
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Together Towards Entitlement

Monday 16 November 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Rates (Amendment) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Rates (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 3 November 2009.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 November 2009.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 November 2009.

Mr Speaker: The motion has been agreed, so today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the report 'Together Towards Entitlement'.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As I understand it, under Standing Orders, copies of a ministerial statement should be made available 30 minutes before the sitting commences. However, I had difficulty getting hold of the Minister's statement. I checked with the Business Office and in my pigeonhole, but the statement was not available beforehand. It is therefore difficult for Members to scrutinise properly the statement.

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that the statement was available half an hour before today's sitting.

Such matters are solely and absolutely the responsibility of Ministers, but, if the Minister wants to address the issue, she may have an answer.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an ráiteas seo a thabhairt do mo chomhghleacaithe Tionóil inniu le cur in iúl dóibh gur foilsíodh an tuarascáil 'Le Chéile i dTreo na Teidlíochta'. Is éard atá sa tuarascáil ná an cinneadh agus na moltaí ón chleachtas iarbhunscoile pleanála ceantarbhunaithe a choimisiúnaigh mé anuraidh le coincheap na pleanála ceantarbhunaithe a thástail san earnáil iarbhunscoile bunaithe ar sholáthar éifeachtúil éifeachtach an chreata teidlíochta faoi 2013.

I welcome the opportunity to make a statement to my Assembly colleagues informing them of the publication of the 'Together Towards Entitlement' report, which contains the findings and recommendations from the post-primary area-based planning exercise that I commissioned last year to test the concept of area-based planning in the post-primary sector centred around the efficient and effective delivery of the entitlement framework by 2013.

It is vital that we plan strategically, on an area basis, for the effective delivery of a high-quality and sustainable curricular offering to ensure that we meet the needs and aspirations of young people by maximising the impact of resources that are available to us. If we are serious about raising standards in our education system, all pupils must be able to access courses that genuinely interest them and are of value to them as they prepare for adult life.

The entitlement framework will guarantee greater choice and flexibility for all young people aged 14 and above by providing them with access to a wide range of learning opportunities that are suited to their needs,

aptitudes and interests, irrespective of where they live or the school that they attend. Currently, that is not the case for far too many of our young people. It is not fair or equitable that a number of our young people have access to a very limited range of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16. In addition, there is an overemphasis on general academic-type courses and a shortage of applied vocational-type courses.

In March last year, I established a central group, with an independent chairperson and vice-chairperson and five independently chaired area groups. I thank Adeline Dinsmore and Joe Martin, the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the central group. I also thank the chairpersons of the five area groups — Tom Shaw, John Young, Maighréad Uí Mháirtín, Pat McAleavey and Rev Robert Herron — for the strong leadership and direction that they provided throughout this new and challenging exercise. I thank all the members of the area groups. They have completed a complex piece of work with skill and care, ensuring at all times a clear and unequivocal focus on the needs and aspirations of young people.

Bhí na hearnálacha ar fad bainteach leis na grúpaí seo: na cúig bhord oideachais agus leabharlainne, CCMS, NICIE, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Comhlachas na bhForas Rialaithe, Comhlachas na gColáistí, na coláistí breisoideachais, foireann feidhmithe an ESA, an Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama, Iontaobhaithe na Scoileanna Caitliceacha, Comhairle na nIonadaithe Aistreora, Comhdháil na gCeardchumann, agus an Fóram Idirchreidimh. Ba mhian liom buíochas a ghabháil leis na hionadaithe ón Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sa Deisceart. Tá sé tábhachtach go roinnimid saineolas agus go mbíonn comhoibriú ar siúl eadrainn. .

All sectors were included in the groups: the five education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), NICIE, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), the Governing Bodies Association, the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC), the further education colleges, the education and skills authority implementation team (ESAIT), the Department for Employment and Learning, the trustees of Catholic schools, the Transferor Representatives' Council, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Inter-Faith Forum. I also thank the representatives from the Department of Education and Science in the South; it is important that we share expertise and work together.

Since receiving the 'Together Towards Entitlement' report in July, I have been carefully considering its findings and recommendations. I have concluded that the recommendations are robust and provide a pragmatic approach to the delivery of the entitlement framework. The rigorous testing of an area-based approach to planning will provide valuable insights and lessons that the education and skills authority (ESA) will be

able to draw on when developing the statutory area-based planning process.

The exercise was open and transparent and, as a result, secured a very high level of engagement not just within and between the groups but from schools, further education colleges, area-learning communities, community groups and other educational organisations that made submissions.

The recommendations cover two areas: the entitlement framework and an area-based approach to planning. Taken together, those recommendations provide a road map to deliver a better, equality-based post-primary education system that serves the needs of all our young people, including those who choose to learn through the medium of Irish.

The report states that we must clearly define the policy context and ensure that the linkages between the component parts are widely understood. I agree with that and have sought to ensure that the reforms represent a suite of policies that are supportive of one another and are designed to enable us to deliver our vision. More work needs to be done, particularly on the 14-19 strategy, and I will work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to introduce that strategy.

I have already said that I intend to make the full entitlement framework a statutory requirement from 2013. Therefore, all our young people must have access to courses that interest them; that they consider relevant; and that will lead to fulfilling careers. As Members read the report, they will realise, as I did, that it makes clear that the pace of change needs to be quickened. We need to step up a gear if we are to achieve our vision that all young people should have access to high-quality education provision that meets their needs and allows them to reach their full potential.

Mar gheall air sin, scríobh mé chuig gach iarbhunscóil le cur in iúl go gcaithfear iarracht níos fearr a dhéanamh leis an athrú a chur i bhfeidhm níos gaiste. Tá mé ag dúil leis go léireoidh scoileanna an dóigh a soláthróidh siad an creat teidlíochta go héifeachtach agus an dóigh a n-uasmhéadóidh siad an rogha a bheas ann do pháistí san am atá romhainn. Ba mhaith liom a bpleananna a fheiceáil, agus ba mhaith liom a bheith cinnte de go bhfuil siad láidir insoláthartha.

I have written to all post-primary schools indicating that I want to see a change in pace and a stepping-up of efforts. I will expect schools to demonstrate how they will deliver the entitlement framework effectively and maximise choice for children in the future. I want to see their plans to ensure that they are robust and deliverable. Some schools have focused mainly on reaching the numbers 24 and 27, about which there has been much debate. It is not simply about adding more courses; schools need to revisit their curricular offer to

determine whether it is fit for purpose and prepares young people for life and work in the twenty-first century.

The concept of area learning communities has been widely embraced in all areas, and schools are already working together. The report suggests that the Department of Education and the ESA should further encourage the development of a shared responsibility through that approach. I concur with that view and want to see the development of highly effective collaborative arrangements. I want schools to be seen as gateways to quality and choice, not destinations where choice is poor and restricted. An area-based planning approach was a real challenge for the groups, mainly because it had never been done before. As the ESA develops area-based planning, it will be able to draw on the lessons that have been learned from this exercise.

Tá athchóiriú forásach radacach de dhíth go géar ar an chóras oideachais. Tá gach polasaí ceangailte le chéile mar chuid den bheart athchóirithe céanna — Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith, an curaclam athbhreithnithe, an creat teidlíochta, aistriú 2010, an t-athbhreithniú ar an Ghaelscolaíocht, an t-athbhreithniú ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus ar chuimsiú, an t-athbhreithniú ar riarachán poiblí, straitéis na luathbhlianta — agus tá siad go léir a bhforbairt chun comhionannas a chur chun cinn sa chóras.

A progressive and radical reform of the education system is badly needed and long overdue. All policies are interconnected and form part of the same jigsaw of reform. Policies such as ‘Every School a Good School’, the revised curriculum, the entitlement framework, Transfer 2010, the review of the Irish medium, the special educational needs and inclusion review, the review of public administration and the early years strategy are all being introduced to promote equality in the system.

It is evident that we cannot continue to plan on an unco-ordinated, bottom-up basis through which individual institutions essentially compete with one another. We need to put in place a pattern of provision that delivers quality learning, guarantees wider and more coherent curriculum choice and delivers equality.

12.15 pm

It is essential that the enormous investment in the educational estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework that I am putting in place. We need to optimise provision for all and not settle for second best. The ‘Together Towards Entitlement’ report suggests that we accelerate the implementation of the sustainable schools policy. In response, I commissioned a review of all current capital projects to validate their consistency with the Department of Education’s policy framework.

I have also asked the Education and Training Inspectorate to ensure that, from now on, all inspections

in post-primary schools focus on what is available to pupils at 14 and as they prepare to enter sixth form, with a particular focus on the coherence of what is available, including the careers education and guidance that help pupils to make meaningful choices.

Beidh tacaíocht de dhíth ar scoileanna chun an t-athrú seo a chur i bhfeidhm. Is léir ón tuarascáil gur fearr an tacaíocht atá ar fáil i roinnt réimsí ná i réimsí eile. Níl sé sin inghlactha. Agus sin an fáth a bhfuil mé ag iarraidh ar an ESA measúnú láithreach a dhéanamh ar an tacaíocht atá ar fáil do scoileanna agus dá bpobail foghlama ceantair lena chinntiú go bhfuil an tacaíocht freagrúil, de chaighdeán ard agus go bhfuil sí dírithe ar chuidiú a thabhairt dóibh an creat teidlíochta a sheachadadh dá ndaltaí.

Schools will need support to deliver that change. Today’s report makes clear that that support is better in some areas than in others. That is not acceptable, and that is why I am also asking ESA to conduct an immediate assessment of the support available to schools and their area-based learning communities to ensure that it is responsive, high-quality and focused on helping them to deliver the entitlement framework to their pupils.

The ‘Together Towards Entitlement’ report is aptly named, and it highlights the fact that there are many different stakeholders. The report identifies priorities for action for each partner taking this forward together. It is not enough for some partners to move forward; successful implementation requires each stakeholder to take responsibility for their role and act now.

I want to see an educational landscape that is characterised by a range of school options and in which diversity and choice are the norm. Schools are the key to delivering high-quality education and choice. Many of the priorities for action fall to the schools, and I want to ensure that they are supported in carrying out those tasks. They need a responsive and targeted support service.

The establishment of ESA is crucial to the raising of standards, increasing choice and building equality. I have made clear to the cathaoirleach/chairperson-designate, Sean Hogan, and to the príomhfheidhmeannach/chief executive designate, Gavin Boyd, that I expect them to set the pace in working with schools to ensure a sustained focus on improving outcomes for every child.

The report not only highlights actions that need to be progressed; importantly, it also offers a clear set of principles to create the right climate and context for planning sustainable curricular provision and the supporting infrastructure to deliver it. If we progress that work in the spirit of those principles, we can achieve a great deal and benefit many young people.

I have asked Adeline and her colleagues to conduct a series of seminars to disseminate the findings of the report across the North. Those will begin on Wednesday

18 November 2009 and will continue until the end of the month. Everyone has a part to play, and I hope that the messages are well received and, more importantly, acted on.

The need to effectively plan for the delivery of high-quality, sustainable curricular provision cannot be overemphasised; it is vital. We need to implement not only the changes highlighted in the report but all those in my package of reforms. If we are to provide our young people with the education they so richly deserve, we must implement them now.

Ní féidir áibhéil a dhéanamh ar an riachtanas le soláthar curaclaim inbhuanaithe de chaighdeán ard a phleanáil go héifeachtach. Tá sé ríthábhachtach. Ní amháin go gcaithfidimid na hathruithe atá luaite sa tuarascáil a fheidhmiú, caithfidimid gach athrú eile atá luaite i mo phacáiste athchóirithe a fheidhmiú. Ach caithfidimid iad a fheidhmiú anois chun an caighdeán oideachais atá tuillte ag daoine óga a sholáthar dóibh.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, let me make it absolutely clear that, as is the convention with ministerial statements, the Chairperson has some latitude in getting to his question. However, thereafter, I do not want to hear long introductions to a question or Members making further statements. Questions on ministerial statements are about holding the Minister and the Executive to account, so Members must ask one question only. If Members insist on giving long introductions or making statements, I will ask that Member to take his or her seat and move on to the Member who is next on the list to ask a question.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I respond to the Minister's statement with a degree of concern. I will speak first as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

I remind the Minister that there was much debate about the number of subjects to be offered under the entitlement framework, namely 24 for pupils older than 14 and 27 for pupils older than 16. In May 2008, officials from the Minister's Department gave the Committee for Education an assurance that directions for the entitlement framework would be forwarded to the Committee in sufficient time to allow for detailed scrutiny prior to the relevant commencement Orders being made. Will the Minister confirm the assurances that the Committee will be given sufficient time to carry out that detailed scrutiny? I ask that question in light of the regrettable delay in the Education (No. 2) Bill being provided to the Committee by the Minister and the Department. Despite repeated assurances from the Minister and her officials, it was only on the final day of the Committee's scrutiny of the Education Bill that we saw the second Bill. That is absolutely unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

There is a clear contradiction between open enrolment and area-based planning. A departmental official described it as a "tension", but will the Minister explain how she intends to reconcile that blatant contradiction between open enrolment and the entitlement framework?

I will now speak as a private Member. Do the Minister's comments about maximising choice not condemn her as one of the most blatant hypocrites in the House? She would remove from parents and pupils the very choice that they exercised legally at the weekend by engaging in independent tests. Those tests are permissible under the law, but that choice would be removed if the Minister got her way. As Saturday proved, the Minister is not getting her way.

The Minister of Education: Ar dtús, oibrím leis an Choiste. I always work with the Committee for Education, and my Department will continue to do that. As for the question about area-based planning and open enrolment, all sectors are working together for the first time. We will work to ensure that we have an adequate plan to deal with the number of young people transferring from primary school to post-primary school. I will not deal with the Member's third question, which was abusive. People resort to personal abuse when they have lost the argument; that speaks for itself.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. In line with your direction, Mr Speaker, I will come straight to the point. Much is made of the North's education system, and some people claim that it is world-class. Will the Minister explain how that "world-class" system compares with education systems in the rest of the world?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. The programme for international student assessment (PISA) examines the reading, mathematical and scientific skills of 15-year-olds from countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and elsewhere. The examination takes place every three years and is designed to measure students' ability to apply knowledge and their readiness for the scientific, reading and mathematical demands of their future education and adult life.

The mean scores of students in the North dropped over the last three PISA cycles in 2000, 2003 and 2006. In the North, the gap in PISA scores on mathematics and reading is larger than the average of OECD countries. It is larger than the gap in England, Scotland or Wales and considerably larger than the gap in the South. Relative to the situation internationally, weak students fall further behind strong students here.

In the North of Ireland, 21% of students — 30% of males — failed to show baseline reading proficiency in the 2006 PISA cycle. Although that is close to the OECD average of 20% and the figure in England,

which is 19%, it is considerably worse than countries such as the South of Ireland, where only 12% of students do not reach the baseline. The figure for South Korea and Finland is 5%. For mathematics, 23% of students in the North did not demonstrate baseline proficiency; the OECD average is 21%. The equivalent figures for England and the South are 20% and 16%.

The data from PISA and GCSEs clearly shows that the North of Ireland demonstrates a long body of underachievement. Although many students perform at a very high level, which is to be welcomed, far too many fail to show what is considered to be basic literacy and numeracy. That is likely to lead to poorer employment opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential and an increased likelihood of living in poverty. I have quoted many statistics in this House in the past, but I remind Members that, two years ago, 12,000 people left our schools without a GCSE in English or maths. That is a very high number; it represented 47% of school leavers. We need to take a good, hard look at the policies that the Department brings forward because they are already making a difference and will continue to do so. Focusing on underachievement will bring about changes in our system and will create equality and academic excellence for all.

Mr B McCrea: Before I begin, Mr Speaker, is it in order to raise a point of order during a statement?

Mr Speaker: It is not in order.

Mr B McCrea: I give notice to speak to you about the matter afterwards.

Will the Minister say when she changed her mind? She stated that she wishes to see an educational landscape characterised by a range of school options, where diversity and choice are the norm. That seems to be in contradiction to her statement that children should go to their closest school.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister tell us how she can reconcile the apparent inconsistency between that statement and her statement about open enrolment?

The Minister of Education: There is no inconsistency. I have always said that it is not about having a one-size-fits-all approach. What happens in Newry will be very different from what happens in Derry, Coleraine or Ballymena. That is the whole point of area-based planning. We need to bring together all the stakeholders, which is what we have done. We need to ensure that all young people have access to a wide curricular choice, which is what we are doing. There is no inconsistency at all.

The Member will also be aware that we have six categories of suitable school. I respectfully suggest

that the Member goes back and reads the statements that I have consistently made.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Má fheictear don Aire go bhfuil gá le scoileanna áirithe an deis a thapú, an ionann sin is a rá go bhfuil siad ag tarraingt na gcos ina ndiaidh? An féidir leis an Aire an drogall sin a mhíniú? An féidir léi a rá cad iad na háiseanna breise a bheas ar fáil do scoileanna leis an obair seo a chur i gcrích?

If the Minister sees the need for a change in pace and a stepping-up of efforts, that seems to indicate that not all schools have bought into the entitlement framework. Will the Minister explain why that is so? Will she reveal what extra resources will be available to schools to provide the additional courses that are needed?

The Minister of Education: Some schools have not bought into the entitlement framework in the way in which they should have. That is one of the reasons why I wrote to all of the schools to explain that we need to step up a gear and move towards working with our area-learning communities to make sure that the entitlement framework is available to all young people. That is what we are doing.

12.30 pm

We are putting a huge focus on the entitlement framework. We are going to local communities, where people will hear directly from those involved in the area-based planning working groups, including the chairperson, Adeline Dinsmore, who did a very good job and who, as a principal, was a leader in her field.

Schools already receive considerable resources to implement area-based planning. We have entitlement framework officers in all board areas, which will continue under ESA. We have also put aside resources to administer area-based planning and the entitlement framework.

Collaboration between schools so that they work together is a major part of area-based planning. We have to move away from having three or four schools in one town offering the same course, with very few post-16 students on each course. That is simply not a good use of public money. We must intensify collaboration between schools.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister said that she received the paperwork back in July and that she has written to all post-primary schools. Have all those schools replied? Were all those replies positive? If they were not, what action will the Minister take to bring schools into line on the 'Together Towards Entitlement' report?

The Minister of Education: We are receiving replies from schools, and I will certainly share those replies with the Member at the appropriate time. All post-primary schools have a statutory duty to provide a wide range of choice and to collaborate by 2013, and

my Department will make sure that schools fulfil their duties. As I said, we have also reviewed all capital build projects to ensure that they are in line with departmental policy, because there is a jigsaw of reforms and all the policies are interconnected.

Miss McIlveen: Will the Minister assure the House that the emphasis on maximising pupil choice at age 14 does not pre-empt the Assembly's view of transfer from primary to post-primary schools, and that local areas will be able to choose their school structure? What we have heard today could be regarded by many as another diktat from the Minister. What happens to schools that fail to meet the Minister's expectations?

The Minister of Education: We are actively engaging with local areas, and they will have a say. We are using public money. We have to ensure that we do something about the alarming figures that I read out in answer to Michelle O'Neill's question, rather than be fixated by some parties' claims to have saved academic selection. We need to move away from that; that is the last century's debate. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: The rest of the world has moved on, and we are moving on. Transfer 2010 is the official policy of the Department of Education.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. What steps has she taken to ensure that the entitlement framework becomes a reality for all pupils by 2013? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathail. First, I have met representatives of all post-primary schools in the North of Ireland. I recently had a series of accountability review meetings with the boards, CCMS, grammar schools in each board area and the integrated sector. The entitlement framework and area-based planning were a major part of those discussions, as was working with the area learning community.

All schools are clear about their statutory duties and that it is essential for schools to work with the Department to meet their statutory duties in relation to the curriculum. Many of those schools are embracing wholeheartedly the entitlement framework and area-based planning, and I welcome that. For the schools that are not embracing it, the Department will engage and have robust discussions with them about their statutory duties.

Mr Ross: I want to return to something that Mr McCrea raised earlier. The Minister said that she wishes:

“to see an educational landscape that is characterised by a range of school options, where diversity and choice are the norm.”

From which areas of education does she not want to see local preferred options emerging?

The Minister of Education: I do not want to see local preferred options that discriminate against children.

Mr K Robinson: The Minister referred several times to ESA's role: she wants an immediate assessment from it; she said that it is crucial to raising standards; and she wants it to set the pace. ESA is a shadowy body, which does not exist, so on what basis does the Minister presume that the House — if the Education Bill ever comes before it — will accept ESA and set it in motion?

The Minister of Education: The Education Bill will have its Consideration Stage when the Executive agree to schedule it. I remain focused on the January 2010 implementation date. Therefore, as we move into 2010, it is very important that we work with the chairperson, the chief executive designate and the existing staff of ESA, because the transfer from the boards, CCMS, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the various organisations to the education and skills authority must be seamless. I look forward to working with the Member's party to bring ESA forward, and I am working with his colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning, who has asked me to make some amendments.

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

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister confirm the level of communication that there has been between the learning communities and the central group to ensure that they are working in tandem?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. As I said, the chairperson and area group members will attend a series of seminars throughout the North of Ireland, at which they will discuss the report and engage with local people and stakeholders. I look forward to those discussions, which will be very important.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the questions from the opposite Benches clearly show that, despite those Members' claims that they recognise that both the maintained and controlled post-primary sectors offer, and can offer, an enhanced role in our education system, they have concentrated once again on academic selection? If academic selection is removed from —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question for the Minister?

Mr O'Dowd: The question is coming. Does the Minister agree that if academic selection were removed from the education vocabulary of the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP, they would have no education policy?

The Minister of Education: The Member has answered his own question, but I agree that we should focus on the jigsaw of progressive radical reforms that

we are bringing forward, which put the child, rather than perceived institutional need, at the centre.

Mr Craig: The Minister said:

“The concept of area learning communities has been widely embraced”.

Does the Minister not also recognise that there is an overprovision of sixth-form education in some areas and that the area learning community concept will not deal with that core issue? Has the Minister looked at area learning plan concepts that have taken place in England? Unfortunately, most of those have ended up in the courts.

The Minister of Education: I agree with the Member about the overprovision of sixth forms, which is one reason why the area learning communities must work together to deliver the entitlement framework. Unless schools work together, it will be very difficult for them. Area learning communities are very active in each of their areas, and all stakeholders are involved in the area learning communities, so it is really important that they continue to work together.

As I said earlier, there is no point in having, in a single town, four or five classes in which one particular subject is taught, with four or five young people in each class, while preschool and primary-school education do not get the money that they deserve. An enormous disparity still exists between funding for primary and post-primary education, and that must change.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us how she intends to meet the challenges of demographic decline? Moreover, how does she intend to close the wide gap in achievement that allows 3,500 young people to leave the system every year without basic literacy and numeracy skills?

The Minister of Education: That is a most timely question.

I will give one example. To date, Fermanagh is the area that has suffered the highest rates of demographic decline. There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh: four grammar schools and 10 secondary schools. Forty-eight per cent of the children who attend the 14 schools are educated at the four grammar schools, while 52% are educated at the 10 secondary schools.

There are 940 empty desks in the 10 secondary schools: an average of 94 empty desks per school. In the 10 secondary schools, 19% of children, almost one in five, are entitled to free school meals. Some 127 children are SEN-statemented, which is an average of 13 SEN-statemented children per school. In the four grammar schools, 6%, or one in 17 children, are entitled to free school meals. Nine children are SEN-statemented, which is an average of two SEN-statemented children per school.

In Fermanagh, the different post-primary sectors must get together to plan provision, whatever that provision may be, be it to do with curriculum, capital build or the school improvement policy ‘Every School a Good School’. All must be planned on an area basis.

We cannot do what was done in the past, which was to build schools in different areas willy-nilly without recourse to proper planning and then, a couple of years later, have the boards brought in front of the planning appeals committee or the Public Accounts Committee because the schools are empty. I am not prepared to do that on my watch. We have a certain amount of public money and we must make the best use of it. The money has to be used with the child at the centre of our concerns.

Mr Spratt: A number of times this morning, the Minister referred to consultation with the education and library boards. Other Members and I have concerns that the South Eastern Education and Library Board is unrepresentative of the community or of independent members of the community. It is still run by stooges — four commissioners of the Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Do you have a question?

Mr Spratt: Will the Minister confirm that she is satisfied that, when she consults with the board, she is getting the full feelings of the South Eastern Board area, which is a very big school area? Has she any concerns about that?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, ESA will be set up on 1 January 2010. From that time, we will have more consistent provision right across the North of Ireland. I look forward to ESA’s taking up its role on equality and standards on behalf of all children, including those in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.

Mr Cree: It is clear to most of us that grave reservations surround the special educational needs and inclusion review, transfer 2010, the RPA and ESA. Will the Minister assure the House that the outcome of the jigsaw of reform, to which she refers, will not be ongoing chaos in our education system?

The Minister of Education: A range of policies has been introduced that, for the first time ever, makes the education system much fairer. I have outlined the many, many difficulties in the system. Many of our children are failed by the current system, and that is simply not acceptable. I cannot allow a system that fails 12,000 young people every year to continue. That is simply unacceptable.

Thankfully, the focus now is on maintaining excellence right across the system and on ensuring that that excellence is available for all, rather than for a small minority.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr Kinahan. Please resume your seat.

There are no special dispensations permitting anyone to shout across the Chamber. All remarks must be made through me. Carry on, Mr Kinahan.

12.45 pm

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her report 'Together Towards Entitlement', of which recommendations EF4, EF5, EF6, EF7 and others involve the ESA. The Minister did not make clear either what legislation she will bring before the House to set up the ESA so that she can implement the report's recommendations or when she will do that. I presume that that will be discussed when the Consideration Stage of the Bill in question is reached.

The Minister of Education: As the Member will know, the Chamber is the place for discussing legislation. I will bring the Education Bill to Consideration Stage, and we can have a good debate and discussion on it then.

Mr Savage: The Minister spoke about the need for reforms. Does she accept that the current disarray, which has been brought about by the removal of the 11-plus, has failed each child across Northern Ireland? How soon can that situation be rectified?

The Minister of Education: The debate today is about area-based planning. I note that the Member focused on one aspect of the reforms. I would prefer it if we took a broader view and focused on all the reforms that the education system is going through.

That said, never let it be said that I have not answered the Member's question. It is good to see that we now have transfer 2010, which is the Department of Education's official policy. Transfer 2010 means that, for the first time, a group of children will not have to sit state-sponsored tests at the tender age of 10 or 11.

Unfortunately, a small minority of schools have chosen to break away on the issues of tests. It is very disappointing to see that some children had to do a test because some schools put up barriers. We are continuing with our reform of the system. I welcome the fact that fewer children are doing tests this year than in any other year. No child should be sitting, or have to sit, a test to get an education to which they are entitled. Grammar schools should not be putting children through the trauma of having to sit tests to get an education to which they are entitled.

Mr Beggs: In answer to earlier questions, the Minister highlighted the unacceptable number of children in secondary schools who are not meeting baseline levels of education. Does the Minister not accept that the critical stage for children is when they are between the

ages of 0 and 6 and that those are their formative years? Why has she not acknowledged that in anything that she has said about what is being done to improve levels of attainment?

We have learned about post-primary area-based planning. When will amalgamations such as that which will create the new Islandmagee primary school learn whether they can proceed? For many years, schools in that situation have been left in limbo, sites have been purchased and no development has been allowed.

The Minister of Education: I agree absolutely about the importance of the 0 to 6 years, and we are bringing forward an early-years strategy. We have also brought in the revised curriculum, which, thankfully, young people are learning in a stimulating and innovative way. The Member will know from talking to primary school principals that the vast majority of schools find the revised curriculum very good at the primary stage. The primary curriculum was distorted, but that is no longer the case, and I welcome that. Given that the curriculum is no longer distorted, I believe that we will see significant improvements.

With regard to primary school area-based planning, I welcome the fact that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has brought forward the amalgamation of the Islandmagee schools. I know that the Member's father is chairperson of that board. We now need to look at all the capital builds in our programme and make sure that we move as quickly as possible once they adhere to all our policies and the range of policies that is in the system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education.

Order. The next item of business is the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will speak to the Speaker, but I want this point on the record. It is extremely difficult to cross-examine the Minister of Education on what has been said, given that she talks at considerable length, but not on the question that she was asked. Members have to ask short questions, but the Minister has considerable latitude, and that seems to be unfair.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has said that he will speak to the Speaker, therefore the matter rests there.

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, will you rule as to whether it was a point of order according to the Speaker's previous rulings? Clearly, that point of order does not fall into that category. Was it a point of order? Is there some guidance for Members?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is precisely why I said that the matter rests with the discussion that will take place with the Speaker. I will not adjudicate on that matter.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Provisions Bill

Further Consideration Stage

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

Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):
I beg to move

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval of a set of regulations relating to child support, which was laid before the Assembly on 29 July 2009. The making of child support regulation packages is a fairly regular process, the purpose of which is to ensure that the child maintenance system operates as well as possible and that legislation is transparent and kept up to date.

The Child Maintenance Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 gives my Department powers to introduce tougher collection and enforcement measures that can be used alongside existing methods of collection and enforcement. This set of regulations flows from the powers conferred by the 2008 Act. Regulation 2 will insert into the collection and enforcement regulations four new parts, which will make provision for two administrative tools, regular and lump-sum deduction orders. Those orders will enable my Department to collect child maintenance from an account held by a deposit taker — normally a bank or building society — that contains money belonging to a non-resident parent who has arrears of child maintenance.

Currently, deduction from earnings orders can be issued administratively to deduct child maintenance directly from a non-resident parent's earnings where he or she has failed to meet financial commitments to his or her children. Although that has proven to be a successful method of collection, it is not always effective, for example, where the non-resident parent changes jobs frequently or is self employed. These new regular and lump-sum deduction orders will be an additional enforcement measure to help to improve the flow of money to children.

Non-resident parents who have arrears will have every opportunity to make arrangements to pay the arrears before the deduction order is made. If they fail to do so, my Department will liaise with the deposit takers, using information it has already, to identify a suitable account on which to make an order. It will then decide which deduction order is likely to be most effective in a particular case. If it is decided to make to a regular deduction order, the Department for Social Development (DSD) will issue an order to a deposit taker that will instruct it to deduct regular amounts for ongoing child maintenance and/or arrears from a specified account, detailing the dates when the deductions should be made and from when the order will take effect. A copy of the order will be sent to the non-resident parent.

The deposit taker will have a legal duty to make deductions from the account specified in the order and to send them to my Department. The deposit taker will be able to deduct an amount up to £10 towards its administrative costs before making each deduction. That takes account of the fact that the deduction orders will have to be processed manually because they operate differently from direct debits and standing orders and cannot be automated.

Safeguards will be in place to protect both the non-resident parent and the deposit taker. Each deduction must not exceed 40% of the non-resident parent's net weekly income, and the deposit taker must not deduct an amount that would result in the account being overdrawn. The deposit taker can make deductions from an account that is used wholly or in part for business purposes, but only where that account is used by the non-resident parent as a sole trader.

The regulations set out clearly the circumstances in which either the non-resident parent or the deposit taker can apply for a review of a regular deduction order. Those include, for example, instances when there has been a change in the amount of the maintenance calculation in question or when the non-resident parent has no beneficial interest in some or all of the amounts standing to the credit of the account specified. Both the non-resident parent and the deposit taker will have a right of appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against the making of the order and against a decision following an application to review the order.

A lump-sum deduction order differs from a regular deduction order. The lump-sum order can only be made by my Department to deduct a lump sum from the non-resident parent's account in respect of the specified amount of arrears of child maintenance. If it is decided that a lump-sum deduction is the best way of recovering unpaid child maintenance, an interim order will be issued to the deposit taker detailing the amount to be deducted. The interim order will also act as an instruction to freeze funds up to the amount specified in the order. A copy of the order will be sent to the non-resident parent.

As with regular deduction orders, safeguards are in place. The non-resident parent and the deposit taker will have 14 days following the issue of the interim order to make representations to DSD against proposals in it. Following the period allowed for representations, a final order will be issued to the deposit taker instructing it to deduct the funds from the account.

At any point during the process until funds are paid, both the non-resident parent and the deposit taker will be able to apply to DSD for some, or all, of the specified amounts to be released from the account. The non-resident parent might do that where, for example, the funds are needed to prevent hardship. The deposit

taker might do it if it already has a written agreement with the account holder that a specific amount in the account is held as security against a loan.

Again, a robust appeal process will be in place, with both the non-resident parent and the deposit taker having the right of appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against the making of the final order and any decision following an application for consent to release funds. Although the deposit taker is instructed in the final order to deduct funds, they will not be asked to send the money to my Department until the time limit for appeals — 21 days — has expired or the outcome of any appeal is known.

The deposit taker will have a legal duty to comply with the requirements, and may take a maximum of £55 towards its administrative costs before sending the money to my Department. That amount is consistent with the amount that a deposit taker charges for processing other debt orders made by a court using a similar procedure.

The provisions in the regulations for regular and lump-sum deduction orders will enable my Department to continue to ensure that more money flows to more children and that parents take financial responsibility for their children.

Regulation 3 of the package is essentially a tidying-up exercise. The amendment will ensure that councillor's expenses are not counted as income for child maintenance calculation purposes for cases effective from 3 March 2003. That will bring Northern Ireland legislation into line with that of Britain.

1.00 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I thank the Minister for her run-through of the effect of the legislation. After such a simple and straightforward explanation, surely no one can be heard saying that that the world of child maintenance is a difficult and not easily understood subject.

The Committee for Social Development considered the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 at its meetings of 25 June and 10 September. As the House is aware, the statutory rule will add to the Department's existing administrative tools, which allow it to deduct child maintenance from a liable person. The Committee welcomes the new rule as a means of ensuring that absent parents live up to their responsibilities and provide for their children. That is something that we all want. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on

the regulations. Since its inception in 1992, the Child Support Agency has proved to be somewhat disastrous in holding non-resident parents accountable for the amount that they owe and for taking responsibility. The legislation is a tidying-up exercise that will make it easier for the Department to get money from non-resident parents. Therefore, the parent who has care of the child will benefit.

Mr K Robinson: I support the legislation. Will the Member agree that, in the past, the agency has made many miscalculations and that many non-resident parents have been driven to distress when faced with having to pay an amount of money? It is concerning, particularly in the case of younger men, that that might be the final straw that tips the balance and causes them to think about the future of their lives. By the time such inaccuracies are rectified, the non-resident parent can be in extreme physical, emotional and financial difficulty.

The reliance on a summary court of justice here provides just that: summary justice. The full facts are sometimes not brought before the court, and it is not fully explained why someone is in such a distressed situation.

Mr Brady: As someone who worked in the advice sector for a long time, I agree that there are two aspects to child support. I have spoken to both non-resident parents and parents with care, and both have strong views. In the North alone, around £61 million — a huge amount of money — is outstanding. That shows that the legislation to date has been ineffective.

As I said, this legislation is a tidying-up exercise that will give the Department more power to deduct money from bank and building society accounts. The Department must be careful to show sympathy to both resident and non-resident parents, and its calculations must be correct. The disaster that child support has been is shown by the fact that, in the past 14 years, the agency has had 12 different heads, all of whom disappeared after a relatively short time with good handouts that were more than they deserved in the circumstances. If they had been doing their jobs properly, they would not have had to leave.

Child support is a contentious issue for both sides, and it must be dealt with sensitively. If the legislation is handled properly, it can be beneficial for both sides.

Mr Armstrong: I thank Minister Ritchie for bringing forward the regulations for approval.

Child maintenance is regular and reliable financial support to help towards paying children's everyday living costs. It is a moral and legal obligation on non-resident parents to support their children. I welcome the regulations because they seek to make it easier to ensure that non-resident parents who fall behind on payments, or who refuse to pay, are forced to do so, by

taking ongoing deductions or a lump-sum deduction from their bank accounts or relevant funds.

Deduction rates are such that the maximum deduction will leave non-residents parents with 60% of their income, which ensures that they still have enough to live on while they support their children.

I seek further clarity from the Minister on two areas. First, will she inform the House of the level of administration costs for the process outlined in the regulations and how much money from maintenance deductions will go towards that cost? Secondly, in the current economic crisis, as parents lose their jobs or have their working hours severely reduced, what steps of mitigation or negotiation can be taken before any deduction order is implemented?

Supporting children and providing them with necessities is a moral obligation on every parent. I welcome the fact that the regulations will make it much harder for certain parents to shirk their obligations. I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank my colleague, the Minister for Social Development, for bringing to the House for its approval improved regulations to deal with child support. During the year that preceded September 2009, more than 16,000 children benefited from the payment of child maintenance who would normally not have done so. That is to be welcomed.

It is important that the Assembly looks after resident parents and protects non-resident parents who cooperate with the child maintenance and enforcement division.

I particularly welcome the fact that banks, buildings societies and the like cannot deduct an amount that will result in an overdrawn balance. The regulations are intended to be to children's financial benefit, not that of financial establishments that already do well from account charges that they impose.

The Minister has, again, shown her concern for improving people's lives. If those amendments are to make children's lives better and more secure, I hope that the House will support them fully.

Ms Lo: I certainly welcome the regulations. It is poignant that they should come before the House during the week in which the twentieth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is celebrated. All children deserve, and have the right to receive, proper child maintenance; particularly in Northern Ireland, which has the highest level of child poverty in the UK. Twenty nine per cent of children are categorised as suffering poverty.

For too long, the Child Support Agency was criticised for not having enough teeth to force non-resident parents to pay maintenance for their children. Parents have a responsibility to their children, whether they

live with them or not, to ensure that they are properly fed and clothed, and that they have enough money to live on. I strongly welcome the extra power for the Department to take steps to ensure that children get the money that is rightfully theirs.

I also welcome the hefty bank fees that would make non-resident parents think twice about owing money in arrears to their children. That will deter them from not paying up properly and at the right time.

Mr Burns: I speak as a member of the Committee for Social Development, which considered the new proposals in June 2009. I urge the Assembly to adopt the Committee's recommendations and to approve the new Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009.

I will not dwell too much on the specifics of the legislation, because the Minister has spoken about them in great detail. I support the introduction of firmer collection and enforcement measures. The child maintenance and enforcement division should use such measures robustly along with its current powers.

Those regular and lump-sum deduction orders will allow the child maintenance and enforcement division to take money from the bank accounts of non-resident parents if they are in arrears. It can sometimes be difficult for the authorities to deduct regular payments from people's wages, especially when a non-resident parent is self-employed or regularly changes jobs. The new powers make it easier for resident parents to get the child support payments and the arrears that they are owed.

The legislation is not about raiding people's bank accounts and taking money that they do not have. Safeguards will be in place to ensure that the system is fair. Parents will be given every opportunity to get their payment issues resolved before the measures are taken, which will be as a last resort. Furthermore, a right of appeal will, of course, exist. Even in the event of an order being made, there will be reasonable limits on what deductions can be made. We certainly do not want to drive non-resident parents into hardship. However, at the same time, they must meet their responsibility to their children. Therefore, I welcome the new regulations.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development and the various Members for their contributions to the discussion about the regulations. A number of points were raised during the debate, which I will try to address. Mr Brady rightly highlighted the sensitive nature of child support and child support regulations and the fact that two people, as well as the children, are involved in each case. We have to be sensitive about those matters.

Mr Brady also raised the issue of accuracy, as did Mr Ken Robinson. In September 2008, the accuracy figure in the child maintenance and enforcement division

was 95%. The most recent quarterly report showed that, in September 2009, the accuracy figure was 97%.

A full appeals process is in place, so there are many opportunities for people to make queries before a case gets to the point of certain difficulties. If Mr Ken Robinson has particular issues of a general policy nature or specifically to do with constituents, he can contact me, and I will be more than happy to have such issues investigated with a view to resolution.

The regulations do not restrict the grounds for an appeal. An appeal may be made when it appears, for example, that the amount on the deduction order is wrong, or when the non-resident parent considers that a reasonable arrangement for the arrears has been made. An appeal can also be made following a refusal to give consent to release some or all the frozen funds in an account. The circumstances for giving consent are set out in the regulations. Therefore, it is implicit that a court would consider an appeal against the refusal to release funds only if it related to any of those circumstances.

Mr Armstrong raised the issue of costs. It costs £10 for a regular deduction and £15 for a lump-sum deduction.

The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2009 makes important changes to the child support scheme. Those regulations now give my Department much-needed powers to go after parents who refuse to face up to their responsibilities to their children. I should say, though, that in addition to enhanced enforcement, a major objective in all the work that we do is to change attitudes. We must make it socially unacceptable for parents to avoid or deny their financial responsibility to their own children and to effectively keep money that belongs to their children. That is really what we are talking about.

1.15 pm

Finally, I pay tribute to the staff of the child maintenance enforcement division who have worked hard to improve every aspect of their performance over the past couple of years. In a recession, the public sector, and the Civil Service in particular, come in for critical scrutiny. I put on record my respect for the hundreds of junior civil servants in the child maintenance enforcement division who do the most difficult and stressful work for modest salaries. Without their commitment, there would not have been an increase in the number of children who were helped and in the amount of money that was collected on their behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

UK Child Poverty Bill

Legislative Consent Motion

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Child Poverty Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 11 June 2009.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We are here today to consider a significant piece of legislation that enshrines in law the duty to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and to debate the principle that the Child Poverty Bill that was introduced at Westminster in June 2009 should extend to this jurisdiction.

The purpose of the Bill is to ensure that eradicating child poverty is a high priority for the Government and that it receives the necessary focus to achieve the four targets set out in the Bill. Those targets cover absolute poverty, relative low-income poverty, relative low income and material deprivation, and persistent poverty. Although the Secretary of State will be responsible in law for ensuring that those are met, the duty on the Executive and Departments will be to demonstrate what actions they are taking to meet the targets and to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The placing of those targets in legislation will ensure that success can be defined and measured, and, although they are challenging, everyone should aim to achieve them.

The Bill also supports a co-ordinated approach to tackling poverty across all the Administrations, and it aims to build consensus and momentum on tackling child poverty. To help with co-ordination, the Bill proposes a new child poverty commission that will give advice to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) as it prepares the Executive's child poverty strategy. It also provides for OFMDFM to appoint a commissioner to that new body.

It is a radical step to introduce legislation with targets that will present huge challenges throughout government. There will be a duty on all Departments to contribute to a three-year strategy that will be laid before the Assembly and will set out how they will contribute to the targets. There will also be a duty on Departments to report annually on those targets through the Assembly.

The Executive have already confirmed their agreement to the extension of the Bill, and there are several reasons for that. Programme for Government targets on child poverty are already in place, and the legislation can serve to bring only clarity. It will focus efforts on the important area of child poverty, and, by placing more specific duties on all Departments, it will underpin the

Executive's commitment to achieving the targets set out in the Programme for Government.

Actions that relate to reserved and devolved matters are required to tackle poverty, and the Bill recognises the importance of the devolved Administrations' contribution to achieving the targets based on the four themes. The Bill will also provide for the greater accountability, transparency and involvement of the Assembly.

In bringing the matter forward, we have been grateful for the views of the OFMDFM Committee. We are conscious of the knowledge that the Committee from its inquiry into child poverty. Indeed, Members will have received the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's detailed information brief, for which we are grateful. One of the main concerns that the Committee raised was how local authorities will contribute in future. That matter remains to be explored, as will happen in due course after the review of public administration (RPA).

I want to emphasise the two main amendments to the Bill. The first places explicit requirements on all Departments to contribute to the development of a strategy and to meeting the targets. The second places a duty on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report annually to the Assembly. Those amendments show how serious the Executive are about the challenges ahead and that we are prepared to be accountable for our actions in the area.

It will be a challenge and difficult decisions will need to be taken about how we allocate resources and work together. However, we must remember that at the heart of the Bill is a vision of equality for all our children. Poverty narrows the choices available to our young people. The lasting detrimental legacy of poverty is poorer health, education and quality-of-life outcomes. We must do everything that we can to build a fairer society in which every child, from an early age, has the opportunity to thrive and make the most of their potential. We know that a poor start in life all too often means that a child will be disadvantaged later in life.

The Bill will provide a framework in which we can work together across all of government to co-operate and agree the measures that we must put in place to lift around 80,000 children out of poverty by 2020. Obviously, we will have to work even harder in the current economic climate in which public finances are likely to be constrained. The Child Poverty Bill is about fairness and equality and also about a strong economy. Releasing the potential of all those who would otherwise be held back by poverty will mean that all of us will be better off.

Child poverty is largely dictated by the income of the parents. Therefore, it is not always possible to isolate child poverty from wider poverty. However, we are able to measure the number of children who are

living in households that are suffering from income poverty. We recognise that progress has been made: absolute poverty has halved since 1998. However, the relative income measure demonstrates that the gap between the poorest and richest is still significant, with only a small decrease since 1998 when the baseline was set.

We believe that the legislation will contribute in a positive and tangible way to achieving a reduction in child poverty. Should the Assembly give its consent to the motion, it will endorse the continued extension of the Child Poverty Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons on 11 June 2009, to here. It would, thus, create a common legislative framework within which we and other jurisdictions will work. That will enable us to draw on a pool of expertise from within the proposed commission and require us to report regularly to our respective Assemblies on progress made. This is progressive legislation in which we should be included.

Mr Elliott: Unfortunately, the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are unavailable today. I apologise on their behalf. I will speak for the Committee on the motion. I thank the junior Minister for his explanation of the legislative consent motion and the background to the Bill.

During completion of the Committee's extensive child poverty inquiry, it became apparent that no single policy or programme will eliminate child poverty. Eliminating child poverty will require action by all Departments and government agencies and by local partners in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. In reality, it also depends significantly on the actions of the UK Government on taxation and benefits policy. The Committee welcomes the UK Child Poverty Bill as a basis for government to build on.

The Bill will provide a statutory basis to the commitment made by the Government in 1999 to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Its stated purpose is to give new impetus to the Government's commitment and to drive action across Departments. It also aims to define success in eradicating child poverty and to create a framework to monitor progress at a national and a local level.

I commend the junior Minister on the willingness of his officials to come before the Committee to brief members on the workings of the Bill. On 18 February 2009, officials attended to consult the Committee on the UK Government's consultation document on legislative proposals for the introduction of a child poverty Bill, which was published on 28 January 2009. The Committee welcomed any measure that raises the profile of child poverty, focuses minds on the demanding

Government targets in that area and maintains momentum on tackling the issues that cause child poverty.

The Committee also welcomed the pre-legislative consultation and the laudable effort to address child poverty in the long term through legislative action.

During the consultation period, the Committee raised a number of concerns for the Department to take forward. Following consultation with the OFMDFM Committee, and with the Executive's agreement, the First Minister and deputy First Minister wrote to the UK Government requesting that amendments be made to the Child Poverty Bill. First, they requested an amendment that would recognise explicitly the role and responsibility that all Northern Ireland Departments will have in relation to the Northern Ireland child poverty strategy and reports. For example, all Departments will have to set out the measures that they are taking to contribute to the meeting of the targets set out in clauses 2 to 5 and describe the effect of those measures.

Secondly, they requested an amendment to impose a duty on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report annually to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the measures taken by the Northern Ireland Departments, in accordance with the Northern Ireland strategy, and on the effect of those measures in contributing to the meeting of the targets set out in clauses 2 to 5 of the Child Poverty Bill.

On 1 July 2009, 16 September 2009, 30 September 2009 and 4 November 2009, the Committee received further briefings from officials on the Bill, the legislative consent motion and the amendments to the Bill.

At the Committee meeting on 4 November, officials explained that, on 9 October, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister had written to the lead Minister for the Bill, Stephen Timms, requesting that amendments be made. Those amendments would, first, place a duty on OFMDFM to report annually to the Assembly and, secondly, extend the scope of the Bill to all Northern Ireland Departments. The officials explained that Minister Timms had agreed that the amendments be included in the Government amendments going forward to the Westminster Committee for its consideration of the Bill.

The Committee Stage is complete, and the Committee at Westminster has accepted the amendments, which are now part of the Bill. It is expected that the Report Stage at Westminster will take place in early December and, hopefully, the Bill will attain Royal Assent in early January 2010.

At its meeting on 11 November 2009, the OFMDFM Committee agreed to issue a Committee information brief to all Members and party support staff detailing the issues that gave rise to this legislative consent motion. It was intended that that would aid Members in contributing to today's debate. I am pleased to say

that the Committee for OFMDFM supports the legislative consent motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me, I will now put forward the Ulster Unionist Party's perspective on the motion.

The legislative consent motion continues the well-established principle of parity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom with regard to welfare matters. As such, it is important that the legislative consent motion receives the support of the House. Equally important, however, is the fact that it addresses the moral, social and economic scandal of child poverty within not only the Province, but the UK.

That said, there are important questions to ask about the Child Poverty Bill. One wonders whether it was a concern about child poverty that motivated the UK Government to introduce the Bill. Labour has been in power since 1997, but there is a reasonable expectation among political commentators of all shades that it will lose the general election next year. Why, therefore, has Labour waited until the very end of its term in Government to introduce such an important Bill?

There are questions around the current UK Government's record on child poverty. Despite their welcome pledge to reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010 and to eradicate it by 2020, the number of children living in child poverty has increased under the Labour Government. Therefore, are the Labour Government best placed to introduce legislation on a matter on which they have so obviously failed?

The Labour Government have had a near total reliance on welfare measures to address child poverty. That one-dimensional approach to child poverty — salvation by economics alone — has, as I have said, failed. It has failed because child poverty is not a matter of simple economics. Raising income levels alone does not address social exclusion. The poverty of aspiration, educational opportunity, family support and community support, has all been left untouched due to Labour's focus on income levels.

The Labour Party has ignored the root cause of child poverty. It has ignored the importance of the child's family, the role played by economic inactivity and trans-generational unemployment and the poverty of educational aspirations and opportunities. How can the House be sure that the Child Poverty Bill does not seek to enshrine in legislation an already failed approach to child poverty? I look forward to a much more positive and proactive response to those matters, both in the Child Poverty Bill and in child poverty issues throughout government

1.30 pm

Mr Shannon: I support the legislative consent motion. I pay tribute to everyone in the Committee for the

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Committee members have worked together on the issue, there has been consensus, and all parties are united in their desire to eliminate child poverty.

I have spoken about child poverty in the Chamber on many occasions, as a member of the Committee and as a public representative. In many cases, what one sees as a public representative can be used in Committee meetings. A public representative sees the incidence of child poverty in his or her own area and understands how to tackle the root of the problem.

I wholeheartedly support the theory behind the motion. We need a co-ordinated effort to put child poverty in its place — the past. In 2007, I was provided with shocking figures, which showed that more than 10,000 children in Northern Ireland were living in poverty. That figure covered only those who were living in poverty; there are many others on the edge of it. The detail of those figures goes to the core of our society and shows that the underbelly of society in Northern Ireland is under pressure. Early indications show that the child poverty figure rose again in 2007. The economic crisis has resulted in more child poverty. The figures make me feel sick, because, despite being far from an underprivileged society, we have so many children living below the poverty threshold.

Children are at a higher risk of living in poverty if they are in a family in which there are no working adults; there is only one resident parent; there are four or more children; or a child is disabled. All the statistics show that child poverty is higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK or Europe. A survey by Save the Children found that very poor children are badly affected. In many cases, there are social consequences: the children in question lack friends, lack hobbies, never go on family trips and have severe financial pressures.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has found that 6,805 families with dependent children are homeless, which is a 50% increase over 10 years. In play and social development, poor children lose out on basic social activities due to low household incomes, and their health is affected from birth. I represent Strangford. It is an area that some would perceive as affluent, but the child poverty figures are scary, and that worries me. I am still surprised that there are children who go to bed hungry and cannot enjoy activities that a lot of other children take for granted, such as swimming.

I have been told by many people who work with children daily that there are signs of deprivation in most youth groups. When one youth club in Newtownards ceased its 50p dues policy and made entry to the club free, more children from the estates attended. However, when there are outings and the kids must pay towards

the bus, many cannot attend. If the provision is free, children in poverty can attend, but even a nominal cost means that they are unable to participate.

I have a heart for the issue as Newtownards is one of the top spots for child deprivation in the Province. I have seen that at first hand via my constituency office. It concerns me to think of the worries that some of our children take on their small shoulders, which are not designed for burdens such as paying bills. Some of them carry a heavy burden from an early age. The Assembly has recognised that children have a right to a carefree existence, and there is an overall aim to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Although that is ambitious, it is achievable if all Departments work together to flag up the signs of poverty and issue the aid that is needed. I am sure that, during his response to the debate, the junior Minister will speak about how Departments will address the issue collectively and responsibly.

The passing of the Bill will give focus to the implementation of our child poverty policy and will be a guide to help us to find a solution. It is not all about problems; it is about solutions and how we address issues, and today's legislative consent motion offers the Assembly an opportunity to do just that. We have the capacity to make a difference and, as I said earlier, there is a will to do so in the Committee. The Bill should be the start of real change for children in the Province, who can and should have a bright future regardless of their background. The facts are clear, as is the pressure on elected representatives to make it happen.

We must combat the statistics, which can only have worsened since the survey because of the economic climate and the credit crunch. In the Chamber, Members have already made a commitment to eradicate child poverty. The issue has been discussed and agreed by all parties here. The Bill that we are discussing today is the next step towards achieving our goal. However, we cannot do so alone; it must be a UK-wide battle. The help that the Bill provides, through the child poverty commission and the pressure on the Secretary of State, can only be a good thing.

Child poverty must be tackled at its root; that is, through the provision of jobs for parents and their ability to work in those jobs with adequate childcare arrangements in place. That is a core issue in addressing child poverty and is an intricate part of the issue. However, that is a debate for next week: I understand that the House will debate childcare next Tuesday, and we will have an opportunity to discuss that issue then.

There cannot be anyone in the Chamber who does not recognise the importance of driving a strategy for child poverty, not simply to meet the target of eradication by 2020 but to make a difference to the lives of children

throughout the Province who are growing up in homes in which there is only one meal a day. The rumbling of their stomachs is no laughing matter. For some, that is a daily occurrence. Some children do not have the food that we have in our homes: sometimes we have too much. That cannot be allowed to continue in the Province. It is vital that Members nail their colours to the mast today and take a step forward by supporting the legislative consent motion. I support the motion and ask other Members to do likewise. I am convinced that they will. Let us make child poverty a thing of the past and do better for our children.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I support the legislative consent motion. When the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's child poverty inquiry looked into the issues, it laid bare the scandalous extent of child poverty here. Moreover, it demonstrated the need for a proactive and cross-cutting measure to combat it.

The first thing I did as a newly elected MLA and new member of the Committee was lobby for the inquiry. I did not do so alone: Jim Shannon, in particular, was eager to have the inquiry. Jim and I lobbied for the inquiry because like many other people, not only Committee members but MLAs, I was appalled at the level of child poverty. My constituency of Foyle has a child poverty rate of 34%. That means that more than one in three children in the city of Derry live in poverty. That is an absolute scandal, and the Committee found similar scandalous evidence across the North. The Committee was appalled to discover evidence that 135,000 children live in poverty across the North.

However, this new dispensation has the opportunity and the responsibility to begin to address that legacy. To begin with, the commitments in the Programme for Government, particularly the target of eliminating child poverty by 2020, must become a reality. To do that, Departments must target proposals within their remits that demonstrate that they will alleviate child poverty. We must see evidence that their programmes and projects will have an effect on alleviating child poverty.

The Assembly has already signed up to that 2020 target, which is laudable, but this legislative action is already long overdue if we are to achieve that target. The overarching aim of the Child Poverty Bill is to increase those efforts. It seeks to define and set targets in legislation to eradicate child poverty and to promote measures to meet those targets. That takes into account some of the concerns raised by the Committee. It also seeks to hold the Government to account for their progress against those targets, and that is to be welcomed. There is great potential within the Bill.

Comments have been made about the motion coming before the Chamber at this moment in time. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister did not wait until the end of its tenure before it focused on or addressed child poverty. The first thing that the Committee did was to instigate an inquiry into child poverty, for which there was cross-party and cross-community support. Whatever happened elsewhere has not been replicated in this Chamber.

However, gaps in the legislation were identified by members of the Committee when we discussed the Bill. We carried out a consultation with key stakeholders, including Save the Children, the NSPCC, Barnardo's, CiNI and the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Although there was a broad welcome for the aims and intent of the Bill, there was a feeling among the Committee members and the stakeholders that additional measures were needed to reflect our particular circumstances. A number of amendments were subsequently requested, and it is those that now require the legislative consent.

The Committee was pleased to see that its concerns were not just taken into account but were followed up, and amendments have been made to the legislation that make it more robust than before. The amendments place a duty not just on OFMDFM but on the Executive as a whole to prepare our own child poverty strategy setting out how the North will contribute to child poverty targets and what actions our Departments must take on the issue.

Departments need to demonstrate, as has been repeatedly discussed in the Committee, how programmes, projects or proposals coming through will impact. They need to be evidence-based so that we can track the changes that take place. The amendments also impose a requirement for the North's strategy to be revised every three years. To that end, we should be able to measure where we are, where we have got to and how we got there, as well as knowing what else we need to do.

There will be a requirement for OFMDFM to request the advice of the new child poverty commission in preparing the Executive's child poverty strategy and to have regard to that advice. The Bill will include a right for OFMDFM to appoint a commissioner to the new child poverty commission and a clause that will allow OFMDFM to be consulted by the British Secretary of State on the overall membership of that commission. That is an input that we recommended for the implementation of this Bill and what needs to be done with the strategy.

The amendments and new mechanisms will assist in the monitoring and implementation of the kind of cross-cutting measures that will help to eradicate the scourge of child poverty. The proposals coming from

Departments must be targeted. They must be measurable, and we must be able to see how they will make an impact on child poverty. On that basis, I commend the legislative consent motion to the House.

Mrs M Bradley: I hope that by now, no Members of the House will argue against the motion. I fully support the ethos of the motion and the UK Child Poverty Bill and its contents. Although there are many intricacies, which my colleague and party leader spoke about during the Bill's progress at Westminster, it is generally to be welcomed. I am hopeful, given the directives and requirements that the Bill will issue, that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will offer full and explicit co-operation and a renewed vigour to reach the goals that the Executive set after restoration.

Devolved institutions and Departments will have no place to hide once legislative consent has been attained. They will not be able to renege on the principles, aims and objectives that form part, or all, of the long-awaited and elusive anti-poverty strategy, which will be catapulted into the mainframe of the UK Government and the devolved institutions.

1.45 pm

Northern Ireland has a history of poverty. We are by far the poorest of any region in the EU, with more than one third of children living in poverty. The population of Northern Ireland is also the youngest of any UK region, with 27% of its population aged under 18. The report 'Childhood in Transition', which was commissioned by Save the Children, the Prince's Trust and Queen's University, was transparent in its assessment that poverty, and more specifically persistent poverty, was one of the main contributors to the future prospects and life experience of children in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, our troubled past and divided society make our job more difficult. Northern Ireland's children have more challenges to face and overcome than those in other regions.

For example, education should be a pathway out of poverty, but we face many in-house issues on that very subject. The 'Every School a Good School' ethos is centred on area-based planning and will not help in the challenge to eradicate poverty. Many cross-departmental issues will need to be reviewed, tweaked and even, I am sorry to say, shelved if we are to achieve our goal in 2020. I have been critical of OFMDFM, particularly regarding its approach to older people, another vulnerable group, and their need for a commissioner with real teeth. I will continue to be vigilant of OFMDFM's actions following the consultation period and the publication of the outcome and summaries.

However, I have hopes that the legislative pressure that the UK Child Poverty Bill will place on devolved Governments will mean that OFMDFM finally has to

act, rather than pontificate, on child poverty in Northern Ireland. OFMDFM will no longer be able to merely say the right things to catch headlines and throw the public off the scent. Actions speak louder than words. I urge all Members and Ministers to take account of even the smallest perspective on any child-centred issue and to reaffirm their commitment to children and the eradication of child poverty by accepting the motion. I expect that all Departments will be given an opportunity to contribute to the child poverty strategy and that the current economic conditions will not be used as a get-out clause to excuse a lack of the positive activity and dedication to the legislative commitment that the motion requires.

In Northern Ireland, 96,000 children exist in a state of poverty on a daily basis, and some 45,000 of those children live in severe poverty. Our receipt of out-of-work benefit is 19%, which is 6% above the UK average. Those figures are totally unacceptable, but we are at the threshold of a real and positive opportunity to change them. We must give full and honest support to the motion. Given the economic situation, we should be under no illusion that it will be a hard task. However, with commitment, we can make it happen. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak in support of the legislative consent motion on behalf of the Alliance Party. Child poverty is a scourge on our society that should be eradicated at the earliest possible moment. I pay tribute to the many individuals and voluntary groups throughout Northern Ireland who work continuously to overcome this very serious issue. The Alliance Party welcomes the UK Child Poverty Bill and will work with everyone concerned to make child poverty a thing of the past. It is our wish that all our children enjoy a good, sound, playful and healthy childhood. Surely that is the least that Members should work for in whatever way we can.

The Bill makes provision for the appointment of a child poverty commissioner to advise on strategic and technical matters. The Bill will place a duty on the Secretary of State to produce an initial UK strategy to eradicate child poverty, as well as to devise a revised strategy every three years. Furthermore, the Bill will recognise explicitly the role and responsibility that all Northern Ireland Departments will have for producing a Northern Ireland strategy and any reports. Indeed, Minister Kelly acknowledged that earlier.

In the Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive set out 2012 as the interim target by which child poverty should be eradicated. However, the Child Poverty Bill sets 2020 as the target, which is rather disappointing. I hope that the Northern Ireland Executive will do everything possible to retain the 2012 target or propose one that is as close as possible to that date.

The Bill will ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to ensure that the performance of public bodies is accountable against targets that have been set. Those mechanisms include the establishment of a commission that is independent and possesses real powers, such as authorising research and calling for evidence. The Bill states that the Government must have regard to the commission's advice; however, it should also state explicitly that the Government must explain to Parliament why they reject any of the commission's recommendations.

Save the Children believes that the relative low income level should be set at a precise numerical target of 5% or below, rather than 10%, which is what the Bill states. Save the Children also believes that the target for persistent poverty should be set to approach zero. In Northern Ireland, persistent poverty is 21%, which is more than double the GB level. Surely that is a shocking statistic. Indeed, we are told that some 44,000 children live in such poverty. However, if I heard the Minister correctly, he said that 80,000 children in Northern Ireland live in severe poverty. That shows that current policy interventions are not reaching the children that they should. We must not permit the situation that creates those figures to continue. It is a shameful situation, particularly as the UK is regarded as one of the most prosperous countries in the world.

Earlier in the Chamber, we all supported Minister Ritchie's efforts to direct finance to child poverty so that people can feed and clothe their children. Although the Alliance Party welcomes the Bill, we would like to see its contents finalised and implemented well before 2020.

Mr Spratt: I apologise to the Minister for not being in the Chamber at the start of the debate. I am pleased to support the motion and speak in the debate.

As Members are aware, the Child Poverty Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 11 June 2009. It is right and proper that the Bill be extended to this Assembly. Its objectives and goals will have an impact on many families here in Northern Ireland. As other Members said earlier, it was heart-rending to hear some of the evidence in the Committee from the various organisations that deal with the many families that are caught in the terrible trap of child poverty. Our hearts went out to those folks on many occasions.

There is a clear onus on the UK Government to commit to eradicating child poverty by 2020. As has been said, we all hoped that child poverty could have been eradicated before that date. Even eradicating child poverty by 2020 is now a major task that the Government have set themselves. Although the Westminster Government ultimately hold the levers of power on this matter, it is important that all the devolved Assemblies throughout the rest of the United Kingdom work towards

that goal and that we do everything within our powers to eradicate some of the problems earlier than 2020.

It is important to point out that child poverty has decreased since 1998, but the level remains very high, and knowledge of that decrease makes no difference to families who are caught in the poverty trap. A lot of progress has been made and life has improved for many people, but for people caught in that trap life has not improved, and it must.

To keep the eradication of child poverty at the top of the agenda, it is essential that we set targets based on the child poverty measures that are detailed in the Bill, for example:

“relative low income...combined low income and material deprivation...absolute low income”

and “persistent poverty”. We must also monitor progress, and there are ways in which to do that. The Committee suggested that the First Minister and deputy First Minister provide regular progress reports to the Assembly. In addition, the UK Government have a duty to report annually and to establish a child poverty commission. It is important for Northern Ireland to have a representative on that commission. Of course, the same applies to the United Kingdom’s other devolved institutions. There is a clear obligation to produce a strategy to tackle child poverty; however, that will require all Departments and public bodies to play their part.

From an economic perspective, one of the best ways to tackle poverty is to create employment opportunities, although the present economic climate that is being endured by us all makes achieving that difficult. Other methods to tackle child poverty include supporting working parents, particularly lone parents. Childcare vouchers are important for parents who work, and I sincerely hope that the Prime Minister and the Government will take that into account, given the debate about the childcare voucher system in recent days and weeks.

There is much work to be done on child poverty. We on this side of the House fully support the motion. The Assembly must tackle the issue as a matter of urgency and deal with it in whatever way it can. I hope that OFMDFM takes all of my points on board.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin and I thank junior Minister Gerry Kelly for his explanation of how the legislative consent motion is connected to the Child Poverty Bill.

The Bill’s stated intent is to:

“Set targets relating to the eradication of child poverty, and to make other provision about child poverty.”

That might seem simple to do; the language is simple and the intention is laudable. However, Mr Shannon,

Martina Anderson and others gave examples of their views of what it is to be poor, and we must take on board that “poverty” and “being poor” might well mean different things to different people. We all have our own images, some of them traditional, of what those terms mean. The Child Poverty Bill is a commendable attempt to lay down in statute identifiable targets and measures to deal with child poverty.

2.00 pm

Reference was made to what British Governments have or have not done thus far and to why they might be bringing a Bill forward at this stage. As Mr Elliott said, it goes back to a pledge that the British Government made in 1999 to put into statute provisions to deal with poverty. I listened to Mary Bradley, and I was glad that she supported that view, because, although not everything will be managed in the way in which we might want, it is important that we manage what we can and that legislation exists to allow us to do so.

Some of the groups that responded to the consultation pointed out that the Lifetime Opportunities strategy does not include a legal obligation to protect children in poverty, and I interpreted Children in Northern Ireland’s comments to mean that it would be good to have such an obligation in statute. A number of other groups referred to the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, and the Law Centre pointed out that now is not the time, and perhaps it is not even appropriate, to have another strategy. It suggested, indeed, that we should refer to the strategy that we have — the Lifetime Opportunities strategy — whether or not it has worked thus far. The Child Poverty Bill is an attempt to make things better from here on in, and my party supports that position, as I do as an individual.

In April this year, when Departments here were asked to respond to the consultation document, ‘Ending Child Poverty: Making it Happen’, interestingly, some of them made no comment and some responded at length. In fact, DSD said that although it is good to have an aspiration to eradicate child poverty, it may be difficult to enshrine it in legislation, because conditions change, and so on.

Of all the Departments that responded, only two — the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) — referred to the Lifetime Opportunities strategy. DARD is working hard to alleviate poverty in rural areas, and I welcome that. We should consider the Lifetime Opportunities strategy. The Child Poverty Bill calls for more focus on child poverty, and that is commendable. DARD’s rural White Paper and its other plans to sort out poverty in rural areas feed into that goal, as that Department said in its response to the consultation. I repeat that other Departments did not refer to the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, and that is

something that OFMDFM needs to consider. Members of the OFMDFM Committee have already given a commitment to look into that.

The amendments to the Bill that specify the involvement of all Departments in enacting its provisions are very valuable. The responses to the consultation thus far indicate that there is a gap in involvement, for which we must all take some of the blame. Departments must contribute to the process, because the momentum that the Bill should give to dealing with child poverty will be extremely welcome. In spite of what Mr Elliott said, I understand that that is the Westminster Parliament's intention, and we support that intention.

As my colleague Mickey Brady has just pointed out to me, we associate fuel poverty with elderly people, yet as many as one in three children living in fuel poverty may develop respiratory conditions and other problems.

If we are to tackle child poverty, there must be joined-up working and co-ordination between Departments, and the Bill provides for that. I fully support the motion and the Bill. My party accepts that there is work to be done, as Martina Anderson outlined in her contribution. We all have work to do, and it is a matter of making progress and addressing the problem. I take Mary Bradley's point about what Departments and Ministers did in the past, and I repeat that Sinn Féin wants to contribute to the process of reducing child poverty. We fully support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the critical issue of child poverty. I also welcome the work of the Labour Government. During their years in power, they have shown a commitment to tackling child poverty.

However, in Northern Ireland, we need to take more control of the issue. We have particular needs and difficulties, and we have set our own ambitious targets. Devolution is all about the local picture. We know the local area and where the pockets of deprivation lie. The problem, however, extends far beyond those pockets of deprivation. It is particularly relevant, in view of the economic downturn, to those living just above the benefits threshold. They are called the "new poor", but they are not so newly poor. I support the Labour Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020. However, the SDLP believes that the Assembly should use its devolved power to do its utmost to achieve that before 2020 and closer to the date that we set.

Part 2 of the Bill places a duty on each local authority to undertake a child poverty assessment in its area. That applies only to local authorities in England, and, therefore, no such duty is placed on local councils

in Northern Ireland. We must examine how we manage that duty in the North and, as we are in the middle of the review of public administration, we should do so now. It is important, and it would show devolution at work.

More importantly, that duty must also be acted upon by every Department, and I welcome the Bill's amendment of the law to that effect. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of the Environment are all highly involved, and it is important that they are all part of the process.

Northern Ireland legislation would allow us to set our own targets. Kieran McCarthy pointed out that the target for relative low income is set at 10%, but many organisations in the children's sector believe that it should be set at 5%. In addition, the Bill does not contain a target for children living in severe poverty, but such a target is contained in our Programme for Government. That is the most difficult group to lift out of poverty, and, therefore, we must focus on and prioritise those children.

The deprivation gap in health is widening, and we must focus more on prevention, early intervention, good parenting programmes, initiatives in schools and good preschool programmes such as Sure Start. We are well aware of fuel poverty, and the need for childcare vouchers was also mentioned.

Legislation alone will not end child poverty, and I am keen to hear from OFMDFM what additional resources will accompany the Bill, particularly for areas in which that Department is not under a duty to act. I have in mind such initiatives as the promotion and facilitation of the employment of parents, the development of skills, the provision of financial support for children and parents and the promotion of social inclusion.

We can see the gap that exists in health provision and the division in education that the 11-plus created. Although the 11-plus was brought in for a good reason, it has brought about a two-tier system. We need to have really good primary-school education. That is essential to ensuring that, regardless of age, children who transfer have the three Rs — reading, writing and arithmetic. It is imperative that they start off on a level playing field. In the long term, it is worrying and sad that many children will be socially excluded and unable to achieve their potential.

I would like to receive an update on what measures OFMDFM has undertaken to ensure that child poverty is being tackled by coherent cross-departmental action, because never before in any issue has such joined-up action been required.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the debate, and I am glad that there will be a legislative context in which we can take forward these matters. However, I am mindful of the fact that constraints arise from the legislation that need to be rectified at the earliest possible opportunity. My comments are meant as constructive encouragement, and I hope that the deputy First Minister will accept them in that spirit.

My colleague Mrs Hanna referred to the duty on local authorities to undertake a child poverty assessment in their areas, and, in his opening remarks, the deputy First Minister said that that:

“remains a matter to be explored”.

That matter was touched on and somewhat explored by the Committee, but it has still not been resolved. The SDLP believes that it would have been better to seek from the British Government an amendment to the Bill in which councils in the North, whatever their future designation, would have an obligation to eradicate child poverty, because it is normally best practice to create certainty earlier, rather than to allow doubt to linger longer. That argument has been confirmed by the fact that, in recent days, the Minister of the Environment has indicated that there may be some issues around the review of public administration legislation. In view of that new context, it may be that ultimately, unless the issues are corrected, we will regret at leisure our failure to seek in the primary Westminster legislation a provision that local councils have an obligation to eradicate child poverty.

It would, however, be helpful if the deputy Minister were in a position to confirm whether it is the intention of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to encourage the Assembly to put in the review of public administration legislation, if and when it comes to the House, an obligation in law that is at least equivalent to that which will apply to councils in England and Wales under the Westminster legislation. If the junior Minister were in a position to confirm that today, it would create some degree of certainty. If he were to do so, at least that matter would be tied down.

I welcome the Children’s Rights Alliance’s argument that the Government should have a duty to report annually, that OFMDFM supported that call and that it is now included in the legislation. All of that is good, but, without anticipating a future debate in the House on European matters, evidence has been given to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on what reporting means for each Department when it comes to its obligations on implementing EU policy in Northern Ireland. Colleagues on the Committee will confirm that the evidence that OFMDFM officials have given to the Committee on the subject is very much a mixed bag.

2.15 pm

For example, we are told that some Departments’ obligations on mainstreaming EU policy appear to be very much about the ticking of boxes. There is evidence that one Department has a different way of operating from others when it comes to EU matters. There is also evidence that there is no change in how Departments here respond to a change of priorities in the EU when the EU presidency changes every six months.

Such evidence to the Committee suggests that the reporting function and accountability for what Departments do about EU matters may not be a healthy precedent for how the Government may report on how Departments perform on child poverty each year. Mrs McGill touched upon that matter when she confirmed that, in respect of a proposal for Departments to have an obligation regarding child poverty, some of them made no comment whatsoever about their responsibilities.

Although annual reporting is important, it needs to be much more than some of the reporting that goes on in a parallel area, such as EU strategy, when it is working through Departments in the North. The annual report should be about hard targets, real strategies, common standards between Departments, and they should be measured in an evidence-based and rigorous way.

The junior Minister rightly acknowledged that what some view as radical targets in eradicating child poverty inevitably become more challenging in an economic downturn. The consequence is that the Assembly and the Government must be frank with themselves in that context: the targets for 2020 will require more strategies and investment. If we are going to get close to meeting some of the measurable targets — and not all of them can be measured — we must recognise that the Assembly will have to make decisions about strategy and resources to address those matters.

That is complicated and compounded by the fact that child poverty will be most intense in those families, of which there are significant numbers in the Catholic and Protestant communities, in which no member of a household — grandparent, parent or child — is in work. When it comes to equality, in general, and child poverty, in particular, that sector of society requires a dedicated approach. A Committee on the Administration of Justice report that was referred to in this House two or three years ago said that the number of workless families in the Catholic community remained constant, and there was growing evidence of workless families in the Protestant community. Not a child, parent or grandparent in those households was in work. That wider issue has to be dealt with, and, in doing so, we will deal with some of the most acute child poverty figures in the North.

One amendment that the Children's Rights Alliance suggested that the Assembly and Executive endorse in the primary legislation in West referred to the employment of parents, including quality, affordable childcare, and developing parental skills.

In that context, and given that the matter has been highlighted by the Children's Rights Alliance, where do we sit in respect of the roll-out of the childcare strategy? The Minister has reported to the House that the subgroup is working on that matter, and that various attempts have been made to take forward the childcare strategy. It would be helpful if the Minister were in a position to indicate where things stand, because the aim is to help families and children in poverty.

I conclude by recalling what Jim Shannon and Mary Bradley said, which was touched on by other Members: 96,000 children are in poverty, and 45,000 children are in severe poverty. Given what I said earlier about the economic situation and considering that, at times, our Government do not work in a joined-up way, and given what Mrs McGill said about some Departments not even responding to the consultation, those figures should be a wake-up call for all Members in the Chamber, and many in government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call junior Minister Kelly to wind up the debate, and I give him the challenge of finishing before 2.30 pm, when Question Time begins.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I start by thanking Alex Attwood for both promoting and demoting me during his fairly long speech. My speech will be fairly short because all Members supported the motion, and I thank them for that. I thank Tom Elliott, in particular, for representing the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I appreciate the positive manner in which the Committee dealt with the proposals for the legislative consent motion, as did everyone else.

I will pick up on one or two issues and totally ignore the question of the Labour Party's reasons for introducing the Bill, which is a welcome piece of legislation. Jim Shannon articulated on behalf of many Members the on-the-ground experience in our constituencies, and referred to the necessity for the motion. He also made the helpful comment that the 2020 target is achievable, and, as Alex Attwood just said, it is a wake-up call.

Martina Anderson used Derry as another example. She said that the consultation with the stakeholders was very important, and mentioned that the strategy would be revised every three years. Mary Bradley spent most of her time talking about accountability and transparency, which is crucial, because the statistics for child poverty here are the worst in Europe. I thank Members for not getting too party political during the

debate; Mary Bradley almost went there, but resisted. She said that OFMDFM was pontificating, but she also said that all Departments needed to play their part, and I thank her for that.

Kieran McCarthy also supported the motion. However, it is important to make the point that he was talking about dealing with severe child poverty by 2012. As Carmel Hanna pointed out, that target is additional to the Bill; we have addressed that in our Programme for Government, and it remains something that we will try to do. The Bill seeks to eradicate child poverty by 2020, and there was some confusion around the two targets. Jimmy Spratt was very supportive, and said that a lot of work had to be done. He referred to childcare vouchers, the commission and the commissioner. The commission and the commissioner will be very helpful.

Claire McGill mentioned Lifetime Opportunities, which the legislation can encompass. She also referred to rural areas. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, inside and outside Executive meetings, always refers to rural proofing all measures, and that is important. Carmel Hanna said that it was the local picture that counted, and that is true. She also said that, although the levers of power in respect of the legislation are at Westminster, we have our part to play and we can have an effect. I think that we will have an effect, and that effort must be cross-departmental.

She also mentioned a series of ideas, which we can come back to; I will not go through them now. I agree entirely that legislation is not enough and that there is a need for joined-up action.

Alex Attwood said a lot, but I will only deal with a few of the points that he raised. He mentioned the RPA legislation. I do not think that we could have placed that duty on the RPA, because the legislation for that was going through at the time. He also mentioned a lot of examples from Europe and the lack of joined-up government, specifically in relation to reporting. All that I can say on that matter is that reporting is very important and must not be a box-ticking exercise; we will do all that we can to avoid that.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Executive's belief that the Bill will bring greater clarity to our child poverty targets, greater transparency as we strive to meet those targets and greater accountability to the Assembly. Ultimately, the Bill is intended to help us to build a better future for all our children and, for that reason, I commend the motion to the Assembly and thank Members for their support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his brevity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Child Poverty Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 11 June 2009.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Disability Strategy

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's disability strategy. (AQO 362/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): On 2 March, I set out to the House my intention to develop a new disability strategy during 2009-2010. Development work is under way, and I plan to publish a draft strategy for full public consultation by the end of March 2010. The strategy will promote a person-centred approach to treatment, care and support and will cover all age groups. It will not focus on individual disabilities; rather, it will provide a framework for the development of services to assist all people with a physical and/or sensory disability to lead a full and independent life.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is unfortunate that the strategy has again been put back. Will the Minister detail the efforts that his Department has made to ensure that it consults effectively with the disability sector, particularly the service users, as it develops the strategy?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not clear about the aside about the strategy being put back; it certainly has not been. As the Member will be aware, there are a number of disability and neurology strategies, including on the issues of acquired brain injury, sensory impairment, a neurology review, respite, allied health and wheelchairs. This review brings all those issues together. Users and their carers play a key role in all of that, so their input is vital. The consultation will pay due regard to those opinions, as it will pay due regard to the opinions that come forward from all sources.

Mr P Ramsey: What protocols are in place for written communications for people with visual impairment disabilities? I have had a number of representations from people with visual impairments

who have received letters in small print and on coloured paper and cannot understand them.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trusts are engaged in ongoing work on the patient administration system to provide information in a form and manner that the patient can readily access. If the GP of a person who is partially sighted informs the trust of that through the patient administration system, the trust can take steps to ensure that contact is made, usually through direct telephone contact and also through the provision of appointment cards in Braille or large print and the transcription of appointments and letters onto an audio CD or cassette. It is vital that, if a patient is having an appointment, for example, they understand the information so that they can be at the appropriate place at the appropriate time.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the Mencap campaign, Changing Places. Will the Minister guarantee the Assembly that he will consider including that in the strategy? Will he ensure that Changing Places will be facilitated in the health estates?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mencap will have access to the consultation process, as will all other organisations, groups and users. Its views will be taken into consideration, as will the views of all other parties that are interested and want to come forward with their input. It would be premature if I were to give guarantees on what the outcome of the strategy will be, but it has some importance in the Department.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his answer in relation to the RNIB and people who are blind. Is it his policy to contact surgeries and clinics to make GPs aware that the facilities that the Minister outlined are available for people who are visually impaired or who have visual problems?

The reason that I bring the matter to the Minister's attention is because a number of people with visual impairment have contacted me to say that when they have been called to clinics, they have not been made aware — nor, seemingly, are their GPs aware — that those facilities could be delivered to them.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In fact, the onus is on GPs: they have patient lists and, therefore, know which of their patients are partially sighted and require that type of support.

I will speak to the Chief Medical Officer. We will try to ensure that all GPs are informed through the proper channels that they are able to take that step and that, in fact, trusts can be informed.

Altnagelvin Hospital: Radiotherapy

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current status of the business case commissioned by his Department into the provision of a satellite radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQO 363/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The business case for that project was submitted to my Department last month and is being considered by my officials. It should be noted that although pressure on the Department's capital budget cannot be ignored, the development has high priority. It is necessary to ensure that sufficient radiotherapy capacity exists to continue to treat cancer patients safely and effectively.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Has he had any recent discussions on the matter with the Minister for Health and Children in the South, Mary Harney? Due to Altnagelvin Hospital's proximity to Donegal, the provision of a satellite radiotherapy centre there would be helpful to patients. I welcome that. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have nothing to report on that front, further to what I have reported to the House during recent Question Times. In the past, I have had discussions with Mary Harney. She is supportive in principle.

The business case must be considered, which is what the Department is currently doing. I must work my way through it before I can determine whether I have the resources to take the matter forward. It must be remembered that the project requires investment of £65 million, which, given the climate in which my Department currently operates, is substantial. We need to look at the way forward.

As Members are aware, there are several cancer units in Northern Ireland. The proposal is that the Department supplements the cancer centre at the Belfast City Hospital with a sub-centre for radiotherapy at Altnagelvin Hospital. There is concern that capacity will be reached by 2015. Supplementing that capacity will involve the provision of four linear accelerators. Therefore, I will look at the business case. When I have done so, I may have something of substance to bring to Mary Harney.

Mrs M Bradley: I acknowledge the work that the Minister has done for the unit at Altnagelvin Hospital. I strongly welcome that and thank him for it.

Provided that there are no further threats to plans to build the unit at Altnagelvin Hospital, will the Minister confirm that it will operate as a cross-border unit?

There are many concerns about that. I ask the Minister to clear that up if he can.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, the capacity that is proposed to be built into the unit at Altnagelvin Hospital is for four linear accelerators and 36 in-patient beds. That is the basis of the business case, the focus of which is to address demand in Northern Ireland.

There is also a capacity issue across the border in Donegal. The Irish Government have indicated to me, in principle, that they are prepared to support capital investment and their share of revenue consequences in return for allowing their patients to access the cancer centre. If they are prepared to pay, then this is an example of cross-border co-operation that is positive for patients in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

The step at which we are working at present is the business case, which has been submitted to the Department and is being considered by my officials. When consideration is complete, I will be in a position to take the next step.

Tyrone County Hospital: Maternity Services

3. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the ongoing delay in bringing forward proposals for stand-alone midwife-led maternity services in the Tyrone County Hospital. (AQO 364/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The study that was carried out by the former Western Board regarding the potential for a community midwifery unit in Omagh indicated that such a facility would be feasible. However, a number of issues need careful consideration before I can commit to the development of such a new service; for example, patient safety, the needs of local women, the availability of appropriately skilled staff and the sustainability of the service in the future. Resourcing the development of such a new service and the value for money that it would deliver are key issues that require detailed consideration in view of the many competing priorities that are faced by my Department and the inadequacy of the available resources to health and social care in Northern Ireland.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his answer. There are no maternity facilities in County Tyrone. Does the Minister accept that that is unacceptable? Furthermore, does he agree that the continual delay for which he is responsible has put the lives of women in danger?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I caught the last part of Mr Bresland's

comments about the lives of women being in danger, and I do not accept that that is the situation. The people of Omagh are well served by up-to-date, modern facilities in Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The Member will be aware that we are constructing a new acute hospital in Enniskillen that will have a full range of obstetric-led maternity facilities. Therefore, that area is well served.

That said, I am considering Omagh, as well as other areas, for a stand-alone community midwife-led unit. Such units are in operation in other parts of the UK. In fact, I believe that this is the only part of the UK that does not have a stand-alone unit. One is being developed in the new hospital in Downpatrick and I am looking at advancing such a facility in Lagan Valley Hospital, all of which will help to advise us as to the future for Omagh.

The Omagh midwifery unit will require a newbuild, and it will accommodate between 100 and 150 deliveries per annum. That is the proposition that we are considering. As I said, a number of other issues in and around Omagh must be considered.

Dr Deeny: Before I ask my question, I want to put it on record that I disagree with the Minister: our patients are not being well provided for through maternity services.

Does the Minister accept that there are people west of Omagh, including my own patients? Does he also accept that there is a need for a midwifery-led unit in Tyrone to serve the people of Tyrone? If he does, why did he approve and readily commit to such services in the east of the Province but does not do so for the mothers in County Tyrone who are further away from a consultant-led obstetric unit than are the people of east Down?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I listened to Dr Deeny's comments, and I do not agree that mothers west of the Bann are not being well provided for. A consideration of Altnagelvin Hospital, for example, and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen, would show that we are providing sufficient capacity to address that need.

I am, however, considering the possibility of a community midwife-led unit in Omagh. We have a proposal and have carried out a study, but a number of issues need careful consideration before I commit to the development of that new service. As I said in my answer to the substantive question, issues such as patient safety, the needs of local women and the availability of appropriately skilled staff must be considered.

As far as provision in Lisburn, for example, is concerned, there is a ready-made unit there, and there is a ready-made midwifery workforce that is willing to

go forward on a midwife-led stand-alone unit. That makes the business case for that much easier.

As I said, and as Dr Deeny will be aware, everything is constrained by the revenue and capital resource limits that the Department is now facing.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister join me in my expression of gratitude to the midwife-led unit at Craigavon Area Hospital for its dedication and hard work and the excellent service that it provides in that area?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with the Member readily, bearing in mind that there has been an increase in the number of deliveries that the Craigavon maternity unit accommodates. Since I came into office, I have announced two separate investments in Craigavon Area Hospital's maternity unit. The birth rate in Northern Ireland is rising substantially, increasing by approximately 10% over the past three years and by around 20% over the past eight years. Given that substantial and sustained increase, the work that midwives in Craigavon Area Hospital and elsewhere do is highly commendable.

2.45 pm

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I note the Minister's response with some interest. Will he assure the House that the safety of mothers and babies will not be endangered because of the ongoing delay in the development of maternity services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no delay in the ongoing development of maternity services. The Member will be aware of a major investment in maternity services at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, where a new and very successful unit was opened recently. He will also be aware of a substantial investment in Enniskillen in the form of a new acute hospital that includes an obstetrician-led maternity unit and of the investment in the Craigavon maternity unit, which I just mentioned. Investments are also being made in other maternity units.

When the Member considers the increase in the birth rate and in the number of deliveries, he will realise where capacity issues exist. There are no capacity issues at either Altnagelvin Area Hospital or Erne Hospital. Capacity issues exist elsewhere, and given my capital budget and the resources that are available to me, I have to address those by priority.

Swine Flu: Vaccination

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all children identified as having underlying health conditions have received the swine flu vaccination. (AQO 365/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process for indentifying and offering the vaccine to all children who have underlying health conditions and who, therefore, fall within the priority group for vaccination is being undertaken by GPs and is ongoing.

An estimated 490,000 vaccines will be available for all the initial priority groups, and it is expected that that process will be completed by mid-December. On 22 and 23 October, approximately 2,500 children who attend special schools for severe learning disability were offered the vaccine. In addition, other children with special needs and underlying physical health conditions who are not in similar special schools have been identified, and their details have been passed to their GPs so that they can be offered the vaccine.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he been informed of a rumour that is doing the rounds that the vaccination has had an adverse impact on those who have received it? Will he explain what action the Department is taking to deal with that rumour?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member referred to the adverse impact of rumours doing the rounds. At times, it is difficult to counter rumours, particularly when it is not clear about their source.

The vaccine has been tested by the European Medicines Agency. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies provided the four Health Departments in the home countries with advice on the vaccination, and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation gave advice about the priority groups. I am not aware of any adverse impact that the vaccination has had, except for the fact that the injection may leave a person's arm red and sore for a couple of days. That is the only adverse reaction that I am aware of.

I am aware of that type of rumour. We take steps to get across the message that although swine flu is a mild illness for most people, for a small minority it is much more severe and for a tiny minority it is absolutely catastrophic. We do not know who will find swine flu catastrophic and who will find it mild. The best defence is a vaccination programme, which is what we are doing, and we have started with priority groups.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister indicate whether he has any figures or feedback on the take-up of the vaccine from schools for children with special needs?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The take-up was high. I cannot give a precise figure, but I am happy to write to the Member with the information. I know that the take-up from pregnant women has also been high. I will be in a position to report the figures to the House in due course. Indeed, I intend to make a statement on swine flu to the House next week in which I will look to

provide some of that information. However, I will try to provide the Member with the information that she requires.

Mr P J Bradley: Will the Minister give the Assembly an update on the uptake of the vaccine by the designated groups?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The feedback that I have received is that uptake is high. As Members are aware, the priority groups were those aged between six months and 65 years in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at risk groups, all pregnant women, household contacts of immunocompromised individuals, and people aged 65 and over in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at risk groups. We added children with special needs to those priority groups, and we continue to widen it as we go.

We anticipate that all those in the at-risk groups will have been offered the vaccine by the middle of December 2009, including front line health and social care workers. My understanding is that the uptake is high, and that is encouraging. As I said, I will look to provide some of this information to the House in a statement next week. I will also write to the Member when the information becomes available to me. However, uptake among pregnant women has been high.

South-West Acute Hospital

5. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new South-West Acute Hospital. (AQO 366/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The construction of the new acute hospital for the south-west began in May 2009, immediately after financial close. The construction programme focuses on the substructure, piling and external works; the piling works are nearing completion, and the substructure and rising elements are progressing to plan. The construction of the frame for the main hospital building will commence later this month. The project is on target for completion in 2012.

Mr Elliott: I want to put on record my thanks to all those concerned for the progress that is being made on the new hospital at Enniskillen, including the construction agency, the Minister and the Department.

A vicious rumour has been circulating that money is being taken from the funding for the new hospital in Omagh to help to pay for the project at Enniskillen. Will the Minister clarify the situation? Will he put on record that it is only a rumour, thereby putting it to bed once and for all?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That rumour is complete nonsense:

money is not being siphoned off from the Omagh hospital. The new acute hospital for the south-west is a PFI project, which is going forward with the Northern Ireland health group providing on a design-and-build process. It is on time and on money; we do not need to take money from the budget for the Omagh hospital or from any other budget to pay for the construction. The money for the Enniskillen project was set aside. At a cost of some £270 million, it is a major development for the Health Service, which will provide an acute hospital to meet the acute service needs of the entire population of the south-west and to do an extremely good job for the local population.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his update on the new south-west hospital. I am sure that he is aware of the ongoing concerns about securing the foundations at that site. Will the Minister confirm when he last met the developer to discuss those concerns? Furthermore, will he confirm whether the works completed to date are within budget and, if not, will he tell the House where the extra money will come from?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There was a landslide at the site, but it is not as though half of the Matterhorn fell down and carried with it millions of cubic metres of snow and ice. There was a small landslide; it is an engineering problem that requires an engineering solution. That is firmly within the scope of the contract that has been agreed under a PFI. At this stage, I am not aware that there will be any additional costs. The project will be managed within the contract sum and, as I said, on time and on money.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister detail what progress has been made on the local enhanced hospital in Omagh and the range of services that will be provided there? That development is, of course, linked to the Enniskillen project.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I remain committed to the Omagh hospital. It is very much part of our plan to develop better services for the future of hospitals. We have been reviewing the procurement process for the Omagh hospital, the choice being between direct procurement and PFI. Given the way in which the money markets in London have been going, that will be an exercise for each major project as we go forward.

The anticipated headline cost for the Omagh hospital was, and is, £190 million. That includes a new enhanced hospital, a mental-health centre and a health and care centre. The hospital will provide 66 beds, with an additional 97 beds for mental-health patients, and 70% to 80% of the hospital services that are required by the local population. As Members are aware, a liaison group including local councillors has

been established, and the trust is taking forward the procurement and planning processes. A review of the business case is ongoing, and is nearing completion. All things being equal, and if my budget is properly respected, we can go forward to the next stage of a development to meet 70% to 80% of hospital needs in the Omagh area.

Efficiency Savings and Cuts

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the difference between services which are reduced to meet efficiency savings and services which are cut.

(AQO 367/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: No cuts are being made and no are services being reduced as a result of efficiency plans. As we give the public the extra services that increased demand requires, we are delivering more, not less. Unfortunately, demand is rising substantially faster than the resources to pay for it.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister appreciate that there is much concern in the community that, when trusts are asked to make the efficiencies that they are required to, and to which the Minister agreed in the Budget, the proposals that emerge are, invariably, cuts, and not the sort of efficiencies that we expect? Will the Minister explain to the trusts the difference between efficiencies and cuts to ensure an end to the emotional game that we are all being subjected to?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I put that question straight back to Mr Hamilton, along with his accusation of playing "emotional games". Mr Hamilton, just a few days ago, talked in the House about how the Health Service had, for years, been force-fed billions upon billions of pounds. Not for the first time, he was quite clear in what he had to say about funding for the Health Service, and, if necessary, I have quotations to back that up. The fact is that this year's increase in the Health Service budget is the lowest in living memory. In real terms, it was 0.5%.

The Appleby report was on efficiency, and it said that the increase should be 4.3%. I repeat the fact that a report on efficiency recommended that level of increase. However, that was the one recommendation that was not implemented, because it was the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel, and it failed to do so.

3.00 pm

We are finding £700 million of efficiencies, four sevenths of which do not come back to us as efficiencies for new services. In addition, there is a

provision gap of £600 million between Northern Ireland and England. Against that, the Health Service and the trusts have increased their productivity by almost 7% and have met need over and above the level for which they are resourced. Trusts are required to find efficiencies, and that is what they are doing.

The situation was also complicated by the fact that, in June, I could not persuade my Executive colleagues to discuss funding to combat swine flu and, therefore, faced a minimum bill of £64 million. As I was unable to help the trusts, all their financial deficits had to be addressed through further contingency plans. Those contingency plans have still to reach me. The Member was reacting to rumours, leaks and rumours of leaks.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Belfast Rapid Transit System

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any plans for the introduction of legislation for Belfast's rapid transit system.

(AQO 376/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I plan to introduce legislation that will provide my Department with the necessary powers to implement the Belfast rapid transit system by June 2010, subject to the necessary approvals. A public consultation on the policy proposals is due to commence later this month.

Dr McDonnell: When does the Minister envisage the process being completed? When will we see some results on the ground?

The Minister for Regional Development: As the Member knows, there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to have progress on the ground by 2011. The rapid transit division is preparing a project works programme. That programme denotes the main milestones up to December 2011 for taking forward the required primary legislation to allow for the implementation and operation of rapid transit. Many studies have been carried out on the three pilot routes identified. The Programme for Government contains the target to commence work on the first rapid transit line in greater Belfast by 2011.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What powers will be provided to the Department under the proposed legislation?

The Minister for Regional Development: The legislation is required to provide my Department with the necessary powers to enable it to implement the proposals for the rapid transit system. The new

legislation will provide a general enabling power; a land acquisition power; a power to purchase, lease and dispose of goods and services; a contracting power for the operation of the system; the power to make by-laws relating to conduct on vehicles and in or on premises; and the power to install, operate and maintain off-board ticketing machines. Once approved and brought through the normal processes in the Assembly, the legislation will apply not only to Belfast but to anywhere in the North where rapid transit is introduced.

Mr Cree: In light of the ongoing fiscal crisis in the Executive and the uncertain future, what assurances can the Minister provide that the rapid transit system will receive the necessary funding? Will he provide us with a date for the completion of the business case?

The Minister for Regional Development: I would not describe the Executive's budgetary discussions as a fiscal crisis. As the commitment to rapid transit is contained in the Programme for Government, I expect it to be honoured. The enhancement of the economy is also central to the Programme for Government, and I regard the provision of a rapid transit system in Belfast as central to enhancing and growing the economy in the city and across the region. When the time comes for allocating budgets to the project, I expect all my Executive colleagues to honour that commitment.

Mr G Robinson: Will there be a detrimental impact on budgets for public transport in the rest of Northern Ireland when the rapid transit system is introduced?

The Minister for Regional Development: No; the budget for the rapid transit system has not been allocated at the expense of other public transport budgets.

The Member will know, as all Members do, that we are facing constrained times. On the other side of the West election, we may face even more constrained times. However, the budget that we have identified for developing the pilot schemes on rapid transit is not at the expense of other public transport projects.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they need to stand in their place if they want to be called.

Water Supply: Rural Areas

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the work currently being undertaken by his Department in relation to water mains connections in rural communities. (AQO 377/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department is reviewing the policy on the provision of financial assistance to properties that are not served by a water main. It is an extensive review that involves a number of stages.

The first stage involved an assessment of mains water provision for all domestic properties in the North, which revealed that about 4,000 properties might not be served by a water main. Questionnaires were issued to those households, and, after the second issue, there was a response rate of around 50%. Analysis of the responses indicated about 1,200 properties that might not be served by mains water. About 300 of those properties expressed an interest in being connected.

The next stage of the review will be to develop policy options, including estimating approximate costs and funding requirements and drafting a policy proposal for Executive consideration and public consultation that might effectively tackle the issue.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. We have lobbied on the issue of mains water connections in rural areas for a long time. I thank the Department and the officials for the thorough work that has been done. My constituents and I are grateful for that. Could the cost of requisition be reduced by adopting a self-lay policy?

The Minister for Regional Development: I recognise that the issue affects isolated rural dwellings and share the Member's concern that we should try to identify the extent of the issue and the cost attached to rectifying it.

The Member asked about a self-lay policy. Article 86 of the Water and Sewerage Services Order 2006 sets out the basis on which NIW (Northern Ireland Water) could adopt a water mains laid by other bodies or, in other words, a self-lay policy. However, that article has not yet been commenced, so it is not yet in force. NIW is developing a self-lay policy, and, when it is drawn up and agreed, my Department will commence the articles subject to Assembly approval. However, I caution that, although a self-lay option might initially seem financially attractive, NIW has a responsibility to maintain the security and quality of the public supply. Advocates of self-lay policies do not always take into account the costs that are associated with that.

Mr Shannon: I have a concern. There have been occasions when new water supplies have been put into rural communities along main roads and the main road has been damaged, but the contractor acting on behalf of Northern Ireland Water has been either unaware of it or has ignored it. Has the Department taken any steps to ensure that when Northern Ireland Water is taking water supplies to rural communities, monitoring is carried out to check whether any damage has been done to any pipes on the roads? Last week, in my constituency — there has been a lot of it in the past while — severe damage was done, and some ladies'

houses were almost flooded. Aside from supplying the water, what does the Department do to monitor contractors and ensure that work is done properly?

The Minister for Regional Development: All utilities, including water, gas and telecommunications, disturb the road network to lay pipes, gain access to pipes or to fix things. There is a process by which approval is sought to do that. Utilities have the right to use the public roads network. However, there is a requirement on them to restore it to the state that they found it in. That is rigorously followed up, and I know that the Public Accounts Committee produced a report on that subject recently and made a series of recommendations. That will further strengthen the accountability of utilities. There is a requirement on NIW, or contractors acting on its behalf, to restore the roads to the state that they found them in. Roads Service will pursue that requirement.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister explain why connection costs for newbuilds in the countryside have increased significantly to, in many cases, four-figure sums? Will he explain that dramatic increase in such charges?

The Minister for Regional Development: Regulation 7 of the Water and Sewerage Charges Scheme Regulations 2007 provides for a reasonable cost allowance of around £2,000 for each property. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) supplements that allowance up to a maximum of £10,000 for properties constructed before 2000. That was increased from £6,500 in April 2009.

Connection charges are a necessary part of building in the countryside. The intention of the issue under discussion is to deal with properties in the countryside that have not had access to mains water supply for historical reasons. The level of charges put forward by NIW will have been tested by those who have a statutory obligation to test the policies: the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator. I presume that it meets with their approval. NIW would have to stand over that level of charges. A reasonable cost allowance is made available to people who wish to be connected. However, the cost can sometimes be prohibitive in the case of very isolated rural properties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

DRD: 2010-11 Budget

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assessment of how the proposed budgetary reductions for 2010-11, as outlined by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, will impact on his Department. (AQO 379/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Executive have not yet decided how the amount of any proposed budgetary reductions for 2010-11 would apply to my Department; therefore, I am not yet in a position to assess what impact that would have.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer; maybe we will have to speculate somewhat. There has been a suggestion of £370 million of savings for the Executive, £210 million of which have been set aside to cover the deferment of water charges. Will the Minister confirm whether £210 million will cover the full costs of the deferment of water charges for 2010-11, or will it cost nearer to £400 million?

The Minister for Regional Development: The figure of £210 million was part of the NIW business plan. The Member may be aware that there is a PC10 price control process going on between NIW and the Utility Regulator, which will end in a more accurate assessment of what is required in the next year to fully fund water and sewerage services. Within a number of weeks, we may have a more accurate figure than that of £210 million.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure us that any reduction in budgets or any effort by the Department of Finance and Personnel to reduce budgets will not in any way lead to the introduction of water charges for domestic properties?

The Minister for Regional Development: I have made my position very clear on a number of occasions: water charges should not be introduced. When they were first appointed, the Executive decided to defer the issue. Last November, they decided that it would be wrong to consider the issue for some time, given the economic climate. I subscribe to that commitment, and I am sure that the Member and his party do so as well.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure us that his Department is properly focused on securing an adequate budget for rural roads maintenance? Is that issue often raised in budgetary discussions?

The Minister for Regional Development: Yes; every Department raises the issues that it faces during budgetary discussions. The Member will be aware that we have recently commissioned a report that underpins what I have said many times, which is that the structural maintenance budget is underfunded.

Traditionally, the Department would receive a substantial allocation through the monitoring rounds, particularly towards the end of the year. Absorbing that funding would enable the Department to get a lot of work done between Christmas and the end of the financial year. Given that Departments' financial arrangements and spends are now better managed, very little money is being returned as part of the

monitoring rounds. Therefore, structural maintenance has suffered even more from a lack of top-up money.

The Snaith report that I commissioned, which Roads Service now has possession of, clearly underpins the argument that Roads Service and I have been making, which is that to continue to underinvest in structural maintenance will only store up greater problems in the roads network. The biggest asset that the Executive own is the roads network. I would argue very firmly that we need to maintain that asset.

3.15 pm

A29 Passenger Transport

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any discussions he has had with Translink about increasing the frequency of passenger services on the A29 route. (AQO 380/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not had discussions with Translink on the matter. In previous correspondence with the Member, I explained that it remains an operational matter for Translink. I understand that Translink's chief operating officer has written to the Member to explain that there is little evidence of sufficient demand to justify an increase in services on the A29 or a diversion of other services to that route.

Mr Armstrong: It seems that, all too often, Translink's idea of transport policy is to get people in and out of Belfast. Does the Minister agree that people who live along the A29, along with tourists and students of the University of Ulster at Coleraine, are entitled to a regular and reliable service along the Province's main north-south route?

The Minister for Regional Development: The purpose of public transport is not to get people in and out of Belfast. The purpose of public transport is to get people about their business without them having to use a private car. Public transport services in the North cover a vast, but largely rural, area, which means that some routes are underused. As with all other agencies and Departments, the figures in public transport must stack up. If people are not using a certain route and there is greater demand in another area, it makes sense to put public transport onto the routes where there is sufficient demand.

Translink has informed me that it assessed the A29 route and deemed that there is insufficient demand to justify an increase in services there. I am sure that some individuals who live along that route wish that the situation was different, but there must be an assessment of the number of people who will use the service. If there is not sufficient demand to justify a

service in a particular area, one would expect resources to be put into an area where there will be a greater return.

Mr I McCrea: I thank Mr Armstrong for submitting this question on an important issue. Given that the A29 is the main arterial route through my constituency, does the Minister agree that the rural perspective is most important in the provision of public transport? Will the Minister give a commitment to consider increasing rural transport provision, through his Department and Translink, to enable people to make connecting journeys via the A29?

The Minister for Regional Development:

There are Translink services on the A29, including Goldline service 278, which runs between Portrush and Monaghan, and Ulsterbus service 116, which runs between Coleraine and Magherafelt. However, Translink is not the only provider of rural transport systems.

I agree that we must provide rural transport, and I have been very supportive of the rural community transport networks that are in place. The Minister of Agriculture and I launched the Dial-a-Lift scheme last week. It will further improve public transport in rural areas and ensure that people are not isolated or left behind. The provision of public transport in rural areas is an important issue, but there is a question of which services are best suited to the sparser rural routes.

Lord Morrow: The Minister has touched on the question that I wish to ask about rural transport. Does the Minister meet Translink regularly to ascertain the current, and future, position on transport in rural communities? I hope that the Minister agrees that rural communities must be given due consideration in the drawing up of timetables and routes.

The Minister for Regional Development: I have regular meetings with Translink at which we discuss its services and operations generally. There must be consultation to ensure that local people know how to access whatever service is being provided. However, I am sure that the Member agrees that some services are underused, perhaps as a result of demographic changes. People may no longer live in a certain area, or there may have been more development elsewhere. Translink continually reassesses its services to ensure that it provides services where they are most needed. That is prudent, especially at a time of stretched budgets.

I agree that transport services for rural communities are very important and that rural communities must not feel isolated. Translink is not the only provider of transport in rural areas — there is also community-based transport provision — but all providers must assess which routes are underused and which routes they cannot economically justify placing a service on.

A5 Dual Carriageway

6. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Regional Development when contractors and designers will be appointed for the A5 road scheme from Aughnacloy. (AQO 381/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Provided that there are no challenges to the procurement process, it is expected that contractors will be appointed by the end of November this year to provide design advice and to construct the proposed dualling of the A5.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his brief answer. Will he outline what communications have taken place between his Department and the affected landowners and farmers about the A5 road scheme?

The Minister for Regional Development: This is a rather longer answer, so it should please the Member more.

There has been a high level of consultation with the public as the scheme has developed. The public suggestions and comments have been considered fully as part of the process. The public consultation events, which were attended by more than 5,400 people, were held in April 2008 to present the study area, in February 2009 to present the route options and in July 2009 to present the preferred route. The public have also used the A5 website and helpline widely.

A round of meetings involving staff from Roads Service, Mouchel, which is the scheme consultant group, and all affected landowners is coming to a close. Those meetings were arranged so that details of the land boundaries, the use of the lands and any other concerns could be discussed. A second round of meetings is proposed between December 2009 and February 2010 so that accommodation works and mitigation measures can be agreed with landowners. A third series of meetings will take place late in spring 2010 to finalise land-take details and vesting maps. Additional meetings will take place as required, particularly where alternative lines are being examined or land-use surveys are required. There will also be a formal consultation process in advance of the public inquiry, during which all affected parties and others may make comments on and lodge objections to the draft orders and environmental statements. Those comments and objections will then be heard at the public inquiry in 2011.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his reply. I know that he responded previously to this question, but, given the continuous constraints and pressures on budgets North and South, is the Minister still in a position to confirm that funding remains in place for the project?

The Minister for Regional Development: Yes. I had the opportunity to discuss the project again last week at the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting with my counterpart, Noel Dempsey. He again confirmed that the Dublin Government are still committed to the A5 project. Indeed, I think that we are trying to arrange an early payment, before the year is out.

Dr Deeny: My question has been answered partly, so I thank the Minister for his response. We keep hearing about a commitment from the Government in the South. Will the Northern Government confirm that the Northern sector of the A5 project will go ahead? How long will the project take? In what year is it likely to be completed?

The Minister for Regional Development: I have given that commitment on numerous occasions. If elected representatives continue to question it, they may create a degree of uncertainty about the project. On every occasion that we have been asked about it, the commitment from the authorities, North and South, has been restated and confirmed. That is still the case.

The intention is to hold a public inquiry in 2011. If there is a successful outcome to that inquiry, we want to be on the ground in 2012 and have the project completed in 2015.

Mr McFarland: In answer to a recent question for written answer from my colleague Lord Laird, the Secretary of State for Transport said that it was Government policy to build motorways on existing alignments rather than on new ones. Will the Minister explain why he has a completely different policy here? Is any money from the Northern Ireland Executive likely to be made available for the Northern part of the route?

The Minister for Regional Development: The simple answer is that I am not in the British Government, so their policy does not apply to me.

People have argued quite correctly for a high-speed, high-grade dual carriageway with grade-separated junctions and no central crossover. Putting that on the existing road, where there are perhaps more than hundreds of access points between Aughnacloy and Derry, would lead to huge disruption. Some houses have access to the road, so more than just small and minor roads and more substantial trunk roads would be affected.

The preferred route has been chosen after a very long examination of a number of routes, some of which were probably largely on line. The preferred route has been assessed using a range of indicators considered by Roads Service. The route is subject to further discussion and consultation and, in all likelihood, will be subject to a public inquiry and a subsequent inspector's report. I am not an engineer,

but I believe that the preferred route stacks up against the requirements put forward. However, that will be tested at public inquiry, when there will be ample opportunity for other arguments to be put.

A8 Dual Carriageway

7. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps his Department is taking to ensure that farmland will not be destroyed as a result of the dualling of the A8. (AQO 382/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The preferred route for the 14 km section of the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling scheme is predominantly an on-line improvement scheme that will, effectively, widen the existing roads to dual carriageway standard. However, there are two off-line sections — a 1.5 km section around the hamlet of Bruslee and a 3.4 km section to the west of Ballynure.

Roads Service appointed an agriculture consultant to assess the scale of the impact on farms affected by the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling scheme. Roads Service is committed to working with farmers to ensure that access to land is maintained and the impact mitigated, where possible, through accommodation works. One-to-one consultations with farmers to discuss the likely accommodation works are ongoing.

Dr W McCrea: Does the Minister accept that many of the recent routes for traffic that have been deemed preferred, for example, in my South Antrim constituency, have had little or no respect for the destruction of top-grade farmland, family farms and the general farming industry? Does he understand that there is great anger at what has happened in Bruslee and Ballynure? The community has no confidence in the survey that was done and an urgent rethink is being demanded. Will he allow those people to achieve that?

The Minister for Regional Development: Again, as with the A5, the process of selecting the preferred route involves a series of stages. There was consultation in Ballynure. I recollect that the response was largely 50:50 as to whether the route to the east or that to the west of Ballynure was chosen. I suppose everybody has their own issue, according to which piece of land is affected.

I accept entirely that building new roads through open country will impact significantly on farmland, as it has in my constituency with the Newry to Dundalk road and the continuation of the Newry bypass. In such cases, every effort should be, and is, made by Roads Service and the consultants that it employs to ensure that issues concerning land access and compensation are dealt with properly.

As I said, there was an assessment of on-line corridor options for Ballynure, one of which assessed widening the existing A8 through Ballynure. However, that was rejected, primarily due to the increased severance of the village, the impact there would be on residents during construction and traffic management issues for Ballynure, both during and after construction.

Whatever route is chosen, it will have a negative impact on some people. Those are the kinds of arguments that have to be weighed up in the process of selecting routes. Again, though, the A8 dualling will undergo consultation and end up in a public inquiry at which I am sure that the Member and those who object to the current proposals will have an opportunity to state their case.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. However, does he agree that the route through the centre of Ballynure, which virtually exists already, is the cheaper option? Does the Minister further accept that the preferred route does not take that into account and is the route that will destroy farms?

The Minister for Regional Development: Cost is not the only issue involved. There are about five different categories, including environmental and engineering, against which the options are scored. Economics is only one of them. Therefore, it is not simply a question of costs.

Putting a dual carriageway through the middle of a village will, obviously, have a very serious impact on that village by separating one side from the other. It can be seen that whatever route is chosen — through the middle of a village or through open farmland — competing demands must be weighed when a preferred route is being assessed. However, there is mechanism involved, which scores options against a range of indicators, and that is what has led to the preferred route in this case.

People who feel that the conclusion is wrong will have an opportunity to challenge it at public inquiry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 8 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Foyle

9. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Regional Development how Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water responded to the recent flooding in the Foyle area. (AQO 384/10)

3.30 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: NI Water has advised that between Friday 30 October and Sunday 1 November it received a total of 6 reports of flooding on private property in the Foyle area.

One report of internal flooding was received from Fallowlea Park, and five reports of external flooding were received — one each at Summerhill, Brae Head Road and Pennyburn industrial estate and two at Faughan View Park. NI Water contractors responded to each incident within its customer service target times of four hours for internal flooding and 24 hours for external flooding.

On Wednesday 4 November, at approximately 4.00 pm, officials in the Roads Service Derry office became aware of potential flooding in the area and, in a very short period of time, Roads Service received more than 50 telephone requests for assistance. Work was prioritised according to the degree of threat posed to the public and property. The normal after-hours workforce was supplemented by a further four supervisors, bringing the number of Roads Service personnel who were providing assistance to 20. When approached, the Rivers Agency immediately made two pumps available and, later, four officials. With respect to plant equipment, Roads Service deployed a gully emptier, a mini-digger, five lorries and a sweeper. The local Roads Service depot had 250 sandbags immediately available and a further 400 in reserve, supplemented by an additional 250 sandbags from the Rivers Agency. Approximately 200 sandbags were used on the day.

Roads Service continued its operations through the night until approximately 5.00 am on the morning of 5 November. All reported incidents were visited and appropriate action was taken. No domestic property was flooded as a result of the rainfall on 4 November.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Obesity

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 15 minutes in which to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on its inquiry into obesity; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in liaison with Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

Obesity is a major global public health problem and, in recent decades, there has been a significant rise in the number of overweight and obese people in many countries. In a number of major developed countries, including the United Kingdom and the USA, obesity rates have doubled in the past 25 years, and that relentless increase is predicted to continue for the decade ahead.

In 2005, the most recent health and social well-being survey in Northern Ireland found that 24% of adults are obese. That is almost a quarter of our population, which is very worrying. Even more worrying is data from the Northern Ireland Child Health System 2004-05, which found that 22% of children are either overweight or obese. However, there are some rays of hope. Updated assessments by public health scientists working for the National Obesity Forum suggest that the anticipated surge in the number of severely overweight children is now levelling off. I certainly hope that that is the case.

Obese children grow up to be obese adults, and they end up suffering chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, which robs them of vitality, limbs, eyesight and a long life. I would not wish that future for any child. Nevertheless, unless the trend is reversed, by 2050, Northern Ireland will be a mainly obese society, and the cost of that to the Northern Ireland Budget could be enormous. We already pay £500 million a year to cope with the problem. We have a ticking time bomb, which, if it is not tackled, could overwhelm the Health Service in Northern Ireland, as it could elsewhere in the world.

Many people have no idea that obesity poses such a serious risk. However, it is a condition that seriously shortens life by up to nine years and leads to other conditions such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and osteoarthritis. Indeed, one study has shown that

63% of heart attacks in the Western World are caused by obesity. Not only will the problem have an enormous impact on the health of our population, but it threatens to engulf the entire Health Service and will have a serious impact on society and the economy. Members of the obese generation could have a shorter lifespan than their parents, so there is a job to tackle here and now. The question is how.

I will now address a few of the report's recommendations that may help the Department to tackle obesity. In its research, the Committee was unable to find an example of a strategy that successfully dealt with the problems of obesity. However, in England, a new approach is being taken that focuses on the population as a whole. That approach is called Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives. It represents the first national population-wide strategy, and, though it is too early to assess its success, the Committee found its approach encouraging.

The reason why the Committee found that approach encouraging is that obesity levels have increased steadily over many years, and we believe that it will take a long-term response to reverse that trend. Starting the trend away from obesity will take a shift in the way that the population thinks. It is a shift similar to that which occurred in attitudes to drink-driving and smoking in public places. Those campaigns show that it can be done, and the Committee firmly believes that it must be done.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health has moved away from its Fit Futures initiative, which focused on tackling obesity in children and young people, to developing a whole life-course approach, similar to the Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives strategy in England.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that, already, many primary and secondary schools have embarked on very efficient methods of encouraging young people to steer away from the materials that would make them obese in later life?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Much work is being done by schools, but we are still left with the worrying situation of 22% of children being overweight.

In 2012, the London Olympics will be held. We are told that that will be a shining example of how to encourage fitness among young people and encourage a reduced intake of salts, sugar and fats. Yet who are the three main sponsors of the London Olympics? They are McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Cadbury. That is some example to set children.

In the Committee's report on the strategic direction that the Department should take in tackling obesity, we recommend that tackling obesity is not just a matter for

the Health Service. We recommended strongly that the new life course strategy be developed in partnership with other Departments, particularly the Department of Education, which refers to Mr McCarthy's point.

Let me expand on that. The Department of Education has a critical and central role. Though the Committee welcomed the action on nutrition that has been taken in schools, it would like PE to be made compulsory. When I was a child, many years ago — some time before the Boer War — PE was compulsory. That is no longer the case, and we need to return to that basic standard to ensure that at least some part of the curriculum is set aside for physical activity.

The Committee also recommends that the funding for the life-course strategy is ring-fenced for at least the first phase of implementation, to ensure that it is not impacted on by other emerging priorities.

Another key issue is the requirement for an immediate audit of the existing obesity-related initiatives. The Committee found that there was a plethora of programmes and initiatives on obesity. To some extent, that is good news because it shows that there is an understanding of the seriousness of the issue by a wide variety of agencies, including district councils, workplaces and charities. However, there is no central source of information on what programmes are available or how successful they have been. Therefore, as well as an audit of initiatives and the dissemination of good practice, the Committee recommends that the Regional Health and Social Care Board develops a range of evidence-based referral options for use by primary care practitioners.

The Committee also asks the Minister to undertake an urgent review of weight management services at all levels for adults and children, including the need for a dedicated obesity clinic and bariatric services for Northern Ireland. Severely obese people often require specialist services, not just in medical terms but with regard to transportation to hospitals, hoists for lifts in and out of bed and special seating. The number of severely obese people is expected to rise by around 5% annually, and bariatric surgery is increasingly used to treat the severely obese. However, there is a lack of funding for bariatric services in Northern Ireland, and it is not commissioned by health boards in the Province. Nevertheless, last year, £1.5 million was made available to allow some 120 people to travel to Great Britain for bariatric surgery. Trusts are looking at how to fund patients to travel to Great Britain, but we are aware that the Department has no plans to provide such surgery in Northern Ireland. That is an area that the Committee believes should be reviewed.

The Committee is also making recommendations on diet, exercise, healthy eating and food labelling. Diet and exercise are not the whole story, but they are major

contributors. Poor dietary habits and decreasing physical activity will become ingrained in much of our population, and it will take a strategic, long-term approach to change that. People are eating and drinking products that are high in saturated fat, sugar and salt. The Committee is glad to see that the Food Standards Agency is working with the industry to reduce the intake of salt and saturated fat, but more needs to be done. The Committee would like continuous pressure to be exerted at national and European level to introduce regulatory controls on the levels of salt and saturated fat in manufactured food. We also recommend that the Food Standards Agency and the Minister consider introducing clear and simple labelling based on the traffic light system in which red illustrates that a food has a high fat, sugar and salt content, amber has medium and green has low.

The Committee also acknowledged that there has been a shift towards larger portions, but academic opinion suggests that there is a link between portion size and weight gain. People seem confused about what a regular portion size is, and we recommend to the Department and the Food Standards Agency that they take a serious look at that issue.

As well as diet and healthy eating, exercise is an essential element to tackling obesity. Therefore the Committee welcomes anything that encourages exercise, particularly the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's draft 10-year strategy for sports and physical recreation. The Committee has concerns about possible delays in implementing the strategy and cannot emphasise strongly enough the need for a strategy to increase physical activity.

At its simplest, obesity can be explained as an imbalance between the amount that we eat and the level of exercise that we take. However, it is not as simple as that. There are many and varied environmental factors, from the accessibility and the marketing of food to transport, planning and other issues, which dissuade from physical exercise. All those issues are referred to as the obesogenic environment. Local government and every Department have a part to play in tackling the obesogenic — I do not like that word — environment, and we urge them to play their part.

There are links between obesity and health inequalities. People on lower incomes tend to buy more fast and processed foods and less healthy food, and, generally, they are less inclined to engage in regular exercise. In other words, research shows that the lifestyle of people on lower incomes is more likely to predispose them to obesity. Research also suggests that women tend to have a higher risk than men of obesity. The Committee strongly believes that the Department should take account of health inequalities and address the issue of greater obesity in areas of social deprivation.

I want to finish on a positive note. Small weight losses produce healthy gains; and research shows that even a modest reduction in weight of 10% can have a significant impact on a patient's health. We have been told that a 10% weight loss can reduce one's chances of getting type-2 diabetes and certain forms of cancer by 50%; therefore taking the issue seriously can produce quick gains for the public. We hope that the public will take heed and take heart from the impact that small changes in lifestyle can have on their health.

I thank the many groups that provided written and oral evidence to the Committee on this important issue. We were overwhelmed by the response to the trawl for evidence. In particular, I thank Dr Jane Wilde, the chief executive of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, who made a major contribution by chairing a research event on 19 May, which was one of the most important parts of the Committee's evidence-gathering programme.

This is the first Committee report that I have had the pleasure of introducing to the Assembly since I was appointed Chairperson, and, having lived with this document for the past four months, I have the greatest pleasure in commending it to the Assembly and recommending its support by the House.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Following the thanks offered by the Committee Chairperson, Jim Wells, I thank the people who helped me in my capacity as a Committee member. I thank the civil servants who provided help: those who attend Committee meetings now and those who attended previously. In fact, I see some of them in the Public Gallery. I also thank the previous Chairperson of the Committee, who is in the Chamber.

3.45 pm

The Committee Chairperson mentioned a number of the report's key points, but they are important enough to repeat. Obesity is a global health problem, and we hear about rising levels of obesity and numbers of overweight people. According to the most recent health and social well-being survey, carried out in 2005, 59% of adults were overweight or obese. That is a fairly high figure.

As far back as 2002, the Department's Investing for Health strategy estimated that by 2010, which is just around the corner, the cost of obesity to the Northern Ireland economy could exceed £500 million per annum. Whether that happens is a matter of conjecture, but it will soon be 2010, and some Departments, particularly the Department of Health, will be able to assess exactly what obesity is costing the economy. We cannot afford to lose any money foolishly.

What do we do about obesity? The Committee has finished its inquiry. However, it appears that no strategy in any country has been able to deal effectively

with the problem. We have had difficulties with our own strategies. The Committee was told that the Fit Futures initiative was, perhaps, not implemented in the way that it should have been and not properly signed off. I understand that the Department is embarking on a whole life-course strategy, which the Committee fully supports.

A number of Departments need to contribute to solving the obesity issue. The Department of Education is key because of its responsibility for physical education. I fully support the idea of young people doing a minimum of two hours' physical education a week. That has a positive effect on all sorts of issues: mental health, physical health and discipline, which is sometimes overlooked. Strategies from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Health Committee also matter.

The Committee raised the issue of eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. I admit that I was not sure about portion sizes or how much to eat. I raised that issue during a Committee visit to the Food Standards Agency, which outlined exactly what the portions should be. People might consider a small tomato a portion, but the Food Standards Agency said that it was not so easy to eat five portions. It may be more difficult for people who live in the countryside and do not have access to fresh fruit and vegetables in a shop, if they do not grow their own. Therefore, a number of simple actions should come out of the inquiry, and one is to look at that issue.

Another thing that I learned about during the inquiry was the obesogenic environment and the need to tackle it. That word refers to a situation in which everything is against a person doing the right thing. The Committee discussed what was happening in this Building and what could be done to make it a healthier place. I commend the improvements in the canteen. I am not saying that it was bad previously, but there have been improvements in the amount of fruit of vegetables on offer, and fruit is provided at Committee meetings.

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

Mrs McGill: I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: In supporting the motion, I draw the Assembly's attention to the fact that 60% of adults and one in five schoolchildren in primary 1 — those aged four and five — are overweight or obese. There is increasing evidence to show that the health impact of obesity is similar to that of smoking more than 10 cigarettes a day. Some people with underlying health conditions are more at risk when they are overweight or obese, most notably those with diabetes.

Anti-obesity drugs are costing the Health Service locally £2 million a year. However, the overall cost to

the economy has been estimated at £500 million a year, much of which relates to lost working days. I have never heard anyone work out the sums, but I often wonder how much the National Health Service would save down the line for every pound spent on reducing obesity, particularly among children. Health spending on obesity in the United States is about \$150 billion a year, and it has also been shown that the health spending on an obese person is \$1,400 a year more than the figure for a person of normal weight.

Much is already being done at a local level. I am the chairman of the board of governors of two primary schools that run breakfast clubs in order to encourage healthy eating. Children are dropped off at 8.00 am and have breakfast in school, as opposed to them bringing in sweet stuff to eat. The children plant apple trees, carrots, parsnips, beetroot and the like in the school grounds, and they take an amazing interest in a healthier lifestyle. We are on the right track in trying to overcome the problem. It is a matter of changing attitudes towards food for the long term.

It would be wrong for Members to debate the issue without making reference to the need for greater regulation of the food sector. The big food producers of cereal and the like have a vested interest in selling their products. Recently, however, there have been some horror stories about the contents of some breakfast cereals. Researchers have discovered that a 30 g bowl of Kellogg's cornflakes has more salt than a bag of Walkers ready salted crisps. The food industry is a big player and has huge amounts of advertising revenue at its disposal, and children are particularly vulnerable to advertising.

Any proper childhood anti-obesity strategy must also tackle the vexed issue of food labelling. Only last week, we heard from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the levels of childhood poverty in Northern Ireland were more than double those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Childhood poverty and bad diet often go hand in hand.

Although I welcome the Health Committee's report, I stress that it is only the beginning. I remind Members that we have started to tackle this problem in Northern Ireland long after every other part of the country.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion. I pay tribute to Research Services, the previous Clerk to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other staff and the groups who gave evidence to the Committee.

The extent of obesity in our society is very worrying. The Fit Futures strategy focuses on preventive measures among young people, offering a joined-up policy on physical activity. However, it has not been implemented and, therefore, has not yet yielded many positive results. The strategy must be evidence-based. The Chairperson of the Health

Committee referred to Dr Jane Wilde, and those who gave evidence at the session that she chaired spoke strongly about the need for evidence. There must be evidence that we are generating positive results, and we must ensure that money spent on health represents effective investment. We can only afford to go with what works.

The strategy must focus not only on promoting healthy lifestyle choices but on those who are not yet obese but are considerably at risk, with a BMI index of between 25 and 29. Research shows that, at that stage, even a small amount of weight loss has health benefits. Weight loss of 10% results in significant changes. What I am really saying is that we should try to prevent people from reaching the obese level, because it is dangerous for their health and costs the Health Service a fortune to send them across the water for bariatric procedures.

The report's recommendations are about encouraging people to take more responsibility for their own health and putting support in place to promote good nutrition and exercise. Most of us know how hard it can be to say no to a second piece of cake. It is difficult to change such habits, but we need to develop a strategy that deals with the issue in the long term so that to be overweight or obese is not considered the norm. Our new Public Health Agency has the lead responsibility for that strategy.

As has been mentioned, the Food Standards Agency has a big role to play in pushing for a clear and uniform labelling system akin to the traffic light system. The FSA must also work with the food industry to address the overload of salt, fat and sugar in foods.

Physical education in schools is essential if we are to instil early on in children habits that they can incorporate into their lifestyle and carry with them as they get older. That especially applies to young girls, who are sometimes less inclined to take up sports. Most young boys will kick a ball about the place and at least get some exercise that way, but we need to think more creatively about ways to encourage more participation, especially from girls. We should perhaps focus on less competitive sports and other disciplines such as dance, yoga or karate, which reap the health benefits and could bring some fun back into exercising. Primary-school children should also be encouraged to play outside, whether that be in the school yard, the garden or the park. We should perhaps consider skipping, tag and other games that we used to play a long time ago.

The health inequality gap means that the wealthier have recourse to much more enticing brands of healthier food. That makes it difficult for people on a very low income who are struggling to feed a family to do so healthily. They may have to resort to

cheaper brands that have a much higher sugar and fat content. The health inequality gap really needs to be addressed, because anything that I ever see on offer or very cheaply priced in the supermarket is rubbish and contains a great deal of fat, sugar and salt. Supermarkets need to be involved, because they have a social responsibility.

Obesity is one of the biggest challenges facing our health system and accounts for the steep increase in type 2 diabetes and heart disease. It also contributes to high blood pressure and some forms of cancer. The list of those diagnosed with those conditions is getting longer. Dr Ryan, when giving evidence to the Committee, said that, when he was training, type 2 diabetes was called maturity onset diabetes, and now he is seeing 18- and 19-year-olds presenting with it. I was heartened to hear recently that, according to research, the rate of childhood obesity may be beginning to slow in England, after the prediction for obesity levels for 2020 was revised.

Rather than pick up the pieces, we must work with the community, retailers, schools, the Food Standards Agency, the Public Health Agency and all health professionals to produce an all-encompassing strategy that deals with the root causes of obesity and with prevention and early intervention.

Dr Deeny: I also support the motion. Obesity is a societal problem; it is not a disease, but, as we have heard, it leads to very serious diseases. We should not medicalise obesity. It needs to be tackled by society as a whole, so we need to take a holistic approach, as has been said already, that involves communities and their representatives, such as politicians and policymakers. We need cross-government, cross-departmental involvement, and, as the Committee Chairperson said — I agree with him — education in health.

The consequences of obesity have already been mentioned, and those, of course, are medical.

Obesity has major health implications, and it is left to the Health Service, the Department and healthcare workers to pick up the pieces of that societal epidemic. Type 2 diabetes has already been mentioned, and ischaemic heart disease, hypertension, loco-motor and mobility problems can also result from obesity. The serious mental-health issues that affect people with obesity have not been mentioned, but those are important too.

4.00 pm

We all know that obesity decreases life expectancy and lessens the quality of life. Members who read the Committee's report will see that its theme is one of positive thinking and finding a positive way to deal with the issue of obesity. The media is important in sending out positive messages, including advertising. We must instil a positive attitude and mindset in people

with weight problems. That works much better than creating a negative attitude and mindset. That never works.

A focus on the negative consequences of obesity and other societal problems, such as alcohol abuse and cigarette smoking, never works. It terrifies people, and their behaviours do not change. We must be positive and focus on the great benefits of more exercise and healthy eating, rather than constantly reminding people that they may die younger. There is a danger of stigmatising obese people. If we were to start to play the blame game and people were made to feel that they were to blame for their weight problem, that would concern me. Were that to happen, people would be less likely to be motivated to do something about their obesity.

The report contains a number of interesting points, and I have picked three. I am glad that the Minister is in the Chamber. Paragraph 82 mentions the Healthwise scheme, through which appropriate physical activity is prescribed for individuals in primary care. That should be made available across Northern Ireland.

The need for clear and simple messages was mentioned. Paragraph 114 makes the point that correct food labelling is essential so that people can make the right health choices, and paragraph 120 calls for clarity on what constitutes five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. The report says that the public should be told exactly what that means, and there is currently much confusion on that issue.

The Chairperson referred to education. Some people say that one hour of physical exercise is needed each day, but schools are required by law to have at least two hours of PE a week. Of course, we want an educated population, but we do not want an educated and unhealthy population.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member agree that, although schools should be encouraged to make time for physical education and they would like to do so, there is little point in that if children pass a variety of fast-food outlets at lunchtime or on the way home from school? That negates everything that the school might have preached during the day.

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

Dr Deeny: I take the Member's comments on board, but that is no reason for not having the required level of physical activity in school. Obesity is a societal problem, and the fact that children do other things outside school does not mean that what schools do when kids are there is not important.

A community approach must be taken. That happens in France under a project called Ensemble, Prévenons l'Obésité des Enfants (EPODE). That is my attempt at speaking French for the day.

Mr Shannon: Was that "Del Boy" French?

Dr Deeny: Yes, I am afraid that it was. It means that together, we can prevent obesity in children. EPODE, which is referenced in the report, takes a holistic approach. It focuses not on obesity but on physical activity and healthy eating, yet its outcomes have a definite impact on obesity. I urge all Members to support the motion and the Committee's report.

Mrs I Robinson: I, too, thank my Committee colleagues, officials, and respondents to our inquiry; it proved to be a successful road to go down. Obesity causes great concern, not only in the Health Service, but in other areas of government. I support the motion on the obesity report and call on the Health Minister to read it and to act on its recommendations.

The Health Service exists to treat and to care for people; it also has a key role in disease prevention. In the long run, disease prevention saves the public service money; more important, it reduces the prevalence of diseases such as cancer, heart conditions and diabetes, which is particularly prevalent in obese people.

Obesity is a ticking time bomb. The Chairperson also used that terminology. Indeed, the point was made on many occasions in the Committee. During the past 25 years, obesity rates have doubled and continue to rise. In 2005, a health and well-being survey in Northern Ireland found that 59% of adults were either overweight or obese. Worryingly, 22% of children were found to be either overweight or obese. Those figures highlight the problem's seriousness — the figure for children is particularly alarming.

Obesity is generally preventable through healthy eating and regular exercise. However, I note the submission of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which suggested that:

"obesity should be understood in a wider context than simply a lifestyle choice concerning nutrition or physical activity. Obesity is often combined with issues of mental health, self esteem, isolation, family support and emotional wellbeing."

That demonstrates that the cause of obesity is not necessarily straightforward and can be closely linked to mental health; an issue on which I have long lobbied the Minister in the wake of the Bamford review.

Although the motion focuses on the Health Department, all Departments need to take note because they all have a part to play in reducing obesity. For several years, schools have implemented a healthy-eating strategy, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has developed a 10-year strategy for sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland.

As other Members said, criticism has been levelled at the Minister and the Department for not completing the Fit Futures implementation plan, which is aimed at children and young people. Despite being in the public

domain since 2007, the plan has not been implemented or formally signed off.

Instead, Northern Ireland has adopted the obesity strategy from the United Kingdom mainland, entitled 'Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives', which was launched in January 2008. The view of respondents who contributed to the report is that that strategy is not necessarily the correct approach because Fit Futures offers:

"a vision of joined-up policy on physical activity".

Respondents noted that although they believe that it is a good strategy, little has been done to implement it.

Tackling obesity now could save lives as well as money. In the United Kingdom, the 2007 Foresight report entitled 'Tackling Obesities: Future Choices' stated that:

"By 2050, 60% of males and 50% of females could be obese."

It also states that by 2050 obesity could add £5.5 billion to the annual cost of the NHS, with wider costs to society and business estimated to be £49.9 billion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mrs I Robinson: There are cost implications not only for our Health Service but for our economy and wider society. The report highlights the comments that were made by the representatives of the Institute of Public Health, who told us that:

"The loss of productivity and the costs of care and treatment of obesity and related conditions have serious effects on the economy and threaten to engulf the health service."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mrs I Robinson: They went on to say that:

"Obesity is estimated to cause 450 deaths per year, £14.2 million in lost productivity and £90 million cost to health and social care."

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I dare say that if I announced an initiative in the House today that would put £500 million into the Northern Ireland economy every year in these difficult economic times, it would be a stop-press moment. Headlines would be written on the subject, and it would be a cause of significant celebration. However, is it not the case that the Department's Investing for Health strategy informs us that the outlay for addressing obesity will not only hit that unwelcome target of £500 million but will exceed it? Something must be done. Failure to tackle obesity is simply not an option. I do not want to overuse that statement, but it is apt for the matter in question.

I endorse the maxim that prevention is better than cure. The problem of obesity is a global one. The report contains two major strands aimed at addressing the problem: prevention and weight management. Let

us apply ourselves principally to the cost of obesity, which is not an economic one but, rather, the health and well-being of our people. We are talking about serious and complex health issues that have life-threatening implications.

Why do I say prevention? Consider for a moment what is next for severely obese patients when lifestyle and drugs interventions have been unsuccessful: surgery. After that come lifelong medical follow-up treatments. It should set alarm bells ringing in the House that, for those who are obese, there is something of a famine of primary and secondary services. For those who are obese but who have not reached a severe enough level, we need to look to service delivery to see how further weight gain can be reduced.

Let us think financially for a moment. Is it not the reality that some 50,000 of our people meet the eligibility criteria for surgery? Let us take a financial reality check: the cost of surgical treatment and the necessary follow-up per 1,000 patients is between £10 million and £15 million. Multiply that by 50 to get a real sense of the financial implications for our Health Service.

The message must go out from the House today that in terms of health a little bit of weight loss goes a long way in terms of health. As other Members said, a weight loss of as little as 10% can deliver a significant improvement in health.

It is impossible to give due regard to a 46-page report that contains some 24 recommendations; therefore let me highlight some of them when commending the entirety of the document. Let us place PE at the core of redressing the situation. PE is integral to our children's education, and it is important to remember that one in four of our children is overweight or obese. To use an appropriate metaphor, it is time that the Department of Education stepped up to the plate to deliver two hours of compulsory PE a week. Furthermore, to show our determination in that regard, let us utilise the Education and Training Inspectorate to audit the situation.

On a national, and, indeed, European platform, let us punch at our weight in ensuring adequate controls over salt and saturated fat when manufacturing foods. Although many of us have heard the message about five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, are we confident that the exact proportions are easily understood? I think not, so let us clarify the message.

I urge employers to join in promoting the healthy lifestyle message, in promoting healthy eating in the workplace, and in asking themselves how they can promote exercise in the workplace. After all, it is an investment in the future of their staff.

Policymakers must likewise look at the considerable effect that obesity has on our society. Is it not time that

we also consider obesity-proofing our policies and include it as a real proofing exercise in all new policies?

The Minister must also go further. It falls to him to go beyond merely registering obese patients to raising his horizons to the national level and move to the introduction of quality and outcomes framework points for positive obesity management.

4.15 pm

The life course strategy is key to tackling obesity and although I do not underestimate the almost infinite pressure on finite health resources, to deliver that strategy we must put our money where our mouth is by ring-fencing the resources for that, at least for the initial period of three to five years. Trust me when I say that that will be money well spent.

In conclusion, I highlight the need for professionals in the primary-care sector to have a range of evidence-based referral options provided for them. That is a matter to which the Department and the Regional Health and Social Care Board should apply themselves. They can no longer pay lip service to addressing obesity, because tinkering at the margins will not meet that need. The report goes a long way to being part of the solution to the obesity problem. I place on record my thanks to the Committee staff for all their efforts in producing the report. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, but I wish to reflect on another issue as well as obesity. Other Members spoke about the issue of obesity because of the report that is before us today; however, I wish to talk about obesity and lifestyle choices, particularly in respect of their links to diabetes.

I declare an interest as a diabetic, and Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you, too, are diabetic. One of the problems with obesity is its link to diabetes. The figures for the number of people with diabetes are horrendous. Some 65,000 adults are diagnosed as having diabetes. Since 2008, the number of cases has increased by 7%, and since 2005, it has increased by some 26%. More than 1,000 children in Northern Ireland have diabetes. I know that not all diabetics, certainly not those with type 1 diabetes, have the condition because of their eating habits. However, all type 2 diabetics —

Mr Wells: I must emphasise that there is absolutely no link between obesity and type 1 diabetes. However, the percentage link between obesity and type 2 diabetes is as high as 80% or 85% and that is clearly the issue. No health choices can influence whether someone develops type 1 diabetes.

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

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is exactly the point that I made, and I thank him for confirming that. It is clear that type 2 diabetes is caused by lifestyle choices, stress and anxiety, and by eating and snacking on certain foods.

I am encouraged by most of the comments about the report, which provides some background information on diabetes. Prevention now will mean better health and less cost later, and cost is another important factor. Of the NHS's annual budget, which is approximately £400,000 million, 10% is spent on treating people with both types of diabetes. Therefore, I am keen that we address the issue of prevention at an earlier stage so that there will be better health and less cost later. I know that that is what the Minister and the Assembly want to do.

The efficiency framework that is in place is not to the satisfaction of those who are involved in diabetes care. In addition, I do not believe that there is enough effective, structured education about diabetes. We must address those issues at an early stage to ensure that diabetes does not become a scourge later on. I know that the Minister is supportive of that principle. My colleague Iris Robinson said that obesity is a time bomb, but so is diabetes. Minister McGimpsey has said previously that he wants to prevent the Health Service from being overwhelmed by diabetes within 20 years. Where is the framework to ensure that that happens? We need to have that in place and address those issues early on.

Last week, the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, had the opportunity to look at that issue in its discussions about the report on 'The Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland'. That report draws attention to practice in Australia, where targets for tackling the prevention of diabetes have been established. I asked why, having acknowledged the importance of targets, our Health Department is not following Australia's good lead. I believe that it should be.

I also believe that a diabetes screening programme is needed. The Department's approach is to focus on high-risk groups, but it should be looking beyond that to ensure that the approach is structured and systematic. Although I commend the Committee's report and support it in its totality, I ask the Minister and, perhaps, the Committee, which endorses and supports it, to address the scourge of diabetes.

In the report, Dr Naresh Chada from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is quoted as saying that:

"we could have another 10,000 to 15,000 people with diabetes in Northern Ireland by the early to middle part of the next decade."

Those figures are worrying, and we should focus on them.

Mr McQuillan: I support the motion.

The 2008 annual report from the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Dr Michael McBride, states that:

“Levels of obesity in children and adults in Northern Ireland continue to be a major health concern. Recent surveys indicate that around one in four girls and one in six boys in Primary One are overweight or obese, and that almost 60% of all adults measured are either overweight (35%) or obese (24%). They also found that around 30% of young men and women aged 16-24 are either overweight or obese.”

In other words, one in five adults and one in three children has a weight problem.

At the Northern Ireland Health Economics Group’s conference, which was held on 16 October, Mr Rob Phillips from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) reported that obesity is estimated to be costing the NHS £4.2 billion each year, and that cost is forecast to more than double by 2050. The cost to the wider economy is estimated to be £16 billion each year, and that is predicted to rise to £50 billion each year by 2050 if left unchecked.

What is being done? First, the Fit Futures initiative, which aims to reduce obesity in children, was established by the ministerial group on public health in 2006 and implemented in 2007. Secondly, a joint public service agreement target was put in place to halt the rise in childhood obesity by 2010. That has since been expanded to include adults. Thirdly, in 2008, DHSSPS set up the obesity prevention steering group, and it is working on an obesity prevention strategic framework, which is due for publication in 2010. Furthermore, in 2009, the Health Committee undertook its inquiry into obesity.

Although all of that work is welcome, there is a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of such interventions in reducing obesity levels. The recent Change4Life media campaign cost £75 million, and previous media campaigns have been costly and largely ineffective. The concept of communicating risk about unhealthy lifestyle behaviours has not led to significant modification. Our population is getting bigger: the ‘Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey 2005/06’ found an overall increase of 26% in adult obesity in Northern Ireland since 1997.

According to a report released in July 2009 by the Trust for America’s Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, such policies are failing in America. The report states that adult obesity rates increased in 23 states and did not decrease in a single state in the past year and that the percentage of obese or overweight children is at or above 30% in 30 states. The report calls for obesity prevention and control to become a high priority in healthcare reform, which I very much support.

The increase in the weight problem is such that current resources are overstretched and cannot adequately address the need for professional intervention. For example, the Northern Ireland Audit Office recently published a report stating that over 62,000 people in Northern Ireland, of which I am one, have type 2 diabetes. Some 20,000 people are unaware that they have the condition, and it is predicted that 81,000 people will have it by 2015. Type 2 diabetes is a condition that is reaching epidemic proportions.

Diabetes is one of the most costly and burdensome chronic diseases of our time; treatment of diabetes takes £1 in every £7 spent on healthcare in Northern Ireland. In 2005-06, £43.7 million was spent on diabetes treatment, excluding primary or community care, personal or social care and outpatient services. It is estimated that 10% of the NHS annual budget goes on treating diabetes. The increase in its prevalence is largely explained by the rising trend in obesity.

Obese patients are seen at a diabetic clinic where the focus is on blood sugar control, blood pressure and cholesterol levels, with weight being a secondary consideration. Often, conventional models of weight reduction are not sufficiently effective to impact on life expectancy or healthcare costs, as they rely on brief, opportunistic interventions. Such a service is not adequate or appropriate.

Obesity is strongly associated with raised blood pressure and cholesterol. Twenty-one percent of heart disease cases can be attributed to excess weight or obesity, and heart disease is the leading cause of death in patients with type 2 diabetes. Given that weight has an impact on patients’ life expectancy that is similar to that of smoking, high blood pressure or high cholesterol, why do we not have the necessary resources and skills to help them to manage their weight?

Leading healthcare professionals are calling for lifestyle management to become part of healthcare provision. Weight loss is one of the few interventions that may result in increased life expectancy for many patients. Research has constantly shown that effective weight reduction can, over three years, prevent 58% of overweight individuals from developing diabetes.

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

Mr McQuillan: In the UK, 26% of total prescribing costs are attributed to complications experienced by overweight or obese patients. There is plenty more that I could say on the subject; however, I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the Committee’s report on its inquiry into obesity. Members have devoted considerable time and effort to compiling the report and to ensuring that the issue

of obesity remains at the forefront of public interest. The report contains 24 recommendations, and, I am pleased to say, my Department has either addressed, or is considering, all the issues that it raises.

Obesity is a complex issue, the scale of which should never be underestimated. Often, it has been referred to as a time bomb and, in 1997, the World Health Organization described obesity as a global epidemic. In Northern Ireland we are facing significant problems: obesity rates have tripled over the past 20 years, and it is estimated that obesity causes 450 deaths each year.

Being obese reduces life expectancy and can lead to considerable health problems; significantly, the risk of developing the biggest killer diseases, coronary heart disease and cancer. Obesity also increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and can lead to depression and lack of self-esteem.

Obesity levels are rising at an alarming rate, particularly among children. Recent surveys indicate that around one in four girls and one in six boys in primary 1 are overweight or obese and that almost 60% of adults measured are overweight or obese. That is clearly a matter that we must address if we are to protect people from the serious health problems that are associated with obesity and ensure that our Health Service does not have to face the additional burden that that will place on services.

Such high rates of obesity bring with them a considerable cost to our society, which, in today's difficult economic climate, is becoming increasingly unaffordable. In 2003 and 2004, following a House of Commons Health Committee inquiry, a Foresight report estimated the cost of obesity as £3.7 billion a year.

In Northern Ireland, obesity results in the loss of 260,000 working days each year and costs the economy around £500 million. However, it is not just about the cost to our society; it is about the cost to people's health and the impact that obesity has on their lives and that of their families. That is why it makes sense to invest in preventing obesity and in helping people to change their lifestyles for the better.

Much progress has been made in tackling childhood obesity, and it is encouraging that, already, there appears to be some levelling off in the rise of obesity among P1 children. As a result of the Fit Futures task force, we now have programmes such as the healthy breaks initiative. As well as working to ensure that there is healthier school food for children, further progress has been made in making sure that food labelling is clearer, that there are tougher restrictions on the advertising of food that is high in fat and sugar, and that physical activity levels in schools improve.

Following the Foresight report, there has been increasing interest in obesity and an acknowledgement

that we should be focusing on the whole population and not just on children. In February 2008, my Department established the obesity prevention steering group. Initially, that group was established to drive forward the Fit Futures programme, and, latterly, it began work on the development of an obesity prevention strategic framework that targets the whole population.

I note and agree with the report's view that obesity is not just a health issue. From the outset of the debate, Members have accepted that the issue is not specific to my Department; it is cross-departmental and cross-governmental.

4.30 pm

Work on developing the strategic framework continues based on the life-course approach and tackling what is now described as the obesogenic environment. That means that we will be looking at ways to improve lifestyle and the physical health of the entire population. Following full public consultation, the framework should be launched in June next year.

As we all know, it is one thing to develop a strategy, but how the strategy is implemented is crucial. I believe that we are now in a position to make a major difference, thanks to the creation of the Public Health Agency. I established the agency specifically to ensure that strategies and policies were delivered and implemented at ground level. The key strength of the Public Health Agency is that it is uniquely placed to co-ordinate and deliver health improvements to the Northern Ireland public at both the regional and, through effective partnership working, the local level. The local partnerships will also include councils, because I am convinced that we should harness the skills and knowledge of local people in delivering initiatives to the local population.

I have already referred to the costs of obesity to our society. I am particularly concerned about the cost to the Health Service on the part of individuals who have made unhealthy lifestyle choices. Everyone in Northern Ireland has a responsibility in respect of lifestyle issues such as alcohol and smoking. In the end, individuals make decisions on their own lifestyle. It is essential that they make the right choices and that the Government provide the information and help that they need to do that.

Obesity has a clear link with another issue that I am determined to tackle: health inequalities. Those are associated with a wide range of social determinants, including poverty, unemployment, poor education and poor housing. The same determinants impact on individuals' opportunities and choices on healthy eating and physical activity. Tackling health inequalities is an issue that I have tasked the Public Health Agency with addressing urgently.

Although the main focus of the report is on prevention, it also highlights the important issue of obesity management and treatment. Weight-management programmes may be delivered in a variety of settings. Examples elsewhere illustrate the important role that can be played by a range of public services, including the leisure services provided by local councils and, in the health sector, primary and community care services.

We must recognise that the management of obesity can be challenging. Bariatric surgery may be considered for patients for whom a dietary approach has been unsuccessful. The management of bariatric patients is complex and involves not just surgery, but extensive support from a range of professionals before and after surgery. In particular, dietary management after surgery requires specialised support to avoid complications. There is strong clinical evidence to suggest that patient outcomes, including risk of death and post-operative complications are best treated in specialist units that perform a large number of procedures each year.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Before the Minister moves away from the subject of bariatric services, I note that there is a school of thought that says that a sufficient number of people from Northern Ireland are having such treatment to warrant consideration of locating a clinic dedicated to such services at one of the acute hospitals in the Province. We send 120 patients across the water each year at a cost of £1.5 million. Surely, we are getting to the stage where it would be better to provide that service in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, we have a budget of £1.5 million to deal with the number of people who come forward for such services; currently, that is 150 suitable patients per annum. That level of activity means that it would not be cost effective to establish a dedicated clinic for such surgery here. The advice that I receive is that, because the procedure is very complex and there is a risk of death and post-operative complications, patients are best treated in specialist units that perform large numbers of procedures each year. Access is travel.

Against that, the Chairperson advanced the argument that we provide that service locally. At the minute, we are not at the point of being able to develop a dedicated stand-alone service in Northern Ireland.

Primary care in Northern Ireland continues to make a positive contribution to identifying and supporting patients with obesity through an enhanced service that has been delivered by GP practices. Since 2006, I have invested £3.2 million in primary care to assist patients

specifically in managing their weight through the provision of advice and guidance and referral to appropriate opportunities for sport and leisure. That is exactly what happens in the Grove Wellbeing Centre in Belfast, which brings together high-quality health, social care, leisure, lifestyle and lifelong learning services to its customers.

The report specifically talks about resources. Last year, my Department allocated £1.6 million to prevention. Additional long-term investment is needed in that area, and I intend to discuss that matter with the Executive.

Obesity is a key public health issue that we always have addressed, and will continue to address, as a matter of urgency. I welcome the Committee's interest in the matter, and we will respond to each recommendation in more detail in due course. I recognise the long-term cost to our society that will ensue if we do not halt the rise in obesity. As I said, we are having some initial success with P1 children. In fact, when I took up my ministerial post, one of the first things that I said to the House was that my advice suggested that, if we do not take steps to address it, the Health Service in Northern Ireland will be overwhelmed by type 2 diabetes within 20 years. I listened carefully to that advice and followed up on it, not only through the Fit Futures policy, which I inherited, but through the obesity prevention steering group, which is overseeing the implementation, and through a new overarching 10-year obesity prevention strategic framework.

Furthermore, I am specifically addressing obesity issues across the whole population. We have included diabetes as a key anchor of the new cardiovascular framework. To date, I have included the development and implementation of the Healthy Breaks initiative, which, combined with food-in-schools policy, will ensure healthier school food for children. I have also established the Public Health Agency, which I believe will be the main driver to address issues such as health inequalities. Members mentioned Dr Jane Wilde of the Institute of Public Health, who plays an important role. The Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland will play a crucial role in the future.

Prevention is better than cure. We must work through GPs and primary care, and invest in primary care, to address those issues with patients. Other UK health Departments are reviewing what our Department is doing for obesity under our long-term condition management enhanced service with a view to introducing similar measures. We are far from complacent. How to get the message to local communities is always the issue. We should use local people to help local people. That is the key issue for the Public Health Agency. It must also address health inequalities. People who live in disadvantaged communities or in poverty are more likely to face such

challenges than people who live in more affluent areas. The Public Health Agency and the Department are driving progress on those issues.

Sadly, the Public Health Agency, which was established on 1 April, immediately faced the huge challenge of swine flu. Therefore, Members are not seeing its activity properly as yet. However, it is working away, and that activity will become more apparent in the future.

The Department will carefully consider the recommendations in the Committee's report, many of which we are taking forward already. We will consider all ideas and proposals, and all suggestions are more than welcome.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for taking part in the debate and I thank the Minister for his response. Obesity is a major issue, and the Committee has undertaken a very valuable piece of work. We expect that our report will influence the Department's thinking and policy development, and I welcome the Minister's comments on that.

Obesity is pivotal not just because it is a major health issue that is central to the quality of life of our population but because of the major financial implications that many Members have highlighted. Last week, Members had an extensive debate on finance and efficiencies in the Health Service. The potential cost of obesity to the Health Service dwarfs the efficiencies that were discussed during that debate, and we have heard today that, as predicted by the Investing for Health strategy back in 2002, unless trends are reversed, obesity will cost the Health Service £500 million a year. Much of that potential expenditure can be saved if we can reverse the trend.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Obesity must be tackled. We have no choice, if we are to have an affordable Health Service and if our population is to have good quality of life. We need to invest now in order to save later. Many Members spoke about how obesity is tackled, including the development of the new life course strategy, the lack of implementation on the Fit Futures initiative, and the need for a partnership approach with other Departments, particularly with the Department of Education, given its role in providing physical education in schools. We are aware that physical education is part of the curriculum, but the number of hours a child spends in physical education each week is not compulsory. That is a key measure that the Department of Education can take forward.

Other Departments also have a role. The Department for Regional Development has a role to play in promoting the Sustrans Safe Routes to School scheme,

so that children will have safer routes by which to walk to school. Members referred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's sport and physical recreation strategy, a 10-year strategy that is sitting somewhere in the Department. That strategy needs to be published and actioned.

There is a role for the Department of the Environment through local government and the availability of leisure services. Again, the key issue is to ensure that people can afford the services offered. OFMDFM also has a key role to play in tackling health inequalities and poverty. Members will agree that those living in poverty are affected by any health problems disproportionately and seem to be predisposed to obesity. Many Members referred to those issues, and there will be consensus that a strategy to tackle obesity is required quickly and must be cross-departmental.

Another theme that has emerged in the debate today is the requirement for an immediate audit of existing obesity-related initiatives, such as the dissemination of local good practice and a central database of projects with standardised evaluation tools. Dr Deeny mentioned the Healthwise scheme, which is a 12-week exercise programme in which people are referred to their leisure centre. That is a fantastic example, but the problem is that it is not consistent and it is not available across the board. Those examples of good practice need to be implemented in all areas. They need to be consistent and measurable, because we need to know whether people are achieving something through them. The Committee hopes to see an audit of initiatives and the dissemination of that good practice across the board.

The other clear theme was weight management, the need for dedicated obesity clinics, and the possible provision of bariatric services. Many Members referred to bariatric surgery, which is not being delivered locally. People requiring it must travel to receive it. Those who live in the North should be able to benefit from this life-saving, life-changing treatment. They need to be able to access that surgery in local hospitals. Everyone agrees that local care, and more particularly, follow-up care, is best delivered locally. Bariatric surgery should be no exception. The Chairperson of the Committee referred to the number of people referred to England for that surgery, which costs the Health Service £1.5 million a year. Given that we are expected to see a 5% year-on-year increase in the level of obesity, and subsequently the number of people who may need to access that service, we need to plan for the future.

The Committee is also making a series of recommendations around diet and exercise, which some Members referred to. Diet and exercise are not the whole story. They are major contributors, but we need to look at the "whole life" approach. There needs

to be a major shift in thinking and a major change in how society and communities behave.

People must take more personal ownership of, and individual responsibility for, their health. We must analyse the root causes of ill health. I urge the Minister to bring forward the review of the Investing for Health strategy as a matter of urgency. There is strong evidence to indicate that people living in food poverty almost always have a diet that predisposes them to the risk of obesity, and we must take that seriously.

4.45 pm

I will now refer to Members' contributions. Claire McGill pointed out that no country has a strategy that we can look to as an example of best practice. Therefore, the Assembly has an opportunity to lead the way in bringing forward a strategy that other places can look to as best practice. She also referred to the good example that is set by the Assembly's canteen facilities.

Samuel Gardiner mentioned the rising levels of obesity and the cost of anti-obesity drugs to the Health Service every year. He referred to local good practice and outlined the need for a more consistent, whole-population approach. Mr Gardiner also said that people can be confused easily about the levels of salt, sugar and fat in their diets and about what is good for them and what is not. Clear, transparent, consistent front-of-package labelling is needed. A traffic-light system would be perfect, because it would enable busy people to see easily what food is healthy when they are doing their shopping. If a label has more green boxes than those of any other colour, people will know that that food is healthy.

Carmel Hanna pointed out the need to ensure that money is spent effectively and to focus on people who are in danger of becoming obese, as well as those who are obese already. We must tackle the problem of obesity at its root cause. She also talked about the role of sports, and she said that young girls are less inclined to take up sport, particularly competitive sport. Sport NI told the Committee that such activity is not all about competitive sport and that we must encourage recreational sport. Mrs Hanna also referred to the role that the food industry and retailers play in deciding on portion sizes, labelling, and so on.

Dr Deeny said that people are not always aware of obesity's associated health risks, such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and an increased risk of some cancers. Action Cancer told the Committee that obesity can lead to an increased risk of uterine, cervical and ovarian cancer. The statistics about that are worrying, but people do not generally associate those illnesses with obesity. Dr Deeny went on to talk about avoiding getting into a blame game or attaching

a stigma to obesity. We must be very conscious of the need to avoid that.

Iris Robinson gave some startling statistics that I must repeat. Some 25% of children are either obese or on their way to being obese, and 60% of adults are obese or overweight. Obesity is a global problem that we must tackle now. Mrs Robinson also outlined the need for all Departments to get involved, and she said that they all have a role to play.

Alex Easton said that failure to tackle obesity is not an option, and he referred to the weight-management services. The Committee is calling for a review of those services so that people are supported in their endeavours to lose weight. Mr Easton also mentioned the role that employers can play in promoting healthy lifestyles at work. We have a long way to go to tackle the problem, but this debate is a good step forward. The Committee is committed to working with the Minister so that the matter can be progressed.

Jim Shannon said that he is a diabetic, and he made the link between obesity and type 2 diabetes. He said that the number of people who are presenting with type 2 diabetes is increasing rapidly, and he referred to the need for a service framework to tackle diabetes properly.

Adrian McQuillan talked about how the Chief Medical Officer's report highlighted the danger of obesity and the lack of evidence to support the work of various programmes. Therefore, more evidence must be gathered to guide the way forward.

I thank the Minister for welcoming the report and for his commitment to working with the Committee in taking forward the 24 recommendations. I welcome his comments that it makes sense to invest in services. I also welcome the fact that some progress has been made. However, we must work together to make more progress in tackling this epidemic.

I agree with the Minister's reference to the positive role that the Public Health Agency plays. That agency has hit the ground running in dealing with swine flu, but it has a key role to play in tackling obesity, and it is best placed to deliver co-ordinated services and a co-ordinated approach.

The Minister also talked about health inequalities. We cannot get away from those. There are social determinants of ill health, and we must tackle the fact that people who live in socially deprived areas have poorer health than those who live in other areas.

In conclusion, no one in the House disagreed with the fact that obesity is a global public health issue. There is no getting away from the fact that obesity costs the Health Service a colossal amount of money. We must invest now so that we will save in the future.

I echo the Minister's words that prevention is better than cure. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on its inquiry into obesity; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in liaison with Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

EU Fisheries Council

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the proposals submitted by the EU Fisheries Council to reduce fish quotas and days at sea; acknowledges that Irish sea stocks were fished in a sustainable manner during the past year; expresses concern in relation to the implications for the fishing industry should these proposals be adopted; calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to meet with the United Kingdom Fisheries Minister ahead of the Council meeting to convey the importance of these negotiations with regard to the future viability of the Northern Ireland fishing fleet; and calls on the Minister to participate personally and directly at the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council, to ensure that these proposals are rejected.

Every autumn, our fishermen look forward to the December EU Fisheries Council meeting more in fear and trepidation than in hope. The future of fishing for the next 12 months is determined at that meeting. The industry will look back on the autumn of 2009 with particular concern because of several things that have already happened. During October, the European Community forced a new control regulation, which is Europe's fisheries enforcement tool, through the Fisheries Council. Later this month, it hopes to force the new technical conservation regulation through the council. Of course, the December council meeting, at which the quota regulations for 2010 will be agreed, is also to come.

Every year, industry commentators believe that the situation cannot get any worse. Unfortunately, things do get worse for our fishermen year in, year out. The autumn is plagued by concerns that the December council meeting will be a disaster for the industry. The ill-thought-out rules, as well as containing known problems, are polluted with many more hidden problems that come to light only later in the fishing year. Some 12 months ago, the regulation on long-term cod recovery was agreed against the advice of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Therefore, in the months that lie ahead, our fishermen are justified in fearing and expecting that the meeting will not work to their advantage.

Earlier this year, the European Commission launched its latest review of Europe's common fisheries policy. At the outset, it seemed to promise much, with a key point being the potential for a decentralised fishing policy for regions such as the

Irish Sea. However, in light of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, even were regionalisation of the new common fisheries policy possible, our fishing industry is asking what will be left to manage in the Irish Sea should the European Community's latest quota proposals be approved.

I pay tribute to our fishermen, who do a marvellous job in harvesting a catch for the Northern Ireland industry and for those who enjoy eating fish. Week in, week out, they do what is probably one of the most dangerous jobs in these islands. I say that against the background of two serious incidents involving local fishing vessels, one in Belfast Lough and one not so long ago in Warrenpoint. In the latter incident, two fishermen were quite seriously injured.

Fishing is the most dangerous civilian occupation, which is too easily forgotten as we enjoy our fish supper or whatever other food that has been harvested for us. Despite the dangers and often pitiful reward for their endeavours, our fishermen have proven resistant to a whole series of crises. Despite the problems, our fishermen constantly search for the light at the end of the tunnel. Each year, however, European Commission regulations and restrictions are piled on the industry, and that light, instead of becoming brighter, becomes dimmer.

Indeed, our First Minister recently described the local agrifood sector as one of the jewels in Northern Ireland's crown. I, along with many Members who represent fishing villages and communities, contend that that could still be said of our fishing industry. It is a jewel but one that is in grave need of repair and TLC. That attention must be given, and given at leadership level, primarily by our politicians.

A sense almost of depression sometimes descends when we begin to discuss our fishing industry. The news always seems to be bad. Some pessimistic commentators would try to tell us that there is nothing worth saving. However, we need to send out a very strong message that the industry is not only worth saving but is vital to many parts of our community and to many villages up and down our coast. The fishing industry must be preserved.

There has been much good news as well, and our fishermen have done a great deal of work with the Department to ensure that the new rules and regulations are properly obeyed and honoured in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law. During the year, DARD has also been busy administering the hardship payments that the Executive agreed. Many fishermen greatly appreciated that aid, and it was widely welcomed. I trust that the Minister will reassure the House that all those payments have been processed.

I will now get to the nub of the issue. The European Community wants to inflict a 50% cut in our quota on

prawns, the most important species that we harvest. That announcement during the summer triggered the usual roller coaster of deep concern among the entire industry, followed by rumour, counter-rumour and proposals from the European Commission.

According to its own rules, the European Commission should not cut the prawn quota by any more than 15%, which, although totally unjustifiable, would have been bad enough. However, a few weeks ago, the European Commission proclaimed that it would seek a 30% cut in the quota. Why? It said that the stock was being overfished and that it was being done for the sake of consistency with the harvest rule that was developed for the prawn industry in the North Sea. Not the Irish Sea. It is nonsense to apply that rule to the harvest from the Irish Sea.

The Commission claims to favour regional management, yet it imposes rules on our fishermen in the Irish Sea that have been developed for fisheries in the North Sea. Although on the one hand it offers some hope that our Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) fishery scientists can provide expert local evidence to challenge Europe's diktat, it should not be a surprise that fishermen have asked the Committee what the point is of having and paying for local fishery scientists when their advice is ignored by those who are supposed to take it.

The facts speak for themselves. The Northern Ireland prawn fleet landed a record number of prawns from the Irish Sea in 2009. As well as meaning hundreds of jobs on local trawlers, those landings have helped to sustain more than 700 onshore jobs among scampi processors and prawn exporters. They have helped to sustain local villages, traditions and livelihoods.

The evidence from our fishermen is supported by AFBI scientists, whose underwater camera surveys of the fishing beds indicate an 8% increase in the Irish Sea stock this year compared with last year. If ever there was a sustainably fished stock, surely it must be prawns in the Irish Sea. That was the message that Committee members and I delivered to Commissioner Joe Borg when we met him in Brussels in October.

Of course, I realise that stock is managed across a much wider area than the Irish Sea, and there is cause for concern about part of the stock in the west of Ireland. Yet again, our fishermen, along with their colleagues from other parts of Europe, have been proactive in proposing measures designed to address that specific problem. Therefore, I repeat that the proposal to cut the area 7/Irish Sea prawn quota is totally unfounded and must be resisted.

That resistance must come from the House, with the Department's backing. The House should speak on this issue with one clear voice. We are here to encourage

and develop one of the jewels of our food processing industry — our fishing stock — and to ensure that the men who do such a worthwhile job under very difficult conditions are supported in the industry in which they have chosen to serve.

5.00 pm

In December, the Minister must go to the Council meeting in Brussels, at which she should be encouraged and emboldened to tell UKRep that Northern Ireland has drawn a line in the sand that will not be rubbed out. The industry here demands support, and UKRep should represent this part of the UK strongly and valiantly to ensure that our industry is preserved and that our fishing stock is allowed to sustainably do the job that scientists say that it can do. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House, and I urge Members to unite in encouraging the Minister and the Executive to ensure that our fishermen's jobs are preserved.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I thank the Members opposite for tabling it. I also thank the Minister for her efforts on behalf of the fishing industry. She is tackling most of the issues that the motion raises, and the industry recognises the work that she has undertaken.

Sinn Féin believes that the North is entitled to full and independent representation in all relevant negotiations that impact on devolved matters. We should be able to do what is best for our fishing industry. Presently, the British Government determine who represents Administrations at European Council meetings. The North is hampered by the dominance of another Administration, namely Scotland, that is fighting for its own fishing communities. We are not a sovereign nation, and Members need to understand that fact.

I shall base my speech on the recognition that, this year, the fishing industry here is facing a difficult set of circumstances. Fish and nephrops prices have been very low, but, on the other hand, fuel prices have been very high. Fish prices have been stagnating, and the catching sector sees only a small proportion of the final fish sale price. Fishermen are not able to pass on costs, and prices did not go up even in 2008, when there was a massive hike in fuel costs.

As politicians, we often talk in this warm Chamber about fishing. I remind Members that fishing is a hard and dangerous occupation, and we should not forget that fact. Nephrops is the single most important catch in the North of Ireland, particularly along the County Down coast. Based on 2008 figures, it contributes more than 60% to the value of the total catch. Therefore, a 30% cut in the nephrops quota would be likely to have a disastrous impact on the local fishing industry.

Will the Minister clarify the position with respect to the size of prawns that may be landed? The industry is concerned about more bureaucracy and diktats from Europe. It is similar to the straight bananas debate, about which we heard previously.

Mr McNarry: Maybe you could fish for those bananas.

Mr W Clarke: In a banana boat. *[Laughter.]*

In my constituency, increasing the size of prawns that are allowed to be caught would represent a significant cut in both prospective catches and fishermen's incomes at an economically tough time, when they are struggling to make ends meet, particularly given that overheads are continually being driven up by high fuel prices. Rural jobs are difficult enough to sustain without yearly threats from the EU. A balance needs to be struck between environmental scientists, fishermen and coastal communities that rely on fishing.

Fishing provides the lifeblood for many communities and meaning to many people's lives. It is a way of life, and it plays an economic, social and cultural role in south Down, as well as in many other areas. I remind Members again that we are debating one of the most dangerous occupations. In the past, many fishermen have paid the ultimate price to bring food to our tables, and I have known many of those men personally.

We are entering a critical phase for the future capability of the fishing industry; we are not just facing important annual negotiations, but entering a defining period for the future of European fisheries. At long last, discussions are about to begin on the future of the common fisheries policy.

I want to talk about discards. In my opinion, it is morally wrong for fishermen to hurl good dead fish overboard because they have quota for only one species in the net. No one can convince me that that is sustainable fishing.

That takes me to the review of the common fisheries policy, which I will touch on briefly. We need a fully accountable fishery to give confidence that, in return for landing more of what is discarded, we will ensure that the same levels of discarding do not continue. On-board cameras, which are being piloted by some vessels in Scotland and Denmark and which other nations are considering, might give us the assurance that we need to move from simply measuring what is landed to a catch-quota system. Industry representatives are monitoring those pilot schemes, but on their own, they will not be a panacea. Our fishing sector is engaging with scientists, but as was said earlier, they are demoralised when sound scientific evidence is ignored.

When an economic driver is lost, there is devastation. In south Down, our construction industry has been decimated due to the recession. Manufacturing is also very stressed. When cuts are made to the prawn industry, the whole community will have to absorb them.

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

Mr W Clarke: Shops, pubs, restaurants, as well as the businesses that service the industry, are all in difficulties. The fishing industry, particularly the prawn sector, is under extreme pressure.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who secured the debate. It is a timely intervention, given that we are approaching what I call the "Christmas shenanigans" in Brussels. That has become almost an annual event, and it is an unwelcome Christmas present for fishermen in Northern Ireland that appears to get worse every year. Every year, we anticipate that the situation will improve, and we are encouraged to think that. The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Paisley Jnr, relayed to us the outcome of his recent meeting with Commissioner Borg. In December 2007, the former Committee Chairperson, Dr McCrea, together with Mr Willie Clarke, Mr P J Bradley, other Committee members and I also met Commissioner Borg. We took some comfort from that meeting and thought that there would be a better outcome for us in December. Instead, however, the situation got worse.

We can say what we want about our own or any other Minister, but the difficulty is that the people in Brussels just do not seem to listen to us. We put a good case to the UK Government, but when it comes to decision-making, we are like a small drop in the ocean. The people in Brussels do not realise the impact that they have on the industry and economy of Northern Ireland. I take that very seriously, particularly when I visit fishermen in ports throughout Northern Ireland. They are frustrated that we cannot get a better handle on the situation.

It has been suggested that we look to other countries for support for our industry. For example, it has been suggested that we co-operate with the Scottish Government and that in the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland is a member state. As Mr Clarke said, Northern Ireland is not a member state, and we must rely on the UK to put forward our case. It may be helpful at times to co-operate with those other countries, but the difficulty is that they are also our competitors. Clearly, they will do nothing that will disturb or impinge upon the benefits they will get out of the Fisheries Council meeting. I say to Members and to the Minister that they should beware of who they are trying to befriend, because those people may be doing more harm than good in the negotiations.

This is one of those issues in the European Union where we try to exert as much power as we can, sometimes without much success.

I want to pick up on an issue that Mr Clarke touched on, which is the discards. That involves throwing back into the sea good fish as waste, at a time when that fish could be beneficial to the local fishing community, the Northern Ireland economy and to those throughout the world who are starving.

It is one of the greatest wastes and among the greatest nonsense to have emerged from the common fisheries policy. We need to impress upon the Commission the need for it to do something about that waste urgently. When we met Commissioner Borg, we impressed upon him the importance of having that issue urgently addressed. If it is not, no part of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland will be able to reap the benefits.

We have heard about the proposed quota cuts, and reference was made to the 50% cut in prawn quotas. Those cuts would be catastrophic for the small fishing industry that remains in Northern Ireland, and our immediate concern is to defeat those proposals. I am waiting to hear from the Minister, and I hope that her discussions have been ongoing. Although the debate is timely, the Commission debate and negotiations in Brussels will happen in only one month. I hope that our case has been made long before now and that the Minister has made her case not only to the Commission but to the UK Government, whose officials will be at the table on our behalf. Those are the people who we have to convince, and I hope that that has been done before now.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion on securing the future viability of the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, and I compliment the Members who proposed it. I have a few concerns about the motion, but those will emerge during my contribution. Given that the Irish Sea is fished predominantly by Irish and UK fleets, the scope of the motion, if it is intended to affect the outcome of the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council, seems somewhat limited. On 7 October, the Minister met her English and Scottish counterparts, and, on 4 November, she met the Irish Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Tony Killeen. It would be a surprise, therefore, if the Minister neglected to continue with that course of action. In fact, is there any reason why she should not meet the French, Belgian and Spanish Ministers or those of any other countries whose fleets fish the Irish Sea?

I urge caution on rejecting outright any scientific evidence, particularly from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, on some fish stocks while accepting it on others, such as herring and haddock, for which the total of allowable catches is to

remain the same, and plaice and anglerfish, for which the total is to increase. The rejection of scientific advice contributed significantly to the collapse of cod stocks and the need for the current cod recovery plan. The Irish Marine Institute's stock book of 2008 states that cod, whiting and haddock stocks are severely depleted in fishing grounds west of Scotland and that cod stocks in the Irish Sea, in which there are few signs of recovery, have virtually collapsed. The stock book also states that cod stocks in the Celtic Sea remain below sustainable levels.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's 'Northern Ireland Fleet Futures Analysis (2004-2013): Methodology and Results' notes that the reduction in the total allowable catches for nephrops that was introduced by the EC was:

"an attempt to reduce the Nephrops fishery by-catch of whitefish — notably cod, whiting, haddock and saithe caught mainly by twin-rig Nephrops trawl gears as opposed to single-rig gears — in the face of deteriorating whitefish stocks, rather than due to particular concerns about the state of Nephrops stocks themselves.

The Nephrops stocks targeted by the NI fleet are considered to have been fished at sustainable levels over the past decade and are currently thought to be within safe biological limits, although there is some dispute between assessments of stocks size and state, and resultant management decisions, by the scientific community and fishermen's understanding of true stock sizes. It is generally recognised that there is a discrepancy between the reported landings volumes of Nephrops and the true extent of activity in the fisheries."

Concerns continue about the assessment and management of stock sizes and state, as reflected in the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea's (ICES) 2009 advice on nephrops:

"Current management of Nephrops in Subarea VII (both in terms of TACs and effort) does not provide adequate safeguards to ensure that local effort is sufficiently limited to avoid depletion of resources in separate Functional Units. The current situation allows for catches to be taken anywhere in the ICES division and this could imply inappropriate harvest rates from some parts. More importantly, vessels are free to move between grounds, allowing effort to develop on some grounds in a largely uncontrolled way."

That seems to have been a particular problem on the Porcupine Bank, where there has been a large increase in effort over the past five years and the stock has declined substantially.

5.15 pm

However, the importance of the prawn catch to the Northern Ireland fleet — 90% of the fleet fishes for nephrops — and its impact on other commercial fish stocks, was acknowledged by the Minister in a written answer, AQW 8378/09 on 7 July 2009 when she identified as a key priority maintaining the nephrops total allowable catch:

"at a level that sustains the stock and the activity of our catching and processing sectors."

It is worth focusing on that stock in particular. The ICES advice in 2009 talked about trawling for nephrops and the resultant discarding of small nephrops and fish, which can be high — a point to which Mr Clarke and Mr Elliott referred. It is that aspect of nephrops fishing, along with uncertainty about the level of the stock, which contributes to the restrictions on the total allowable catch. ICES scientific advice states that, given the apparent stability of the stock, current levels of exploitation and effort appear to be sustainable. This year, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea stated that in the Irish Sea west —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: I support the motion by saying that we need to maintain the sustainability of stock; otherwise there will be no fishing industry.

Mr Ford: I too welcome the debate and congratulate those who secured it. It brings back to me nostalgia for the days of the first Assembly, when, every autumn, the Agriculture Committee devoted parts of a number of meetings to discussions on the forthcoming European Fisheries Council meeting. We got the results after the Christmas break, and, generally, they were uniformly bad. However, it is important that that discussion is not confined just to the Agriculture Committee and that the motion is on the Floor of the Assembly for wider consideration of what is needed.

I remember how frequently, in the early days of the Assembly, the Committee was presented with two entirely differing views on the stock situation. A scientific view was generally cited by those who supported the European Commission, and there was the view from the decks of the vessels which sail out of Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel, and they rarely coincided on real stock levels in the Irish Sea.

In more recent years, work done by the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) with fishermen has shown much greater consensus, at least locally, about what is possible and what is not. That scientific evidence must be supported by the Assembly and carried forward by the Minister in her discussions with other UK Ministers, hopefully with the support of her friends from Ireland, and into the European Fisheries Council in December to make an impact on the Commission as a view that is shared not just around here but as evidence that can start to make a real difference to us.

A report from the Minister in January about last December's European Fisheries Council meeting referred to a 2% cut in the nephrops quota, and a somewhat higher cut for cod. She pointed out in her statement to the Assembly that that was rather better than the 5% cut in the North Sea and west of Scotland.

Nonetheless, in response to a question I asked, she pointed out that the 2% cut resulted in a £372,000 financial loss. That is how much fishermen in Northern Ireland lost from what was perceived as a modest cut. It also indicates why we must ensure that, if we are to continue to have a viable fishing industry in Northern Ireland, the cuts that are being talked about for some areas must be resisted, because it is clear from the scientific opinion of AFBI and the experience of those who work the trawlers that they are utterly unrealistic.

There was not only that £372,000 loss from the nephrops quota but a further loss to the white fish catches, where cod and haddock quotas did not quite balance out. That was not the extent of the financial loss, because costs in general for the fishing industry have gone up. Although the cost of fuel may fluctuate from month to month, the overall trend is for costs to go up, not down, and fishermen experience continuing suffering and difficulty. There is also the sheer difficulty of maintaining the capital cost of a boat if the number of days that it can be at sea to reap any reward from that investment is restricted.

There is clear evidence now that the science is in line with what the fishermen are saying, at least in the concept of our largest issue, nephrops. That evidence must be backed by the Assembly to show that that it has been noted.

A couple of Members referred to the by-catch of white fish and the criminal activities that take place when discards have to be thrown back into the sea rather than be used. Surely, that is something that we can all agree on, whether it is on the grounds of the fishermen's income or on the morality of throwing away good food in a hungry world. We must ensure that measures are taken that will deal with that issue properly, so that the by-catch issue does not become an excuse for cutting the quota of nephrops generally. We have heard a clear message on that matter from those who proposed the motion. Mr Elliott said that that was pressed on the Commissioner when the Committee was in Brussels recently, and I am glad of that. I trust that it is a message that we can rely on the Minister putting forward in her discussions with other Ministers and the Commission. I trust that she will be successful in putting forward the views of the Assembly to the Fisheries Council in December.

Mr Irwin: I have never been aboard a fishing vessel in the Irish Sea, but I have seen the television programme 'Trawlermen', which gave a great account of life at sea for the crews of fishing vessels. It is not a job that I would be comfortable doing. As a farmer, the green grass and the country lanes of County Armagh are more my cup of tea than being in a fishing boat on the rough sea. *[Laughter.]* Therefore, I believe that the effort and resolve of our fishermen is something to be proud of. They are at great risk while pursuing their

catch. Our supermarkets, restaurants and fast-food outlets would be sadly lacking without the immense effort put in by our fishermen.

However, the ever-meddling hand of Europe has been a source of concern for our fishermen for many years. Of late, that interference is getting to the stage where our fishing industry cannot sustain much more pressure from EU directives. In 10 years, we have seen a 33% decrease in the number of fishermen in Northern Ireland, and that is the harsh reality of the industry.

Although the policing of cod stocks in the Irish Sea is concerning, our fishermen have responded responsibly. The key words over the past few years have been conservation of stock and responsible fishing. I agree with the Members who said that it is morally wrong to see millions of dead fish thrown overboard because of the EU policy that does not allow them to be brought ashore. It is a travesty for the industry that that is allowed to happen.

With 90% of our fleet fishing for prawns, the news that there is the possibility of a further 40% cut is extremely concerning. One can understand the anxiety of the local fishing fleet as we approach the December meeting. Prawn fishing forms the backbone of the industry in Northern Ireland and the seriousness of the matter cannot be overemphasised. I reiterate the need for the Minister to take a full and active role in relaying our serious concerns about the reduction in quotas and days at sea. It is apparent that Brussels is applying a broad-brush approach to the industry here. However, scientific evidence suggests that stocks of prawns are OK, especially if they are fished sustainably.

I was part of a delegation from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development that met with Joe Borg. We were able to explain the current health of the prawn stock in the Irish Sea and how it has remained stable, and the fact that the North Sea harvest control rule is not something that should be applied uniformly along the coast of the UK and Ireland. It is important for the Minister to link successfully with her counterpart in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the December meeting, and a clear and forceful voice must be heard in full support of our industry here. The opportunity exists for our position on the proposed reductions to be made now, and it is up to our Minister to use every avenue available to ensure that the Fisheries Council is left in no doubt about our objections and the damage that would inevitably be caused should such drastic reductions be forced on our industry. I support the motion.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Members who secured the motion for doing so. It goes without saying that the fishing industry in Northern Ireland has played a vital part in our local economy for hundreds of years. It currently employs approximately 1,200 people,

contributing around £100 million per annum to the local economy. It does that despite the repeated failing policies of the European Union. We have had decades of regulation, quotas and countless hoops to jump through, which have reduced the industry to a shadow of its former self, and in no way, I would suggest, have they protected the fish stocks as they were supposedly designed to do.

The common fisheries policy is a prime example of how centralised and generic bureaucracy fails to meet its most basic objectives. It is a policy that has failed our fishermen and our fish stocks. I welcomed the European Commission's admission that the common fisheries policy has abjectly failed. As we head towards the renegotiation of that policy in 2012 — I know that it should have been yesterday and not that far away — we must ensure that decisions on fishing quotas and time at sea are more flexible and have a greater regional and localised input.

Brussels, through defunct logic, has assumed, incorrectly, that the fishing industry is not interested in protecting fish stocks, the environment and the biodiversity of our seas and oceans. That could not be further from the truth. The sea is the fisherman's livelihood, and it is therefore only logical that he needs to protect the stock of that livelihood. However, the current quota system has maintained the disgraceful continuation of discards and the one-size-fits-all regulation. That logic must be replaced by a more flexible and dynamic approach that balances sustainability and economic survival with local knowledge.

The motion itself, however, deals with the more immediate problem of member states' Fisheries Ministers negotiating this December on the EU Fisheries Council final quotas for next year. The motion correctly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to meet the UK Fisheries Minister ahead of the council meeting to ensure that Northern Ireland's needs and priorities are properly represented at the negotiations. We in the Ulster Unionist Party support that call.

A particular concern is the EC's proposals to slash the Irish Sea prawn quota. Ian Paisley Jnr said that it would be slashed by 50%, although I think it may be 30%. Nevertheless, it is one mighty slash. That has correctly been described as a — and I love these words — “massive disappointment” that could have a devastating impact on the fleet. There is no doubt that it will have such an impact. That is doubly frustrating for the local fishing industry in my constituency and elsewhere, because there is clear evidence that prawns are being fished sustainably in the Irish Sea. It is therefore crucial that we get an outcome from the negotiations that is in the best interests of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Mr Paisley Jnr called for a united stand. I have heard him make that call from other platforms, but it sounded pretty good today on this issue, as the Assembly can unite together behind the motion. It is not in the best interests of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom to put the livelihood of hundreds of people at risk and cost Northern Ireland's economy tens of millions of pounds.

Suffice it to say that we recognise that as well as maintaining our waters as resources, we must also protect them and improve their biodiversity. I note that the Marine and Coastal Access Bill received Royal Assent last week. Northern Ireland still has much work to do to produce its marine management plan, and I encourage our local fishing industry, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment and local environmental groups to combine and work together to come up with a plan that will benefit all parties.

Again, it is in our best interests to have a sustainable fishing industry and healthy and diverse waters. We support the motion and call on the Minister to hear what is being said and do all within her power to get the best deal for our local fishing fleet.

5.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: My mother's side of the family grew up in Ardglass, which, as everyone knows, is a fishing port. I am sure that Members would struggle to find many DUP families in Ardglass — they are like hen's teeth. It is a trawl that may not produce too much, but we always try our best.

I can remember visiting regularly a thriving fishing industry at that port. I remember sitting at my relatives' house and looking into the harbour, where I saw dozens and dozens of boats come in every weekend. I remember my grandfather taking me to the fish market in Ardglass, where I witnessed a thriving business. A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit Kilkeel with the Assembly and Business Trust. Kilkeel was always the biggest port, and the real jewel in the crown of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. What I saw recently could not have contrasted more with what I remember as a young boy in Ardglass, which was always a small port.

As a constituency representative for Strangford, I know only too well the importance of the fishing industry to my area and to the whole economy of Northern Ireland. It is important not only to the fishermen and their families but to the people who are employed on the back of the industry. Sadly, we are reminded regularly of how dangerous fishermen's work is. People are employed behind the front line in processing, in supplying material to the industry, in engineering and in retail, as well as restaurant and café owners, who market themselves as offering locally available,

excellent produce, fresh on people's plates. Small and family-run businesses dotted all over the Ards Peninsula, not only in Portavogie, where fishing is centred, are utterly dependent on the fishing industry.

Prawn fishing is dominant in the Northern Ireland fishing industry because of the cuts in white fish quotas, and there are rumours of cuts of 30% in prawn quotas. That would have the effect not only of decimating and devastating an industry but of devastating communities. Fishing is literally the only industry and the only employer in some communities, and I shudder to think what the impact of 30% cuts might be on communities, people, families and businesses in those areas. That should be at the forefront of our minds and the Minister's mind.

The scientific position on prawns is, at best, confusing and, at worst, completely contradictory. A couple of weeks ago, the Minister said that science showed that the prawn stocks in the Irish Sea are reasonably stable, yet the industry faces cuts of 30% or more. It is baffling and impossible to explain. It defies logic.

Many of us will find different places to point the finger of blame, but, generally, the finger ends up pointing in the direction of Brussels and at its common fisheries policy. It is a bit of a joke that that is called the common fisheries policy, because there is not a terrible lot that is common about it. The fishing fleets of other member states seem to do what they want, flouting the laws that are laid down by the European Commission. In our country, we seem to do what we are told and much more. That is concerning, because that also has a devastating impact on the industry.

Having talked to members of the fishing community, I know that they want a champion for fishing. Last year, the Minister secured hardship funding for the industry, so I acknowledge that she understands that there is a problem. The fishing community is crying out for someone to speak out loudly for its interests and to work with colleagues in other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom to take a step forward and a lead to say that the misrepresentation and poor representation of the local industry annually at the Fisheries Council will no longer suffice.

The Assembly must decide whether it wants Northern Ireland to have a fishing industry any longer. If it does, it needs to step forward and take the lead.

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

Mr Burns: There has been general agreement on the key issues in the debate, and I do not want to repeat the contributions that have been made by my party colleague and other Members.

The issue is complex. Regulations and legislation on fisheries are as complex and detailed as any that have

come from the EU. There is no denying that certain fish stocks, such as cod, are in desperate trouble. I will do my best to state the case in a simple and direct manner, the same way that fishermen have spoken to members of the Agriculture Committee.

If the EU Fisheries Council decides to reduce fish quotas and the number of days at sea, it will be a hammer blow to the local fishing industry and coastal communities. The Assembly must resist proposed cuts in the quotas of herring, prawns and other fish because if it does not, soon, there will be no fishing fleet. All other related jobs in processing plants and so on will go to the wall, too.

I fully expect the Minister to fight our corner fiercely at the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council. As stated in the motion, she must meet the UK Fisheries Minister ahead of the meeting in order to put across the Assembly's point of view.

The fishing industry had a tough year in 2008. Due to high fuel costs, in particular, 2009 has not been much better. The Executive established a hardship package for the industry, which was most welcome. However, the fact that it had to be set up in the first place clearly indicates the distress in the fishing industry.

The industry needs to be sustainable, profitable and economically viable and not one that is being helped off its knees regularly. The Assembly can help to deliver that in a number of ways. As well as resisting cuts, there needs to be a sensible increase in certain quotas in the Irish Sea. Where possible, the Assembly must ensure that the fishing fleet is free from restrictions on fishing time, by proving that it makes little impact on fish mortality.

Fishermen must also do their bit, although that will not be easy. They switched from catching white fish to mainly catching prawn. Now, prawn stocks are being hit hard, and cod stocks have not recovered as well as we hoped. Some boats could use better, more sensitive equipment if they are to diversify. However, where will money for that be found?

It looks as though 2010 will be another difficult year for the fishing industry. The Assembly must do its best to see the industry through these challenging times. The situation is stark: by the time that cod stocks recover, will there be a fishing fleet left? I hope that the Minister brings back good news from the meeting of the EU Fisheries Council in December 2009. I support the motion.

Mr P J Bradley: I also support the motion. I thank the Members who tabled it and call on the Minister to meet the UK Fisheries Minister in advance of the EU fisheries negotiations in Brussels.

Sadly, the Assembly must recognise the fact that Northern Ireland's fishing industry does not and never

did have the support of UK Fisheries Ministers. That fact is silently recognised by the industry here. Despite that, I agree with the motion: there is nothing wrong with trying to get the current Minister on our side.

Successive Fisheries Ministers have made no bones about their primary interest in the wider marine environment, rather than in the well-being of the fishing industry. What real concern have London-based Ministers ever displayed towards fishing fleets in faraway Scotland and Northern Ireland?

How can we look forward to better times when those who should be the fishing industry's champions have no interest whatsoever in that industry? The County Down fishing industry has paid a high price for its attachment to the UK industry. That was pointed out quite clearly to me in 2001 when I, along with Dr Paisley and George Savage, met Mr Fischler. He gave us a warm reception but, within minutes, he pulled the rug from under our feet when he said that he did not understand why we were looking for an increase in quotas at a time when the UK had taken up only 75% of its quota. That left us with very little to go on. Nevertheless, in the December talks of that year, there was some success on whiting. However, the UK Minister could not claim any credit for that, and I say well done to my former colleague Brid Rogers who helped to deliver something at that time.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development recently met her counterpart in the Republic, Tony Killeen, the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and that they have agreed to continue to work together closely in the run up to this year's Fisheries Council meetings and, in the longer term, in their approach to the reform of the common fisheries policy.

There are two long-term scenarios that, should either of them be achieved, would go some way to helping the Northern Ireland fishing industry. Ian Paisley Jnr referred to the first of those, which is the acquisition of regional status, but the member state would have to agree to that and I doubt that that would happen. The other scenario is the introduction of an all-Ireland fishing policy or industry. I doubt that the former is achievable and, as for the latter, there may not be the goodwill in the industry here or from political representatives to pursue that line, even if it assured a profitable future for the industry.

This time round, the Commission has proposed to implement a 30% cut in the allowable prawn catch, which is a repeat of the old trick of presenting a very high figure from which the EU Fisheries Council can commence negotiations. I was at Kilkeel harbour last Friday, and there is a belief in the industry that the figure will come out at 5% to 7%. Even a 5% or 7% reduction or any reduction in the total allowable catch

(TAC) will have devastating consequences for the industry, the processors and the associated businesses throughout the area, which Mr Hamilton referred to.

Jim Wells, Jim Shannon and I visited processors in Kilkeel, and other Members visited processing factories, and we all heard about their fears. For too many years, they have had to live under annual threats. Each year, they have a small bit of enjoyment, but then a new threat arises around August or September. I do not know how they survive that.

This year, on top of the call from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea for a 30% cut in the allowable catch of prawns in most of the waters around the coast of Ireland — from the north to the Shannon and down to Wexford — the Commission is proposing to increase the minimum landing size of prawns in the Irish seas to a 25 millimetre tail length, which for some processors will prove to be yet another setback for their sector.

The last part of the motion calls upon the Minister to ensure personally that the proposals are rejected, which I am confident that she will endeavour to do.

It just remains for me to thank those who tabled the motion, and on behalf of my constituents who are involved in the fishing industry I wish the delegation well in its negotiations.

Ms Ritchie: I support the motion. Yet again, the Northern Ireland fishing industry, the fishing fleet and particularly the fishermen in the County Down fishing ports of Ardglass, Portavogie and Kilkeel face an uncertain and unsatisfactory future as they await the news of the fish quota allocations and days at sea restrictions for 2010.

To appreciate fully the importance of the fishing industry to the local economy, it is important to put it in some context. The industry employs approximately 1,200 people, who are concentrated in those three communities along the County Down coast. The industry contributes around £100 million per annum to the local economy, it receives no production subsidies from Europe, and it is 100% owned by local businesses. All those involved in the fishing industry are to be commended for their entrepreneurial spirit in the face of ongoing bureaucratic adversity. It is worth noting that the fishing community in Kilkeel in particular and the wider community in Kilkeel and the Mournes have suffered from job losses, particularly in B/E Aerospace, SuperValu, ToughGlass and Cunningham Stone. It must be noted that Kilkeel has already suffered from those vicissitudes of fortune, so any projected cuts in total allowable catches will have a serious impact on the area.

5.45 pm

Irish Sea stocks have been fished in a sustainable manner for many years. Fishermen in the three ports have faced unnecessary reductions in quotas, and restrictions on the number of days that they can fish have been imposed on them. The first Westminster legislation regarding that matter was passed in 1993. Cod recovery measures, which were first introduced in 2000, the days-at-sea regulations and the reductions in quota were all perceived to be fish conservation measures. However, scientists, the Department and the European Union totally disregarded the fishermen's knowledge of the depth of shoals and fish species. Predictions from Brussels suggest that more stringent, punitive measures are on the way, and those will impact on not only the fishing fleets and local communities but the fish processing industries on which the economies of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie rely.

During discussions with her UK and Brussels counterparts, will the Minister challenge the fact that the EU has ruled out any review of the cod recovery measures this December? That must be reviewed, and a better deal must be achieved for fishermen. We must concentrate on finding interim and long-term solutions to alleviate the impact of those swingeing cuts on the fishing industry.

First, it is important that the Minister meets her counterparts in London and that Northern Ireland is given a place at the negotiating table during discussions on quota allocations in Brussels this December. Secondly, we must redouble our efforts for the 2012 negotiations on the revision of the common fisheries policy to ensure that it fully reflects fishermen's views on the nature of the fishing areas in the Irish Sea, the amount of fish species and the impact of climate change on the migratory movement of fish. The revised common fisheries policy must ensure that the principle of relative stability for fishing industries in certain locations is reflected with reference to the County Down ports.

It is deeply unfortunate that fishermen from Kilkeel have quotas imposed on them in respect of certain fish species, while their colleagues in Clogherhead, County Louth, are afforded greater flexibility to catch larger quotas of the same fish species through the Dublin Government being able to invoke the Hague preference. In any event, it is important —

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

Ms Ritchie: It is important that fishing communities, fishing families and the fishing industry in the County Down ports are sustained and protected.

Thirdly, we should seek to ensure that we obtain full responsibility for fisheries, which is currently a reserved matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Ms Ritchie: In order to ensure our full place at the discussions on the annual quota allocations, we need to directly negotiate on our own behalf. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister believe in devolution, they should take that issue on board.

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

Ms Ritchie: Thank you.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope that I get the same amount of latitude as Ms Ritchie, because I have much to cover to reflect today's debate.

First, I congratulate Messrs Paisley Jnr, Shannon and Irwin on securing the debate, and I welcome the interest that Members have shown in the fishing industry. I acknowledge the role that the Committee has played, and I am grateful to Mr Paisley Jnr and the rest of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for taking the time to visit Joe Borg and press the case for the local industry.

I pay tribute to fishermen, who do a very difficult and dangerous job. Indeed, I have been getting weekly updates from the skipper about Rico, the fisherman who was seriously injured, and I am glad to say that he is recovering well. I wish him a full recovery.

This is the third round of autumn negotiations that I have been involved in since I became Minister. This year will definitely be the most challenging yet. I am in absolutely no doubt about the seriousness of the situation that the local fishing industry faces. I know the importance of the fishing industry to the economy of south Down — something that many Members have referred to during the debate — and the dependence that there is on it. I also want to assure the Committee Chairman and members that the hardship payments that we received from the Executive last year have all been made.

As I have said on previous occasions, the process of the negotiations on fishing opportunities takes place over several months. It is not front-loaded in December; it is an ongoing negotiation. During that time, the other Fisheries Ministers — Richard Lochhead in Scotland, Elin Jones in Wales, and Huw Irranca-Davies at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs — and I meet on several occasions to discuss negotiating priorities ahead of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meetings.

Members may be aware that Huw Irranca-Davies visited Portavogie in August. He had the opportunity to meet representatives of the local industry and to hear at first hand the industry's concerns about the impact of the cod recovery plan, the advice from ICES and the effect of the economic downturn and poor prices. In fairness to Huw Irranca-Davies, he is well aware of and I have impressed on him the seriousness of the situation here and the importance of the industry.

The Fisheries Ministers met — obviously, I was there — in Edinburgh on 7 October. We discussed our approach to this year's negotiations with the full range of stakeholders, including representatives from the local industry. At the beginning of this month, I also met Tony Killeen TD, my counterpart in the South, to see where, how and when we could support each other's interventions with the EU Commission to maximise the benefit for our fishing industries working the Irish Sea.

I assure Members that, as in previous years, I will be attending the December Council of Ministers and will be arguing forcefully on behalf of the local industry. Indeed, I have done and will do all that I can to influence the approach of DEFRA. It was that intervention last year that led to a minimal cut; again, as David Ford pointed out, it still meant a lot to the industry. However, it was about as minimal as I could get it.

Before I turn to the proposals on fishing opportunities for next year, I want to cover the proposals on technical conservation, which will be decided at the Council's November meeting, which I will be attending at the end of this week.

While the Commission's proposals for TACs and quotas are, to say the least, disappointing, there are further, more immediate threats to our industry in the shape of the proposed technical conservation regulation. This regulation has been under discussion for well over a year, but the Commission and the Swedish presidency seem determined to put it through this Friday. Over the last month, there have been several iterations of the regulation which have been discussed in detail at official level, and some of the flaws have been ironed out through that process, but problems remain.

At the beginning of November, there was a last-minute ill-conceived proposal that would have required the industry to land all nephrops whole. At that time, I spoke directly to Huw Irranca-Davies and Tony Killeen to highlight how important it was that this unjustified proposal be rejected. Thankfully, strong opposition by Britain, Ireland, Spain and others ensured that it was withdrawn.

However, there remains another very serious threat to our industry which is still in the draft regulation: a

uniform minimum landing size of 25 mm for nephrops throughout EU waters. It has been presented as a simplification measure — or, as Willie Clarke referred to it, as straight bananas. He is right: one size does not fit all in this arena. I support simplification where a common approach is appropriate, but I cannot accept it in circumstances in which regional variations in stock characteristics mean that a tailored approach is needed. The Commission's approach to simplification on this issue appears to ignore conservation objectives. I believe that applying a harmonised standard, as proposed, will result in increased discards, which Members have talked about, and disrupt long-standing fishing industries and markets in the process.

For more than 30 years, the average size of nephrops in the Irish Sea has been 24 mm to 25 mm, compared to 30 mm for the North Sea. In that time, fishing effort has fluctuated, but there has been no perceptible change in the average size of nephrops. Therefore, there is no evidence to support increasing the minimum landing size from 20 mm to 25 mm in the Irish Sea for conservation reasons. Raising the minimum landing size for Irish Sea nephrops will have a devastating effect on the scampi sector, and, in particular, on the businesses that have invested in developing and marketing scampi products that are based on smaller prawns.

The catching and processing sectors in the North of Ireland, which account for the vast majority of nephrops taken from the Irish Sea, have developed their businesses to adapt to smaller prawns. Most of the prawns landed by the North of Ireland fishing fleet are tailed and used as the basis for valuable breaded scampi products. Larger prawn tails are used in whole-tail scampi, which has a higher value added, and a market and technology utilising smaller tails have been developed for reformed-tail scampi.

I have spoken to Huw Irranca-Davies and Richard Lochhead and impressed on them the importance of the issue for our local industry. We have submitted those concerns in writing to the Commission. Tony Killeen, the Fisheries Minister in the South, is also opposed to the change.

That sort of proposal is a retrograde step by the Commission when it comes to having a credible and flexible common fisheries policy. The proposal appears to abandon policies that advocate regional solutions, and it sends entirely the wrong signal to the fishing industry about the Commission's intentions with regard to regionalisation within CFP reform.

I assure Members and the local fishing industry that I will make strenuous attempts to persuade the Commission to drop the so-called simplification measure, which makes absolutely no sense on conservation grounds.

I am aware that the local catching sector is concerned about much of the technical detail, particularly the proposed rules relating to fishing nets. Along with my ministerial colleagues, I am arguing for the retention of a strengthening bag for boats fishing for prawns and, on behalf of the industry, that its concerns about the location of the square mesh panel be addressed.

I will now turn to the Commission's proposals for fishing opportunities in 2010. There is some good news but very little of it. On 29 September, the Commission published its TAC proposals, which, following further consideration by the EU's advisers, the STECF, have drawn on ICES scientific advice. Those proposals covered only the TACs; as yet, there is no confirmation of effort-controlled ceilings. However, in keeping with the cod recovery plan, I expect that the maximum allowable effort, as measured in kilowatt days, will be down by 25% due to the poor state of cod stocks.

The Commission has proposed a rollover in the TAC for Irish Sea haddock but a 25% decrease in the TAC for Irish Sea cod. Because of the provisions of the cod recovery plan, the latter proposal was expected. The cod recovery plan will bring about a similar year-on-year decrease in the TAC until spawning stocks rebuild to a level of 6,000 tons. Current estimates put the spawning stock biomass at less than 2,000 tons.

I understand the points that Members made about increasing discards as a consequence of decreasing the TAC. Based on the current scientific assessment, the Commission will strongly resist any argument that the cod stock in the Irish Sea is being fished sustainably and that the TAC should not, therefore, be reduced.

If we can demonstrate that the local fleet has taken steps to reduce cod mortality, there will be opportunities to secure additional fishing effort. My Department will work closely with the industry in developing suitable cod avoidance measures and will use the EFF funds to assist the industry in adopting more selective fishing gear.

A rollover of the herring TAC has been proposed. However, I believe that there is sufficient evidence from our expanded scientific surveys to justify an increase in that TAC. My Department has put papers to the STECF, and I hope that it will recommend a 15% increase in the herring TAC, which will appear in the draft regulation. If that does not happen, I will press for it at the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council.

Cuts of 25% have been proposed to the TACs for whiting and sole. However, those stocks are of little economic significance to our fleet. An increase of 14% to the TAC for plaice is welcome, and that reverses the trend of cuts for that stock in recent years.

Nephrops is the stock on which the industry depends, and the ICES advice for that area came as something of a shock. Members will recall that, last year, there

was some uncertainty around the interpretation of underwater television surveys of nephrops burrow counts that were used to estimate the nephrops population. That issue has been resolved; however, there is now disagreement over the level of fishing, or harvest ratio, that the nephrops populations can sustain in the longer term.

ICES believes that nephrops stocks in area 7 are not being fished sustainably and, accordingly, has recommended a harvest ratio that would see the TAC drop by almost 50%. The STECF took a slightly different view, and, subsequently, the Commission proposed that the reduction in the TAC for area 7 should be 30%.

For the first time, we have new in-year survey data available for the western Irish Sea and Aran grounds stock. ICES has identified the time gap between the survey and the TAC year for which the advice is given as a source of uncertainty in the assessment and forecast. Together with the South, we have been successful in persuading ICES to consider that new information.

6.00 pm

Although it has not been possible to have the entire area 7 advice reopened and to get new advice published, the acceptance of the new data by ICES strengthens our case to the Commission in support of arguments that the Irish Sea prawn stock is stable. On that basis, we are pressing the Commission to accept that the Irish Sea and Aran grounds components of the overall area 7 TAC should be unchanged. On that assumption, the effect would be to increase the proposed overall TAC for area 7 from 17,000 tons to 18,900 tons. That would mean a cut of about 23% on last year's TAC of 24.5 tons.

Under current management arrangements, the amount of prawns that can be taken depends on a member state's relative stability share of the TAC. For area 7, Spain has 6%, France has 24%, Ireland has 37% and Britain and the North of Ireland have 33%. The local industry has an 85% share of the combined Britain and North of Ireland quota, which means that 5,300 tons would be available based on a TAC of 18,900 tons. To put that in perspective, the landings this year to date are in the order of 7,500 tons, most of which were taken in the Irish Sea. The overall position is complicated by the fact that the area 7 TAC is made up of a number of different nephrops stocks, not all of which can be demonstrated to be as stable as the Irish Sea stock. For that reason, the Commission is still likely to want to see a significant cut in the overall TAC.

Members are absolutely right about discards. We have to get to a situation whereby the rules of fisheries management do not lead to an increase in the number of fish being discarded. That is shameful, and I know that the issue concerns the buying public as well as the

fishermen and the House. We need more regional control from the reform of the common fisheries policy so that we have fisheries policies that are appropriate to the Irish Sea.

It is no exaggeration to say that the survival of the local fishing fleet at its current level and the businesses and employment that it supports in processing and support industries hang in the balance. The decision on the minimum landing size issue that will be taken at the November Council meeting and the decision on the nephrops quota that will be taken at the December Council meeting are key to the future of fishing here. On top of the impact of the economic downturn, that means that we have reached a tipping point. If we do not get the right deal in Brussels, the whole industry may well collapse.

Resisting the proposed cut in nephrops TAC in area 7 is my top priority. I have just come from a teleconference with my fellow Fisheries Ministers, at which I again emphasised that it should be a top priority in the negotiations with the Commission in December. I agree that the common fisheries policy has failed, and I want to see it replaced by a more regionalised approach with more input from local stakeholders. That will be a key issue for us in 2010. I want to explore the scope to adapt new approaches within current rules, even ahead of reform being agreed.

I congratulate Ian Paisley Jnr on securing the debate, and I appreciate the support that Members have expressed for the local fishing industry. At the teleconference, I said that the House would be united in its support for the fishing industry and for a strong outcome in the November and December Council meetings.

I am pleased to advise Members that, at my invitation, Fisheries Ministers will meet here on 9 December to finalise priorities for the December Council meeting, which will be held on the 14th and 15th of the month. I will be attending the Council meetings in November and December, at which time I will have a series of meetings with my fellow Fisheries Ministers. There will also be meetings between us, the presidency and the Commission. I will use every opportunity to press home my arguments. Members can be assured that I will do my utmost to resist these unreasonable EU proposals, which threaten the viability of the fleet and the future of the entire local industry.

Mr Shannon: I thank every Member present for taking the time to stay for the debate and for making valuable contributions. I pay tribute to our fishermen and to the industry.

I am not sure whether Members have ever been in a fishing boat. I was out in a fishing boat on a calm day, which was exciting. I always thought that, on a rough day, it might not be as exciting to be tossed about in the sea in a small boat. I do not know whether Members know where the sleeping quarters are in a

boat; fishermen have to curl up in a ball, almost like a chicken, and put a load of pillows around them. That is how they sleep. Sleeping in those conditions would be a miracle. I pay tribute to our fishermen, who are the only remaining real hunters, by which I mean that they hunt for their living. TV programmes such as 'Trawlermen', which my colleague William Irwin mentioned, and 'Deadliest Catch', of which most Members will be aware, provide a good perspective of what it means to be a fisherman.

Today's debate focuses specifically on the EU. Fishing generates about 1% of the gross national product. There are 260,000 fishermen in the EU. My comments should illustrate how important fishing is, how much it is worth to EU trade and the amount of fish that fishermen bring in compared to that which is for themselves. Fishing represents no more than 10% of local employment in any region of the EU. However, it often exists in areas, as it does in my area, where employment opportunities are limited and where unemployment is high, such as Portavogie, Ardglass or Kilkeel. P J Bradley mentioned that matter, and Margaret Ritchie mentioned job losses in Kilkeel.

The market for fish and fish products has changed in recent years. It is not just about the fishing boats and the fishing industry; it is also about processing. Supermarkets are now the main buyers of fish, and they expect steady supplies.

Thair's less fresh faash sould the noo, hooiniver demand fer processed faash an'readie maide meals hes grew. In spite o'thon the nummers waarkin i faash processin' hae bein fallin', wi 60% o'faash ate i the EU cummin fae ootby. In pairt thon bes oan account o' the ability tae transport fresh faash internationally gettin' better. The EU bes the worls secon' baagest faaschin power efter China.

Fresh fish sales have fallen, but demand for processed fish and prepared meals is growing. Despite that, employment in fish processing has been falling, and 60% of fish that is consumed in the EU comes from outside it. That is partly due to improvements in the ability to transport fresh fish internationally. The EU is the world's second largest fishing power after China. That outlines the importance of fishing for the EU; it is doubly or triply important for us in Northern Ireland.

Some two million tonnes of fish products were exported in 2006, and more than six million tonnes had to be imported to meet EU needs. The competitiveness of the EU fishing industry has been affected by overcapacity and shortages of fish to catch. Moreover, fishermen are simply not allowed to fish and, therefore, cannot provide the fish that is needed by supermarkets. Some Members mentioned fuel costs; everyone is aware of that matter. Furthermore, we are aware of the red tape. As my colleague Simon

Hamilton mentioned, certain EU countries seem to be able to fish oblivious to rules and regulations, while we are doubly zealous to ensure that we follow them.

I want to touch on the Minister's reply. In his introduction, my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr mentioned the technical configuration. People wonder what I am on about when I use those big words. I am on about the catch and the size of the nets. A couple of fishermen came to my advice centre in Portavogie on Saturday and told me that they had bought nets at £2,500 each, after which the EU had changed regulations on net sizes. Fishermen have invested in such equipment and will be hurt because of that. I commend the Minister on the hardship fund, which has partly addressed many issues.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I take the Member's point about the gear. The EU is keen to avoid discards of selective fishing gear. Under the EFF, money and support will be available for fishermen who want to replace those nets. I know that it is a small part of the problem, but we recognise the challenges in that area.

Mr Shannon: One of those men spent £50,000 on a new engine for his boat and £7,500 on new nets. That gives an idea of investment in the fishing industry. This is an issue not only for fishermen but for the fish-processing industry as well.

PJ Bradley and I visited Rooney Fish in Kilkeel through the Assembly and Business Trust, which gave us an idea of the big issue: prawns. Rooney Fish and Rockall Seafoods in Kilkeel told us that reducing the prawn quota would affect not only fishermen but fish processing as well; it concerns jobs at sea and on shore.

I encourage the Minister to stand tall — I know that she will, all 5 ft 5 in or 5 ft 6 in of her — with her UK counterparts to do everything possible to ensure that the fishing industry survives. The cod industry once supported 46 boats in three ports; it now supports six. As Members said, the cod industry is critical.

Ian Paisley Jnr outlined the importance of the fishing industry and of the December meeting and the fact that fishermen are looking to it with fear and trepidation. The reduction in the prawn quota is the big issue for us. Willie Clarke mentioned fuel costs and the dangers of the sea. I mentioned that earlier: every Member who knows fishing knows the danger in that industry. He referred to "straight bananas"; that is no doubt to do with the catching gear. That illustrates the importance of getting things right.

Tom Elliott referred to the December meeting or the "Christmas shenanigans", as he called it. It gets worse every year, and that is an unfortunate part of the industry. The fishing industry needs confidence to buoy it up; we are concerned that it seems to go from crisis to crisis. Patsy McGlone referred to the virtual collapse of cod stocks in the Irish Sea; those who

represent fishing areas are well aware of that. The prawn catch could be the saviour of the NI fleet, but hearing what the quota restrictions are makes things very worrying.

David Ford referred to memories of past debates, which I suppose were something similar to this one. However, the scientific view overrules what the fishing industry in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel has to say. Willie Irwin — the Tom Jones of the DUP — prefers the green, green grass of home to a fishing boat. He put forward the point of view of the prawn industry. Even though he may not have been in a fishing boat, he is still very supportive of the industry.

David McNarry referred to decades of regulation and said that more flexibility is needed. That is very true. Simon Hamilton, who has an ancestry in Ardglass that I was not aware of, would have seen the boats when they were present in great number. Thomas Burns referred to the fishing stocks that need to be retained. The hardship fund has made a partial difference. PJ Bradley underlined his knowledge of the fishing industry in south Down and was very ably supported by Margaret Ritchie, who outlined her position on the fishing industry and its importance.

I record my thanks to the Minister for the work that she has done and the work that she will do. The Assembly is asking her to do a great deal on behalf of our fishing industry. We need the Minister to don her armour and step forward to Brussels, ready to do the business to ensure the safety of the fishing industry that we represent and support. They are talking about reducing the prawn quotas, but we want to ensure that everything is done that can be done to help the fishing industry. The Minister has had many meetings about that, and effort is being put into it. That is good news, but we need to retain the fishing industry.

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

Mr Shannon: We are asking the Minister to do her best for us at the December meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the proposals submitted by the EU Fisheries Council to reduce fish quotas and days at sea; acknowledges that Irish sea stocks were fished in a sustainable manner during the past year; expresses concern in relation to the implications for the fishing industry should these proposals be adopted; calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to meet with the United Kingdom Fisheries Minister ahead of the Council meeting to convey the importance of these negotiations with regard to the future viability of the Northern Ireland fishing fleet; and calls on the Minister to participate personally and directly at the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council, to ensure that these proposals are rejected.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm