production; there is no doubt about that. Unfortunately, for some inexplicable reason, it took no account of the fact that the British Government have already held their spring Budget, which was a response to the economic downturn. It seems that only the SDLP was unaware that that would have a significant impact on this region. Its document asked: where is the money? That might well be a suitable title for a TV game show, but it is hardly a policy or the type of response that is needed for the economic downturn or the critical matter of the divisions and tensions in our society.

The wider issue, which neither the motion nor the amendment have addressed, is the steady progress towards a sustainable political accommodation that

represents our entire society and which has already transformed the situation in the North. It has also transformed the cost-benefit analysis of the responses that the Executive and the Assembly would take.

The benchmark that will govern the success of the application of Executive policy will be the delivery of equality, and it is the responsibility of the Assembly to hold the Executive to account in that respect. Go raibh míle maith agat.

4.30 pm

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to support the motion if amended, which makes for a more practical and realistic response to some of the problems that society faces.

The motion brings up two major issues. First, the Alliance Party still has an unrealistic approach to a shared future. It fails to recognise that changing people's attitudes and our society involves a process. Thirty years of violence and division cannot simply be wished away. Having listened to Martina Anderson's contribution, in which she blamed everything on the British, I am greatly relieved that Northern Ireland belongs to the United Kingdom, with the National Health Service and an education service that works — despite the efforts of a Sinn Féin Minister.

Secondly, although the Alliance Party is, perhaps, too optimistic about the immediacy of change, Sinn Féin and the DUP appear to be completely incapable of addressing the issue. Their inability to push the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, and their carve-up of politics and policies to date, show that both Sinn Féin and the DUP are more interested in freezing division than building trust and co-operation between the two traditions in Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party welcomed the Deloitte report when it was published. It made a positive contribution to the wider debate on a shared future. However, as well as not being comprehensive, it has flaws. The first is that it is too reductive. Although the Assembly must always seek to protect the public purse by removing waste and inefficiency, we cannot merely reduce the cost of division to pounds and pence. We must always take into consideration the human cost of the past 30-plus years of terrorism and violence.

Many of the figures in the report are misleading. The figure of £1.5 billion per year includes many ambiguous sums. For example, it includes support for victims of past terrorist violence. I consider money that is spent in that area to be crucial to delivering a shared future, and not a cost of division. It includes the cost of policing civil disorder, which all Members should consider a necessity and which is, in fact, not unique to Northern Ireland. It includes costs that are associated

with certain administrative changes under RPA, which have been broadly welcomed by the Assembly.

Another problem with the Deloitte report is that it does not outline a process by which those costs can be reduced. Merely closing a leisure centre will not remove the segregation that people face; it simply removes a particular community's facilities.

Likewise, the Executive cannot be prepared to force people into integrated education. That would not be the right thing to do. That is why the Assembly needs OFMDFM to publish its strategy on how society moves forward to deliver a shared future. To date, however, it appears to have come to few decisions that do not entrench division further, rather than lessen it.

I am bemused, therefore, by what appears to be the Alliance Party's ongoing courtship in an attempt to take the justice brief. If it does —

Mrs D Kelly: Surely not.

Mr McCallister: Who knows?

Mr Ford: I wonder whether the Member was in the Chamber earlier to hear Ms Anderson's contribution. If he describes that as a courtship with the Alliance Party, he has a funny idea of what I understand to be a courtship.

Mr McCallister: I remind the Member that, at one time, Ms Anderson was in charge of unionist outreach. It was almost as successful as her courting of the Alliance Party.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Well, why not?

Mr McElduff: I congratulate the Member on his recent engagement.

Mr Kennedy: He will soon be as happy as the rest of us.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Mr McElduff for that useful intervention. I hope that my engagement will be a happier one than the Alliance/DUP/Sinn Féin carve-up.

The SDLP amendment outlines a much more realistic approach. The Ulster Unionist Party has been calling for a revision of the Programme for Government for some time in order to better reflect current economic and social problems.

In the context of a shared future, any such revision would be correct and sensible. However, to date, we have not been led by much common sense, as a certain party's absence from the Chamber appropriately highlights.

To achieve a shared and better future for the people of Northern Ireland, we must not rely on freezing hostilities, but on a process of developing mutual understanding, recognition of our reliance on one

another and a plan that will break down historical barriers that have been built over many years. No golden ticket will deliver that outcome, but we will certainly not progress in the right direction with Sinn Féin and the DUP in charge. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for returning to the subject matter of the debate.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion as amended by the SDLP. The motion needs to be amended, because a shared future is vital, and the Alliance Party's approach to the matter, not only in respect of this motion, is somewhat simplistic. Attaining a shared future is considerably more complex than that party's analysis suggests.

On many occasions, the Alliance Party has quoted a figure of £1 billion as the cost of division emerging from the Deloitte report. That report does not validate the accuracy of that figure, but has considerable value nonetheless. The Deloitte model refers to three areas: quantified costs — or, perhaps, quantifiable costs; costs that are identified but not quantified; and economic lost opportunities. That is a correct way to frame the situation. On quantifiable costs, the report refers to the example of policing, whereby one can place some hard figures. However, some Members, including Danny Kennedy, indicated that even those figures are debatable. Deloitte is open about the fact that other major potential costs of division often cannot be quantified. Therefore, any figures could rationally be argued as the cost of division.

Martina Anderson outlined a different perspective on the matter. Her argument is perfectly sustainable and every bit as valid as that of the Alliance Party. The figure of £3 billion that she latched onto is as defensible or indefensible as any other figure. There are huge social and economic costs of division, but it is important not to trivialise the issue, as often happens.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He mentioned accuracy of figures. Will he respond to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' criticism of the figures in the SDLP's economic document of last month?

Mr O'Loan: The Member is shifting the debate. That, perhaps, indicates a weakness in his position. I could debate that matter, but I will not use my time to do so.

The situation that arose at a Tesco store in Antrim last week highlights the need to address this issue. There were objections to young people wearing GAA club jerseys during a charity collection, and we are told that it is "understandable" that Tesco asked them to wear plain T-shirts. That was the wrong reaction. The right response would have been to face down the objectors and to treat those young people in the same

way that any other team that collected for charity in Tesco had been treated in the past.

I raise that matter because it is representative of a wider approach to such matters. Some people think that a shared future can be built by smoothing out all aspects of diversity — I disagree. Some people support a similar approach to Catholic schools. Some people, but not all, who support integrated schools advocate such schools as the sole model for education. I do not attribute that view to Stephen Farry. Although at one point he described integrated schools as the apex of his policy approach, he did not say that it was the only model that should be considered.

There is a tendency by some to think that that would be the ideal type of structure in some sort of perfect state. Dolores Kelly rightly offered counterpoints to that argument that must necessarily be heard.

Many at the extreme end of that spectrum — as I said, I do not put Stephen Farry in that category — adopt a very intolerant approach and ignore the great added benefit to society of faith-based education and the contribution of its values system and community-based approach.

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland has a deeply dysfunctional society and that there are huge costs of division. The fundamental resolution must be a political one. Such resolution is not easy; it involves a process, and it is not just about smoothing diversity. We are in a better place today as a result of political agreement, and it is no accident that the community is more settled. Leadership matters, and leadership must not falter. There is a shaky relationship between the DUP and Sinn Féin, as witnessed in their failure to agree on a programme for cohesion, sharing and integration.

I will comment briefly on unionism. The First Minister was exemplary in his approach to the Massereene murders when he said that there is no turning back. However, from Diane Dodds we hear talk of smashing Sinn Féin and republicanism. One cannot have it both ways. We need to hear the message that there is no turning back, particularly in relation to North/South development.

Sinn Féin is in an equal quandary, so much so that it halted movement for five months and then started from exactly the same place. That party does not know whether it is working for or against the DUP and what stance it should take in regard to its own approach to violence over the past 30 years.

The message is that unionists and republicans should resolve those dilemmas: that is the superstructure for a shared future. Then we can build the internal walls, as expressed in my party's amendment.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): At the

outset, I welcome the opportunity afforded by the Alliance Party's motion to discuss the costs of division and the work that we are doing to address the many legacies of the past and to build a fair, cohesive society and a shared and better future for all our people. This is a debate worth having: it is a discussion that we need to have, along with continuing dialogue.

I welcome the contributions that have been made by Members across the Chamber. We may differ on aspects of the issue, but within the Assembly, there is a desire to tackle the costs and causes of division in Northern Ireland.

I will refer to some of the comments made by various Members. The debate was opened by Dr Stephen Farry for the Alliance Party. He quoted the First Minister who, he said, recognised the problem, but he also said that the issues had not yet been addressed in the Programme for Government. We accept that the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) needs to be reviewed. It is being reviewed at the moment. That strategy is the core piece of work that will determine our policies and priorities in tackling the causes of division in Northern Ireland in the coming years. I stress that that is a revision of an existing strategy. There is a strategy at the moment, but we accept that it needs to be updated in light of the political progress that has been made and changing attitudes in society.

Dr Farry referred to the Deloitte report, which is mentioned in the Alliance Party's motion. He accepted that the report was not perfect. During the debate, others described it as "incredibly misleading", "flawed", and so on. The diverse opinions on the report that we have heard this afternoon and the fact that even its proponents have been critical of it is recognition that the report does not offer the basis for tackling the problems. There is information in the report of which we can make use, but there are aspects that I, too, feel are flawed and inaccurate.

That is why we must look at the bigger picture. The revised CSI strategy provides us with an opportunity to do so.

I look forward to the publication next week of the Alliance Party's paper on savings in public services that can be made under the banner of tackling the costs of division. We will look carefully at the Alliance Party's contribution to the ongoing debate.

4.45 pm

In proposing the SDLP amendment, Mrs Kelly said that the SDLP wanted the Programme for Government to be revised to take account of the recession and the cost of division and how we tackle those issues. However, the Programme for Government clearly sets out our commitment to building a shared future. The revised CSI strategy will give us a basis on which to

move that work forward. Therefore, we do not necessarily believe that there is a need to review the Programme for Government.

Progress is being made. There are differences between the DUP and Sinn Féin representation in OFMDFM on some of the detail of the revised strategy, but we are working our way through those differences and we are hopeful that we can publish the revised strategy in the near future. That will, in turn, invite responses from the parties that are represented in the Assembly.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel is more than capable of speaking for himself about the need to revise the Budget. If the revised CSI strategy has budgetary implications, we will examine those at the appropriate time. However, our position on the recession remains the same. We believe that the Budget and the Programme for Government form a sound basis for tackling Northern Ireland's economic problems.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, Martina Anderson estimated that the cost of partition stood at £3 billion a year. However, I suggest to Sinn Féin that the cost of partition to Northern Ireland, given the recession and our position within the United Kingdom, is a lot less when one factors in the economic situation in the Republic compared with that of the UK. Northern Ireland is a lot better off as a result of partition than it would be if we were part of an economy that, alongside Greece, is in serious trouble in comparison with other EU countries and which has just lost its triple A-star rating on the international money markets. We are satisfied that we are in the right place.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, Danny Kennedy described the Deloitte report as "incredibly misleading" and cited the issue of victims. He said that it was wrong to conclude that funding support for victims of the Troubles should be regarded as a cost of division. It is certainly part of the legacy of the Troubles and of the consequences of conflict. In that sense, it could be argued that it is a consequence of division. However, we cannot remove the funding for victims. Indeed, we have increased significantly the amount of funding that is available for victims to £36 million over the current three-year period. We recognise that bringing about healing for the victims of the Troubles is part of the strategy to address the causes of division. That cost can be set on the other side of the balance sheet, because it is about addressing the causes of division. It is about healing for those who have suffered as a consequence of a divided society in Northern Ireland. I concur with the points that Danny Kennedy made in that regard.

John McCallister said that the DUP and Sinn Féin were the main reasons for the failure to address the cost of division in Northern Ireland. I do not agree

with John at all. I can speak clearly for the Democratic Unionist Party when I say that it is committed to building a shared future. It is somewhat bizarre to criticise parties for seeking to include another political party within the power-sharing arrangements to make the Executive inclusive of all the main parties in the Assembly and then say that that is not the product of building a shared future.

Why, if we are building a shared future, would we want to exclude one element of the Assembly from it? It is the ambition of those who want to build a shared future to be more — not less — inclusive. There is a contradiction in attacking the DUP and Sinn Féin for carving things up and, at the same time, attacking us for seeking to include even more people in the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Loan, on behalf of the SDLP, gave the example of Tesco in Antrim, where some people who were packing bags to raise funds were objected to because they were wearing their GAA team's shirts. He said that the objectors should be faced down; however, we need a common approach to those issues. In other places, people have objected to staff wearing poppies, for example.

I want to see the day when such things are not a matter for objection; when an Orangeman can wear his sash and people do not dance up and down because they find it objectionable; when a member of the GAA can wear his GAA shirt and people do not find that objectionable; when a man who got a Glasgow Rangers tattoo in his youth, because that was his favourite team, is not restricted from joining our Police Service, given that the tattoo would be covered almost all the time.

That, sadly, is an example of division in our society, and I agree that we need to tackle it. We need to find ways of dealing with those issues that ensure that people do not get hung up on sporting symbols and that we can learn to live and let live. It works both ways.

The restoration of devolution has been a key step in ensuring a more stable society in Northern Ireland. Devolution also sends a strong, clear message about working together for the benefit of all.

This week marks the second anniversary of devolution in its current phase, and it is appropriate that we are once again discussing this important issue. Working together is not always easy, but, ultimately, we remain united in our determination to strive to build a shared, better and brighter future for all. That was indicated in the clearest terms when all parties in the Chamber stood together in condemnation of those three terrible murders. For many people, the reassurance of their political leaders standing together at that time sent a powerful message that there is a commitment to building a shared future and that we

will not allow those who want to destroy the prospect of a shared future to drag us back to the past.

Not long ago, we debated the possibility of removing the peace walls that exist in many places, particularly in Belfast. At the time, I said that the emphasis should not be on an imposed programme of demolition but on ensuring that we support local communities that have been divided by those barriers to build strong, supportive and trusting relationships and to develop joint working on areas of common concern. That will ultimately make the so-called peace walls unnecessary.

The costs of division are symptoms of the causes of division. We need a shared approach to tackling the causes of division, because in tackling the causes, we deal with the costs. However, one cannot deal with the costs without dealing with the causes; that is why the CSI strategy is important. It is why the ongoing work in OFMDFM and in other Departments, in building community capacity, in helping communities to reach out to one another, and in breaking down barriers, is continuing. That work is slowly but surely helping to bring down barriers and to help people to sense what it might be like to have a shared future. OFMDFM remains committed to continuing that work.

Conflict and violence have left a profound legacy. We should not underestimate the effort and time that are needed to mend relationships in local communities. I fully realise the importance of striking the right balance when it comes to being realistic about the scale of those challenges. Undoubtedly, considerable challenges exist — for example, to change long-standing housing patterns, to encourage greater sharing in education or to ensure changes in employment patterns. Those challenges will require commitment across Departments, statutory agencies and the private sector to build a solid framework that is based on the promotion of equality and the fostering of good and better relations among all sections of the community. Tolerance, respect and safety are integral parts of that work.

Economic growth and prosperity are also important. Those are underpinned by stability, and sharing that growth will further promote that stability. There can be no place in our society, or in any society, for inequality, racism, sectarianism or prejudice. We must keep working to tackle those attitudes, because they are at the heart of the causes of division in our local communities. We need a peaceful society in which our children can play together, people can work together, and families can live happily side by side regardless of their community or ethnic background or their religious beliefs. That is something for which, I believe, we all want to strive.

This is a time of peace and opportunity in Northern Ireland. It is a challenging time in economic and social terms, but I believe that everyone's mindset is that we will deal with those challenges best by moving forward

together. As we work to build and to mend the relationships that will overcome the divisions that we have experienced, we must recognise that a headline figure is not seen as immediately or easily recoverable in savings. However, we want to make those savings, because they can be reinvested in other ways.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the junior Minister please draw his remarks to a close?

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): As I said at the outset, I welcome this debate. It is a good opportunity to cover the issues, and I hope that colleagues across the Chamber can continue to work together towards building that shared future.

Mr Attwood: I want, by and large, to thank everyone for their contributions to the debate, but more about that later.

Many Members have, quite properly, bored into the Alliance Party motion and outlined how it is a flawed basis on which to proceed. However, the one question that I want to ask Alliance Party Members — I would ask them to reply in a few minutes' time — is simply this: does the Alliance Party believe or not believe that to deal with the issues of our divided past and to create a shared future, including in the current spending period, the Budget needs to be revisited? That is my question, because, curiously, Dr Farry, when he outlined the reasons for the motion, said that an opportunity could be presented to deal with issues of a divided past and create a shared future by using the proposed £123 million efficiency savings between now and 2011 as a mechanism to try to build in more opportunities for shared services.

My question is, therefore, is that the height of it, or is the Alliance Party now on board with the SDLP in saying that if we want to deal with issues about our divided past or shared future, and all issues about the Budget, we need to consider the entire Budget? We cannot consider only efficiency savings and quarterly returns but must examine the entire Budget so that we can deal with all the issues that are not being dealt with because of the inadequacies of the Budget that was forced through the Assembly two or three years ago.

That is my question, and it deserves an answer. Otherwise, John McCallister is right to say that the motion is part of a courtship ritual with the DUP. Perhaps it is about trying to address the financial issues at the heart of this Government, including the financial issues about a shared society?

The junior Minister gave a fairly soft and defensive reply, but the hard end of his response worried me because he said that issues such as wearing poppies, football jerseys, or other symbols or emblems that identify people must be dealt with in the round. You are wrong, Minister. What happened in Tesco should have been dealt with on its own merit. When young

people and children become the front line of the legacy of our past, and the only answer from Government is that we have to deal with it in respect of all the other issues about flags, emblems, clothing or uniforms —

5.00 pm

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way. I think that you are putting the issue on the sideline, rather than dealing with the fundamental issue, which is that a few people decided to put a small group of young people on the front line of our divided society, and Government, including you, Minister, should have dealt with that on its own merit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair. This is not the first time that I have reminded you about that, Mr Attwood. Please make your remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: I give way to the junior Minister.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): I stress that I was referring to tackling the attitudes that result in those problems. I was also making the point that those attitudes do not belong to one side of the community or the other. It is about changing mindsets. The incident at Tesco was a symptom of the problem. I am not saying that it did not need to be dealt with there and then. I am saying that it is symptomatic of an attitude that we need to tackle across the board.

Mr Attwood: I thank the junior Minister for that, but that is different from what he said. The point is that the Tesco incident was the time for the people of Antrim to make a stand about past attitudes and about what was and was not acceptable.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will not give way.

To allow that moment to pass allowed those past attitudes to prevail, but things cannot be done that way. People have to take a stand when the moment arises. By all means, deal with the broader issues and the inherited baggage that we all have. However, issues must be dealt with when they manifest themselves, as this one did on the floor of Tesco.

The most worrying speech came from Sinn Féin. Having endorsed the SDLP's proposals around North/South making sense, Martina Anderson said:

“Perhaps you do not recognise the division that was so carefully fostered by an alien Government.”

We need to have a debate about how division was fostered, or not, in the past. However, to make no hint, reference or comment, in six minutes of speech, to the divisions brutally inflicted on the people of Ireland for 40 years against their will is an enormous indictment

on someone who says that they want to promote a shared society. Divisions were forced upon people, but those divisions were compounded by a very small minority who, even when there was a democratic alternative, decided that violence, and killing 1,800 people out of the 3,600 people who were killed, was a way to create a shared and better future. They were wrong then, they are wrong now, and they should have said it in that speech.

Mr Ford: It is clear that we in this society need a meaningful community relations strategy, whether it is a shared future strategy, a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration, or some new document. At the moment, anything from the Executive will be welcome. We have had promises from the junior Minister this afternoon, but we have seen very little product over the past two years.

A huge range of issues need to be tackled, and Stephen Farry spoke of some of them. We need specific obligations in every Department, not just something that is sidelined into a small section of OFMDFM, to encourage desegregation and to look at the long-term costs of failing to tackle the manifestation of sectarianism across society. Far too many decisions are being taken by public officials; they are short-term expedients and are damaging, in the long term, to a good relations strategy.

In the same way as we have equality impact assessments for new policies, we need to have some logical way of proofing for sharing rather than separation.

If we are serious about promoting a shared future, it must be an essential part of every aspect of new policy. We must see those policies applied regardless of which Department or public agency is carrying them out. Active attention to the needs of victims and to the promotion of good relations will save money elsewhere in the Budget. The most obvious example is mental health, which is not an either/or matter — one benefits the other.

It is unfortunate that many of the comments made by Members during the debate were not entirely on topic in respect of the motion, and did not take account of some of the points that were made by the proposer. However, I welcome the significant degree of engagement on the part of most parties in the Assembly.

When Stephen Farry proposed the motion, he set out the costs that we suffer as a segregated society — and they are costs. Some of them are entirely necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of victims; others deal with the direct cost of violence or the duplication of services. The cost of lost opportunities for tourism and inward investment due to our past divided society are unquantifiable, but clearly very large.

In proposing her amendment, Dolores Kelly broadly supported the motion. Perhaps that was no surprise, because we can be sure that there will be broad agreement. I confess, however, that I thought that in some respects, the amendment somewhat represented a dance on the head of a pin. I make it clear to Mrs Kelly, Declan O'Loan and Alex Attwood that the Alliance Party agrees that the Budget must be revisited. However, our motion was about a shared future, rather than merely restating the issue of revisiting the Budget. That is why we phrased the motion in the way that we did.

We accept that the SDLP amendment is phrased slightly differently. It does not do as good a job as our initial motion, but, frankly, there are many more significant issues than just debating the minutiae of exactly what way those measures will be funded.

Dolores Kelly spoke about the need for leadership from the top. I follow the leadership that Naomi Long gives — another effective woman whom Mrs Kelly can place alongside Margaret Ritchie.

Martina Anderson talked a fair bit about the cost of division on a North/South basis, which is something of a red herring in the debate. Over the years, it has been absolutely clear that the Alliance Party has no problems with North/South structures that meet our economic and social needs and that share the cost of administering certain services across the whole island.

At the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, which met in Dublin in the mid-1990s, I remember Alliance Party members talking about the sharing of healthcare facilities and about the recognition that that was more than a cross-border issue — for some specialist services, it was an all-island issue. Therefore, we do not need entirely tangential lectures from Ms Anderson on that point. Since she talked about the “primary issue” of equality, perhaps I should remind her that we all know that section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 refers to the equality duty. However, perhaps Ms Anderson and some of her colleagues, including Mr McLaughlin, need to read section 75(2), which states:

“Without prejudice to its obligations under subsection (1), a public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”

Section 75 is not the equality section; it is the equality and good relations section. It is time for people who lecture us on section 75(1) to read section 75(2) in order to make those lectures accurate, because Sinn Féin's incapability of reading the Act, as it stands, is getting a little bit annoying.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share my surprise that given Sinn Féin's talk of equality, and despite the Equality Commissioner writing several months ago to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask that

amending legislation be introduced to update equality laws, no such legislation has been timetabled?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that the Member must ask that question of OFMDFM rather than the mere, humble leader of the opposition in this place.

Ms Anderson: I assure the Member that Sinn Féin knows the equality agenda inside out. Two little words in section 75(1) state the requirement to have “due regard” to promoting equality of opportunity. Section 75(2) uses the exact wording that the Member cited. However, section 75(1), which states the primary duty, mentions “due regard”. That is the law.

Mr Ford: I am baffled; I thought that I could read the Act. We have just had the perfect example of Sinn Féin's inability to read section 75(2). I thank the Member for that helpful intervention.

Danny Kennedy's comments demonstrated the ongoing love affair between the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. Clearly, there is greater agreement between the two parties that are either side of me than there is between us and the SDLP on some matters. Nonetheless, the points that Mr Kennedy made about the inadequacies of the Deloitte report were addressed by Stephen Farry during his speech. Similar points were made by Mr Kennedy's colleague John McCallister, although neither of them is present at the moment.

Mitchel McLaughlin's argument that the Deloitte report is not ours seems just a little dubious. Is the validity of a report entirely assessed on who commissioned it, rather than on the quality of that report? I also point out to Declan O'Loan that the Alliance Party made its estimate of the £1 billion that is wasted each year on the costs of segregation about a year before the Deloitte report was published. We entirely accept, and have argued from the very beginning, that there are faults in the Deloitte report. However, we also believe that there are some broad general accuracies in it that need to be taken into account, and that the flawed methodology in certain parts does not invalidate the general tenor of that report, or the issue that we must address today.

Mr O'Loan: I hope that this point will be taken in full seriousness: does the Member not agree that to attempt to oversimplify this debate by attaching a single figure to it — whether it be £1 billion, £1.5 billion or £3 billion — does not do justice to a very serious argument?

Mr Ford: I agree. We have always said that the estimate was broad. The issue is the cost of segregation, not whether we calculate it to the nearest £100,000.

I welcome some of the comments that were made by the Minister, who seems to be in a degree of disagreement with his Back-Bench colleagues on the other side of the Chamber. Sadly, we did not hear from

his Back-Benchers. It seems that he quite seriously talked about the need for the acceptance of people across this society. I assure him that if one competed in the Belfast marathon, one would hear banter and jokes thrown at the leader of the Alliance Party in every part of this city. However, one would also run past peace lines at Bridgend, between the Clonard and the Shankill, and on the Whitewell Road. Those issues have to be addressed and have to be taken seriously.

I welcome the words of the junior Minister, but this corner of the House wants to see some degree of action on the matter. Unfortunately, we have not seen that.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I am sorry; I have only about 20 seconds left.

The position is quite clear: it is not just words that we need at this stage; we must see signs of serious action. Unfortunately, OFMDFM has batted words around, but nothing is being carried through. Since 1999, successive Government programmes have failed to take serious account of the need to take real action on the promotion of good relations.

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

Mr Ford: The obligations are contained in every part of section 75. Divisions hurt everyone at a human level and they must be addressed.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 17; Noes 40.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr O'Loan.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Irwin and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 16; Noes 16.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Burns, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Butler, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Mr McLaughlin.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Main Question accordingly negatived.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Management of Assets and Pensions at Visteon Corporation

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Members should note that the Speaker has been advised that, for reasons related to the appointment of administrators to the company, there will be no ministerial response.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom a rá gur ábhar an-tábhachtach é seo átaimid a phlé inniu. Ba mhaith liom a rá fosta go gcuirim fáilte roimh na hoibrithe ó Visteon atá sa Tionól inniu agus a bheas ag éisteacht leis an díospóireacht.

On behalf of the Assembly, I welcome the Visteon workers who are in the Public Gallery. They have conducted their campaign with great dignity and unity and staged a sit-in at the plant for the past 36 days. As a result of those efforts and the public support for their campaign, the Visteon Corporation has been forced to negotiate a resolution. The pay-off that Visteon has offered goes some way to addressing the workers' rights to redundancy packages, but the corporation has differentiated between workers even in that. Moreover, neither Visteon nor Ford has made any effort to reinstate employment and manufacturing in Belfast, and those companies still have to answer for the workforce's pension funds.

The behaviour of the board of Visteon UK and the Ford Motor Company, and the treatment of the workers here and in Britain, has been shameful. Indeed, I believe that aspects of that behaviour amount to fraud, corruption and sharp practice. It is important that we highlight those matters and bring them to the attention of the Assembly. We must seek to ensure that the relevant Government and statutory agencies, including the Pensions Regulator, carry out the necessary rigorous assessments and investigations into the conduct of those companies.

The immediate background to the Visteon dispute began on 31 March, when the directors of Visteon UK put their company into administration. On that day, 210 men and women employed at the Belfast plant were told that their jobs ceased to exist. That information came by letter from the management of Visteon UK. The statutory 90-day consultation period was not afforded to the workers. No information was given to

them about their rights and entitlements. They were denied any right of reply. Moreover, their right to Ford terms and conditions, including the lifetime protection of their discretionary pension in payment increases contained in the:

“Agreement governing the separation of the Ford Visteon organisation”

was binned by the company.

That is unacceptable. It is contemptible behaviour by the management of those two companies. In the light of it, the workers rightly and courageously took over the plant and refused to leave until Ford and Visteon negotiated a satisfactory agreement on redundancies and pensions. The workers refused to be cowed or intimidated by threat of legal action, and they lobbied and fought for their rights. Their actions encouraged their union colleagues in Britain. I congratulate the workers on their principled stand against injustice, and I commend them for the example they have set in defence of workers’ rights.

The activities of Ford and Visteon raise serious concerns about the management of assets and pensions by both companies, including passing the burden for paying pensions on to the public purse; in other words, the taxpayer. Sinn Féin also has concerns about information provided by Visteon UK about future plans for the Belfast plant and the use of Government investment in new production lines. We have provided that information to the administrator, and we intend to place it on the record in this debate. It is too much material for one Member to present in the time available, so my colleagues will continue presenting it when I am finished until the full information is on the record.

Sinn Féin believes that the closure of the Belfast plant has not been a reaction to unprecedented financial difficulties. It is not the result of what is happening globally. It is the result, indeed it is the objective, of strategic decision-making by the Ford Motor Company in conjunction with Visteon Corporation, which includes Visteon UK.

Visteon UK would not exist but for the Ford Motor Company. The workforce came mostly from Ford, and the workers were transferred to Visteon under what is known as a “spin-off agreement” in 2000. That agreement was negotiated and signed by the Ford Motor Company. The agreement that governed the formation of Visteon UK said:

“For the duration of their employment, terms and conditions of existing Ford employees, who transfer to Newco”

— that is, Visteon —

“will mirror Ford conditions (including discretionary pension in payment increases) in their respective countries (lifetime protection).”

Ford has claimed that it has no responsibility to the workforce under the terms of the spin-off agreement.

Yet one of the signatories to the agreement was J R Walker, the vice-president of Ford in Europe. The agreement itself was faxed from his office, the Ford office in Cologne, Germany, on 25 January 2000.

The Belfast workers worked for Ford. Some of them have given up to 30 years’ service to that company through the worst times of the conflict. When they were presented with an assurance by Ford that they would have mirrored terms and conditions in employment and pensions, with lifetime protection, they agreed to the spin-off agreement. In Sinn Féin’s view, Ford cannot evade its moral, ethical and contractual obligation to the workers. Ford has a duty to ensure that workers who have given loyal service receive their full rights and entitlements.

The information shows that, since 2000, Visteon UK was not a company that lost its way due to unexpected economic difficulties. Of course, the prevailing economic circumstances are hostile to manufacturing, especially in the automotive industry. However, it is clear that shortly after Ford established Visteon UK, the rundown and closure of Belfast and other plants was already on its agenda. Visteon UK never made a profit from the time of the spin-off. The viability and profitability of the Visteon UK plant in Belfast was entirely in Ford’s hands. Ford had been the owner of the plant; it then became the sole customer of the Belfast plant.

Visteon UK secured the transfer of the Swansea plant to new owners only because the Ford president and chief executive officer, Allan Mullaly, approved a sourcing agreement for the manufacture of global flywheels.

5.45 pm

If Ford helped to form Visteon UK and then controlled supplies and sales, it is no accident that Visteon UK was struggling to be profitable. In fact, it has been argued that by cynically creating a separation between Visteon UK as a parts company from Ford as a car maker, Ford has benefited from the increased competition for parts, thereby driving down costs.

It also ensured that loss-making aspects of Ford production no longer appear on Ford’s books; that gave, and gives, Ford the appearance of being more profitable than it might otherwise have been. If it still had responsibility for the production of those car parts, it would not be in that position. In addition, with the failure of Visteon UK, Ford hoped to bury the promise that was made to local workers in January 2000.

Sinn Féin’s primary concern is with the rights and entitlements of the workforce and sustaining local employment. During meetings in 2005 Sinn Féin learnt that Visteon UK was considering the position of its four plants, and in December 2005 I visited the Belfast plant to meet workers and management. At that time, the company indicated that it expected to make a

decision about the Belfast plant by the end of March 2006. Management made it clear that it wished to renegotiate workers' terms and conditions, including the Ford spin-off agreement.

In July 2006, I facilitated a meeting in Parliament Buildings between the management and the workforce. It was agreed then that the management and workers would reconvene to commence the process to spell out in detail a viable future for the plant and to address, explore and seek to resolve the concerns of the Belfast workforce. However, information has come to light that shows that Visteon UK was working to a different agenda.

In 2001, the year after the spin-off agreement, Visteon commissioned the Stone study on the future of the Belfast plant. The only three options that were considered were closure in 2001, closure in 2007 or a substantial reduction in the Belfast plant. Visteon UK chose to shrink the plant and assets, which included selling off all the land on which the Belfast plant was based. The money that was accrued from those sales amounted to £114 million.

Meanwhile, some components that were manufactured on site were moved to other locations. Then Visteon UK leased back part of its old site. All of that was consistent with the objectives that were set out in the Stone study of 2001. None of it represented an earnest attempt to consolidate the Belfast plant; in fact, it amounted to sharp practice.

In 2007, Visteon formulated another confidential plan named project Protea that stated that Belfast's geographical location made it a financial liability. The project strategy proposed to engage Ford for assistance in transferring products to new locations or, in other words, out of Belfast.

On the issue of fuel rails, which were one of the main components manufactured in Belfast, the confidential document stated:

"This business is marginally profitable in Belfast... under Project Protea it will be transferred to the Visteon Port Elizabeth facility."

That facility is in South Africa.

Another report that signalled Visteon's ulterior agenda was Visteon UK's confidential Cummins D3 strategy, which is dated February 2008. It reiterates Visteon's intention to transfer manufacturing from Belfast to other locations, including South Africa. Steve Gawne of Visteon UK led the Project Cummins D3. At the same time, Visteon published its annual report for the end of 2006. The report stated:

"In 2009 and beyond, we will have our restructuring mostly behind us and will begin to see the full benefits of our efforts to move Visteon to sustained profitability and a stronger global market position."

That was at the cost of workers in Belfast and Britain as well as taxpayers' money.

In a confidential paper entitled 'European Cycle Plan Actions 2005-2009' Ford scheduled its exit from certain manufacturing lines in Belfast and signalled its intention to seek an alternative buyer.

Despite examining a basis for closing the Belfast plant, Ford and Visteon continued to seek and receive Government grants. In 2003, Visteon sought funding of almost £110,000 from Invest NI. Of that amount, £97,210 was paid for research on, and the development of, fuel rails. However, Visteon spent the past two years planning to move that product to South Africa.

Invest NI said that its letter of offer to Visteon stated that the company's acceptance of the money precluded its exploitation of the project outside the European Union without Invest NI's written consent. From our discussion with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sinn Féin understands that she is examining ways to claw back that money. Although Ford owned the Belfast plant, it is worth noting that the IDB, which was Invest NI's predecessor, also invested public money. The exact detail of that investment is not known, but Sinn Féin is seeking to uncover it.

Sinn Féin wants to put on record in the Chamber that there must be a full, rigorous investigation and assessment of how the situation can be resolved in the interests of justice, the workforce and the economy. Later in the debate, one of my colleagues will continue from where I leave off. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Donaldson: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this afternoon's debate. I appreciate that the Member for West Belfast brought the matter to the Chamber.

I, too, visited Visteon on several occasions in 2005, when I met the management and unions to discuss a particular matter. The DUP has met the workers on a number of occasions since the announcement of the closure of the Belfast plant. The DUP deeply regrets that decision, because the Belfast plant could have been sustained. I agree with the Member for West Belfast that the company has been working to an agenda for some time. Under Protea, Visteon has systematically attempted to unload services and manufacturing from Belfast to other plants, most notably to South Africa. Every time workers made efficiencies or stepped up to the mark to meet management requirements, they were presented with yet another hurdle. Regrettably, the company came up with more reasons to lay off workers or transfer work from Belfast.

However, the manner in which the workers have been treated, particularly in relation to redundancy, is even more regrettable. When Ford transferred ownership of the company to Visteon UK, it amounted to nothing more than a paper transfer because, as the Member for West Belfast stated, Ford continued to be the sole

customer of the Belfast plant. In effect, therefore, Ford controlled manufacturing in Belfast.

However, when Visteon UK was established, Ford's management agreed to guarantee the workers their redundancy and pension rights in perpetuity. Those rights were guaranteed not for the lifetime of the Belfast plant, but for the working lifetime of the individual workers. Therefore, their redundancy rights were guaranteed for as long as the workers remained employed, and their pension rights were guaranteed until they reached retirement age.

Yesterday, here at Stormont, I met workers from Nortel in Monkstown. It is a matter of regret that the rights of the Visteon workers have been similarly ignored. When the closure of the Belfast plant was announced, the previous agreements with Ford on redundancy payments were discarded arbitrarily and without consultation. I am thankful that, through negotiation by the unions, notably Unite, Visteon UK has now made an offer, at least to those workers who were employed by Ford and transferred to Visteon UK in 2000.

On Sunday, a ballot took place, in which the majority of workers in the Belfast plant voted to accept Visteon's proposal for the plant and its redundancies.

Dr W McCrea: Is it not regrettable that Visteon has deliberately tried to divide workers and to take away the rights of people who have given excellent service to the firm? In light of what the company has done, does the Member agree that the Department must act immediately to take back any money that Visteon received wrongfully?

Mr Donaldson: The Member for South Antrim makes a fair point. It is important that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment investigates what has been done, and whether taxpayers' money can be recovered from Visteon. Although I accept entirely their right to go along with the proposals, the difficulty with the deal that the Visteon workers accepted on Sunday is that it leaves a number of workers at the Belfast plant in a disadvantaged position.

That brings me to the similar situation at Nortel. From our meeting with Nortel workers yesterday and the discussions that we have had with Visteon workers, it is clear that there is a weakness in the law here, which big corporations are exploiting to the detriment of workers. We need to look at that urgently. When looking at their global coverage, it is clear that companies are focusing on plants in the UK, specifically those in Northern Ireland, and they are making workers redundant although it is clear that those plants are competitive, effective and efficient. Plants are being closed because, as one Nortel manager said, they are seen as a soft touch.

Our employment laws must be looked at. We must look at how we can protect the rights of workers, including those who have lost out at Visteon and Nortel. We need to pursue the issue of pension rights, because the agreement that was reached with the union did not cover the pension rights to the extent that would protect the entitlement of workers. There are issues remaining, and, for our part, we will work with the other parties, and with the unions and the workers, to try to secure those rights and entitlements.

Mr B McCrea: Success has many claimants; failure, as they say, is an orphan. When I attended the May Day march, and listened to the fine speeches, I had to pause to reflect on who really won this battle. As far as I am concerned, it was the local workers and the local union; it was they who made the case. I do not know if other Members had the same experience, but I received a number of sharp e-mails, which brought to my attention the plight of the workers in the plant. I had the privilege and the pleasure of being at the plant on three occasions. Apparently, I will get a medal that has been stamped for me, for breaking the law like the rest of the workers. However, I did so for a very good cause and an appropriate course of action.

The case was laid out in full by Mr Adams. Looking at the paperwork, one cannot escape the feeling that there has been shoddy work at play, that people have not acted fairly, and that a particularly hardworking and conscientious workforce has been done down by multinational machinations.

I fully support the debate, and I thank the Member for tabling it. We will do what we can to assist. Although it is useful for us to put these matters on the record, the real battle over pensions will come in the courts. Perhaps people are not sure whether that battle will be successful; however, I understand that the initial indications are quite positive.

As Mr Donaldson said, the issue is about how we can help people. Perhaps we can look at who should be fighting those court cases, and at what we can do when multinationals fail to honour their obligations. Perhaps the Minister can look at that area to see whether we can assist.

6.00 pm

At the risk of regurgitating arguments that will be made more fully by others, I must say that the issue raises questions about capitalism, the economy and the way forward. It is clear that we want investment from multinationals. As a relatively small part of the world that is isolated from the big consumers, we need to find a way of getting the skills base to come in to attract investment and to gain access to the markets. When we consider how to toughen legislation, we must be careful not to toughen it so much that we end up not getting the investment that we need. However,

that is a challenge for Government. Given that our Government placed the economy at the centre of their Programme for Government, consideration should be given to devising schemes to ensure that the cute financial moves that people made in such areas as land, equipment, buildings and elsewhere are not allowed. Perhaps public ownership has to be taken of those buildings when bringing companies through.

I do not wish to prolong the debate. I have been really impressed by the way in which the workers have stood together and how they have forced the issue to the top of the agenda against a number of setbacks from people who thought that they were simply an irritant. They proved that they were not an irritant and that they had right on their side. Many other trade unionists have taken heart from the way in which those workers have conducted themselves and the successes that they achieved.

The House should find ways of supporting the Visteon workers and getting justice for their very real concerns and demands. I know that it is not to everyone's liking because not everyone did as well as others, but, in the circumstances, the deal is generally a good one. I have asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, to see what he can do for the people who were not as fortunate as some of the others and to put his best foot forward.

Mr Attwood: I also welcome the debate, and I join other Members in acknowledging that, over the past few weeks, the front line has been the workers, their partners and their families. They have had to carry the burden of the doubts and the uncertainties about the matter, and they, more than anyone else, deserve our acknowledgement and our appreciation. I say that for a number of reasons. It is not coincidental that, within hours of the start of the occupation, even the London news had the story about the Visteon workers as one of its headlines. It is no coincidence that, even yesterday morning, the RTÉ morning news had the story as one of its headlines. The actions of the Visteon workers, on their own behalf and on the behalf of other workers here and elsewhere, have laid down standards against which those sorts of issues should be judged in the future and against which we as politicians and as the Northern Ireland Assembly should judge ourselves.

The first of those standards is that the workers nailed the lie that, when workers' rights are put in jeopardy, whether that is because of the manipulation of Visteon/Ford in this case or because of the recession or other reasons in other cases, there is nothing that can be done. We hear that view occasionally, even in the Assembly Chamber. On this occasion, however, the Visteon workers powerfully demonstrated that there are things that are within our capacity, control or influence. Led by them, we as a political community followed in support of what they were doing and in

support of doing something when others said that nothing could happen.

The second standard that has been laid down, as other Members mentioned, is the principle that the rights of workers, which have been hard won over decades, must not now be casually put in jeopardy. For various reasons, the workforce in the North is particularly vulnerable. It is vulnerable to corporations that, as Jeffrey Donaldson said, see the North as an easy touch.

If the Assembly takes one broad response to the Visteon/Ford situation, it should be to set up urgently an inter-ministerial group that will sit down and identify where there are legal and policy gaps in workers' protection and move rapidly to fill them. In doing so, lessons can be learned from the Visteon/Ford experience in order to protect other workers who may yet be vulnerable to the ravages of recession or the manipulation of evidence and information from corporations that want to withdraw.

The third lesson is that, although all workers will not get all their entitlements and other matters are yet to be resolved, they demonstrated that, if one takes a stand, one can sweep down the mightiest walls of resistance. In recent weeks, the SDLP had a meeting about that and other matters with a senior civil servant who came from an IDB background. That official said that there was no point in pursuing Ford because it had left the North years ago. Well, Visteon workers demonstrated that there was a point in pursuing people who had got million of pounds of taxpayers' money and profits off the backs of workers in the North and who thought that they could cut and run. That is a lesson for INI, Ministers and Government: they must ensure that any corporation that invests in the North cannot do again what Visteon did to its workers — cut and run through manipulation of events or in response to the recession.

Finally, a situation can never again arise in which any business in this part of what is referred to as the United Kingdom can do what Ford Europe tried to do: not even return the phone calls of a Government Minister. After the dismissal of workers in such a manner, nothing demonstrated Ford Europe's high-handed approach more than that. It did not have the will, wish or obligation to respond to a political appeal. Never again can Ford or the likes of it get away with that sort of behaviour.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleague Gerry Adams for bringing this important Adjournment topic to the Assembly. I will take up where he left off.

Visteon Engineering Systems Ltd is another member of the Visteon family. It has not been put into administration. It was incorporated on 9 June 2007. The company's chairman, Steve Meszaros, is vice-

president of Visteon Corporation. One of his fellow directors of Visteon Engineering Systems Ltd is Len Drury, who was director of human resources at Visteon UK. Subsequently, 148 managers chose to move their pensions out of Visteon UK and into a new pension scheme under Visteon Engineering Systems Ltd. That asset transfer was scheduled to be complete during 2008.

Another new company called Automotive Products Ltd was incorporated on 4 February 2009. That resembles the name that was given by Ford to its component supplier called Automotive Products Operation. In 2000, that company was renamed Visteon. The name and address of the main shareholder in that new automotive product company is Visteon International Holdings, with Eric Sachs and Michael Lewis authorising the documentation on behalf of Visteon. The company has the same address and postcode and has the same company secretary as Visteon Engineering Systems Ltd. One of the company directors is Stephen Gawne, who is a former managing director of Visteon UK.

From the time of Visteon's spin-off from Ford, workers were assured that their terms and conditions, including any redundancy or pension payments, would mirror those that were promised by Ford. However, they were also told that they had no option but to move their pension schemes to Visteon. That, as my colleague outlined in his opening remarks, now smacks of sharp practice — a confidence trick on the workers. Management, on the other hand, were treated very differently from ordinary workers.

As far back as 2003, questions arose about the commitment of Visteon and Ford to meeting their pension obligations to employees of Visteon UK. From close to its outset, the Visteon UK pension plan had a deficit of \$49 million. In April 2008, the chairperson of Visteon UK trustees wrote to Visteon Corporation to remind its board that the transfer of funds from the Ford plans to the Visteon UK plan left a substantial deficit. The chairperson reminded Visteon that commitments had been given to sponsoring the plan as an ongoing concern and to meeting fully its funding responsibilities on a statutory and fiduciary basis.

In October 2007, company management was invited to move pensions out of Visteon UK and into a new pension scheme under Visteon Engineering Systems Ltd. Although Visteon UK continued to examine options for closing plants and transferring products, 148 managers chose to move their pensions. That asset transfer was scheduled to be completed during 2008.

Visteon did not engage with the Pensions Regulator when making the asset transfer. In total, around £22 million was transferred from Visteon UK. During 2008, other assets were transferred from Visteon UK's pension plan, and Ford and Visteon maintained

communication on each other's pension plan liabilities while the restructuring of Visteon UK continued. Moreover, they shared information about employees, the reason for which has still not been explained.

In April 2008, at a meeting of the trustees of the pension plan, it was confirmed that approximately £18 million would be transferred to Ford under a scheme named Firefly. That impacts on the assets that are available to the administrator that now handles the company. More importantly, the massive divestment from Visteon UK's pension plan that was arranged by Ford and Visteon impinges on the workers. It is still unclear what was shared with or approved by the Pensions Regulator. However, it is clear from the available information that vast sums of money were moving out of Visteon UK's pension plan and into other companies during 2007 and 2008.

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

Ms J McCann: One of my colleagues will pick up where I finish. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: I do not want to repeat what has been said during the debate. I thank Gerry Adams for securing this important debate, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue, which is of particular concern to me and to my constituents, a number of whom were Visteon employees and are now former Visteon employees.

I welcome the large number of former Visteon employees who are watching the debate from the Public Gallery. I congratulate them; their determination and dedication to stand up to naked corporate greed and manipulation and to fight for their honour, dignity and livelihood is supported by their families, neighbours and all in the Chamber and across Northern Ireland. Their courageous and dignified stand has shone a glaring light on the appalling way that Visteon and Ford treat loyal and committed employees. Moreover, it has shone a glaring light on the way that several companies — not only Visteon; others operate the same scams — try to use the cloak of the recession to abdicate their responsibilities to workers, many of whom have given a lifetime of service and built those companies into world-class enterprises.

The Member for Lagan Valley Jeffrey Donaldson, mentioned a similar situation in respect of Nortel. I could continue, but I do not want use my time to discuss Nortel. That company is still trading, but somehow managed and thinks that it can manage to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should stay on the subject of Visteon and not deviate to Nortel.

Dr McDonnell: I am not deviating; I am highlighting comparable issues.

6.15 pm

As other Members have said, there is clear evidence to show that, since Visteon was established, the management have not been committed to the long-term future of the Belfast plant and that the problems being experienced, although exacerbated by the current recession, were not due entirely to that recession but go back much farther and were in fact planned perhaps seven, eight, or nine years ago. In fact, there is a lot of evidence to show that the Visteon plant was being deliberately run down, with work being actively outsourced to South Africa and other places.

Through all of that, the workers in the Belfast plant — sometimes aware or suspicious, sometimes perhaps a little oblivious to all the manipulation that went on — worked with management to examine ways of cutting costs in order to increase the sustainability of their company, their employment and their livelihoods. What did they get in return? As far as I know, most of them got little more than six or seven minutes to pack their belongings and get out when the decision was taken.

Respect is a two-way process, but our insolvency laws and the way we allow administrators to operate so ruthlessly take all respect for and responsibility towards the worker out of the equation. Where are the respect, dignity, fairness and justice in the system? The Visteon workers stood up against that very unjust system and, through their own grit and determination, forced the employer to come out of hiding behind the cloak of the administrator and sit around the table. I find it amusing, because, as my colleague Mr Attwood said earlier, the employers ignored a call from a Minister and the Executive, yet a few days ago there were phone calls and e-mails flying all over the place in an effort to try to curry favour for themselves as pressure from the workers built up.

The workers have now voted to accept an offer on the redundancy pay, but that still leaves the issue of pensions to be resolved. I intend pursuing the issue, with their support, to the best of my ability. The Prime Minister has agreed to meet me to discuss the situation of the Visteon workers; I understand that that is likely to take place next week, and I will certainly be pushing the issue of pensions. I will emphasise to the Prime Minister the need for Visteon to be held to account and to live up to its moral and legal obligations to fulfil the repeated commitments made by the management at the time of the separation between Ford and Visteon.

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

Dr McDonnell: I know that a deal has been struck in recent days, but I want to see it completed before I will be satisfied.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. Like other Members, I thank Gerry Adams for bringing this Adjournment debate to the House, and I also thank

other Members who have taken part. It has been a very good debate. Basil McCrea said earlier that he was entitled to a medal; a large number of people will get a medal, and fair play to the staff of Visteon who have actually produced that medal. It is a good keepsake for us all. Thank you, the staff who have worked hard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be referred through the Chair. Members should not refer to the Public Gallery.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Without challenging the ruling of the Speaker, every Member who spoke has referred to the Public Gallery. I want that on record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members have referred to the Public Gallery, but they have not referred directly to the Public Gallery.

Mr P Maskey: OK, a LeasCheann Comhairle, this is an important debate, and I am not going to get involved in any squabbles. I will add a lot of information to that provided by Gerry Adams and Jennifer McCann.

Knowledge and information about pensions and liabilities was being shared among the same management of Visteon and Ford who were sharing knowledge and ambitions to close down Visteon UK. At the beginning of March — the same month that Visteon UK was put into administration — Visteon Corporation paid a performance bonus of an unspecified amount to 2,700 salaried workers worldwide. That included the senior management of Visteon Corporation and Visteon UK. That was the final insult.

We know that information and documentation is under examination by the Pensions Regulator and that there is a case for a full investigation. However, before any final assessment is made, it is imperative to establish whether any of those involved in the confidential projects detrimental to the future of the Belfast plant and Visteon UK were also involved in or aware of the transfer of assets out of the company.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, at the beginning of the year, the Visteon Corporation began a process that purported to be a feasibility study of the future of Visteon UK. The parent company asked the managing director of Visteon UK to produce proposals by 31 March 2009 that would ensure its financial viability. That feasibility study was a cosmetic exercise that was designed to cover the decision to close the Belfast plant and the other two remaining plants. When Visteon UK asked the Visteon Corporation for a subvention, it knew what the answer would be and that administration was next. Visteon UK knew that a 90-day consultation would not be provided and that the company would try to pass on responsibility for the pensions of existing and former workers to the public purse.

Sinn Féin recognises that there have been many job losses in recent times. Many people are finding it tough to make ends meet, and local businesses are

being hurt as well as local workers. However, the Ford/Visteon scandal is unlike any other job-loss situation. Sinn Féin believes that it is in the interest of the workers, their families and their communities that a full and rigorous examination of this scandal is carried out by the proper authorities and goes beyond its impact on individual workers, the loss of manufacturing jobs and its status as a case study of global capitalist malpractice.

The Visteon Corporation has declared a stake in Visteon Engineering Services (VES) and Visteon Automotive Systems UK. It has confirmed that VES and Visteon UK were part of the same corporate family. The Visteon Group makes parts for Ford car production. In real life, if someone falsely claims material separation from a partner to try to draw down social welfare, no effort is spared by the state in investigating such a fraud. In a legalistic, superficial and expedient way, Ford and Visteon have claimed separation, but when Ford talks to Visteon, it is looking at itself in the mirror. Their legal representatives have, presumably, advised them on the legality of their manoeuvres. Sinn Féin believes that Ford and Visteon have been engaged in corporate fraud. This scandal has been a decade in the making. It not only deserves but requires a rigorous and comprehensive investigation. All the information that has been revealed today has been placed in the Assembly Library for reference.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, in conclusion, Sinn Féin has furnished copies of that information to the Pensions Regulator, the Minister for Employment and Learning, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the private company that is handling Visteon UK's administration. We will draw this scandal to the attention of the New York State Comptroller and other interested parties in the United States Congress. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta cead cainte a bheith agam sa díospóireacht seo faoi Visteon. I thank my colleague Gerry Adams for securing the debate and the contributors from other parties for the support that they have given to the workers at the Visteon plant. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and the Minister for Employment and Learning, Reg Empey, are not here today, but I hope that they take the debate on board and read carefully the report that Sinn Féin has presented of the sharp practice and corruption that has occurred and of the way in which the workers have been dealt with.

It is a credit to the 200 workers who were left at the Belfast plant that they stood up to a multinational company, Ford and Visteon, and won. They refused to leave the plant and were threatened with court action by Visteon, which did not work. They were united and stayed together. The Unite union and the trade union movement stood by them through thick and thin. Although the issue of pensions has still to be resolved,

the workers have voted in favour of a redundancy package. However, it is important to say something about how those people were treated throughout this episode. People came to the plant to tell workers that they had lost their jobs, workers who had given 30 or 40 years' service and had been loyal to Ford.

I visited the plant on several occasions. Some of the workers who could have taken redundancy over the past couple of years did not do so because they were loyal to Ford and to their fellow workers. They wanted to make the plant a going concern; they stayed on, yet they were on the receiving end of sharp practice by Visteon and Ford.

I hope that both Ministers will take on board what has been said. Our colleagues gave us a great deal of the detail of what happened at Visteon, and I take on board what Members from Lagan Valley and West Belfast said. Gerry Adams, Jennifer McCann and Paul Maskey set out the crux of the matter: pension funds being moved to other companies — the pension funds of the workers who are here today — and how the redundancy exercise was handled.

The other important point is that the workers are staying in the plant until the redundancy packages are in their bank accounts. It is no wonder that they are doing so, given how they have been treated by Visteon; we can believe nothing that comes out of its mouth. We should keep a watching brief to ensure that Visteon honours the deal and stands by it.

The workers in the Visteon plant have inspired workers across Britain and Europe by their stance. There were times when they felt demoralised and thought that they would get nothing, but they stood together. They were very encouraged by the support of people from all political parties in the Assembly who visited the plant and stayed with them. This debate is encouraging for them.

I hope that the Minister for Employment and Learning takes note. It is important to get as many as possible of those who have been made redundant into training programmes to secure other employment for them. I hope that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will investigate why some of the money that Invest NI put into the plant was to develop products that were moved to South Africa, as Gerry Adams pointed out. When I visited the plant some of the workers told me that they had gone to South Africa to train people before Visteon and Ford moved production there.

This useful debate has brought a focus on the issue.

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

Mr Butler: I hope that the debate inspires other workers to take the same stance as the workers at Visteon. Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.28 pm.