
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 20 October 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Programme-led Apprenticeships

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement regarding programme-led apprenticeships.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): During a debate on 22 June, I announced that I would introduce a new programme-led apprenticeship aimed at school-leavers as a further intervention measure in light of the recession. That announcement was prompted by the declining jobs market and the strong indications that school-leavers would be exceptionally hard hit. The unemployment trends over the summer have confirmed those fears. Failure to address the issue would have presented further problems in subsequent years, such as the assignment of many young people to the not in education, employment or training category and gaps in the skills pool when the recession ends and growth begins.

In the lead-up to that announcement, and since then, I was aware that there has been considerable interest by Members and some industry sectors in how programme-led apprenticeships would impact on employers and the traditional and preferred employer-led apprenticeship model. In making this statement, I want to say up front that this intervention was not a knee-jerk reaction, but a measured response that added to earlier interventions that I had put in place. The new temporary provision secures apprenticeship training.

ApprenticeshipsNI, the employer-led provision, must always be the preferred option. It is our best training model, but it requires the continued support of employers. In the past year, we have seen a number of employers that have, historically, run apprenticeship programmes — such as Northern Ireland Electricity, Bombardier, Wrightbus and companies in the electrical sector — postponing their annual intake or reducing it

significantly. That is why I had to take action to introduce an alternative measure to the employer-led route.

A programme-led apprenticeship does not mean a lesser or second-tier qualification; it offers quality training and the same level of qualification as the employer-led route.

Programme-led apprentices will spend more time with the training organisation, and a strong emphasis will be placed on skills training in a simulated work environment. Time spent in the real work environment will be in the form of a one day a week work placement, with an opportunity for a block placement of six to eight weeks during the summer.

Training will follow the same apprenticeship framework, and it will allow for a seamless progression to the employer-led route should the young person secure employment at any time during their training. Similarly, if an employed apprentice who is under 18 is made redundant, they can join the programme-led route to continue their training.

The new provision will involve an additional cost to the Department of approximately £6.3 million. To have used that money for a wage-subsidy scheme that was to be paid directly to employers would have drawn in issues such as European Union regulations on state aid, and it could have displaced existing higher-paid jobs. Therefore, the funding is targeted at the individual, not the employer.

In a pre-prepared statement that I gave to the House, I included enrolment figures for the scheme up to 6 October 2009. I now have updated figures that show that in the period from the scheme's inception on 7 September 2009 to 19 October 2009, a total of 2,763 trainees enrolled. Those figures demonstrate clearly both the scale of the demand for the training and the potential problems that could have arisen had I not acted. The young people involved have voted with their feet in very large numbers.

Had I not introduced the programme now, provision would still have been made under the existing Training for Success pre-apprenticeship scheme. However, some 2,000 trainees from last year would have been due to leave that scheme with limited job prospects. Programme-led apprenticeships will extend those apprentices' training for a further year, allowing them to complete a full level 2 apprenticeship framework.

In addition to the 2,763 programme-led apprentices who have enrolled since 7 September 2009, most of the pre-apprenticeship intakes from last year have now signed up to complete their second year of training under the programme-led scheme. That means that over 4,700 apprentices are now participating in the scheme.

Some of the arguments that have been made against the initiative are that we are overtraining apprentices, that there will be too many young people trained with too few jobs for them to move into and that too many young people will not be trained to the correct level for some sectors. However, what would the alternative have been? Is it not better to have a pool of young people who are equally equipped to compete for the jobs when they come, rather than to have unskilled young people with few or no qualifications or experience?

Those young people will also be well on track to attain a higher skill level, as required by their employer, when they begin work. The employer-led programme will assist with that training.

I accept that in the lead-up to announcing the programme-led apprenticeship scheme, discussions with the industry sectors could have been more complete. However, I also recognise that the scheme could never meet all the demands of all the sectors. In responding to social issues such as this, there will always be tension. In this case, that tension was between the needs of the young school-leavers and the business needs of the employers. However, the House should be assured that departmental officials will continue to work with employers and their representatives. Hopefully, Members will appreciate that the new provision meets social and economic needs, as it goes a long way to meet the requirements of employers while protecting the Northern Ireland skills base for when we emerge from the recession.

I am content that the programme-led apprenticeship scheme will provide opportunities for young people to follow their chosen careers, to acquire relevant qualifications and to be exposed to the world of work. It will produce young people who will be experienced, qualified and ready to meet the needs of employers when the eventual upturn in the economy arises.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I had a meeting with the Minister just over two weeks ago, at which we discussed some of the issues and concerns that had been brought to my attention. I suggested to the Minister that if he made a statement to the Assembly, that would allow other Members to ask questions, as there is some confusion out there, and nobody is better placed to answer those questions than the Minister.

The Minister said that he is responding to social issues and the economic downturn, and we have all had to respond to the recession in different ways. Does he envisage any scenario in which programme-led apprenticeships will last beyond the current economic downturn? I understand that the programme-led apprenticeship scheme is at capacity, and the Minister

has given amended figures in his statement. However, when does he believe that the numbers will level off, or have they already levelled off? Is there a danger that the scheme will need to be expanded because of the possibility of more apprentice redundancies?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The scheme is a response to the current economic downturn. We have undertaken to keep it under review, and it will be reviewed at least annually. I believe that the numbers are levelling off. From 6 to 19 October, approximately 100 extra apprentices signed up for the programme-led apprenticeship. We are pretty well reaching the stage at which it is too late for people to enrol, because if they enrol now, they will have missed a substantial amount of the programme. Therefore, the numbers are levelling off. However, we had always estimated that there would be provision for between 2,500 and 3,000 places. The figure of approximately £6.3 million for the cost of the scheme was based on having around 3,000 apprentices in post by this stage.

I can confirm to the Chairperson that we said that we would keep the situation under continuous review, because it is a response to a particular set of circumstances. I know that the Committee has argued consistently — as have others — that the best way forward is to go down the employer-led route, and I agree. However, the employer-led route means that an apprentice must have a contract of employment and, in effect, be an employee. We all know that some of our major companies either have failed to recruit apprentices this year or have drastically reduced their numbers. Therefore, what were we to do with the young people? We have more than 4,700 young people in a good programme. If we had done nothing, those 4,700 young people would be out there somewhere. Although the situation is not ideal or perfect, we are in a far better scenario than had we sat back and done nothing.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Buchanan): I welcome the Minister's statement and his reassurance that programme-led apprenticeships offer the same quality of training and the same qualifications as employer-led apprenticeships. There was some concern that that was not the case, so I welcome his reassurance.

Will the Minister outline any other options that he considered in response to the rise in apprentice redundancies before he went down the programme-led apprenticeships route? Now that there has been time to consult on the programme-led apprenticeship scheme, will the Minister inform the House whether those who were sceptical about the scheme at the time have now bought into it?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The answer to the Member's last question is that people's

scepticism has, to some extent, been assuaged. Some organisations felt that the scheme would lead to a significant reduction in standards. There is a difference between the two schemes. The employer-led scheme means that an apprentice would spend far more time on a practical job with an employer.

The programme-led scheme, on the other hand, involves the provision of a simulated working environment, which could be in a college or with another training provider. There is no doubt that the better of the two options is for an apprentice to be with an employer in the actual work environment. The programme-led scheme is the next best possible scenario to that.

10.45 am

Let me be clear: the qualifications that the apprentices will be seeking are fully accredited. An apprentice will gain a qualification that is fully accredited and fully recognised; however, the amount of time spent on placement with an employer will be substantially less. That is the essential difference between the two schemes. I would much prefer the scheme to be with an employer, but in circumstances where employers are not taking on apprentices, or are drastically reducing the number of apprentices that they are taking on, what alternatives are open? That is the dilemma that we faced earlier in the year.

The Member asked what other options were considered. We were lobbied, and the suggestion was made that the Department should give a subsidy to employers to maintain or take on apprentices. However, once state money is given to companies, it opens up a Pandora's box of European interventions. For example, if we are subsidising someone's wages, questions will be asked about whether it is state aid. It would open us up to all sorts of issues, and, in fact, it is quite possible that those subsidies would be challenged by the European Commission. Quite frankly, in some cases, we would have a hard job standing up to the criticism. We took the view that we should concentrate our resources on the individual, not on the company, and on the employee, not the employer. By doing that we avoid all the European issues that could trip us up.

There have also been other interventions, including the establishment of Skillsafe, which is designed to help an existing apprentice who, for instance, may be put on short time by an employer. Through that scheme, the Department will take up the slack for one or two days by paying that apprentice at least the minimum wage and providing free training during the time that they are working short time. There has not been a large take-up of that scheme, but those who are availing themselves of it find it helpful. We considered a series of interventions and felt that, on balance, the programme-led scheme offered the best option,

without our having to tangle with the European Commission and get into all sorts of arguments there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Rev Dr Bob Coulter, and in doing so I add my congratulations on his important milestone, which takes him a little bit outside the range of the apprenticeship scheme.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Having been an apprentice at one stage, very long ago, I appreciate your kind words today.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and congratulate him on the time and energy that he has given to solving the problem. Will the curriculum for the programme-led apprenticeship scheme be designed and governed by the industry, and not by remote academics?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I do not know whether the Member is speaking in his capacity as a remote academic. I repeat the point: some industry representative bodies have expressed concern to the Department, the Committee and other Members that somehow, by going in this direction, we would be diminishing apprenticeships in some way. However, when one examines what those organisations have been saying, we see that they are dramatically reducing the number of apprentices that they were going to take on. We have a dilemma. I want employers to take the lead in providing apprenticeships — we all want that — but the employers simply were not providing the places.

The unemployment rates for young people in the UK as a whole are far higher than the national average. In other words, a huge slice of unemployment is concentrated in the younger age group — under the age of 24 — and Northern Ireland is no different. Therefore, the problem had to be resolved by providing people in that age group with work. In the UK, growing numbers of people are classified as "NEETs" — young people not in education, employment or training — although the problem is not quite as bad in Northern Ireland as it is in other regions.

Our measure has taken 4,700 of the young people who might not otherwise have had anything and put them in a simulated work environment in which they can work towards obtaining an accredited qualification. No matter how one looks at it, that is a far better scenario than those people being unable to get a job in the current circumstances.

I accept the argument that, to some extent, we are shielding them from the labour market for at least a year. As I said, people in the pre-apprenticeship programme have now moved on to the programme-led scheme, so many young people are now part of that scheme. An upturn will be needed after a year so that those in the pre-apprenticeship scheme who have moved on to the employer-led scheme can seek their

qualification at the end of the current year. It is my hope that, by that stage, the economic recovery will have started.

We will review the scheme, and I assure the Member that we are doing everything that we can to ensure that a high-quality training regime is in place. All schemes will be subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate. There will be no half measures; the regime that is in place to produce quality will remain exactly as it should, subject to full inspection by the inspectorate.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for coming to the House with such a detailed report, and I hope that programme-led apprenticeships are a success. I understand that the training organisations that are part of the Training for Success scheme are saying that placement levels are as low as 25%. Can the Minister, therefore, explain how he hopes to engage with and encourage employers that are not normally associated with apprenticeship schemes, such as employers in the public sector and in the community and voluntary sector? What is the real incentive for employers to become involved?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department continuously engages with employers. During our contact with employers earlier this year, it became obvious that many of them were going to stop taking on apprentices completely, or at least drastically reduce their numbers. Some excellent apprenticeship schemes are run by some of the best employers in Northern Ireland. The Department received that news some months ago, and we were very concerned.

The Member asked whether the public sector could be encouraged to be associated with apprenticeship schemes. The public sector employs a huge slice of the workforce, and, therefore, it is appropriate that it starts to pull its weight by providing apprenticeships. I have written to ministerial colleagues, and we are at an advanced stage of negotiation with other Departments. We are getting a positive response, not only from the Departments but from non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and other agencies.

I believe that, because of the positive response that we have been receiving from Departments, apprenticeships in the public sector will be provided as soon as possible. That means, I hope, that a new avenue will open up to people. The Department for Employment and Learning is making arrangements to try to put such arrangements in place.

An undertaking was made to link the issuing of public contracts and the employment of apprentices by the successful contractor. That has happened only to a minimal extent, and Pat Ramsey's Foyle constituency is the only place where it has occurred. I understand that eight apprentices were taken on as part of a public

contract there. The scheme has not rolled out to the extent to which I believe it should have done, however. Therefore, there are questions to be asked.

I assure the Member that I believe that employers will respond, provided people receive qualifications under the scheme. Employers will not have to revisit the issue because much of the work will be done for them. They will be able to take on people who already have skills and qualifications, which would be easier than training someone from scratch.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement. I strongly welcome his intervention in rolling out programme-led apprenticeships. Like other MLAs, I receive representations and letters from various industries. They have concerns about the future of modern apprenticeships.

We must be realistic. I agree with the Minister that, although we can discuss the pros and cons of the two different programmes, at the end of the day, what will we do with youngsters who leave school? It is much better to give them focus. That could be attending college and, perhaps, one placement day each week. It is much better to give young people that focus so that they can be categorised as active. Going to college and working towards qualifications will focus those young people on getting out of bed in the morning and looking forward to better prospects when the downturn is over.

Pat Ramsey asked the Minister about exploration with the public sector. I am pleased to hear that there has been a good response from that sector. What about the community and voluntary sector, which is a big employer? Has the Minister spoken to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), for example, on exploring possibilities?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am pleased that the Member got to her question in the end. She is correct: we must be realistic. I believe that we have been realistic.

The Member may recall that, a few weeks ago, the Department announced a programme that, over two years, will create 4,000 job opportunities in the voluntary and community sector, whereby people who have been unemployed for at least 30 months will be employed by that sector for six months. We will give the voluntary and community sector the opportunity to take on 1,000 people for six months and to roll that out over two years.

The sector has responded positively. The programme is being taken up across the board. That means that people who have been unemployed for at least 30 months will have the opportunity to apply for a real job with a proper employment contract. When people finish the six-month period, it will be included on their curriculum vitae when they begin to search for a job. The first question that people are asked by

potential employers is when they last worked. People will now be able to answer that question.

The voluntary and community sector is pulling its weight, but we can ask it only to do so much. The Member will be aware that the sector faces huge funding issues. If the scheme works, it offers significant opportunities to people who have been unemployed long term. However, we also want to reach people at the other end of the scale when they start off their working lives.

As far as the Department is concerned, Northern Ireland's important voluntary and community sector, which is still a significant contributor to the economy — it accounts for around 5% of economic activity — is pulling its weight. Given the financial constraints in the sector, there is little more that we can ask it to do at present.

We will look closely at whether the scheme works. If it does, we will take great satisfaction from that; however, if it is not working, we will have to revisit it and come back with some other suggestions.

11.00 am

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's statement. I appreciate his work and that of his Department in what is a very difficult area in the economy at the minute.

I welcome the idea of progression on the employer-led route and the clarification that those who have been made redundant are also able to avail themselves of the programme-led route. There is a small group of people who have been in apprenticeships and, although they have not been made redundant, have continued to work as labourers, particularly in the building industry. If, at this stage, they wish to drop back into the apprenticeship scheme, is that an option?

The Minister gave us some very encouraging figures; is it possible to have those figures broken down by constituency?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I will reflect on the latter question and see what information can be provided. Normally, we are able to provide figures based on where people reside, but we are unable to provide figures on how many people are working in a constituency. We can give the Member figures based on people's addresses; if the Member wishes to write to me, I will be happy to provide him with those. We cannot provide details of whether an individual is employed in, for example, the Member's constituency, East Antrim; however, we can tell him how many people on the programme-led apprenticeship have addresses in his constituency. That is as close as we can get. I will endeavour to provide the Member with those figures.

The construction industry has provided one of our biggest challenges. There are slightly more than 1,600 apprentices in construction this year, and, as I understand

it, that is around half the number that there would have been a year ago. That is a major concern. The Member will know that we have made provision for apprentices who are put on short time. A scheme is in place, Skillsafe, which can help apprentices to make up the short time by giving them at least a minimum-wage payment.

The construction industry has particular needs. The Member will recall that I made a statement last week on the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and the changes that we are making to it. The sector is in a fairly volatile situation, and contractors are struggling to get enough work to keep them going. Therefore, it is very hard to get consistency of apprenticeships among employers. We are working as best we can with the companies, and we have taken steps to try to ease the burden on them by taking a lot of the smaller companies out of the levy. However, the number of apprenticeships has dropped by roughly half, and that is a substantial drop.

It would be foolish of me to say that there was going to be any early change to that situation. The construction industry is in a very difficult position, and it is one of the areas that we are keeping under review. However, if we look at our colleges, we can see that there has been substantial investment in the estate to provide high-quality environments in which people can train in construction skills. There is excellent provision pretty much everywhere. However, it would be misleading of me to tell the Member that I foresee any early improvement to the situation in that sector.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He raised the issue of apprentices getting simulated work experience rather than real work experience.

The Minister mentioned the public sector. I am looking at the reply that I received from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister about capital projects over the next two years. In that period, 232 major capital construction projects will be put out for advertisement, worth somewhere in the region of £2 billion. There will also be an additional £279 million for smaller works.

The Minister touched on that, but he did not get into the detail. I appreciate that there is criticism from employers about simulated work experience for apprentices. However, if the Executive are rolling out a programme of capital projects over the next two years, it is up to the Minister to devise proposals so that we can tap into those projects.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Mr Butler: Does the Minister accept that we need to look at the public sector, given that the Executive are rolling out such programmes?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member makes a reasonable point. I touched on the issue in answer to Mr Ramsey. However, given that it has to be dealt with at the contract stage, it might be more fruitful for me to write to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is responsible for the procurement directorate. Any conditions that one applies have to be implemented at the contract stage; in other words, they must be contained in the contract.

If I am interpreting the Member correctly, he is saying that that level of public spending is an opportunity to ensure that apprentices are engaged at the stage when the contracts are let. That would have to be done by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) through the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD). I will write to the Minister of Finance to inform him of the Member's views and ask him what steps CPD is taking to ensure that apprentices are engaged at the contract stage.

As I said, the roll-out has been very sporadic and has only had a marginal impact, but the Member has a fair point: there is potential to do better.

Mr Savage: I also congratulate the Minister and his Department on the work that they are doing with young apprentices. What is being done for those who are not so young and have lost their jobs? Is anything being done to reskill them?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member knows, we removed the age limit for apprentices last year. Almost 40% of apprentices are now aged over 24, which would not have been possible until last year.

As I said to Anna Lo, we have introduced a scheme with the voluntary and community sector in which people who have been unemployed for 30 months or longer, many of whom tend to be in the older age spectrum, will be offered a six-month contract of employment. Those jobs will be paid and will have a proper contract. The participants will be able to put the jobs they do on their CVs. During the six months, they will get help with their CVs and receive extra training for interviews. Therefore, in addition to a job, the participants will have access to that form of training and, depending on their employer, other forms of training. That scheme deals with the long-term unemployed who, by definition, tend to be further up the age spectrum. All our programmes aim to get people back to work. The Member will know that there has been, in many cases, more than an 80% increase in the past year in the number of unemployed people registering in each jobcentre. The rate varies substantially from one jobcentre to another, but that is the overall increase.

We offer opportunities to those individuals. For instance, we offer the Pathways to Work programme to people who have become ill or are on incapacity benefit. That programme allows those people to be interviewed

consistently up to six times. We offer them all sorts of opportunities, even the chance to start a business. We provide assistance for the first 26 weeks, and, if the business does not work out, the people who are involved suffer no loss and their benefits are maintained.

Therefore, a range of programmes helps people right across the age spectrum. We must remember that we want to value and help people from when they leave school until the end of their working life. If we follow the example of my good colleague Rev Coulter, the Member will ask me the same question in 20 years. I look forward to that.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I will put my question into context: the Minister mentioned the programme-led apprenticeship scheme:

“Time spent in the real work environment will be in the form of a one day a week work placement, with an opportunity for a block placement of six to eight weeks during the summer.”

The Minister referred to rather large employers, such as Bombardier and NIE. What is the record of those companies in trying to do something over and above reducing the number of apprentices that they are taking on at this time? Those companies should be pressed to do more.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Those two employers have probably had among the best apprenticeship schemes in Northern Ireland for many years. I have visited both training centres: NIE's at Nutts Corner and Bombardier's on York Street. I have no doubt that, if Bombardier had not used an aggressive and significant apprenticeship programme for many years, that centre would be closed. Many employers walked away from apprenticeships 15 or 20 years ago, but that company did not. I believe that that is why it is still in business. Its record on apprenticeships is exemplary.

NIE has a fantastic training centre. However, it was, sadly, not able to take on any apprentices this year. That was a big blow, because it normally takes on around 40 young people each year. I visited those apprentices either last year or earlier this year; they do fantastic work. They have a wonderful facility, and they were really getting to grips with a technical and difficult but rewarding job. The fact that NIE did not take on any apprentices this year is a reflection of the economic circumstances.

NIE was one of the best examples of a company in Northern Ireland that was committed to apprenticeships. It has made significant investment in apprentices by providing training facilities and staff to teach people. However, because of the economic circumstances, it was not capable of providing the usual numbers this year. We are in regular and constant touch with those providers, because we are looking ahead to next year

and hoping that, where organisations have been unable to take on trainees or have reduced their numbers, the situation will change. If a training centre does not have a first-year intake, that will create an imbalance. In other words, there is no first year, so the second and third years will be affected, and that will disrupt the whole programme.

11.15 am

The time that is spent in the real working environment is the big difference between employer-led and programme-led apprenticeships. I would prefer young people to be in employer-led apprenticeships, where they are constantly in a real work environment. Alongside the colleges and the other training providers, we are trying to give young people the best possible simulated work environment that we can create. It is not perfect, and it will never be a complete substitute for what happens in a business, but it is the best that we can do. We have to realise that there is only so much that government can do. The available jobs are, in most cases, in the private sector, and there is no substitute for working in a real business.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Education Maintenance Allowance

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that restricting the education maintenance allowance (EMA) specifically to those enrolled in schools or colleges is a key factor which inhibits alternative education providers from reaching those young people who have disengaged from mainstream education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to make EMA accessible to all young people who comply with the age criterion and are engaged in appropriate provision, whether this is in schools or colleges, or with a recognised alternative provider; and further calls on the Minister to engage with the alternative education providers to establish whether the current attendance criteria regarding EMA are too prescriptive.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that so many members of the Committee for Employment and Learning are in the Chamber to participate in the debate, as was the case in yesterday's debate on the provision of childcare for students in further and higher education. The Minister for Employment and Learning is here to listen to the debate. He deserves particular thanks because, even though the education maintenance allowance falls also under the Minister of Education's remit, he has agreed to respond to the motion. The issue cuts across a number of Departments, and it is important that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is willing to take the lead.

Access to the education maintenance allowance (EMA) is complex, as is responsibility for it. The Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning are responsible for disbursing EMA. However, I am struggling to form a clear picture of who has responsibility for the disengaged young people who work with alternative education and training providers outside the usual school or college set-up.

Most if not all Members, at one time or another, have met representatives of some of the organisations that provide support for young people. Those organisations are recognised, and some of their clients can access EMA. Others cannot access EMA, because they are being catered for by organisations that are not recognised, and Members can imagine the confusion that that creates. That is the first point that I want to make: the system is confusing. The Committee believes that widening access further will make things clearer and will also mean that DE and DEL must make clear decisions about their responsibilities.

Since September, the Employment and Learning Committee has engaged with several organisations that specialise in reaching young people who have disengaged from the school and college system. It received presentations from the Prince's Trust, Rathbone, the Alternative Education Providers' (AEP) Forum, Include Youth and others. A common theme in those presentations was that there are few incentives for young people who have had the courage to come to them and admit that they need help.

The Committee also heard from some of those young people about how those organisations have helped them to turn their lives around. However, in cases in which the programme that they follow does not include study in a school or college that would enable them to be eligible for EMA, they have to continue to claim benefits. That means that they have to take time off from their work placements and so forth to sign on. The young people who presented themselves to the Committee told us that they find that humiliating, as it does not reflect the fact that they are trying to change their situation, something for which they deserve recognition.

No one can deny that many of those young people have had a rough time. Some have spent years in care, some have been subject to bad influence and have developed addictions, and some have become estranged from their families, but they have battled those difficulties and have stuck to a programme. They should be rewarded for that, and EMA is just such a reward. They want to take pride in what they do; they do not want handouts.

The Committee understands that there must be criteria for awarding EMA. We are asking that the criteria be reviewed to include programmes, such as those run by Include Youth, in which the focus is not always on re-entry to the formal school or college setting and in which work placements and learning skills in a less formal environment are more common. The young people's efforts should not be ignored just because they are pursuing an alternative route to employment and training.

The criteria for eligibility for EMA are weighted towards a very traditional education or training scenario. The Minister said earlier that we must consider alternative ways to provide opportunities for people to find work because of the recession. That is another issue that we need to examine. In a traditional educational training scenario, there is a necessity to undertake a particular number of hours in education or training in a recognised institution and on a recognised course. The question is whether we should be so prescriptive. The Committee believes that, if EMA was offered in a wider range of scenarios, it would be possible to engage more of those who have been failed by the traditional system. We ask for an acceptance of other routes to the same goal.

The proportion of young people here who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is high. I recently heard estimates that one quarter of our under 25-year-olds are not in employment, education or training. Although EMA is designed for 16- to 19-year-olds, if we were a bit more creative about who could receive that payment within that age group, perhaps we could make some impact on the appalling number of young people who are not in employment, education or training.

The Committee led a debate yesterday about access to on-campus childcare at colleges and universities. I spoke about public service agreement (PSA) targets in the Programme for Government that are about building our prosperity through increasing skills and productivity and through education and training. We will never achieve our aims if we do not become creative, ask ourselves whether there is a different way in which to do things and whether there is an alternative way to think or act. We do not always have to do something because it has been done before.

In correspondence to the Committee, the Minister indicated that his Department and the Department of Education will undertake a joint review of EMA. The Committee welcomes that review and sees it as a perfect opportunity to consider how we can widen access to EMA and, perhaps by doing so, make greater inroads into dealing with our NEET problem. The Departments must engage fully with organisations that provide programmes that run outside schools and colleges. Greater numbers of programmes and participants must be recognised and rewarded by being brought within the reach of EMA.

I said that the Department of Education plays a big role in EMA; however, as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I ask the Minister to examine how expanded EMA provision can be used to enhance the skills strategy and how it might better feed into the 14 to 19 strategy. The Minister's Department is the linchpin in workforce development, and the Committee believes that the NEET issue could be improved if EMA was a more widely available incentive for the disengaged to rejoin the mainstream.

We must encourage those disengaged people to acquire skills so that they can have a role in increasing prosperity and productivity. We will achieve our economic goals only if we bring everyone along, and I know that the Minister shares our passion for social inclusion and transformation. The Committee truly believes that EMA is not being used to its greatest effect, and we feel that the Minister and his Department could make better use of it. The education maintenance allowance is too closely associated with staying at school; it should be more obviously aligned with technical and professional training outside apprenticeship programmes.

The Minister has worked hard to bring new ways of developing the workforce to the fore. We ask that he takes a fresh look at how EMA could be better used, which, in turn, would help his Department. The review of EMA comes at the perfect time to enable engagement with alternative education and training providers and to ascertain how they can use EMA to tackle the NEET problem. It will also allow us to continue to chip away at the obstacles to greater and more inclusive prosperity. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome today's debate, and, after the recent announcement, I look forward to the review of the education maintenance allowance later this year. The Committee examined the issue closely, and the Chairperson indicated the depth of our considerations. The stories of the young people who appeared before the Committee were both moving and encouraging.

I may be stating the obvious, but young people who leave school with fewer than five GCSEs are more likely to fall into unemployment than those who have more than five GCSEs. That fact highlights the complexity of the issue, and, indeed, it might have been more appropriate for a different Minister to have been present for today's debate. The 2005 Northern Ireland young life and times survey revealed that 20% of young people whose families were not well off decided not go back to school; the figure for young people from well-off families is only 5%. It is unfair that the financial circumstances of young people's families have a significant impact on their choice between full-time education and employment.

The education maintenance allowance will undoubtedly have an influence and make it more financially feasible for some students to return to full-time education. Indeed, the allowance has increased participation in full-time education among eligible 16-year-olds by some 5.9%. I ask the Minister that the review is mindful of potential areas of unfairness. For example, if a family has more than one child in full-time education, will it be possible for all of them to claim the allowance? Students' attendance must be strictly recorded, and absence must be authorised. Will students who have been absent for a week without justification or approval lose their allowance for that week?

I also ask that the application process be simple and that decisions on eligibility be made quickly. Such decisions may be a key factor when students are trying to decide whether to return to education. Currently, some 4,000 applications cannot be processed because certain information is missing from the application forms. That suggests that the application forms are not as straightforward as they could be. Difficulties are being encountered, and assistance may be required. Other problems may arise from the fact that no account is taken of students' income. That needs to be reviewed because many students may have savings or an

inheritance. I ask the Minister and the Department, at the very least, to consider reviewing those criteria and, if possible, to put a cap on the amount of savings that is deemed reasonable before EMA is disallowed.

I congratulate the Minister and the Department on the allowance's success since its introduction in 2004, and I look forward to more students from low-income backgrounds returning to full-time education. There is an obvious need to engage with alternative education providers and to reach out to young people who have disengaged from mainstream education. I acknowledge that it is a very complex issue, but I support the motion.

11.30 am

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for tabling the motion, but I must say that I have great difficulty with it and cannot support it. However, I will not push for a Division.

The main reason why my colleagues and I cannot support the motion is that we believe that it has been tabled by the wrong Committee and is being directed to the wrong Minister. Although DEL has a role in the provision of the EMA, that role seems to me a very small one. The lead Department is very much the Department of Education, and I suggest to the Chairperson that it would have been better if, in the first instance, the matter had been brought to the attention of the Minister of Education. That said, I congratulate the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning on doing an excellent job; her commitment and dedication are remarkable. However, if there is a problem with the EMA, the Chairperson would be best to approach her colleague the Minister of Education about it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I cannot let those remarks go —

Mr B McCrea: Were you off getting a departmental briefing there?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: No, I was actually talking about you.

Bob, I know that it is your birthday week, but I cannot let your remarks go without commenting on them. I know that other Departments are involved with the EMA, but young people have come to the Committee for Employment and Learning about the matter, so responsibility lies with DEL. DEL is responsible for people aged between 16 and 24. We want the Department to take the lead on the EMA. That is not a criticism of the Minister for Employment and Learning, for he is doing a good job. We want DEL to take the lead in targeting those young people, and then we will look at the other Departments that are involved with the EMA.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Chairperson for that explanation, but I must point out that it is the

Department of Education that adjudicates on which courses fall within the scope of the rule on the 15 hours' teaching time, among other rules. I must also highlight the fact that the motion fails to identify where the extra money would come from, which is an especially serious problem at this time of tight budgets.

It may well be that the rules need to be extended, but we need to do much more work to identify whether that is, in fact, the case. At this time of strained public finances, we cannot go around making spending pledges in that way. We must go through a robust process of identifying need, ways to tackle that need and the benefits of the chosen policy tool. It is clear that we have not gone through that process, and, as a result, I cannot support the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the motion from the Committee for Employment and Learning, and I look forward to the contribution from the Minister. The education maintenance allowance is a useful, targeted package that encourages and enables young people to remain in education. It sends a strong signal from the state about the importance of education, and it is an investment in all our people, particularly young people, which will pay clear dividends in future.

I am aware that, in the community sector, the EMA is generally managed by the Department of Education in partnership with DEL, but I am confident that both Ministers will be sympathetic to some of the points raised by my colleague Robert Coulter. I am also confident that they would be sympathetic to the views of the particular group of young people who addressed the Committee and to which we have referred today.

I support the Chairperson's earlier comments. I also recently listened to staff and young people from Include Youth and the Give and Take programme, and I was impressed by their dedication and professionalism. They do valuable work with the young people who have been referred to them, particularly by social services, for a range of reasons. Those young people may have mental health and behavioural problems or be leaving the care system, and they may find that, although they want to pick up on their education, they are unable to cope with the fundamentals of the mainstream education system.

Those young people are doing their best, because they want to be full and active members of society. They want to develop and contribute, and it is important that they are assisted and encouraged in doing so.

The Give and Take programme gives young people confidence, and it equips them with the foundation skills and, more importantly, the qualifications that can lead them to EMA-level courses. It is unfortunate, however, that those young people are unable to avail themselves of the benefits of the EMA. It should be obvious that young people should be educated based

on their current level of development, rather than where they should be, based on their age. The level of a course must be appropriate to their needs. It seems reasonable that those and other young people who need support at a similar educational or developmental level should have access to funding under the EMA or a similar funding stream.

I ask the Minister, along with his counterpart in the Department of Education, to review the workings of the EMA. A cross-departmental approach is required to achieve the objectives of encouraging young people to remain in full-time education and ensuring that they are eligible for the EMA based on courses that are appropriate to their educational needs, no matter what their developmental starting point.

Yesterday, Members talked about how access to childcare provision encourages mothers to remain in education; the funding of young people is no different. The Committee works extremely hard to ensure that everyone has access to employment. However, third-level qualifications are the passport to employment, and those can be made available to vulnerable groups, including isolated young people.

Common sense should prevail. The Chairperson was right that the Committee for Employment and Learning was asked to address a particular problem. We have done so by bringing the motion to the Chamber and asking the Minister for Employment and Learning to contribute to achieving its aims. However, it is also important that he work with his counterpart in the Department of Education. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing the motion, which I support, to the House. Given that DEL is to go ahead with a review of the EMA in Northern Ireland later this year and is also reviewing alternative education provision, the debate on such an important issue is timely.

The situation has been confusing because some alternative education providers (AEPs) are recognised by the Department of Education as offering education and training to young people who are not full-time students at school or college. Some clients claim the EMA via the Department of Education, even when they are associated with a college rather than a school. Therefore, we need clarification on who is entitled to claim the EMA.

I agree that we should consider making the EMA accessible to all young people. Based on the 2004 mid-year population estimate, approximately 39% of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland were in receipt of the EMA in the first year of its roll-out. Members heard earlier that young people on programme-led apprenticeships will be able to claim the EMA. It is, therefore, important to look into and clarify the situation. Will all young people receive the EMA, dependent on their meeting

the age criterion and on whether they are engaged in appropriate educational provision, be that in schools or colleges or through recognised alternative providers?

Far too many school leavers have few or no qualifications, and many of those are from disadvantaged communities. Research shows that four times as many young people from poorer families as from families that are well off do not intend to stay on at school beyond the age for which education is compulsory. Many research studies have also shown that income is strongly related to a person's level of education.

On average in Northern Ireland, an extra year of education adds 8% to male earnings and 12% to female earnings. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who leave care or are excluded from mainstream education, very much need help and encouragement so that they do not fall into the category of not in education, employment or training. The economic downturn has led to very high youth unemployment. More school leavers want to carry on in education and training. We need investment in our workplace, and the people will be the assets in our educational capital.

Research that was done in England showed that the EMA increased participation in full-time education among eligible 16-year-olds by 5-9%, with the largest effect being on young people from lower socio-economic groups. The EMA also had a substantial impact on young people who had been low or moderate achievers at the end of year 11. It is important that we try to increase the retention of young people in full-time education by providing them with the EMA.

The motion also calls on the Minister to engage with alternative education providers. I very much agree with that. As others have said, young people have told the Committee about the positive impact that they have had through various programmes, such as Include Youth.

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

Ms Lo: I very much support the call for the Minister to engage with those providers.

Mr Irwin: This is a very complex issue. Discussions and debate on this matter in the Committee for Employment and Learning have shown that there is a clear cross-departmental onus on the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to clarify which of the recognised alternative education providers are able to attract the education maintenance allowance and which are not.

Alternative education providers play a very active role in ensuring that a good number of young people who might otherwise have slipped off the radar in relation to continuing in some form of education are assisted in pursuing an alternative course or programme. However, if a section of those young people are engaged by an

alternative provider whose courses do not attract an award of education maintenance allowance, an award should be made in the appropriate circumstances.

I note that a review of the education maintenance allowance is due to take place later this year. I urge the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to work closely to facilitate those providers that do not currently fall within the EMA criteria.

I know of a few programmes in my constituency that cater for young people who decide to drop out of school. There are notable changes in the young people after they complete those courses. More young people in those circumstances could be targeted if the EMA were more widely available.

The Committee heard at first hand from students who completed alternative courses and who were not entitled to the award. It was much more difficult for them; they felt that if they had been able to access the allowance, it would have made the process more straightforward and less of a financial burden.

Given that a review is due before the end of the year, I hope that the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education take a cross-departmental approach to this issue and work together to provide the allowance across the alternative education sector.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this motion.

The motion is addressing the fact that a category of young people is missing out on full-time education and training and attending further education colleges. Some groups have told the Committee for Employment and Learning how difficult it was for them to get into training or further education and to get a job and a better life. They were missing out, if one likes, when it came to EMA.

11.45 am

I accept, and it was pointed out by Committee Chairperson Sue Ramsey, that the responsibility extends beyond the Minister for Employment and Learning, Reg Empey. The Minister of Education also has a role. Most young people who avail themselves of EMA do not leave post-primary education; they usually stay on and claim the allowance, or their school is involved in a partnership with a further education college.

However, we recognise that there are people who are involved with alternative education providers, and the Committee has met several such organisations in recent months. Such people have had to overcome barriers in their lives, and we heard compelling stories of those who had overcome such barriers. However, they were facing another barrier, which was having to sign on and not being entitled to receive EMA. The motion is trying to address the fact that, although we

accept that there are two Ministers involved in the issue, the Employment and Learning Committee is putting the issue to the Minister for Employment and Learning, who must take it up with Catriona Ruane.

I am sorry that one of the Committee members, Bob Coulter, does not support the motion. A long time ago, I was told that the older one gets the more militant and cantankerous one becomes. I do not know whether one reaches the outer limits of militancy at the age of 80, but broadly, given what Bob has said, we are not criticising the Minister on the issue. We accept what the Minister has said about reviewing EMA, which I assume will be carried out by his Department and the Education Department.

The Minister spoke earlier about the apprentice-led programme. In his statement, he said that staying on and taking up a place in a further education college was not an option. However, it is one of the options that the young people to whom we have talked over recent months want to take. They want to go on to further education. Entitlement to EMA is a complex issue, but research shows that many people from disadvantaged backgrounds or lower-income families are helped by EMA to first get into full-time employment, from which they progress to a job.

Some people from whom the Committee heard have done just that in the absence of EMA. Therefore, the allowance is an issue that must be addressed. Ways must be found to remove barriers for people, so that they can progress and claim the allowance to which they are entitled. I support the motion, and I hope that Rev Robert Coulter has listened to some of our arguments. I accept that the Minister is reviewing EMA, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's statement. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that all Members agree that Bob is young at heart and definitely not cantankerous.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a Committee member, I support the motion. Notwithstanding Rev Robert Coulter's reservations, I believe that the essence of the motion is about widening access. Yesterday, members debated childcare provision, through a motion that was moved by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. I commend the Committee for tabling both those motions.

Widening access to education maintenance allowance is a Programme for Government target, and nothing in the motion conflicts with that goal. As I said yesterday, the Committee wishes to encourage young people to engage with education and to make it, in whatever form, attractive to them. That applies particularly to those who have become disengaged from education or who are from low-income families and find that cost is

a barrier to attending school or college. To some extent, EMA addresses that problem, although not entirely.

As Paul Butler said, the Committee heard from young people who, in order to sign on, had to stop doing the extremely valuable work that they were doing, possibly with a parent. However, they did not want to do that. Therefore, we must respect what those young people were doing, and we must find some way round the problem.

I was looking through some old questions for written answer, and I noticed a reply, on 29 February 2008, to Miss McIlveen, who had asked why EMA is sometimes refused. If I remember correctly, from the beginning of 2007 until 22 January 2008, education maintenance allowance was refused 69 times because the learning centre concerned was not recognised. What kind of work had been going on in those centres? The motion states that young people must be "engaged in appropriate provision"; however, if in that short space of time EMA was refused to 69 people who were attending unrecognised centres, we must look into what happened.

In another question for written answer, the Minister for Employment and Learning's response to my colleague Fra McCann was insightful in distinguishing between education provision that qualifies for EMA and alternative provision that does not. Although it is good that EMA is based on attendance, we have to look at what happens when young people do attend. I am not saying that good work is not being done in centres that are eligible for EMA, but the qualifying criteria emphasise being present. I got a sense from the young people who gave evidence to the Committee that their work is very valuable and helpful and that they had overcome barriers by engaging in it.

I shall finish by mentioning some of the interesting research that Committee members were provided with. I was surprised to discover that pupils who attend a grammar school are more informed about EMA than those who do not attend a grammar school; the figure is something like 96% as opposed to 86%. Those figures may not be accurate, but one key statistic in a Devine and Lloyd research paper was that 51% of people from poor families said that EMA would influence their decision to attend education.

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

Mrs McGill: I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as it begins a debate on the important issues raised by the Alternative Education Providers' Forum, which gave evidence to the Committee. I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate. It is interesting that the praise heaped on my colleague

Reverend Coulter did not last too long. As was said yesterday, no quarter is asked and none given.

Ownership of the EMA policy rests with the Department of Education and my Department. Therefore, I am mindful of the need to take a joint approach when looking at the policy. It will be useful to explain why the EMA scheme was introduced jointly in September 2004 by my Department and the Department of Education.

The main purpose of the scheme is to enable young people from lower-income backgrounds to remain in post-compulsory education at school or college, with the key objective of raising participation, retention and achievement rates in the eligible group and addressing the well-established link between low attainment and low income. Some 23,143 students applied for inclusion in the scheme in the last academic year in Northern Ireland.

The allowance is linked to satisfactory attendance and is paid on a fortnightly basis. In addition to the allowance, young people may also receive periodic bonuses of £100, if they remain on their courses and make good progress with their learning. EMA is provided to eligible students in approved learning centres, which are mainstream schools, colleges, FE colleges and, in a very few cases, alternative education providers outside the mainstream that can deliver education to meet EMA requirements.

My Department is responsible for students in FE colleges and the Department of Education is responsible for those in schools, colleges and other education providers. Provision of EMA is closely monitored in all the learning centres and is dependent upon learning agreements having been signed and agreed by the learning centres and the students. It is attendance based.

It often happens with national schemes that differences exist between devolved Administrations. This is the case with respect to the number of guided or teacher-contact hours each week. In Northern Ireland, there is a requirement for a student to undertake a minimum of 15 guided hours each week to qualify for EMA payments, compared to 12 guided or teacher-contact hours in Wales and 21 guided hours in Scotland. England has a slightly different set of rules whereby each student is required to undertake 12 hours of further education courses and 16 guided hours of work-based and diploma courses.

The term “guided hours” is defined as contact teaching hours that a student must receive in order to be eligible for EMA. Courses must, therefore, be taught in a timetabled teaching slot, when the teacher is engaged in teaching students. Days at home, or at the library, to study do not count as guided hours. The number of guided hours is something that will be considered under the joint Department for Employment and Learning and Department of Education review of EMA, which I will come to later.

The motion focuses on young people who are outside mainstream education. I understand from the Department of Education that there are more than 500 such young people in Northern Ireland, and the number includes those who are not in education, employment or training. It is worth mentioning that the Youth Service, supported by the Department of Education, already provides significant support to young people in that position. That support includes the Prince’s Trust’s xl Programme for 14- to 16-year-olds who are at risk of exclusion, which operates in 40 schools; the Youth Action Community Leadership Programme for 14- to 25-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the Department of Education’s Youth Works Programme for 16- to 17-year-olds in communities suffering the greatest economic social deprivation. My Department also co-funds the Bytes Project with the Department of Education. It operates in 10 centres and is for 16- to 25-year-olds with little or no formal education. Members will be familiar with some of those schemes.

12.00 noon

There is also provision under my Department’s Training for Success programme, specifically the option of “skills for your life”, which addresses the particular needs of young people who have significant barriers to learning, such as poor literacy and numeracy, no qualifications or substance abuse. A weekly allowance of £40, which is not means-tested, is provided. Organisations that have the contract for that provision have significant skills in dealing with those young people. However, despite the support, there are still young people who are not benefiting from adequate education and training.

Alternative education provision is another way to support those young people. The Department of Education has told me that it recognised the need for alternative education provision in 1998 with the publication of ‘Promoting and Sustaining Good Behaviour: A Discipline Strategy for Schools’. That set out a support model of progressively more intensive interventions for pupils whose behaviour was challenging, with the objective of maintaining pupils in mainstream schooling. It was accepted that remaining in mainstream schooling was not a realistic option for a very small number of pupils and that, due to the severity of their behavioural issues or the degree of their disaffection, some form of alternative education provision that was responsive to their needs would be necessary.

The findings that informed the strategy indicated that, across all education and library board areas, around 500 pupils in the last two years of their compulsory schooling — Key Stage 4 — would need that provision each year. The Department of Education expected that provision to be developed by the education and library boards in response to local needs and in partnership with other agencies. I understand that, since 1998, additional funding has been provided to the education and library boards to create new places or secure the continuation

of places on existing projects. In 2007-08, the earmarked allocation to the boards was £4.1 million, which covers the costs of a notional 500 places.

The policy for deciding whether courses warrant an EMA payment is that learners on funded training programmes should be achieving qualifications that are recognised nationally and provide clear progression routes for learners' career advancement. The national database of accredited qualifications is the reference tool that the Department of Education uses to ensure that qualifications have been accredited by the regulators and, therefore, are nationally recognised. I understand from the Department of Education that some community groups which meet the EMA criteria have benefited from the scheme already.

There is provision in the EMA scheme to identify students with special educational needs or vulnerable students. Those students can include homeless young people, those with probation orders, teenaged parents and those with caring responsibilities. Therefore, tailoring the course around the student's ability to attend is important, as is being flexible and aware of additional needs. The courses and the payments of EMA can be extended over a four-year period as opposed to the usual three-year period in order to help to meet those specific needs. On that point of attendance, Mr Hilditch mentioned earlier that illness can lead to absenteeism; I assure Members that students will not lose their allowances if they have a doctor's line.

I understand from the Department of Education that a consultation paper will be issued early in the new year with recommendations that aim to improve the service currently provided in the area of alternative education. Although it is important to keep an open mind on course providers, it is also important to keep a uniform approach to the EMA scheme. I certainly do not want to pre-empt the outcomes of the alternative education provision review, but I would welcome an opportunity for my officials to meet officials from the Department of Education to agree how the EMA scheme could encourage students to re-engage with education in local learning and community centres, provided that those meet the EMA scheme rules.

Later this year, my Department and the Department of Education will commence the first joint review of EMA in Northern Ireland since its introduction in 2004. The aim of the review is to assess whether the scheme is meeting its set goals, which include encouraging students from lower-income families to stay in mainstream education and achieve qualifications, and is delivering value for money.

Methods of delivery and duration will also be reviewed. Any alternative education provision run by the education and library boards or by approved community-based training will be a matter for the Department of Education.

Two separate reviews are being progressed, so it would be prudent for my Department and the Department of Education to consider the reviews' recommendations together in order to determine the best way forward for the EMA scheme and adult education in Northern Ireland. The Minister of Education and I will be studying carefully the Hansard report of today's debate and the points that a number of Members made. Education maintenance allowance is one of those areas that crosses departmental responsibilities. The bulk of the policy lies with the Department of Education, although my Department wields influence. We are undertaking both the reviews, and, hopefully, one will commence later this year, and a paper will be presented early in the new year.

I suspect an added complication will arise, since the existing education and library boards are to be collapsed into the education and skills authority. That may add an extra dimension to the review. Therefore, this may be a timely opportunity for a review. It is a quinquennial review, because the EMA was introduced in 2004. It is difficult to predict what implications the added complication of the introduction of ESA will have for the review. I will ensure that my colleague the Minister of Education receives a copy of the debate for her perusal, and, no doubt, the points that have been raised will be considered when the reviews are commenced.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Buchanan): I thank the Members who participated in the debate, as well as those who took an interest in it. I also thank the Minister for coming to the House to respond to the debate. I agree that the EMA falls within the remit of the Department of Education more than that of the Department for Employment and Learning. However, the motion related to a specific need that came before our Committee, and that is why the motion sought a response from the Minister for Employment and Learning. I also thank the Minister for his indication that a joint review of the EMA is to be carried out by his Department and the Department of Education. The Committee hopes that the issues raised in the debate will be taken into account during the review.

Many research figures have shown that a person's income relates to the level of his or her education. In Northern Ireland, an extra year spent in education adds an average of 8% to a male's earnings and 12% to a female's earnings. Moreover, statistics show that young people in Northern Ireland who leave school at the age of 16 with fewer than five GCSEs are more likely to be unemployed than those who leave school with more than five GCSEs. Although such findings provide clear evidence of the benefits available to individuals who stay in education, they also point to the fact that any investment in education is likely to be a sound investment for the Northern Ireland economy. That is why it is so important that the EMA be made accessible to alternative

education providers who are seeking to reach the young people who are disengaged from mainstream education.

David Hilditch said that people who leave school with fewer than five GCSEs are more likely to become unemployed than those with more than five GCSEs, and he highlighted the complexity of that matter. He said that the extension of EMA would encourage many more young people back into full-time education and that the application process should be made simpler for potential students. He encouraged the Minister to engage with all alternative education providers, and the Committee agrees with that sentiment.

Robert Coulter had difficulties with the motion and indicated that he could not support it because it was being directed from the wrong Committee to the wrong Minister. He stated that the lead Department should be the Department of Education and that DEL played only a small role in EMA. He also asked where the extra finance would come from in such tight economic times if EMA were extended beyond schools and colleges. I say to Reverend Coulter that the debate deals with an issue that was raised in Committee, and, although the Committee agrees that the lead Department is the Department of Education, it has tabled the motion as a response to the issue.

Pat Ramsey spoke about how EMA was a useful package that enabled young people to remain in education. He was also mindful of the fact that EMA is managed primarily by the Department of Education, with the support of DEL. Indeed, every Member who spoke in the debate has recognised that EMA is a cross-departmental issue and that the onus is not just on DEL.

Mr Ramsey went on to speak about how EMA helps young people from poor social backgrounds who want to expand their educational potential but who are unable to avail themselves of EMA. That is the issue. He also acknowledged that the Committee was seeking to address a particular issue that it had been presented with.

Anna Lo spoke about the need to clarify who is entitled to EMA. She suggested that the allowance should be made available to all young people. She went on to say that it should be available not just to those who are attending schools and colleges but to those attending all education providers. Ms Lo also said that four times as many young people from poorer families did not intend to stay on at school. Those are the people who need to receive help, encouragement and support that will have a positive impact on our entire community.

William Irwin spoke about the clear cross-departmental onus and which Department should be the lead Department. He said that students who engage with alternative education providers should receive EMA. He also stated that other education providers who take on young people and seek to get them into education and training should be included in the conditions for EMA and that more young people could be brought

into the education and training realm if EMA were made more widely accessible.

Paul Butler accepted that there was an onus on both Ministers on the matter. He said that the motion sought only to address the needs of young people from whom the Committee had taken evidence.

The Minister for Employment and Learning in his response to the debate stated that he was mindful of the need for a joint approach to EMA and explained why it was introduced in the first place. He said that his Department is responsible for students in FE colleges and that only those attendance-based students who undertake 15 guided hours per week qualify for EMA.

The Minister said that provision was being made for 500 young people for whom mainstream schooling was not a realistic option. Furthermore, he indicated that there are forms of support for those not in schools or colleges and highlighted some of the schemes that the Department was involved in either individually or collectively with the Department of Education. Moreover, he acknowledged that, despite all the support that is already available, there were still young people who had not re-engaged with the education sector.

12.15 pm

The Minister referred to the policy on qualification for the EMA scheme and how it was important to ensure that any courses were tailored to fit the needs of the students and allow for flexibility. He talked about the joint review and how we need to ensure that it is delivering value for money. It is an important issue, and we must examine it to ensure that it is delivering value for money. I welcome the fact that the Minister said that he would look closely at the issues raised in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that restricting the education maintenance allowance (EMA) specifically to those enrolled in schools or colleges is a key factor which inhibits alternative education providers from reaching those young people who have disengaged from mainstream education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to make EMA accessible to all young people who comply with the age criterion and are engaged in appropriate provision, whether this is in schools or colleges, or with a recognised alternative provider; and further calls on the Minister to engage with the alternative education providers to establish whether the current attendance criteria regarding EMA are too prescriptive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.16 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Lisbon Treaty Referendum

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

Mr Campbell: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the verdict of the Republic of Ireland electorate on the Lisbon Treaty referendum; reaffirms its support for a referendum in the United Kingdom on the treaty; and calls for a declaration from those parties aspiring to form the incoming Government of the United Kingdom to give an unequivocal commitment to hold, within a twelve month period from assuming office in 2010, a binding referendum on the Lisbon Treaty that is unconditional and unrelated to how other member states choose to vote, and the result of which will not be held in abeyance pending a further referendum on the subject.

Every so often, the Assembly is criticised for holding debates on issues that are not relevant or important to people's lives, but I suspect that not many people will put this debate and its subject matter in that category.

There is nothing more fundamental than examining the position that citizens would adopt on the future direction of the nation state to which they belong, its composition — in our case, the composition of the United Kingdom — within the European Union, and where the direction taken is likely to lead to generations from now. The debate on the Lisbon Treaty should go to the very heart of how people view their democratic principles, how they view society as a whole and how they view the way in which the nation state to which they belong is likely to be governed in future years.

The Lisbon Treaty is the latest in a series of such treaties, all of which have been viewed in a particular way by great swathes of society across the United Kingdom. For example, people took up positions on whether they should or should not be consulted over the UK's 1973 accession into what was then the Common Market. Many people considered it a cop-out that its citizens were consulted after the UK entered the Common Market, instead of their being consulted first. In more recent years, the Maastricht Treaty was

signed, and, again, many people viewed that treaty as being fundamental. They felt that it went to the heart of personal individual liberties and signposted how government would be conducted in the United Kingdom in future. Now we have the Lisbon Treaty.

I should say at this stage that although I have no doubt that Members will express views — both personal and party views — on whether they are Euro-sceptic or whether they are intensely or moderately pro-European, that is not the heart of the motion before the Assembly.

The issue of whether people are for or against greater European integration is almost, although not quite, irrelevant. At the heart of the motion is the principle that, if the Lisbon Treaty, or any development that follows it, amounts to a fundamental change in the status of the nation state, the citizens of the nation state ought to have the right to express their view by way of a referendum.

Unfortunately, some people in Brussels appear to think that that is a bad thing. An ardent pro-European might look to previous referendum results. Several EU states held a vote on a European constitution, and the people gave their verdict that they did not want it. An ardent pro-European might say that, if the people are going to say no to a referendum when asked, they should not be asked any more. Alternatively, as was the case with the Irish Republic, an ardent pro-European might say that the people who said no to the Lisbon Treaty should be asked again until they say yes. That appears to be at the heart of the views of some of those who stride the corridors of power in Brussels.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member concede that, after the Republic of Ireland said no to the initial referendum, some concessions were awarded? Those concessions allowed the people to say yes in the repeat referendum. That is quite often the case when a referendum is carried out a second time.

Mr Campbell: To some degree, the Member is correct, but he omitted to mention the fact that, between the two referendums in the Irish Republic, the most significant economic downturn in the history not only of Europe but of the world took place.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member agree that not a single line, sentence or word of the treaty was changed between the first referendum and the second referendum?

Mr Campbell: That is exactly what I was referring to when I mentioned peripheral and minor issues. Undoubtedly, if fundamental change is to be made to the constitution of a nation state either in the EU or out of it, the last thing that anyone should advocate is that the citizens of that nation state should not be asked what they think about that change. I imagine and hope that no democrat would subscribe to that. That is at the heart of the motion.

As my friend and colleague from Strangford Mr Hamilton said, no change was made to the wording of the treaty. The Lisbon Treaty and the proposed European constitution contained proposals for a politician to be chosen as President of the European Council for two and a half years and for a new post, combining the jobs of the existing foreign affairs supremo and the Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy. Those proposals are intended to give the EU more clout on the world stage, a smaller Commission and a redistribution of voting weights among member states.

The proposals were contained in the original proposed European constitution, which several nation states rejected. Once they had been rejected, the bureaucrats in Brussels decided that they would circumvent that annoying aspect of democracy, the principle that people have the right to decide their future, and they came up with the Lisbon Treaty. The Czech President has said that he will sign up to the Lisbon Treaty, and some people in the Conservative Party in GB have said that there is no point in having a referendum on it. There is now even more point in having a referendum. That goes to the very heart of what we can do in Europe after we have said either yes or no to greater integration.

I come back to what I said a few moments ago: there cannot be a political system that permits people to say no to further European integration, but permits them to do that provided that they will be asked again until they say yes. At the same time, the system says that when they have said yes to European integration, they cannot say that they want to rethink their position and, perhaps, say no. That is intolerable and cannot be allowed to happen.

Some members of the Conservative Party seem to advocate that position. They say that when the last nation state to ratify the treaty, the Czech Republic, has done so — Poland having done so already — and we are past that post, we cannot go back. I reject that entirely.

The rights of people of individual nation states must be re-established. Those rights are long cherished and long established, some of which, in certain nation states, including our own, have been established for thousands of years. They cannot simply be set to one side because certain people want Europe to evolve even further and will not allow individual nation states and their citizens to have their say.

The amendment is interesting. I am not sure how much approval it has been given, although I assume that the wording of the amendment has been approved at the very top, by David Cameron.

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

Mr Campbell: I see smiling faces from the Ulster Unionist Party Benches. Therefore, I am sure that it

has been given that approval. I look forward to that party endorsing it at Westminster.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “calls” and insert

“on the UK Parliament to rescind the United Kingdom’s ratification of the Treaty; and further calls on those parties who aspire to form the next Government to hold a referendum to halt the ratification process across the European Union.”

I thank the DUP Members for bringing forward the motion. However, my party believes that it is necessary to amend the motion, which is flawed, and I will discuss that in a moment.

At the outset, I want to state emphatically that the Ulster Unionist Party is not anti-Europe; nor does it want the United Kingdom to withdraw from Europe. I am not clear about the DUP’s position on that issue. Perhaps, Mr Campbell’s colleagues will take the opportunity to declare whether they wish the United Kingdom to withdraw formally from the European Union.

It is worth mentioning and remembering that there are considerable —

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that withdrawing from or remaining in the EU plays no part in the Lisbon Treaty, which is the subject of the debate?

Mr Kennedy: I accept what the Member has said. However, the difficulty is that he has left vague his view on whether the DUP sees the European Union as important. Bear in mind that membership of the EU has brought significant benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

That is not to say that the members of my party are uncritical proponents of ever-greater union between European states. We support co-operation between free nations for mutual advantage. However, we oppose over-regulation and harmonisation measures in key areas where we believe Westminster to be the best judge. We have also long campaigned for a referendum on the European constitution, which is now the Treaty of Lisbon.

I remind Members that, as far back as 2004, my party’s European manifesto stated:

“The people should have their say when it is agreed, not when it suits Labour’s electoral interests. An EU Constitution might have been useful if it just consolidated existing treaties. In reality, it is yet another attempt to create an EU super-state.”

We stand over that pledge, which we consider equally applicable now. For even more clarity, let me quote our 2009 European manifesto, which states:

“We pledge that if the Lisbon Treaty is not in force in the event of the election of a Conservative Government this year or next, we will hold a referendum on it, urge its rejection, and — if successful — reverse the UK’s ratification. And if the Constitution is already in force by then, we have made clear that in our view political

integration in the EU would have gone too far, the Treaty would lack democratic legitimacy, and we would not let matters rest there.”

Our position is —

Mr Ford: To stand idly by.

2.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I remind Mr Ford that on 8 October 2007, he told the House:

“A referendum on the EU treaty is long overdue: bring it on.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p248, col 1*].

Is that still his position?

Our position, and the position of our partners, the Conservative Party, has not changed at all, just as the European constitution did not change when it was rebranded the “Lisbon Treaty”. We support a referendum. It is rather curious that the DUP is looking to the next Government, rather than the current Government, to bring forward a referendum. Surely the DUP should be pressing Gordon Brown and the Labour Administration, with whom it has considerable contact, to bring forward a referendum proposal. We support a referendum, and, if in government, we will allow a referendum, should a meaningful one be possible.

My colleagues and I have brought forward an amendment —

Mr Dodds: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Sorry, I have to make progress.

We have brought forward an amendment that makes the motion more coherent and grounded in fact. Quite frankly, there are a couple of reasons why the unamended motion is not good. First, in our view, it is constitutionally illiterate, calling, as it does, on the next UK Government to hold a binding referendum. There is no such thing in the British Constitution. The British Constitution is founded on the principle that Parliament is sovereign; therefore, the decisions of Parliament are binding. However, some DUP members, even those who are Members of the House of Commons, appear to have limited knowledge of that. In October 2007, a DUP Member told the House:

“there is no such thing as a British Constitution.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p255, col 2*].

The DUP can hardly be expected to bring forward a motion that takes account of a constitution that it does not believe exists. For the information of all Members, there are 59 books on the British Constitution in the House of Commons Library. DUP Members may wish to consult some of those before embarrassing themselves again.

Our amendment removes the superfluous word —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am making progress; I gave way earlier to the Member’s colleague.

The amendment removes the superfluous word “binding” and calls on the incoming Government to hold a referendum, but only after asking Parliament to rescind its ratification of the treaty, which was completed on 19 June 2008, which would then have the effect of halting the ratification of the treaty.

It must be made clear that, in the real world, it will not be possible for the UK to do that should the Czech Republic finalise its ratification, a point on which our manifesto is clear. Although it may be desirable and welcome for the British people to have their say on the treaty, a referendum specifically on the Lisbon Treaty would be meaningful only if it had the effect of halting the ratification process. Given that the Czech Republic is on the verge of completing that process, we must recognise that reality.

I am grateful to the DUP Members who sponsored the motion in that they have, at least, acknowledged that the only party with a realistic chance of forming the next national Government is the Ulster Unionist Party, in conjunction with the Conservative Party. Only parties — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Kennedy: Only parties that seek a national mandate can bring change to national politics, and only those parties can bring something new to Northern Ireland.

The DUP does not offer the people of Northern Ireland a referendum on Lisbon: it offers them a commitment to talk about one. The Ulster Unionist Party offers the people of Northern Ireland a say on Europe, a say on defence matters and a say on the United Kingdom’s foreign policy. Therefore, the Ulster Unionist Party offers the people of Northern Ireland something that they have not had for a very long time: a real say in national affairs. While we have been securing our place at the heart of national politics, the DUP has been making sure that it remains on the periphery.

Mrs Robinson’s nine fingers damaged the DUP in the House of Commons. I do not particularly care about that, but it also damaged the reputations of Northern Ireland and unionism. Our alliance with the Conservative Party received a mandate from the people of Northern Ireland in the recent European election. We will continue to seek a referendum for as long as one is possible.

Hopefully, the Ulster Unionists and the Conservatives will pursue that aim and policy from the Government Benches, which is where real influence is exerted and where real change takes place. The Ulster Unionist Party looks forward to the challenge of the Westminster election and other forthcoming elections.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened intently to the Member, and it is vitally important that he sticks to the motion. The Member has strayed outside the motion.

Mr Kennedy: The amendment offers action, and I commend it to the House.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I accept and respect the democratic principles on which the European Community was founded. Given the challenges to global economics that emerged, it was inevitable that the European Community would evolve. That is the kernel of Sinn Féin's opposition to the Lisbon Treaty.

The European Union has fundamentally shifted away from being a union that was based on co-operation between nation states to exercise their collective strengths to mutual benefit. Our objection to the Lisbon Treaty is based on a careful analysis of the treaty, which is more than can be said for the "Yes" camp, particularly during the campaign on the first referendum. The rerun of the referendum further demonstrated that fundamental point — and here I acknowledge the unique experience of agreeing with Gregory Campbell on that issue. My party and I will support the motion.

There has been a strategic and fundamental step away from the democratic rights of the citizens of Europe. The electorate in the Twenty-six Counties faced a very difficult challenge, particularly during the rerun of the referendum, given all of the blacklisting and blackballing that resulted from its rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in the first referendum. That illustrated that democratic opinion does not count to those who proposed the Lisbon Treaty.

In the debates on the first and second referendums, we witnessed the spectacle of those who strongly advocated a "Yes" vote not having any familiarity with the document that they were defending and recommending for acceptance.

The contempt for the first result was reflected in the fact that they did not take the time or trouble to read the document in the first place. The changes were cosmetic, which time will demonstrate. Time will also demonstrate that the Southern Irish electorate was sandbagged. This proposition argues the principle that citizens of European Union member states have a democratic right to vote on fundamental decisions that shift power towards the centre, towards the European Commission or towards the Council of Ministers and away from the Parliament. That is a departure from democratic principles.

The treaty could permit the establishment of a standing military force and could give the European Commission the power to authorise military interventions by that

force. Those are fundamental questions on which every citizen has the right to be consulted and to express their opinion. Numerous Governments in the European Union took that decision and removed citizens' rights to participate in referendums. Some broke their manifesto commitments to hold a referendum on that question because they feared the judgement of the people. On that principle, I support the motion. Moreover, if the amendment receives sufficient support and becomes the substantive motion, we will support the amended motion.

The motion is about a British referendum and, as people will understand, is of no particular importance to Sinn Féin. However, people in Britain have a perfect right to express their views, and individual citizens of all member states have an absolute right to express their views. The fundamental departure from democratic principles is a matter of concern for people who, if the treaty is enacted and implemented, will wonder about the direction for the future.

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

Mr McLaughlin: There are absolutely no grounds to suggest that the European Union will reverse its position on the matter.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McLaughlin: If the proposition is adopted in Britain, it will perhaps be time to call a halt to this undemocratic march.

Mr A Maginness: It is no surprise that Sinn Féin and the DUP have a common cause on the European Union in the House today. It is sad that two major parties are at one in their anti-Europe stance. It is bad for society, and something that I deeply regret. It is bad for our community to send a Euro-sceptic message to Brussels. Parties should reflect deeply on that thought.

Mr McLaughlin made a point about a military pact, which is, of course, incorrect. He did not point out that all decisions on actions in the European Union must be unanimous. They cannot be subject to the majority vote of members in the European Union. Wendy Austin made a pre-referendum visit to Dublin, where she asked a lady in the street how she would vote. She replied that she would vote "No" and then asked what Europe has done for us. Wendy was flabbergasted by the response, because she recognises that the European Union has rebuilt this Republic.

Members' attitudes reflect that lady's opinion. The European Union has done much to enhance this society and can do a lot more.

2.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member not understand that the motion is simply about allowing people to have

their say as to whether they wish Europe to have more of an effect on their lives? Surely the Member is not saying that that in some way represents a slur on those who are calling for people to have their say?

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

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I wish that what the Member said were true, but the motion is anti-European and reflects the DUP and Sinn Féin's views on Europe, which are fundamentally against the European Union, no matter how they dress it up. People should have their say; the people in the Republic had their say on the European Union and on the Lisbon Treaty, which they supported. They expressed their views on the first referendum and got changes made to the treaty. That, I believe, shows the responsibility of any Government to go to Brussels and negotiate with our partners in order to —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; my time is nearly up.

The Irish Government adopted the correct approach. The Irish people responded to that, and they gave a resounding "Yes" to the Lisbon Treaty. The last hurdle will be whether the Czech Republic decides to support the treaty, which I believe is a formality. All the procedures have been gone through, and the House of Commons has voted on the matter. The House of Commons is sovereign in that regard and is the supreme democratic forum for the British people. To suggest that we rerun that vote —

Mr Dodds: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; my time is nearly up.

To suggest that we rerun that vote and, in some way, resile from the position that the House of Commons adopted is wrong. It is wrong in law and wrong in parliamentary procedure. It is almost inevitable now that the Czech Republic will endorse the Lisbon Treaty. That is the right thing to do for everyone in Europe. The Lisbon Treaty improves democracy in Europe, it improves the democracy of the European Parliament, and it extends that body's co-decision-making. The treaty permits national Parliaments to scrutinise, at an early stage, proposed EU legislation and allows —

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

Mr A Maginness: Finally, the Lisbon Treaty allows the European Court of Justice to judicially review any legislation. Those matters are important to the future of Europe.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Ford: I support Alban Maginness's comments in large measure. It will come as no surprise that my colleagues and I will oppose the motion and the amendment.

In proposing the motion, Mr Campbell made much of saying that at its heart was the fundamental issue that the people should be consulted when changes are to be made to a constitution. Leaving aside the minor detail of whether the UK has a constitution — I would have thought that Mr Campbell, as a Member in another place, had views on the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament — the blunt reality is that that was the issue in October 2007, when we debated the matter. Whether we should have had a referendum prior to ratification was a valid debating point, and a point on which, at the time, I disagreed with Alban Maginness. That, however, is not the issue that we face today. The issue is that the UK and 25 other states have ratified the Lisbon Treaty, and it appears that the Czech Republic will do so fairly soon.

The focus of the motion and the amendment is on turning back the clock, but that is simply not recognising the reality of the situation. Where do Members of both unionist parties believe that the UK's relationship with the EU will be, if, having ratified the treaty, the UK Government, whether pre- or post-election next year, do anything to change what has been agreed as being a binding commitment to accept the new treaty? If anything were done, whether the Government were under the control of the current party, a different party or a coalition of parties, how could the Government have any credibility in future relationships with the EU?

Mr Weir: To be fair to colleagues on my right, that does not appear to be their position. Although the UUP has stated that it would "not let matters rest", it has not offered a concrete position on what it will do if the treaty is ratified. I suspect that, rather than not letting the matter rest, the UUP will be gripped by a degree of motionlessness or inertia.

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

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Weir for his intervention. He must have a spy in the Gallery looking over my shoulder, because he is a couple of lines ahead of me in my notes.

I agree: Mr Kennedy said on at least one occasion that Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF) was not anti-European; yet, in practice, it has called for the ratification to be rescinded without saying how that would be done. Perhaps it is not surprising, given some of the strange creatures with whom the UUP associates in the European Parliament, that the UCUNF coalition is not quite sure where it stands. If I were to take my lead from anybody who

had anything to do with that particular grouping, I would rather listen to the views of someone such as Edward McMillan-Scott, the long-standing and rather more sensible Conservative MEP, who is prepared to stand up against the nonsense of those who claim to be a progressive, non-sectarian force in the United Kingdom and who somehow associate with a rather strange bunch of people from some of the recent accession countries, with some of the particular aspects that they have.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: No, I think that you have had your chance to make your point. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: We have to look at what Mr Kennedy quoted from the UUP's 2009 European manifesto: he said that they "would not let matters rest", as Mr Weir highlighted. I am old enough to remember a day in August 1969, when the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, was reported as having said that the Irish army, in the event of difficulties in the North, would not stand idly by — for the sake of accuracy, he did not use the word "idly" — but it seems to me that it is more disingenuous for a party to say that it will do something but will not tell anyone what that "something" is, rather than say it will overturn something even though it is not actually possible to do so.

I supported the concept of a referendum when it was meaningful, realistic and possible, but the position now is that it is none of those: it would be a completely pointless exercise. The UUP says that it will have a real say in national affairs, yet it has chosen to line up in a European cul-de-sac with no realistic aim or objective and no way of saying how it will advance issues within the United Kingdom that will make any sense. The UUP has nothing to offer the House or the wider UK population that could be implemented and that would make a change. To suggest that the UUP will move things forward is nonsense.

Similarly, I listened to Mr McLaughlin with interest. He called the proposition a fundamental departure from democratic principles. I must admit — this point was made by Mr Maginness — that I do not understand how making the institutions of the EU more democratic is somehow a departure from democracy. Neither can I see how giving rights to national Parliaments to have greater consultation and say is anti-democratic or how putting powers into the hands of the European Parliament rather than the alleged Brussels bureaucracy is also anti-democratic.

I firmly believe that the Lisbon Treaty has advanced the ability of Europe to continue to build the peace that was its real meaning, aspiration and success so far and to advance the economy across Europe.

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

Mr Ford: I reject the motion and the amendment.

Mr S Wilson: The Members who spoke to oppose the motion all failed to address what the motion is about. The motion is not about our views on the Lisbon Treaty. It is about whether the people should have a say on major constitutional change that will impact on the ability of the Assembly and the national Parliament at Westminster to take decisions and will result in dramatic changes to the roles of those institutions.

The motion is not anti-Europe; it is pro-democracy. The Members who spoke against the motion have not addressed that issue. Are they afraid to allow the people who will be affected by the Lisbon Treaty and the centralisation that it represents to have their say? We do not have a chance to debate whether the terms of the treaty are democratic or anti-democratic because the people of the United Kingdom and the people of Northern Ireland have not even been given an opportunity to examine the issue and make a decision on it.

Mr Kennedy: The issue is of considerable importance, but, if it is of such fundamental importance to Mr Wilson, why is he a member of a party that, on at least one famous occasion, propped up a Labour Government who have denied the people a referendum on Europe? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: Why did the Member's party prop up the Government with the famous nine votes?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his speaking time.

Mr S Wilson: The Member is well aware of the difficulties that his party is having with a member who wants to be able to prop up the Labour Government, not just on one occasion but into the future. Indeed, that party is looking for all sorts of ways to push that member to one side and get rid of her. The one thing that I would say — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr S Wilson: If the Member is so concerned about that matter, why is he trotting along the Cameron line? The Conservative Party, to which the Member's party wants to ally itself, promised a referendum, but it is now backing away from that. Indeed, I notice that the amendment makes no commitment on whether there should be a referendum on Europe, despite what Ulster Unionist Party members have said about the treaty and the constitution. That party, too, is backing away from giving a definite answer about whether there should be a referendum.

Mr Maginness said that we should consider what Europe has done for us, but today's debate is all about examining what the Lisbon Treaty would potentially enable Europe to do to us. The centralisation of power; increases in qualified majority voting; increases in the European Commission's powers; the powers that the president would have; and the powers of the high commissioner — or whatever fancy name he will have — with regard to foreign policy will all lead to more European-wide decisions. It will be difficult for national Parliaments and national Administrations to oppose those decisions.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member not recognise that the Lisbon Treaty will give national Parliaments greater scrutiny of proposed legislation, increase the powers of the European Parliament and provide for judicial reviews by the European Court? Those represent enhancements of democracy.

Mr S Wilson: One has only to look at the European Parliament, whether in its present form or in the promised enhanced form, to recognise that it is and will continue to be a fairly ineffectual body. It is faced with a Commission that will have more powers and on which some nations will not even be represented any longer. Despite that, the Member tries to argue that the Lisbon Treaty will enhance democracy and lead to more input from national Parliaments.

2.45 pm

We could debate the intricacies of the Lisbon Treaty all day, but the fact remains that it is a constitution. It represents 98% of what was in the original EU constitution. No democrat should be afraid to put the treaty to the people, argue its merits, face its critics and let the people decide on it. That is what national sovereignty is about; it is the people who will be affected by the treaty.

Motorcyclists, lorry drivers, bus drivers and farmers are just some of the groups who were affected by European Union decisions when I was Minister of the Environment.

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

Mr S Wilson: Many people were affected by European decisions over which I, as Minister, and the Assembly had no control. We can do away with that by giving people the opportunity to have a referendum.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. To oppose the Lisbon Treaty is not to be anti-European, which is an insult often hurled at those who oppose it. I strongly suspect that Sinn Féin opposes the Lisbon Treaty for very different reasons from the parties opposite. However, we can all agree on the basic principle that the citizens of Europe have a right to vote on the Lisbon Treaty because it will

bring about a fundamental change in the relationship between the European power bloc, the Commission and the citizens of Europe. That, in itself, should ensure the right of citizens to a vote.

The SDLP now opposes the treaty, which I find remarkable. Dominic Bradley, for example, represents south Armagh, which is part of a border constituency.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just let me finish my point. Dominic Bradley represents a constituency that runs along the Armagh/Louth border. Is it acceptable for a citizen in Louth to have a vote in a referendum but unacceptable for a citizen in Armagh? The SDLP lobbied for a "Yes" vote in Louth; therefore surely it would want the right to lobby for a "Yes" vote in Armagh.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that, contrary to what he just said, the SDLP is not opposed to the treaty?

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise if I said that the SDLP was opposed to the treaty; what I meant to say was that the SDLP is opposed to a referendum. I thank the Member for that intervention.

The shift of power to the Commission under the treaty is alarming. The Commission, not the European Parliament, the Assembly, Westminster or Dáil Éireann, would elect a president, appoint a Minister for foreign affairs and direct European foreign policy. There is no guarantee that the Twenty-six Counties will have a commissioner for all time; its position could be removed.

Alban Maginness's view that Europe could not go to war or use the European army without a unanimous decision is, in my opinion, deeply flawed. The power blocs in —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will let you in in a minute.

In the past, the power blocs in the European Commission used their unhealthy influence to coerce people into making decisions that were not in the interests of their citizens, and they will continue to use that unhealthy influence.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Any decision in that area must be unanimous; no decision can be made that is not unanimous. That is in the treaty.

Mr O'Dowd: The same democrats who support the Lisbon Treaty and who tell us that it contains safeguards turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the wishes of the citizens of the Twenty-six Counties when they voted against the Lisbon Treaty.

Mr A Maginness: No.

Mr O'Dowd: They did; there is no change to the Lisbon Treaty whatsoever. Guarantees were given, but no legal amendments were made to it.

Those who say that they are democrats, that decisions will be unanimous and that they will listen to the smaller nations are the same people who told the Dublin Government that the "No" vote was the wrong result and that they should go back and get the right one. The people in the Twenty-six Counties were coerced into voting "Yes". As Members in the Chamber have been told, the people were told that a "No" vote was anti-European and it let down their European neighbours.

More importantly, citizens of the Twenty-six Counties were told that, if they did not vote "Yes", the country would be economically crippled. The economy is in bad shape as it is. Are the people who said that the same people who guarantee that they will not go to war or use foreign policy against the wishes of smaller nations? Those people omitted to tell the citizens of the Twenty-six Counties that they had been in charge when the economy went down the pan in the first place and that they had had their hands on the tiller of economic policy and direction.

I have no difficulty with working in co-operation or forming agreements with my European neighbours. Ireland must not be isolationist; we have to work with our European neighbours in a joined-up way that benefits all nations. I want Europe to take a new direction. I want a Europe that is prepared to stand up to countries such as Israel and to have a positive and strong role in bringing forward a Middle East peace settlement. I do not want a Europe that simply sits back and allows Israel to continue with the same policies. I want a Europe that ensures that its economic policies do not undermine or restrict the economic growth of the developing world.

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

Mr O'Dowd: There is no point in Europe making lofty statements about bringing poverty to an end. As an economic entity, Europe can help to bring poverty to an end throughout the world.

Mr Ross: The debate centres on the right of UK subjects to express their view on the relationship with the EU and particularly on the Lisbon Treaty, which will further dilute national sovereignty and centralise more power in the EU. As Members have heard, the Assembly endorsed the view that a national referendum should be held to give people a voice. Circumstances have changed since the vote took place in the Irish Republic, but the right of the people in the United Kingdom to speak on such a constitutional change has not.

As with the vote on the Treaty of Nice, the vote in the Irish Republic adhered to the old adage "If at first you don't succeed; try, try, try again." Undoubtedly, had the Irish Republic voted "No" a second time, a third referendum would have been held. That should not surprise us because we have become used to that type of European democracy. When France and the Netherlands voted "No" on the constitutional treaty, the treaty's name was changed. Thus, the opportunity for those countries to have their voice heard on the Lisbon Treaty was circumvented, and the treaty was endorsed through other means.

At least those countries had the opportunity to voice their opposition to the transfer of further power to the European Union. Despite manifesto commitments by the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, the people of the United Kingdom have not had that opportunity. As we have heard, as David Cameron prepares to take over Number 10, he is positioning himself to deny a referendum. Some in his party, such as Daniel Hannan, other MEPs and, indeed, other MPs, take a different view. David Cameron fears a referendum because it would highlight the Euro-sceptic wing in his party and the splits over Europe that he has been trying so hard to cover up.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member acknowledge that, on 5 March 2008, the Conservative Party tabled an amendment in the House of Commons that called for a referendum but was voted down and that, subsequently, on 11 March 2008, the European Union (Amendment) Bill cleared the House of Commons? Does he further acknowledge that, on 11 June 2008, had the DUP's nine MPs voted differently, the Government would have fallen and a Conservative Government would now be in power? There would have been a vote, and the people of the United Kingdom would have had the opportunity of a referendum. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member who had the Floor took an intervention. A Member who intervenes must be careful not to turn an intervention into a statement, but that is exactly what Mr McCrea did. The Member may carry on.

Mr Ross: Mr McCrea became extremely excited for a moment. Perhaps his time would be better spent asking his party colleague or indeed his entire party's representation in the House Commons over the past few years how they voted on a number of issues and how many times they propped up the Labour Government. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us be absolutely clear: everybody who wants to speak in the debate will have the opportunity to do so. However, the Member has the Floor, and other Members should allow him to continue.

Mr S Wilson: The hysterical reaction from Mr McCrea illustrates how vulnerable he and his party feel about the issue. Does he accept that the vote to which he referred, which concerned terrorists and whether there should be a detention period of 42 days, would not have brought down the Government and had nothing to do with the issue?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us be absolutely clear: I will not allow interventions to become political statements. I will not allow that to happen in the House.

Mr Ross: I totally agree with my colleague. The Ulster Unionist Party increasingly finds itself in difficult positions when it answers questions about its relationship with the Conservative Party. The fact remains that the two major parties in the House of Commons are scared to have a referendum because of what the result would be.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way. Too much of my time has already gone.

The people of the United Kingdom deserve their say about our relationship with Europe. Earlier, we heard about the many EU laws and directives that we can do nothing about. Such laws and directives are presented to Members at Committee meetings, but we have no chance to amend them or vote against them. We have experienced that in Northern Ireland because, for so long under direct rule, decisions were made at Westminster through Orders in Council. There was no opportunity for us to debate or amend those decisions, so we know all about the democratic deficit.

The people of the UK were promised that the EU was about a common market and free trade, but of course it was not. Over the years, the EU has accumulated power through various treaties and is becoming closer to the federal state that we all fear.

The Lisbon Treaty is almost identical to the constitutional treaty, and it will create two positions. We remember the famous speech by Mr William Hague in the House of Commons in which he described Gordon's nightmare: Gordon Brown hung on for so long waiting for Tony Blair to stand aside, only for Tony Blair to now have the opportunity to become the president of Europe. The treaty will also create the position of a high representative for foreign affairs, which is a foreign secretary in all but name. Foreign secretaries are required for nation states but not for the type of arrangement that the EU is meant to be. However, the EU is increasingly becoming a union of European citizens rather than a union of member states; we should be afraid of that. We even saw President Barroso pointing to the European flag and saying that that was the flag of his country. That tells us an awful lot about what Europe is becoming.

We also heard about the further centralisation of power in Brussels and how parts of our vetoes are being eroded. Therefore, for an issue as significant as the Lisbon Treaty, it is important that people in the United Kingdom have an opportunity to speak and have a serious debate about the role that the United Kingdom plays in an ever more powerful EU.

Mr Speaker: Order. As Question Time will commence at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Danny Kinahan.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Parades

1. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department will direct the Arts Council to deny funding to bands which participate in parades commemorating loyalist paramilitaries.

(AQO 259/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): My Department is committed to promoting equality of opportunity and good relations. Any organisation that receives funding from my Department and its arm's-length bodies must comply with the equality and good relations policies of the relevant funding organisations. Any body that does not do so is not eligible for funding.

The Arts Council's musical instruments for bands scheme and its small grants programme provide funding to bands for musical tuition costs and instruments. All bands that receive funding are required to comply fully with the Arts Council's commitment to equality of opportunity and good relations. The Arts Council has advised that it does not fund or support any bands that do not comply with that requirement.

For both funding programmes, the council checks individual band websites to ensure that there is no evidence of any content that would breach the equality and good relations commitments.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Given the Minister's answer, is he willing to enquire whether confidence is lost by allowing some loyalist bands that march past nationalist communities every year to commemorate what I would call loyalist paramilitaries? If he does not, people from my community, who have very little confidence in the Minister, will lose what little they had.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I made it clear that the position was that all bands are required to comply fully with the Arts Council's equality of opportunity and good relations commitments. The council has looked into the matter and has advised that it does not fund or support any bands that do not comply with that requirement.

Mr McNarry: There is obviously a list of bands — the Minister referred to it — that have received Arts

Council funding. Does the Minister know whether the Arts Council holds a list of bands that participate in parades?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no single list that notes the bands that participate in parades. That would be the case for loyalist and nationalist or republican parades. A band may say in its application that, as part of its contribution to the community, it participates in community events. However, I do not think that any list of bands that participate in parades exists.

Mr Weir: Has the Arts Council ever rejected an application for funding for a band on the grounds that it had links with a paramilitary organisation?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As part of the assessment process, the Arts Council examines entries on a band's website and details of its activities. If the council considers that a band has contravened the necessary good relations commitment, which, as I said, is a condition for funding, that application is rejected. The Arts Council would not accept further applications from such a band until there was satisfactory evidence of a shift in attitude to the good relations commitment and a change in the website's content.

On the basis of contravening the good relations commitment, the Arts Council rejected two applications from bands in the recent funding round in the musical instruments for bands scheme. The council wrote to both bands to outline the reasons for rejection.

Places for Sport

2. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if 'Places for Sport' funding will be available in the 2010-11 financial year. (AQO 260/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is planned that £2.13 million will be provided for Places for Sport in 2010 and 2011. That is additional to the planned allocation for the current financial year of £6.35 million and an actual allocation for the previous financial year of £1.62 million. That gives an approximate total allocation of £10.1 million over the period 2008-2011.

That represents a significant investment by my Department in facilities across Northern Ireland. The £2.13 million planned allocation for 2010-2011 relates to awards that are anticipated to be made later this year for a phase of the programme for which applications closed in June 2009.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister's Department provide the maximum possible support for the Edendork GAC in County Tyrone, which needs help to replace the clubhouse

that was burned down in an arson attack in November 2008?

I shall also take this opportunity to ask the Minister whether funds are available to repair the recently vandalised facilities at the Mary Peters track.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member asked whether financial support is available for a particular club. I outlined the funding that has been allocated to the scheme, which is open to all clubs for applications, all of which, I am sure, will be treated fairly and properly. However, I cannot comment on funding for a particular club, so there the matter must rest.

The Mary Peters track is owned by Belfast City Council, to which questions about how it intends to deal with the damage should be addressed. The council may have insurance cover for the facility, so it should look into that. The Member should also be aware that the council intends to carry out a more comprehensive refurbishment of the Mary Peters track.

Mr Gardiner: How many applications failed to be approved by the scheme due to late submission?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I do not have that information to hand, but I will endeavour to respond to the Member in due course.

Lord Browne: What benefits will the investment of public funds in sporting programmes and facilities bring before, during and after the London Olympics in 2012?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The investment of public funds in the elite facilities programme will provide a legacy of world-class sports facilities for use by the Northern Ireland community both at performance and grass-roots level, including by schoolchildren. The programme is about creating a facility, performance and participation legacy for Northern Ireland beyond 2012 that will also cover key gaps in facility provision across the sports infrastructure and that will significantly contribute to delivering the strategy for sport and physical recreation.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Windsor Park Football Ground

4. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure that Linfield Football Club is not given an unfair financial advantage as a result of the redevelopment of Windsor Park. (AQO 262/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It has been made absolutely clear to both the IFA and Linfield Football Club that any development at Windsor Park that involves significant public expenditure is conditional on the contractual arrangements being agreed to the

satisfaction of all concerned, and, wherever possible, my Department will facilitate that process. The issue will also feature prominently in the outline business case for regional stadia development that has been commissioned by Sport NI. It is vital that any new contractual arrangements that are put in place provide a sustainable long-term future for international football in Northern Ireland. As far as the commercial arrangement between the IFA and Linfield Football Club is concerned, the IFA is, in the first instance, responsible for addressing the concerns of the other football clubs, and I anticipate that that, too, will be a factor when re-examining the present contract arrangements.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for his response. Is he confident that no unfair financial advantage will be given to Linfield Football Club in the ongoing discussions on contractual arrangements between that club and the IFA?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I said that the arrangement reached has to be fair, acceptable and to the satisfaction of all concerned. I look forward to receiving the consultants' report in due course, and I will look at it very carefully. I hope that the report will be made before the end of the year so that we can make an initial approach to the Executive.

Mr Spratt: What is the position in relation to the provision of a stadium for the three sports?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I outlined during questions for oral answer last month, my predecessor earlier this year asked the three governing bodies of the sports involved to submit their preferred options on regional stadium provision. In June 2009, the Executive received an update on stadium development and a broad outline of the options submitted and agreed the process for advancing regional stadium development.

Since taking office, I have actively encouraged that process and I have met representatives of the governing bodies. A strategic outline case confirming the options to be tested in a full economic appraisal has been produced and has been approved by DFP. Consultants have been appointed recently to undertake an economic appraisal of the options. As I indicated, I expect to be able to return to the Executive before the end of the year with the outcome and proposals to take forward the strategic development of regional sports stadiums.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones, which affect the recording system in the Chamber. Once again, I remind Members to rise continually in their places. The key word is "continually".

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister reassure Members that the distribution of grants to football clubs will be

balanced geographically and will include football clubs that do not play in the Irish League? I mean Derry City Football Club.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I made a useful visit to Fermanagh recently and viewed facilities at Ballinamallard United Football Club. I was most impressed by the good work that goes on there, not only with the main teams, but with the youth and, Members will be glad to hear, several ladies' football teams.

Mr McNarry: So that's why you were there. [Laughter].

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assure Members that no football teams were playing on the day when I visited. David McNarry must be greatly disappointed.

It is important that a fair and equitable spread of resources across the Province is achieved, not just geographically, but at all levels and across all sports. A conversation about this is taking place with Sport NI. Members should be reassured that that is indeed the case.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that the decision to proceed with the investment at Windsor Park was equality-impact assessed? If not, what consideration did he give before allocating the resources to make investment available for health and safety work by the other two sports at Ravenhill and Casement Park?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Some time ago, the Executive decided to look at the needs of the three sports. That decision was made during my predecessor's term as Minister. When I took over, I engaged immediately with all three sports at the same time and at the one meeting. I said to them that I wanted their proposals, and they have each presented them. I am pursuing that, and I am pressing forward as quickly as possible.

3.15 pm

The point that all three governing bodies expressed most emphatically was that they did not want any delay; they were simply concerned that the matter be progressed as quickly as possible. That is why I indicated that we would have something back before the end of the year.

Any assessments would have been made earlier, but we were past that point. The Executive decided earlier in the year to proceed in that way.

Ulster Museum

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the budget and timescale for the refurbishment of the Ulster Museum. (AQO 263/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster Museum will reopen on 22 October 2009, with an additional 1,225 sq m of gallery space. That increases the public areas by more than 10%.

The overall budget for the project is £17.2 million, which is made up of the following contributions: £11.2 million from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; £4.7 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is the largest Heritage Lottery Fund grant to be awarded to a project in Northern Ireland to date; and £1.3 million from trusts, private grants and donations, including a £500,000 donation from private individuals in the USA.

The removal and storage of the collections from the museum, together with the construction and fit out, has taken three years to complete. When the public come to see the end product of the refurbishment, I am sure that they will appreciate that the project has been time and money well spent.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he advise whether a value for money assessment has been carried out on the deployment of museum staff over those three years?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The period that the project has lasted has been a very difficult time for the museum staff, who were endeavouring to do what they could. The other two sites at Cultra and Omagh were open during that time. There were difficulties regarding the staff at the Ulster Museum, and most were relocated to Cultra at various times. They were also involved in the development of the new museum.

The Member asked whether a value for money study was carried out. That is the sort of thing that might have been done at an earlier stage. As I indicated earlier, I arrived at the Department at the beginning of July 2009, at which point the project's completion was only a few months away. The museum reopens on Thursday. I have every confidence that the management in National Museums Northern Ireland ensured that staff were deployed properly and that the refurbishment was carried out to the best of its ability, making the maximum use of staff. However, I can enquire further into whether a study was carried out.

There can be a tendency in our country to spend a great deal of time, resources and money on asking consultants and experts to do all sorts of studies. I would prefer that we devote staff, money and resources to front line services to ensure that, as in this case, we get the best outcome. The museum has a very important role to play in the cultural infrastructure of Northern Ireland.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister tell us how the timescale and budget of the project to refurbish the

Ulster Museum compares with similar projects in the rest of the UK?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: National Museums Northern Ireland has sought to maximise the benefits and opportunities that the project presented throughout its five-year life cycle. Consequently, the project has expanded to provide maximum value for money for stakeholders and the public. Additional work has included the construction of a new applied art gallery, which was not in the original concept. The project has released an additional 1,200 sq m of public space. The Ulster Museum project compares favourably with other national museums' projects in its quality of build, exhibition fit out and value for money. Those other projects include one worked on by National Museums Liverpool at a cost of £72 million and National Museums Scotland's £46 million Royal Museum project in Edinburgh, which is due to open in 2011.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that Northern Ireland is awash with visitors and tourists, and we welcome that. However, following the investment of £17 million into the refurbishment of the Ulster Museum, it is to close on Mondays. How will visitors to Belfast be accommodated on Mondays if all the museums are closed?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: National Museums Northern Ireland has been reviewing how best to support tourism, learning and community engagement. With that in mind, National Museums Northern Ireland has introduced revised opening hours to ensure that its services are aligned more closely with the needs and expectations of visitors. After it reopens at the end of October, the Ulster Museum will be open to the public from 10.00 am to 5.00 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Before the investment was made, the museum was closed on Saturday and Sunday mornings and open only in the afternoons.

Recent market research has shown that more than 70% of people prefer to visit a museum on a Saturday or a Sunday; only 3% cited Monday as the preferred day for a visit. That figure might not please Mr McCarthy, but it is the result of market research that was carried out by National Museums Northern Ireland.

National Museums Northern Ireland will keep its opening hours under review, ensuring that it continues to respond to visitor demands and expectations, and the revised opening hours will be implemented across its estate. Opening hours is an operational matter for the trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland.

North/South Implementation Bodies

6. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what efficiency savings the North/South

bodies, which are under his Department's remit, will be implementing this year. (AQO 264/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Finance and Personnel in Northern Ireland and the Department of Finance in the Irish Republic have agreed guidance on the delivery of efficiency savings, which will affect Waterways Ireland and the North/South Language Body, which are in my remit. The bodies will be required to achieve a minimum of 3% per annum cumulative cash-releasing efficiencies in 2009 and 2010. The baseline figures to be used will be the indicative budgets for 2009, which were established at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meetings in language body sectoral format and in inland waterways sectoral format on 16 January 2009. The bodies will also be required to develop an initial review process, which will encourage efficiency savings on a continual basis. Savings will be removed from the budget grants to the bodies, resulting in reductions in the contributions from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in line with funding ratios.

The bodies are redrafting their 2009 business plans in line with the agreed efficiency guidance. They will be forwarded to the sponsor Departments for clearance by DCAL and DFP Ministers in advance of business plans being presented for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Department will also wish to consider any scope for efficiencies in discharging its sponsorship role.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's answer and the news that there will be efficiency savings in "North/Southery". Will the Minister detail any plans for savings that he has implemented and changes that he has made in respect of North/South bodies and ministerial meetings over which he has control?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My predecessor, Gregory Campbell, reduced the cost of meetings by holding the NSMC meetings in language body sectoral format and in inland waterways sectoral format on one day and in one place, thereby reducing the cost of travel and accommodation and making a more efficient use of the time of Ministers and officials. I intend to continue that process and hold the two meetings consecutively on one day and in the same place.

I also intend to reduce costs as far as possible when hosting the NSMC meetings. For example, the next meetings will be held in December in my offices in Belfast, and I intend to use departmental premises to hold future meetings, because there is no need to hire plush premises or to put on extravagant lunches. In future, we may even take matters a stage further. There may be some instances where videoconferencing could be used to do business, and that would save on time and

on travel costs. Therefore, things can be done, and the Department will seek to do what it can in that regard.

Mr Attwood: Is the Minister not tempted to sow confusion in the minds of all those who harbour doubts about him and his ability as a Minister, by cutting through the fog and endorsing the proposal for an all-Ireland arts council? That would save money, it would be a non-threatening way of doing arts business on this island and —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Attwood: My question is about saving money, Mr Speaker. The creation of that arts council would define the Minister, in this part of the world, as a visionary rather than as some people portray him.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Attwood has been a bit slow on the uptake. He has not grasped the fact that the Executive's vision — as set out in the Programme for Government, which was signed up to by all the political parties — is to create “a shared and better future” in Northern Ireland. We must get that right in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it is important that we recognise that Northern Ireland's cultural links with Scotland, England and Wales are just as strong as those with the Irish Republic.

I recently took the opportunity of travelling to Edinburgh to meet my corresponding colleagues in the Scottish Government, and the folk there —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Allow him to answer.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I travelled to Scotland to meet the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture and the Minister for Public Health and Sport, to begin a process of developing those east-west links. The scenario that Mr Attwood set out does not recognise or reflect the complexity and nature of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. He seems to be very insular — that is a good word — in his approach. On this side of the Chamber, we approach things in a much more broad-minded manner.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister states that he has been involved in cost-cutting measures with respect to where he will hold future North/South Ministerial Council meetings. However, he could hold meetings in the bus shelter at the bottom of the hill, but he must still hold those meetings. He is involved in the North/South Ministerial Council, and he cannot get away from that fact.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As yet, I have not considered the possibility of using bus shelters to hold meetings. However, I think that we

will settle for the comfort of the DCAL offices in Belfast, which are very satisfactory.

The DUP's position has always been that there is opportunity and benefit in having good relationships with our neighbours in other countries. Therefore, meeting, from time to time, to discuss matters of mutual interest — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It seems that some have not grasped the fact that God gave us one mouth and two ears. It is good to listen, and I suggest that Mr O'Dowd should listen more and say a little bit less: he might learn something.

It is good to have the opportunity to meet folk from the Irish Republic and to do things that are of mutual benefit, just as it good to meet our colleagues in the other parts of the United Kingdom, of which we are an integral part.

Ulster-Scots Language and Culture

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how he determines the proportion of funding to be given to the development of Ulster-Scots language and culture. (AQO 265/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The proportionality or ratio of funding that is provided by Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic for the North/South Language Body, which comprises the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, was agreed when that body was established, on the basis of the assessed benefit to each country from the activities of each body. Currently, my Department funds 75% of the budget of the Ulster-Scots Agency and 25% of the budget of Foras na Gaeilge.

3.30 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Lisbon Treaty Referendum

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the verdict of the Republic of Ireland electorate on the Lisbon Treaty referendum; reaffirms its support for a referendum in the United Kingdom on the treaty; and calls for a declaration from those parties aspiring to form the incoming Government of the United Kingdom to give an unequivocal commitment to hold, within a twelve month period from assuming office in 2010, a binding referendum on the Lisbon Treaty that is unconditional and unrelated to how other member states choose to vote, and the result of which will not be held in abeyance pending a further referendum on the subject. — [*Mr Campbell.*]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “calls” and insert

“on the UK Parliament to rescind the United Kingdom’s ratification of the Treaty; and further calls on those parties who aspire to form the next Government to hold a referendum to halt the ratification process across the European Union.” — [*Mr Kennedy.*]

Mr Kinahan: I look forward to speaking on the serious subject of the Lisbon Treaty referendum. I support the Ulster Unionist Party’s amendment, which proposes to rescind the treaty and hold a referendum. If the public are watching, many will be extremely muddled as to who is for Europe and who is against it.

The motion is muddled in that it looks for a binding promise that we cannot give on an issue that we may not be able to deliver. ‘The Economist’ has stated that the Lisbon Treaty had made Europe too complicated and that it is difficult for all of us to understand. The Ulster Unionist Party is pro-Europe, most Members are pro-Europe to varying degrees, and most Members support a referendum. The Ulster Unionist Party is for Europe, and I will point out what Europe has done for us. It has brought together 27 very different countries, which has been an enormous success; it has helped struggling nations; and it has opened discussions on the issue of climate change and introduced environmental legislation that the House may not even have considered, given that one corner of the House does not believe in global warming.

Nevertheless, the Lisbon Treaty may take away our sovereignty and part of our history, of which we are very proud. The European Union is complicated, and it is becoming too big and too expensive.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member agree that the anti-European or Euro-sceptic views that have been expressed by some Members are to be regretted? We should be at the heart of, and show our wholehearted support for, Europe, which the Member has just done.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you. I look forward to an extra minute.

I do not agree fully with the Member. In varying degrees, we are all for Europe. ‘The Economist’ has stated that politics is local and that economics is global. We joined Europe for economic reasons, and we want that to continue. However, we want Europe to have less influence in our politics.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No. If I may, I would like to keep going.

The Lisbon Treaty may take all of that away. Recently, I was lucky enough to visit Brussels, where, in one of the many meetings that I attended, it was explained that, if we want to influence European legislation, we need to look at it two years before it is introduced. Once it is introduced, there is very little that we can do about it. The UK must not throw away its influence with the Commonwealth and its special relationship with America. Europe has been weak in certain areas, particularly in defence. Remember Rwanda, when Europe stood by and did absolutely nothing. A referendum is needed.

The motion refers to parties that have aspirations. That is a reference to the UUP, which is not part of the sideshow or of little Ulster. We want to have influence through our link with the Conservative Party, and we want to be with it in influencing what happens in Europe and what happens here. We are proud of the Union, and we are ready for change.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants a referendum for two reasons. First, the public must have their chance and their say. We must all educate the public on European issues and on where we are going. Secondly, a referendum is needed so that Europe knows exactly where the UK stands.

Dr McDonnell: I thank all the Members who have taken part in the debate, because I think it is very useful. Although some are suggesting that it is merely about a referendum, I have not missed — I do not think anybody could miss — the anti-European undertone of most of those who are proposing that there should be a referendum. It is a referendum with a view to undermining our commitment to Europe, and, indeed, undermining the commitment of Europe to us.

We in the SDLP have never been uncritical supporters of the European Union, but we examine each situation that arises rationally and on its merits. Over many years, I have repeatedly drawn the conclusion that the European Union as a whole, and European integration generally, works in our best interests. The simple — maybe too simple — illustration of that is the fact that over €1.65 billion, around £1.5 billion, has been invested

in Northern Ireland from the European Union via the peace and reconciliation funds. That funding has, without question, provided a vital lifeline in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic.

The European Union continues to prove that it is essential for securing and promoting jobs, the development of tourism, and the protection of our agriculture sector. Although things can sometimes be bad when we are inside, and working with, the European Union, they would be an awful lot worse if we were outside.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way. Although the Member mentioned how good Europe has been for the farming industry, it has not been equally as good for the fishing industry. That industry is one of the poor relations, with all the regulations that come from Europe, and the so-called scientific evidence that results in restricting the days at sea and restricting quotas. Does the Member accept that the European Union is not helping the fishing industry? Indeed, if anything, it is killing it.

Dr McDonnell: I thank my colleague for reminding me. Fishing is one of the issues that I was thinking of when I said that the SDLP had never been uncritical. Seas have been overfished and overworked, and the European Union has tried to curtail fishing, and sometimes to conserve fishing. Had it not been for some of the conservation — and I feel uncomfortable about it — many of the stocks of fish would have been wiped out. However, it is a concern that the fishing industry has been squeezed again and again. It is not so much a European problem as a global problem. There is overfishing, and one of these days, there will be very few fish left; they will become harder to find.

I am suggesting that Europe has been, and continues to be, good to us, with our infrastructure and community development funded from Brussels. It has continued to be good to us through key infrastructure investments such as the Kelvin project, which will ensure that at least eight towns in Northern Ireland and five just south of the border acquire the fastest telecoms connection to North America from anywhere in Europe. That new infrastructure will help us to attract international business and give us a much better trading platform. In many ways, it may have helped to create the atmosphere for the jobs announcement that we heard earlier this week.

Through the reforms of the Lisbon Treaty, Europe can be even better for us in the future. I am at a loss to understand why there is an intrinsic hostility to Europe espoused by many in the DUP and Sinn Féin, and, indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party. It strikes me as a paranoid view that one cannot trust foreigners.

Mr T Clarke: Perhaps I have missed the point, but surely the essence of the motion is that it is not the DUP's

view. The motion calls for the public to be given an opportunity to have a view; it does not necessarily force the view of the proposers upon others.

Dr McDonnell: Maybe I will get to that in a second. Our suspicion of foreigners is unhealthy. It is wise to be sensible and cautious, but we can sometimes be too cautious.

The Lisbon Treaty is an attempt to bring the institutions of Europe out of the 1970s, when they were set up to manage 15 states, and into the twenty-first century, when the European Union comprises 27 states. I warmly welcome a union of 27 states, because, like a lot of Members, I did not like the concepts of the Iron Curtain and of eastern Europe under the jackboot of Russia. We had an obligation to help those states, and I am glad that the European Union has taken them on board.

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

Dr McDonnell: Globally and locally, we face unprecedented economic and social challenges. Member states cannot rise and overcome those challenges alone.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin believes that every citizen of the European Union should have a say in such fundamental decisions about how society is run, whether that is in Ireland, Britain, France or Holland. Sinn Féin is not hostile to Europe, as the previous Member who spoke alleged. All politicians, elected representatives and members of the public have a right to scrutinise legislation and to make decisions on legislation such as the Lisbon Treaty. It is unhealthy for democracy and democratic debate that some parties adopt a *carte blanche* approach to any legislation that comes out of Europe. The treaty is not about staying in Europe or about economic investment, and some Members must recognise that.

The European Union will advance towards common foreign policies. Funding will increase for a European defence agency, there will be an EU foreign minister, and military alliances will be formed to carry out common foreign and defence initiatives. Those are facts, and that goes above and beyond the peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance that is already taking place.

Lisbon II was not a referendum on whether the Twenty-six Counties should stay in the European Union. It was not a referendum on job creation, as some in the Government alleged. The treaty contains nothing that will incentivise investment or stimulate growth. Ironically, the economic policies that the Lisbon Treaty promotes are exactly the same policies that drove us into the current economic crisis.

For the past 20 years, the European Union has pushed a right-wing economic agenda, promoting deregulation and liberalisation. It has aggressively promoted competition in all areas of the economy, including in public services. The European Union has weakened the ability of the state to manage the economy, leading to privatisation and inequality.

Much is revealed by an interesting quote from the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC). It told the National Forum on Europe that the treaty:

“creates the legal basis for the liberalisation of services of general economic interest (Art. 106). A yes vote for the Lisbon Treaty creates the potential for increased opportunities for Irish business particularly in areas subject to increasing liberalisation such as Health, Education”.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member agree that the Lisbon Treaty will affect 60 important areas, including policing, the army, justice, the finance system and employment? The treaty will make life easier for criminals. Will the Member agree that the people of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom should have the right to vote on it and to say no to it?

Mr McKay: I agree that everyone has the right to vote on issues that are as fundamental as that. It affects a wide range of issues, which must be addressed.

Public services, such as healthcare and education, will, under article 16 of the Lisbon Treaty, be subject to new economic and financial conditions. Healthcare and education will be subject to further privatisation, and, in turn, greater levels of inequality. We do not wish to see a united states of Europe.

We do not want to go down the same road as the United States, not only with regard to foreign policy and a unified army, but on critical issues such as health and education. We are aware of the gross health inequalities in the United States. There is little wonder that politicians such as Silvio Berlusconi have backed the Lisbon Treaty. It is fundamentally a right-wing treaty that will do nothing for Irish people's quality of life.

3.45 pm

SDLP member Alban Maginness suggested that a number of changes to the Lisbon Treaty were secured. That is just wrong: not one word of the treaty was changed between Lisbon I and Lisbon II. He said that a number of guarantees were secured by the Irish Government. In saying that, does he not recognise that Lisbon I was wrong in the first place and that Sinn Féin was, therefore, right to lobby for a “No” vote?

He talks about enhanced democracy. Article 48 of the Lisbon Treaty gives the European Union power to amend treaties without referenda. Clearly, therefore, it takes away from the democratic agenda. As regards nuclear power — an issue that SDLP members allege is close to their hearts — the Lisbon Treaty again

reaffirms and mandates the European Union to promote nuclear energy.

All in all, Cheann Comhairle, I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House. It is important that the House debate European issues. It does not do so often enough. The European Union has a great deal of power to set legislation that affects members of the public on the island. We must ensure that our voices are heard and that the views of the people of Europe are heard on fundamental changes to legislation. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: Why are there concerns about the Lisbon Treaty? If the treaty is enacted throughout Europe, the European community will change. UK citizens will no longer determine their own future. It will frequently be decided by others.

My colleague Danny Kinahan quoted ‘The Economist’; he said, rightly, that politics are local and economics are global. How true that statement is. The European Economic Community will become a political union. It will not be local. There will not be local politics. Decisions will be made remotely and will be unaccountable.

At present, European decisions must have the approval of the democratically elected Government in the European Council, or of the European Parliament. In future, a wide range of decisions will be made by the new proportionality voting system. Gregory Campbell, rightly, highlighted that as the fundamental shift that comes with the Lisbon Treaty. That means that other people can impose laws on us that do not have the British people's support.

We are expected to be content that the Parliament will be consulted for eight weeks, instead of six weeks. Although I respect Alban Maginness's comments, consultation of merely eight weeks, rather than six, does not improve democratic accountability. I question why the Alliance Party seems to be content with that.

We must ask what the purpose of the motion is as it is originally worded. Is it designed to achieve a particular outcome, or is it merely playing at party politics? It calls for parties to give a commitment to hold a referendum within 12 months of the next Westminster election. Why wait, possibly, up to 18 months? Such a delay could enable ratification of the treaty, to which the proposers claim to object.

My colleague Danny Kennedy indicated that the Ulster Unionist Party has given commitments to hold a referendum prior to the ratification of the treaty. That is what my party wishes to do. The proposers of the motion either fail to understand the nature of British parliamentary democracy or EU law, or are being mischievous. The key time is now, not 18 months from now, by which time ratification could have come into effect.

Mr Easton: Does the Member not agree that the DUP put down a motion a year ago that called for a referendum? Therefore, the DUP has been ahead of the game on the issue. My party has been pushing for a referendum — not the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Beggs: The Member did not answer the question that I posed: why does his party want to wait 18 months when, during that time, the treaty could be ratified? Perhaps, in summing up, a member of that party could answer the question.

It will be extremely difficult and painful to change the treaty once it comes into effect. Indeed, how will the outcome of a successful referendum to end the treaty be put into effect? Are the proposers of the motion, who indicate that they wish to hold a referendum in 18 months' time and after the enactment of the treaty, going to bind the UK to withdrawal from Europe? That could be the outcome.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No, I have given way already.

I notice that the proposers of the motion have not stated that that will be the case. However, if that is what they are stating, they should do so clearly.

Mitchel McLaughlin supports both the opposition to the Lisbon Treaty and the DUP motion. However, what consultation has there been with the business community or the community and voluntary sector about a possible withdrawal from Europe? I have major businesses in my constituency to think about; for example, FG Wilson and Schrader Electronics, two companies that trade extensively in Europe. That is a key reason why jobs are located here, why companies invest here and why new investment may come here. Have the proposers of the motion consulted the business community on how withdrawal from Europe could threaten jobs?

The Ulster Unionist Party has its differences with how we are governed in Europe, but withdrawal is not an option at this time. We would rather improve the structures in Europe to meet the needs of the United Kingdom.

The British Labour Party made a commitment to hold a referendum, and then welshed on it. That commitment should be honoured before the Lisbon Treaty is enacted.

Sammy Wilson failed to explain why nine DUP MPs supported the Government, gave them a lifeline, and thus enabled this law to come into effect. Had the Government fallen, and had there been an election, the treaty would not have been ratified. Someone should explain that.

I ask Members to support the amendment, follow the proper procedures to ensure that Parliament withdraws

its approval for the treaty and have an urgent referendum on the issue so that the United Kingdom can legally withdraw from the process. That will allow for a much better process to be put in place, one that enables continuing co-operation in Europe yet respects nation states.

Mr Hamilton: On a personal basis, I am much opposed to the Lisbon Treaty. In particular, I am opposed to the furtherance of EU power at the centre, the erosion of nation-state status, and the weakening of the powers of national Parliaments. I am concerned by the increasing development of the EU as a state, as seen in the Lisbon Treaty; by the idea of a permanent president of the European Council, in effect, a European foreign minister; by the legal personality of the EU; and by the 29 new areas in which qualified majority voting will be the decision-making mechanism, and not unanimity as before.

A Member mentioned the “citizens” of Europe. There is no such thing as a “citizen” of the EU at the moment. However, the Lisbon Treaty will create EU citizens. In many ways, the issue is not so much about the precise provisions of the Lisbon Treaty; rather, it is about further extension of EU power without recourse to the British people and without allowing them to have their say.

On 8 October 2007, David Burnside said that the British people had been sold a pup. There is such a contrast between Mr Burnside's virulent anti-European comments and those of the individual who replaced him in the House. However, in this case, I agree with David Burnside. The British people were sold what was, in effect, a very tame trading block within Europe. That is being replaced with something that is taking on, ever more, the personality of a superstate, as we see in the Lisbon Treaty.

However, this is not about my view, the DUP's view, or the view of any party in the Assembly. It is about the view of the people of the United Kingdom. The British people have been betrayed by the Labour Party, which promised in its 2005 manifesto that it would:

“put it to the British people in a referendum and campaign whole-heartedly for a ‘Yes’ vote to keep Britain a leading nation in Europe.”

It is the Labour Party's right to support a “yes” vote, but the point is its support for a referendum on the treaty. Despite what the previous Member who spoke said, the DUP would welcome a referendum immediately. We want the British people to get their say as soon as possible.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: The Member will have to hold on; I want to expand my point.

If the Member and his colleagues look at the motion, they will see that it reaffirms the Assembly's support for an immediate referendum. The motion demands a referendum today as much as it demands one from the next Government.

The Labour Party's manifesto pledge has been completely ignored. The Conservative Party manifesto states:

"We oppose the EU Constitution and would give the British people the chance to reject its provisions in a referendum".

That pledge has, to be polite, been nuanced to the extent that there is real concern and confusion about the party's position. The Conservative Party moves from unequivocal endorsement of a referendum to a position that is unclear, not just to me and others in this Chamber, but to members of that party.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that the Lisbon Treaty would create a president, a motto, a flag, an anthem and all the trappings of constitutional power? It seems that the Ulster Unionists are backtracking and are supporting the creation of a European superstate.

Mr Hamilton: Like the Member, I am concerned by the European Union's attempt to develop trappings of power that would be centralised in Brussels, particularly the creation of a permanent president and foreign minister. Those are positions that every state has, so if the European Union is not a developing superstate, why does it want to take on those characteristics?

Mr Kennedy: It seems that the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party agree on the need for a referendum. If the DUP regards a referendum as fundamental, why did its parliamentary team at Westminster not, through their votes and influence, take their opportunity to bring down a Labour Government that failed to honour the promise to hold a referendum that they made to the electorate? Why did the DUP not take that opportunity and create circumstances in which a referendum could be held?

Mr Hamilton: After he made that point twice and had it knocked down on both occasions, I did not think that the Member would want to embarrass himself any further. He is accusing my party of propping up a Government by supporting them in a vote on stronger anti-terrorism measures, even though his party's sole MP also supported it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is making a winding-up speech on the motion and has the Floor.

Mr Hamilton: Throughout her tenure at Westminster, the Ulster Unionist Party's sole Member of Parliament has habitually propped up the Labour Government, so much so that she is probably more loyal to the Labour Whip than many of the Labour Party's Back-Benchers.

I am not confused about the Tory position and neither are the people of the United Kingdom; it is the Conservative Party that is confused. One need only look at the mess that it has got itself into over recent weeks to see that. For example, David Heathcoat-Amory said of David Cameron:

"He simply can't fudge his way through this".

On the other side, David Curry said of the treaty:

@We should accept it."

In contrast, Andrew Rosindell said:

"I speak to people in my own constituency and I can tell you that everybody wants a referendum."

Roger Helmer MEP said — *[Interruption.]*

The Ulster Unionist Members do not want to hear about the very difficult position that they have got themselves into with the Conservative Party.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No; I have already given way to the Member.

The Ulster Unionist Party Members are scared stiff of the difficulties that the issue poses in the ranks of their new political alliance. When someone as pro-European as Kenneth Clarke says that he is content with the Conservative Party's position on the Lisbon Treaty, it should be cause for concern for those of us who oppose it, including the Ulster Unionist Party Members who say that they oppose it.

Although the Conservative Party is not in government, it has moved away from the position that is stated in its manifesto about its credentials in opposing a federalist, growing superstate in Europe. After all, the Conservative Party took us into Europe and expanded the remit of the European Union through successive treaties.

4.00 pm

It is clear from today's debate that there is no clarity whatsoever on the possible position of a Conservative Government. The party says that it will not let matters rest, but there is no clarity about whether it will let people have their say. It plays up the issue to win support but, on every occasion, falls short of allowing the British people to have their say on this important issue. If the matter is of such serious political consequence, why have the people of the UK been denied a say? The people of Ireland have had their say on two occasions, whereas the people of the United Kingdom have not once had a say. In fact, we have had no say on the expansion of Europe since the second referendum in the 1970s.

I am concerned about the outsourcing of the constitutional status of the United Kingdom, which is an important issue, to the President of the Czech

Republic. In essence, a matter that should be in the hands of the British people has been given to the head of state of another nation. The British people have been treated abysmally by successive Governments on the European issue. What do the Labour Party and the Conservative Party fear? Why have the people of Britain not been allowed, as they were promised, to have a say on the fundamental constitutional issue? I want a referendum as soon as possible. The party in government in the United Kingdom, and the party that aspires to be, have promised us a referendum; it is high time that we had our referendum.

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

Mr Hamilton: We need an unequivocal commitment to a referendum on an issue that is important to the people of the United Kingdom.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 12; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr Kinahan.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burns, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dallat, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gallagher, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr O'Loan, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Hamilton and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 19.

AYES

Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew,

Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hamilton and Mr Shannon.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCarthy and Mr O'Loan.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the verdict of the Republic of Ireland electorate on the Lisbon Treaty referendum; reaffirms its support for a referendum in the United Kingdom on the treaty; and calls for a declaration from those parties aspiring to form the incoming Government of the United Kingdom to give an unequivocal commitment to hold, within a twelve month period from assuming office in 2010, a binding referendum on the Lisbon Treaty that is unconditional and unrelated to how other member states choose to vote, and the result of which will not be held in abeyance pending a further referendum on the subject.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Local Government Reform Programme

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the local government reform programme.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the local government reform programme and on my intention to launch a short period of stakeholder engagement on the economic appraisal — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

The Minister of the Environment: — of options for local government service delivery that I am publishing today.

Members will be aware of speculation in the media, in councils and in the corridors of the Assembly that the local government reform programme will not proceed; that it is too costly to implement; that it will not yield significant savings for taxpayers and ratepayers; that it no longer makes sense in difficult economic times; and that insufficient time is available between now and May 2011 to implement the move to 11 new councils.

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

Today, I want to scotch those rumours. First, I want to make it clear to Members, to our colleagues on councils and to the public that local government reform is proceeding and that I am committed to delivering that programme successfully. Secondly, I want to demonstrate that we have made, and are making, real progress in implementing local government reform. Finally, by publishing the economic appraisal of options for local government service delivery today, I want to demonstrate that, if we make the right political choices on the detailed design of new local government, proceeding with its reform makes sense, because it will improve efficiency, effectiveness and value for money.

Members will recall that my predecessor Arlene Foster announced the Executive's decisions on the future of local government in a statement to the Assembly on 31 March 2008. She announced that the 26 councils would be rationalised to 11 new councils that would take on a significant range of functions from central government and other bodies in May 2011. She also announced that the new councils would need a new statute-based community planning process and that, working within a new statutory governance framework, they would have available a power of well-being. Importantly, Arlene set out the Executive's vision of local government, and that vision bears repeating today:

“our vision is of a strong, dynamic local government that creates vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at their core. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality, efficient services that respond to people's needs and continuously improve over time.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p2, col 1]*.

That vision resonates with the Executive's Programme for Government and strategic priorities. It is even more relevant now that there are difficult economic times than it was 18 months ago.

Where do I and my Executive colleagues stand on the reform of local government some 18 months after the Executive made those decisions? There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that, in order to deliver strong, effective local government and improve services for all citizens, the Executive mean to deliver local government reform in May 2011. I am fully committed to ensuring that that happens because, as a long-standing councillor, I understand the potential of local government.

The reform programme can and will unlock that potential and enable local councils to become effective local champions that respond to the aspirations and concerns of their communities, and, in partnership with others, guide the future development of their areas.

4.30 pm

Since the Executive took those decisions in March 2008, my predecessors and I have worked hard to ensure that the necessary policy, legislation and practical arrangements are put in place to create the new 11 councils in May 2011 and to transfer a significant range of central government functions and staff to local government. In doing so, we have worked closely with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the five main political parties and the existing councils to prepare the way for the change.

The strategic leadership board, which I chair, supported by three politically led policy development panels, has agreed a suite of policies and processes to underpin the development and operation of the 11 new councils. That work has underpinned the development of the four Bills that I will take through the Assembly in the course of the next 18 months, which will provide for the creation of the new councils; put in place new governance mechanisms; provide for fair and effective decision-making; create a new performance management and ethical standards regime; provide new powers of community planning and well-being; and transfer reformed planning functions to local government.

The first of those Bills, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, is already before the Assembly and has just completed its Committee Stage. I thank the Committee for its effective, rational and timely response. I very much look forward to the Consideration Stage debate in this Chamber in the not-too-distant future. The second Bill, the local

government finance Bill, will modernise the financial framework within which local government works. It is currently being consulted on. I look forward to introducing that Bill to the Assembly early next spring.

The final two Bills will give effect to the reorganisation of local government and to the reform and transfer of planning functions. As Members will know, I have just completed a period of intensive and wide-ranging consultation on planning reform. I will consider the outcome of that consultation before I bring detailed legislative proposals before the Executive for agreement.

Policy proposals for local government reorganisation are currently before the Executive. Subject to the Executive's agreement, I propose to publish those proposals for consultation in November. I will also bring Bills through the Assembly on nuisance hedges and on a clean neighbourhoods agenda, two issues in which local government will have a significant role to play. I intend to bring those Bills before the Assembly next summer.

I have considered the report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and have issued a paper to the Executive. Subject to the Executive's agreement, the final report, the draft Order and the statement about modifications will be laid before this Assembly. My intention is that that order should be debated before the Christmas recess. If it is approved by Members, it will take effect at the next local government election.

Members will also know that we have established and provided a range of guidance to voluntary transition committees across the 11 council groups, and that those committees have driven forward the implementation programme at local level. I will take time to visit each and every transition committee of the merging councils in the coming weeks to brief them on the progress of the programme of change, to thank them for the efforts that they have made in preparing the way for the new councils and to encourage them to continue to do so. I have already had the pleasure of visiting three transition committees and have been impressed by the work that they are doing to prepare the way for the creation of the new councils. None of us underestimates the complexity and difficulty of the task that lies ahead.

I have also established negotiating machinery — the local government reform joint forum — to enable the employer organisations that are affected by the programme to come together with trade unions to negotiate and agree the detailed arrangements for dealing with staffing issues that arise from the change process. That forum is making rapid progress in addressing and agreeing some of the most complex change-management issues that we face in taking forward this programme.

We have made good progress in addressing a wide range of policy, legislative and practical arrangements for delivering the programme. I pay tribute to my predecessors and all others who were involved in the regional and local implementation machinery for what has already been achieved.

I have also been working with my colleagues on the strategic leadership board to conduct a full economic appraisal of the options for local government service delivery. In January 2009, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) was commissioned by the strategic leadership board to identify the operational arrangements of the functions to be transferred from central to local government, and those currently delivered, on a group basis, by local government.

PWC was also required to analyse the proposed operating models for delivering functions after the May 2011 transfer. In taking forward that work, PWC identified and assessed options for the delivery of local government services and made preliminary recommendations on a preferred option to the strategic leadership board in July.

The key recommendations arising from the phase 1 report were: the adoption of a design approach to the development of a consistent operating model for the new councils, giving local government a unique opportunity to design a purpose-built solution for Northern Ireland; that a full economic appraisal should be conducted on the shortlisting options for the design of operating models in the new councils; that the definition of each option in the economic appraisal should articulate the associated role and responsibilities of transition committees, the key elements of support that each committee will be offered, and the key actions; dependencies and milestones on the overall implementation plan for which transitional committees will be responsible; and that decisions should be taken on the design of appropriate regional structures for local government in Northern Ireland.

The phase 1 report was accepted by the strategic leadership board on 3 July 2009 and is available on my Department's website. PWC then moved to the second phase of its assignment, which it completed and presented to the strategic leadership board last week for initial discussion. However, my colleagues and I on that board felt that it was important to widen the debate on the report's recommendations by seeking the views of key stakeholders.

That is why I am publishing that report today and have arranged for copies to be made available to Members. It will be placed on the Department of the Environment's (DOE) website and will be made available to a wide range of stakeholders who have an interest in local government reform. I intend to allow six weeks for stakeholders to consider and discuss the

report and to submit their views to me on its recommendations.

I will also seek the views of my Executive colleagues, most notably the Ministers who are responsible for the functions that are due to transfer to local government in May 2011. I will also discuss the report with my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explore the implementation and longer-term funding options that may be available to the Executive, with a view to putting detailed proposals to the Executive towards the end of the year.

For the most part, Members will not have had an opportunity to consider the report. However, I encourage all of them to do so. I want to take the opportunity to set out the report's core recommendations, which include 11 new councils in Northern Ireland, each of which will deliver the full range of local government services. Current group-working arrangements for environmental health and building control will cease, and each council will develop a self-contained capacity to deliver those services. A regional business services organisation will be formed that is wholly owned, operated and run by local government, which will enable collaborative solutions across local government. A single waste disposal authority wholly owned and operated by local government will be created, aimed at delivering efficiencies in future procurement and contract-management activities.

The reform creates a new local government association that revitalises the representation of local councils; it enhances the Northern Ireland Audit Office to reflect its new role of monitoring the new comprehensive performance-management framework for local government; and that of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman to reflect its monitoring of a code of ethics for councillors. The report recognises that such a scale of change cannot be delivered overnight and that the transformation process will not end in May 2011 with the creation of the 11 new councils, but will continue up to 2015.

The report also recognises that change of such a scale and complexity does not happen without significant, up-front investment. PWC has taken a prudent approach to its estimated costs and the benefits of implementing the programme. Its estimates of implementation costs are likely to be on the high side, and, conversely, estimates of savings may be on the low side.

The report concludes that the programme delivery will require an up-front investment, at today's prices, of approximately £118 million over a five-year period. However, that investment will deliver projected savings of £438 million, again at today's prices, over a 25-year period. Under the preferred option that is set out in the report, the reform programme will begin to

realise a reduction in local government operating costs by 2013-14, with the break-even point on the return on the initial investment being reached by 2016-17. That makes economic sense, and it represents long-term value for citizens, ratepayers and taxpayers.

I shall pick out two of the recommendations and explore them in a little more detail. The first is the proposed single waste disposal authority. I pay tribute to the work of the three waste management groups in bringing us this far in dealing with our municipal waste. Nevertheless, the single waste disposal authority is a better model to take us on the remainder of that journey.

Reducing, reusing, recycling and managing waste effectively are the most important environmental challenges that we face. Unless we learn to recognise our waste for what it is — a valuable resource — and manage it effectively, we run the risk of damaging our environment and economy and of placing a huge financial burden on families throughout Northern Ireland as a result of European Union infraction fines that could amount to £500,000 a day.

It is my long-held view that the best way to meet those challenges is through a single waste disposal authority. There are three reasons for that. First, a single waste disposal authority would ensure that there is a strategic approach to waste management, and it would make the best use of that valuable resource. In addition, a single corporate body that is accountable to the new councils would establish a clear and transparent line of authority. Working on behalf of those councils, the authority would seek to reduce the amount of waste that is generated and to maximise reuse, recycling and recovery. It would also manage waste in a way that minimises its impact on the environment and on public health.

Secondly, a single waste disposal authority would ensure that ratepayers receive the best value for money, driving efficiencies in future waste management procurement procedures and in managing waste handling contracts. The three waste management groups have achieved efficiencies already, working on a subregional basis. A single waste disposal authority could build on those efficiencies by encouraging Northern Ireland-wide competition in the waste market.

Thirdly, a single waste disposal authority could promote the best and most practical environmentally sensitive solutions to waste management. Working on behalf of the councils, it would, by its nature, be responsive to the needs of individual councils and the ratepayers that they represent. It would have a responsibility to take on board the real concerns that people have about various types of waste treatment facilities and to promote the highest sustainability standards. At the same time, a single authority would

recognise our collective responsibility to ensure that Northern Ireland people are not faced with the environmental and financial consequences of failing to manage waste effectively.

It is too early to set out details of the structure of the single waste authority, but there are some obvious characteristics that I believe it should have. First and foremost, it would be a local government organisation that is accountable to, and includes representation from, the 11 councils. It would be a mandatory, joint committee of the councils, and it would be incorporated. Such an authority would take on the responsibilities of the existing waste management groups, including managing existing waste contracts and procuring new contracts as necessary. The body would have the necessary specialist expertise to ensure that it achieves the highest procurement standards, and it would be a centre of procurement excellence. Finally, it would be a lean structure that is designed to deliver efficient services with low overheads.

The proposal for a single waste disposal authority cannot, and will not, put current infrastructure procurement processes at risk in any way. The ongoing infrastructure development programme will proceed to completion, and, on its establishment, the contracts will move to the new authority.

4.45 pm

The second recommendation that I want to highlight is the proposed business services organisation. The report proposes the establishment of a business services organisation whose key characteristics are that it is wholly owned, operated and governed by local government and that should deliver a range of collaborative solutions across local government. There are a number of functional areas where it is likely that the councils will be able to gain financial efficiencies and service improvements through collaboration with other councils in the design and implementation of shared solutions.

It is recommended that the new business organisation should lead on the design and implementation of collaborative solutions for local government. Councils will be fully involved in the design of the most appropriate solution for each of the functional areas that is selected for collaborative delivery. There should be no fixed approach to the design of collaborative regional solutions across local government. Approaches to service delivery that should be adopted by the business service organisation include: a network of council-based resources; lead councils; centres of excellence; shared service centres; public sector solutions; and commercial providers. It will be the responsibility of the business service organisation to agree the most appropriate solution, or range of solutions, for the provision of each service and to

negotiate and agree with the 11 councils how and by what means that service might be delivered.

On the question of collaborative working, it strikes me that there are, potentially, areas to which the new councils could give early consideration, especially the new planning functions. I encourage stakeholders, in considering this report, to think about the possibility of collaboration in delivering citizen-facing planning functions.

The report's recommendations offer the opportunity to deliver a world-class, cutting-edge, effective, efficient and value-for-money system of local government in Northern Ireland. I strongly encourage Members, and all local government stakeholders, to consider the report fully and carefully and let me know their views by the end of November. I am particularly keen to hear from the political parties, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), the councils and the transition committees. I also welcome the views of other interested stakeholders.

This is a uniquely challenging change process to manage and deliver and no one involved underestimates the challenges. However, I am confident that, by working together, we will achieve our goals of creating 11 strong and effective councils in May 2011 and of transforming the way in which those councils and the local government sector operate by 2015. The Executive believe that the local government reform programme will yield real benefits for citizens, ratepayers and taxpayers. The reforms will produce better performing, stronger and more effective councils to deliver real improvements in services to local communities.

The economic appraisal published today clearly demonstrates how that can be achieved and what the benefits will be. That is what the programme is about, and that is what I intend to deliver.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I thank the Minister for his statement and his commitment to strong, effective local government, which is something that all Members wish to secure. I thank him also for his remarks in relation to the work of the Committee. Through the programme of Bills that he intends to bring before the House over the year, he has given the Committee a very challenging programme of work. However, we look forward to ensuring that the legislation is robust and delivered in a timely fashion.

The costs of the implementation of the proposals will be a major concern for Committee members of all parties and are particularly concerning for ratepayers. Some £90 million has already been spent on the review of public administration (RPA). As I understand it, the Minister's statement referred to costs of £118 million

and £130 million; we need clarity as to which represents the total cost. Does that cost include the £90 million, or is it an additional cost? At what stage will the Minister seek commitment from the Finance Minister that those costs will be met, in part or in total, by the central Government, as opposed to by the local councils?

Given the challenge of the timescale, are the proposals predicated on the Executive's acceptance of the boundary change recommendations, and when will those be tabled at the Executive?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for her questions and for the commitment of the Environment Committee in helping to drive the programme through by dealing with the legislative process. I recognise that a heavy burden is being placed on the Committee, but it is the public's desire that the Assembly work hard. The Committee will have to deal with six Bills related to one particular issue, and with other Bills, as will I; that is a demonstration that the Assembly is working hard. There might not be anyone outside listening to that, but nonetheless it is a fact.

Of the £90 million that was referred to, £75 million was associated with health reform and has nothing to do with this programme. This programme has to do with local government. The cost is £118 million. We believe that that estimate is at the upper end, and the cost is likely to come in lower than that. The savings are identified at £438 million. Again, that is at the lower end, and we believe that the savings could be considerably greater. The difference between £438 million and £118 million is £320 million, and that is the benefit to the taxpayers and ratepayers.

The fact is that this is being hit up front, so how do we work out a scheme to deal with it? I will be in negotiations with the Finance Minister. However, what happened previously in other parts of the United Kingdom was that government loans were given to local authorities and, once they started to generate savings, those loans were paid back over a period at a preferential interest rate. That has to be negotiated. I will have my negotiations with the Minister and local government, and I will consult the House on the best way forward in respect of finance. Nothing is set in stone at this point, but I have indicated the route that was taken in the rest of the UK.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive statement and, indeed, for the very sensible road map that has been put forward for the progress of the RPA and service delivery.

Will the Minister take an open-minded approach to the structure of the three regional service organisations — the single waste authority, the business service organisation, and the local government association

— and any linkages between them, in order to ensure that service delivery is efficient and flexible? Also, when looking at the suite of services that could go into a business service organisation, will the Minister take cognisance of the evaluation of the experience in Scotland, which showed that a number of services did not lend themselves particularly well to shared services, but that some shared services were implemented very successfully?

The Minister of the Environment: If the reform is to work, it is essential that it be supported. Buy-in is needed from local government in order to gain its support. Local government will establish what it wants from a central business service office and will make the decision to buy those services for its district. That decision will be taken when there are identifiable and considerable savings to be made in the local government area. If local government chooses not to buy those services in and has greater costs for delivering them locally, it will be depriving its ratepayers financially by having to raise rates to meet the services, or it will be denying them of some other service.

There will be a common sense and logical approach to this. I believe that most local government organisations will want to buy into it, but we need to put it before them and for them to take that decision themselves.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement.

The Minister paid tribute to the three groups that are already there and have carried out much valuable work in implementing waste strategies and plans.

The Minister will also recognise that there is an element of doubt about the benefits of change, and there are concerns about the waste strategy in particular. In the Minister's statement, he said that PricewaterhouseCoopers' estimates of cash savings are likely to be on the low side, but, in the following paragraph, he said that there are projected savings over a 25-year period. However, I am not convinced.

Given that the report has no firm indications of any possible significant savings, will the Minister outline how the proposals for a single waste authority will facilitate the ongoing work of the three waste management groups and allow them the autonomy to deliver their individual strategies, meet pressing EU targets and avoid the EU infractions that he mentioned in his statement?

The Minister of the Environment: I paid a sincere tribute to the three waste management organisations that have delivered since they were established. We have been operating under a 26-council model. It would have been impossible for 26 councils to feed into a single waste authority, but it is possible for 11 councils to do that, and to do so reasonably. Members

have heard a fair degree of criticism over the past weeks about how much we spend on consultants, for example. We have three waste authorities, and each of those has had to buy in expertise from consultants. If the costs incurred by one of those authorities are multiplied by three, one will see the total cost to the public. Therefore, it is common sense to opt for a single waste disposal authority, with one procurement exercise and one management body. I recognise the fears that have been expressed by the Member, but, in establishing a single waste disposal authority, it is important that there is local influence and buy-in and that local areas are involved in the implementation of local decision-making processes that are right for the local area. Waste does not travel, and, for the most part, it has to be dealt with locally.

In establishing a regional authority rather than a subregional authority, let us not move away from a model that provides a strong local influence to the outcomes. I am happy to discuss the issue with the Committee for the Environment or with Members. It is imperative that we get the right model, which delivers for taxpayers and ratepayers, and one which provides waste solutions locally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions should be reasonably short.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that the devolution of planning to local government will be crucial in enabling new councils to have a key local relevance? I am thinking about local planning decisions, local area plans and the development of community planning, and so forth. Will those roles be devolved by 2011? Given the decision not to have shadow councils, how will new councillors be trained in preparation for their first day when they will have to make such decisions?

The Minister of the Environment: Ninety-nine per cent of planning decisions will be made by local councils. Strategic decisions will continue to be made at planning headquarters, on behalf of the DOE, but all major and small planning applications will be dealt with by local authorities.

The training of staff is part of the programme of work that the transition committees will address. The DOE will assist the transition committees in providing them with support and advice on how best to train individuals, and we will seek to identify the best way forward in conjunction with the strategic leadership board, which, I understand, the Member will join soon. I recognise that, if councillors' functions are to be changed, there is a need to train councillors who wish to stand for re-election.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his statement, and, as a member of the Committee for the Environment, I thank him for his compliment to the Committee. He

gave a considerable rundown of the work that has been achieved to date. Will he inform the House whether he will feel the need to add any financial issues to the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill when it reaches its Consideration Stage? Given the work that still has to be done, is the Minister satisfied with the operation, so far, of all 11 transition committees?

There is a strong economic case for a single waste management organisation, as can be seen from the context in which the Minister set out his argument. Will the Minister assure the House that a single organisation will be more successful in meeting the needs of waste disposal than, for example, Arc21 has been when dealing with Belfast City Council?

5.00 pm

The Minister of the Environment: I understand what the Member said, but I do not wish to decry the work of Arc21.

The Department has been set high standards to be achieved across Northern Ireland. Indeed, just seven years ago, less than 5% of municipal waste was recycled, and today more than 30% is recycled, which is a sixfold increase and an indication of a success story. I am proud of the successes that have taken place, and I will not allow people to decry the work that has been done, or the achievements that have been made. The Department will drive the issue forward, and it will seek to find the best local solutions to waste generally and to municipal waste in particular.

Mr I McCrea: I also welcome the Minister's statement. He stated that the transition committees will train the new councillors. Will he outline any other roles that the statutory transition committees will have in the implementation of the reform programme?

The Minister of the Environment: The transition committees have a hugely important role to play, particularly as they move to a statutory footing.

Mr Ford wanted to know how well the transitional committees are working, and I can tell him that some are working very well, while others have some catching up to do. However, those committees recognise that, and as the change managers come into position, a great deal of that work will fall into place quickly.

One of the essential tasks that the transition committees will carry out is the appointment of the senior management teams of the new councils, including the new chief executives. They will also have the task of identifying the future income and expenditure of the new councils, and will set the rates for 2011-12. Effectively, in the last year of the existing council arrangements, the transition committees will be the body that will ensure the smooth transition from the 26-council model to the new 11-council model.

The responsibility that is being placed on the transition committees is huge. Those who are involved in that work are undertaking a significant role that will make a very real and positive contribution to creating a more efficient and better form of local government in Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council.

I thank the Minister for his statement. How will he ensure that no potential contractors who are involved in the tendering process will be discouraged with the introduction of the new governance arrangements? Will he particularly give that assurance about the proposed single waste authority?

The Minister of the Environment: There is certainly no shortage of contractors who wish to become involved, which is evident from the bidding and procurement regimes. Whatever bids are made in a procurement exercise, and whoever is eventually successful in being awarded a contract will find that that contract, will be honoured. Furthermore, there will be no divergence from the contracts that are established.

A single management process will be established for a region as opposed to a subregion, but there is no hidden agenda. A subregional method has been used so far to award those contracts, but that process can be managed more efficiently on a regional basis, and that will reduce the cost to the ratepayers. There is no hidden agenda and contractors have nothing to fear.

Mr Craig: I also welcome the Minister's statement, and I declare an interest not only as a member of Lisburn City Council but as the chairman of the Castlereagh/Lisburn transition committee.

Will the Minister outline the timetable for the drawing up of legislation for a legislative transition committee? Furthermore, does the Minister have any plans to legislate for a transition committee for Belfast City Council, as its strategic policy and resources committee is attempting to carry out that function?

The Minister of the Environment: The establishment of the statutory committees is dealt with in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which has just gone through Committee Stage. The legislation will be completed before Christmas, and we will be ready to move to the statutory transition committees in the new year.

As regards the Belfast transition committee, I have made some minor modifications to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner report, which will go to the Executive. On the basis of the Executive accepting those modifications and moving forward, we will be in a position to look at the Belfast transition committee subsuming substantial chunks of Castlereagh and

Lisburn council areas. Therefore, the ratepayers in those areas will have to be entitled to have their voices heard on the establishment of the new Belfast City Council, as it will not be the same Belfast City Council but a greatly expanded Belfast City Council. Ratepayers in both areas that will become part of that council area should have their voices heard and recognised through their public representatives.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Minister for his commitment, and I congratulate both him and his Department for all their hard work.

I welcome the idea of a business service organisation and the answer he has already given on that. However, I need to tease that out a little bit more. Will the need for financial benefits in having some form of central expertise for the legal, insurance and consultancy work be within that business service organisation, and how does he see that working? Will pressure have to be put on councils to ensure that they do not do things in their own way? It looks as though the Minister is giving the organisation most of the tasks to do and that, therefore, councillors may be waiting another four years before they get the work that they are expecting.

The Minister of the Environment: I think that that will be the case. Indeed, areas such as human resources and payrolls, where there is no particular necessity for them to be carried out by the local area, could be added. Someone asked whether the organisation needs to be in Belfast, and I said no, it could be in Derrylin, because it provides and shares information, and, therefore, it does not need to be based in the capital city. Again, an exercise will be carried out to identify the best location.

There are huge advantages in all of this, although they will probably not be delivered by 2011, but some time thereafter; and this area will deliver significant cost benefits to the local authorities.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister has tied up a number of loose ends regarding the reorganisation of councils that have been outstanding for some time. Some questions arise as the result of the report and, in particular, about the implications for ratepayers. The PWC report refers to additional costs of £119 million and, indeed, underlines key works such as that the full additional costs will be passed from central government to local government. In other words, they will be passed to the ratepayers. Another page is devoted to the convergence of the rates in each of the new 11 councils. In Fermanagh's case, for example, it is noticeable that the rate will go up by around 20%, while that in Omagh will drop by about 20%.

If the Minister will ensure that the three new organisations at the centre are based in Fermanagh, it might help to offset the ill effects. If not, can he give

us an assurance for councils that will be negatively affected by the new rating arrangements? Will there be any other cushion from central government?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There were loads of questions there, Minister.

The Minister of the Environment: It was a very good speech. I have demonstrated how much I think of County Fermanagh: I was instrumental in delivering the Waterways Ireland headquarters to Enniskillen, so I would not necessarily oppose those three organisations being based in County Fermanagh.

I suspect that, when the Member says that the £118 million of costs will be a burden on the ratepayers, he would not want central government taking any of the £438 million of savings from local government. We need to facilitate the period between the costs kicking in and the savings kicking in so that no burden falls on the ratepayers in the intervening period and so that costs can be met through the savings made. That can be achieved, and there will be considerable long-term benefits as councils may not have to increase rates by so much because identifiable savings have been made as a result of what we are doing today.

The Member refers to an issue with which I suspect the Finance Minister will have to deal: in some council areas rates will have to increase considerably, while in others they will decrease considerably. My thought on that — I am not the Finance Minister — is that it would be impossible to deliver that in one year and that there must be a period of convergence that would be acceptable to ratepayers. That is something that my ministerial colleague Sammy Wilson will have to consider, but my immediate thought is that a new council could not be established successfully if ratepayers were being hit with a 20% rate rise in the first year of that council. That would be hugely detrimental to the entire process.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement; it is very appropriate. I declare an interest as a local government representative and also as a member of the Southern Waste Management Partnership (SWaMP), one of the regional waste management authorities. The Minister said that a single waste management authority would promote a more practical, environmentally sensitive solution, but it would also incorporate Arc21 and its incinerator into that solution. How can he equate those two things? SWaMP and the north-west group have been able to provide a solution that does not include incineration. It would be a retrograde step to amalgamate the three waste management groups into one.

Will the business services organisation that the Minister mentioned be a local-government-owned association or company? How will the waste management

organisation and the services organisation be constructed with regard to democratic accountability?

The Minister of the Environment: In relation to the waste management process, I would dearly love Northern Ireland to be able to reuse and recycle all its waste; however, I do not think we will be in that situation in the foreseeable future. There are other treatments, such as anaerobic digestion and mechanical biological treatments, but energy from waste has to be considered. The alternative to energy from waste is dumping waste in landfills, and that will come at a considerable cost to the taxpayer and ratepayer. There will be a charge of £72 per ton of waste that goes to landfill. We have to consider those situations and come to logical conclusions.

Were an energy-from-waste proposal to be the logical conclusion for a particular area or areas, then that decision would have to be taken. We do not need to make decisions today on the Floor of the House on how exactly we should handle our waste. We have a problem that must be dealt with, and we must deal with it and get our heads around it.

5.15 pm

The business services organisation that was referred to will be a council-owned organisation that will be answerable to local authorities, with representatives from each local authority. Given the nature of Northern Ireland, it must be ensured that each sector of Northern Ireland is represented on such bodies and that the organisations have cross-party membership in order to work effectively.

Mr B McCrea: I do not doubt the Minister's personal commitment to the project. I will be interested to see whether the projected savings can be trapped; 25 years is a fairly long time, even in politics, and we are being asked to spend £118 million to save £438 million. It is not yet entirely clear how that will be paid for in the early stages.

I take on board the Minister's suggestion that some discussion will take place with DFP, but surely ratepayers in one existing council will pay lower rates than those in another council, and I am interested to know how the Minister will deal with that disparity.

I note that the report mentions that some modifications may be made to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioners proposals. What does the Minister have in mind? Do those new proposals have cross-party support, and are there any knock-on implications for elections?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member raised a number of issues. He is right to say that 25 years is a long time; he may even have received his free TV licence by then and not only his free bus pass. We will have to negotiate with the Department of

Finance and Personnel to identify a solution to finding the £118 million. Central government may make the entire contribution or part of it, local government may make the full contribution, or it may be a combination. Loans, through which councils borrow at very favourable rates and start to pay back the loan when they are financially better off as a result of the savings that are made, may be sanctioned. All that must be worked out.

The Member also identified the issue of convergence. That is a separate and distinct issue that must be resolved among the councils. Mr Gallagher rightly identified that the largest difference is in the new Fermanagh/Omagh council area.

I took on board the lobbying that took place on behalf of the residents of Dunmurry on the boundary changes, through the submission that was made to the Executive. I identified a stronger boundary than the one that was included in the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's proposal. Modest modifications have been made. For example, the civic offices in Castlereagh will remain in the Castlereagh council area, and the leisure development to the Dundonald side will be in the Belfast council area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, if Members' questions get any longer, we will all receive free TV licences by the time we are finished.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his substantial and detailed statement. I wish to follow up on a question that Tommy Gallagher asked. If the proposals go through, several new bodies will be created. Will the Minister guarantee that those bodies will be located outside Belfast?

The Minister of the Environment: I cannot guarantee that, because I will not be making that decision. That will be a decision for local government organisations. I would always give respect to democratically elected politicians and their ability to make their own decisions. I am not a dictator. I tend to listen to people and try to arrive at common-sense decisions. I will leave it to the good people who will set up that body and who will buy its services to identify the best location for its office.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement, but I found it to be rather disappointing, particularly its financial projections. Does the Minister not agree that savings of £17 million per annum fall far short of previous projections of savings that would be made from the reform of local government?

The decision to set up councils in 2011 and increase powers until 2015 sounds a bit like Prior's rolling devolution, which never rolled. Can the Minister give a timetable for the transfer of powers up to 2015?

The Minister of the Environment: I am sorry that the Member is disappointed. However, he is, apparently,

confused. Perhaps, that has led to some of his disappointment.

Powers will be transferred in 2011. However, some services that councils will buy in will not be available until later. Therefore, there is an interim period in which those councils must establish those services themselves in conjunction with DOE.

As regards savings, the Department has worked out prudent figures. I expect that ratepayers will be considerably better off. It is better to be prudent than to come out with silly, outlandish figures that, perhaps, were previously in the ether and which the Member has bought into. I never bought into those figures. I welcome the fact that the way forward is realistic.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement. I wonder whether consideration was given to making efficiency savings under option 1 — maintaining the status quo. The Minister mentioned the increase in waste recycling from 6% to 30%, which clearly indicates the current local government system's positives. Has genuine thought been given to making efficiency savings in the current system, including, perhaps, the waste disposal proposals that have come out of that?

The Minister of the Environment: That was not part of work in which PricewaterhouseCoopers was engaged. Obviously, the councils have been around for 36 or 37 years. Joined-up working and identifiable savings were implemented when there were three subregional bodies to deal with waste. There has been joined-up local government in building control and environmental health, although those are possibly not two of the best examples of local authorities working together. Therefore, that period has allowed those efficiencies to be demonstrated, and PricewaterhouseCoopers did not have to do a stream of work on it.

The Department is moving ahead with the 11-council model that has been proposed. We want to identify the best way to proceed under that 11-council model.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's comprehensive presentation. It contains a number of interesting features. The single waste disposal authority, in particular, is attractive. However, the Assembly would certainly have to consider the details of it before it could give its approval.

The Minister mentioned a saving of £438 million over 25 years. I believe that that works out at around £17.5 million each year for local councils. Yet, upfront investment of £118 million is needed over five years, which represents around £23 million each year. Does being asked to pay a lot of money initially for little return, profit or saving over an extended period of 25 years not place an unfair burden on local government?

The Minister of the Environment: There is certainly a debate to be had on that matter. I have no doubt that local government will make that case, and it will be included in our discussions with the Finance Minister. If the House and the Executive decide that they wish to contribute to the matter, such a decision will be accommodated. However, Members should remember that the review of local government is not about cost savings exclusively; the transfer of functions is a considerable element of the reforms. I believe that the functions proposed for transfer to local government will be better delivered by local government; they will be delivered closer to the people, and that will give the councillors who represent those people greater powers and greater ability to represent the views of constituents at local level.

We have identified significant financial benefits. However, leaving finance to one side, it can be seen that the transfer of powers and functions is of even greater benefit to the local communities. That is a key element that we should never lose sight of. It is one thing to talk about money, but service delivery is the greater prize to be achieved. I encourage all my colleagues to go for the greater prize and to deliver a better service of local government to the local community at a lower cost. I hope that the House is with me on that.

Mr Lunn: In his own words, the Minister has scotched the rumours that have been rife for the past few months about what is going to happen in local government. It is good to have that clarification.

As most of the questions have been asked, I will take a risk and ask the Minister about something that was not in his statement but is of massive interest to a lot of elderly local councillors. I am sure that the Minister knows what is coming. Will he tell us anything about the severance arrangements for local councillors? I declare an interest.

The Minister of the Environment: I think that Trevor Lunn is far too young to be stepping down from local government, but if that is his choice, so be it.

For some time, I have been engaging with Paul Goggins, who is responsible for elections, by-elections, co-options and so on. We have been trying to come to an arrangement that would allow us to proceed with severance arrangements. Paul Goggins has put forward proposals that will be put to public consultation. The proposals will enable us to proceed with some form of severance arrangements in the next financial year; in other words, the last year of the existing councils. That is something that we will most likely proceed with.

I am sympathetic to the notion of severance pay for retiring councillors. The media questioned me earlier on that issue. Sometimes, I cannot get over the level of resentment towards giving a retiring councillor

£15,000 or £20,000, and yet nobody cares about senior officers on councils getting £200,000 or £300,000.

I have huge respect for people who served in local government with, on many occasions, very few responsibilities, at great risk to themselves, and at great loss to their families over a long period of time. Many of those people, across the parties, are the salt of the earth and did it purely for public service. Given that almost a quarter of council places are being lost, I am fully convinced that many of the councillors who wish to retire, having given such good service, are as entitled to some form of compensation as the senior directors who will be losing their jobs as a result of the review of local government. I make no apologies for that.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Invest NI

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.

5.30 pm

Ms J McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the criticism of the performance of Invest NI reported in the Independent Review of Economic Policy; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that any future spending by Invest NI is distributed in an equitable and accountable manner.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the recent announcement on the creation of jobs in Derry and Belfast, and I congratulate all those who were involved in bringing about that much-needed breakthrough in job creation.

The Independent Review of Economic Policy provides clear evidence of the need for a new approach in developing the economy. It also outlines the failings of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and, particularly, those of Invest NI.

Both inside and outside the Chamber, my party has expressed its concern consistently about Invest NI's performance. We have highlighted regional investment inequalities and uncovered the spending of tens of millions of pounds by Invest NI on the rental of empty properties and on its new Belfast headquarters. That amounts to at least £115 million of public money being spent over 25 years through a public-private partnership arrangement.

The report also illustrates a clear need to push on the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector and to grow the export potential of existing businesses. However, although there is a need to drive forward innovation, particularly R&D, I am concerned that the report recommends phasing out support for business expansion. That is a concern, because there is space to move smaller businesses into our export market.

Growing the economy and tackling poverty and disadvantage are two of the key pillars in the Programme for Government and investment strategy. All opportunities must be used to drive both those pillars together. In a recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it was stated that £7 an hour was the minimum wage

necessary for a socially acceptable standard of living. However, in the North of Ireland, half the population falls below that standard.

We need to be clear about how we use public money to grow the economy, but that cannot be dealt with in isolation from the need to keep people in employment and to create jobs. For decades, the focus of Invest NI and its predecessors has been on drawing investment into the greater Belfast area. That approach has failed people in the north-west, west of the Bann and even in certain areas of Belfast.

When the west Belfast economic task force published its report, Invest NI was known as the IDB. The IDB's appalling record on job creation was cited in that document. A number of recommendations related to the investment body, including its being assigned to take a lead role or to act as a funding channel for certain intergrated development fund (IDF) projects. The task force recommended the creation of an enterprise ark, or an enterprise action zone, throughout the task force area. The idea was to have a range of special incentives from government, especially Invest NI, for investing in that area.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: I want to get through my speech; I am sure that the Member will have plenty of time to make his comments.

Invest NI has spent £10.3 million on landscaping the former Mackie site, yet it still has no strategy for generating employment and inward investment there. The former Mackie site is 12.5 acres, and there are another 36 acres in the hands of Invest NI throughout west Belfast, yet almost half of that land lies vacant.

Over a three-year period, west Belfast received the lowest number of offers of assistance in the Six Counties and nearly 5% of Invest NI's investment. That was despite several of the wards in the area being in the top 10 indices for social and economic deprivation and despite one third of Belfast's population living in the area. That is just another example of how Invest NI has failed people in disadvantaged areas.

The Barnett review identifies relatively high levels of selective financial assistance. Despite that, there are huge failures. I am sure that many people will question the value of 30% of Invest NI's grants going to just 10 companies and of almost 50% of assistance going to just 30 companies, many of which have received support year on year. Invest NI needs to move beyond the world of favoured clients to provide more professional support to all businesses.

For too long, Invest NI has failed to provide value for money. Too often, the promise of jobs has been grossly inflated, and companies have pocketed grants and given little in return. Many companies, such as

Visteon, Seagate and Valence, received grants from Invest NI only to up and leave when they found cheaper labour elsewhere.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is important; no one here is suggesting otherwise. However, small and medium-sized local businesses are equally important, including those that operate in the social economy sector. The economic downturn has affected the anticipated level of FDI. Therefore, given the present adverse conditions, it is even more important that small and medium-sized businesses and social economy enterprises be given the resources that they need to sustain themselves in the short term and to develop and grow in the longer term. We need a new and innovative way of thinking if we are to sustain existing businesses and jobs and offset further job losses. Although a mix of different jobs is necessary, too many jobs have been low-waged and insecure. That has done nothing to raise living standards or tackle poverty and inequality at the heart of our economy.

I welcome the report's recognition of the importance of the social economy and its potential to reduce deprivation and increase labour force participation in disadvantaged areas. We should encourage local investment opportunities, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises and the social economy sector. Such investment will not only sustain and grow the economy, but develop communities. However, the budget and resources that have been allocated to the social economy sector by Invest NI do not reflect that.

The social entrepreneurship programme, which will be delivered in the three years up to March 2012, has been allocated just under £3 million for 2008-2012. The social economy fund, which is a special initiative aimed at the long-term unemployed in west Belfast and greater Shankill, runs alongside that programme. Through that, just under £4 million will be allocated to the social economy sector here. The fact that €40.8 million was allocated to such initiatives in the South of Ireland in 2007 alone and that Scotland has allocated £30 million between 2008 and 2011 shows how little is given to the social economy sector.

Regional disparities on inward investment and social and economic inequality in certain areas of the North, particularly west of the Bann and in west and north Belfast, are clear indicators that the current economic policy is not delivering for large sections of the population that are in most need. Those areas are consistently worst served by Invest NI. Those inequalities must be challenged and prioritised and must become the focus of corrective action. Setting targets and measuring outcomes is an important element of performance assessment; it is also a recognised and accepted practice in reducing inequality and alleviating deprivation.

A raft of other measures in the gift of the Executive, such as their economic and social policies, will lift people out of poverty and give them the standard of living to which they are entitled. They have an opportunity to maximise social and employment opportunities for everyone through, for instance, their public procurement processes, which will secure jobs and create new employment opportunities for those in most need. They can relocate public sector jobs in order to help workers who have to travel and to help to develop rural economies.

More accountability is required in public spending to ensure that the most deprived members of society receive the same economic and social equality of opportunity as everyone else. Given the huge amounts of public money that Invest NI spends, there must be an onus on the Department to ensure that it is spent in an equitable and accountable manner. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the opportunity to speak about Professor Barnett's report as Chairperson of the Committee. The Committee has yet to reach a collective view on the report. However, it has indicated that it takes the report seriously and will, in due course, examine it carefully and come to a considered view.

It has to be accepted that the report contains criticisms of Invest Northern Ireland. Those are constructive criticisms, however, and they must be viewed in the round rather than in a selective way. Professor Barnett gave very useful evidence to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in which he emphasised that the real problem was the failure to bridge the productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The closing of that gap is central to the Programme for Government, in which it is regarded as a particular target that ought to be achieved. Professor Barnett made that point as part of his general critique of Invest Northern Ireland.

Professor Barnett put tremendous emphasis on the need for investment in research and development, which, he said, was vital to the future of Northern Ireland's economic expansion. He said that working on a programme-based approach offers:

“a defence mechanism against audits”.

However, he also said that:

“change is required”,

not because Invest Northern Ireland is not equitable or accountable, but:

“because of the government structures that have been imposed on DETI and Invest NI.”

Professor Barnett told the Committee that under such circumstances, we:

“should not be surprised that people are very cautious when making decisions.”

That is one of the problems that he highlighted. The over-emphasis on auditing has led to the development of a risk-averse culture. Professor Barnett said that in order to develop and expand business, people must take risks. There is a tension between auditing and accountability and taking reasonable risks to develop our economy. We must get that into perspective.

Professor Barnett told the Committee that it has a role in ensuring accountability and that we, as politicians, ought to take that role seriously. I agree with that, but the Committee must also exercise its responsibility in a balanced and reasonable way so that it encourages people into economic activity and developing business schemes that will attract high-value jobs to Northern Ireland. It is the lack of high-value jobs that creates the productivity gap. That is not to say that Invest Northern Ireland has not attracted jobs or made investment. It has invested £1 billion and has produced 28,000 new jobs while safeguarding 15,000 existing jobs. It has also attracted over £2.4 billion in investment.

That is a reasonable sketch of what Professor Barnett's review of Invest Northern Ireland put forward. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Moutray: I begin by commending the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, for commissioning the review of Invest Northern Ireland. She has demonstrated great prudence and forethought on what is economically best for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, I have no hesitation in welcoming the publication of the independent review of economic policy. I believe that it is important, at this stage, to place on record our thanks to Professor Barnett and his colleagues on the review panel, who worked tirelessly on a wide range of highly important and complex issues. Compiling the review was a mammoth task, and one that has been carried out at a time when we face immediate economic challenges, as well as looking to the future.

5.45 pm

The report is highly detailed and wide ranging. Its 58 recommendations are direct and forthright, and should doubtless be addressed. If we as a Government are to meet the challenging Programme for Government priorities and targets on the economy, it is vital that DETI and Invest NI are as efficient and effective as possible.

It is important that the report is given full and balanced consideration by the Minister and the Executive as a whole. By commissioning a short period of consultation on the content of the report, the

Minister demonstrated her commitment to take on board and address the issues that it raised. That will allow stakeholders and other interested parties to take the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing debate on how the Government should respond to the report as we seek to grow a dynamic and innovative economy that will improve the living standards of everyone in the Province.

The media has doubtless played a major role in sensationalising the issue. Many media reports were at odds with the balanced tone of the review. Some in the media have hijacked and misrepresented the findings and conclusions of the report. Although I acknowledge the criticism of the performance of Invest Northern Ireland, I do not believe that it calls into question its accountability standards, nor the equitability of its distribution of funding at any point; both of which are implied in the text of the motion. The report does not raise any question of accountability; in fact, Professor Barnett suggests awarding Invest Northern Ireland further autonomy to allow more flexibility and responsiveness to the business community, which will be welcomed by businesses.

The report gives much food for thought on improvements that can be made in Invest Northern Ireland. I do not need to remind the House that there has been considerable criticism of Invest Northern Ireland over the years, but not all of it has been justified; indeed, some of it has been far from justified. Some criticism has been driven by other political agendas. However, the report commends Invest Northern Ireland on its positive contribution to the Province. The report provides important and constructive insights, not only into Invest Northern Ireland and DETI but into the broader economic issues.

I welcome the fact that the Minister, the chairperson and the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland welcomed the report, and are already progressing some of the suggested recommendations. The report comes at a time of considerable change for the local economy. If there are green shoots of recovery, they are very fragile and barely visible. We need to do all that we can to ensure that our economic strategies and policies are efficient and effective.

I do not support the motion. The report provides terms of reference and recommendations that we can glean and learn from. The review covered the period between 1 April 2002 and 31 March 2008, much of which was during the time of direct rule. The report shows that direct rule had a detrimental effect. I am glad that we now have a local Minister in situ who is committed and willing to take on board and address the issues that were raised in the report.

I call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report to the Assembly, after careful and

balanced consideration of the review, on how she intends to implement its findings following the public consultation, and on her discussions with Executive colleagues.

Mr Cree: I thank the Members for tabling the motion, although I am afraid that Sinn Féin has presented a rather confused argument that does little justice to the independent review of economic policy report, the economic reality on the ground or the needs of the business community throughout Northern Ireland.

In addition to proposing a motion on a detailed report that is out for consideration, Sinn Féin has shoehorned its longstanding issue with Invest Northern Ireland into a discussion on that report. The report provides clear evidence that Invest Northern Ireland needs to reform; it puts forward concise arguments that many of its practices are outdated and not reflective of best practice. However, Sinn Féin's jump from those findings to a policy whereby Invest Northern Ireland should distribute money based on geographical equity is at best naive and at worst a hindrance to the development of Northern Ireland's economy as a whole.

Much of Sinn Féin's argument would have been better placed at the door of the Minister for Regional Development. He is in charge of the regional development strategy, which provides greater potential for our infrastructure to be developed in a way that makes it more attractive for businesses to set up and flourish in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a small place, with one medium-sized city that will continue to be the centre of economic growth. All Invest Northern Ireland's investment must be based on objective criteria that are linked to businesses' potential to flourish and increase productivity, employment and exports.

I welcome the report's focus on the productivity gap, and I was pleased by the Chairperson's reference to that. We have been successful in creating employment in the past decade. However, that employment has often been at relatively low wages and created as the result of unsustainable investment that can leave Northern Ireland as quickly as it arrived; call-centre jobs are one example. The report is right that we must make greater investment in research, development and innovation if we are to bridge the productivity gap. The report also confirms what many of us have known for a long time: Invest Northern Ireland has continued a dated industrial development policy, and the selective financial assistance benefits too few client companies and does not help to develop a dynamic and competitive economy.

The report is rightly critical of Invest Northern Ireland's bureaucratic structures. I welcome its statement:

"High-performing investment agencies have cultures that are responsive, fast moving and work to overcome bureaucracy. They are outcome, and not process, focused."

It is time that Invest Northern Ireland became more entrepreneurial and more responsive to business needs. Northern Ireland has come a long way in the past 10 years, and we have made excellent economic progress. However, we must come to terms with the fact that we will not always be able to plead special status, and nor should we want to do that. We must realise that public spending will be extremely tight in the current economic climate. Our private sector must take up some of the slack, and that means bold reform and taking our opportunities.

We have excellent universities, and we produce innovative and brilliant businesspeople. We must give them the opportunities and support that they need to flourish in Northern Ireland. As Wombat Financial Software Ltd has proven, successful, innovative SMEs will deliver the type of inward investment that we need. The Minister must be bold when she makes decisions on the report. It is not an exaggeration to say that Northern Ireland is at a crossroads. We can move forward and participate more fully in the UK and world economy and adapt to take advantage of the economic opportunities that the recession presents. Alternatively, we can continue on the same course.

The report provides the Minister with an excellent opportunity to lay the foundations of a change in the economic vision for Northern Ireland, and I hope that she will not waste it. I am glad that Sinn Féin is not in charge of DETI, because its opinions are 10 times more outdated and counterproductive than Invest Northern Ireland's have ever been. Although the report still requires much detailed analysis, I welcome it and oppose the motion.

Mr Lunn: I thank Sinn Féin for proposing the motion. As a small society, Northern Ireland will always be more dependent on inward investment than many other places. However, the report poses important questions about Invest NI's performance that need to be answered, and I welcome the fact that the Assembly has a chance to do that.

Like others, the Alliance Party sought to amend the motion, but the Speaker must have decided that there were too many amendments and that he would not take any of them, so we must judge the motion on its merits. Unfortunately, the Alliance Party has difficulty in supporting the motion, and that difficulty comes down to the words "equitable and accountable" and the context in which they are used; Mr Moutray made a similar point. Including those words seems to indicate that Invest NI has not operated in an equitable and accountable manner in the past. However, I believe that it did act in such a manner, so I do not think that we can level that accusation at it.

Attracting inward investment and locating it in one place rather than in another is only a small part of

tackling poverty here. Jobs are already located in areas of high deprivation: the Gasworks site is a classic example. However, those jobs are frequently inaccessible to the most deprived people who are living in the communities nearby.

Of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, 15 are located within two and a half miles of Belfast city centre and a further three are within a mile and a half of the centre of Londonderry. The Shankill Road, Falls Road and New Lodge areas are among the most deprived 1% of communities here, yet all have thousands of jobs at all skill levels on their doorsteps. At the same time, hundreds of people from those communities travel daily to work in the greater Belfast area and beyond.

Our most deprived communities deserve access to good jobs, but that means more than just creating jobs. We have all heard the stories about companies in north and west Belfast that attract the bulk of their workforce from areas further afield. To give our poorest communities the future that they deserve, we must remove the barriers preventing people from taking up work. As well as more jobs, people need better skills, easier routes back into education, better childcare and better transport. For many mothers seeking to return to work, affordable childcare is a massive barrier, and it is often in the most deprived areas that it is most difficult to find.

Another serious problem is the weakness in Northern Ireland's public transport system. It is often good enough along radial routes in the main towns and cities but very poor at their outskirts. With so much work now being based in edge-of-town industrial estates, people are in a catch-22 situation: they need a car to access work, but they need work to be able to afford to purchase and run a car. Although Invest NI plays a crucial part in tackling those problems, it is only part of the solution. The Alliance Party's concern is that the motion reads as if locating jobs in areas of deprivation is the magic bullet that will eradicate poverty overnight. To tackle poverty, we need joined-up action across government; job creation is only the first step.

Some of Invest NI's failures must be acknowledged, and Members mentioned many today. I am thinking of Visteon and Valence Technology; indeed, I could go back as far as DeLorean. I know that those failures were the fault of Invest NI's predecessor companies, but they were certainly fairly disastrous projects. Decisions were taken in times of pressure and very high unemployment, and there was a fear that jobs and investment would be lost. At times, I think that decisions were taken too hastily.

The report's criticism of Invest NI seems to be balanced and fairly constructive. The job of Invest NI or any inward investment agency will always involve risk. Risk sometimes means failure, but it can also mean more reward. We cannot have one without the

other. The number of jobs that Invest NI created, which Ms McCann called appalling but which I do not think was that bad, would be even fewer if Invest NI took a really cautious approach in everything it did. Indeed, it might have some money left at the end of the year: that would be the reward for caution. We need to approach the report even-handedly, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. However, the Alliance Party will have to oppose the motion.

Mr Hamilton: If we are to grow the vibrant and dynamic economy that we all want and, indeed, have set as our primary goal in the Programme for Government, then our economic development agency and our economic development policy must be fit for purpose.

6.00 pm

That is why I welcomed the review that the Minister initiated some time ago on Invest Northern Ireland and the wider economic development policy. Although that recently published report is critical about some aspects of Invest Northern Ireland, it is also far-reaching, challenging and comprehensive, in that it deals with a wide range of issues. It proves that, in the pursuit of the goal of developing a more high-tech and productive economy, there are no sacred cows or untouchables. To achieve that aim, to which everyone should aspire, nothing will escape scrutiny. If only every Minister in the Executive would do the same by tackling sacred cows and untouchables in their respective Departments, the Assembly would be firing on all cylinders.

It is easy to attack Invest Northern Ireland in the middle of a downturn when times are tough. Despite that, massive investment has been made in recent days to create high-tech and productive well-paid jobs. Invest Northern Ireland must get credit for that good work. I do not subscribe to the mass hysteria in the media and from some in the House that the £1 billion invested by Invest Northern Ireland over the past 10 years was wasted. Some 28,000 jobs were created and 15,000 were secured, many of which were high-tech. Even those jobs deemed to be less high-tech suited people with certain skill sets and may have been an improvement on their previous employment.

I am pleased with many aspects of the report, such as the freedom to operate. If we want a dynamic economy, we must allow our economic development agency to be dynamic. It should not be constrained or overburdened by bureaucracy. If we want that agency to take risks with investment, we must remove its shackles and allow it to take the same risks that we expect from businesses.

It is good that the report focuses on innovation and R&D. It also mentions the important planning process on which much work is ongoing. It mentions the realignment of the education system, which is a critical

element of the economic development policy. The report suggests the creation of a small-business unit, which would be useful, because Invest Northern Ireland has lost its focus on small businesses. I do not know what name could be conjured up for that new unit — LEDU, perhaps?

Members would expect me to be enthusiastic about the proposal to create a Department of the economy by merging DETI and elements of the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL). One Department, rather than two, would focus on the development of the economy. Elements of other Departments could be merged into that Department of the economy to create a centralised focus on economic development, rather than the current hotchpotch.

I also oppose the motion, principally because I agree with Mr Lunn about its use of the phrase “equitable and accountable manner”. When Sinn Féin uses such a phrase, it is a code for investment in certain areas of Northern Ireland. It is a call not for widespread investment, but for investment in specific areas in which, strangely, Sinn Féin is well represented, such as West Belfast and Foyle. Sinn Féin misses the fundamental point that no company can be forced to invest in a particular place. You cannot have a factory —

Mr P Maskey: I have been going through information provided by the Research and Library Service on the subject. In connection with what Mr Hamilton said about investment in particular areas, the research includes figures for the expenditure on job creation in the Belfast constituencies: £7.6 million in North Belfast, £9.36 million in West Belfast, £60-odd million in East Belfast and £43 million in South Belfast. The total planned investment for East Belfast is £711 million, whereas the figure for West Belfast is only £41 million. That is why Sinn Féin is complaining.

Mr Hamilton: I thought that the Member was a Belfast man and would, therefore, appreciate that East Belfast includes the harbour estate and that South Belfast takes in the city centre, in which a sizeable amount of investment will be made. Sinn Féin is whingeing and whining about which areas receive investment.

I could make an even more conclusive and convincing case than the Member because, in my Strangford constituency, the investment assistance per capita is habitually 10 times lower than that in West Belfast or Foyle. I could make a convincing case that investment in my area is lower but I will not, because I am mature enough to realise that a job in Belfast, whether it is in South or East Belfast, is good for my constituents. Members from North Belfast and West Belfast should be grateful that they have on their doorsteps one of the biggest development opportunities in the whole of

Northern Ireland; namely, the Titanic Quarter. I wish that that were in my constituency.

One cannot seek to sectarianise investment in Northern Ireland. Investors will go where they want to. If there are problems attracting jobs to certain areas, that is an issue in respect of skills, education and abilities.

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

Mr Hamilton: It is those issues that should be tackled, not what Invest Northern Ireland is doing, because, in many respects, it is doing a very good job in very difficult circumstances.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is appropriate to welcome the report because it has developed some very interesting and challenging ideas. It is a recognition that we can change. I particularly welcome the fact that senior executives of Invest NI have acknowledged the report and have said that they will not be complacent and they are not averse to recommendations and changes that would help them to improve their performance.

My party is not here to bash Invest NI. It is a soft target, but the reality is that we welcome yesterday's jobs announcement. In the present economic circumstances, we could not do otherwise. However, it is fair and appropriate to reflect on the quality of jobs that went to Belfast, which were high-end jobs, whereas the jobs that went to Derry — although they are welcome in the circumstances of economic underdevelopment — are low-end, call-centre-type jobs that are mobile and unreliable. I hope that the Minister understands the issue, particularly as she represents a constituency that is at the extreme end of this region, in relation to the Belfast economic centre.

I understand all the arguments about the metropolitan pull. Many economies suffer from the centrist approach that is sometimes reflected in relation to capital cities and seats of Government, etc. We are clearly not of that scale, but it is important to note that, in many instances, Administrations have been forced to reverse that trend because the so-called metropolitan pull had the effect of overheating the economy, with very significant stresses and strains put on infrastructure, transportation and the environment, etc.

Two weeks ago, when the Minister announced the six-week consultation period, I expressed some disappointment because I thought that an opportunity had been missed. I am not overly critical because the consultation process will provide some interesting feedback. Invest NI excites a lot of diverse opinion and, similarly, the report will attract different arguments and perspectives. It will be important to hear those. However, value would have been added to that process had the Minister, guided and supported by the views of her senior officials, provided some of the preliminary

responses. That would have helped the consultation process because it is an opportunity for a strategic review.

The issue that we have to address is the question of regional disparity. It is not a question of saying that there must be investment in a particular area to the detriment of another. It is, in fact, a matter of looking at the remit of Invest NI because the existing remit does not contain any requirement — policy or otherwise — for Invest NI to address that question. Instead, it attempts to approach the issue on the basis of the entire North being regarded as a travel-to-work area for the centre of Belfast. That is unfair and creates many injustices.

In relation to the discussion that we have previously had, and to which we will return, about the relocation of Departments, there are many people, including —

Mr O'Loan: I note what the Member has said. Does he agree with the report that, when attracting jobs to disadvantaged areas:

“It is therefore important to allow companies the scope to locate where they can operate most profitably.”?

That is in chapter 3. Chapter 5 goes on to state that, under such circumstances:

“public policy can, and should, help to mitigate these shortcomings.”

Does the Member agree with me, and will he ask the Minister to look again at her departmental colleague's dismissal of the Bain report on the location of public sector jobs?

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Member and I accept the point that he made. It was pretty much what I was leading to. We have to consider the value that is added by stimulating economic development in areas that have not always enjoyed such a stimulus. The economy receives an added value from the development of a wider reach in the economic opportunities that present themselves.

I appeal for the Minister to use the report to give Invest NI the remit and direction that allows it to address, and be measured on the effectiveness of how it addresses, the question of regional disparity. In the modern economic era, the distances involved and recent telecommunication advances have spelt the death of distance in the North, when it comes to location. A proactive policy would bear a lot of good for us all.

Mr Bresland: The motion raises important economic issues. However, the way in which it is worded raises serious doubts about the motives of the Members who tabled it. Invest Northern Ireland is far from a perfect organisation, but the Barnett report does not condemn it. It is a pity that so much press reporting of the Barnett report was negative and over the top.

The motion adopts the same sort of negative approach. Reading between the lines, I am not sure whether the motion's proposers or their party are fully committed to developing the Northern Ireland economy. They would much prefer to see an all-Ireland approach. That is one reason why they are not happy with Invest Northern Ireland.

No organisation on this earth is perfect. I commend my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for establishing the independent review of her own Department's performance and that of Invest Northern Ireland. By doing so, she has shown commitment to ensuring that the key players in the economy are as effective and efficient as possible.

The Barnett report is helpful, balanced and timely. I note that it has been welcomed by the chairman of Invest Northern Ireland, Stephen Kingon, and its chief executive, Alistair Hamilton. I also note that Mr Hamilton has said that some recommendations in the Barnett report are already being implemented, which is good.

I fully accept that Invest Northern Ireland has not always delivered and that some of the criticism has been justified. There has been too much dependence on call-centre jobs that are here today and gone tomorrow. My own constituency of West Tyrone, and the north-west in general, have traditionally suffered from high rates of unemployment, and we need more jobs.

However, in line with the targets in the Programme for Government, those jobs must last and add value to the economy. Invest Northern Ireland needs to focus much more on innovation and on research and development. That will help to increase productivity and to ensure that we are ready to take full advantage of the economic recovery, when it comes.

Many criticisms of Invest Northern Ireland relate to the period before restoration of the Assembly and devolution in May 2007. I am confident that change for the better is already occurring. I oppose the motion.

6.15 pm

Mr McFarland: I share my colleague Mr Cree's concern that the motion is more a reflection on Sinn Féin's dodgy political ideology than a considered reflection on a worthwhile report. Indeed, it is questionable why we are having the debate, because the report is out for consultation. Perhaps it deserves a thorough and detailed analysis before receiving a public judgement.

Sinn Féin and, in particular, the Member for Foyle Ms Martina Anderson's accusation is that Invest Northern Ireland routinely fails the north-west region. The premise of that argument is that Invest NI should not allocate investments on objective criteria that are based on potential economic success. Rather, there should be some sort of state command and control

policy. Ms Anderson recently outlined that position when she said:

“This report provides further evidence of the need for a complete restructuring of Invest NI and strict direction on its functions if we are to change the laissez faire approach it presently has to developing the economy.”

That quotation reveals many things. First, it shows us that Sinn Féin has not even read the report. If it had, it would have noted one of the report's major recommendations:

“Invest NI should be allowed more freedom to operate, with DETI having less involvement in operational matters, to enable the organisation to be more entrepreneurial and responsive to business needs.”

The report also recommends that:

“Invest NI should disengage its direct involvement with venture capital (VC) funds. Rather than direct participation in the market, Invest NI should act as a facilitator between companies and VCs.”

On the one hand, the report says that Invest NI must be much less controlled by government and set free to foster organic activity. On the other hand, Sinn Féin says that Invest NI must be strictly directed to invest in certain places and, logically, no doubt, in certain businesses. To follow Sinn Féin's line would sound the death knell for Northern Ireland's economy and its economic prospects.

The report makes some incisive and clear observations and some timely and necessary recommendations, and I congratulate the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for commissioning it. Nevertheless, after consultation, I hope that she acts decisively and courageously to implement its recommendations. Although the report's remit was limited, it creates a potential blueprint for a new vision and an innovative direction for Northern Ireland.

The report envisages a reformed Invest NI, which should:

“concentrate support mainly to small firms and to projects with a high Innovative content”.

I welcome that shift of emphasis, and I hope that such firms develop further throughout Northern Ireland.

I share my colleague's view that linking innovative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into export markets will attract foreign direct investment (FDI) more readily than any number of expensive trade forums. Innovation and R&D are the most important long-term productivity drivers in Northern Ireland. If we are to compete in world markets, we surely have to become world market leaders. Institutional change is needed in Invest NI and in DETI. However, I am glad that that change is not being driven by Sinn Féin. I welcome the report, which provides us with a genuine opportunity, but I reject the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. At the outset, I thank the Minister of Enterprise,

Trade and Investment for requesting this important review, which was long overdue. I also thank Professor Richard Barnett for his analysis and for compiling the subsequent recommendations. Furthermore, I congratulate the Minister for her pragmatic and businesslike approach since taking up the Enterprise, Trade and Investment portfolio. She brings a sense of robustness to the position that is long overdue, and I hope that she will long continue to do so.

As Members will have discovered from my colleague's speech, the SDLP warmly welcomes the publication of the ‘Independent Review of Economic Policy’, which rightly points out that productivity levels in Northern Ireland lag seriously behind those in Britain, while the gap in living standards continues to widen and deepen.

The SDLP believes that it is the responsibility of the Executive and various delivery agencies, including Invest Northern Ireland, to reduce the gaps in productivity and living standards. To a large extent, they have failed to do so. They fail to do so, in spite of Northern Ireland being a relatively attractive place for investors. We have competitive wages, a skilled labour force and generous incentives on offer. Yet, over the years, we have failed to significantly increase productivity levels.

To a large extent the impact of Invest Northern Ireland has been badly hampered by red tape, over-bureaucratic bureaucrats and a risk-averse approach. Equally, to be honest, Northern Ireland has had some resounding successes. One has to go back only a few days to the announcement that the New York Stock Exchange is to bring some 400 high-end jobs to our city. Invest Northern Ireland was critical in securing that investment, which is good for the whole city, not just economically, but in the confidence that it creates and the image that it portrays about the investment potential here. Invest Northern Ireland can repeat that success on a firmer and more frequent footing. However, that will require that the recommendations be implemented. Invest Northern Ireland needs urgent restructuring, reform and much greater autonomy. That is just a summary of the recommendations.

The SDLP has long called for greater clarity and co-ordination in the responsibility for, and delivery of, economic policy, which is why we strongly support the creation of a cross-departmental standing Committee on economic development, as was recommended in the report. Public finances are tight and will get tighter. EU state aid rules mean that we will steadily lose the ability to provide the financial assistance that brings work and business to Northern Ireland. Therefore, Invest Northern Ireland will have to be more focused on how, and on what, it spends. As the independent review points out, the key focus should be on attracting,

developing and retaining high-value-added investment, both indigenous and foreign direct investment.

If we are to attract higher-value-added jobs and address the productivity gap, which is a key objective of the Programme for Government, our priority should be to support innovation and R&D. It is only via that route that we can begin to raise private sector productivity levels, ensuring better wages and a better standard of living for our people.

I am confident that, in the very capable and dynamic hands of the new chief executive, Alastair Hamilton, Invest Northern Ireland (INI) will rise to the challenges that we face. However, to do that he needs the full support of the House; half-hearted support is not enough. We must work with him, not against him or casually in the background.

It is important that the focus on economic and business development should not be to the exclusion of our local small and medium-sized enterprises. Small indigenous enterprises must also be supported. They need assistance and targeted training programmes.

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

Dr McDonnell: There is much room for discussion on what is the best way to deliver such programmes.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus lena rá go bhfuil mé an-sásta go bhfuil muid ag plé an ábhair thábhachtaigh seo inniu.

I support the motion, and I appeal to Members not to react in knee-jerk fashion to it simply because it is a Sinn Féin motion. If they listen to what is being said, Members will find that this is not an INI-bashing session. We strive to critically appraise and analyse INI.

The backdrop to the motion is the recent report on the work of INI by Professor Richard Barnett. The report has a particular focus, which other Members have touched on in their contributions. In my opinion, the report provides an opportunity to critically appraise the work of INI in tackling regional disparity and economic disadvantage. It also provides an opportunity for the Minister to bring forward a focused and strategic approach in delivering the pledge in the Programme for Government that undertakes:

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

The Minister for Regional Development has a role in that, and one of the first things that he did was to call for a review of the regional development strategy. However, it is not the sole remit of one Minister. Indeed, as far as I am aware, all four parties in the Executive signed up to it. The Programme for Government states that all Government agencies should play a constructive

role in honouring that pledge. I believe that INI has a leading role in assisting to make that pledge a reality.

However, where we have to be critical is that, as the report highlights, any objective analysis of INI shows that it fails to make a meaningful contribution to the delivery of that pledge. In its defence, INI will state — as it has stated at every presentation that I have heard it make — that its remit is to sell or market the North as a single entity and marketplace; therein lies the problem for my party and me. As long as that remains the strategic framework within which INI operates, it will have a curtailed and limited impact in tackling regional disparity and, indeed, may compound it.

With this report and with her consultation on the way forward, the Minister should ensure that the way forward gives clear indicators on how INI will play a role in tackling regional disparity and economic disadvantage in a measurable way. I welcome the Minister's view and her acceptance in her public response to the report that there are short- and long-term challenges to building a dynamic and innovative local economy. I hope that she includes putting structures and programmes in place to bring an end to regional disparities and to social and economic disadvantage among those challenges. After all, that is what the Programme for Government says. The Minister must also ensure that where the report recommends the need for structural change she applies that right across INI policy.

There is a tendency that when this analysis is put forward it is viewed as Derry versus the rest. In fact, Alan McFarland mentioned that today. My role is to stand up for Derry. However, I remind Members of two telling statistics that highlight that this issue and the work of INI affect many constituencies. To my knowledge, in 10 years, there has not been a single first-time inward investment project in the constituencies of East Derry and North Antrim. In the same period, the number of jobs promoted in South Belfast exceeded the combined total in the West Tyrone, Newry and Armagh, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Foyle constituencies.

Irrespective of the review of INI and of Sinn Féin's view, that cannot continue if we are to deliver the Programme for Government; nor can the debate be reduced to the well-worn mantra of “Will we refuse jobs?”. Of course not; job announcements such as the one made yesterday are to be welcomed. The debate cannot be reduced to the “travel-to-work thesis” either. That thesis on its own undermines tackling regional disparity.

I remind the parties in the Executive that all those issues have to be viewed in the context of the Programme for Government pledge. The Assembly must be seen to be tackling regional disparity, and all

its agencies must play a role in that, not by indirect consequence but by policy direction. That opportunity is now before the Minister. The challenge is obvious: this is the time for delivery.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Events have overtaken this debate — indeed, this motion — to a large degree. It comes less than 24 hours after Invest Northern Ireland landed one of the biggest and most prestigious inward investment fish that could have come to our economy. Had the movers of the motion reflected on what the New York Stock Exchange announced in Belfast yesterday, they would, with some modesty, have withdrawn it and waited, as Alan McFarland said, until the consultation process was over.

Let us stop for one moment and think about it: almost 400 jobs from the New York Stock Exchange come to where? London? Zürich? Hong Kong? Shanghai? No; they came to Belfast. Why have they come to Northern Ireland? Think about it for a moment. All those places were competing equally for those jobs, yet they came here.

6.30 pm

We need to stop gurning and yapping about the economy. Members must stop saying that they want jobs on their doorsteps, in west Belfast or elsewhere. We have to stop knocking the economy and recognise that we are privileged that a tiny country called Northern Ireland was able to attract 400 jobs from the New York Stock Exchange 12 hours ago. We should recognise the tremendous opportunity that we have and the role that was played by Invest Northern Ireland in delivering those jobs. That demonstrates that the Government of Northern Ireland were right to put the economy at the centre of the Programme for Government.

It would be wrong for us to justify prescribing where businesses should go, as the proposer of the motion has tried to do. One cannot attract the type of high-end jobs and develop the sort of economy that Raymond McCartney spoke about and, at the same time, curtail the investor by giving rules and regulations about whether the jobs should be Catholic jobs, or in Protestant catchment areas, or in areas that suit a Member's political motivations.

Ms J McCann: We did not say that.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member might not have said it, but the code is clear.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No. I could get unity tonight with the Member for North Antrim Declan O'Loan if I said that I wanted to see every inward investment job for Northern Ireland coming to Ballymena, Ballycastle and Ballymoney. That would sort out my problems, thank you very much. It is not realistic to expect that;

it is not right. Members should wise up and recognise that if they want the sort of investments that were announced yesterday, they cannot gurn and whinge and say that the jobs must be in Turf Lodge. Neither can Members use the Barnett report as a foundation for the criticism that has been launched today. I think that it was Alan McFarland who quoted from the report the conclusion that companies should be allowed to locate where they wish.

The review is not a foundation stone from which to throw bricks at the Minister or at Invest Northern Ireland; it is a foundation stone from which to congratulate them for what should be done and what is being proposed to be done.

Belfast is not a vast metropolis that is so far stretched in either direction that people in Turf Lodge, Ballygomartin, Tigers Bay and Ballybeen cannot come into the city centre and work. It is a wee place, and we should be delighted that we are receiving the sort of investment that is being made. Members should stop whingeing about the fact that it has not come to their backyards.

My colleague Simon Hamilton informed the House that the £1 billion investment that has been made has created approximately 21,000 new jobs; that is a remarkable investment. We should also recognise that the investment has gone to areas in which there has been need.

Raymond McCartney was wrong to say that there has not been investment in North Antrim. If Invest Northern Ireland did not exist, another 200 people in North Antrim would be unemployed, because Wrightbus would not have been supported by inward investment activities in respect of research and development. That investment kept people in employment in the past year. Furthermore, Michelin would not have been able to carry out the training schemes that it ran for the past year to keep people in employment.

I welcome the work and the flexibility that we are seeing at the heart of Invest Northern Ireland, because it is sustaining employment in areas where it has to be sustained. I look forward to the day when we will see more people queuing up to bring to Northern Ireland — and, hopefully, to Ballymena — the sort of investments that have been announced in the past 24 hours.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Members might think that I am not thankful that they tabled the motion, but I do thank them, because it has given Members an opportunity to comment on the issue. Most of what Members have said has made an important contribution to the wider debate on the conclusions of the Barnett review, and I hope that it will form part of the ongoing consultation on the report.

In my statement to the Assembly on 5 October, when I informed Members of my intention to launch the consultation on the independent review of economic policy, I emphasised that there was a need to give the report careful and balanced consideration. At the outset, let me be clear that at no point does the report call into question Invest Northern Ireland's standards of accountability or challenge the equity of its distribution of funding — both of which, regrettably, have been implied in the wording of the motion.

I do not accept that there is any need for Invest Northern Ireland to be made more accountable. Indeed, robust governance systems are in place between the Department and Invest Northern Ireland, and I am fully satisfied that those arrangements are fit for purpose. There is nothing in the findings of the report to suggest that there were any issues of accountability, and that has been recognised by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and many other Members during the debate. In fact, the report clearly states that Invest Northern Ireland should be given more autonomy to allow it to become more flexible and responsive to the needs of the business community here, and to the needs of those who seek to invest in Northern Ireland. However, those needs must be balanced against the facts that Invest Northern Ireland deals with public money, and that it must be accountable for that expenditure. Indeed, the issue of Invest Northern Ireland's accountability versus the need for it to be innovative and flexible in what it does is something that must be kept under constant review.

In the context of the debate, I want to highlight that I specifically asked the review panel to consider the subregional distribution of inward investment, other support mechanisms for indigenous businesses and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment. I specifically asked the review team to examine those areas, and for them to insert those areas in the report's terms of reference. Indeed, point 1.7 of the report's terms of reference states that the review team were asked to analyse and make recommendations about:

“The sub-regional distribution of an inward investment and other support measures to indigenous businesses, and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment”.

As I had asked the Barnett review to specifically examine those areas, I find the wording of the motion somewhat contradictory. On one hand, the proposers of the motion state that they note the report and what is contained in it, and then go on to say something that frankly is not in the report. That is disappointing.

Page 115 of the report states:

“Evidence reviewed by the Panel suggests that competitiveness varies between places in a region, with cities offering significant agglomeration and spillover benefits. The implication is that firms should be allowed to locate where they generate the highest returns,

although this should not be at the expense of where people in NI wish to live.”

That relates to the issue of the regional development strategy that Mr Cree mentioned earlier.

The report goes on to state:

“This approach will seek to efficiently connect people and jobs given their location preference, but it demands the full co-ordination of policy toward business, housing, the labour market/skill formation, transport, regulation and planning.”

Therefore, it is not jobs alone that bring equality to communities; rather, such communities require much more than just jobs.

An Adjournment debate on economic development in West Belfast will follow this debate, and 61% of the people who are employed in that area do not live there. We must ask why that is the case. Wider social, housing and skills issues are at play, and the motion that has been tabled does not address those issues.

Mr P Maskey: The Minister stated that 61% of the people who work in West Belfast do not live there. However, when I have asked Invest NI or the Minister's Department for information on how many people from West Belfast work on the Boucher Road, or in other areas, that information can never be obtained. I have requested that information on several occasions and it has never been forthcoming.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am surprised that my Department has not been able to provide that information for the Member, but I will endeavour to provide it for him. I give him that commitment today. When I was considering information about the Adjournment topic, I wanted to know how many people travelled into West Belfast to work, as opposed to how many people travelled out of it.

Returning to the motion under debate, I said on many occasions that Invest Northern Ireland works with a base across Northern Ireland, and in the case of new foreign direct investment, it is the companies that make the decision on where to locate. I am aware that some Members may not accept that, but that is the case. For larger-scale investments, that will usually mean that a location is chosen that is close to the main centres of population, and where a full range of infrastructural support already exists. That point is also noted in the findings of the report. Indeed, when we examined some of the findings that relate to productivity, infrastructure was a key issue. I will return to that issue later.

The report also acknowledges the importance of ensuring that rural areas are better linked to urban areas to allow workers to live where they want to live and work where the jobs are located; I will give that issue careful consideration. When I take the matter to the Executive, I hope that my Executive colleagues

will also recognise the role that they have to play on the important issue of economic growth. The panel believes that other Departments have a key role to play in addressing regional disparities, particularly in the development of adequate transportation links.

Ms McCann referred to the important contribution of the social economy, and, obviously, that is recognised in the report. I am disappointed that, when she quotes figures from Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, she does not give the percentage of the Budget that the relevant Departments are allocated. Perhaps she can find that out for me, because I would be interested to see the figures. Stark figures do not mean anything if they are not examined in conjunction with the total amount available to spend.

The panel also recognises the importance of tourism to the economy, and I am disappointed that nobody mentioned that issue in the debate. The Barnett review specifically stated that tourism, given the beautiful areas of Northern Ireland, could be a key innovator for us. The panel said that increased prosperity for Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas, could be significantly addressed by building a more vibrant tourism sector. I look forward to the forthcoming tourism strategy to find out whether that can be moved on. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board recently announced its new branding strategy, which was a huge success, and I look forward to that strategy being rolled out in the coming months.

The report makes a total of 58 recommendations, including the need to place greater emphasis on supporting innovation and research and development. Several Members spoke about the aforementioned need to provide greater autonomy and improve the way in which economic policy is developed and co-ordinated in the public sector. *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor, and there is a lot of conversation going on.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am disappointed that I am not holding their attention, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The report also outlines a number of recommendations in other areas of government that help to deliver on the Programme for Government productivity goal, including important areas such as skills, infrastructure and planning. Members who read the report in full will know that it offers a balanced assessment of the work of Invest Northern Ireland, but it is incorrect to conclude that the report represents an indictment of Invest Northern Ireland's performance. I welcome the balanced nature of today's debate.

The report highlights good areas of performance, but it is also critical. However, as I have said on previous occasions, I have sought and wanted constructive criticism, and we now need a debate on the way forward.

Mention was made of the 10 companies that received 30% of the grants. *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to refrain from conversations. The Minister has the Floor, and Members should pay attention.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I note that most of the noise is coming from behind me, which is a bit disconcerting.

There are 14,500 jobs in those 10 companies, and we must reflect on that. We also need to reflect on the fact that a large company such as Bombardier has a huge supply chain in Northern Ireland; I refer to Bombardier because I was reading about it recently. I have a map with me, and I am happy to share it with colleagues. Bombardier reaches many places in Northern Ireland because of its supply chain. I am not only talking about the jobs in Bombardier but jobs in all the other little companies that are associated with Bombardier, which we must also consider.

6.45 pm

Ms McCann referred to business expansion; she was concerned about the criticism of that in the report. I know that Invest Northern Ireland is also concerned about that; it believes that that business-expansion role gives it the ability to support local and international companies as they grow to scale. It is an important tool in developing the private sector, and ceasing to support such growth ambitions, as the review suggests, would, in the opinion of the board of Invest Northern Ireland, be a lost opportunity. I am increasingly coming to that view myself, and it is something that I am taking on board and considering at present.

It is also important to note that the report states:

“Since its inception, Invest NI has made a strong and positive contribution to economic development.”

However, we cannot be complacent. We need to move on and determine how that contribution could be greater still. That is one of the reasons why I asked for the report to be produced. I have been particularly encouraged that many of the recommendations in the report are consistent with changes that are already under way in Invest NI. Someone has already made that point. For example, the increasing focus on innovation, levels of R&D, widening the reach of support for business and encouraging the development of higher-added-value sectors are all central elements of the agency's current corporate plan.

I think that it was the Chairperson of the Committee who said that the main criticism for him and for a lot of people was in relation to productivity issues. However, I think he will accept that that productivity goal was only set in 2008, and it is therefore something that we really need to concentrate on now. The productivity deficit arises for three reasons: the high

levels of economic inactivity; the structural composition of our economy; and the predominantly small business base, which lacks the critical mass to be fully competitive. We really need to look at those three areas to see what we can do about them. It is fair to say that dealing with that productivity gap will be the focus for us in the coming months.

Many of the recommendations in the report, particularly those aimed at reducing bureaucracy and proposing greater operational freedom for Invest NI, would, if implemented in a timely and proper manner, have the potential to aid the work of Invest NI and improve the economic landscape of Northern Ireland enormously; I endorse that.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the review highlights both the areas where Invest NI has performed well — I have outlined them — and where it could do much better. I welcome that, because, if we are going to have the step change that our economy needs to move forward and deal with those productivity issues, we need to look critically at those areas.

I stress again that we are in a period of consultation. I urge everyone who has taken part in the debate and those who are here to listen to it to continue to contribute fully to that process. In relation to the motion, I say genuinely that the report did consider the issue and expressed the view that it was not the job of Invest NI to do those sorts of things. However, I say to Members in areas like my own where there is difficulty in getting foreign direct investment that we may need to do more in relation to that and to work with Invest NI. I hope that the Members opposite will accept that Invest NI has been more proactive in recent months and years and that there is a determination in that organisation to work with local communities. I hope that that will be recognised in the concluding remarks.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have had a long debate about Invest NI, and I welcome the Minister and her comments. There were two parts to the motion: first, it welcomed Professor Barnett's report on Invest NI. We also welcome the fact that the Minister asked for that report to be produced. My colleague Jennifer McCann, who moved the motion, said that it was not about bashing Invest NI or the Minister. Mitchel McLaughlin also made that point. As Jennifer McCann, who is a Member for West Belfast, said, there has been criticism over many years that Invest NI failed to invest in some areas. People referred to some of those years being under direct rule.

It was unfortunate that one Member, Ian Paisley Jnr, tried to sectarianise the debate. Regardless of whether Members support or oppose the motion, it should be acknowledged that it has nothing to do with religion. Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned some areas in west Belfast,

and I should remind him that the Shankill Road is part of the West Belfast constituency and is probably one of the most deprived parts of the constituency. Sinn Féin believes that investment should be made to areas that are deprived and in need, regardless of people's background or religion.

Jennifer McCann referred to the importance that the report placed on the social economy. Professor Barnett told the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment about how the social economy can bring about change, particularly for people who are unemployed. Jennifer McCann said that £4 million or £5 million is invested in the social economy here, whereas around £30 million is invested in Scotland. She also spoke about how public procurement could help.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Alban Maginness, mentioned the productivity gap, which Professor Barnett referred to in his report. Mr Maginness mentioned the emphasis on research and development and innovation and the way that government structures that are imposed on Invest NI restrict its progress on economic development.

Stephen Moutray mentioned the objectives of the Programme for Government. He did not seem to accept the criticisms that were made of Invest NI. He said that some of the report covers the period of direct rule.

Leslie Cree said that many companies had not benefited from special financial assistance. Professor Barnett was critical of that in his report, and he said that Invest NI should be more responsive to the needs of businesses here, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises.

Trevor Lunn referred to areas of deprivation and disadvantage, an issue that was a theme of the debate. He said that more is needed than jobs to tackle disadvantage and educational underachievement. He said that better educational attainment, childcare facilities and transport links were needed.

Simon Hamilton did not accept the main thrust of the motion, but he referred to how the planning process can help to regenerate the economy by getting rid of much of the red tape so that businesses, particularly those in the construction sector, can get on. The report referred to that, and that is welcome.

The issue of merging DETI with DEL is a bit controversial. That has been suggested because DEL is responsible for skills. That is for a future debate.

My colleague Mitchel McLaughlin said that the motion was not about bashing Invest NI. Sinn Féin welcomes the comments by the Minister that she will look at the issue of regional disparities and whether investment should go to major cities rather than rural areas. I take it on board that she said that there should

be better connection between urban and rural areas. Mitchel McLaughlin developed that theme of regional disparities, and he said that Invest NI must have a responsibility to address that.

Allan Bresland said that many of the criticisms that the report makes of Invest NI are for the period of direct rule. He made the point that, although some jobs were announced yesterday, there is a dependence on call centres. Several Members mentioned yesterday's announcement of New York Stock Exchange jobs that will come here, as well as the announcement on the call centre in Derry.

Mr McFarland suggested that Invest NI should be freed up and have fewer controls and restrictions on it; he said that its risk-averse culture should be dealt with. Alasdair McDonnell said that the North lags behind other regions in productivity and living standards, which, I believe, is also mentioned in the report. He said that Invest NI needs to be restructured urgently. He also referred to the report's recommendation to set up an Executive subcommittee to take forward economic policy.

My colleague Raymond McCartney mentioned economic disadvantage and regional disparities, particularly in Derry, and said that Invest NI had failed to address that issue. As we take the report forward, the Minister must take that on board.

Although Ian Paisley Jnr referred to parts of west Belfast in a way that, I believe, sectarianised the debate, he at least welcomed the jobs that were announced by the New York Stock Exchange and also jobs in Derry. He also said that Wrightbus and Michelin in his constituency would not be where they are today without Invest NI.

The Minister was fairly balanced in her remarks. However, some heated debate took place, and we are not agreed on how Invest NI should go forward. Sinn Féin has certain criticisms. The report refers to places such as west Belfast, Derry and some rural areas where, in the past, Invest NI has not invested. I take on board the Minister's comments about the regional development strategy; it also needs to come into play. The matter is not just about Invest NI investment and jobs creation but about transport links and other issues.

Declan O'Loan discussed the Bain report and whether jobs will be relocated to rural areas. Professor Barnett told the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that the Executive and the Assembly must look at such policies. That would be welcome.

No one except the Minister mentioned tourism and how it can create jobs and attract investors. All the political parties missed the opportunity to comment on that issue. Tourism can bring positive developments.

All in all, I welcome all Members' comments in the debate. Although we may not find agreement on the issue, at least we debated it.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 23; Noes 33.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mrs Hanna, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr W Clarke and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lunn, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Bresland and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Economic Development in West Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic has 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Business Committee for accepting this Adjournment debate. I also thank those who remain in the Chamber to contribute to it, including the Minister, who has a long distance to travel this evening.

Everybody who knows west Belfast will acknowledge and thank the people of the area, who, across the walls and divisions, have developed over the years a common and shared agenda for the needs of the community and its economic development.

I will begin by offering some answers to the problems that west Belfast faces as a deeply deprived community. I want to flag up five or six issues, some of which apply to west Belfast in particular and others that can be broadly applied to areas of need and unemployment in the North of Ireland.

First, the Government tell us that more investment is being rolled out in the North than in any phase of our history. However, that is not reflected by social clauses in the award of public contracts. Only one public contract that has been awarded recently contains a social clause requiring the employment of unemployed people. The contract is for a footbridge in Derry, and there is a requirement to employ one unemployed person for every £1 million of spend, which, in that case, means employing eight people. If big investment is to be rolled out, subject to the financial situation in the coming years, such a requirement must become a mainstay in the award of public contracts. That is true for west Belfast, especially in the event of the award of a contract for a new hospital for women and babies on the Royal Hospitals site. I will return to that matter later.

When the new chief executive of Invest NI was appointed, I sensed that the door was more open than it had been heretofore; I still believe that that is the case. Without discussing the details of specific ongoing negotiations, I say to the Minister and to Invest NI that now is the time to open that door fully to employers, especially the indigenous employers of west Belfast. I have no doubt that conversations are ongoing and that business cases have been presented to Invest NI and its new chief executive. It is now time to deliver on those

conversations. In the event that those conversations do not reach maturity and success, then, potentially, indigenous employers in west Belfast who compete in the global market and have a substantial and growing workforce and are the best example of manufacturing in Northern Ireland, as regards outreach into the world — one business in particular — might not fulfil their economic potential here and may go overseas.

I listened attentively to the Minister's comments during her conclusion to the previous debate. She was right: job location is dictated by many factors, and she named some of them. However, job location is also influenced by the intention and ambition of economic agencies when it comes to deprived areas such as west Belfast. The hard figures show that, in the past year, west Belfast received the fourth lowest amount of assistance for economic development from Invest NI. It is well down the league table of visits by potential investors, but it is not as low as Derry and south Down. Nonetheless, the number of visits is so low that it is virtually meaningless. Unless Invest NI sets hard targets and is judged by its results, people will continue to believe that its interests are in south and east Belfast, regardless of the Minister's assertion that contracts in south and east Belfast will lead to business in other parts of the North. The imbalance in economic investment between north and west Belfast and south and east Belfast is too enormous and requires remedial action.

I mentioned the Royal Hospitals earlier. There would be no better economic investment in west Belfast than in a hospital for women and babies on the Royal Hospitals site. There is no better way to define west Belfast than through that investment. In 2000, a Minister said that a building would be erected on the site in five years; in 2003, another Minister said that funding was available to commence the work quickly. Therefore, it is a matter of grave regret that, nine years later, the cost of a newbuild hospital is £400 million, which is much greater than it was previously. That issue must be addressed. Negotiations are ongoing on the devolution of policing and justice, and some reassurances have been given about capital projects for the justice side, perhaps the new prison or the police college. I am worried that, when it comes down to it, there will be greater pain in relation to other capital projects in the North, such as the new maternity hospital on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. I hope that that fear is not realised, but it could be.

7.15 pm

I want to briefly mention Visteon, to which the Minister has been attentive. When I contacted the Pensions Regulator recently, he told me that he was about to open four boxes of documents relating to the matter. It will be of residual reassurance to the people who lost good jobs that should never have been lost if the Government and Members of the Assembly

continue to press the Pensions Regulator to correct what were, in my view, irregularities in the management of Visteon's pension fund.

I ask the Minister and her colleagues to consider the need for better joined-up activity between agencies and Departments on the requirements of west Belfast. The closure of Bass Ireland, Trivirix, Mackies International, Boxmore International plc, Richardsons, Westside and Ford Visteon has raised many issues. The lands that were zoned for economic development should be protected so that, in the event of a turn in fortunes of the constituency of West Belfast, they are developed for economic purposes.

I want the Minister to re-examine an unfair clause that legislates against places such as west Belfast by not allowing the development of office accommodation that exceeds 2,000 sq m. That is an impediment in a situation of grave difficulty for west Belfast, and it must be revisited, as should the bar on financial assistance for hotel developments within a 10-mile radius of Belfast city centre. The lack of hotel accommodation outside Belfast is an impediment to tourism development in the North and must be addressed. All the indicators show that, based on all the tourist interests in west Belfast, hotel development in that part of the city should be forthcoming.

Mr F McCann: The Member has covered many issues. Living in inner-city west Belfast, I know that, for many years, there has been a belief that the city centre has been pushed eastwards on the western and eastern sides of the River Lagan. That has left an almost total dereliction of the north and west ends of the city centre. Major investment there could create hundreds — if not thousands — of new jobs.

Mr Attwood: I concur with my colleague from West Belfast. There are many other proposals that I could make to the Minister in writing in due course, but that is why, in an indicative way, the adjustments that I have recommended, along with others, can reprofile west Belfast so that it becomes that much more attractive to any new investors that INI may bring in in the coming year and beyond.

Ultimately, a strategic approach to development is required. No constituency in the North has, by itself and through external advice, developed better projects to sustain and accelerate its economic development. Consider the Department for Social Development (DSD) proposal for the Andersonstown gateway, the enterprise proposals for the Black Mountain, the Andersonstown village, the Gaeltacht quarter, Fernhill House and the village communities in the Shankill and elsewhere. Consider the proposals that have come from the West Belfast Partnership Board, which is a mature organisation that has experienced a great deal of growth and pain over the years. It is not for want of

visionary proposals that are right for the constituency that economic development has not gone as far as it should have. It needs a strategic approach, and the time has come for the constituency and government to decide what such an approach should be.

There are many options. Some people argue for an urban development strategy, such as those of Laganside Corporation or the Maze/Long Kesh. Others say that the strategic regeneration framework, which knits together the city and could knit together the constituency, is in place and is the right model. Some people in the community sector in west Belfast, for whom I have the greatest regard, just say, "Get on with it". They do not want us to get too heavily involved in the architecture.

I have a view about how that issue should be resolved, but it needs to be resolved so that proposals such as those for the Andersonstown gateway, which Margaret Ritchie described as far-reaching and transformative, and those which the Enterprise Council calls "Think Transformation" can be realised over the next decade. It could, realistically, take that amount of time.

I have offered some solutions to the problem of the lack of development in west Belfast, but the question is why it is so. It is not just because this part of our country has suffered, along with north Belfast, the greatest loss of life and the greatest upset and disorder through the years of conflict; it is also because west Belfast, when measured across virtually every multiple deprivation index, comes out bottom or near bottom of the league. That is confirmed by figures released in August, which state that the West Belfast constituency — I have not mentioned any part of West Belfast, I refer to the entire constituency — has the fourth highest unemployment rate of any Westminster constituency. That rate includes 22.6% of males and 7.3% of females: 15.8% overall. Imagine a street where 22.6% of the adult male population are not in work.

Although those figures are harsh, they do not begin to tell the story of the struggle that some people face in order to live in those conditions. Those figures cannot convey the hopelessness and exasperation of people in that condition. They cannot and do not convey how alienating life can be for people in that condition. They cannot measure the damage done to the soul of an individual or of a community that has displayed such resilience in the face of adversity in every other way over the past 30 or 40 years. For all those reasons, I hope that the debate might be a catalyst to further, urgent actions around those matters.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. Someone recently said that, over the past 10 or 20 years, there have been five Presidents, five Prime Ministers, three Secretaries-General of the UN and enormous global change, but, for all the change in our society, a lot of that has yet to impact on the abject

conditions of poverty and deprivation faced by far too many in west Belfast.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my constituency colleague for bringing the Adjournment debate to the House, because economic development in west Belfast is very important.

To pick up on one of the points that Mr Attwood mentioned, there are many ideas, proposals and master plans. On occasion, I have argued that there are too many. All those plans allow all the Departments to escape their responsibilities, because they can blame each other. They can also blame each other for the number of proposals and feasibility studies that have been carried out. I guarantee that dozens of those documents can be seen in any community organisation or constituency office in West Belfast. That is wrong.

I have the Enterprise Council's feasibility study, 'Think Transformation', as well as the Department for Social Development's Andersonstown gateway feasibility study.

The inclusion of timeframes in some of the documents provides Departments with an escape route. The regeneration of west Belfast may take 20 years, and such a time frame may allow Departments to put projects on the long finger. The women and children's hospital at the Royal is one example; it will now cost far more than was originally anticipated.

It is worth reflecting that one third of Belfast's population lives in the west of the city, including the Shankill. I refer to the constituency as a whole and do not segregate it in any way. We have a duty to ensure that those people have good employment opportunities and that they can create businesses in the constituency of West Belfast. Many Departments have managed to escape dealing directly with west Belfast; indeed, some of the recommendations in the task force reports have yet to be implemented. Departments must step up to the mark; we have heard all about how much certain Departments will invest, but that investment is often put on the long finger. That is not good enough; it is time that Departments gave the people of west Belfast a fair crack of the whip in respect to investment opportunities.

I must thank a number of community organisations. The West Belfast Partnership Board has worked on many issues over the years, and it has had a lead role in economic development, including the strategic regeneration framework, and in bringing traders' forums together. The Enterprise Council, which is funded by Invest NI, is also important, and we must recognise the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in that. Some Departments have been better than others in implementing the task force's recommendations.

Gerry Adams, Jennifer McCann, Fra McCann and I recently met Alastair Hamilton in the constituency. Compared to other Invest NI representatives with whom we have dealt, he said many of the right things; however, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Areas such as west Belfast need delivery. We must give people a chance to work together, and one of the highlights of the meeting was the idea that more can be achieved if we work together. Hopefully, the meeting with Invest NI's new chief executive represents a positive new start. We can delve into the past, but people such as Alastair Hamilton must be given the opportunity to take us forward. Complaining about the past will not change it; instead, we must work together to ensure that we achieve more.

There have been significant changes. For example, the Tourist Board recently held a meeting in west Belfast for the first time. That reflects positively on both the Tourist Board and the Minister's Department. The meeting was held in An Cultúrlann, and Tourist Board officials also visited some of west Belfast's tourist attractions, including the graveyards. I recently received a letter of thanks from Howard Wells of the Tourist Board. He said that he and the other representatives had really enjoyed their trip to the west of the city. Those are positive signs, and I hope that we can ensure that such good work continues. Tourism is a very —

Mr McCausland: Perhaps the Member will help me, because I am a little confused about the sudden mention of Howard Wells. Howard Wells may have certain skills in the football world, but I did not know that he was involved in tourism.

7.30 pm

Mr P Maskey: I appreciate that. Minister, I think that it was your Department's arm's-length bodies that did the job of getting rid of Howard Wells, but that was before you became Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I hope that Howard Hastings will stay in post a lot longer than Howard Wells did.

A number of exciting initiatives are planned for the west of the city. For example, the rapid transit system will allow connectivity between east and west Belfast and other parts of the city, and, if we get it right, it will allow people from east Belfast to enjoy employment opportunities in west Belfast.

There is also the proposed redevelopment of Casement Park. I see that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has just joined us in the Chamber, so we have the luxury of having two Ministers present for the debate. I urge the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to do all that he can to ensure that that redevelopment happens as smoothly and quickly as possible. We talked about the Andersonstown gateway and the regeneration of that area, and the redevelopment of

Casement Park would be a massive step in the right direction in that it would create employment opportunities in west Belfast. That positive step should be taken sooner rather than later.

We have had many issues with the Tourist Board, and Alex Attwood touched on the fact that west Belfast is the only part of Belfast that does not yet have a hotel. I know that, at one time, Lisburn was the only city that did not have a hotel, but it now has one. I hope that in the not-too-distant future, there will be hotels in west Belfast. Thousands upon thousands of tourists come to the west of the city daily, but they do not stay in the west; they spend their money and the evening in other parts of the city.

I ask the Minister to consider whether it is possible to introduce pilot schemes that will tackle the severe shortage of tourist accommodation in the west of the city; for example, schemes to establish bed and breakfasts. Over the years, many people have bought into the tourism concept for west Belfast. Sometimes people there feel like goldfish in a bowl; people drive in and drive back out again. We need to work hard to change that. Perhaps, Minister, we could look at that issue together to see what possibilities exist. I would be very grateful if your Department could consider the matter.

The Gaeltacht Quarter is very important because it promotes both language and culture, and that distinguishes the area from other parts of the city, such as the Titanic Quarter, the Cathedral Quarter or Queen's Quarter. I am not sure how many quarters there are in Belfast now; the last time I counted, there were around seven. Those who work in the area and who sit on the Gaeltacht Quarter board — most of whom do so in a voluntary capacity — have worked hard to ensure that the quarter has developed. The Minister can ask Howard Hastings and the board about the respect that they were shown in the meeting at An Cultúrlann, which is in the heart of the Gaeltacht Quarter.

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

Mr P Maskey: People from the Greater Shankill Partnership were at the meeting also. Minister, I leave those thoughts with you.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Attwood for securing the debate, and I will concentrate on some issues that have not been covered, rather than repeat what other Members have said.

The previous debate was on Invest NI, and the Minister was present for that, too. I must repeat that people in west Belfast feel very let down by organisations such as Invest NI. Whether people agree with that statement or not, we must consider the issue from the viewpoint of those who live in that area. Let me return

to some of the recommendations in the report by the West Belfast and greater Shankill task forces. For example, when consideration was being given to which areas would be designated as major employment locations in the Belfast metropolitan area plan, Invest NI did not heed the task force call for west Belfast to be designated as one such location. I wanted to touch on that point.

There is a clear need for a focus on economic development in west Belfast. The last two Members to speak have mentioned various proposals, and I have also been involved in some of the proposals from the development stage. Some worthy proposals can sit for too long at the planning stage or remain as strategies that do not go anywhere. The Enterprise Council's Belfast Hills project is a good proposal. As Members mentioned, in the constituency that I am from and in which I live, money has been secured to continue the Colin Glen gateway project that had stalled for years. That is all good news.

In Fra McCann's area, projects include the Andersonstown gateway at Castle Street and the Andersonstown village. There are a lot of good projects in the system, and I hope that they can be taken forward. West Belfast is a good area for business to locate and for foreign direct investment. The large Mackie's site, for instance, is not being used. It is on the Springfield Road, which leads directly to Belfast International Airport. People could, therefore, fly in and out without having to go through the city centre. There is plenty of office space.

Some people may say that the social economy is my hobby horse, but I have to mention it. Many social enterprises, particularly in areas such as west Belfast, came from the community and voluntary sector, and they had to reinvent themselves when their funding began to dry up.

Last week, I attended a launch of the social economy fund at the Farset centre. I listened to some of the stories, and there was one of a young girl who was working in the Shankill Women's Centre. She told how she had left school aged 16 and become pregnant at the age of 17. She had no qualifications, and no one was offering her an employment opportunity. The Shankill Women's Centre offered an NVQ course in childcare, and she now works in the childcare project there. The Shankill Women's Centre is now in the process of trying to create and develop a second childcare project, because it is needed.

Mr F McCann: It goes back to what I said earlier, and Alex Attwood also touched on it: in many of the streets in west Belfast, the rate of unemployment may be 26% or even higher. The Member mentioned the Shankill and the Falls, where the rate could be 50% or

60%. Most of that unemployment is not recent; in some areas, it is generational.

In my constituency, a young man told me that he could not wait to leave school and start working in McDonald's. Something drastic is needed right away to allow such children to buy into the situation. Ms McCann mentioned the Mackie's site, where the prospect of west Belfast having a university was taken away. Something must be done in those areas that will have an immediate impact over the next year or two, and that will tell the people of the area that they are worth something, not only in that community but in the broader scheme of political life.

Ms J McCann: I agree. Other successful projects in the social economy sector include the Ardmonagh Family Centre, the Footprints Women's Centre and Colin Care. As they are businesses, they generate profit, but they invest that profit in creating more jobs for people in, for example, women's centres.

Alex Attwood talked about public procurement, which, particularly at local council level, could generate employment in those areas. The earlier debate touched on the idea that some businesses do not want to locate to areas like west Belfast because they do not see a skilled workforce there. The skills are there, but I recognise that not everybody would be at the level to do those jobs straight away. However, there are ways to create employment for people like the young girl who was mentioned earlier, for instance. Perhaps she is doing an NVQ this year, but she may go on to gain other skills and qualifications.

Mention was made of a project in the Colin area that is dealing with graffiti, picking up litter and generally keeping the area tidy. It is trying to get a contract from Lisburn City Council. There are ways in which local councils could use their public procurement policies to achieve value for money, add value to the regeneration of a local community and the local economy, and create jobs. There are all those ways of looking at economic development in west Belfast, but we should not take our eye off the ball in relation to getting major investment into the area.

People say that if investment was made in east Belfast or south Belfast, people from west Belfast could travel there. However, the reality is that, depending on where the investment is made in those areas, there may not be a public transport system. Therefore, unless people have cars, they may have to get two buses. If people live at the further end of west Belfast, in places like Twinbrook and Poleglass, they would have to come right down into the city centre and then get another bus. I am not saying that that is not doable, especially if people need the jobs, but, when we are looking at the proposed rapid-transit system, for instance — which, hopefully, will be put in place —

there will be better connections throughout north, south, east and west Belfast, which is a good thing.

The people of west Belfast must get inward investment into their area. As I said, the area is ripe for it, and it would be good because it would create a confidence in people. My colleague Fra McCann mentioned the long-term unemployed and the economically inactive — they would all benefit from investment, so those issues should run as a twin track.

I mentioned the social economy. A number of small and medium-sized businesses, which perhaps employ 20 or 30 people, are located in the area, and I have visited some of them over the past six or seven months. We could help them to create a dynamic. Some of those businesses export their products, which is good. If we can get that help from organisations like Invest NI, we will go a long way.

Mr McCausland: Issues have been raised today about employment, unemployment and employment opportunities in west Belfast. I want to draw attention to some of those points in relation to a particular area of west Belfast, namely the Shankill. Not all of the Shankill area is in west Belfast, but a substantial part of it is. The comments that I will make concern that part in west Belfast and the wider community of the greater Shankill.

Many of the points that have already been made are common right across west Belfast and the greater Shankill. I will pick up on a few of those. In regard to the points Paul Maskey made about the potential for tourism, we have seen a tremendous growth in tourism over the years. More and more people from abroad come to Belfast. A number of cruise ships bring people to the city, and many weekend visitors come for short breaks in Belfast.

7.45 pm

The difficulty is that all too often people stay in the city centre and do not really go out to the various communities. If they do, it is probably in a bus that drives through those areas but does not actually stop. The visitors look at people and continue on their way, without stopping in those communities to use facilities or to spend money in shops and so on. We must find ways of ensuring that tourism is broadened from the city centre to communities across Belfast — north, south, east and west.

Progress is being made in developing tourism in the Shankill area. The Greater Shankill Partnership and Shankill Tourism, which is part of the partnership, carried out a piece of work some time ago to brand the Shankill. They came up with the brand "Original Belfast" because the Shankill is the oldest part of Belfast. The graveyard on the Shankill Road is at the site of the original Christian settlement in the area; it is the oldest community in Belfast, hence the area was

branded as “Original Belfast”. There is a nice picture in the newspaper of the Minister dressed in her “Original Belfast” T-shirt on the occasion of that launch.

Thus, there is potential in the idea of having city quarters, although I accept that there is no limit to the apparently endless number of quarters that a city can have. A proposal is emerging for a Shankill cultural quarter. That should be encouraged, because the Shankill has a good brand name that is known across the world. People from the Shankill have travelled around the world, and it has a rich cultural heritage.

The report of the West Belfast and greater Shankill task forces has been referred to. I sometimes think that it is almost as though such projects develop with a primary emphasis on west Belfast; the greater Shankill can sometimes be almost forgotten and be a bit of an afterthought. That can be for a number of reasons, particularly historic, because during the period that that report was being prepared, there were internal difficulties in the Shankill that militated against proper engagement in the process.

However, we need to flag up that whenever people talk about west Belfast and the greater Shankill, whether about this or other initiatives, there must be a general recognition that the Shankill community needs to be engaged fully and properly. In some ways, the greater Shankill, and even the west Belfast part of it, is as much linked to north Belfast as it is to west Belfast. I think, for example, of the opportunities that will be presented by the development of the Crumlin Road jail and the courthouse, which sit in north Belfast. However, the streets across the road from those buildings, which are in the lower Shankill, are part of west Belfast. I think that there is huge potential for the Shankill part of west Belfast, in that it is adjacent to and contiguous with the Crumlin Road jail and courthouse. That will be a major tourism draw in the future that will benefit not just north, but west Belfast.

There is also the potential to draw people from that area into the city centre and to draw people up from the Cathedral Quarter as it develops. The Belfast Education and Library Board, and now the Northern Ireland Library Authority, have mooted proposals to redevelop Belfast Central Library into a much bigger facility with a full provincial significance. With greater development in that area, we will see some movement of the city’s centre of gravity in that direction. Councillors who represent the north of the city have discussed the idea of using a cultural corridor to link the Cathedral Quarter to the jail and the courthouse so that people can be drawn to that area.

There are as many really significant historic buildings in that short stretch of road as there are in any part of Belfast. From St Patrick’s and the former school beside it, up to the poorhouse, the Orange Hall,

the old synagogue in Annesley Street, the Clifton Street graveyard, St Malachy’s, the Mater Hospital and so on, right up to the jail —

Mr F McCann: I notice that the Member spoke about the Shankill end of west Belfast being very much part of north Belfast, but all the areas that he spoke about go into north Belfast. I spoke about both sides earlier on.

I have spoken to councillors, and the area around Union Street, North Street, Castle Street and Berry Street is totally derelict. We will get nowhere unless we start to deal with that.

Mr McCausland: I do not disagree. The route to the Shankill Road along North Street to Peter’s Hill is very depressing, and the area between North Street and Donegall Street requires significant development. There is the potential to do something, and there is no disagreement about that. I was simply saying that if we are trying to draw people from the Cathedral Quarter, which will become more of a tourist attraction because of developments such as the Metropolitan Arts Centre and the new hotels, the link-up to the Shankill Road has real strategic significance.

I picked up on Jennifer McCann’s point about the young lady from the Shankill Women’s Centre. One of the big challenges is to provide educational support in those areas. I have visited the Shankill Women’s Centre on a number of occasions, as have my party colleagues, and I am familiar with the marvellous job that it does to bring young women who may have missed out on education back into it. Such women may not have the confidence to engage with education providers, so, in that way, the centre does a valuable job.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Impact Training in Lanark Way, which also addresses the needs of young people who have gone through school without gaining qualifications and have little in the way of job or life skills. Therefore, I commend Joe Stewart and the folk at Impact Training for their good work with those young people. There is a particular need, they have particular skills, and they do a very good job.

In all those ways, it is important to ensure that young and older people in the area have the skills to get jobs in areas such as tourism, where there is potential for growth. We should also be broad-minded enough to recognise that not all jobs will be in the immediate area. However, if young people have the job skills, life skills and confidence to go out and get jobs, they will be willing to go to other parts of the city. It is important that we do what we can to develop employment in the area and to ensure that people have the skills to get jobs there and elsewhere.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Even though the hour is late, this has been an incredibly useful exchange. I can

assure Mr Attwood that, after the debate, I am going to a dinner with Chinese aviators, so I am not going home. Nevertheless, I thank him for securing the debate and for affording me the opportunity to address the issue.

I have listened with interest to Members' points. I was going to detail the amount of assistance that Invest NI has given in the past seven years and what has happened with that funding, but I think that Members are fully aware of everything that has happened in west Belfast. Some Members said that the issue is one of perception, be that with Invest NI or with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Therefore, at the outset of my response to Members, I want to say that I hope that that perception will change in the coming months and years.

We have already heard that Howard Hastings held an NITB board meeting in the Cultúrlann in west Belfast, and he regaled me with stories of people jumping out from behind gravestones. Nevertheless, the board members had a genuine engagement, and I think that they enjoyed their time and saw a lot when they were there. In addition, Alastair Hamilton has been proactive in engaging with West Belfast Members, and he will continue to do so. People say that it is not about whether he can talk the talk but whether he can walk the walk, so I hope that he will do that.

Mr Attwood was talking in code when he mentioned a particular employer, and I think that I know the employer to which he was referring. If it is the one that I am thinking of, I can assure the Member that things are going very well, and I hope that we will be able to do something about it in the near future. I will leave the code there.

Nelson referred to the cultural corridor from the centre of town, past St Patrick's Church and up to Carlisle Memorial Methodist Church, which is a beautiful building that was recently put on a list of the most endangered buildings in the world.

Physical infrastructure has a key role. That was starkly obvious recently when the Department for Employment and Learning held a meeting about skills in the Europa Hotel, yet there was no one there from Sandy Row because the inhabitants did not think that the Europa was in a part of their area. I come from a rural background, and I find that incredible. I travel 14 or 15 miles into Enniskillen to attend my constituency office, and travelling such distances is normal for me as I live in a large constituency. It is significant that people have mindset problems to overcome. Ms McCann referred to having the appropriate skills to travel to different parts of the city. Physical infrastructure is important to enable people to do that, and improvements are being made so that people can go about the city.

There is also the issue of not being ghettoised, and I say that about the whole of Belfast as there are ghettos all across the city. I understand that people who live in the Markets did not apply for jobs in the Radisson SAS Hotel because they do not think of it as being in their part of Belfast. For me, that is significant, as it shows that people do not move around the city, which is a huge issue. Is it an issue for DETI? I am not sure that it is, but it is one that needs to be addressed right across the Government, which is a point that some Members made.

There is increasing evidence that tradable service projects are going to city centre locations. That is accepted. They offer access to a large and skilled labour pool and are within a reasonable travel-to-work area. However, will people travel out of their own areas for that work? That issue is closely related to aspiration. Mr McCann talked of the long-term unemployed, which is also a huge issue, as is the number of economically inactive people. Northern Ireland has the highest percentage of economically inactive people in the UK, and it gives me no satisfaction to say so. We need to consider those issues, but that is not something I alone can do; rather, it is something that must be addressed by the Executive as a whole. It is difficult for me, a person from a rural constituency, to understand why people in west Belfast cannot work in the city centre, but I am beginning to understand that more fully, and we need to deal with those issues.

As I said during the previous debate, the majority of the working residents of west Belfast are employed outside the constituency. Therefore, it is fair to assume that many people from that area will have positively benefited from the type of investments that we announced earlier in the week, because they are travelling to work.

It is also worth noting that, in the wider context, despite the constraints on Invest NI's ability to influence the location decision of investors, a high proportion — about 53% — of assistance has been offered to businesses within designated areas of economic disadvantage.

Over the past few years, significant progress has been made in addressing many of the issues that were identified by the West Belfast and greater Shankill task forces, and a subsequent bid for the integrated development fund has resulted in a substantive package of support for the area. I understand what Members said about there being too many strategies, too many ideas floating about and how it is time for action. However, 16 of the 17 projects included in the integrated development fund (IDF) bid have been completed or are in the process of being implemented. Mention was made of some of those, including the establishment of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise

Council, the implementation of a £1 million pilot social economy fund initiative, the extension to the facilities at the Whiterock Children's Centre and the development of two new business units at Lanark Way.

A couple of Members mentioned the tourism issue, and the fact that west Belfast has benefited indirectly from Tourist Board assistance to tourism projects across the Belfast City Council area, and I put that in the context of what I said about the greater Belfast area. I take Alex Attwood's point about hotels and the ban on the opening of hotels 10 miles or 20 miles outside the city centre. That point was made to me by Members representing East Antrim and Lagan Valley. Lagan Valley only recently received its first hotel, as Members are aware.

8.00 pm

I am happy to look at that matter again, and I have no difficulty in doing so. However, it is something that Members need to look at with me. As Nelson McCausland said, we need to get more people to stay in those areas. The new brand issued by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board talks about authenticity and being real about our tourism. If we are to follow that through, then we need more accommodation — albeit, not hotels initially — in those areas, so that people who want to stay there have choice.

The social economy is a huge part of the economy in west Belfast. Nowhere is the contribution more evident than in west Belfast and greater Shankill, particularly in organisations such as the Colin Glen Trust, Fasset International, and Ulster Sheltered Employment Ltd. Ms McCann referred to the Shankill Women's Centre. I had the great privilege of visiting the centre and seeing the work that is going on there. It is incredible to see so many young children being looked after so expertly there, sometimes by their mothers who have taken qualifications and are doing very well because of that. Again, it is back to the issue of getting those young women, in that case, to have the aspiration to achieve that qualification and the support to do so. I was greatly encouraged when I saw what was happening in the Shankill, and indeed throughout the constituency.

I reassure Members that the Department, Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board are committed to playing their part and will continue to work with clients and local partners to encourage further investment and employment opportunities to those living in areas such as west Belfast. I commented that we are working with a significant employer in the area already. We will continue to do that. It is important that we are as open as possible. I believe that we are getting to that stage, and, hopefully, we will be able to develop those relationships that may have been lacking in the past. I

hope that having a devolved Administration means that we can have those relationships in a way in which we may not have been able to in the past, under direct rule Ministers.

In saying all of that, we have face up to the realities of modern business and competitive pressures. It was interesting that Mr Attwood opened by saying that the public sector has a role to play in relation to social clauses in public contracts. That is something that should be looked at. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is looking at the whole area of public procurement and, perhaps, social clauses can be looked at as part of that. I do not think that social clauses are possible in the private sector. However, if the public sector is playing a role, then it is something that public procurement and, particularly, the Department of Finance and Personnel can look at in particular areas.

I welcome the debate. If there is any issue that I have not addressed, I am happy to follow it up. It has been a hugely useful debate and I thank the Members for bringing it to the House.

Adjourned at 8.03 pm.

