
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 May 2009

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has asked me to advise the House that he will be absent from Parliament Buildings today on official Assembly business.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to provide Members with a further update on the swine flu virus. The most significant development has been the announcement of Northern Ireland's first confirmed case of swine flu. People should not be alarmed by that, because, in the light of the situation across the world, it was only to be expected that there would be a case in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to hear that the individual concerned, who recently returned from Mexico, is at home and continues to make a good recovery.

It is reassuring that, to date, confirmed cases of swine flu across the UK have all been relatively mild, and all those who have been affected have responded well to antiviral treatment. The strategy to use antiviral drugs to contain the spread of the virus appears to have been effective in reducing both the spread of the virus and its symptoms. The Public Health Agency has contacted passengers who travelled on the same flight as the individual who has been confirmed as having swine flu. As the flight was more than seven days ago, the Public Health Agency's advice is that the risk of infection is very low.

I also emphasise that there have been no cases of swine flu in schoolchildren in Northern Ireland; parents, teachers and pupils can be reassured by that. The message to schoolchildren and everyone else is to follow simple, effective measures to reduce the spread of the flu. Hands should be washed frequently with soap and water, and a tissue should be used to cover the mouth and nose when sneezing. Anyone who has travelled to Mexico or another affected area in the past week and who subsequently develops a flu-like illness should stay at home and seek medical advice from a GP. The GP will then contact the Public Health Agency, which in turn will quickly ensure that any necessary further investigation is carried out and treatment administered.

This is a developing situation that we are continuing to monitor very closely. It is clear that the virus continues to spread across the world, and there are now confirmed cases in 36 countries. In the UK, there are now 101 confirmed cases, and there is one in the Republic of Ireland. As I stated already, Northern Ireland has only one confirmed case of swine flu, and two are under investigation. The World Health Organization pandemic alert level remains at phase 5. That indicates the increasing likelihood of a pandemic but does not, I stress, suggest that one is inevitable.

I realise that the confirmation of Northern Ireland's first case may have caused some public concern. The clear advice of the Public Health Agency and that of other health professionals is that, although they are treating the current global situation seriously, there is good reason to be confident that we can deal with it. Scientists have examined previous pandemics, and we now know much more than ever before about treatments and about how to stop the virus spreading. A good deal of work is under way in studying the virus. However, it is still too early to determine what impact swine flu will have, and it is not possible to predict whether the virus will remain mild. We must continue to be vigilant, and we must prepare for a potential further wave of the swine flu virus in the autumn, when it may be more widespread.

In the light of that, it is essential that we use our stock of antiviral drugs carefully so that the public will be protected during the winter months. Northern Ireland is well prepared for any potential pandemic and has been planning for such a situation for years. In the past few days, an agreement to secure the production of a pre-pandemic vaccine has been signed. That is an opportunity to secure vaccine supplies for the UK in advance of a pandemic wave. Those arrangements provide the opportunity to have enough pre-pandemic vaccine by December to protect at least half the population from swine flu. In addition, as part of our plans to deal with a pandemic, we have sleeping contracts in place. If the World Health Organization

pandemic alert level moves to phase 6 and a pandemic is declared, we will receive a vaccine when it becomes available. That means that everyone in Northern Ireland will have access to two doses of the pandemic vaccine if they need them.

It will, however, be several months before a vaccine becomes available. In the interim, we need to ensure that we have enough antiviral drugs to treat those who may need them. We have a stock of antiviral drugs that will cover half the population. Steps are in place to increase that so that there will be antiviral drugs to treat up to 80% of the population. Previous global pandemics have not been known to have affected more than one third of the population.

The arrangements that we have in place and that we are continuing to make will help us to respond well to any emerging situation. Officials of my Department, together with staff of the Public Health Agency and in the health and social care sector, have been working tirelessly to ensure that there is robust surveillance and appropriate testing of individuals who are at risk. They have also put measures in place to ensure the immediate availability of antiviral medications to those who may need them.

The public should be reassured that the health and social care service, GPs and other health professionals are geared up to deal with the situation. Supplies of antiviral drugs have been sent to hospitals, GP out-of-hours centres and community pharmacies. Work is also under way to increase supplies of antibiotics to ensure that we have enough to treat the potential complications of influenza, particularly pneumonia.

The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline continues to operate, and up to 1,700 calls have been made to the 0800 0514 142 number since it was set up at the end of April. Information on swine flu is also available from the UK swine flu information line, the number for which is 0800 1 513 513. A major publicity campaign, including television, radio and newspaper advertising, has been running over the past few weeks. I believe that that has been effective in communicating the steps that people can take to protect themselves. The main way that the public can help to prevent the spread of the virus is to follow good hygiene practices. That includes washing hands regularly, using a clean tissue to cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and remaining at home if flu-like symptoms develop. Those are simple yet highly effective steps that every individual can take and that will make a real difference.

Every home in Northern Ireland should now have received a leaflet providing further public advice and information. Again, I ask people to read the leaflet and keep it safe. I continue to receive full and detailed briefings on the situation as it develops, and those include taking part in regular (COBRA) meetings,

which the Secretary of State for Health in England, Alan Johnson, chairs and which the Health Ministers from Wales and Scotland also attend.

Daily updates on the situation continue to be issued to the media and to all Assembly Members. I assure the public and the Assembly that this issue is being taken seriously by the Government not just in Northern Ireland but across the world. I will, of course, report again to the Assembly if there are significant changes to 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 Health Service staff for the commitment, support and dedication that they have demonstrated in the face of a potential pandemic.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for again updating the House on the situation facing us.

Over the past few weeks, people's awareness about what they can do to curb the spread of swine flu has been raised by a public information campaign, which involves running adverts and providing leaflets at hospitals, GPs' surgeries and other public places. How much has that cost the Department to date? Will individual trusts be requested at any stage to pay for adverts, educational programmes or even vaccines for the areas that they serve?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Substantial costs are involved that were not contained in the health budget. Therefore, we will be seeking money to cover those costs in due course. I do not anticipate asking trusts to pay for Northern Ireland's share of the vaccine, the cost of which will be considerable. Given the commercial sensitivity of the issue, I do not want to get into details. However, I can say that the total cost of vaccines, antiviral drugs, extra antibiotics and all the other arrangements has placed a considerable burden on the Health Service. My permanent secretary is in conversation with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) about the matter. Within UK funding arrangements, there is a contingency fund for emergency and crisis situations. That is a matter for discussion between DFP and the Treasury.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the previous Member, I thank the Minister for updating the House today. I give credit where credit is due, and I congratulate the Minister and his officials, as well as the Public Health Agency, on taking a measured approach to the issue and on their work to date, including the daily updates, which have been quite useful. I also take this opportunity to send my best wishes to the individual who has contracted swine flu; I wish him a speedy recovery.

The Minister said that the Public Health Agency has contacted the passengers who travelled on the same

flight from London to Belfast as the man who contracted swine flu. Have the passengers who travelled on the flight from Mexico to London been contacted, because some of them might not have got that return flight to Belfast? Have the people who were in the vicinity of the hospital when the man presented himself at the accident and emergency department been contacted? Is the Minister in regular contact with the Department of Health and Children in Dublin about the issue?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased to say that the patient is responding very well to antiviral drugs. His family and the wider community are also receiving antiviral drugs. The Health Service is providing antiviral drugs to 16 people in the community as a precaution.

12.15 pm

There are no direct flights between Ireland and Mexico; the flights come through other airports, primarily Gatwick. That individual flew from Mexico to Gatwick, where the standard procedure is that officials from the Health Protection Agency meet all aeroplanes and provide information to all passengers. He will have received that information. Staff from the Public Health Agency meet all planes that arrive at Northern Ireland airports and provide information to the passengers. That individual's flight landed on Friday 8 May. The maximum incubation period is seven days, so the risk to anyone who was on that flight and has not already developed symptoms is extremely low.

We have contacted the passengers, and we consider that 76 of them, including the crew, are from or are based in Northern Ireland. Of those, 20 have been placed on antiviral drugs. Other people in England, Scotland and Wales will have been contacted by their authorities. I have no doubt that, if they had been considered to be at risk, they would have been given antiviral drugs.

My officials are in constant contact with the authorities in the Irish Republic, and they keep them updated.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for providing another update and for his reassurances that his Department has the necessary capability to respond to and deal with swine flu. The Minister said that he had signed an agreement to secure a pre-pandemic vaccine and that the Department will receive that when it becomes available. Is there a difference between the pre-pandemic vaccine and the vaccine itself? Is the Department giving clear guidance on travelling to Mexico at this time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Advice on travel arrangements is provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which advises that people should not travel to Mexico

unless it is absolutely essential to do so. It has provided that advice for the past couple of weeks.

As part of the UK response, there are sleeping contracts for a vaccine, when it is developed, to cover every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland. The vaccine will run to 132 million individual shots or doses, because it is anticipated that two would be needed for each person. Those sleeping contracts will automatically go into operation and production once the World Health Organization declares level 6, which is pandemic level.

We have also placed orders for a pre-pandemic vaccine, which is the same vaccine. If the World Health Organization does not declare level 6, the sleeping contracts will not come into play. The four countries of the United Kingdom will buy what we call a pre-pandemic vaccine, which will provide an immediate opportunity to begin vaccination.

Dr Deeny: I also commend the Minister and his Department for dealing with swine flu in a professional manner, both medically and politically. We have heard that the vaccine will be available from December. Will the vaccine be able to be incorporated into the annual winter flu vaccine, a new one of which is issued every year? That may not be possible, because work begins on that in February each year. If that is not the case, I suspect that two vaccines will be needed to protect our population. One will be the annual vaccine, and the other will be the vaccine for swine flu. That should not be a problem, considering the number of vaccinations that children have.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The point about the winter flu vaccine is important because there is an issue about production capacity, and our contract requirements to fill the required number of winter flu vaccines for the current year will be completed in June. Only after that will factories be able to proceed to production of the vaccine for the pre-pandemic or pandemic flu — whichever one wants to call it. Although there may be an opportunity to combine the two vaccines in future years, in 2009 there will be two separate vaccinations: one for winter flu, which is already under production; and, subsequently, the swine flu vaccine, when it becomes available.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Minister's statement and the hard work that he is putting into the Department's response to swine flu. Can he tell the House whether the Department has been in contact with health organisations throughout the world? The spread of swine flu seems to be slowing down as it moves outside Mexico. Thankfully, there have been few deaths outside of that country.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The response is very much international,

national and local. The Department is responsible for the local response. The national response is handled through COBRA and the four health Departments. The World Health Organization is responsible for co-ordinating the international response.

One feature of the outbreak is that its spread does not appear to be slowing down. The US has overtaken Mexico in its number of confirmed cases, which is now almost 5,000. The update that I received on Sunday informed me that there have been four deaths in the US, although I understand that that number has since risen. I will receive another update shortly. In Mexico, there have been slightly fewer than 3,000 cases and 66 deaths. Canada has slightly fewer than 500 confirmed cases.

One feature of the virus is that its speed of travel appears to be significant. I say "appears" because no one can be absolutely definitive about a new and novel virus. That speed is not simply due to aeroplane travel; there appears also to be rapid person-to-person infection. The World Health Organization's estimate, which I heard during the weekend, is that, within 12 months, approximately one third of the earth's entire population will be infected with the virus. As the earth's population is around seven billion people, Members can appreciate that the number of people who are liable to be infected is staggering. That is why COBRA regards production and access to pre-pandemic vaccines as highly important.

Mr T Clarke: I also thank the Minister for today's update. Why did the infected person present himself at A&E and not to his general practitioner? I was approached by a constituent who has flu and who had contacted his GP. He was told not to come into the surgery, and no one was sent to see him. Is it the case that not all GPs have been brought up to speed on the proper procedure?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: GPs have been brought up to speed on the proper procedure. Indeed, the British Medical Association commended the Department in that respect. The proper procedure is that people do not present to A&E departments or to GPs. The best way to tackle the virus is through self-containment and isolation at home. A person should ring his or her GP, who will arrange for antivirals to be delivered, provided that the patient meets the case definition, which is that he or she has been to an affected area or has been in contact with such a person and that he or she exhibits the symptoms of Mexico's swine flu.

At present, the response to the virus is at containment stage, which means that, if a person contacts his or her GP, someone will take samples from that person for testing. As I have said, GPs have received that information. That is regarded as crucial because GPs

are at the front line and are normally the first point of contact for patients. The procedure is laid down in the leaflet that has been provided by the Department. Our aim is to ensure that that procedure is followed during the containment stage.

Eventually, I anticipate that the response will reach the post-containment stage. At that point, there will be no automatic testing. If someone exhibits symptoms, he or she will be given medication immediately. At present, however, the aim is to contain the virus.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his commitment and dedication to the issue. His statement makes it clear that the risk of catching the virus in Mexico is very high and advises people to not travel there. However, in the real world, many young couples have recently married and have spent thousands of pounds on a honeymoon to Mexico. What pressure has been applied to travel companies and their insurers to give young couples in that position the opportunity to choose another destination?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I covered that matter in response to an earlier question. We are in the hands of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which has issued guidance to the effect that people should not travel to Mexico unless it is absolutely essential. At this point, we are not being prescriptive, because there are now more cases in the US than in Mexico. There have been approximately 8,500 cases worldwide to date, and the figure is rising rapidly. Therefore, it is sensible for people to follow clear travel guidance. Containment depends on the sensible co-operation of all individuals.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee: Draft Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2009

Resolved:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an ad hoc committee to consider the proposal for a Draft Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2009, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 30 June 2009.

Composition:

DUP	4
Sinn Féin	3
UUP	2
SDLP	2
Other parties	1

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — *[Mr Cobain.]*

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Healthcare for Older People

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 wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reconfigure and enhance services for older people to ensure that these services are integrated, person-centred and well-staffed; that the dignity of the individual is promoted; that information is communicated effectively to patients and relatives by health professionals; that inpatients receive a nutritional diet; and that personal care is provided free of charge to all those with medical need.

I hope that the Minister will be present at some stage during the debate. I thank the Business Committee for bringing this most important of motions back to the Floor of the House. I thank the Minister for now taking his place to hear the debate.

In the past 50 years, older people in Northern Ireland have witnessed a world that has changed beyond measure. The current generation of older people has lived through the turmoil of political and civil instability as well as the arrival of new technologies and discoveries in medicine and services. Therefore, as the spotlight shines on the lives of a generation of older people who have experienced more in their lifetime than previous generations could imagine, it is important that our devolved institution picks up the challenges that face our older people, embraces the new opportunities and provides the leadership that is required to ensure that our older generation and ageing population are respected, valued and properly cared for in society.

That is why action is required to put in place measures that not only are fundamental to improving the health and well-being of today's generation of older people but will set the basic principles for tomorrow's ageing population.

12.30 pm

Estimates that Help the Aged has provided suggest that almost 240,000 people in Northern Ireland are aged 65 and over, and that number is expected to increase by 85% over the next 25 years. There is no doubt that, with people living longer, there will be an increase in conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, lung disease, stroke, osteoporosis, mental impairment, cancer, dementia, and hearing and vision loss. Therefore, access to a greater number of care services, ranging from primary, secondary and domiciliary care to community care, nursing homes and residential homes, will be

required. That constitutes a challenge to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and his Department to provide that high standard of effective healthcare, which will continue to be essential to enable individuals to manage their health and enjoy a good quality of life into their twilight years.

On 13 May 2008, the Minister announced that older people's health and well-being will be a priority in the next round of service frameworks. However, despite the many statements, strategies and policies published and standards set by the Department, and despite the good level of healthcare that is available in Northern Ireland, care of older people is not always delivered to a high standard, and the elderly are not always treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

In October 2008, the British Medical Association (BMA) Northern Ireland launched a policy document titled 'Improving the care of older people in Northern Ireland' to highlight how the healthcare system should relate to older people now and in future. That document included a number of recommendations, which are underpinned by the need for equity of healthcare access and for service users to be treated with dignity and respect. We would do well to examine some of those recommendations today.

A number of areas of concern prompted the recommendations, the first of which was the integration and co-ordination of services. I will be crystal clear: unless and until healthcare services are fully integrated and co-ordinated right across the Department and among the various agencies and healthcare providers, the delivery of those services for older people will continue to fail. The current situation, in which various agencies and providers all work to their own agenda, must change. They must all be united and working to the same agenda if the deserved and necessary level of healthcare services for older people is to be provided.

A second issue of concern was staff recruitment, retention and motivation. It is a well-known fact that domiciliary care workers are generally poorly paid and poorly trained. That leads to recruitment and retention difficulties, and, consequently, a high turnover of staff, resulting in a lack of continuity, which can be unsettling and distressing for older people. The recruitment and retention of skilled staff must, therefore, be a priority for the Department and all agencies that are involved in delivering care for older people. The Department must ensure that properly trained staff are in place and that they are properly paid for the job that they do with the older and ageing population.

Thirdly, care must be person-centred. For far too long, older people's views have not been sought to enable the Department to provide a care package that is tailored to meet their needs. Older people must be empowered to make informed choices about their own

healthcare packages. It is essential that the Department liaises with older people to determine their views and requirements so that tailored packages that meet their needs are put in place.

There must be clear lines of communication between healthcare providers and professionals, the Health Service and users. The information that is provided to users and their families is totally inadequate, and that must be addressed urgently. The Department must take appropriate steps to ensure that all health and social care trusts fulfil their obligations by providing adequate information to users and their families. The breakdown of communication between the Department, the Health Service, healthcare providers and families is a big concern for elderly people and their families, and that must be addressed by the Department. Furthermore, the BMA has recommended that standards of nutritional care and diets in care settings must be improved to prevent poor health outcomes.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that personal care should be provided free of charge to older people, who have, over the years, rendered an invaluable contribution to society. Now that they are in their twilight years, it is only right that we provide them with free personal care. I have set the scene for today's debate, and I await with bated breath the Minister's response and his comments on the delivery of an enhanced service for our ageing population, as set out in the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin believes that people have the right to social, economic, gender and cultural equality. Creating the conditions for establishing an equal society means recognising that many diverse groups need enhanced protection from the state. Many of the issues that must be addressed in promoting social inclusion are related to the provision of, and access to, quality services. Equal services and equal access must be given to older people in all areas of life. Discrimination in the health services that are available to people who are over 65 must be tackled.

The introduction of free personal care for all senior citizens is essential. In relation to healthcare, age should never be a pretext for not treating people with dignity. Yet, in a survey that was carried out by Help the Aged, over 50% of older people said that they expected to be accorded little dignity in a hospital or a care home. In the same survey, 50% of older people said that, all too often, health professionals dismissed their symptoms as being down to old age and, therefore, inevitable. Surely that is wrong; if that is the perception of older people, it must be changed.

Older people in the health system often have complex health needs. In the process of meeting those needs, an older person's dignity must be recognised as a clear

priority. Professional practitioners should reflect that. As has been mentioned, the British Medical Association made a number of recommendations in a publication titled 'Improving the care of older people'. It states:

"The social inclusion of older people in our society must be at the forefront of policy development, to enable all individuals to participate fully in society without fear of discrimination or disadvantage. ... Standards of care in all healthcare settings must not only be rigorously implemented, but exceeded. ... Healthcare professionals and managers must take responsibility to ensure that policies, structures and resources are in place so that elderly patients are nutritionally screened on admission and an appropriate nutritional care plan implemented. ... Cross-border initiatives that improve healthcare for older people and reduce economic and social disadvantage, which can result from the existence of a border, should be developed and implemented.

Living in a border area should not create inequities for its local population. Healthcare for older people should be easily accessible and appropriate to an individual's need, regardless of their location. Improvements in cross-border healthcare offer opportunities to improve healthcare for older people."

With respect to mental-health matters:

"The Bamford Review recommendations must be implemented in full."

The BMA has a number of concerns:

"The lack of services for frail elderly patients ... That older people should have equal access to specialist treatment and be treated with respect and dignity ... That older people are discriminated against in the provision of national health services".

The Minister:

"has an ultimate responsibility to ensure that adequate resources exist to enable those in care homes to be properly cared for".

I ask the Minister to confirm:

"The delivery of older people's healthcare services must be fully integrated and seamless across and between agencies ... The recruitment and retention of adequate numbers of skilled staff must be made a priority for all agencies involved in delivering care ... Older people's care must be person-centred, and person-centred care must be a key element of the Service Framework for Older People's Health and Wellbeing ... Communication between all healthcare providers should be improved, including the provision of more effective training in communication skills for staff ... Models of care should be tailored to an individual's need and free to all those who need it."

That includes personal care. In addition:

"Support for carers must be increased as a matter of urgency, due to the excessive burden placed on informal carers as a consequence of inadequate funding of community care."

I ask the Minister to consider all those issues, because society owes a debt of gratitude to its older people, and we must ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect in all areas of their lives. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Here we are again; after thousands of questions for written and oral answer and many more debates than any DUP Minister has responded to, we are back discussing a DUP motion on health. Devolution

has been restored for two years — two years in which the DUP had opportunities to raise these issues. Yet, here we are, in the middle of a swine flu outbreak, having this debate, unrelated, I am sure, to the European election campaign. Is the Health Service in a major crisis? It probably would be if Peter Robinson's draft Budget a couple of years ago had got through unchanged. The Health Service is not in crisis. It is being run and reformed well by an Ulster Unionist Party Minister, yet the DUP continues to snipe. Indeed, it could be reasonably argued that the DUP protests too much.

Thankfully, the press and media in Northern Ireland are too discerning to pick up on the nonsense that the DUP press office pushes every week. Maybe that is because they know that the Health Minister is doing a good job and that efficiency savings have been forced upon him by the DUP — the same DUP that attempts to mislead people about the savings that the Minister is making.

The motion calls for free personal care for elderly people. In 2005, my party launched a policy document that called for the same thing. We are committed to free personal care for elderly people, because we understand that the welfare state should mean care from the cradle to the grave. The Minister's phased abolition of prescription charges highlights the UUP's ability to make, and deliver on, firm policy commitments.

Although we are committed to free personal care for elderly people, the fact remains that Nigel Dodds, like Peter Robinson before him, must decide whether he wants to pay for it. Consequently, the real question for members of the DUP, including Mr Buchanan, Mr Easton and Mrs Robinson, is whether they are actively lobbying the Finance Minister for the resources that are required to deliver on that commitment.

The public knows that the UUP is committed to health and to following through on policy promises, and that the DUP is the party with the ball in its court when it comes to money. The DUP must stop its crocodile tears and false outrage and begin to take seriously its responsibilities on financing health. Motions such as this achieve nothing. Care for older people in a Health Service that needs reform must be handled sensitively.

It is estimated that, in the next 40 years, the proportion of the Northern Ireland population over the age of 65 will almost double. That creates challenges for the Health Service, and it comes with proportional increases in conditions such as arthritis, dementia, and hearing problems, to mention but a few.

12.45 pm

The Northern Ireland single assessment tool, which the Minister of Health launched in February 2009, will go a long way to ensuring that the treatment of older people is more streamlined and efficient as the number

of people needing treatment rises. It will ensure that their treatment is sensitive to the individual's particular needs and that information will be collected only once.

Care homes are also crucial to the care of older people. Many Members will have been inundated, as I have been, by constituents who are concerned at health trusts' recent plans to close care homes. In my constituency, Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel was under threat from the Southern Trust, as was Skeagh House in Dromore. Members will be as pleased as I am that the Health Minister is committed to the quality care that those homes provide and to keeping homes open unless a suitable equivalent facility is available. Both Slieve Roe House and Skeagh House were saved, as were many other care homes across Northern Ireland.

The Minister's actions have shown him to be committed to care for the elderly and to the quality provision of health services for everyone in Northern Ireland. Frankly, the DUP's actions and words paint a very different picture.

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

Mr McCallister: We know that during this election campaign and the public engagement that goes with it, the public is glad that the Ulster Unionist Party is safeguarding the Health Service from the DUP's so-called efficiencies.

Mrs M Bradley: Dignity, respect and equitable value and treatment are the key words that echo through any article or research piece that pertains to our older people. However, today's society, and sometimes even our Departments, have trouble applying those terms when dealing with older people in our community.

The motion calls for the older person to be at the centre of any and all decisions that concern their health. I was approached recently by at least two people who, during hospital stays, shared wards with older people. They were highly concerned with the treatment — or rather the lack of treatment — that those older people were being given. The younger patients were so appalled by that treatment that they fed the older people and had to help to lift them in and out of their beds.

It appears that if older people are unable to feed themselves, they simply do not eat. Breakfast and dinner trays are left on a table at the bottom of the beds of those patients who are unable to walk. That is neither acceptable nor humane. It is becoming clear to me that in many general hospitals, the pattern seems to be that if someone is old, they are a burden, but if they are old and infirm, they are forgotten.

It is not a crime to be old. It is inconvenient, if not demoralising, for the older person to ask for help in the

first instance. I stress that it is not the nurses' fault — they are under a lot of pressure. The fault lies with a bureaucratic system that has forgotten that there are human beings — in these cases, older human beings — at the end of the red tape. They are suffering day and daily for the sake of administration. The abundance of administrative work makes it difficult for nurses to do the real job of nursing. Today's nurses are professional carers, and it is shameful that health trusts are using such staff to do paperwork.

The Public Accounts Committee commissioned the report 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', which was printed just over a year ago. The Committee said that a survey that the Comptroller and Auditor General carried out illustrated:

"there is scope for the Department to be more proactive in seeking the views of older people so that their needs and wishes can be central to decision making."

I am very interested to know whether that recommendation was ever taken on board, and, furthermore, whether it was put into practice.

Older people are not androids who can be shifted from pillar to post. They should not be made to settle for second best just because they are older. We all age, some of us better than others. Until last year, the Assembly was led by an octogenarian. However, I am horrified constantly by some of the stories that are brought to my constituency office. Our older people are crying out for equality in health, in society and in employment.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister gave us a glimmer of hope in December 2007, when it finally announced its intention to create the post of commissioner for older people. However, that has never come to fruition. We were told that the interim post of an advocate would not delay the creation of the role of a commissioner proper, but, alas, it appears to have done just that.

The objectives outlined in the motion are optimal for providing good and basic care for older people. The practice of transferring trust establishments to private enterprises, which was used in the past and is used currently, is not a good one. I am particularly mindful of the Waterside Hospital in my constituency, which is a purpose-built hospital for older people who cannot remain at home and require round-the-clock care. That unit will also undergo a change of usage, which, I hasten to add, was decided without consultation.

How can the Department be serious about providing a quality care package when it is closing the very units that are ideal for providing such a service? Privatisation of healthcare facilities is not a good idea and will not, in any way, help us to reach the position that is called for in the motion. As I have said in every contribution that I have made in the House on issues pertaining to

older people, Wales has got it right; its strategy is already in its second phase, and it is working.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been trying hard to deliver, in spite of a very optimistic Budget. My party voted against that Budget, because we knew that it did not deliver on the Programme for Government commitments. Our older people deserve proper treatment and a dignified life.

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

Mrs M Bradley: They were the people who kept Northern Ireland on its feet, and it is our turn to support them. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: My party and I are happy to support the motion. We would be extremely angry if the issues in the motion — such as respect and dignity for patients, the provision of good food and information, and the provision of person-centred and well-staffed services — were not being implemented, with our elderly and infirm patients suffering as a result. I am concerned that the fact that the Assembly is discussing health provision for the elderly means that there may be instances of that happening.

A recent report from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) showed that some institutions were falling far short of what is required; problems related to a range of issues, including care, staffing, record keeping, and the administering of medicines. That is deplorable and should not be tolerated under any circumstances. Such findings prove the need for a full-time commissioner for older people; the sooner that position is filled, the better.

In its report 'Improving the care of older people in Northern Ireland', the BMA acknowledges that the care that is available is not achieving the outcomes that it should and proposes 11 recommendations, four of which are detailed in the motion. I draw the attention of Members to the last paragraph of the report's introduction, which states:

"If local policy makers are serious about improving healthcare for older people, then action is needed now."

The "local policy makers" are us, and I sincerely hope that we, as a local Assembly, will rise to that challenge.

I am glad that our Health Minister, who is present, recently stated his commitment to ensuring that the elderly are treated with dignity and respect while they are in receipt of any healthcare. That was an encouraging statement, and it is the bottom line. Everyone must ensure that that commitment is fulfilled and that the days of horror stories are over and will never return.

Turning to the final sentence of the motion, I am delighted that free personal care will become a reality. After the motion is passed, we expect the Finance Minister to provide the funding for that very important

provision. The Assembly can end the misery of those elderly people who have to sell their homes to pay for personal care at a time in their lives when they are unable to cope.

On 27 February 2001, I and the current Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds, asked the Assembly to implement in full the report that was prepared by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care, known as the Sutherland Report, which would have meant the introduction of free personal care.

That was unanimously agreed by the Assembly. However, in June 2002, my amendments to the Health and Personal Social Services Bill were rejected. The then Sinn Féin Health Minister and the Health Committee had no funding and the time was not right — any excuse to say no.

In May 2007, our colleague Carmel Hanna tried unsuccessfully to introduce free personal care; again, no funding was the excuse. Now that the DUP and Sinn Féin are in control of the purse strings, we expect the necessary funding to be provided, especially as the motion was tabled by a DUP Member.

I remind Members of comments that were made by Nigel Dodds on 27 February 2001, when he said in a debate on care for the elderly:

"No Member would ever argue that, because cancer treatment was becoming more and more expensive, we ought not to treat people." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 9, p317, col 2*].

That comment is as relevant today as it was then, except that the Assembly did not then have the power to implement the will of its Members. Today, it has that power, and we now expect the necessary funding to be given to the Health Minister to carry out the will of the Assembly.

I want to put on record the Alliance Party's thanks to Age Concern, Help the Aged, the age sector reference group, and the many other groups for their excellent campaigning over many years.

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

Mr McCarthy: We want and expect the Assembly, if the motion is agreed today, to put the funding in place so that free personal care can be achieved in the very near future.

Mr Shannon: There is a well-known saying that a society is judged by how it treats its vulnerable members, and I agree with that. One category of vulnerable people is the older generation, who have contributed so much to our lives and who have moulded the world and how we live in it.

Ivryboadie hes bein effected bae sim aulder boadie laike members o' oor ain femmelies ir neebors an we hae aa hed sim blessin' i oor lives oan account o' thon.

Hit isnae jist doon tae the fect at Ah'm noo a croose gran' faither masesel an at sim fowk nicht alloo at Ah'm movin intae the aulder bracket. Ah'm stannin theday accause A hae respect fer thaim at hae lived thair lives waarkin an' leukin aboot ither fowk an noo hae need fer the wee bit o' care an respect at bes due tae thaim.

We have all been affected by the input of someone older than ourselves, whether it be a family member or a neighbour, and we have all had some blessing as a result of that input. I say that not simply because I am now a proud grandfather myself, and, some might say, starting to move into the older bracket. I say that because I have respect for those who have lived their lives working and taking care of others, and who now need the little bit of care and respect that is due to them.

According to a British Medical Association survey last year on the care that was provided to older patients, eight in 10 doctors believed that healthcare services for older people were not good enough. Those are not my words, but the words of the survey. Only one in 10 doctors believed that the NHS spent enough money on care for the elderly. About 500 GPs, consultants and staff-grade doctors responded to the survey.

The biggest concern was the lack of services that were available in the community, with only 8.1% feeling that activities that were provided in residential and care homes to maintain mental agility and physical exercise were adequate; some 62% thought that there were not enough services to support people with dementia, and just over 33% said that older people have continuous access to podiatry services.

That is why it is time to focus services more specifically on older people so that centres are well equipped and staffed. The motto of the Health Service should be to promote the importance of care services for older people; if that were the central theme, delivery would soon follow.

I have, for some time, advocated a direct-payment scheme that allows older people to choose how to allocate their budget and meet their care needs. What has been surprising is that there has been only a small take-up of the scheme. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that the scheme is more widely known about? The scheme would definitely help people to get what they need rather than accepting something less that does not always completely meet their needs. There must be a way of ensuring better knowledge and take-up of the scheme, and that is something that the Minister and his Department could address.

It is of the utmost importance that the dignity of the individual is promoted. I get frustrated and angry when I see how elderly people are often brushed aside and ignored because of their age. I am sure that I am not the only person to have heard people making derogatory

comments about people being old and having nothing else to complain about. None of us has control over life and death, and it behoves all of us who express such statements to be aware of the fragility of life and to be aware of the fact that, some day, sooner than we care to think about, we will be in a similar position, and we would not like to be treated in the way that they are treated.

1.00 pm

People who come into my advice centre regularly tell me that information does not flow freely between patients and relatives and health professionals, and the manner in which some news is given can, at times, breed fear. That information may not always be the most palatable, and it may represent bad news, but it must be relayed. Although the information is always relayed professionally, sometimes a stark and cold approach adds to the angst that is felt. There is often a better way of doing things, and it is important that we address that issue. Older people in particular may find it harder to understand what is said to them in a clinical manner. They would benefit from someone spending time with them and explaining in detail and in everyday terms their prognosis and treatment plan.

Too often, as elected representatives, we have heard constituents saying that no one told them what was happening. That must stop. There must be a holistic approach to care. It is vital for older people to have a balanced, nutritional diet. As someone who was recently diagnosed as diabetic, I know the importance of a healthy diet. Older people have the right to receive the best care and nutrition.

We spend much time saying that there should be equality for men and women, black and white, Protestant and Catholic, but what about old and young? I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I commend the Members who brought this important issue to the Floor of the House. I welcome the Minister's attendance. Last week, I criticised him for being elsewhere during the swine flu outbreak, but he is here now, and I commend him for that. It is important that the Minister, as the boss of the Health Department, hears at first hand the issues that we raise.

Members who have already spoken highlighted strategies and recommendations, so I do not propose to go over that again. I am going to ignore the opportunity to get involved in an election fight between the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party because we need to bring some reality into the debate. Jim Shannon rightly pointed out that, every other week, we talk about how we as a society will be judged on how we treat our most vulnerable citizens, whether they are children, young people, the elderly or people with disabilities.

We, as a society, will be tested on that, and we need to show that we want to make changes.

With that in mind, I thank the Assembly's Research Services for the information that it provided to us for the debate. Mary Bradley mentioned last year's Public Accounts Committee report on older people and domiciliary care. A number of important points struck me when looking through the research papers. In 2005-06, trusts spent more than 60% of their money on residential or nursing home care, but the overall number of people who received those services fell. That is an important issue. Will the Minister provide us with more up-to-date information on that? The motion calls on the Minister to reconfigure and enhance services for older people. The Public Accounts Committee has raised those issues with trusts, through the Comptroller and Auditor General, and we must reconfigure those services.

The Public Accounts Committee also stressed the importance of more careful planning of discharges from institutions, including hospitals, and the need to ensure that an appropriate package is in place. We can all relate to that. Every day, but particularly during the winter months, there are delayed discharges from hospitals, because the proper care package is not in place for patients, most notably for elderly patients. There must be seamless links among hospitals, trusts and society.

I hope that we are not inundated with cases of swine flu this winter, because that would add to the problems that we already face. That brings me back to the motion. We are talking about the dignity of the individual. If that is to be promoted, we must deal with delayed discharges by ensuring the delivery of proper, person-centred care packages.

The Research and Library Services information pack also informs Members that the Department has been involved in trying to get the right services delivered to older people since the 1990s. I have no doubt that, 19 years down the line, the Department knows what services are needed. It is 2009, and we must deal with that need.

Members have spoken about carers. We are in debt to carers: we owe them a lot of gratitude because they take a lot of pressure off the Health Service. They must be commended for the work that they do for society in general and for their loved ones in particular.

I am conscious of the time. Some Members have mentioned the British Medical Association (BMA). I am struck, not by recommendations of the BMA, which were useful, but by the introduction to them from the then chairman of the BMA council, who, in 2008, said:

"Despite the high standards of healthcare that exist...the British Medical Association...is concerned that the care of older people is

sometimes deficient, despite the many strategies, policies and care standards that exist. This is unacceptable."

Therefore, like other Members, I make no apology for supporting the motion or for bringing some of the issues involved to the House or to the Health Committee, because that is what I am elected to do.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I cannot. I have 20 seconds left in which to speak.

Going back to Jim Shannon's point, which I want to highlight, discrimination is an issue.

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

Mr S Ramsey: In order to ensure that no one is discriminated against, the Assembly must protect our most vulnerable people.

Mr Gardiner: It is another Monday, and once more we have a DUP motion on health, the fifty-sixth, to debate. I will add little to what I said this time last week except to say that, if the then DUP Finance Minister, Peter Robinson — the husband of one of the Members who tabled the motion, who is, unfortunately, not able to be here today, Mrs Iris Robinson — had given the Health Minister the budget that he requested, there is no doubt that we could have afforded to keep parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Such parity is proclaimed by the DUP everywhere other than in health; never mind the wish list with which the DUP regales Members every week.

The motion is a further DUP attempt to portray the Health Minister as someone who cuts services and fails to deliver. That flies in the face of the evidence. The motion mentions effective communication of information to patients. The Minister assessed the cost to his Department of free personal care and made a bid for that funding during the budgetary process for the current (CSR) period. That bid was rejected by the then Finance Minister, Peter Robinson.

The Minister is currently implementing reforms to improve care for older people while increasing the level of care provided in the community. In January 2009, Mr McGimpsey launched the Northern Ireland single assessment tool, which is a mechanism designed to assess the care needed for older people from the Health Service. The population is ageing; the over-75 age group will almost triple in the next 50 years. The Department is spending more than £600 million on our older people, the second-largest slice of the health budget after acute services. The Northern Ireland single assessment tool allows for a person-centred evaluation of people's needs to ensure that they get the right individual care packages, whether in their own home, residential homes or nursing homes. That is already happening. Other areas of the United Kingdom

have introduced single assessment processes. However, they have not developed an assessment tool to underpin those processes. Northern Ireland is unique in that it has developed a single assessment tool that is specifically designed for the health and social care system in Northern Ireland. Its use across the region will bring consistency to the assessment of older people. Despite the draconian requirements that the DUP Ministers imposed on Minister McGimpsey, he has managed to produce improvements here that are in advance of the rest of the United Kingdom. On that issue and on many others, we have an active and proactive Health Minister.

Once again, today's motion is an attempt by the DUP to blow hot air. The Minister has already proven his deep commitment to older people, as has my party. I thank Members from other parties who paid tribute to Michael McGimpsey for being an efficient and caring Health Minister. He acts swiftly when the need arises. The Finance Minister should look at the Budget again and give the Health Department the money that it requires.

Mrs Hanna: It is always good to remind ourselves of the needs of older people. We are all very aware of the growing elderly population; we have seen the figures. We are all living longer because we have a better standard of living and much better healthcare. Of course, that has huge impacts and financial implications and presents many challenges for the Health Service today and in the future.

Caring for the elderly, whether it is residential, nursing or domiciliary care, is very demanding and rewarding work. Many family members, through love or gratitude, deliver a lot of that care. We have to be aware that if the carers were not there, much of the work that they do would have to be done by health services.

As far back as 1990, the Health Department published a paper entitled 'People First'. Its key objective was to ensure that older people were able to live in their homes as independently as possible, although it recognised that some older people will always require supported housing or residential or nursing care. We are aware of the Public Accounts Committee's 2008 report, which stated that significant numbers of older people were still being treated in institutional settings. We are all aware of older people in acute hospital beds who are waiting for placements in residential or nursing homes, or, indeed, temporary care in step-down beds.

Big domiciliary care packages do not always have to be used to provide for the needs of the elderly and the very frail. Sometimes, a little support can really pay dividends in increasing a person's independence. Nowhere is prevention and early intervention more important. Since before I was elected to the Assembly, the SDLP has called for free personal care. Indeed,

before I came here, I assessed older people for domiciliary care, so I am very aware of the inequalities in the systems.

It is impossible to separate the nursing and personal care elements. However, as has been said, we have agreed to free personal care for the elderly in the past. The issue has been debated several times. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to update us on a timescale and a funding stream to provide it, because that is very important.

The BMA produced a policy document on improving care for older people that mentioned several of the issues highlighted in today's motion. It goes without saying that all patients should have a care-centred package but none more so than older, vulnerable people.

1.15 pm

Special attention is required to ensure that frail, elderly people are able and willing to eat the food that is provided, whether it be meals on wheels or hospital meals, and to ensure that somebody is there to help them, if necessary, so that those meals are not left sitting on a bedside table.

As far as duplication and better communication are concerned, we all know that duplication is a waste of money and that it is very frustrating for patients to be asked the same questions over and over again.

The SDLP firmly believes in prevention and early intervention. If people have good general health and if they are encouraged to stop smoking, to limit their alcohol intake and to get more exercise, that pays dividends when they grow older. Of course, as we get older, we become more prone to cancer, heart disease, thinning of the bones and other such ailments. The new Public Health Agency will pick up on all those issues, particularly those around prevention and early intervention. People will live even longer because their health will be better. If the health of older people gets better generally, fewer NHS resources will be required to care for them, and the resources saved can then be directed to where there is more need.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to extend a fáilte, a welcome, to the Minister. There is some discussion about whether we should have this debate, but I support our having it. It raises the profile of health provision for older people. I am reminded of a comment made by Elaine Way, the chief executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. She said of the recent consultation on care provision in residential homes that, whatever the outcome in any particular area, the consultation at least raised the profile of the issue, and other health professionals working in the Western Trust agreed. That is important in itself.

I spoke to somebody in the Western Trust about today's motion. That person told me that the trust is

moving towards providing an integrated service. When I looked at the website for the Western Trust, I saw that the word “integration” is used repeatedly. That is important, even in a subliminal way. There is nothing worse than older people having to go here or there to find an occupational therapist, a community nurse or any of the various health professionals who might be needed to deliver care to them in the community, as my party colleague said. An elderly person should not be in the position of not knowing exactly what their community care package will be. That point was made in the latest PAC report, which noted that community care packages are key.

An integrated service delivery team is in place in the Western Trust, which operates in my area of West Tyrone. It is early days, but that is very important. There are four service localities in the Western Trust area, stretching down as far as Fermanagh and up towards Derry, and within each there is a senior manager and three subgroups. When I talked to the health professional from the Western Trust, it was stressed to me that it is early days but that the trust is very conscious of the need for an integrated service. A number of Members made that point.

I also discussed the promotion of the dignity of individuals with the health professional from the Western Trust. That is a key issue, and it was mentioned by other Members including my party colleague Mickey Brady. It is particularly important that the dignity of the individual is promoted. Often, people who require a home help feel that they are in some way begging for help. Many of them are proud individuals who do not want to be put in such a situation. Therefore it is imperative that the dignity of the people in the community who require a home-help service is protected and promoted.

When speaking to the health professional from the Western Trust, I got the impression that the trust is aware of the need to protect and promote the dignity of individuals. It is employing flexicare. The system is in its infancy in the Western Trust, and I heard criticisms of it at an event that I attended on residential care homes. However, it is early days for the system, and it is hoped that it will be more effective when the teething problems have been sorted out.

As regards communication, the Western Trust has learned from the consultation.

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

Mrs McGill: There are mechanisms in place to improve communication.

The Western Trust did a good job on the residential care home. Representatives from the trust went to Greenfield Residential Home for Older People and

spoke to people there, and I know that the same happened in other cases.

The debate is helpful in raising the profile of the issues included in the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr Deeny: I support the motion. I am pleased to be speaking on behalf of the elderly, a section of our population whom I consider to be wonderful. I agree with Mrs McGill and disagree with Mr McCallister: the debate is worthwhile, if only to give much-needed public reassurance to the elderly from the House and the Minister that their health and social care needs will be met in the future.

As has been said, the elderly are an important section of our community. They have paid their way in society, and they deserve to be treated well in the future. They should not be marginalised or feel that they are going to be marginalised. As has been said, they should be treated with care and respect.

Mr Shannon talked about GPs and their concerns, and he is correct: GPs are concerned. We talk about care in the community, and that is the right way to go. However, if all sorts of patients, including the elderly, are to be treated in the community in the future, the finance to put the necessary resources in place is required. That is an important point to be made today.

Our elderly people are an important section of our patients, and, increasingly, they will be looked after in the community.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that by virtue of the fact that the motion on the Order Paper has been moved by the DUP — the governing body in the Assembly — it must have received a wink or a nod from the Finance Minister that he would provide sufficient funding to implement the motion?

Dr Deeny: I agree with Mr McCarthy. However, this debate is not the place for inter-party bickering. We are talking about the elderly, who are an important section of our community.

I feel privileged to have worked with and for our elderly for well over 25 years as a front line health professional. They still have a major part to play in society and have a lot to offer. If one listens to the elderly, one can learn from their wisdom.

It is important that health professionals are given the resources they need to ensure that they are able to work in the community to keep elderly people mentally and physically healthy, fit and active. Elderly people contributed greatly to the world as we know it.

As a healthcare professional, I find older people the most satisfying group to work with, because they express the most gratitude. Many of my patients are quite old, and they remember the days before the NHS was

established to provide free care in 1948. They are very grateful for treatment and express their thanks, and those of us who treat them like and appreciate that gratitude.

We must also remember that almost 250,000 people are over 65 years of age. Let us not forget that we are all heading in the same direction; we will all be elderly some day. Therefore, it is vital that we send out a message today that the health and social care needs of our elderly population will be met. The House, the Department of Health and other Departments have a responsibility to send out that loud and clear message today.

I mentioned GPs' concerns. I know a lot of elderly folk, and I am keen to stress that I consider some of them to be my close friends. There is concern among those elderly people — particularly when they hear of efficiency savings — that they will be left at the back of the queue and that their needs will be seen to be less important than the needs of others. Those are the people we need to reassure today.

I am also worried about community care. I have said time and again in the Health Committee and elsewhere that we need to ensure that resources are available in the community to provide the care that is being planned for the future. We need adequate numbers of doctors, nurses and carers. Other Members have mentioned carers, and it is important to incentivise people to become carers. I know people who cannot get work at present and are claiming unemployment benefit. They need financial incentives to reassure them that care work will be well paid. They also need geographical incentives because, for instance, some people who would like to be carers are not interested in doing so because they are being asked to work far from home. Elderly people want to remain and be looked after in their own homes. That is consistent across the board.

Today, the Health Department must send out, loud and clear, the reassuring message to elderly people that their health and social care needs will be provided for. The whole House should state that in no way will elderly people be sidelined or marginalised but that all of their health and social care needs will be fully supported. I ask all Members to support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Our older population is increasing. Over the next 50 years, the number of people aged over 65 will more than double, from almost 250,000 to 500,000. The number of people aged over 75 in our community is rising faster than the number in any other age group; by 2050, it will be three times greater than it is today.

We already spend more than £630 million a year to support older people — a spend that is second only to funding for acute services — and I am investing a further £60 million in this CSR period to support an

additional 1,500 older people in the community. I remind Members that that is considerably more than the budget increase that I received, which was just over 1% per annum in real terms. We are investing where we see the need.

I wish to tell the House about the significantly greater investment for older people, investment which older people deserve and which I am committed to increasing to ensure that people are properly supported to live independently and safely in the community and in their own homes. Members will be aware, however, of the struggle that I had to increase the initial Budget allocation to my Department despite rigid opposition from some in the DUP. Although I succeeded in increasing my final allocation, it still falls short of the level needed to give the people of Northern Ireland the service that they deserve. Despite denials, demand for health and social care services continues to increase right across health, social services and ambulance services. The public expect rapid access to high-quality healthcare in hospitals and in the community.

1.30 pm

Every day, I am forced to make difficult decisions because of the lack of funding. I have to deliver services to people in Northern Ireland. I have made that point many times, but, sadly, some people have taken a long time to accept it. However, during a debate three weeks ago, it appeared that the penny had finally dropped for some Members. As I said then, the DUP controls finances because the Minister of Finance and Personnel is a member of the DUP. If some of those Members are so concerned, have any of them even approached their Minister of Finance and Personnel to ask about the provision of increased funding for the Health Service, and, if not, why not? If they have, what was his answer?

Rather than acknowledging the problems that our Health Service faces, some people have criticised me for not having enough money when I have not been given enough money in the first place. That is hypocrisy. Members choose to turn serious health issues into point-scoring exercises for electioneering purposes. Cynical tactics smack of political opportunism and are totally against the principles of the Health Service, which seeks to serve the entire population equally. If Members are so outraged that I do not have the resources to fund the Health Service properly, are they prepared to stand with me and the many healthcare workers in fighting for more money?

My difficulties have been compounded by the requirement to achieve 3% efficiency savings amounting to £700 million by 2011. The Health Service can be more efficient and should always strive to spend every penny carefully. However, we are being asked to do so in a short time frame, while we are

already struggling to catch up with a massive £300 million funding gap compared with England, which will rise to £600 million by 2011. I note the comparisons made with the mainland, which many people seem, conveniently, to ignore. The most vulnerable groups in society, including elderly people, are paying for years of underfunding.

We debated a motion on the issue only a month ago, and it is astonishing that despite standing on the steps of the Building with trade unionists to demand that health should be exempt from the CSR process, some Members did a dramatic U-turn and walked through the Lobby against such a proposal. That approach has been met with disdain by many who work in the Health Service. It is time for Members to realise that actions speak louder than words.

I now turn to the motion's call to provide free personal care to those with medical needs. Members will be aware of my support for the principle of free personal care. In May 2007, that issue was the topic of a motion in one of my first debates as Minister. After that debate, I asked officials to carry out an assessment of the costs and implications of introducing free personal care and to consider a range of alternative options: excluding a person's main home from any financial assessment; increasing the level of assets and savings a person can hold; increasing personal expenses allowances; and an update of the proposal originally put to the Executive in 2002. The report concluded that it would cost over £30 million a year to introduce free personal care and significantly more to introduce alternative options.

At the last Budget, I made a bid for the necessary resources to allow me to introduce free personal care, and despite a compelling case, my request was refused. Surely that demonstrates that if the proposers of the motion were serious, they would take up the issue with their Minister of Finance and Personnel, because it was that DUP Minister who turned down the request. Nonetheless, everyone is well aware of the severe constraints on my budget, which mean that I am unable to proceed with the introduction of free personal care at this point. That will come as a great disappointment to many people, but it reflects only the extreme difficulty that we face in providing services within limited resources. Personal care, not only for older people but for everyone who needs it, is already free in a person's own home, and Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where that is the case.

I remain committed, however, to the principle of free personal care in care homes and will keep the matter under continual review.

Despite the constrained budget that is available to me, I am determined that our services be designed and structured to meet the needs of our older people in the

most effective and efficient way possible. Ensuring that our older people are treated with dignity across the health and social care sector is more than just a tick-box exercise — it is fundamental to what we do. Dignity means care that supports and promotes and that does not undermine a person's self-respect.

In November last year, I launched 'Improving the patient and client experience', which identified privacy and dignity as one of the five standards that are central to ensuring a positive patient experience of health and social care. As a starting point, a proper, consistent and comprehensive assessment of need is fundamental to ensuring that we have a full picture of an individual's needs and that we can determine how best to meet those needs.

Assessment must focus on maximising opportunities for patients and clients to maintain an independent life where possible, and it must take account of their expectations as well as physical needs. It is absolutely vital that assessment be designed to give older people the opportunity to participate fully in their own assessment, and that is why I am investing more than £1 million in the development and implementation of a single assessment tool for older people. Northern Ireland will be the first region in the UK to use a single tool that is specifically designed to strengthen our integrated assessment process. As a result, whether in Bangor or Belleek, our older people will receive the same comprehensive assessment. As the single assessment tool is embedded in practice, I expect to hear about better assessment experiences and for people to have better outcomes that are based on independence and choice.

Above all, I want to end inappropriate institutional care for people who can, and want to, be supported to live at home. Indeed, that is already happening. In recent years, significant changes have been made to the wide range of support that is available to older people. There has been a shift away from inappropriate hospital-based care to support services that are provided in the community. We have almost eradicated bed blocking by medically fit people, who can, and should, be supported elsewhere.

The range of support service is diverse and includes assistive technology; promoting active ageing; protecting vulnerable people; responding to acute crises when they arise; providing the opportunity for rehabilitation; and supporting carers. The expansion of responsive domiciliary care services has been a central element of our response. Working closely with the independent and voluntary sectors, we have made significant strides in that regard over the past number of years. We now support more people with complex needs in their own homes than are in either residential care or nursing-home care. I have set challenging targets for the service to ensure that we continue to

build on the good work that is already being done. The continued development of immediate-care services such as rapid-response nursing and step-up/step-down beds is making a real and positive difference to people.

By providing focused intensive care in the right setting, we can avoid unnecessary admission to hospital and reduce delayed discharge. Supported living also has an important role to play. I opened Barn Halt Cottages in Carrickfergus in October 2007, and I want to see that type of development appear across Northern Ireland. I am aware that some trusts are drafting supported-living proposals, and I look forward to working with Minister Ritchie as those proposals develop. All the developments that I have mentioned show how services for our older people are changing for the better.

In order to meet our patients' needs, it is also important that we have the right number of staff, with the right skills, in the right place, and at the right time. However, I want to make it clear that the changes will not happen overnight. The process must be evolutionary and take account of the wide range of services that people want and need. We must recognise that residential and nursing homes have an important role to play when ill and vulnerable older people can no longer be safely supported in their own homes. Similarly, although we aim to reduce inappropriate hospital admissions, I recognise that there will be times when older people must be admitted to hospital for treatment. Indeed, older people occupy about two thirds of general hospital beds.

Everyone who is admitted to hospital should have access to a nutritional diet, but I recognise the particular importance of a nutritional diet for older people. Patients over the age of 80 who have been admitted to hospital are five times more likely to suffer from malnutrition than those under the age of 50, and older patients may be at greater risk of not being able to recover.

In November 2007, nursing care standards for patient food in hospital set out the level of nutritional quality that is to be achieved. Patients are screened for malnutrition on admission to hospital, nursing care plans are put in place for those who require nutritional intervention, and all patients who need help with eating and drinking are identified clearly.

Turning to the communication of information to patients and relatives, the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 places a statutory duty on Health Service organisations to involve people actively in decision-making at a regional, local and individual level. That involvement must be co-ordinated and meaningful to give people a sense of ownership of the decisions that affect their lives. In addition, the Patient and Client Council has a statutory duty to promote the provision of advice and

information to the public about the design, commissioning and delivery of health and social care. In addition, the RQIA monitors the Health Service against a quality standard for health and social care on effective communication and information. My Department has begun work already on a service framework for older people. That will see the development of standards that are designed to improve further the health and well-being of older people, reduce inequalities, promote social inclusion, and improve the safety and quality of care.

Our older people deserve the best possible care that we can provide within the resources that we have been given. I am committed firmly to improving continually the support that we provide to older people. Given that, I make no apology about the fact that I will continue to press for more resources and for better outcomes for those very vulnerable members of society. I look forward to those Members who tabled the motion supporting my making that case to ensure that more investment is made for the most vulnerable in our community.

Mr Easton: I pay due regard to the elderly population and the invaluable contribution that it makes to society. My constituency of North Down is enriched by the large population of older people, which is growing continuously. Given Northern Ireland's changing demographics and the increase in the population of older persons, this debate is particularly relevant. Now is the time for proactive planning to ensure that the values and practices that are inherent in the motion are converted into reality for the older persons of tomorrow.

Many instances of good practice can be seen. For example, in many of my constituency's surgeries, older persons and their carers pay tribute to the quality of care that they have received. My evidence for that is that a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General recorded the positive experience of many older people who use the Health Service. It is vital that we support and endorse that good practice.

However, that has not always been the case, and I take it as read that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority ensures effective and efficient inspections. We must focus on the regularity of health provision, its reliability, and, critically, its flexibility, with the requisite level of monitoring and evaluation.

We must listen actively to our older persons. They will provide the critical information that will be necessary to ensure that our health provision is tailor-made for them and that it meets individual needs adequately. I welcome measures that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers my constituency, has taken. Its planning is effective and shows a detailed examination of the future needs of our expanding population of older people. I welcome the increase in day-care admissions and the fact that

more complex surgeries can be undertaken on a day-care basis.

However, that brings with it the challenge of ensuring that domiciliary care is effective and appropriate to address the needs of older persons who are coming out of hospital. With respect to that, it is imperative that any specialist equipment that is required is offered equitably to those utilising domiciliary care.

Multidisciplinary assessments are of the utmost importance, and their timing is crucial. The evidence points strongly to the importance of early assessment, so that, at the point of discharge, the service is ready for the elderly person.

How are we to achieve health provision that promotes independence, while valuing the dignity of older people? The following areas should have primacy. We must ensure that the RQIA provides comprehensive, effective inspection. In promoting independence, we should see a shift in the direction of funding towards domiciliary care, given that people in domiciliary care should get access to the specialist equipment targeted to their assessed need. Fundamentally, we want to see early multidisciplinary assessment of older people so that there is no regression from the promotion of independence.

1.45 pm

We should go further by promoting respite and sleepover services, where appropriate, in the client's home. In these challenging times, it is important that we promote job security in the private and voluntary sector to enhance morale. Let us see effective use of the single assessment tool; it might have been a long time in the making but, now that it is here, it should be implemented rigorously. It is vital that good practice be shared and that there be effective communication across all areas of our knowledge base.

I pay tribute to the people who are termed "informal carers". In many cases, those people are the heroes, so we should support them with targeted respite. Their work promotes independence and helps people to live at home for longer.

Mr Buchanan said that we need properly trained staff to look after the elderly and that the elderly's views must be taken into consideration. Mickey Brady said that discrimination against older people needs to be addressed.

It is unfortunate that the Ulster Unionists decided to bring politics into the debate, given that we were not going to have a go at the Minister today.

A Member: You will do it tomorrow.

Mr Easton: No, we will not do it tomorrow either.

Mr McCallister complained about the motion — *[Interruption.]* Do not worry, we have Lady Sylvia's vote now.

Mr McCallister complained about the motion and its timing. If the Minister had bothered to turn up on the date on which the motion was tabled previously, the motion would have been debated before the launch of the European election campaign. The Member needs to get his facts right.

I also remind the Member that the trusts' proposals to reduce the number of residential homes —

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Speaker and I have agreed on the timings of my appearances in the House. However, those have been influenced by the international swine flu crisis, about which I made a statement an hour ago. Therefore, Mr Easton should not be able to make political capital from that point or play party politics with it, which is exactly what he is doing.

The fact is that I have responded to more debates in the House than any other Minister. I have responded to 56 debates, which is many times more than DUP Ministers. My nearest rival for appearances is Sinn Féin's Caitríona Ruane, who has responded to 36 or 38 debates. Margaret Ritchie has responded to 28 debates. The number of debates that the other Ministers have responded to is in the teens and single figures, which is where the DUP Ministers can be found. Therefore, it is very unfortunate that Mr Easton is using an issue such as swine flu to make a point and to play politics with an international crisis. He is playing politics with matters that are crucial and vital.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his point of order. The Business Committee fully discussed and debated this issue, and, as every Member knows, matters that the Business Committee debates are not for debate in the House.

Mr Easton: It is a pity that the Minister did not mention that it was his party that raised the issue first. That is the reality. It would be interesting to see what commitments the Minister had in his diary for the dates on which he did not turn up.

Mr McCallister complained about the trusts' proposals to reduce the number of residential homes. I point out that Mr McGimpsey is the Minister in charge of the Health Department and that it is up to him to ensure that there are no cuts made to front line services, residential homes and nursing jobs. It is up to the Minister to ensure that those cuts do not happen.

Mary Bradley complained about the treatment and underfeeding of the elderly in hospital and blamed an over-bureaucratic system for nurses' workload. Kieran McCarthy said that he supports the motion, but that he

has concerns that parts of the Health Service are not already implementing what the motion states.

Jim Shannon said that we all have family members who have been affected by the issue, and I agree with him. He also said that we should give the elderly the respect that they deserve and that he is concerned about the lack of facilities for the elderly in the local community.

Ms Sue Ramsey said that resources need to be reconfigured so that they are directed at elderly people and that the dignity of elderly people must be promoted.

Sam Gardiner complained that the DUP has tabled more motions on health than any other party, and I thank him for highlighting that fact. Mr Gardiner spoke about cuts in the money that is available to the Health Service; however, I remind him of the record investment that has been made in the Health Service.

Carmel Hanna mentioned promotion of, and early intervention for, elderly people. Claire McGill said that the Western Trust was moving towards the integration of services, and she welcomed the promotion of the dignity of elderly people. Dr Kieran Deeny said that the debate was worthwhile, and he disagreed with the Ulster Unionist Party that the issue should not be debated. He said that much can be learned from the wisdom of elderly people, and I totally agree with that.

The Health Minister said that the elderly population is increasing, and he highlighted the increase in resources that was supplied by the DUP Finance Minister. I thank the Health Minister for that. More than half the entire Budget for Northern Ireland goes to health, and the Minister needs to use it a bit more wisely. In a question for written answer, I asked the Minister whether he had raised the matter of efficiency savings with the Executive. Judging from his answer, the Minister has not bothered to raise that issue with the Executive. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reconfigure and enhance services for older people to ensure that these services are integrated, person-centred and well-staffed; that the dignity of the individual is promoted; that information is communicated effectively to patients and relatives by health professionals; that inpatients receive a nutritional diet; and that personal care is provided free of charge to all those with medical need.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Restructuring of the Executive and Assembly

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

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months.

The Ulster Unionist Party is relaxed with the amendment, because we are confident in the merits of the motion; if the House thinks differently, we shall let it choose what it favours. Our purpose is to generate a worthwhile and open debate, secure in the knowledge that a very interested public is listening.

The debate is not about the spectacle of double-jobbing, family dynasties, dubious rents or the use of office-cost allowances, although we hope that, as an inevitable consequence of direct action on our motion, an end to those controversies that highlight the issues will be in sight. Nor is the debate about MPs' expenses, food bills, rent overpay, second homes, mortgages, capital gains, manure, furniture, moats or any other example of acute embarrassment to those who have been exposed by 'The Daily Telegraph'. Such activities are a matter for another House to rectify.

However, we cannot escape putting our own house in order; the comparisons are too close for comfort. MLAs are under public scrutiny. Our motion is about reform and about workable economies of scale that are designed to combat wastage. The Assembly has moved on from the days when the Labour Government contrived to enlarge MLA numbers solely to bring in diverse groups. Those groups might have contributed, but that was then, and this is now in much better circumstances.

The Assembly feels a more settled place in which to conduct business. Even that arch-sceptic and font of wisdom Lord Morrow acknowledges the catchphrase that we are moving on, although, like many, I suspect

that he reserves the right to question the precise direction in which we are moving.

That begs the obvious question: has the initial initiative of getting us here in the first place, through my party's heavy lifting, been successful to the point that those of us who are here are prepared to move on? Are we ready to move on under our own steam and to restructure and reorganise at a pace with which the electorate can identify and support? Are we willing to act in the lifetime of this Assembly to scale down ministerial posts and reduce the number of MLAs? In other words, is that a serious proposition on which we are prepared to deliver?

Although the Assembly seems to be content to continue with British rule under devolved arrangements, I do not believe that the current Executive structure can last. I am less confident, therefore, that moving on will bring the Assembly closer to the real test of its maturity, which is the shift from an enforced mandatory coalition to a voluntary coalition. This moving on caper is all well and good when the direction is clear and not littered with obstacles and uncertainty, as has been illustrated recently in debates and votes on the economy, in heated debates on the Programme for Government and its budgetary outworkings, in stormy debates on the education stalemate, and by the fact that there is little prospect of agreement, so far, on the devolution of policing and justice.

Therefore, room should be made for us to reflect on the context of where we started, where we are now, and where we are going. We must be big enough to give due recognition to how far the institution has progressed in a relatively short time. Without the efforts of the original First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly of that time, and, indeed, without the giant step that was taken by the previous First Minister, Dr Paisley, and the stepping into his large shoes by the current First Minister, we would probably not be here. The thought of debating this motion, or any other motion, in the Assembly might well have been aborted some time ago.

That said, no one could fail to notice that as recently as Monday 11 May 2009, the deputy First Minister stepped in and dismissed proposals that the First Minister put forward for various efficiency measures, including streamlining the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the merger of the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the post of Commissioner for Children and Young People, having fewer Departments and MLAs, and, lo and behold, the phasing out of double-jobbing. The deputy First Minister described it as "shallow electioneering".

Therein lies the problem with moving on, especially when Sinn Féin's terms and conditions clearly do not

fit in with those of unionists. The Assembly has a duty to deal with differences and to decide, urgently, how best to restore the integrity of our profession and win back large swathes of a disillusioned electorate.

Long before 'The Daily Telegraph' unfolded its graphic disclosures of goings on at Westminster, MLAs — and this affects us all — were subject to ridicule in the media, abuse on phone-in shows, which still happens, and newspaper comments such as, "It's time some politicians voted themselves out of a job", followed by, "One MLA for every 16,000 of us? We have let too many in already."

Surely, those are reasons enough for the Assembly to agree to the Ulster Unionist Party's motion and good reason to show the public that it accepts that top-heaviness is detrimental to our effectiveness. Those are good reasons to show that rather than talk the talk, we will make good on and implement the necessary improvements.

Only the motion conveys that message to the public, and only the motion calls for a review of the number of MLAs and a timescale to report within six months. The amendment fudges on the aspect of support in principle; in fact, it deletes the words "in principle" from the motion. It also shies away from a review of MLA numbers when such a review is crucial, and it removes any reference to a timescale. Is that it? Is the solution to simply put the matter off, as we do normally?

I acknowledge and welcome the OFMDFM commitment, which offers to establish an efficiency review panel to examine the Departments and to release a report later this year. It said that it would establish the panel after Easter — there is no sign of it yet — and produce the report thereafter. However, the OFMDFM proposal does not include a review of MLA numbers.

2.00 pm

Our motion is specific in relation to Departments, MLAs and timescale. In my most persuasive manner, I urge Members to reconsider the motion and the amendment carefully and to think of the electorate who voted us into the House. We are not debating actual numbers. We will do that on another day, sooner rather than later. If Members want to support the amendment, they can suit themselves. However, such a move will stop short of decisive action, which is something of which we are repeatedly accused.

Support for the motion will signal to the public that our unanimous — I emphasise unanimous — intention is to provide an opportunity for them to vote for a new-look Stormont Assembly at the next election. That is the right signal to send, and only the Ulster Unionist motion sends that signal. We are public servants who are employed by the public, who expect us to act responsibly. The people deserve no less, and, ultimately, we will all be judged at the ballot box.

I trust that today's debate will be open. Ulster Unionists will voice their opinion against the amendment and, if the House divides, will vote accordingly. Only the motion is worth supporting, and I commend it to Members.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "supports" and insert

"improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government; recognises the need for new scrutiny and oversight arrangements in the Assembly to permanently pursue such ends; calls on the First and deputy First Minister to make a statement on their proposals for an Efficiency Review Panel; notes the review procedures set out in the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to provide for agreed changes to the institutions, including the size and structure of the Assembly and the institutional workings of the Executive; further notes the role of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in examining such matters; calls on that Committee to accelerate consideration of changes to the number of MLAs and the number of government Departments; and asks it to produce a report this year outlining proposals which respect the principles of proportional representation and inclusion."

Mr McNarry began by saying that he and his party colleagues were relaxed about the Assembly's decision to support or reject the amendment before going on to outline several false arguments against the amendment. The motion seems to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a statement that offers an update on their proposals for an efficiency review panel. The SDLP amendment also asks the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement to the House on that matter.

The motion calls for a report to be produced within six months, whereas the amendment asks for a report this year, which is not much longer than six months. Mr McNarry suggested that the amendment did not outline a timescale and did not mention a report. The amendment states that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee should consider the matter and report this year. Mr McNarry said that the amendment does not address the number of MLAs. It does: the amendment specifically states that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee should introduce proposals on the number of MLAs and Departments. Therefore, all issues are addressed, and the timetable is accommodated.

We commend the amendment to the House because it is more considered and possibly more competent. We do not necessarily agree that the First Minister and deputy First Minister should make proposals on the number of MLAs. A review procedure was built into the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, it is reflected in legislation, and supplementary review aspects were built in through the creation of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Therefore, the amendment tries to reflect the statutory reality, the spirit of the agreement and the arrangements that are in place. We want to adhere to those proper review mechanisms.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister should not decide on the number of MLAs. The Assembly can competently address that matter through the Committee and can process the issue through a proper review mechanism under the terms of the agreement.

Remember that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have not even been elected by the Assembly, which is unlike the original Assembly. Therefore, it is not within their mandate to bring forward those kinds of issues. They have many other burdens and responsibilities, and lots of things have been promised to be delivered by that Department within months that have not actually been delivered.

I am not sure that the most positive way of promoting action on those significant issues is to remit them to the First Minister and deputy First Minister through some other panel. People want to see MLAs, politicians and parties taking a handle on those issues and not constantly handing things out to other worthies and experts. We are the people who are paid the money and the allowances and we should be working in the Assembly and using the structures that were created. If people went out of their way to create an Assembly and Executive Review Committee to deal with such matters, let us use that Committee for that purpose, rather than creating a Committee and then getting someone else to do the job. That is what the public complain about and that is what our amendment attempts to avoid.

We also recognise that it is not just the number of MLAs and Departments that must be considered. Yet again, the SDLP is making the point that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Government requires some new Assembly scrutiny and oversight mechanisms. We hear a lot of talk about joined-up Government, but we do not get it.

One of the things that we do not have in the Assembly is joined-up scrutiny. We do not have a Committee that has the competence of a ways-and-means Committee or Budget Committee. The Committee for Finance and Personnel does not and cannot play that role. The Department of Finance and Personnel does not play a strong role in policing the performance and practice of Government expenditure across Departments: most of its time is spent on Budget-planning matters.

The SDLP has argued for the creation of new Assembly Committees with powers, not unlike the Public Accounts Committee, to call in people from Departments and non-departmental bodies. We suggest that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee considers the establishment of a Committee that is permanently dedicated to interrogating the cost of the Government. That matter should not be dealt with in a one-off review aimed at reducing the number of

Departments, although many people would find that useful. There should be a Committee that is permanently dedicated to interrogating how much the Government and the Departments are spending on themselves. It would be better than the Public Accounts Committee, which can only look at things after the fact and tends to concentrate on secondary and tertiary budget holders. The proposed Committee would test what the Government and the Departments are doing with the big budgets and their big spending on themselves in real time.

Those are positive ideas, as is the idea of a Committee to permanently oversee capital expenditure across all Departments. We hear a lot of complaints about the effectiveness, performance and delivery of Departments. Even in the context of the headline figures for capital expenditure and the investment strategy, there are complaints about delivery.

The Assembly is supposed to be a chamber of accountability and a theatre of scrutiny and challenge. Let us use it as such, and let us equip it with the proper tools of scrutiny and challenge. That is why our motion identifies the need for new measures and mechanisms.

The SDLP does not shy away from the issue of the number of MLAs. When the Good Friday Agreement was being negotiated, we proposed constituencies with five seats. On the basis that there were 18 constituencies at the time, that would have delivered 90 MLAs. It was essentially the intervention of the British Government that led to each constituency having six seats. Some of us preferred to add 10 extra seats to the proposed 90 in the first Assembly as a way of trying to accommodate the interests of some of the smaller parties that had been involved in negotiating the Agreement. However, a model of constituencies with six seats in each was chosen. That gives us an Assembly that, in most people's estimation, is too large. The SDLP is in favour of reducing it, and has suggested ways of doing that; for instance, by reducing the number of Northern Ireland constituencies.

The Boundary Commission says that Northern Ireland should have between 16 and 18 parliamentary constituencies. If the number were reduced to 16, with five seats in each constituency, the number of MLAs would be reduced by 28.

That would give us a reasonably sized Assembly of 80 Members. If, after further reviews in Westminster, there are other reductions to the size of Parliament, the number of constituency seats here will be lower. If we continue to use parliamentary constituencies as Assembly constituencies, that will result in a smaller Assembly. Contrary to what the DUP and others alleged last week, we have put forward proposals in the past. We made those proposals during the review of the Good Friday Agreement that occurred before the

talks at Leeds Castle, and we were meant to participate in a review at Leeds Castle, but that was aborted.

We do not shy away from the issue of reducing the number of Departments. It is strange that some of the parties that make a big deal about reducing the number of Departments are in the business of increasing the number of Departments to accommodate the devolution of justice and policing. We do not need an extra Department for justice and policing; we could easily rejig our complement of Departments and still fit in a Department of justice without adding to the existing 10. Other parties have decided that they want to go above 10, because they want to use the false and dishonest excuse of bypassing the d'Hondt mechanism. They are contriving to create more Departments while pretending that they are trying to reduce them.

We are serious about reducing the number of Departments. We do not necessarily buy the figure of six that many people have proposed. When we had six Departments here, they proved unwieldy and were not competent or convincing in dealing with the range of policy interests that faced them. Furthermore, we are not sure how much accountability those Departments would be subject to in the Assembly.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member advise the House how the SDLP voted on the establishment of a Department of justice? Is it not the case that his party supported the creation of an additional Department of justice? The SDLP did not argue for a reduction of the 10 Departments in that instance.

Mr Durkan: The Member is wrong. In an earlier submission, we made the point that devolution of policing and justice could and should be done in the way that I described. There was no reason why it should not have been done that way.

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

Mr Durkan: We recognised the way in which others were going. The amendment competently addresses all the issues that the proposer's party wanted to deal with, but does so more convincingly, more properly and in a more orderly way. The amendment ensures that the Assembly will have responsibility for the matter and does not kick it somewhere else.

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion in the genuine spirit in which it was moved. I oppose the amendment, because I remain to be convinced that the SDLP is genuinely committed to reducing the number of Departments in Northern Ireland and the number of Assembly Members, which is the thrust of the motion. That was betrayed by some of Mr Durkan's comments. I welcome the fact that we are discussing the restructuring and streamlining of government in Northern Ireland. Since the inception of the Belfast

Agreement and the bloated political bureaucracy that was born out of it in subsequent years, my party has been a lone voice in calling for a reduction in the number of Departments and Assembly Members.

Whatever reason there was for having six-seat constituencies and 108 MLAs, there was no justification for it in a country the size of Northern Ireland, just as there was never a justification for having 10, 11 or 12 Departments. There are relevant examples not too far away from here in other devolved regions. In Scotland, for example, MSP representation is significantly lower per head of population and, more importantly, there was a recent reduction in Departments from nine to six. That makes the point that a country with a population much larger than ours can function perfectly adequately with significantly fewer Departments.

The context for today's debate is provided by the motion that was moved by my party and passed by the Assembly on 19 January 2009, which called on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reduce the number of Departments. I welcome the intention to create an efficiency review panel, which is the focus of Mr McNarry's motion.

Having had that discussion, which is culminating in today's debate, I am pleased that we have made some conversions. After being the lone voice for those years, it is gratifying to my party that there have been conversions, particularly from the parties of the two Members who spoke last. Those parties are principally responsible for the bloated bureaucracy that we are in the midst of today.

2.15 pm

I also wish to make some general points concerning the value that my party puts on driving efficiency into the heart of Government. If one looks at our record since devolution, in only two years, there have been many examples of the DUP and DUP Ministers driving the principle of more efficient Government into the DNA of Departments and agencies. I accept that we are not alone in doing that, but we are the principal drivers of that reform agenda into the heart of Government in Northern Ireland.

In particular, I am thinking of some of the conclusions of the review of public administration (RPA), including the reduction of the number of councils from 26 to 11, the creation of the performance and efficiency delivery unit, and the creation of the strategic projects unit, which is fast-tracking major planning applications. Furthermore, we have been driving the general reform of the Civil Service, including the introduction of the three-digit contact number. Those and other examples of reform are driving more efficient interfacing with the public and the more efficient delivery of public services in general.

My party takes those things seriously, places value on them and is glad to see them happening. However, that is not where it stops, nor should it be where things end for Departments or MLAs. There is a convincing case for looking at bodies such as the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and other commissions, without turning our backs on the principles of equality or human rights. Although we value and cherish those principles, we do not cherish or value the need for separate commissions, and there are convincing cases for considering reducing their number in order to streamline them and save money.

We must all embrace the need to reduce the size of Government and to streamline structures in Stormont and elsewhere. When Mr McNarry proposed the motion, he said that there must be buy-in from other parties. I accept that point, but we must all embrace the whole agenda. In the past, there was posturing indicating that there would be no changes to accountability; however, we have seen changes.

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

Mr Hamilton: Margaret Ritchie has learnt to her cost — or, rather, to the cost of £300,000 to the ratepayers — that changes have been made. We must all embrace this agenda and drive it forward, because the people of Northern Ireland are looking to us and demanding that we do so. I welcome the motion and I reject the amendment.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Chomhairle. I have listened closely to the contributions thus far, and my party remains unconvinced by the motivation behind the motion and that behind the amendment.

Political parties here were recently given an opportunity to show their commitment to efficient Government. All but Sinn Féin fell at the last hurdle, because Sinn Féin was the only party that, in the interest of achieving a number of objectives, including the efficient and effective delivery of services and value for money, went for the seven-council option in the RPA recommendations. That was a test for parties. Parties around the Chamber talked about how they would reduce the number of MLAs, Departments and bodies, but when they were given the option to do so, every party apart from mine went for 11, 15 or 17 councils, and some secretly hoped that the number would remain at 26. That was all about "saving our seats".

I remember the debate in this Chamber during the Hain Assembly, as it was referred to. I left that debate, and the title that I gave it was the "save our seats" debate. I strongly suspect that when the elections are out of the road, the dust has settled and it comes to making the crucial decisions about how many MLAs will sit in the Chamber and how many Departments

and advisers there will be, etc, some of the political parties that are making strong statements today about reducing bureaucracy and the number of Departments will fall at the last fence.

Another concern that my party has about the motion relates to the issue of electioneering. Indeed, Mr McNarry referred to something that Martin McGuinness said about that matter. That is, electioneering not only with respect to efficiencies, but with respect to the removal of equality, which goes to the heart of this institution and the institutions that are built around it. This institution is built fairly and squarely on the foundations of the Good Friday Agreement.

There are still those on the Benches opposite and the Benches to my left who believe that they will hollow out the equality mechanisms of the Good Friday Agreement; that they will return to the one-party-rule system of the old Stormont; and that they will not have to share power with their nationalist and republican neighbours. Until they realise that those days are over, and that those days did not serve anybody well, particularly the communities that they represent, we will continue to have these silly debates on reducing the number of Departments under the headline of efficiency savings.

Mr Hamilton: The Member has made the same argument on previous occasions. Will he not accept that it is ridiculous to suggest that a reduction in the number of Departments and Assembly Members is in no way compatible with what he has already said? In any of those circumstances, we all accept that Northern Ireland cannot be governed in the way in which it was 50 years ago. There can still be protections for minority rights within Northern Ireland. That is not incompatible with a reduction in the number of Departments and Members.

Mr O'Dowd: It can be done, but I regret that the statement from Mr Hamilton is not backed up by actions from his party colleagues. I still strongly suspect that there are those in the DUP who believe that they will someday return to this institution in a one-party state, and they will not be protecting the rights and entitlements of the minority — “minority” is the wrong term — of communities within this society. They are not interested in sharing power with their nationalist and republican neighbours.

As long as Sinn Féin is the second-largest party in the Executive, and, therefore, the largest nationalist and republican party in the Executive, we will not accept any measures that undermine the entitlements of the Good Friday Agreement.

As regards the number of Members, 108 is excessive, but remember where we have come from and how the agreement was formatted. We are a society coming out of conflict. We have had 30 or 40

years of terrible conflict, and the reason that we have so many MLAs is to allow alternative voices to represent communities from all sectors of our society.

What price democracy? Due to the reports of the expenditure of those in the British Westminster system who are abusing the responsibility placed on them by the public, some members of the public are quite rightly asking whether they can afford those politicians. I ask this: can we afford not to have politicians? Politicians have brought normality to this society. Not all politicians are milking the system. Not all politicians are living the high life. Not all politicians entered public service out of self-interest. There are those, and I rank my colleagues among them, who have entered politics because they believe in the supremacy of politics. Politics can and should be used to bring positive change into people's lives.

We are in our first real term of the institutions that were established under the Good Friday Agreement.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Let these institutions complete their task and allow the efficiency review panel that has been established under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report. First and foremost, it will report on equality.

Mrs Long: I support the motion and thank the proposers for bringing it today.

As Members are aware, the Alliance Party has a wide agenda for reforming these institutions and the system of government in Northern Ireland. We have been very open and honest about that. We are on record as having sought progressive changes to these institutions, whether through designations in the voting system; moving from a mandatory to a voluntary coalition system; or making better use of the North/South institutions to bring maximum benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. The size and nature of government in Northern Ireland has to be included in those considerations.

It goes without saying that the number of Departments is a critical part of that agenda, as is the number of MLAs who sit on these Benches.

I want to address several issues. I will reflect on the contribution of the previous Member who spoke. I agree that we should all acknowledge that our current arrangements exist for a reason. Our political structure was designed to fulfil the needs of a peace process rather than to promote good and efficient government. Members need to acknowledge that. It is much harder to sustain the argument that that political structure should remain for ever and a day because of its genesis.

We have a large number of Members to ensure inclusion and proportionality. However, inclusion and

proportionality can be achieved if the number of Members is reduced by altering the number of constituencies so that there are still multi-Member constituencies. That is one option. The number of Departments can also be inclusive and proportional provided one either examines the management of government — a different level of proportionality may be required in the transition period — or puts more emphasis on the role of opposition within good government. The latter option is preferable because if those outside Government are properly funded and supported to challenge Government, that is good for all people.

The efficiency review panel has already been tasked with examining the number of MLAs and Departments, and it has been stated that it will report by the end of the year. Therefore, our only question about the motion is what it adds, apart from a month or two to the reporting time; there is little more to be gained from it. However, we have no objection to that report being published sooner rather than later.

We also have no doubt that a reduction in the number of Departments would produce financial savings; no one could argue against that. However, I am wary that the level of financial savings has, at times, been significantly overstated. I think, for example, of the scant attention that is given to the cost of division, which runs at around £1 billion per annum and is, by comparison, a black hole in the Budget. Therefore, perspective is required.

The main objective of reform of the institutions is to deliver more effective and efficient government, which we have made clear on several occasions. With the planned reduction in the number of councils from 26 to 11 as part of the RPA, it is logical that the number of Departments be reviewed. Councils will take on additional powers, including some that reside with central Departments. Therefore, there is an opportunity for efficiency. The new Health and Social Care Board and the proposed education and skills authority will also take work away from their host Departments, which presents opportunities for efficiencies.

It can be argued that 11 Departments mean that there is distribution of responsibility on many issues, which can lead to little being achieved. I could give a number of examples, but the one that exercises me also exercised the House recently: school-age childcare. A number of Departments claim an interest in that issue, but no one will take responsibility and address the problem.

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

Mrs Long: Although we support the motion, we favour a focus on the more effective and efficient delivery of good governance. It is important that we do not overstate the potential financial savings, but we

acknowledge that significant financial savings could be made.

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, and Alastair Ross will be the first Member to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Aid for Peace Approach

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the ‘Aid for Peace Approach’ is applied in assessment of all programmes that it funds. (AQO 2711/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Aid for Peace approach is an evaluation methodology for examining peace-building interventions. It has been used in developing the Peace III programme and was also applied in Peace III at an operational level, as part of the monitoring and evaluation strategy. It should provide a fuller indication of the impact of EU peace funding than any previously available approach.

The lead partner of each project is taken through the stages of the Aid for Peace approach by a facilitator. It is not expected that the approach will be onerous for EU-funded projects. Although the evaluation model is not used directly in the assessment of programmes that are funded by OFMDFM, the four key elements of the EU process will be part of our decision-making. Analysing issues such as peace-building needs, how programmes address identified needs and the impacts that are being achieved is an essential and routine component of our programme and policy process.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his response. When did he become aware that Frankie Gallagher and other members of the UPRG had left Farset and taken up employment with another special European programme-funded body?

The First Minister: I am not aware that they have. I understood that Mr Gallagher had been involved with the CTI project, which was unlawfully stopped by the Minister from the Member’s party. Neither I nor, I believe, the deputy First Minister have been made aware of any termination of employment at the CTI project — indeed, nor should we be because it is the responsibility of the Minister from the Member’s party rather than mine.

Mr Shannon: Will the First Minister indicate how the Aid for Peace scheme will work in relation to local government? I understand that with Peace I and II

there was a relationship with local government in the allocation of funds. It is important for local government to be involved with this scheme, because it would have the avenues to the projects that might be awarded funding.

The First Minister: We should be clear that although the Aid for Peace approach is set out in the four categories that are identified under the EU process, they are probably just common sense and will be used by anyone who is assessing those projects, whether in central, regional or local government.

The first element is an analysis of the conflict dynamics and in particular the peace-building process. There is then an assessment of whether an intervention is relevant to the needs of peace-building before moving to conflict risk assessment, assessing and identifying problems and risks with which projects and interventions might be confronted. Finally, there is the peace and conflict effects assessment, examining the effects of an intervention and assessing what changes have occurred. All of those seem to me to be the sort of questions that one would need to assess in local government or elsewhere, whether one uses the Aid for Peace approach or any other approach.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the First Minister comment on the criticisms by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency that the Aid for Peace approach is not being evaluated properly and that impacts over a period of time need to be assessed, as well as more immediate inputs and outcomes?

The First Minister: I would be happy to have officials make an assessment and, perhaps, even to speak to NISRA about its criticisms.

No matter what Department is involved, it is important that the Government use the best methodology when making assessments of any project. If improvements can be made, it is right and proper that officials learn what they are.

Cross-sector Advisory Forum

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the relationship between the cross-sector advisory forum and the Economic Development Forum. (AQO 2712/09)

The First Minister: On 20 April, during my statement to the Assembly on the cross-sector advisory forum (CSAF), I made specific reference to the work of the Economic Development Forum (EDF). We are keenly aware of the valuable work that the EDF does, and it is not our intention to unnecessarily duplicate that effort in the cross-sector advisory forum. The CSAF’s terms of reference clearly state its purpose, which is to make recommendations for addressing the

problems arising from the economic crisis. That forum is rooted firmly in dealing with the effects of the economic downturn. The Economic Development Forum has a role to provide advice and recommendations to the Executive on matters relating to the development of the local economy within the context set by the Programme for Government. The EDF's remit is focused on improving the strength of our economy, even in normal times.

During the CSAF's first meeting on 6 April, reference was made to the work of the EDF. There is consensus that there will be a complementary relationship between the EDF and the CSAF. It is also worth noting that we anticipate that the cross-sector advisory forum will bring forward proposals for social welfare, as well as economic responses to the current crisis.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his response. How often has it met, and when will it report to the House?

The First Minister: I assume that the "it" refers to the cross-sector advisory forum. As I said, the cross-sector advisory forum met in April. At that meeting, we agreed that we would meet before the summer recess but, importantly, that the main work of the forum could be done through work groups that would be set up to cover a range of seven different subjects. We were looking for an input, not just from the various interests in the cross-sector advisory forum, each of whom will be asked what groups they want to be part of, but from the appropriate Ministers in those Departments.

Mr Spratt: What steps have the Executive taken to address the economic downturn?

The First Minister: Each Minister in the Executive is focused on dealing with their departmental responsibilities on matters relating to the downturn. As we have already indicated, the establishment of the cross-sector advisory forum was important in that it flowed out of a series of meetings that the deputy First Minister and I had with banks, the construction industry, energy companies, the energy regulator, the Institute of Directors and other business interests. We met the voluntary and community sector and the trade unions. We had a series of meetings, and the feedback that we received was that a body of this type would be useful.

In respect of the Member's wider question, in December, my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel brought before the Assembly proposals aimed at helping businesses and, in particular, small businesses, as well as households in hardship, particularly in relation to fuel poverty. DETI has increased its support for debt advisory services to local people, and we have fast-tracked support services for businesses. We have also improved support services for unemployed people through the jobs and benefits

offices, and we have used capital spending in our investment strategy to support construction. The investment strategy is almost twice the size that it was in the previous comprehensive spending review period. At between £1.4 and £1.5 billion, it can fill a significant gap, because of the downturn in housing.

We have been meeting the banks, and we will continue to do that. We met a number of the sectoral interests during that time.

An update on the economic downturn is a key item at every Executive meeting. Each Minister reports on how it is affecting their Department, and the Executive consider what steps can be taken. As we approach the June monitoring round, the Finance Minister will look at that issue again and, as part of the June review, we will seek proposals for changes not only from the Executive but, because we are happy to receive them, from Assembly Members and the public.

Dr Farry: Members acknowledge that the Budget and Programme for Government prioritise the economy; however, if the cross-sector advisory forum or the Economic Development Forum recommend that either document must be recast with a different emphasis on the economy, will the First Minister and the Executive follow that advice?

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister, I and all our colleagues will take advice that we are given from experts on the economy very seriously. Let me be clear: the deputy First Minister and I did not create this body as some kind of optics for the public; the body is there to facilitate a partnership with business and other sectors of the community so that we can best respond to the economic downturn. That is what we intend to do, even if it is unpleasant and requires difficult changes.

Equality Commission

3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to ensure that the Equality Commission builds confidence across all communities. (AQO 2713/09)

The First Minister: The Equality Commission's draft corporate plan for the next three years, that is, 2009-2012, was subject to a 12-week consultation that ended on 12 January 2009. The draft is with Ministers for approval. In its draft plan, a key strategic priority of the commission is to reach out to the whole community.

The deputy First Minister and I recognise that the Equality Commission must ensure that it builds confidence across all sections of the community and all communities. As the funding Department for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is

accountable for the commission's resourcing arrangements and business activities. In that context, the deputy First Minister and I approved the commission's three-year corporate plan. Our Department must approve the commission's annual business plan. It also carries out reviews of the commission every five years or so. The next is scheduled for 2009-2010.

OFMDFM receives quarterly performance reports from the commission on its progress towards achieving its aim, objective and target, as set out in the commission's annual business plan. In turn, OFMDFM officials consider the contents of those quarterly reports and request further details as appropriate. Our officials also meet commission staff on a bimonthly basis to discuss various issues, including the outworking of the business and corporate plans. Formal meetings at senior management level take place on a quarterly basis.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for his answer. I appreciate his recognition that the Equality Commission must build confidence across society. However, given the First Minister's stated position last week on the continuing function of the Equality Commission and other commissions, does he understand or accept that, although the SDLP may be willing to remove what it regards as the "ugly scaffolding" of equality and power-sharing arrangements, Sinn Féin is not prepared to alter or dilute those safeguards, which are for everyone in this society?

The First Minister: I will not enter into the electoral battle that is under way. I will allow others to take up cudgels on that issue.

I will make it very clear: the proposal that I and my colleagues made last week was not to abolish the issue of equality, because those matters can still be dealt with. The reality is that the plethora of commissions raises the question of whether there is value and economy in bringing a number of their tasks together into one commission. That is a matter of efficiency rather than abolition. I believe that there is a very good case for bringing together at least three of those commissions.

Mr Hamilton: Does the First Minister agree that one reason for a lack of confidence in the Equality Commission among the unionist community is the utterly unrepresentative nature of its commissioners? Given that the Secretary of State is in the process of making additional appointments, does the First Minister agree that it is imperative that the Secretary of State does not repeat the mistakes of the past and that he ensures that those appointments are reflective of the whole community in Northern Ireland?

2.45 pm

The First Minister: As the Member who asked the previous question indicated, there is a common thread: we all want those who are responsible within the

Equality Commission to be representative of the community and to work for all sections of the community. It is imperative that the commission is itself representative of the community — regrettably, the present commission is not — and that its staff are representative of the community, too.

It is very hard for the Equality Commission to preach to others if its own statistics do not indicate the broad strengths of the various communities. I think that the commission's present workforce breaks down as 34% Protestant and 64% Roman Catholic. That is clearly not representative of the community, so the Equality Commission has work to do. It would be in a much better position to go out and encourage others if it could show that it has been able to deal with that issue itself.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Member who asked the main question for her choice of colour today. It has added brightness to the Chamber, and it has reassured me vis-à-vis the Equality Commission. Does the First Minister agree that there is still a strong residual suspicion of the Equality Commission throughout the unionist community? What steps does he believe must be taken to address that deep-seated perception?

The First Minister: Ms Anderson's outfit is almost Day-Glo; I should have brought my shades into the Chamber.

The unionist community's concerns about the Equality Commission stem largely from the issue that was raised by the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton, namely its unrepresentative nature. If someone wants to speak to the Equality Commission, they are inclined to consider who in the commission shares their broad ethos, way of life and outlook. The unionist community finds it difficult to make that kind of identification, and one can see why that is so when one looks at the statistics.

Mrs M Bradley: What additional resources have been provided to the commission? Are there any outstanding legislative amendments that the commission requires to fulfil its responsibilities?

The First Minister: The key areas in which there is a requirement for changes to be made are matters that are clearly within the scope of either the Secretary of State, who makes appointments, or of the commission itself, which makes its staffing arrangements. More than anywhere else, it is those areas in which there is a lack of confidence.

If the Equality Commission indicates to the deputy First Minister and me that there is a requirement for more resources in order to be able to pursue the kind of projects about which we have been talking — encouraging equality among all communities — we will, of course, look at that and, no doubt, have to discuss it with the Finance Minister.

Strategic Investment Board: Chief Executive

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an assessment of the salary of the chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board, which was recently quoted in the 'Daily Mail', and if it believes it is appropriate, or in the public interest, for any public body in Northern Ireland to be paying salaries at this level.

(AQO 2714/09)

The First Minister: The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) was conceived during the first period of devolution and was established by direct rule Ministers. The present SIB chief executive was recruited under direct rule. I understand that his terms and conditions were subject to scrutiny by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by Her Majesty's Treasury before being agreed.

Although we fully accept that the chief executive of SIB is highly paid, he is not in the top 10 of public sector chief executives, as the newspaper claimed. The Strategic Investment Board has played a key role in helping to raise infrastructure investment to record levels over the past five years. In 2003-04, only £680 million was invested; in 2008-09, the total is expected to be in the region of £1.5 billion. Not only are we achieving record investment, but we now deliver it through a coherent investment strategy that ensures that it is targeted at the Executive's key Programme for Government priorities so that it will deliver the best outcomes for all of our people.

SIB was established as a limited company with a board of directors. That enables it to operate with a degree of independence from the rest of the public sector and to recruit the skills and the experience that are needed to do the job that Ministers set for it. Many of the critical skills required to achieve the acceleration of investment effort, which is vital in achieving the aims of the Programme for Government, are simply not available in the public sector; therefore, SIB has had to look outside the public sector for scarce skills. That means that for some key jobs it has to be prepared to pay market rates, which are often considered higher than those in the public sector.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his reply. Does his Department have any plans to review the appointments process for executive and non-executive members of the SIB, and are there any plans to review the overall work of the SIB? Can the First Minister provide an update on the review of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which is part of the SIB?

The First Minister: There is a periodic review of the SIB. When I was Minister of Finance, I came to the

Executive when we were looking at the issue of asset management, the sale of assets and the SIB's role in that. I said to colleagues that it was useful to have a review of the SIB and its operations. That review is due to take place this year, and it can look at the wider issues. It is worth pointing out that the chief executive retains his salary unless he resigns or retires or a review reconsiders the role that he and others play in the organisation. Such a review would have to come before Executive colleagues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Ross.

Mr Ross: I am still Alastair Ross, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I notice that the other Deputy Speaker is rubbing off on you.

We should be focusing on the overall performance of the SIB, but can the First Minister offer any views on how the 'Daily Mail' came to misreport the salary of the chief executive of the SIB?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies, Mr Ross.

The First Minister: I am glad that my colleague raises the issue of the 'Daily Mail', as it exaggerates and gets figures wrong consistently, not just on this issue. However, an investigation would probably find that the 'Daily Mail' had added his national insurance contribution to his salary, which would not be done with any other individual. The 'Daily Mail' does not exactly go by the lines, and, perhaps more often than any other paper, sensationalises.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. Can I ask the Minister whether the increase from five to 10 days for the chairman of Ilex was cleared by any Minister?

The First Minister: I would have to speak to ministerial colleagues to see whether that was the case. As it is not the subject of the main question, it is hard for me to have been briefed previously on the matter. However, I can give an undertaking that we will attempt to establish the answer and let the Member know and perhaps put it in the Library so that other colleagues will know as well.

Cross-sector Advisory Forum

5. **Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the social economy sector will be represented on the cross-sector advisory forum. (AQO 2715/09)

The First Minister: Using the accepted definition of a social economy organisation as one that reinvests its surpluses in the organisation or community, I can confirm that a number of such bodies are included in the membership of the cross-sector advisory forum. A list of the full membership was attached to my statement to the Assembly of 20 April. That included representation from NICVA, the trade unions, the

credit unions and a number of agencies established for the public good. Since the first meeting of the cross-sector advisory forum, we have been approached by a number of organisations, including those in the social economy sector, offering support and seeking membership of the forum. I can see the value of having greater involvement, and the deputy First Minister and I are considering whether that is best done through increasing the membership of the forum or by allowing those groups to be part of the subgroups that are under examination.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister outline his understanding of the role played by the social economy sector in tackling poverty and disadvantage and in promoting economic development and helping the economy?

The First Minister: I support the work of the third sector, as we call the social economy sector. I recall going to the Bryson House recycling operation, although I cannot remember whether I was Finance Minister or First Minister at the time. That operation does not require funds from others; Bryson House can do the job itself. Not only does that operation pay its way, but Bryson House now has satellite businesses that employ many people who would otherwise be unemployed. That is the type of operation that one wants to support, particularly at this time.

The danger faced by a third sector is that, although it is needed most at times of economic downturn, it has difficulties in getting resources because of the requirement on it to get its funds beyond the public sector. Therefore there is a conflict between its position and the needs of society.

I support the third sector, and I want to hear from it. The deputy First Minister and I have met representatives of the third sector at sectoral meetings. It has a part to play, but we have to gauge whether that would be best played at the plenary meetings or through the working groups.

Mr Moutray: Will the First Minister provide a brief account of the groups that are represented on the cross-sector advisory forum?

The First Minister: The cross-sector advisory forum is a representative body — I almost said that its membership was like that of a civic forum. In fact, it might be a good substitute for the Civic Forum. Its representatives will have direct contact with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and it is considerably cheaper than the Civic Forum.

The groups involved include not only the trade unions and the farmers' unions but representatives from voluntary and community groups, professional organisations, energy companies, the energy regulator, our four banks and business and construction industries. It is, therefore, a representative body that

covers all the areas in which there are concerns in the current economy.

Dr McDonnell: How will staff be recruited to the cross-sector advisory forum? Will there be an open and transparent recruitment process, or will it be a mere coalition of the willing?

The First Minister: I am encouraged by the fact that a number of sectors want to be involved in the forum, as it shows that the community wants to play a part in getting us out of the present economic downturn. The staffing of the cross-sector advisory forum will be done in OFMDFM at no additional cost. It is not possible to have Members on the forum, but we have established the seven sub-working groups that will deal with the seven areas of activity that I outlined in my statement to the House some weeks ago. It is possible that the Ministers who are dealing with those areas of responsibility will be in membership, and we have invited each of the people on the forum to choose which of those subgroups or how many of them they want to be on. There may be room for other organisations to play a part in the sector that best relates to their area of interest.

We do not want it to be a long-term body; it has been established to deal with the current economic crisis. The question for oral answer that was asked by Mrs Kelly the Member for Upper Bann related to the fact that there is a body that, in normal circumstances, can look at these business areas, and we do not want to take away responsibilities from it. The cross-sector advisory forum is here for the temporary emergency, and therefore I hope that its life will not be long.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Childcare

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the implementation of the findings of the rural childcare stakeholder group. (AQO 2731/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Shortly after I took office, I established the rural childcare stakeholder group, and I was pleased to present its report 'Rural Childcare: Investing in the Future' to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people last year. The report contains a number of recommendations for my Department, as well as some cross-cutting recommendations.

As a working mother and a rural dweller, I know at first hand how important it is to have access to affordable, accessible, good childcare. I am keen to play my part so that more rural families have support to allow them to consider taking up work or training opportunities. My officials are finalising the details of a rural childcare programme, which is anticipated to open for applications early this summer. That programme will be funded from my Department's rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, which will spend £10 million addressing poverty and exclusion in rural areas.

My officials are working with other Departments on the other recommendations for rural childcare as part of the development of the rural champion concept and the rural White Paper. Work is ongoing to ensure that the rural aspects of childcare are taken into account by, for example, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in its work on examining childcare across the North, and the Department of Education in its early-years strategy.

I will continue to advocate the needs of rural children, in particular, through my membership of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I asked the question in the context of matters arising from child poverty. Is the Minister considering issues such as transport, which is one important factor that has been raised? Moreover, has the issue of school-age childcare been resolved, and are any discussions ongoing on that matter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are five priority areas in our rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, one of which is rural transport. Access to good, affordable childcare in rural areas that helps people to take up employment or training is a route out of poverty, and, as such, it is very important that we provide childcare that reflects the specific needs of rural dwellers. For example, people may have long distances to travel, so childcare providers must open early and be flexible for parents who do shift work, and so on. We need to ensure that rural dwellers have as equitable access to services and opportunities as urban dwellers.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. She obviously recognises the importance of childcare provision in the rural community. Does she feel that her Department should ensure that there is parity of provision between rural and urban areas?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: One reason that I initiated the rural childcare stakeholder group is that it is clear that there is no parity of provision for rural children. We must recognise that for a private childcare provider, one important element in determining whether a business will be successful is the critical mass that it has to

draw upon. Therefore, what is suitable in Camlough will not necessarily be suitable in Tullyreagh. We need to ensure that the Government help, where possible. That is why we are rolling out a number of pilot projects to try to address the need in rural areas that might not otherwise work. We recognise the difficulty that exists and the geographical area that a rural childcare provider must cover when trying to make a business work.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that although several childcare strategy documents have been published over the years, we have not seen enough improvement on the ground, especially in rural communities?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I said at my first meeting with the childcare group that we should not try to reinvent the wheel, but should look at other childcare reports that had previously been commissioned, draw on those experiences and try to keep our project time limited.

It was very clear that although there may be some difficulty in accessing childcare in some urban areas, no specific study of rural provision had been carried out. I felt that I, as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, should use the opportunity to ensure that children and parents in rural areas can access childcare and that they are not disadvantaged in relation to their urban counterparts.

That was one of my first areas of work when I became Minister, and it was an opportunity that I did not want to waste.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

2. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when farmers will be told if they have been successful with their applications for the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2732/09)

17. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2747/09)

18. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress on the farm modernisation scheme; and when letters of offer will be issued. (AQO 2748/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 2, 17 and 18 together.

After initial concerns were expressed by the European Commission about the basis for the allocation of funding to applicants under the farm modernisation programme, the Commission confirmed that it is not for it to determine, at this stage, whether the selection criteria have been established in conformity with

European legislation and further confirmed that it will proceed to release funding for the programme. Therefore, I confirmed on 2 April that the first tranche of the programme will proceed along the lines originally planned.

Applications are being assessed by the managing agent for the programme, and I am pleased that the process of issuing letters of offer to successful applicants, and giving notification to unsuccessful applicants, has commenced. I expect approximately 1,100 successful applicants for the £6 million funding that is available under the first tranche of the scheme.

Dr W McCrea: I am sure that the Minister accepts that farmers need certainty on this issue, especially in light of the recent press coverage. She has said that letters have started to go out to the farmers. Will any farmer who posted an application form for the farm modernisation scheme receive funding from the first tranche of money?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A number of applicants will have posted their applications. Until each application has been assessed, we cannot determine the exact number of postal applications that will be funded. However, by way of illustration, for every 1,000 applicants funded, 268 will be postal, which means that about one quarter of the applications, or 26.83%, will have been received by post.

Mr Ford: I have no desire to rehash the issue of the first tranche of funding from the farm management scheme. However, given the difficulties that arose from that scheme, and the issue of ongoing European funding, will the Minister give some reassurance to those who have lost out in the first tranche that there will be an early second tranche, and that they will have a meaningful opportunity to reapply?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We had always intended to open the second tranche no earlier than next year. The second tranche will not be open for the next 12 months. We want to learn lessons from the initial tranche and to ensure that we have a more robust mechanism, which people will be happy with. I was upfront in my request to my partners to help us to find a way to deliver on that, and the same situation applies. I look forward to hearing the views of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on how we should proceed.

Farmers know that if we can fund only around 1,100 applicants out of the first tranche, many more will be disappointed than will be happy, because we had more than 9,000 applications. Our economy has been given a great boost by the fact that so many farmers are willing to invest a lot of their own money to modernise their farm businesses.

Mr Dallat: The Minister is far too young to remember the long dole queues of the 1950s. However, does she agree that that was no way to treat farmers, and that they would have been much better off back on the farm, milking Daisy? Will she assure Members that farmers will never again be asked to stand in queues, clutching application forms, for money that is rightly theirs?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have been very open. I did not want farmers to have to queue to submit their application forms. It was perceived that farmers were queuing up for a handout, which was not the case. If every farmer had arrived on the same morning and formed a queue, they would all have been dealt with by lunchtime. All 9,000 applications were processed in a morning, with very little difficulty. It is commendable that staff in the DARD Direct offices were able to process those applications and that it was done with little fuss and great good humour across all nine offices. However, lessons have been learned from the first tranche.

I do not remember the dole queues of the 1950s, but farmers were not queuing up for money under the farm modernisation scheme. They were submitting application forms, and the selection criteria had already been established. There was some disingenuous reporting of the process.

Mr Savage: Have the EU authorities given any assurance that there will be no financial recall due to the selection criteria?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It is not helpful to speculate about disallowance. There is the possibility that any scheme could be subject to an EU audit at some time, and, therefore, there is always a risk of disallowance. However, we can offer a strong argument that we have met all the EU legislative requirements and that we have taken a belt-and-braces approach since 17 February. Stringent measures have been taken to ensure that no auditor could find fault with the process. We wanted to be in a position to issue letters of offer as early as possible and to let farmers know whether they had been successful in the first tranche.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

DARD Appeals

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there are any plans to review the appeals system available to farmers. (AQO 2734/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The issue of DARD's appeal process has been raised before, both in the Chamber and at the Committee. Due to the concerns that were raised earlier this year, I commissioned my Department to

initiate a review of its review processes. A scoping study is being completed, and I hope to have the results of that exercise soon.

I have always advocated that farmers and rural dwellers have a right to seek a review of my Department's decisions. I want to ensure that the outcome of the review will provide farmers and rural dwellers with access to an appeals system that is fair, objective, transparent and independent. That will ensure that the review process has delivered our obligations under both EU and domestic legislation.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for those comments, and I appreciate the review that is ongoing. Does the Minister agree — indeed, does her reply indicate — that the current system is not fair, objective or independent?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Given the House's level of concern about the matter, I thought that it was incumbent on me to bring forward a review to assess whether there is anything that we can do to make the process more favourable for farmers. The Member would expect me to do that in my position. We will look at the process and ensure that it is the best that it can be for farmers and rural dwellers.

Mr Poots: Would the Minister care to comment on Lord Justice Weatherup's review of a number of appeals? Lord Justice Weatherup has overturned an individual case, which could affect the other 1,100 farmers who had been disallowed. Will she say clearly that those 1,100 farmers will not have to go through an arduous process and that they will get the money that is rightly theirs, as defined by this country's court of law?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will know that the applications were dismissed in two of the four cases that were referred for judicial review. Therefore, penalties will not be refunded in those two cases. I can confirm that the two cases that Justice Weatherup referred back to the external panel have been finalised and that the farm businesses involved have been excused of their penalties.

Although that satisfies the requirements of the judgement, my officials have been actively engaged with legal advisers to consider the outworking of the judgement. Those discussions have taken longer than expected, but I understand that proposals on the options for the handling of other duplicate-field cases are being prepared and should be with me shortly. The proposals will need to be discussed with industry representatives and the Agriculture Committee before any final decision can be made.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I find it difficult to accept that the Minister overruled the appellants' cases, and the

independent panel's support for farming, in favour of the establishment. The Minister obviously should have some understanding of what that loss of finance will mean for farms. Does she not agree that her failure to accept the panel's decision is a snub to its members and their ability to sit in judgement on appeals? How many times has the Minister overruled the panel's rejection of appeals?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member knows that there is a statutory basis for the review of the decisions that have been through the appeals process. The outcome of any appeals system is to ensure that the right decisions are made. Until the review of the current processes is complete, I am in no position to determine whether any appeals decision under a revised process will be binding on the Department. The appeals panel exists to do a job. I am not able to overturn its decisions; I can only ensure that the proper procedures are carried out. There is a lack of understanding of my role in the process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Contingency Plans

6. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the flooding events last summer, (i) what contingency plans the Rivers Agency has in place; and (ii) to detail the lessons learned. (AQO 2736/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Having witnessed the extent of the flooding at first hand, I am well aware of the impact that the extreme flooding event of last August has had on people's lives and property. Climate change is likely to make such extreme events more common. It is important for the Government to collectively provide a co-ordinated response to minimise the impact of such events on society. Although the response to the flooding of August 2008 gave clear evidence of a collective response by the Government, nevertheless, lessons can be learned.

The Rivers Agency, which is an executive agency in my Department, has an important role to play in flood-emergency planning, and it has a well-structured process that is co-ordinated with Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water and other responders. The agency's suite of emergency plans is tested and debriefed regularly. Debriefing following events such as the August flooding are fed into the emergency planning process.

Last August, early co-ordination in anticipation of flooding, along with the response itself, undoubtedly prevented damage at many locations. Nevertheless, the agency has identified lessons to be learned and is taking action on them. Those include the Rivers Agency's recently introduced flooding incident line that provides a single point of contact for people seeking assistance. The Rivers Agency has offered to supply sandbags to each of the 26 district councils, to be stored close to areas known to be at risk from flooding.

Promoting awareness is also vital to the management of flood risk, and the launch of the strategic flood map in November 2008 enables householders and businesses to find out more about the areas prone to flooding and to take appropriate action.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister has outlined in detail what has happened since last year. Will she advise the House about the actions that the Rivers Agency has taken to prevent similar occurrences to those we witnessed during last year's flooding? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In the aftermath of the flooding of August 2008, the Rivers Agency undertook extensive maintenance and repair works to restore the operation of the drainage network in the areas affected adversely. Initial investigations into the flooding were also undertaken, and they indicated that 900 properties at numerous locations were affected by flooding from rivers. Where a solution is considered viable, further detailed investigations are being commissioned and additional funding is being sought for new projects to be included in the Rivers Agency's major works programme.

Mr T Clarke: I am appalled by some of the things that I am hearing about the reviews and what is taking place. It came as no surprise to me, when the Rivers Agency made a presentation to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, that it inspects some rivers only every two to three years. Debris is still lying in and beside the Six Mile Water where properties were flooded. The Rivers Agency has not cleared that debris. What will the Minister do in relation to it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In many cases, the responsibility for keeping watercourses clear is that of the riparian landowner. There should be no confusion about that. However, the Rivers Agency has worked on issues and has taken action in the past because it believes that the actions of others may lead to a flooding incident and that preventative action is needed.

The Member is welcome to write to me and I will respond on the specific case of the Six Mile Water. We want to work with elected representatives and the public to try to prevent incidents of flooding. However,

the resources of the Rivers Agency are finite and it has planned major works. The agency cannot be responsible for maintaining rivers outside its responsibility and it has no budget for keeping watercourses clear.

We must be clear as to whose job it is to keep certain rivers clear. We will not be found wanting when it comes to meeting the Government's responsibilities, but landowners have to meet their responsibilities. I ask that they work with us to keep watercourses free from debris and to ensure that actions are not being taken that could lead to a flooding event during the next heavy rainfall.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give a specific update on the measures being taken to prevent the River Halfpenny from flooding neighbouring homes in the Knockramer Meadows area of Lurgan as it did last year?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I do not have that information with me. The Member has corresponded with me about that issue and I am happy to provide her with an update in writing.

Rural Tourism

7. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about promoting tourism in the countryside. (AQO 2737/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have accompanied the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format on three occasions. At those meetings, we agreed with our counterparts in the South a number of actions to promote tourism on the island of Ireland and not just in Fermanagh. Obviously, one would expect me to get plenty of spake in about the potential for rural tourism and what it can do for the economy in rural areas.

In addition, my officials have maintained ongoing contact with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Invest NI and the NITB (Northern Ireland Tourist Board) throughout the implementation phase of the programme. It was through those contacts that my officials were able to agree with DETI and the NITB that up to four self-catering units could be funded providing that planning permission was in place before an application was submitted. That was important to the programme. Farmers are very interested in developing self-catering units as potential farm diversification projects. It is a good example of how closely officials have been working together, and I thank all those involved.

Originally, there had to be a minimum of four units; however, we have identified that it is OK to proceed

with up to four units. Again, I emphasise that it is vitally important that Departments and agencies work together to ensure that synergies are developed between the various programmes so that we maximise the effect that funding has in rural areas.

Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and other Departments and agencies have met representatives of the joint council committees to discuss the tourism elements of their strategies. Recently, DARD appointed a senior official to sit on the DETI steering group that is considering the development of a new tourism strategy for the North.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her response. Given the current exchange rate, will the Minister and her Department encourage even more rural tourism in Northern Ireland? Will she also encourage the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to promote rural tourism in Northern Ireland even more?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I was doing that long before I became the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Some beautiful parts of the country are being vastly under-exploited when it comes to tourism. We are funding tourism measures through the rural development programme, and I am keen to hear from council clusters about any difficulties they are having in getting match funding. I want to be able to help to free up the money that is needed to match some of those projects.

I believe that rural tourism is vastly under-exploited and that a huge number of opportunities exist. We should encourage people to get out, enjoy and appreciate the beauty of the scenery that we have to offer.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister is aware that I have raised the issue of the benefits of mountain biking for tourism in Northern Ireland. I know that her Department is in discussions with Cookstown District Council about Davagh Forest; however, will the Minister detail what other ongoing discussions her Department has held to promote mountain biking in Northern Ireland and its tourism potential?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member knows, our forests have great potential to support the tourism agenda. My officials have been exploring that area of opportunity. We have held discussions with councils and the Forest Service, which has been a major partner in developing mountain-bike trails in Cam Forest. Those discussions were especially relevant to the forests within the signature project areas that the Tourist Board has identified.

Forest Service officials have been involved in discussions with the Tourist Board and other stakeholders about the contribution that forests can make and how that can best be delivered. We are forming

partnerships with other interested providers, such as councils, to better realise the opportunities available. I will ensure that that work continues, and I am happy to keep the Member informed as things develop.

I hope that some exciting projects can be found for mountain biking in forests.

Mr McClarty: The Minister will be well aware of the huge difficulties in obtaining planning permission for rural tourism developments. Will the Minister detail what actions she has taken, with the Minister of the Environment, to address that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member is correct; as a constituency MP, I am aware of the difficulties in obtaining planning permission in time to spend the funding that has been allocated within the parameters. That has come up in discussions between the Minister of the Environment and me. I shall continue to press on the need to front-load applications that come from Government funding to ensure that money at the end of a project is not wasted because of a difficulty such as planning permission.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline how tourism is encouraged at Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Loughs Agency has a statutory responsibility for the development of marine tourism and the promotion of the development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough for commercial and recreational purposes. I understand that the agency is about to receive a letter of offer for €4 million of INTERREG funding under its tourism measure. The industry will promote a number of key themes, including boating access and infrastructure, angling infrastructure, visitor facilities such as drying rooms, and effective marketing.

The Loughs Agency has also implemented the sustainable development fund to assist tourism development in 2008-09. It had a budget of £100,000 in each year and provided funding to two broad themes: the development of angling and of marine tourism. Many good things are happening at Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, and I hope that that is an added benefit to rural tourism projects.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn, and Mr McElduff is not in his place to ask question 9.

Food Supply

10. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department has done to improve the supply chain in the production of food.
(AQO 2740/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is no doubt about the need to support our agrifood industry to improve and develop the supply chain, and the need for increased producer knowledge and involvement in the food supply chain was highlighted in the industry's vision report of 2001. In response to that, my Department initiated the supply-chain awareness programme for farmers to improve knowledge of their respective supply chains. That included learning workshops and a series of visits to examine supply chains here and in other countries. Between 2003 and 2007, over 1,300 producers participated in that programme.

A further programme was put together to support farmers who wished to take the next step and become more active in building a new supply chain. Under the Fit for Market initiative, we piloted the supply-chain development programme with six groups of farmers. That demonstrated the benefits of the programme, and it has now been adopted into axis 1 of the rural development programme to be available to more farmers. In turn, that interfaces with the processing and marketing grant scheme, and the marketing and development grant scheme, to support market-led initiatives through financial support, capital costs and non-capital expenditure.

My Department is also working with farmers and processors to increase their capability to improve and strengthen their supply chains. We are supporting a three-year project with the University of Ulster to analyse the vast amount of market data that is available from the Tesco Clubcard database. My answer is quite long, so I will take a supplementary question.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that answer. Does her Department prevent duplicating the support that is available to the industry through Invest NI? If so, how does it do that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: All the support for the improvement of supply chains has been carried out with the co-operation and involvement of Invest NI, and much of it was co-ordinated through interdepartmental working groups that were set up to implement the recommendations of the Fit for Market study. That is monitored by the Food Strategy Implementation Partnership. After the completion of that partnership's work, new arrangements have been put in place between DARD and DETI to co-ordinate support to the agrifood industry.

An industry advisory panel, an interdepartmental working group and five interdepartmental project teams, including a supply-chain team, have been set up to facilitate formal arrangements by which DARD and Invest NI work together for the good of the local agrifood industry.

Those teams will continue to develop and deliver work that is instigated under the Fit for Market initiative.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

North/South Bodies

1. **Dr W McCrea** asked Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he has made of the effect of the Budget announced by the Government of the Republic of Ireland on the language and waterways North/South bodies. (AQO 2751/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): The implications of the supplementary Budget that was published in the Irish Republic in April 2009 on the North/South Language Body and Waterways Ireland are currently being considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by officials in my Department. The figures that have been published in the Irish Republic show that there has been a 10% reduction in funding for the North/South Language Body, which amounts to €1.84 million, and a 4% reduction in funding for Waterways Ireland, which amounts to €1.64 million, when compared against the 2008 out-turn figures.

As almost 94% of the North/South Language Body's funding in the Republic is directed towards Foras na Gaeilge, it appears to be suffering the major impact. However, budgets have not been agreed and, from my perspective, the priorities will be to deliver efficiencies from North/South bodies and to further reduce the funding disparity between Irish and Ulster Scots. Additionally, if current funding ratios are to be maintained, Northern Ireland's financial contribution to North/South bodies may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Dr W McCrea: Before I ask my supplementary question, I am sure that the Minister will join me in offering the family of Mark Young from Cookstown, who died after an incident at the North West 200, our deepest sympathy, while also praying earnestly that John Anderton from Antrim will make a speedy recovery and that his family will have comfort as they sit at his bedside during this difficult time.

What funding implications will the proposed cuts have for the two agencies of the North/South Language Body?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Of course, our thoughts and prayers are with the families who were affected by the incidents that took place at the North West 200. We hope that the injured biker will recover. We think of the relatives of the young biker who, sadly, on the first occasion of his taking part in the North West 200 lost his life.

Any revised amounts that are allocated to the two agencies must be agreed by the sponsor and the Finance Departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic. They must then be approved by Ministers at the North/South Ministerial Council's language sectoral meeting. Initial indications from the proposals that are currently under consideration are that the reduction in the Ulster-Scots Agency's budget will be in the region of 3% of its proposed budget figure. That equates to approximately £100,000. Initial indications for Foras na Gaeilge's budget, which is funded predominantly by my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, are that it could face a reduction in funding of between 8% and 9%. That equates to a reduction of in the region of €1.89 million against the draft budget.

Since I came to office, one of my objectives has been to eliminate the disparity in funding for Irish and Ulster Scots, just as it was for my predecessor. It is unfortunate that this is the route that may have to be pursued, but, nonetheless, the Republic has had to cut its cloth accordingly. That is a matter for its Government, who have made that decision. Northern Ireland must make a corresponding reduction. Therefore, the gap will narrow, although not in the way that we had anticipated.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I want to be associated with William McCrea's comments and extend my sympathy to the family of Mark Young.

Will the Minister provide assurance that any efficiency savings that are made will not impact on the operational effectiveness of Waterways Ireland or, indeed, the all-Ireland language body, An Foras Teanga, given the importance of their work?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can certainly assure the Member that my objective is to ensure that taxpayers in Northern Ireland, in particular, get value for money. We want to ensure that the incorporated savings do not impact on the front line service that the various bodies provide. However, we are in a different financial regime from the one that we were in 12 months ago, or two or three years ago, and we may have to curtail expenditure. We will do so in the appropriate way and minimise direct services to consumers.

As usual, the Member used language such as "all-Ireland bodies". I am not sure what that means. If he means bodies that are made up from bodies from this country and from the Irish Republic, I know exactly what he means, even if he has misappropriated the language. However, we intend to ensure that people receive value for money.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister assessed the financial cuts that are likely to be imposed on his Department after the Chancellor's announcement of £14 billion of efficiency savings for the period after 2011? Has he discussed that issue with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the rest of the Executive?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Discussions are ongoing on the implications of that announcement for a range of Departments, not only for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. We will discuss the issue with the Department of Finance and Personnel and have wider discussions with the Chancellor to minimise implications for people in Northern Ireland and to maintain the position in so far as it is possible.

Mr Attwood: The Minister's remarks are somewhat churlish. The Government in the other part of Ireland have given millions of pounds to the North and provided up to 85% of the funding for Waterways Ireland. I was waiting for the Minister to do a jig of delight at how the Southern economy is suffering and how the North will bear the financial consequences. Will he reassure the House that, in his conversations with the Irish Government, he will be mindful of their economic conditions and will leave no stone unturned to maximise the Irish Government's funding of Foras na Gaeilge, the Ulster-Scots Language Agency and Waterways Ireland? Will he punch his weight during those negotiations?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member is attempting to overreach himself. I must ensure that the delivery of the Department's functions, through arm's-length bodies and so on, ensures that value for money is accrued. I intend to secure value for money for the Ulster-Scots Language Agency and through our contribution to Foras na Gaeilge.

The honourable Member says that I am being churlish. I am not being churlish at all; I am merely reporting the factual position given to me by my counterpart in the Irish Republic. The Irish Government report that they have had to cut their cloth accordingly and reduce significantly the amount of money that they put into the North/South Language Body. We will have to do likewise. It is a case not of churlishness but of facing reality. We will do what we can to protect services and, as far as possible, to deliver the programmes that we have outlined. However, we must face that reality and not run away from it.

Sports Grounds: Safety

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his Department's proposals for

ensuring that spectator safety at sports grounds is not compromised. (AQO 2752/09)

6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department is taking to increase safety at sports stadiums. (AQO 2756/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 6 together.

In the first instance, responsibility for increasing safety at sports grounds and ensuring that it is not compromised rests with the owners and operators of those venues. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is currently taking forward a safety at sports grounds initiative. The aim of that is to encourage and assist owners and operators of major sports facilities to improve spectator safety at their grounds. As part of that initiative, the Department has introduced and is currently implementing new legislation on safety at sports grounds; that is, the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Furthermore, Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, has been running funding programmes designed to assist owners and operators of venues to improve spectator safety at their venues. Those include a stadia safety programme and, previously, an interim safe sports ground scheme.

In addition, I am in ongoing correspondence with Paul Goggins MP, Minister with responsibility for criminal justice in the NIO, about the introduction of complementary public order legislation to help combat spectator behaviour problems where they arise. DCAL officials have assisted the NIO with the development of draft proposals for legislation, and I have since written to Minister Goggins asking him to publish those for consultation as soon as is practicable. I understand from the NIO that a response will be provided shortly.

Mr Burns: Can the Minister tell us how much money is available to upgrade facilities at sports grounds? Does he not agree that the GAA county grounds, the Irish league football grounds and rugby grounds such as Ravenhill need a massive injection of cash immediately to get them up to the necessary standard?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can tell the Member that, in the past eight and a half years, Sport Northern Ireland has made available approximately £12.5 million since August 2000 to help clubs develop proposals and implement safety improvements at their grounds. There are a number of schemes in place, and I know of a range of applications that are currently being processed that will complement that total. It is work in progress that needs to continue, and I certainly intend to ensure that, in so far as we can, we will

develop grounds in which spectators can watch sport in safety and those participating can do so in safety.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister have any concept of the shortfall between the funding that is available and the amount of money that is needed to bring the grounds up to the required safety levels? Furthermore, can he give us a time frame or any indication of when we are likely to see some progress on the issue of the Football (Offences) Act 1991?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I do not have figures for the shortfall between what is available and what is required, because a number of stadia can be assisted by offering provision merely to eliminate relatively minor safety problems, whereas other grounds may have more major problems. The obvious example is Windsor Park, where there are safety considerations involving some aspects of the ground that are more significant than others. Work on what needs to be done is ongoing. I cannot provide the Member with a time frame, but I will obtain that and write to her, so that she can get a clear picture of when that is likely to be achieved.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate what proportion of his Department's overall safety-linked expenditure on football goes towards major league clubs and what proportion goes to local and community-based football teams? While I am on my feet, will he join me in congratulating Glentoran Football Club on lifting the Gibson Cup? I am sure that he trusts that Glasgow Rangers can emulate that achievement.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In relation to the latter part of the Member's question, I know that he is a long-standing Glentoran supporter, but he will understand that, as sports Minister, I must remain neutral.

Moving swiftly on, he has asked me to outline the breakdown of expenditure on major league grounds and how that compares with the smaller teams. I know that Sport Northern Ireland recently provided funding to Ballymena United, Cliftonville, Portadown and Donegal Celtic and to Gaelic football grounds in Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Antrim. The smaller grounds do not require such significant investments in safety, but Sport NI will be able to provide the Member with a comprehensive list that he can peruse at his leisure.

3.45 pm

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response about safety at sports grounds. Many of us have concerns about that issue, but does the Minister know whether there have been any major incidents or injuries at football grounds in the past few years?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question, which is pertinent in the context of some headlines that followed previous questions for oral answer. Unfortunately, discussions about spectator safety can cover anything from a faulty turnstile or light bulb to major problems with stands in which a significant number of people may be at risk. Some people in the media concentrate only on the major issues, for understandable reasons. I am not aware of any safety considerations at football grounds that have led to major accidents in recent years. However, that is not a cause for over-optimism in future. There are grounds in need of upgrading that have received money and will continue to receive money. We must ensure that maximum spectator safety is delivered and that participants play at grounds that have safety provisions built in.

Library Services

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department intends to ensure that there are high-quality long-term working relationships with the Department of Education with regard to the provision of library services. (AQO 2753/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has had a close working relationship with the Department of Education throughout the process of creating the new Northern Ireland library authority, which will now be known as Libraries NI. Those arrangements will continue into the future with the education and library boards and then the education and skills authority. Libraries NI is developing strategic partnerships with a number of organisations, and close working arrangements will continue for the delivery of the public and schools library service.

My officials are also working closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate on a learning strategy with the aim of developing innovative ways of supporting schools' delivery of the revised curriculum. Public libraries will continue to work with schools and school-age children through classroom visits, homework clubs and reading groups, to list just a few of the many services that are provided by public libraries.

Mr Dallat: I strongly welcome the Minister's reply. Does he agree with me that, considering the very high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy in Northern Ireland and particularly the 250,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 who have been failed by the education system, there must be the closest co-operation between the library service and the Department of Education? Furthermore, will he ensure that that service is available in all the towns and villages of Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The short answer is yes. Unfortunately, the library service is somewhat of a Cinderella service, and it is much overlooked. I highly recommend that honourable Members and the wider public visit their local library, because the traditional concept of a library has changed dramatically in the past five or six years. I know that change is on the agenda for the next few years as well. I concur fully with the honourable Member's remarks. There must be close co-operation between the new libraries authority and the schools. In addition, the "silver surfer" phenomenon has become a significant feature in libraries. Senior citizens are using libraries to obtain information and to pass their leisure time. Libraries have undergone significant developments for the benefit of all age groups, and I recommend that people use them. It is to be hoped that the progress that has been made will continue in the future.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide details of the smooth operation or otherwise of the voluntary redundancy scheme that was part of the formation of the library authority?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My understanding is that progress is being made on the transfer and on those who are facing redundancy. Obviously, salary payments must be adapted for those who are moving from their previous employer to continue working for the new employer. I understand that there are no significant outstanding difficulties and that the transition is reasonably smooth.

Mr T Clarke: What meetings has the Minister had with the Department of Education on the setting up of Libraries NI?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the financial year that has just ended, Libraries NI met the permanent secretary of DCAL and Department of Education officials to address all outstanding issues. Subsequent to that series of initial meetings, a further series of meetings took place between my Department and the Department of Education on a range of transfer matters. Of course, in the coming months, such meetings will continue until the process has been completed.

Football Grounds

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department and its associated bodies have done to support stadia improvements for football clubs in the past financial year and if there are plans to support improvements in this financial year. (AQO 2754/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The responsibility for stadia improvements at football clubs rests, in the first instance, with the owners of the

venues. However, Sport NI, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, has been running a number of programmes to which owners of football stadia are eligible to apply. Those include the stadia safety programme and the soccer strategy playing facilities programme.

In the past financial year, Sport NI has paid out more than £1.3 million from those programmes to, among others, Ballymena United Football Club, Cliftonville Football Club, Donegal Celtic Football Club and Portadown Football Club to assist with improvements to their stadia. For the current CSR period, DCAL has allocated £8.418 million for stadia safety. In this financial year, Sport NI is considering awarding £5.45 million, of which £3.85 million will be aimed at football stadia. Of course, that is subject to economic appraisals, statutory processes and the necessary approvals.

Furthermore, the Irish Football Association has launched a soccer strategy playing facilities programme to assist Irish league clubs to meet UEFA licensing and IFA Premiership and IFA Intermediate League facility requirements. Under that programme, Sport NI has issued provisional letters of offer totalling £3.47 million to 23 football clubs.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. When might the money that could be released this year be available to football clubs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am glad that the Member asked about the precise timing, because DCAL and Sport NI are considering five business cases that football clubs have submitted under the stadia safety programme. Subject to the completion of the necessary accountability and approval processes, I expect approval to be given to a number of those clubs in time for the beginning of the new football season. Institute Football Club and Ballymena United Football Club are two of the clubs that are at the forefront of the approval process.

Lord Browne: Will the Minister confirm that the necessary health and safety measures will be implemented at Windsor Park to ensure that international football is played there for the foreseeable future? I also take this opportunity to congratulate the other two Belfast clubs that lifted trophies recently; namely, Crusaders Football Club and Harland and Wolff Welders Football Club.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I sense that there will be a round of congratulations to all clubs as we come towards the end of the football season. There are a few other trophies yet to be won, not just in Northern Ireland. We shall see what the next week or so brings forth.

The Member rightly raises the issue of Windsor Park. It is imperative that we maintain and retain

international football in Northern Ireland for the Northern Ireland team. Someone told me that, since I came to office, Northern Ireland has been unbeaten in competitive games. That is good. I wish we could finish the rest of the qualifying campaign in the next couple of months, because then we could get through to the World Cup finals without any difficulty.

We need to ensure that Windsor Park is kept up to the necessary standard and that international football continues to be played there, so that we do not find ourselves in the position that we were in a few years ago, whereby Northern Ireland had to play its home games in either England or Scotland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn, and question 6 has been grouped.

Sports Funding

7. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to lobby the NIO to ensure that monies acquired from criminal assets recovery will be reinvested in sport.
(AQO 2757/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Issues pertinent to assets recovery and the redistribution of cash forfeiture receipts are a reserved matter and the responsibility of the Home Office in conjunction with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am aware, however, that recovered assets from both civil and criminal cases are returned to the Home Office, which retains half and returns the remaining half of the amount raised, net of costs, to the agency or agencies responsible for the recovery. That is known as incentivisation. Where a portion of the incentivisation funds are directed towards the community, it is clear that those funds are to be used to fund local crime-fighting priorities for the benefit of that community.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. In thanking the Minister for his answer, I wonder if he has had any contact with his counterpart in Scotland, the Minister for Public Health and Sport, who has an excellent scheme that uses all assets recovered from criminals to pour back into health projects. Does the Minister have any such plans for the future?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the Scottish scheme, and I will want to ensure that whatever is available elsewhere is no more generous than would be available in Northern Ireland. I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Public Health and Sport as this is a relatively new funding scheme, and I am told by the NIO that it is at a very early stage. I am happy to have such discussions.

All of us, whether Members, Ministers or members of the public, should do whatever we can to ensure that those who are engaged in crime cease to engage in it. We must do whatever we can to ensure that young people do not get involved in crime in the first place. If we can channel funds into providing opportunities, particularly sporting opportunities, to ensure that young people do not get involved in criminal activities, we should do so.

Mr McNarry: I note that the Member for Foyle who asked the previous question, who might know someone who might know some more, is not offering cash back from the proceeds of the Northern Bank robbery. It would substantially add to the criminal asset recovery funds if he or some of his friends were to come forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member keep to his question?

Mr McNarry: I am sorry if that upset you, Deputy Speaker. I will follow your instructions.

The Minister alluded to the CashBack for Communities programme in Scotland, which has benefited 38,000 young people and invested £11 million. Those behind the scheme negotiated for that money. Does the Minister agree that it would be worthwhile to attempt to negotiate a sum from the Northern Ireland Office for a similar scheme in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member and empathise with his views on all that we have to do and should keep doing to ensure that benefit is accrued, particularly but not exclusively for young people. We should do all we can to ensure that they do not get involved with paramilitary groups; and there are those who have some prior knowledge of that type of activity in a past life. Now that we have moved away from that and people have decided that that is not the route for them, we ought to ensure that no future generation does likewise.

As I said in my previous answer, I want to ensure that the Northern Ireland scheme is no less generous than the scheme in Scotland or any other similar scheme. At present, it is a reserved matter, but I am happy to have the discussions that will be required to ensure that, in helping people to stay away from crime, we get the best possible bang for our buck.

4.00 pm

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to Mr McNarry's lead-in to his question, were his comments about another Member appropriate? I ask the Speaker to check the record and return with a ruling. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Speaker will look at the Hansard report and will reply.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Restructuring of the Executive and Assembly

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months. — [Mr McNarry.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "supports" and insert

"improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government; recognises the need for new scrutiny and oversight arrangements in the Assembly to permanently pursue such ends; calls on the First and deputy First Minister to make a statement on their proposals for an Efficiency Review Panel; notes the review procedures set out in the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to provide for agreed changes to the institutions, including the size and structure of the Assembly and the institutional workings of the Executive; further notes the role of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in examining such matters; calls on that Committee to accelerate consideration of changes to the number of MLAs and the number of government Departments; and asks it to produce a report this year outlining proposals which respect the principles of proportional representation and inclusion." — [Mr Durkan.]

Mr Ross: One would be forgiven for thinking that there is a touch of déjà vu in Mr McNarry's motion, given that it was Members of the DUP who brought the issue to the House on 19 January 2009. However, Mr McNarry has been accused of recycling DUP speeches for his own use before, so it should be considered nothing new if he does the same with motions.

Mr McNarry's justification for tabling his motion was that the motion tabled by the DUP in January was a stunt. However, that does not hold much water, given that he has tabled exactly the same motion. Looking back at the debate on that motion on 19 January, it is interesting to note the comments of some Members from the Ulster Unionist Party, who spoke with scepticism and questioned the relevance of the motion. I am glad that those Members have changed their minds and are now, just a few months later, in full support of DUP policy.

Mr McNarry knows why we have an inflated Assembly. It is because of the role that his party played in creating a swollen number of Departments and in ensuring that there are 108 Assembly Members. That was not done for efficiency but so that the minor parties could be represented in the Chamber and Sinn Féin could be represented at the Executive table. Before devolution in 1998, the NIO was able to operate with only six Departments. Perhaps we should look at

that model of government and use it as a starting point when we consider the shape that reform should take in Northern Ireland.

From the outset, the Democratic Unionist Party opposed the structures that were set up as part of the Belfast Agreement, and it has maintained that position since it became the largest party in the Assembly. Just last week, we launched 'Driving forward a reform agenda', a document which outlines many of the structural changes that are required at Stormont, including a reduction in the number of Assembly Members to, perhaps, 54 or 72 and a reduction in the number of Departments to six or seven. However, perhaps we should take the process of slimming down the Executive in stages; we could start with eight Departments and work backwards. In addition, we have said that there should be an end to mandatory coalition, a streamlining of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, an end to the designation process and an end to the financial waste that is associated with certain North/South bodies, various quangos and the Civic Forum. When it comes to reform, it is the DUP that comes up with the ideas and policies.

I listened to Mr O'Dowd's comments earlier in the debate. Any reform agendas proposed by the DUP do not seek a return to single-party rule; there must be built-in protections for all minority communities and, if we are changing the designation system, there could be weighted-majority voting in the Chamber. It is important that we move to more democratic structures. With regard to the Equality Commission and other such quangos, we seek not to abolish all of their agendas but to bring them together for efficiency purposes.

At a time when we are moving forward with the RPA and reducing the number of councils across Northern Ireland, it is a good time to start looking at what we can do here. The reasons for such reform are twofold. First, the money that is saved can be redirected towards front line services. Secondly, we can come up with more streamlined, effective and efficient structures so that, for example, voluntary groups that are struggling to find funding do not have to go to three or four Departments and get shunted from one place to another.

Reform is also needed so that we have more consistent and structured planning within certain Departments, particularly the Department of Education. All Members will have dealt with voluntary and community groups that have had difficulties in finding the right Department to get funding from.

Education is a prime example. The Department of Education is responsible for a young person until he or she leaves school, but once they leave school they are the responsibility of the Department for Employment

and Learning. We should consider a single Department for lifelong learning similar to that in Scotland; most people would recognise that as a sensible way forward.

We can see examples of how other devolved institutions in the United Kingdom, in Cardiff or in Edinburgh, have slimmed down their Executives and how they organise their Departments. We heard earlier that the Welsh Assembly has 60 Members and the Scottish Parliament 129. Compared to the populations of those regions and the number of their elected representatives, Northern Ireland is massively over-represented. We need change.

We must welcome the intention to establish the efficiency review panel and the ongoing review of North/South bodies. At this time of tighter finances, it is important that the House send out the message that it supports reform and greater efficiency. This issue also presents a challenge for nationalist Members to examine genuinely some of the North/South structures and ask whether they provide value for money, particularly in the light of recent comments by the Irish Government about slimming them down.

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

Mr Ross: I support the motion but reject the amendment.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like my colleague John O'Dowd, I cast some scorn on the motion and the amendment; today's debate is a wee bit of a sham fight.

The Good Friday Agreement and the underpinning structures of these institutions contain the facility for the formal reviews about which Members have been speaking. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee includes the deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, one of whose members tabled the motion, and SDLP representation. Therefore, the parties that tabled the motion and the amendment are represented on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and are fully aware that that Committee, in its workload and forward planning, has already agreed to fulfil its remit by undertaking to review the institutions to which the motion and amendment refer. Moreover, OFMDFM recently announced the establishment of an efficiency review panel. Therefore, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP are fully aware that there already exists the wherewithal to carry out such a review. The matter was, as Members have said, well debated in the House not too long ago; therefore, Sinn Féin cannot see why the motion and its proposed amendment have been tabled today.

I want to reiterate some of John O'Dowd's comments. All parties had the opportunity in the review of public administration and the reform of local government to cut back on bureaucracy in the interests

of efficiency and effectiveness — underpinned by equality and community balance — but they failed to do so. There remains in the RPA the clear need and ability to review and downsize the number of quangos. In every debate on this matter in recent years, Members regularly referred to the number of quangos or unaccountable bodies as some might call them. Yet we have never managed the type of cull that is required for a number of those agencies and groups. That is work that we need to undertake, and it is within the remit of the review of public administration. It is being spearheaded under the tutelage of the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, but all parties are involved through the strategic leadership board. Therefore, all parties have had the opportunity and will continue to have the opportunity to ensure that they maximise and put into practice all the demands and assertions that they are making here again today. I have heard plenty of demands but no commitments.

The leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, whose party tabled an amendment to the motion, said that his party had raised the idea of taking away one of the existing Departments, instead of creating an additional Department to facilitate the transfer of justice powers. However, that proposal was never made in my time. No Member or party put that proposal to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee before it produced its latest report, which was endorsed by the Assembly.

Some Members said that they want to make proposals, and they outlined a number of them, such as approaching the Boundary Commission to seek a reduction in the number of elected representatives. However, those proposals have not been formally made by any party. We talk about reducing the number of MLAs, cutting back on the number of Departments, quangos and so on, but not one proposal has been put before the Committee to back any of that up.

John O'Dowd made the point that we are in the mouth of an election. Parties want to hear themselves talking and to be seen to place issues on the agenda as though they are trying to do something about them. However, when they have had the opportunity to do something about such issues, they have failed miserably.

We are not wedded to any number of Departments, and we are strongly committed to ensuring that the institutions are efficient and effective. However, those institutions were built on the basis of ensuring that we have a participative democracy and that we have inclusion. That is why we have the number of MLAs per constituency that has served us well so far. Nevertheless, we are fully prepared to see through the review in a non-prescriptive manner.

Mr Poots: We are living in an era when the public are demanding change, and the House needs to take on board what the public are saying. Everything that has

happened in the past few weeks has brought the public's focus and attention to issues around politics and how it works. We have stated for some time how this place could work better and how we could do a better service for the public at a lower cost. Ultimately, it would be a notable achievement if we could arrive at the point at which we are delivering a better service to the public at a lower cost. Many of the proposals that have been set out indicate how that can be done.

At St Andrews, many of the unsavoury aspects of the Belfast Agreement were amended until we reached a situation in which we had a means of taking matters forward, but the task is not complete; there is still work to be done. I do not think that a mandatory coalition is the way forward. Although that arrangement may serve us temporarily, ultimately we need to work towards bringing the process to a conclusion, to the point at which we have normality and a voluntary coalition that can represent a broad scope of the community in Northern Ireland without being exclusive.

There is also work to be done to make government more efficient. I recall wondering why there was a need for 108 MLAs when I first read the Belfast Agreement. However, it was obvious that the system was designed to get as many people as possible from as many backgrounds as possible into the Assembly. There were parties such as the Women's Coalition, the UDP and the PUP, but the only party that remains in the Assembly is the Progressive Unionist Party. The other parties have been dealt with by the electors, who have said that they do not want those parties to represent them. Therefore, there is no point in having additional seats to bring those people into this forum — they cannot get elected even with those extra seats.

The Civic Forum was a laughing stock, and I have heard people from various parties attempt to defend it for some time. The Civic Forum had no credibility, and it will have no credibility in the future if we are foolish enough to re-establish it. However, I do not believe that that will happen. Many of the North/South bodies have demonstrated themselves to be fairly ineffective, and I do not believe that we can continue putting in the sort of money that is going to those bodies unless they are more effective and can deliver for people. We cannot have them just for the sake of having them. That would be a political decision, and that is not acceptable.

Then, of course, there were the 10 Departments. Many of us were aghast when we moved from six to 10 Departments. Was that done for the public's benefit, or was it a political carve-up by the two main parties of the time, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP? Of course it was political carve-up.

4.15 pm

Ten years later, I am glad that the Ulster Unionists have woken up, smelt the coffee and realised, "Oh,

we've got this wrong; in fact, we've got it badly wrong." Ulster Unionist Members are now jumping on to the DUP bandwagon, on which they are very welcome, by acknowledging that we must have more efficient government.

I know that David McNarry was around at that time, for I often saw him and David Trimble together. When the designers tell the Assembly that what they designed is wrong, is bad and is no longer fit for purpose — I see that designer David is shaking his head — it is reasonable to conclude that the DUP got it right at the time. With the Ulster Unionists on board, we need others to join us, including the SDLP, by admitting that they also got it wrong and by starting to deliver more efficient government for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: Does the Member recognise that it is not only Ulster Unionist MLAs who now support DUP policy? Some of the party's members in North Down are leaving the Ulster Unionist Party to join the DUP.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be allowed an extra minute.

Mr Kennedy: What about Jim Allister?

Mr Poots: Thank you very much. Those Ulster Unionists will always be very welcome. Mr Kennedy asks, "What about Jim Allister?". I suggest that he will be making that comment again in a few weeks' time. However, we will wait and see. The electorate will have the opportunity to consider that issue.

We cannot continue to argue for 108 Members. I look to Sinn Féin, which appears quite defensive about changing anything here in case it undermines some of its political agenda. However, we cannot tell the public that 108 MLAs are required. That argument cannot be made to the public. I declare here today that I am prepared to go into an election in which there are fewer seats for MLAs in my constituency, and if I lose my seat, so be it. For the sake of the general public, we must plan to reduce the number of MLAs.

We must also challenge the Civil Service, which is grossly overmanned. In particular, we must reduce its middle management. How can we challenge the Civil Service when the Assembly is overmanned in the first place? For MLAs to vote to reduce their numbers is like turkeys voting for Christmas. Nonetheless, that is what must be done in the wider public interest.

Mr Elliott: It is interesting that this debate follows the discussion on health, in which I was pleased that the Minister gave another assurance of his commitment to free personal care for the elderly. That has been an Ulster Unionist Party commitment for some time and one on which it has delivered. More delivery is required of this Government. Let it be clear: we will not get delivery by sitting on our hands. We can all

shout back and forward in the Chamber, but what we really want is practical, working politics.

When we consider the motion that my colleague Mr McNarry tabled, we must look back at the St Andrews Agreement. We hear all the talk about the Belfast Agreement, but look back to the more recent St Andrews Agreement. The opportunity to make various changes at that time was not taken. Yes, we were promised a review panel. A press release from OFMDFM in April stated that proposals on the appointment of that panel would be brought to this place after Easter. I suppose that OFMDFM remains within that timescale, because it is still after Easter. However, we are almost in the summer, so it may come about after the summer. We must have more than a statement that outlines a vague timescale. We must have real proposals. We must see the panel appointed, up and running and delivering.

We must have efficiencies. Members badger our Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the Chamber about efficiencies that, given more money, he would not be required to find. The only way to get to that position is by starting to make changes in this place. I hear Members who have been here for years saying that that is their policy, but they have not done much about it up until now. Therefore, it is time that we all got real and started making the necessary changes.

We are also aware that, while other Departments and their budgets are being squeezed, the number of staff in OFMDFM has increased hugely since the two larger parties took over two years ago.

It is unfortunate that the SDLP tabled its amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party will not support it. I ask the SDLP to reconsider and to support our motion, which I believe is real and practical. We all want the efficiency review panel to report within six months. Is there anybody here who does not want that? I hope and trust that the SDLP will help us.

We also need real, practical government. I am sometimes fed up with the "we cannot do it because" attitude, which means that somebody has blown the dust off a four-year-old consultation report and highlighted a paragraph to a Minister that states that the matter in question cannot be addressed. We must have a system that is about real politics and about people here making decisions that help and support people. That is what was expected of us when we were elected, and it is what we have to deliver.

Sometimes, it is very unfortunate that, because we or, indeed, the Senior Civil Service cannot make decisions, we pay a fortune to have a consultation report done. If we are to stand for election, we have to be big enough to make the necessary decisions and get

on with life. The business world is screaming for us to get on, do the work and make those decisions.

I have not always been critical of the Civil Service, but I have had my day. The practical reality is that decisions have to be made. Some career civil servants and people who work in government have never lived in the real world. A person should not reach the Senior Civil Service unless they have served in the private sector for four years. That would ensure that they know what the real world is about.

I ask Members to get behind our motion and to let us move on with good government.

Mr O'Loan: The first question is: why did the Ulster Unionist Party table the motion today? Surely the answer is to do with recent DUP comments about and proposals on this issue; the Ulster Unionists feel that getting a slice of that action would be beneficial to them.

When we are considering an issue such as this, it is important that it is approached seriously. The motion does not do that. It is simplistic and incomplete. It does not do justice to the seriousness of the issue. That is the reason why we produced a substantial amendment and the reason why we cannot support the motion.

In many ways, the motion is a surrogate for recent DUP views. My criticisms of the motion apply even more to the plethora of recent DUP comments about this issue. I will say something about the technical weakness of the DUP arguments in a moment, but I will first talk about the reason that the DUP has made such comments recently. Very often, the reason is more important than the detail and tells us a good deal more about the current state of politics and what could come out of that situation. There are real dangers in the way that the DUP is presenting the debate.

The first reason that the DUP is presenting its case is to try to divert the public from far more pressing issues, such as the fact that it is failing to deliver on the vital issue of economic change. It has been mentioned that an election is coming up in a couple of weeks. It is hardly a coincidence that so much of this talk is recent. The DUP wants to pretend that the focus on apparent efficiency makes a major contribution to improving our economic state or that it is at least a signal of what the party would describe as moving in the right direction. That is a false lesson, and I hope that the public will not be fooled by it.

My second criticism is that underlying the philosophy of cutting the number of MLAs and Departments is a belief that somehow Northern Ireland can be made into a normal place. My response to that is that Northern Ireland is not and cannot ever be a normal place. Mechanisms have been created with great difficulty and considerable pain over many years.

Mr Ross: On the Member's first point that it is a recent conversion that has led the DUP to push the subject for electoral purposes, does he not concede that it has in fact been Democratic Unionist Party policy for the past 10 years? When the Belfast Agreement established the Assembly, we said that the institution was inflated and needed to be reduced in size, and that message has been consistent.

On the Member's second point about the number of MLAs, does he not recognise that Northern Ireland is far over-represented compared with anywhere else in the world? That needs to change if we are really to take the Assembly seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute.

Mr O'Loan: If the DUP were serious about making changes, it has had two years in which to deliver them. The party has had it fully within its legal powers to bring measures to the Assembly before now, yet it has not done so.

We have created mechanisms to deal with a very complex society; one that contains very real and deep tensions. Nobody should believe for a moment that those tensions can be eradicated by tinkering with the structures. Let me voice an alternative approach, which is to stop worrying so much about tinkering with the structures and to focus more on making those structures work. If Members read our amendment, they will see precise methods that would make those structures work even better. Such an approach would make a big difference to the way in which much of the business is conducted here.

I must comment on the technical weakness of the DUP case. Nigel Dodds states that cutting the number of MLAs and Departments will save £40 million to £50 million. I am amazed at the extent to which that figure has been bought without thought by so many Members. Cutting the number of MLAs to 72 would save the sum of £4 million a year or perhaps a little more if the offices at Stormont and so on were taken into account. Joining together Departments does not necessarily save money, unless things are done consequently. However, those things could be done anyway without the need to join together Departments. In our recent document, the SDLP advocated ways in which we might save considerable sums of public money. The argument for reducing the number of MLAs and Departments comes from a lead party in the Assembly that runs three economic policy units yet has not thought to eradicate that bit of complexity. That really shows where the DUP is coming from.

Some gains can be made from having a larger number of Departments. If they are run properly, greater opportunities arise for the public, key groups and individuals to interface with our Ministers, and

that is what the public are looking for from a working Assembly. That is something that we should value and make work. Of course, change will be needed in due course, but, in the meantime, do not simply create a smokescreen around the issue, which is what this debate largely does. When change is made, do not throw out the baby with the bathwater but ensure that our Government remain fully inclusive; otherwise, the Government still have the potential to collapse. If the DUP is serious about making government more efficient, set that in the much broader context of public sector reform. Restructuring the Executive and the Assembly is only one aspect of public sector reform, and, arguably, it is neither the most urgent nor has it the most potential for real gain.

Mr Attwood: The essential difference between what the SDLP amendment proposes and what the UUP motion proposes is political ownership of the agenda of efficiency and effectiveness to produce a proper political way forward. Our method is more rounded and more balanced and will produce a fairer outcome. The Ulster Unionist motion puts all the eggs in one basket, and that basket is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Members should warn themselves against adopting that mechanism. There are two or three reasons for my saying that. One reason is that the temptation in OFMDFM, as Members have seen in too many instances over the past two years, has been to act in a partisan or partial way. The temptation to do so in respect of this issue will manifest itself in due course as well.

4.30 pm

If Members do not believe in that argument, they should accept that it is folly to believe the notion that OFMDFM will come forward with proposals within the next six months, as proposed in the motion. Members should consider the facts. In two years, OFMDFM has failed to present proposals on a range of high-profile and important issues around victims, sharing and cohesion. Furthermore, in the past two weeks, we have heard two Ministers — one from the DUP and one from the Ulster Unionist Party — say that, once again, things are getting held up in OFMDFM, and Executive business is not getting turned over. Even the UUP's Health Minister is saying that he cannot get OFMDFM and the Executive to sign off important proposals. Why, therefore, should we give OFMDFM more authority on an issue around which there could be all sorts of mischief-making?

DUP Members made some interesting observations, but I was astounded that Simon Hamilton and the other DUP Members who spoke missed the obvious irony of today's debate. It is four months to the day since the DUP motion on reducing the number of Departments was passed, but OFMDFM has been so inefficient that

it has not moved forward with the membership of the proposed efficiency review panel. The irony of that should not escape anyone.

I agree with my colleague Mr O'Loan. What worries me as much as anything about the DUP's ambitions is its attempt to reconfigure the equality, human rights and wider issues in Northern society. When it was fully developed, our conflict revolved around issues of law, order and justice. Unfortunately, a small number of people in state organisations and in terror groups took that difference to the point of murder and mayhem.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. We have learned from our 30-year experience about how to create a balance of institutional safeguards and mechanisms to protect equality, human rights and policing and justice arrangements, and if the DUP proposes to unpick all that — under the guise of efficiency and effectiveness — it does so at some peril. Those institutions, which can work better, are a consequence of our conflict that revolved around those rubbing points, and the DUP needs to be cautious in looking at that.

I want to reserve my final comments for Sinn Féin.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Apparently, I will not be given extra time if I give way during a winding-up speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You will, Mr Attwood.

Mr Attwood: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Poots: The Member said that the original agreement was based around law, order and justice. However, at that time, one could be in Government and not support law and order. In fact, punishment beatings were being perpetrated by the IRA while a Sinn Féin Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was in post. It was at the DUP's insistence that parties had to support law and order before they could enter Government. That is the difference between now and then.

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

Mr Attwood: I do not walk away from some of the consequences of what the Member has said. My point is that our national conflict revolved around issues of law, order and justice. At any one time during the conflict, the rubbing points were disputes, differences and divisions about how law, order and justice were — or were not — administered in the North. Look at parades, our courts and the kangaroo courts of the IRA and others. They were the rubbing points of our conflict, and the institutional arrangements of the Good

Friday Agreement were meant to resolve that and, for all their inefficiencies, they have contributed to that.

John O'Dowd said that Sinn Féin would oppose any measures to undermine the entitlements of the Good Friday Agreement. How hollow does that sound? Sinn Féin has conceded the entitlement of the Good Friday Agreement and d'Hondt in its proposal for a justice Minister, and it conceded the entitlements of ministerial authority through its sell-out to the DUP at St Andrews.

When people hear that sort of language, they know that Sinn Féin says one thing —

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

Mr Attwood: — but does something absolutely different.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up the debate on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. It has been interesting to listen to the pre-election gambits of the various representatives. Nonetheless, the motion was brought forward as a serious proposal, and I welcome the fact that, at least, we have all had an opportunity to air our views on it.

I will deal first with Members' contributions. Obviously, Mr Durkan thinks that the SDLP amendment has more merit than the motion. From my party's point of view, the proper focus has to remain on the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their Department. Having made announcements, they should bring forward proposals as they have promised. The SDLP amendment seeks only to confuse people and to throw in, at this stage, additional issues that are not helpful.

Mr Hamilton from the Democratic Unionist Party said that it had always been the DUP's view that it was a lone voice in calling for the number of MLAs and Departments to be reduced. It seemed strange that although he mentioned the various reforms through which the DUP had effected savings and caused public expenditure to be reduced, the one issue that he did not mention was the appointment of four victims' commissioners. That seemed to increase public expenditure, rather than reduce it. However, I am sure that he will address that oversight at some stage.

Mr O'Dowd was unconvinced by the arguments and took a cynical view on why we were talking about the issue today. He promised us that no changes would be made to the Good Friday Agreement as Sinn Féin saw it, and we have heard the SDLP view on that.

I am grateful to Naomi Long for indicating that the Alliance Party supports the motion. She said, rightly, that the original conditions were designed to meet the political needs of the time. However, nothing lasts forever, and the law of the Medes and Persians does not apply here. Changes can come.

I am glad to see that Mr Ross is in his place. Until he spoke, he seemed to be the only person in the House, if not in Northern Ireland, who believed that there was no connection whatsoever between the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement and that the architecture, somehow, had been changed fundamentally as a result of what the DUP did — or some would say, failed to do — as part of the St Andrews Agreement. His contribution today could best be described as being on election message; it did not represent hard reality.

Mr Alex Maskey reinforced the view given earlier by Mr O'Dowd. He even mentioned the sham fight. As someone who attends the sham fight in Scarva every year, I have yet to see Mr Maskey witness it. Nevertheless, it was interesting that he mentioned it. He also mentioned the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and he seemed somewhat irked that that Committee had not been given responsibility for looking at the issues.

Mr Poots acted as a cheerleader for Mr Ross's earlier contribution. The world began at St Andrews as far as the DUP is concerned. Nobody else did anything of any substance before that. Mr Poots said that turkeys in this place could be voting for Christmas and, in the cold reality of day, it will be interesting to see whether that will ever happen.

Mr Elliott brought a sense of proportion back to the debate and reminded us that this place ought to be about delivery and the practical working of politics — real politics and not some of the airy-fairy stuff in the political bubble and froth that we hear and deal with.

I am glad that Mr O'Loan is in his place. I was concerned about one particular section of his contribution where he said that Northern Ireland:

“cannot ever be a normal place.”

I think that I have quoted him accurately. That is entirely the wrong attitude for any Member. We are all here to make Northern Ireland a better place. We are certainly in a better place than that from which we have come, and we look forward in a constructive way. The negative view expressed by Mr O'Loan was a matter of regret, and I hope that he will address it.

Mr Attwood said that it was a matter of political ownership and that the SDLP amendment would be much better and more balanced. However, the Ulster Unionist Party believes that the focus remains, and should remain, with the two parties that currently lead the Executive. They have promised us proposals; let us examine those proposals and keep the focus more narrow at this stage.

Last week, the deputy First Minister called his colleague the First Minister's proposals for cutting Government waste “shallow electioneering”. It would

appear that the deputy First Minister is correct — and he does not often receive praise from me. The Ulster Unionist Party, in its partnership with the Conservative Party, is the only party that can enact real change in the areas that the First Minister was talking about. It is only on the national stage — the United Kingdom stage, of which we are all a part — that we can bring down the cost and size of Government and make a difference to tax bills. The First Minister will realise that in about a year's time.

Of course, the First Minister does not have to do anything about the pledges that he makes now. He can, it seems, quite safely make sweeping statements about all manner of things in relation to Governments and quangos, safe in the knowledge that Sinn Féin will not let him do it. Such grandstanding and headline-grabbing are the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Unionist Party. It is not a party of responsibility but one of cynical political advantage.

My friend the Minister of Health has shown that the Ulster Unionist Party is committed to making and delivering firm policy commitments, including the abolition of prescription charges. We are serious about considering the issue of reducing the size of Government structures, which is why the motion calls for the efficiency review panel to appear from the haze in OFMDFM.

We have not been grandstanding with nonsense figures such as £50 million of savings. We know, and are prepared to say, that any savings will be nothing like that. If the number of MLAs were cut to 72, it would, as we have heard already, save only £4 million. The Finance Minister is staring into a black hole, and having slightly fewer MLAs would provide him with mere pocket money, not the real savings that he has to make. We want to consider reducing the number of MLAs because it is the right thing to do, not because it will solve all our financial problems — it will not.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months.

Adjourned at 4.45 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Department for Regional Development: Corporate Plan 2009-11 and Business Plan 2009-10

Published at 1pm on 18 May 2009

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members of the publication of the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Corporate Plan 2009-11 and Business Plan 2009-10.

The Corporate Plan recognises that times have changed and that we are facing very significant economic pressures. It outlines how we will face the challenges this presents and continue to improve the quality of life for all by investing in Roads, Public Transport and Water and Sewerage services.

The Business Plan details our targets for 2009-10 as we work towards delivering our longer-term Public Service Agreement targets and other commitments set out in the Programme for Government 2008-11.

The plans are available for viewing on the DRD internet site at www.drdni.gov.uk. Hard copies of the plan are available from the Library. Additional copies can be obtained by contacting the Department's Strategic Planning Branch on (028) 9054 0930.

