
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 30 November 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Flooding: Fermanagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on recent flooding in Fermanagh.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on recent flooding in Fermanagh and on the devastating effects that it has had on the town of Enniskillen and the wider rural community.

Members will be aware of the exceptional situation in Fermanagh during November, when approximately three times the average monthly winter rainfall fell in one month. As a result, water levels rose to their highest recorded levels since records began in 1956. Thankfully, after a number of dry days, lough levels have peaked and are starting to fall steadily.

However, a resolution to the widespread road flooding around the loughs and the consequent disruption to normal life is not likely for at least some weeks and is directly dependent on rainfall levels in the catchment area. Furthermore, farmland may take much longer to recover from prolonged waterlogging. I witnessed at first hand the distress that the flooding caused, and I assure Members that my Department is working with others and doing everything in its power to alleviate the problems that local communities are facing.

My Department continues to work with the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, Fermanagh District Council, the Western Health and Social Care Trust and other key partners in responding to the flooding. We have also been working closely with our counterparts in the South of Ireland to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to lessen the misery that the flooding has caused.

My Department worked closely with the Electricity Supply Board in the South of Ireland to ensure that lough levels were drawn down to the lowest permissible level in October to provide maximum storage capacity for the winter months. That is attempted every year but, owing to weather conditions, is often not achieved. Fortunately, we enjoyed a very dry spell in the first two weeks in October, and that enabled maximum storage to be provided before the onset of the prolonged rainfall. Since 5 November, all sluice gates that control the Lough Erne system have been fully open, and the system's outflow channel has been operating at maximum capacity. The management of Lough Erne water levels involves the delicate balancing of a range of interests, including drainage, navigation and the environment.

The legislation that administers lough levels recognises that we are not in control of all the factors that influence water levels. There will, therefore, be natural fluctuation in the levels. Our challenge is to ensure that we do all that we can to lessen the effects of such an extreme event.

Getting back to normal will not be easy. Resolution of the widespread road flooding alone is not likely for a number of weeks and is directly dependent on rainfall levels. The extensive flooding to agricultural land around the loughs will take even longer to recede. My officials are currently running meetings to advise farmers about managing feeding of livestock during the winter. Many households and farms remain isolated by the flood water. Consequently, normal family life and business is, at best, difficult.

It is considered that the event is now moving from emergency response towards recovery phase. Now, the focus is on management of disruption to local communities. Fermanagh District Council is co-ordinating the social aspects of the emergency response and recovery. Isolated households that require assistance can contact the council or the Western Health and Social Care Trust. Rivers Agency officials continue to monitor water levels closely and to provide practical support through the social recovery phase, such as delivery of supplies to households that are cut off by the flood water. Rivers Agency officials, in co-operation with our partners, intend to undertake a prompt review of that flooding event to ensure that any lessons that can be learned are recognised and implemented as soon as possible.

Looking further ahead, the EU floods directive requires competent authorities in the North and South of Ireland to develop flood risk management plans to provide a framework for the assessment and management of risks of floods such as that which Fermanagh currently faces. As the competent authority in the North of Ireland, in co-ordination with the competent authority in the South, Rivers Agency will ensure that the flood risk

management plan for the Erne will focus on the overall management of its catchment area and will look at existing management practices, including land use, planning and water-level control, to determine how best to manage flood risk and to take account of the range of stakeholders involved. Given the impact that that flooding is having on the broader community in Fermanagh, Rivers Agency will review the start date for the Erne plan.

A number of elected representatives were able to see the impact of the flooding at first hand. I thank my party colleague Martin McGuinness, who accompanied me when I visited Fermanagh on Friday. We met some of the communities that have been worst affected. I am also aware that Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster visited the area on Saturday 28 November. I will provide an update to Executive colleagues on Thursday 3 December.

Finally, having witnessed the flooding in Fermanagh at first hand and having spoken to people who have felt its full impact, I must comment on the resilience and fortitude of the community, which has worked together, especially to help the people who are most affected. Martin McGuinness and I heard stories about elderly people who were isolated and cut off, whose neighbours called in to check that they had everything that they needed and kept an eye on them.

We also heard heart-warming stories about how school principals have managed. Two schools that have been badly affected are Killyhommon Primary School in Boho and Moat Primary School. A number of schoolchildren have not been able to get to school across the worst of the flooding. Some of the children whom we met on Friday actually had to travel across two floods by tractor and a third by boat where flooding was particularly bad.

It has been an extremely difficult situation. I commend the people of Fermanagh for looking out for one another and their neighbours and for the community spirit that they have shown. As I said, the community continues to cope with a difficult situation. I believe that the House wants to recognise how people have responded. I also want to recognise the efforts of all the public authorities that have worked extremely hard in difficult circumstances to help to mitigate the effects of the worst flooding.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): At the outset, I want to offer the Committee's thoughts to all the families and businesses that have been affected terribly by that devastating local calamity for Fermanagh. I also commend the emergency services, council workers, Rivers Agency operatives and the wider community in Fermanagh for the support that they have provided during the past week and for pulling together as a community in such trying circumstances.

The Minister's statement, quite rightly, offers sympathy to people who have been affected but absolutely nothing else except the damning confirmation that, as she has indicated, she is not in control of all of the factors that influence water levels. Who is in control of the situation, and what needs to be done? Will the Minister confirm that the Department will provide a hardship fund for farm businesses that are unable to insure against this type of calamity? I understand that many farmers' recently installed slurry tanks have now flooded. Will DARD relax the cross-compliance rules on those flooded slurry tanks, so that farmers will not be penalised under the nitrates directive? Has the Minister made any application to the European community in the past week for support for flooded areas? What is DARD doing to ensure that people in private dwellings are aware of the Executive's emergency relief fund of £1,000 per household, which, I understand, closes on 1 December?

Furthermore, is it possible for research to be carried out into flood plains and building on flood plains? Now that some building has taken place on flood plains, maximum protection is no longer available to many areas that face flooding crises. Will the Department lead such an examination to find out whether those flood plains can be protected and maximum protection offered?

Finally, it has been alleged that the sluice gates at Ballyshannon were closed too early, and, as a result, the flood levels rose. There must be an examination of the amount of water that passed through those sluice gates between October and November. If there was a dramatic increase, why was some release not given and those sluice gates opened, so that the flooding could have been relieved in some way?

Serious issues have arisen as a result of the flooding. Hopefully, we are now through the worst of it, and we can get some examination of the facts and answers to the important questions for the people of Fermanagh who have suffered as a result.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is quite a bit in there, so I will take my time and try to get through it all.

The Chairman of the Committee mentioned the sluice gates and the hydroelectric situation in Ballyshannon. A major drainage scheme was carried out in the 1950s, and it entailed significant improvements to the inter-lough channel through Enniskillen and the outfall channel from the lower lough. The hydroelectric generating plants and spillway structures were constructed at that time to accommodate the maximum flow that the channels could deliver. The water levels were determined as part of the 1950s legislation, which includes arrangements for quickly drawing down the lough levels by full

generation and spilling. Those trigger levels were reached on 5 November, and it is anticipated that full generation and spilling will remain in place for some time. I can confirm to the Chairman that the sluice gates were not closed early in Ballyshannon and that the full generation and spilling remained in place.

In October, the levels of the lough were drawn down to the absolute lowest permissible level to provide maximum storage in anticipation of the wetter winter months. As I have said, that is done every year, but we do not always have such a dry spell in October to be able to bring the lough right down to the minimum level.

When I met farmers and householders who were directly affected by the ongoing flooding, it was suggested that the low levels should have been breached in order to provide even more storage. However, it must be remembered that no one knew with any certainty that an event of this magnitude was going to impact on the Erne system. If the level had been drawn down and a storm not impacted, the environment, the tourism industry and, potentially, the stability of clay foundation buildings in Enniskillen might have been compromised. Therefore, the outfall channel has operated at maximum capacity since 5 November, some 20 days before the water level peaked.

I was asked about who is in control. The Erne system can be managed to a certain extent, but, ultimately, the person in control is the man above or the woman above. There has been three months' rainfall in one month, which is unprecedented. I will put it into context: while we were suffering badly in Fermanagh with that level of rainfall in a short period, the same level of rainfall fell in parts of England in 24 hours. As a result, we saw devastation in places such as Cockermouth, where bridges were washed away and people lost their life. We have seen the consequences of three months' rainfall in one month, and we know just how difficult it is to work with that.

12.15 pm

Ultimately, the amount of rain that fell over that period created huge difficulties. I was in Boho in west Fermanagh a fortnight ago. I spoke to Eileen McKenzie, the principal of the school there, who told me of the difficulties they were having in getting children in and out of school and the dangerous levels of the Sillees. We have had an awful lot of rain this autumn, and we have to deal with the difficulties that that brings. We will be reviewing the situation and working with other agencies.

I agree with the Chairman of the Committee that the emergency response was very good. All the agencies worked well together, and I want to commend everyone involved.

I will take a review to the Executive on Thursday, and I will put a case to them. The Executive have made

available flood relief of £1,000 per household. However, it is down to the fortitude of people in the county that so few houses were flooded. The levels of the lough used to be much higher, and people built on higher ground. Rivers Agency has worked in consultation with the Planning Service to try to ensure that people are not instructed to build houses near the lough or within the flood plain, to minimise the danger.

Consider the extent of the flooding: had it taken place anywhere else in the North, many more homes would have been affected. The number of houses flooded is in single figures. Members will have seen the pictures: the Share centre is devastated. However, taking stock of everything, a minimal number of homes were flooded. People showed great resilience and fortitude. Traders in Enniskillen were continuing to trade last Tuesday. Although flood water was only inches from their front door, businesses were open. Schoolchildren were walking across sandbags to reach their school buses. It is amazing how people cope in a situation like that.

We want to be able to help and to ensure that we are able to respond in the future. Rivers Agency did a magnificent job in getting out there, providing sandbags and helping people to carry on their day-to-day life. I will be looking into all of that and seeing what we can do in future to alleviate suffering and misery such as we have seen in Fermanagh over the last few weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move to questions, I remind Members that questions must be on the Minister's statement. The flexibility that I gave to the Chairperson of the Committee to deal with wider issues will not be afforded to every Member.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers to the Chairperson's questions. What can be done in the future to reduce the risk of this situation or a worse one recurring in the Fermanagh area?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It must be borne in mind that we are dealing with an extreme event. We are not in control of all the factors that influence the flood risk, as I have said. We will not be able to prevent this type of event happening in the future, but by working together we will, hopefully, be able to better plan for and manage the risk of flooding, damage and disruption to our communities.

To that end, I have asked Rivers Agency officials, in co-operation with their partners North and South, to undertake a prompt review of this flooding event to ensure that any lessons that can be learnt are recognised and implemented as soon as possible. Looking further ahead, the EU floods directive requires competent authorities North and South to develop flood risk management plans and to provide a framework for the

assessment and management of flood risk, such as the floods which Fermanagh faces. As the competent authority in the North, the Rivers Agency will review the start date for the Erne flood risk management plan, with a view to bringing it forward as early as is practically possible.

Mr Elliott: I declare an interest as a member of Fermanagh District Council. I pay tribute to the agencies who worked so well together in this crisis. I had the opportunity to visit a number of the flooded areas on Thursday. I offer my sympathy to those most affected.

There is an indication that the ESB station at Ballyshannon is not allowed to put surplus water off until it reaches a certain level. If that is so, is it reasonable to ask that that level be reviewed to allow such water to be let off much earlier than has been the case? There is a suggestion that that is where the problem is.

Secondly, has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of the Environment regarding the closed period for slurry spreading?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Nobody is in the form for spreading slurry in Fermanagh these days. Given that the ground is waterlogged, there is no point. First, there will be no growth, and, secondly, it might have catastrophic environmental consequences. We must be practical. I agree with the Member's assessment that all the agencies worked well with one another and pulled together. That combined approach is important.

The Member asked about the system in Ballyshannon. The current system works well, and, generally, we do not have problems such as this. However, the weather changes the situation and the outlook. As I said, the water in Lough Erne was drawn to its lowest level earlier this year in order to create maximum storage. However, that was surpassed by the unimaginable amount of rainwater that fell, and now we have to manage the situation as well as we can.

If the lough's minimum water levels were breached, some of the foundations in Enniskillen would be exposed and, as a consequence, deterioration caused to buildings. We are dealing with a difficult situation, but I assure the Member that Rivers Agency officials were in contact with Electricity Supply Board staff every day, that they managed the situation and that everything that could have been done to minimise the risk of disruption was done during that time.

Mr Gallagher: I want to ask the Minister about the costly damage to many properties in Fermanagh. Why was one Department involved in helping out the big players in that area? A different Department released a statement about the flooding this morning. Why was there not an offer to help the people of Fermanagh who are hurting the most as a result of the floods?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am a bit confused about the question, because I am not sure which Department the Member is referring to.

Mr Gallagher: The Department for Regional Development.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I assure the Member that Rivers Agency works for everybody and that it helped everyone affected in Enniskillen and the rural areas.

Mr Gallagher: I am talking about Roads Service.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It would have been helpful if the Member had said that in his question.

Dr Farry: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. As an expat of Fermanagh — I am one generation removed — I take a great interest in what happens down there. The Minister spoke about the need to learn lessons from the response to the flooding, and I join other Members in paying tribute to the response from the services. Have any initial conclusions been reached as to how the response could be better in future?

Will the Minister give us a preliminary indication of the estimated financial cost and economic loss to Fermanagh resulting from the floods? In recognition of that, will her Department, in conjunction with other Departments, be considering any possible improvements to infrastructure in the area so that it can better handle future incidents, should those occur?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Initial conclusions are not yet ready. I hope to have more information available by Thursday, when I will update my Executive colleagues. The Member is right about the issue of infrastructure, and I will again be stressing to the Executive the work that needs to be done to put right the damage caused. As the Member knows, a number of roads are under water, and, by the time the water levels go down, those roads will probably have been under water for weeks. That will have implications for the roads infrastructure in particular, and I want to discuss that with my ministerial colleague.

There will be an assessment, but it is too early to know what the financial cost has been, so I do not have any figures for that. We have all been so busy dealing with the impact of the flooding and with helping people, and I must say that Rivers Agency went over and above its statutory duty. Its boats were used to get help to householders, which is not necessarily part of its remit. However, it was so exercised that it consistently worked hard to help people during that time.

I am hopeful that the infrastructure issues will be dealt by the EU flood directive over the next number of years.

On Tuesday, before I went to Fermanagh, I had a conversation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the flood alleviation programme and, recognising that we are in a difficult fiscal climate, about how that money is hugely important to ensure that people do not have to suffer. As elected representatives, we have all seen at first hand what families have to suffer when their home is flooded, their possessions destroyed and their memories and photographs washed away. Flooding is as devastating as fire.

We want to do all that we can to alleviate the risk to people and to ensure that homes are not flooded. That will require a multi-agency, multi-Department approach. It is important that we reflect to the Planning Service the fact that people in Fermanagh — not just this generation but previous generations, including Dr Farry's family — had the sense to build higher up. Although that may not necessarily sit well with today's planning considerations, it is important that the risk of flooding be managed. We must try to ensure that people are not living in an area where, when they awake at night to hear the rain beating off the window, they have to worry that the water will be at the doorstep or in the kitchen by morning.

Mrs Foster: As the Minister said, the First Minister and I were in the area on Saturday meeting residents, traders and farmers. I must say to the Minister that each of those groups said that they were disappointed at the reaction of the Rivers Agency and Roads Service. In fact, some had no contact from either agency, and, when they contacted the agencies, they were passed on to another agency. There was a great deal of passing the buck.

A concern has been raised about the level of Lough Erne immediately before the flooding. I note from the Minister's statement that the sluice gates have been open since 5 November. Perhaps the Minister can confirm the dates on which the Portora sluice gates were closed prior to 5 November and what level Lough Erne reached before the gates were reopened.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not have that level of detail with me, so I will respond to the Member in writing.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and for the ongoing work that is being done. I understand that serious, immediate concerns exist in the area and wish her well in addressing them. Does the Minister think that the effects of climate change will make the type of flooding witnessed in Fermanagh more likely in future?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Climate is the long-term pattern of weather. Therefore, a storm or flood event in isolation cannot necessarily be considered to be an indication of

change. However, we must not be complacent, and events in Fermanagh have given us all a real insight into the increased risk from flooding that may result from climate change.

Although investment in flood and sea defences and a precautionary planning policy have been successful in reducing flood risk, a significant element of risk remains. That risk is likely to increase with climate change. My Department's policy framework for flood risk management, 'Living with Rivers and the Sea', identifies a more holistic approach to the management of risk, including the impact of climate change, by working in partnership with government, industry, commerce and the public. That partnership is further reinforced by the EU floods directive, for which the Rivers Agency is the competent authority.

Lord Morrow: Does the Minister accept that many people in Fermanagh feel completely let down by her Department's response? What plans has she put in place to ensure that the flooding, which was something close to a natural disaster, will not happen again? At the very least, contingency plans must be put in place to ensure that swift action is applied.

The Minister said that, given the impact that the flooding is having on the broader community in Fermanagh, the Rivers Agency will review the start date for the Erne plan. Does the Minister intend to bring forward the introduction of that plan, and can she assure the Assembly that it will be given a top priority? Does the Minister further accept the necessity for cross-departmental action on issues such as the flooding in Fermanagh?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am not sure whether the Member was in his seat when I answered some of the earlier questions. However, I gave assurances that I would bring forward the date of the Erne plan so that we could see what could be done. Contingency planning is an absolute imperative, and the Member makes a very important point.

12.30 pm

Unfortunately, we are dealing with a situation in which the budgets of all Departments, including my own, are being cut. We are fighting to find ways to manage that situation. As I said, I will raise that with the Finance Minister, as I did last Tuesday afternoon when I stressed the importance of implementing contingency plans, putting flood alleviation works at the top of our agenda and ensuring that such work is carried out. It is hugely important to those who live on flood plains and in other areas at risk of flooding that the necessary infrastructural work is carried out to a satisfactory standard. We hope that the Erne plan will be brought forward by two years, which will be a significant increase.

The view stated by the Member was not shared by the people whom the deputy First Minister and I met. We are all talking about how agencies and Departments worked well together to deal with the situation. Now is not the time for political opportunism. People in Fermanagh do not have an appetite for that.

Mr Savage: I also thank the Minister for her statement and offer my condolences to the people of Fermanagh. I understand what they are going through, because the same thing happened in my constituency last year. Our thoughts are with them.

I understand from one of my colleagues that there was no loss of life, which is a consolation in itself. What has happened has happened, and it is nice to know that all the Departments are working together. However, we think that everything is at hand, but when there are floods and we go to look for things, we find that they are not there. This is a learning process, and I hope that such a situation does not happen again.

Is there anything that the Department of Agriculture needs to do with regard to water levels to alleviate such a situation in the future? That may be pie in the sky. One of the big issues facing us is climate change, which is something that we have no control over.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank the Member for his pragmatism and common sense on the issue. This is something that we do not have any control over. All we can do is manage the risk as best we can. Events such as this are a test. We review how the agencies work together, and I am pleased with the way that Rivers Agency went out and did things that it was under no obligation to do in order to alleviate the misery for people in Fermanagh. Other agencies also worked well together.

Water levels are very difficult to control, given that we do not know where, how much or when rain will fall. We can only manage it as best we can. The good news is that water levels have peaked and are starting to recede. Although the forecast tomorrow is for wet weather, which will cause some concern, with a possibility of snow, the rest of the week is forecast to be relatively dry. Rivers Agency will remain on high alert, as water levels are still exceptionally high and the land is saturated.

As a farmer, the Member knows that when land is as wet as it is in Fermanagh, it is very difficult to walk on, never mind use machinery on. That will have an impact, not just now but in the springtime when farmers are thinking about putting cattle back out into fields, because the land may still be heavily saturated. That is when we may see the worst effects of the flooding on farmers. Therefore, although we are dealing with the situation now, there are consequences further down the line.

In every flooding event that we have seen, there have been consequences for other agencies, such as DSD for housing, NI Water and the Department of Health. Therefore, we need a multi-Department approach to deal with the social response as well as the emergency response to the flooding. We all have to work together to make life as easy as we can.

Dr McDonnell: Although I do not represent Fermanagh, I have experienced urban flooding in Belfast over the past number of years and the runaround that we have been given at times in response.

I am really confused because in my mind and in the minds of many people in Fermanagh to whom I have talked, something went seriously wrong and Fermanagh was devastated. The fact that people were resilient does not take away from the devastation that they suffered. All those affected deserve our sympathy and support.

It appears to me that we did not move fast enough. I ask the Minister to get our act together faster so that flood water can be got rid of. The effects of climate change mean that we can anticipate that type of rainfall in future. We must act faster to open sluice gates and to do whatever needs to be done. If necessary, we must drop the water level, even if it does expose foundations in Enniskillen. I do not think that foundations will be exposed in Enniskillen for a while.

I am not sure who sets the permissible water levels. Can those be renegotiated and sorted out? Can we ensure that if such a situation happens again, we will be prepared for it and the flood water will be got rid of? It does not matter whether it happens at the sluice gates at lower Lough Erne or through Enniskillen. People want to know what we are going to do to ensure that the flooding does not happen again.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The temptation is to be glib and to respond to such a question by saying that something went wrong, it rained, and to make sure it does not happen again, we will knock Enniskillen down and start again. We did everything that we possibly could, and the water was brought down to the lowest possible level. If we had lowered it any further that would have had an effect not only on foundations in Enniskillen, but on the environment as a whole. We have to be reasonable, and we have to do everything that we can. I believe that everything that could be done was done.

We were lucky that we had a couple of dry weeks in October so that we could bring the level of the lough down to its absolute minimum and provide the maximum amount of storage. However, there was three months' rainfall in one month, and the water had to go somewhere. It went into the lough and spilled out. The television and newspaper pictures show the amount of water that there is in Fermanagh.

The joke is that for half the year, Lough Erne is in Fermanagh and the other half of the year, Fermanagh is in Lough Erne, but that is true. There are people there who are now island dwellers and could remain so for weeks or months before things get back to normal. They are coping with that, so now is not the time for point scoring. Everything that could be done was done, and I assure the Member that in future, everything that can be done will be done to minimise the risk. However, we cannot control the weather.

Mr McHugh: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. You will excuse my voice; I have a bit of a cold.

I thank the Minister for her statement, which I got only a few minutes ago. People who are not from Fermanagh have a lot of concern about the situation, which is interesting. However, it is difficult to have the full facts unless you are from there. I would like there to be a review of all the areas that could be tightened up, and that would enable us to react differently in future.

The Minister made the point about the extremely heavy amount of rain that fell within a very short time. There was, perhaps, a month's rain in one night, which made a difference. In areas such as Ballinasloe, hundreds of houses were flooded, and we were lucky that that did not happen to us. Although there are difficulties there, people are prepared to cope with them. The waters in some parts of Lough Erne were at extremely high levels compared to times when flooding was very severe. I want to thank all the agencies that were involved. The Rivers Agency, DARD and Roads Service did a considerable job.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr McHugh: Yes, I have two questions, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, the Minister mentioned full generation and spillage at Ballyshannon. A third turbine was to be installed in that hydro scheme several years ago but that has not happened yet. Is it the case that water levels are being kept high in order to make money when the flood waters recede? My second question is about the reaction to very heavy amounts of rainfall on one day or over a few days. Is there provision in the Erne flood risk management plan to examine, given climate change, the difference between recent rainfall and that which occurred in years past?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: OK. I thank the Member for his question and his recognition that, largely, the situation was caused by the heavy amounts of rainfall that we had to deal with.

There is still no single agency that deals with flooding: the work must be carried out across Departments and statutory organisations. The Rivers Agency did what it could to help the people of Fermanagh over the past weeks.

As far as hydroelectric generating plants are concerned, a major drainage scheme was carried out in the 1950s. I am not suggesting that the Member remembers that, but it entailed significant improvements to the interlock channel through Enniskillen and the outfall channel from the lower lough. The hydroelectric generating plants and spillways structures were constructed at that time to accommodate the maximum flow that the channels could deliver. The water levels were determined as part of the 1950s legislation, and there are full arrangements for quickly drawing down the lough levels by spilling and full generation, which was done. Those trigger levels were reached on 5 November, and we expect that full generational spilling will remain in place for some time to help to get the water out and to deal with it that way.

It is recognised that there has been very heavy rainfall, and people in Fermanagh have been used to dealing with such situations in the past. Climate change may result in more such situations in future. We are bringing the review forward by two years to see what can be done. We will work with other agencies to manage the risk to people, not only in Fermanagh but across the North.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to introduce the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill [NIA 4/09], which is a Bill to transfer the functions of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will now be printed and put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to introduce the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09], which is a Bill to make provision about biodiversity; to amend the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and Part 4 of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002; to abolish game licences and game dealers' licences; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will now be printed and put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Diseases of Animals 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 to discuss the Diseases of Animals 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.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pay, Pensions and Financial Support for the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves the Assembly Commission's 'Report on the Pay, Pensions and Financial Support for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly' (November 2009); and makes the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Expenditure) Determination 2009 and the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Salaries) Determination 2009. — [*Rev Dr Robert Coulter*]

Motion not moved.

12.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has there been any explanation of why the Assembly Commission's motion was not moved?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no requirement to give a reason for not moving a motion at this stage. The Business Committee will deal with the matter at another stage.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Employment and Support Allowance

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

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Minister for Social Development to urgently review the administration of employment and support allowance; and views with concern the adverse impact this benefit is having on the most vulnerable in our society.

At the outset, I would like to say that the motion is being brought forward in response to the representations of claimants, and many advice centres, who have experienced difficulties with the employment and support allowance (ESA) and its administration. Any changes in the benefit system should benefit those who are claiming, rather than just make it easier for the Social Security Agency, which seems, to a large degree, to have abdicated its responsibility to administer the benefit properly.

Staff in local offices were under extreme pressure already, but dealing with a complex new system has caused more difficulties and put them under even more stress. I accept that the legislation involved is parity legislation and that, unfortunately, we cannot change that at the moment. However, we can try to ensure that the benefit is administered properly and that vulnerable people who are entitled to claim are treated with sensitivity and dignity.

On the face of it, the introduction of the employment and support allowance seemed to be a reasonably straightforward procedure. It replaced incapacity benefit and income support for people who had been claiming since October 2008. Central to the employment and support allowance are the new medical assessments, which examine what people can do rather than what they cannot do. That is laudable in principle, but the mindsets of the Department and the examining doctors have not changed in reality. The employment and support allowance was sold on the premise of evidence that being out of work contributes to poor health and that being in work delivers benefits to health, well-being and self-esteem. However, as rolling out the benefit is proving to be problematic, people's health, self-esteem, and so on are being adversely affected.

There is a fine line between expecting people who are on benefit to have a motivation towards self-sufficiency and punishing them for their misfortune of being unemployed. There needs to be a reassessment

of the so-called sickness culture, which the Government appear to think is prevalent without having tried to get to the core of the problem and deal with it in a practical and caring way. Only full-time carers and disabled people with the greatest needs are exempt from being expected to find work. Eventually, lone parents of children aged seven or older will be expected to seek work. That will be particularly difficult for parents in areas of the North where childcare is rudimentary. The Minister has said that sanctions will not be imposed where it is accepted that childcare provision is not available. However, the outworkings of that plan appear to have been fairly arbitrary so far.

I will now list some of the particular problems encountered by ESA claimants. When claimants first contact the office to make their claim, they can spend 20 minutes or more on the phone. We were told that the introduction of ESA was predicated on the majority of claims being made by phone. Calls from BT landlines are free, but calls from other networks and mobiles can cost a lot. Many people who claim benefits use pay-as-you-go mobiles because they can be cheaper, but they are certainly not the cheapest option when ringing to claim ESA.

I know of a case in which someone spent £17 of a £20 top-up trying to contact the Social Security Agency. When people telephone the agency, they find that existing employment and support allowance claims cannot be accessed. All the information must be given over the telephone. The process of changing from claiming one benefit to claiming another can take several weeks. That could leave the customer without money and in the position of having to claim crisis loans.

People who were on income support can make their employment and support allowance claim only the day after their income support ends. It does not seem unreasonable that customers should be able to make an employment and support allowance claim well in advance of their income support's coming to an end. That would seem to be common sense. It can take several weeks, and sometimes months, for a claim to be processed. That can have a knock-on effect on other benefits, such as housing benefit. People who claim employment and support allowance should also be told that they should claim child tax credits for their children but are often not.

I have been in contact with many claimants and advice centre workers, and a feeling exists that, because they are centralised in Belfast, employment and support allowance staff are more insulated and more difficult to deal with. In such cases, perception is often everything.

The claim forms are long and complex, and they are difficult to complete. They must be simplified. An ESA1, which is a claim form for employment and support allowance, has 52 pages. The ESA50 form, which

replaced the IB50 form, contains 27 pages. For two forms, therefore, we are talking about 79 pages, which averages almost 40 pages a form. They are very difficult for people to complete, particularly when the full range of information is not available to them.

When the employment and support allowance legislation was debated in the Chamber in 2007, Sinn Féin asked for changes to it that would benefit claimants and make welfare reform easier to administer. However, those practical suggestions were not accepted. I have been in constant touch with Social Security Agency staff and with Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) staff in local offices. The general feeling is that training in the new benefit has been totally inadequate. Staff are expected to deal with clients who have specific mental health problems and disabilities such as autism. I have met groups that represent people with particular disabilities, and the feeling is universal: in many cases, the criteria for employment and support allowance are not being applied properly.

Employment and support allowance has now been in place for just over one year. The general feeling is that it is not fit for purpose. Now seems to be an appropriate time for the Minister for Social Development to review urgently the administration of employment and support allowance. I urge the House to support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I speak initially as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. As the House is aware, the Committee previously considered legislation that related to the introduction of employment and support allowance. At that time, Committee members expressed serious concerns over access to employment and support allowance for vulnerable claimants. Members were particularly worried about staff resources and training.

It is fair to say that Members took some comfort from the Minister's assurances on 5 May 2009 that the Social Security Agency would get additional staff and that its personnel would receive disability awareness training. Today's motion, like the one that was proposed in May, refers to "vulnerable" employment and support allowance claimants. Given the Committee's previous deliberations on the subject, it is appropriate to highlight the fact that employment and support allowance and the wider welfare reform process is not just about securing benefits for those who need them but about helping vulnerable claimants to make their way back into useful work.

Employment and support allowance was introduced as part of a wider legislative welfare reform package. A key theme of the package is a migration of individuals in certain groups from incapacity benefit to employment

and support allowance. It is intended that many of those on employment and support allowance will ultimately move on to full-time or part-time employment.

Safe, appropriately rewarded work provides people with a purpose. It puts money in their pockets, and it has been shown to improve their health and well-being. Therefore, the Committee supports the principle of helping vulnerable employment and support allowance claimants who may have mental health issues to find useful, safe and appropriately rewarded employment. However, the Committee expects the Social Security Agency and the Department for Employment and Learning to make every effort to ensure that those claimants are supported in their search for work and helped to find the right benefits while they look for employment.

The Committee unanimously agrees that no one should be forgotten or left behind by the welfare state. A majority of Committee members accepts that reform of the welfare state is inevitable. That said, no one wants vulnerable claimants to be forced to remain on benefits when they want to work or denied the benefits to which they are clearly entitled.

The Committee considered the increasing use of telephony in connection with claims for employment and support allowance and other benefits, as approximately 79% of claims for employment and support allowance are made by telephone. On 2 April 2008, the Social Security Advisory Committee told the Committee for Social Development that it favoured enhanced free telephone access to benefits, as it works well for most customers. Notwithstanding that, Committee members still have considerable concerns about the use of telephony for all benefit claimants, especially the vulnerable. Therefore, members would value an assessment of the ease of telephone access to employment and support allowance and other benefits for vulnerable claimants.

As the House is aware, in October 2008, the Committee for Social Development issued a report on the administration of disability living allowance. That report set out practical and achievable recommendations on, for example, the simplification of application forms. The Committee was pleased to note that the Department accepted and implemented some of those recommendations. It is hoped that the Department will adopt a similarly flexible approach to the employment and support allowance and will amend its procedures as appropriate and in response to the needs of the vulnerable.

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

I conclude my remarks on behalf of the Committee by saying that we would all be concerned to learn about any apparent difficulties in administering the employment and support allowance. As the Committee

Chairperson, I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

In my capacity as a Democratic Unionist Party Member of the Assembly, I support the central principles behind the employment and support allowance. We should all welcome any mechanism or device that encourages people who want to return to work.

Mr F McCann: That may be the case in normal times, but we are in the middle of a recession, and there are no jobs out there for people to go to.

Mr Hamilton: I do not agree that there are no jobs for people to go to. Statistics show a considerable number of unfilled vacancies in Northern Ireland. A clear distinction must be drawn between jobs not being available and people not wanting to take certain jobs. There are always appropriate levels of work — the key word is “appropriate” — that people can take to deal with their particular circumstances, and I encourage people to avail themselves of any mechanism that allows them to contribute to the wider society.

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have time.

As everyone knows, we have the highest rate of economic inactivity in the UK, and we need to get to grips with the problem. Nevertheless, I appreciate that certain groups, especially those in society who are vulnerable, have particular problems. Last Friday, in Londonderry, I met a group from Disability Action, who, of all the issues that they could have chosen, selected the employment and support allowance and its administration as one of two issues for discussion. The group used the word “fear” in describing how its members, friends and families feel. If people are applying for the allowance in that frame of mind, we must accept that there is a problem.

I appreciate that there may be teething problems with the benefit's administration; it is a massive and widespread change, and we are still getting to grips with telephony.

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

Mr Hamilton: The essential principles are right, but we must respect the particular needs of the most vulnerable in society.

Mr Armstrong: As I stated in the House on 5 May 2009, I am fully aware of the many problems in implementing the employment and support allowance and, when I read about the 50-page ESA1 application form, I sympathised with those who believe that the process is too lengthy and overly complicated.

I still believe that the intentions behind the new allowance were sound and that something had to be done to change the previous system. The employment

and support allowance was, potentially, a step in the right direction. It is designed to enable those who want and are able to work to get back into work. That will benefit not only the individual but the economy as a whole.

1.00 pm

My guiding principle on matters of state benefits is clear and simple: benefits should be made available to those who are entitled to them and should be denied to those who are not, and fraud should be prosecuted and eradicated. I understand that evidence is emerging that some vulnerable groups are experiencing difficulty with the new processes that are linked to the employment and support allowance, especially people who are affected by autism. That was clearly never the intention of the employment and support allowance, and it is only right that the Minister and the Department should reassess the outworkings of the employment and support allowance to ensure that unnecessary obstacles are not placed in the way of genuine claimants.

I am not, however, writing off the employment and support allowance as a failed initiative; it has positive aspects and aims, in that it seeks to ensure that those who are capable of working are encouraged to do so. Too many people find themselves stuck in a rut of long-term unemployment. In some cases, generations experience it, and it becomes an alternative lifestyle choice.

Recent evidence shows that it is more difficult to claim benefits because of sickness. The number of sickness-related benefit claims likely to be rejected across the UK because of the new system will top 250,000 a year. In light of the low productivity and disproportionately large number of claimants in Northern Ireland, that should be welcomed.

It is a crime to condemn people to long-term unemployment, and we must do everything possible to ensure that those who want to and are able to work get back into work. That will benefit not only the individual but the economy as a whole.

The current economic climate means that there are far fewer jobs than there were this time last year, and we must recognise that those who are able to work can work only if jobs are available. That is a challenge facing Governments and economies worldwide.

I am content to support the call for a review of the employment and support allowance to see that it is implemented in the most effective and efficient manner and what modifications can be made to improve its outworkings.

Mr Burns: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak once again on the employment and support allowance. As Members will know, this is the second time in recent months that a Sinn Féin motion on this

issue has been debated in the Assembly. Members will also know that, as has been stated by other Members today, the employment and support allowance was introduced approximately one year ago as a replacement for incapacity benefit, and the idea behind the change was worthwhile.

The employment and support allowance focuses on how people can be helped into work, and it was never assumed that a person who has a medical condition is incapable of working and does not want to work. Everyone wants to work, and everyone should have the opportunity to do so. When people are in employment, they are better off, not just financially; their health, self-confidence, social networks and general well-being are all improved and strengthened by their having a job.

However, the employment and support allowance is quite a complex allowance, and there were some teething problems with its introduction, particularly with the phone system and the processing of new claims. Many individuals who claim the benefit are vulnerable and include people with learning disabilities or mental-health conditions. However, as the Minister explained during the previous debate on the issue, much effort has been made to assist claimants. Performance regarding the handling of employment and support allowance claims has improved and continues to improve all the time. Although we are satisfied with the improvements that have been made, we want to see even more.

The performance of the telephone system has improved vastly. It was far from perfect at the start, but more staff have been deployed and the people manning the phones are more experienced. Nearly all of the calls to the 0800 and 0845 numbers are answered and dealt with right away.

A similar improvement has been seen in the processing of forms. The average time for processing the old incapacity benefit form was 22 days, but the average time for processing the new employment and support allowance form is 16 days. Therefore, people are getting their money faster under the new system, and we hope to improve on those times.

The majority of customers make their claims over the phone, but the employment and support allowance centre has new procedures in place to assist people who have difficulty making a claim in such a way. Assistance during a telephone call can be provided by a representative acting on behalf of a claimant, or forms may be filled in at home. If that does not suit, a claimant may go to the jobs and benefits office for face-to-face service, and they can bring someone with them to act as their representative during that visit.

Staff have been given awareness training regarding autism. Disability awareness training has also been provided by Disability Action. The training is being

provided to telephone agents and all other operative staff, and the process should be completed soon.

The motion urges the Minister to consider the most vulnerable in our society and their claims to employment and support allowance, and that is exactly what has been done. Everything should and will remain under review, and the measures that we have in place will, no doubt, be built on in the future.

It is right to expect that staff are properly trained to deal with all types of employment and support allowance claimants and that people find it easy to access their benefits and get their money on time. That is the type of service that we intend to deliver. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I support the spirit of the ongoing welfare reform, which aims to reduce the number of people who are dependent on long-term benefits and to get more people back to work. Our Programme for Government has as its top priority the building of the economy. It is important that more people become economically active in order to allow us to move away from a benefits culture.

Research findings from the Department for Work and Pensions on new claimants to the employment and support allowance, from its commencement in October 2008 to February 2009, covered almost 200,000 claims, and it showed that only 5% of those seeking the allowance were assessed as being incapable for work. Those people are, therefore, entitled to the full benefit with a rate higher than the previous incapacity benefit.

It is important that we target the genuine cases and give adequate benefits to those who are most in need. However, research has shown that the majority of people want to work, because it gives them not only financial reward, but higher self-esteem and better health and well-being. The employment and support allowance focus on helping people to get back to work is right. However, claimants also need proper advice, support and training to enable them to get into the workplace, and we need to help them and be more sensitive and caring as they go through the process.

During the initial period, my office, like others, received a number of complaints about the delays in the application process, which caused a lot of unnecessary concerns and stress to people who need the money, and who, because of the delays, are facing difficulties and hardships. Indeed, one applicant sent in a completed application form, enclosing all of the original documents, yet was told that the office had not received it. The assessment office eventually owned up to the fact that the application had been lost in its internal postal system. The new process is certainly complicated. However, it is still very new and will take time to evolve, so we should not be too hard on the staff in the new office.

We need to listen to a number of disability organisations that have raised awareness of some health conditions and the impact that the employment and support allowance may have on people with disabilities and certain health conditions. It is essential that the staff and health professionals who are involved in assessments receive adequate training and are given clear guidance to help them through the very complex process. That will allow them to become more understanding, sensitive and knowledgeable about the various disabilities that they are dealing with when carrying out assessments.

For example, Macmillan Cancer Support has advocated that anyone who is undergoing active cancer treatment or who is terminally ill should not be subjected to compulsory interviews. I am very sympathetic to that view and feel that we must look into such approaches. Furthermore, the Nationalist Autistic Society has made it clear that autism is a lifelong condition and has suggested that asking those with autism to produce sick lines time and again is impractical. Again, such criteria should be reviewed and scrapped. Moreover, the Parkinson's Disease Society has pointed out that the conditions associated with that disease fluctuate and that the nature of the disease varies. It has suggested that that variance could mean that people with that disease could have their illness assessed as manageable.

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

Ms Lo: Such an assessment could mean that the applicant does not receive the benefit to which he or she is entitled.

I support the motion, but we must listen to all of the voices from the voluntary sector.

Mr Craig: I support the motion. When the employment and support allowance was introduced in October 2008, its aim was to help those with disabilities who want to work — and I stress the word “want” — and who can work to get back to work. That must be borne in mind. I believe that the Government were right to create this lifelong benefit for those living with disability. There are some people with disabilities who want to get back to work, but find it extremely difficult to do so.

However, the employment and support allowance is not without its problems, all of which seem to emanate from its administration. In reply to a question asked in July 2009, the Minister stated that the total number of claims received between October 2008 and June 2009 was 21,457. That shows the incredible demand that there has been in the system for the allowance.

Issues with the telephone system have also been highlighted, and people are being encouraged to make a telephone application rather than take part in a one-to-one interview. The total number of telephone calls that the unit dealing with the allowance received in that

same period, October 2008 to June 2009, was 167,441, which, by anyone's account, is a massive number of calls. Therefore, is it any wonder that people have had difficulties in getting through and have been left on hold? The system is in overload; there is no other way to describe it.

Earlier this year, the Minister admitted that there were issues with the telephone system, and, in fairness, she introduced measures to improve the situation. However, even with those improvements, there are still some issues about the length of calls. Given those facts, it would be unwise for people to use their mobile phones to call the system because they could be waiting for a long, long time.

1.15 pm

I also take issue with the 13-week assessment period. Why does it take 13 weeks? The process is complex and daunting; that is the understatement of the century. The books must be balanced, and bureaucracy is breeding bureaucracy. We are inventing a system of support for a support system. That is bewildering in anybody's mind. We must get our heads round a way to simplify the system without allowing it to be left open to abuse. Last week, I listened to a discussion on ‘Good Morning Ulster’ that highlighted the fact that we are engrossed in form filling, and, unfortunately, all those benefits came to mind. It is an administrator's heaven. We must examine the issues and simplify them.

Some people seek to play the system, which, unfortunately, has led to a lot of the administration. However, those who are out to play the system can take advantage of bureaucracy. We think that we can catch out those people if we make the forms more complicated. In my experience, those people are much more intelligent about form filling than, possibly, Members of the Assembly or administrative staff who fill out forms. The process can end up being counter-productive. I appeal for the system to be simplified. How many cheats are clogging up the administration system? We can never seem to find the answer to that question. Nevertheless, we continue to over-complicate the system to accommodate —

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

Mr Craig: Finally, although I agree that there are complications and issues with the system, I fundamentally believe that the Government's initiative is worthwhile. We live in an era in which there are not as many jobs as there were, but we should not forget the individuals who want to work.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. I support the motion. Although I understand that the Minister may have no room for manoeuvre when she deals with the legislation and the employment and support allowance, she has control

over how the benefit is administered. When the Bill was introduced, we raised a number of concerns about the impact that it would have on those claiming the new benefit. Let us face the fact that the British Government can dress it up any way that they want: it is not about making life easier for those unfortunate enough to be claiming the benefit; it is about eventually reducing the number of people claiming incapacity benefit, or the employment and support allowance, as it is now labelled. I have heard it said that the Government's target is that half of those who currently claim the benefit will eventually be put off claiming for it. Over 100,000 people receive the benefit in the North, so imagine the impact that that will have.

I spoke to several people who work in the section that administers the employment and support allowance. They summed up the situation by saying that chaos reigns and that senior managers have little experience of dealing with front line services but that they are pushing the benefit, warts and all. Many of the staff are at breaking point.

Some time ago in the House, I asked about the use of phones, and I was told that each office had free phones that were tied to BT; that is not the case. At that time, I was concerned about the large number of people who are not tied to BT, who have access only to a mobile phone and who are out a small fortune for using their mobile phones to make claims. Although the Minister said that the service was free at the point of use, BT is paid by the Department for the service. My colleague Mickey Brady gave a clear example of how expensive it can be to phone that service.

It is also interesting that, between 27 October 2008 and 26 June 2009, 167,000 people used the phone service. Of that number, 125,061 calls were made from the inquiry line; therefore, those callers had to pay for the service. It would be interesting to find out how much money BT was paid for the service and how much money claimants have had to pay since the benefit became live.

People who apply for benefits are the most needy in society. To make them pay for the luxury of making a claim is somehow immoral. I represent a number of the most socially deprived wards in the North. The local benefits office has scaled back the number of employees, all of whom had provided an excellent service for claimants. When people arrive at that office to claim employment and support allowance they are informed that they should go to the local advice centre, where they will be allowed to use the phone and will get help with their claim.

We were told that free phones would be available in each office, but there are none in the office on the Falls Road. I asked someone to call there this morning in case phones had been provided over the weekend, and

they were told that the office was supposed to get them but that they had not been provided. That office is recognised as dealing with the most socially deprived people in Belfast. Claimants either arrive at our party office on the Falls Road or use their own phones at a cost.

We have also been told that it should take between five and nine minutes for someone to make a claim by phone. I recently witnessed someone making a claim by phone, and they were on the phone for at least 20 minutes. I also rang a number of advice centres, and they verified that the norm is 15 to 20 minutes but that it can take longer. When people make first contact on the phone but do not have all the required information at hand or cannot remember dates of previous claims, they must make a second or third call to finalise their claims.

It is my understanding that the employment and support allowance division does not have a public office; all contact must be made by phone or letter. Some cases can run for months, with employment and support allowance (ESA) staff asking for additional information. People have been asked for information to back their cases and then, several weeks later, have been asked for other bits of information. That can be the case when customers are asked for financial records; they supply a statement and find that, after some weeks, they are asked to supply further statements for three months and then six months, thus prolonging the claim. That is causing serious problems for claimants. One would think there would be a set list of required information that would cut out all the administration and ensure that people would be paid speedily.

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

Mr F McCann: People who were previously in receipt of income support can apply for employment and support allowance only when their income support expires. There should be a mechanism to allow people who are in receipt of income support to apply for employment and support allowance weeks before their income support runs out. That will ensure that people will be paid during the waiting process.

Mr Easton: In supporting the case for a review of the administration of employment and support allowance, it is useful to analyse the aims and objectives of that allowance and to highlight the fact that its administration should worry Members. That is all the more significant when we realise that the people who depend on the allowance are vulnerable, hence the need for urgency.

The research that shows that nine out of 10 new customers for what was incapacity benefit state that they wish to return to work will be warmly welcomed. It shows a positive work ethic and demonstrates that people who have the right assistance and support can

go on to take up successful employment. We are taking a holistic approach, caring about the whole person. Returning people to employment is more than just boosting the economy. I can point to the plethora of research that shows how employment positively contributes to physical and mental health, contributing to the overall sense of well-being of the individual and their respective families.

The provision of the pathway adviser, bringing the knowledge from the Department for Employment and Learning and assessing financial support packages, is highly commendable. I also take time out to acknowledge the provision of the condition management programme, where the professionalism and vocation of our Health Service staff are utilised to assist and support our people to manage an illness or disability in a work context.

We must acknowledge that some people are unable to undertake any work-related activity. Those people must be offered increased financial support, and no burden of expectation must be placed on them that they should return to work.

Time does not allow for a full analysis of the benefits, but it would be remiss of me not to note the benefits of tailored personal support with a trained advisor who provides medical assessments that allow individuals to find out what they can do and what personal support is available to help them to do it.

Several questions must be asked. Is employment and support allowance getting to the people who are most in need of it in a timely and efficient manner? Are queries being answered promptly? Are the vulnerable sections of society who depend on the employment and support allowance getting the service that has been outlined?

Regrettably, I cannot respond to those questions positively, and major questions remain. For example, a major cancer charity has expressed real fears that the system's safeguards are inadequate to prevent someone who is undergoing active cancer treatment from being compelled to attend interviews. Due regard must also be paid to people who live with complex illnesses such as Parkinson's disease. The Parkinson's Disease Society noted its concern that, if a person were incorrectly assessed as having more manageable symptoms of Parkinson's disease, the ensuing stress of attending work-focused interviews would exacerbate the problem and lead to increased difficulties in managing the situation.

Lessons can be learned from the administration of the employment and support allowance here and in other parts of the United Kingdom. Problem areas include the creation of increased barriers to entitlement; red tape and burdens of bureaucracy leading to people getting into debt; claimants being judged ineligible when their general practitioner is in no doubt that they are unfit for work; and the mental health of ex-service

personnel who have endured traumatic experiences not being considered.

The case for review could go on and on, but the unequivocal fact is that vulnerable people in the system have been left wanting, which is unacceptable. Earlier, I outlined the noble aims of the employment and support allowance; those have not been delivered, leaving many to raise the issue that the administration of the system is not fit for purpose for some of the most vulnerable people. The review must come as a priority for those sections of society.

Mrs M Bradley: I am sure that many Members have been contacted, at some point, by constituents who are disgruntled to say the least by the employment and support allowance, most likely because their entitlement to the benefit has been critically questioned. The long and troubled history of Northern Ireland that, hopefully, we are leaving behind, has made it difficult for communities. For many people, incapacity benefit was the benefit of choice, and, given some of the physical and emotional injuries that many people had been subjected to, that is hardly surprising.

On 27 October 2008, the employment and support allowance replaced incapacity benefit, and there are bound to be teething problems. In the early days of the transition, my office was busy with complaints regarding ESA; now it seems to have become considerably quieter. However, that does not mean that ESA is perfect in any way. The roll-out of any benefit at any level is complicated, but, when the Labour Government decided to change incapacity benefit, it was problematic, to say the least.

The new process makes it difficult for people suffering from disabilities or illnesses that are not readily recognised or visible. For example, people with autistic spectrum disorder appear perfectly healthy, and their disability is masked quite easily and unintentionally on the applicant's behalf. Therefore, it is essential that staff in ESA centres are trained to the highest standards and equipped with the appropriate tools and education to identify and assist applicants who suffer from autistic spectrum disorder.

It is also essential that staff are made aware that it should be the norm, rather than the exception, that they make clear to applicants their right to engage the help of an advocate who can act on their behalf throughout the application process. It is essential that people who suffer from serious illnesses but whose prognosis is not terminal are given the time and assistance that they need to recover from their illness and not feel pressurised to return to work prematurely simply to keep government Departments off their back. However, many constituents are under that impression. All Members will have been approached by constituents who have similar stories.

1.30 pm

There is a fine line between good practice and harassment. I am pleased that the Minister recognises that and that she is doing all that she can to make the process more user-friendly and accessible for those who find it difficult to make an application in the first instance. Given the economic climate and the negative effect that its implications can and are having on people's emotional and physical health, I can assume only that the employment and support allowance benefit will be fully utilised with those factors in mind.

It is right and proper that I finish with sentiments that autism pressure groups expressed throughout the Don't Write Me Off campaign. They want to receive the right information to assist them to get work when they are able to do so; the appropriate and timely payment of benefits when they are not able to work; and knowledgeable and well-trained staff to appreciate the difficulties involved for vulnerable people.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, and the Minister will take all the issues on board in her response.

The Department for Social Development website states that some 114,000 people are on incapacity benefit — the precursor to employment and support allowance — 74% of whom have been dependent on it for more than two years. Nine out of 10 claimants are anxious to return to work.

It is positive that many people want to gain employment, but, from what I hear in my constituency office, the change from incapacity benefit to income support and now to employment and support allowance does not provide much encouragement. I am sure that many other Members who are present in the Chamber are aware of that problem, and perhaps they referred to it today. People who are unwell are already under stress, mostly because of their illness. However, that stress is increased by paperwork and the many hoops through which they must jump to get money on which to live. In many cases, that stress causes a worsening of the illness. The motion aims to address the problems with the system, some of which I will now highlight.

In common with most Members, I have had too many constituents come to my office because they simply cannot climb over the paper mountain to access the benefit that will enable them to feed their children. It is as basic as that. We have all heard horror stories from those who visit our constituency offices. One young lady, for example, despite having provided all the required information, had not received a payment for three weeks. She spent almost £10 calling the central number for the employment and support allowance from her mobile phone, because low-cost calls do not extend to mobile phones and she does not have a landline.

Mr F McCann: I had hoped to raise that issue when I was saying a few words. When claimants are waiting for their first payment, they are entitled to only one crisis loan, which quickly runs out. They are left to their own devices for the remainder of the time.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. I could provide more examples from my constituency office.

The young lady came to my office almost every day for a week in an attempt to get her money, and she was unable to understand what the problem was. When my office staff made some calls, they discovered that further information was required from the Child Benefit Office. Sometimes, therefore, other agencies do not feed into the system. When we rang the Child Benefit Office, we were assured that they had sent the information but told that because their computers were down they could not check. Calls went back and forth for three days until we got in touch with an employment and support allowance officer in Belfast, who took it upon herself to go to the office to clear up the paperwork. That young lady deserves great credit, because she did more work on that claim than most of the other staff and eventually sorted out my constituent's problem. I want to put that on record.

I am aware of too many such cases. Suffice it to say that the system as it stands does not always work and makes little sense to most people. The new system has teething problems, but those problems are so serious that they must be inherent in its make-up. The teething stage should be well behind us.

I want my points to be constructive. When constituents call into the social security office building in Ards with information that has been requested, such as a doctor's line, they hand it over to the staff, who efficiently send it by courier to Belfast so that it arrives there the same day. One would like to think that someone would process that information and facilitate a payment within the next day or so, but that is not the case. It takes five days for the information to be processed. Again, the system is not functioning as it should.

The telephone system — again, I have some constructive criticism — is a complete nightmare. People who are down to the change in their purse are unable to put credit on their mobile phones to make the necessary calls. In saying that, I must be honest and admit that, any time that I have phoned with a query, staff have been most pleasant and helpful. However, the system as a whole cannot be tolerated for much longer. If my constituents are able to tell me that they have encountered problems, the system needs to change.

People are confused about what forms need to be submitted and copied. Members will love this one: one of my constituents was advised by her doctor to photocopy her sick line several times and to send one

in the post and one by fax because of the surprising way in which sick lines get lost and because she had too many patients to write out three copies of a sick line for her every month. That is what some doctors are saying. If that is going on, there is a problem somewhere in the system. That doctor was not being rude; she was simply being honest. She certainly has more work to do than to fill out the same forms for patients over and over again. She should not have to do that.

I want to take the opportunity to ask the Minister to ensure not only that there are clear markers for people, so that they understand what forms need to be submitted in order for them to get their money, but that the system is revamped so that, when people have gathered the relevant information, it is processed in a timely fashion, and they do not have to wait weeks before getting their money.

We would not accept that delay from an employer who did not pay us our sick pay properly. Why should it be acceptable for Departments to do that? It is not acceptable. I am sure that the Minister will deal with Members' questions in her response and that she will undertake to make the changes that are necessary to help my constituents and those of every other Member and to improve the system for employment and support allowance.

Mr McHugh: I support the motion. Members who have contributed to the debate are aware of the difficulties. As I am the last Member to speak before the Minister responds, many of my points have already been raised. Some of the salient points that Jim Shannon made certainly ring true for me, as do points that were made by Fra McCann, who knows the system backwards.

I often wonder why certain changes are made. In my part of the world, "ESA" means different things, depending on who you are speaking to. To farmers, it is an "environmentally sensitive area". Almost every five minutes, there is a change of lingo. Members must make a great deal of effort just to keep up. I wonder why the title of incapacity benefit or sick pay was changed. Why does it have to be called "employment and support allowance"? Is there a hidden reason behind that decision? Is there a drive simply to get people off benefits, as Fra McCann has said? A large number of MLAs will never have been in the position of being able to identify with people who need those benefits, because they come from a wealthy background or are well enough paid. They have never known what it is like to depend on a small amount of money each week.

The Minister should look at making the system people-friendly. It should be about the people who need the money. In some instances, it is a matter of surviving from week to week, as Jim Shannon said.

The system creates great fear and puts pressure and stress on people who are in any way ill when they know that their money could be cut off in a week or two if, for example, they cannot prove that they are looking for work. Imagine the litany of bureaucracy that would be involved in checking whether someone looked for work at a time when there is no work even for people who are capable of doing it.

Thousands of people — young fellows — were able to build from here to Dublin. Now they have not got a single thing to do, yet they are being made to prove every week that they have gone to employers to ask for work. God help employers who must listen to people who come in to get forms signed about work that they simply do not have enough of for themselves, let alone for the people who ask about it.

A certain attitude exists. I am sorry if I appear negative; however, there seems to be a Civil Service drive, certainly at Whitehall or Westminster level, to attack people who perhaps, for educational reasons, cannot get out of the culture in which they find themselves. That is why I have taken a broad-brush approach rather than dealing with individual differences. I am aware that the process itself has massive difficulties. Every week, I hear about them in my office. I often wonder whether anyone else does anything about those problems when all the people come to me. Individuals who try to get through the process experience great difficulties, not least of which is having to make calls on their mobile phones.

I must say that, without question, Civil Service staff at the Department's Enniskillen office do a tremendous job. For the most part, civil servants are proactive in helping people, but some have a chip on their shoulder. It should be taken into account, when reducing the number of people on benefits, that there are no bleeding jobs out there. That should be taken into account when people are harassed about filling in forms, which I see every day of the week.

Some young mothers want to look after their kids even after they have reached age of 12. They are doing a very good job at home and do not necessarily want to go to work. That should also be taken into account at a time when there is no employment, because there is no point in them wasting their time going to businesses to look for jobs. Indeed, in the case of Fermanagh, there are now no big employers anyway, except for Sean Quinn.

ESA was designed during the boom, when there was full employment and we needed to drive people back into work. However, that has changed, and I do not think that all the things that were done during the boom time to reduce the number of people on benefits were necessarily done for the right reasons.

I will leave the Minister to think about those points. Indeed, all the points that other Members made are very valid.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank everyone who contributed to today's discussion. The employment and support allowance centre celebrated its first birthday on 27 October, and I welcome this timely opportunity to update Members on the progress made in the first year and highlight the steps that my officials have taken to engage with various groups to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable customers are taken into account.

The principle behind ESA is that appropriate work is good for most people's physical and mental health and well-being, as well as for their finances. It is about creating more opportunities for individuals and helping to raise their personal aspirations. ESA focuses on what people can do rather than what they cannot do, and it helps them to improve their own lives and the lives of their families.

Employment and support allowance is a more active benefit, and most ESA customers are expected to consider appropriate steps to move back into work, although they will not be forced into work. The most severely disabled people, those with severe health conditions and those who are very ill, do not have to undertake a work capability assessment. That is the policy, and I think that it stacks up as a policy. Several references were made to people who are severely disabled and are suffering. We are being very sensitive about people who are suffering from terminal illness or from other life-threatening conditions.

I accept that many of the concerns expressed today are not about the policy but are about implementation and administration. Implementation involved migration from two complex benefit regimes, incapacity benefit and income support, to one new, equally complex benefit. Members will rightly ask about the challenges. They involved training large numbers of staff to expert level; moving thousands of claimants over during the transfer; introducing completely new processes headquartered in a single new centre; and shifting most of the customer interaction over to telephony. Therefore, lots of change came with the Welfare Reform Act, and I think, by and large, our staff achieved the transition without any calamity and without dropping the ball. However, I am the first to admit that there were teething problems. Policy projection in Britain underestimated resource requirements, but the Northern Ireland ESA centre quickly addressed the matter, setting up a dedicated hotline when the service was launched. Looking at performance now, we have come a long way in a single year.

Many concerns have been raised today about the treatment of vulnerable customers. Inevitably, many

ESA customers have vulnerabilities, including mental health and learning challenges, and, although measures have been in place from day one to provide additional support for vulnerable customers, those have been built upon over the past year. That is notwithstanding the number of issues that have been raised by MLAs, MPs and other public representatives, as well as customers themselves. It is through that learning experience that we improve our administrative systems.

1.45 pm

There are safeguards and choices for vulnerable claimants right along the customer journey. For those who have difficulty using a phone, an application form can be filled in. Members will recall that I made a point of making ESA forms available to their constituency offices as well as via the voluntary advice sector and the agency's local office network. That was to ensure that there is the greatest possible opportunity and accessibility for everyone. All those who are entitled to the allowance should be applying for it or having their application forms assessed.

Vulnerable customers can also make best use of the face-to-face service that is delivered from the extensive local office network through the jobs and benefits offices, whether for information and advice or help with an application. In addition, special arrangements exist to enable ESA claims made on behalf of a vulnerable person by representatives, family members or other advocates to be dealt with over the telephone. In fact, I sat with staff in the ESA centre while they completed such an application form over the telephone. Where a doctor considers that additional medical evidence would be beneficial in considering whether a customer should be placed in a vulnerable category, that will be followed up.

As we are particularly conscious that some customers with certain health conditions or disabilities may not fully appreciate their obligation to attend a medical examination or provide evidence to substantiate their application, a further safety net has been built in, whereby an officer will visit a vulnerable claimant in his or her home to provide help. Any customer who is disallowed the ESA following a medical examination has a right of appeal. In most instances, such customers will continue to receive the allowance pending the outcome of their appeals.

Let me say a few words about how the ESA is performing now. Things have moved on in the past year. Interestingly, nearly 80% of all customers calling the free phone number to enquire about making a claim go ahead and make that claim over the phone. Jonathan Craig referred to the number of claimants. We have now 33,000 claims for ESA. All of that is a sound endorsement of the new telephony service. I have seen it working. The average time taken to deal

with a full claim is between 20 and 25 minutes. That includes the option to make a claim for housing benefit. My officials are very conscious that it may take time for people to express or convey their requirements. Therefore, we give them time over the telephone to do that. We are particularly sensitive in that respect.

As for getting through to the ESA centre, there has been a dramatic improvement over the year. Some 95% of calls are now answered first time and waiting times have reduced significantly. On average, ESA applications are now being processed in less than 16 days, from the customer's initial contact to payment. That compares favourably with the 22-day target for the old incapacity benefit. In addition, procedures have been put in place to offer customers the option of interim payments rather than to direct customers to the social fund. That said, crisis loans are an added safety net for customers who are facing financial hardship.

Jim Shannon referred cases to me, even at my constituency office. My staff have communicated to me on particular issues, as did other Members. I was glad to be able to have those issues resolved to the satisfaction of those concerned, because we are dealing with some of the most vulnerable in society and we want to be able to help them to get a resolution. I am interested in helping people to get solutions to their problems.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has made herself available to me to discuss a number of constituency issues. I have met her in her office, and her phone number is available. She gets the job done.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for that intervention.

I think that we have shown initiative and applied common sense by arranging, where possible, to pay the contributory benefit of ESA while information continues to be collected for any income-related element. As always, our commitment to customers is to get their payments issued as soon as possible. Overall, the management and staff of the agency have achieved a lot over the past 12 months, and the service will continue to improve.

Recently, I launched the Department's new benefits adviser service, which is a free, anonymous service that allows customers to check their potential entitlement to 27 benefits, pensions and credits, and to get an estimate of the amount of financial assistance that they may be entitled to for 11 benefits and credits, including ESA. It also has the facility for customers to simulate "what if" scenarios to find out what would happen if their circumstances were to change. Therefore, we were thinking of every eventuality. That complements the ongoing promotion of benefit uptake, which has been a key priority for my Department. Since 2005, our benefit

uptake programmes have generated more than £27 million in annual benefits and arrears for customers.

In addition, an outreach service has been running for some time to get accurate and practical information about ESA to vulnerable customer groups. For instance, in recent months, staff from the centre have visited special schools to talk about ESA for youth; they have spoken to supported employment organisations about the work that customers are permitted to do while receiving ESA; and they have engaged with the Northern Ireland education and library boards' transition service to ensure that young people aged between 16 and 19 years with special educational needs and their carers are fully aware of any ESA entitlements.

Not only have my officials visited groups that represent our most vulnerable customers, they have arranged for representatives and advice workers to visit the ESA centre to see at first hand how it works. Only two weeks ago, advice workers from the National Autistic Society visited the centre and saw for themselves how calls are handled and how the ESA process works.

I am also committed to ensuring that staff are properly equipped to deal with all aspects of ESA, and, to that end, learning and development is an operational priority that is not just restricted to in-house training courses. For example, Disability Action has delivered disability awareness training to 120 ESA staff to date, with another 130 to follow. The Advice Services Alliance has worked with ESA on developing frequently asked questions for their members and the public to access.

To celebrate ESA's first birthday, I recently spent a morning in the ESA centre and was immediately struck by the positive attitude and morale of the staff whom I met. Those staff have a real can-do approach. They have faced the difficulties encountered in developing the new service with great commitment and professionalism, often going that extra mile when necessary.

Although many observers feel that the ESA claim form is too complex, unfortunately the detail that is required is dictated by legislation that has already been endorsed by the House. That said, we should remember that customers used to have to engage with staff from the incapacity benefit branch, income support and the Housing Executive to progress three separate claims that can now be made during a single 20- to 25-minute telephone call.

Members will also be interested to note that the ESA helpline is being extended to increase capacity for all elected representatives. I encourage Members to continue using that service, if and when required. I also assure Members that procedures and processes in the ESA centre are under ongoing operational review.

Staff are learning from that approach, and performance continues to improve.

Issues were raised today that derive from constituent cases. If there are particular issues that Members want me to examine, please give them to me, and I will be only too content to examine those cases to ensure that a solution is arrived at.

Reference was made to mobile phones, and I can tell Members that ESA staff are instructed to offer customers a call back on request.

Anna Lo raised the issue of sick notes. Customers are only required to have a medical certificate to support their claim until they are assessed. When someone is assessed and remains entitled to employment and support allowance, the important point is that no further medical certificates are required.

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

The Minister for Social Development: Other issues were raised by Members, and I will come back to specific Members in writing. The debate is a timely opportunity for me to extend an invitation to Members to take the time to visit the ESA centre to see at first hand the solid work that staff are doing to deliver this new benefit for customers —

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

The Minister for Social Development: Not least those who are most vulnerable in our society.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion, and I thank the Business Committee for its support. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, which has been very constructive.

It is worth repeating what Mickey Brady said about some of the difficulties and stresses that staff in the ESA centre have experienced. One of the central themes, as touched upon by most Members who spoke, is that staff are doing a good job; it is just that the system seems to be completely overwhelmed.

I will go through some of the comments that Members made and then come to some of the points that the Minister seemed to invite me to return to.

The motion calls for a review of the administration of the employment and support allowance. Thomas Burns pointed out that this is the second time that we have brought such a motion to the House. Regardless of the number of times the motion has been before the House and which Department it addresses, if the issue exists and if it continues to be problematic for people, particularly for claimants who, as outlined, are the most vulnerable in our society, any Department should welcome constructive criticism and indicators of how the system can be improved. The need for additional

staff and resources is a point that has been well made throughout the debate.

Mickey Brady made the point that, at a very personal level, applying for ESA is demoralising, especially for people who have cancer, Parkinson's disease or other life-limiting illnesses, for people with autism or mental health problems, and for anyone who has had to endure countless minutes on the phone. Mickey Brady gave the example of a woman who had to spend £17 on calls from a mobile phone before she got an answer. Perhaps she did get a call back when staff got her application; however, that is very demoralising. Poverty is a humiliating experience, and trying to access a benefit around which there are so many difficulties and barriers — including having to pay £17 for a phone call — adds to that humiliation. I think that all Members and everybody in the Department would want fewer people to have that burden.

There have been difficulties with the telephone system and the way in which people have tried to make applications for ESA. That issue was raised by almost every Member who spoke. I suggest that, at the end of the debate, the Minister and her civil servants look at the Hansard report to see whether Members' suggested improvements can be made. I do not think that anybody raised anything that would cause any major shakes. Members have been very measured and considered in their contributions.

The reason why we tabled the motion, and why so many Members spoke to it, is that the administration of the employment and support allowance is a source of ongoing difficulties in our constituencies. It is frustrating for people who are trying to make a successful claim.

2.00 pm

Simon Hamilton, speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, said that Committee members have concerns. I am sure that David Simpson, if he were in the Chamber, and former Committee members could talk about the difficulties that they encountered, but most Members support the principle of getting people back to work. However, getting people back to work should not be done at a cost to others, and that is where Simon Hamilton departed. The employment and support allowance is for people who have a can-do attitude and who want to get back to work. DSD and DEL have a role to play, and Simon Hamilton said that no one should be left behind or forgotten about.

It is worth revisiting the report on DLA, because it made helpful recommendations on the employment and support allowance. Mickey Brady and other Members made the point that, although DLA, like the employment and support allowance, is a parity issue, the Assembly, the Minister and the Department can

adopt a local approach. That may mean adapting and amending measures to fit local trends and to help local people. The report's approach to DLA was progressive.

Billy Armstrong mentioned that the process was too lengthy and over-complicated and supported the call for the employment and support allowance to be reviewed. From what I heard in the debate, no Member wants the benefit to be stopped as part of a big shake-up. Members should shout out if they feel that I am speaking out of turn or not accurately articulating what they said. We need to try to address the comments and queries that have been raised in the debate.

When Thomas Burns talked about "we", I thought that he was talking on behalf of the Department. I thought that he had inherited the Department over the weekend. Perhaps some of his notes got mixed up with those of his colleague the Minister for Social Development. He made the point that there is a need for a face-to-face service, which is important.

Mary Bradley, Anna Lo and other Members mentioned the Don't Write Us Off campaign, autism and people with cancer and other life-limiting illnesses. There is a need for proper sensitivity and understanding. By and large, most staff have the necessary awareness, and it is helpful that organisations provide training. The time that people have to wait for a response seems to cause much frustration.

Jonathan Craig reiterated that the employment and support allowance is about helping those who want to get back to work. He said that the initiative is still worthwhile. However, the system is experiencing a massive overload, which is creating huge stresses and challenges. That is a crucial element of the debate. We need to consider the 13-week assessment period because that would constitute a practical step that we can take to make a difference.

Fra McCann spoke about the number of people who are trying to make claims but are having difficulties. His constituency office is probably one of busiest in Belfast for dealing with issues from benefits claimants. As Gerry McHugh said, Fra McCann, like Mickey Brady, knows the welfare system inside out because he has represented the needs of claimants for a number of years.

Alex Easton spoke about the plethora of bureaucracy that people face, particularly those who have mental-health problems. There seems to be a need for a better point of delivery. From what the Minister said, I am sure that the comments on that issue in the debate will be taken on board.

Jim Shannon gave the practical example of a constituent's coming into his office with a horror situation that must have been traumatic. It is totally unacceptable that a girl who had only pence in her purse was waiting for an answer. The worst thing is that that girl will not be alone: similar cases will be

experienced by many people in our constituencies. I am delighted that Jim Shannon received such a quick response and that the Minister intervened. However, the Minister cannot be expected to intervene for everybody who experiences difficulties with the process.

If any intervention is made, it should be to give more resources to the staff who administer the employment and support allowance. More support staff are needed, as well as the practical measures that were mentioned.

Gerry McHugh spoke about changing the names of benefits, and that in his constituency, people think that ESA is an abbreviation of the phrase "environmentally sensitive area". The name of the benefit does not really matter to the people who have to claim it. What matters is that people cannot access the benefit and are experiencing difficulties and trauma.

The Minister mentioned the first birthday of the employment and support allowance and the positive developments that have taken place in the past year. Those developments have to be welcomed: and I am not saying that we should welcome them, then add a "but" — and then the big slap comes. This is not about political point scoring. We do not table motions to score political points; we table them in order to represent the needs of the people who come into our constituency offices. Sinn Féin's constituency offices, as great as they are, are no different to those of other political parties in this place, and employment and support allowance is an issue that is raised persistently in our offices. It is an issue that we can do something about and make a difference, should it be in reducing the waiting period from 13 weeks, examining the telephony system, or looking at support for the staff who administer the allowance. All those aspects should be examined and reviewed.

I welcome the debate and thank the Members who contributed to it. There is one issue that we must take into consideration. Mickey Brady dealt with a woman who spent £17 on telephone calls —

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly will. We must help people to be reimbursed. I am not encouraging people to commit fraud. I am encouraging people who are furthest removed from the system to be included rather than excluded. I thank Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Minister for Social Development to urgently review the administration of employment and support allowance; and views with concern the adverse impact this benefit is having on the most vulnerable in our society.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

North/South Co-operation

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

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that North/South co-operation and implementation can deliver economic, social, infrastructural and other benefits for the people of Northern Ireland; notes the ongoing North/South review examining (i) the efficiency and value-for-money of existing implementation bodies; and (ii) the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived; calls for immediate publication and public debate of all elements of the review; and further calls for an acceleration of the development and enlargement of North/South opportunities, including, *inter alia*, a response to the economic downturn on this island.

Strand two of the Good Friday Agreement gave effect to the establishment of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), with the aim of developing consultation, co-operation and action on the island of Ireland, including, through implementation on an all-Ireland and cross-border basis, matters of mutual interest within the competence of the Administrations, North and South.

That element of the Good Friday Agreement not only makes sound economic sense, but recognises the aspirations of Irish nationalists for greater co-operation on an all-island basis, the agreement itself allowing for the principle of consent on the constitution of the North of Ireland to be resolved by the people of the North of Ireland.

In voting for the Good Friday Agreement, nationalists on the island of Ireland supported the Irish Government's removal of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, but on the clear understanding that there would be greater North/South co-operation on a wide range of areas and responsibilities. That point is often ignored by unionists, who tell us that the establishment of a devolved Assembly at Stormont was of importance to them. They must respect our rights to greater North/South co-operation. As the DUP leader said at his party's recent conference, more than 40% of the North's population cannot be ignored.

Our proposal states that the Assembly recognises that North/South co-operation and implementation can deliver economic, social and infrastructural benefit for the people of Northern Ireland. To know how valid that

statement is, one has only to look at the evidence thus far. InterTradeIreland, for example, has already helped more than 1,400 companies, North and South, to generate added value worth €200 million, with at least as much again expected from current programmes. That is no easy task in the midst of one of the worst global recessions ever seen.

Tourism Ireland has also worked wonders in attracting visitors to our natural heritage sites and to the North and South as a whole. The work of Waterways Ireland must also be strongly commended. Surely its work is more critical today than ever, particularly for the people of Fermanagh? There are other examples of North/South projects, particularly in health and social care, but, for the SDLP, those do not go far enough. Opportunities exist to tackle environmental crime, reduce the effects of climate change, tackle our waste infrastructure on an all-island basis and protect our natural heritage, including our marine environment, as required by European Union legislation.

The motion also calls for the publication of phase one of the North/South review, which was completed several months ago. What does the DUP have to fear from that? One can only assume that the review gives a massive thumbs-up to North/South co-operation, and that that is the real reason why it is yet to see the light of day.

The SDLP will not accept the DUP amendment, which is disingenuous to say the least. It is more to do with the DUP's internal difficulties and Jim Allister than the objective merits of North/South co-operation. Nationalists have been let down by the go-slow on North/South matters. It is quite clear that Sinn Féin has taken its eye off the second strand of the Good Friday Agreement.

We also recognise the importance of the implementation of strand two of the Good Friday Agreement in having the ability to promote and build reconciliation on the island of Ireland between all people, North and South. We have a clear duty to secure a lasting peace between our people, both for our children and for future generations.

I will not be mean-spirited. I recognise the potential for the implementation of strand three of the Good Friday Agreement, the British-Irish Council (BIC), to build better relationships between the people of Ireland and Britain. The Good Friday Agreement is clear about the promotion of North/South co-operation. There is a clear duty on unionism to recognise the legitimate aspirations of people on this side of the House and over 40% of the electorate and population of the North. The motion should not cause fear or consternation to anyone who has the welfare of the people whom they represent at their hearts. The evidence shows that the

work done thus far has been to our mutual benefit, and to the benefit of everyone.

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

“that balanced North/South and east-west co-operation can deliver benefits for the people of Northern Ireland; notes that the ongoing North/South review has yet to conclude; and welcomes the efficiencies imposed on the implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd.”

The need for the amendment is self-evident. There are parts of the motion that Members on this side of the House could not subscribe to. The remark from Mrs Kelly about how our amendment is motivated by some outside political parties is total nonsense. It is not as though the DUP has just arrived at this position in recent months. We have been consistent in how we deal with North/South matters.

The title of the debate, “North/South Co-operation”, is fine. It is the wording of the motion that causes difficulty. The DUP has always said that it has no issue with genuine North/South co-operation.

However, we do have an issue with the motivation behind the motion, which Mrs Kelly spelt out very clearly when she talked about the nationalist community’s aspiration for a united Ireland. The nationalist community is entitled to have that aspiration, but our party will not help it to achieve it, because we are solidly unionist.

2.15 pm

We recognise that North/South co-operation is very good where it benefits the people of both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. We have no difficulty with North/South co-operation if it benefits the people of Northern Ireland, because that is what our party is all about. We are all about making sure that the people of Northern Ireland get the best deal possible, whether from the devolved institutions at Stormont, our national Parliament at Westminster, the European Union, or North/South bodies. We remain focused on that objective.

For years, normal relations with the Irish Republic were not possible. The Irish Government refused to recognise Northern Ireland’s right to be part of the United Kingdom or acknowledge the fact that the majority of people who live in this country want it to remain part of the United Kingdom. Under the Belfast Agreement, the Ulster Unionists and other pro-agreement parties established free-standing North/South institutions that were not accountable to the Assembly. Thankfully, that situation was rectified at St Andrews by ensuring that North/South bodies are accountable to the House.

We have also addressed the imbalance that existed between North/South relations and east-west relations. I am glad that BIC meetings have become more

frequent in recent years. Our relations with other regions of the United Kingdom are very important. Coming from east Antrim, I know that that our Province is strongly connected with Scotland in respect of tourism, culture, and so on. We need to work on such connections. It is a shame that the SDLP motion fails to acknowledge or note the significance of the BIC or the east-west relationship, not just for us but for other regions.

Mrs D Kelly: I am surprised at the shortness of the Member’s memory. I said that we will not be mean-spirited and that we recognise the British-Irish Council’s importance in promoting good relations.

Mr Ross: I do not have a short memory at all. We can vote only on the words that are on the Order Paper. It does not matter what you say in the course of your speech. What matters is the form of words —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to refer all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Ross: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. It does not matter what the Member said in her contribution. What matters is the form of the words that are on the Order Paper.

It is not only unionists in Northern Ireland who regard the BIC and the east-west relationship as important. Small Crown dependencies in other regions of the United Kingdom also recognise the importance of that relationship, as evidenced by the recent spat between the Westminster Government and the Scottish Government about where the BIC secretariat should be located. That is evidence of the sorts of relationships that we are building in the post-devolution era and of the importance of good relationships between us, other UK countries and the Irish Republic.

One of the main issues that we have with the motion concerns cost. The SDLP motion:

“calls for an acceleration of the development and enlargement of North/South opportunities”.

The SDLP wants to enlarge the North/South structures. However, every Member is painfully aware that public finances are tighter now than they have been at any other stage in recent history and that there will be massive cuts to the Northern Ireland Budget after the next general election. The Conservatives have said that they will cut our Budget; we are all aware of what will happen, and we are bracing ourselves for it. It is up to us to ensure that taxpayers get value for money from every element of government. The DUP has led the way in that regard. We have sought to cut back unnecessary bureaucracy. We are seeking to require all Departments to make efficiency savings. We are pushing forward our reform agenda, which does not just concern structures but calls for fewer Assembly Members. We are also calling for a reduction in the number of Departments and quangos.

North/South bodies cannot be treated any differently. They must be examined so that a decision can be made on whether they provide genuine value for money for the people of Northern Ireland. Tens of millions of pounds are spent on structures such as the North/South Ministerial Council and Tourism Ireland. If politicians are genuine about their commitment to bringing about efficiency and value for money, we must all question the value of the North/South institutions.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that there is some confusion in the DUP about its attitude to the North/South bodies? He travelled to Dublin in March with the Committee for Regional Development and issued a statement that criticised the Chairman for giving evidence to an Oireachtas Committee, only to discover that a Member from his party had done exactly the same. An apology was then issued through one of his colleagues.

Mr Ross: I fail to note the relevance of that point at all. There is absolutely no confusion over how we view North/South co-operation. I will not take part in official proceedings of the Irish Dáil, but that has absolutely nothing to do with the motion.

If we consider attitudes in the Irish Republic to the issue, those who were charged with finding efficiency savings looked straight at the North/South bodies. They said that the amount of money that is being spent in that area could be radically reduced. Politicians in the Irish Republic certainly support that view. Despite what the SDLP and, I imagine, Sinn Féin may claim, people in the Irish Republic are not wedded to the current North/South bodies. They certainly have no appetite to expand the financial commitment to them. In a situation in which money is tight, my view and, I imagine, the view of most people in Northern Ireland is that our money should be focused on front line services such as hospitals, education and building roads. Our money should go into those areas rather than into the North/South structures.

If the SDLP were being responsible, the party would wait for the outcome of the review to which the motion refers before it would even consider calling for North/South opportunities to be enlarged or expanded. As the motion states, there is a review ongoing. It was established at St Andrews and began in October 2007. We should wait for the outcome of that review. Calling for its immediate publication, as the motion does, is premature. Perhaps the SDLP should practice some patience in that regard. It is paramount that the review result in an examination of the type of programmes that have been run and of whether we are getting true value for money from those programmes and structures.

What I would prefer to see, and I think that the SDLP should examine this idea, is North/South co-operation that does not require the level of money, bureaucracy

and red tape that the structures to which that party refers need. We often hear ministerial statements on North/South matters in the House that are perhaps one page long and do not contain much substance. When very little comes out of the existing structures, an expansion to include more areas of “North/Southerly”, as the SDLP proposes, seems absurd. As has been indicated, the motion certainly appears to be politically motivated. It is simply trying to breathe life into the existing moribund structures.

It is far better to have genuine meetings when they are required. There is no reason why Ministers cannot correspond with one another on issues of importance. We know that it is important to discuss farming matters. We also know that it is important to meet on environmental considerations, and Mrs Kelly referred to the dumping of illegal waste. Those are areas in which co-operation is needed in future, but we do not need mass bureaucracy in order to have that level of co-operation.

I know that my time is running out, but the motion also calls for an all-island economic recovery. That raises an eyebrow, because why would we want to tie our economic recovery to the Irish Republic, which is considered to be a basket case all around Europe? I know that shopkeepers in Newry welcome the fact that we have the border and have two separate economies, because they are doing very well. The SDLP motion is a wee bit out of step in that regard.

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

Mr Ross: I ask the House to support the amendment. It is much more balanced and reasonable than the motion. It recognises east-west relationships as well as North/South relationships, and it seeks to have good relations with our neighbours in the Irish Republic and with the remainder of the United Kingdom.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. If the debate were approached on the basis of common sense and a desire to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale for public service delivery and forward planning, including forward spatial planning, the motion would receive the unanimous and enthusiastic backing of all Members in the Chamber.

Believe it or not, I agree with Dolores Kelly's phrase, “objective merits”, and I think that some members of the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party are capable of looking at issues on the basis of objective merit, so I ask them to apply that criterion to the motion. However, if one were to approach the motion with a different mindset, coloured by outdated political

prejudice and narrow political partisanship, the result would be all too predictable.

No matter where they are in Europe or in the world, everybody knows that borders, by their very nature, disrupt economic and social life. They have a very negative impact. Nowhere in the world is a border more unnatural than in Ireland. I am reminded of a meeting that I had with an Irish Government representative to China, who told me that a map of the world on his office wall that was provided by the local Government did not show the island of Ireland at all. He asked me to try to imagine further splitting hairs with potential investors by telling them that there are two states on the island.

There is no doubt that the bodies that are mentioned in the motion provide value for money. However, the scope, terms of reference and areas of co-operation of those bodies are too narrow, restrictive and limiting, and they do not allow the bodies' potential to be fully exploited. At the weekend, I met Professor Pat D'Arcy, a visiting professor at the University of Ulster, who said that, from his perspective, the border should be porous when it comes to the delivery of health services. He said that there are major issues about the future delivery of acute services in Monaghan, Cavan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Craigavon. Why can this region not be considered as a subregion for the delivery of acute services?

Important GP out-of-hours pilot projects have been undertaken in the Castleblayney/Keady/Crossmaglen area and in the Derry/Inishowen area with positive outcomes. Those projects should be extended throughout the border corridor. In addition, if children's cancer services were looked at on a single-island basis, they would be a lot stronger than existing provision. InterTradeIreland has been mentioned; it helps companies in the North to identify new markets in the rest of Ireland. The Ulster canal project is waiting to be developed further. Roads projects, such as the A5/N2 and the Sligo/Enniskillen/Larne route, are supported by both Governments, all of which is positive. Furthermore, I appreciate that, on a number of occasions recently, the North/South Ministerial Council has looked at the economy. The more that the Administrations in the North and the South come together to consider the economic situation, the better.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

One need only consider sport. Some months ago in the House, I drew attention to the fact that an all-Ireland rugby team had managed to beat France. At the weekend, an all-Ireland rugby team managed to beat South Africa, which is, perhaps, the best rugby team in the world. That Ireland team needed northerners and southerners. If we had an all-Ireland soccer team, perhaps, in the not too distant future, we would be

going to the World Cup as well. I say that about a weekend in which, of course, St Gall's and Cookstown achieved major victories in Gaelic football in the Ulster Club Championship, so I commend them as well. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: We are moving towards Question Time, so Members may take their ease until 2.30 pm. The debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to be called will be Mr Danny Kennedy.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Nursery Schools Admissions

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education to outline the admissions process for nursery schools.
(AQO 447/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá soláthar maoinithe réamhscoile ar fáil san earnáil reachtúil agus san earnáil phríobháideach/dheonach. Is córas é an próiseas iontrálacha don earnáil réamhscoile atá bunaithe ar thosaíocht.

Funded preschool provision is available in both the statutory and private voluntary sectors. The admissions process for the preschool sector is a preference-based system. The policy enables parents to state their preferred setting for their children. However, if oversubscribed, individual boards of governors or management committees are required to apply published admissions criteria to determine which pupils to admit.

The Department of Education sets a requirement to give priority to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents are in receipt of certain social security benefits and to those with birthdays in July or August. Once that requirement is satisfied, additional criteria for admission are the responsibility of each individual setting. Those criteria will reflect the board of governors' or management committee's priorities for admissions to their school or playgroup.

Application forms for pupils who have not been accepted for admission to their first-preference school are made available to the parents' second-preference school. That process is repeated for third-preference schools until all places have been filled.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for outlining the process. Given the levels of oversubscription in many nursery schools, will the Minister consider urgently introducing a two-stage application process to ensure that children who are in their final preschool year receive priority over younger children? The difficulty is that when a school board goes to fill its places, it must do so with all the first-preference applications before it considers applications from children from other schools who may be older and for whom the school is a second preference.

The Minister of Education: The Member makes some valid points. The Member will know that we are bringing forward an early years policy, and that is one of the areas that we will consider. The Member will also know that the Audit Office's report on the preschool education expansion programme found that broad principles of good practice were recognised and applied effectively. It also recorded that the establishment of the EPPNI project — the effective preschool provision project — by the Department at the outset was an excellent example of planned evaluation.

However, the report also listed a number of areas for potential improvement that the Department should consider when developing future policy for children, including the need to connect more effectively with parents and to convey how the proposals would support and strengthen families. It is also important that the Department ensures that a professional development framework is created for the workforce. The report also recommended that we give consideration to the different funding arrangements for providers.

We are committed to addressing inequalities in the system. We are open to examining which areas need to be improved, and I will ask my officials to bear in mind the Member's comments.

Mrs M Bradley: In light of the increased responsibilities being placed on the voluntary community and private sector by 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion', what proposals does the Minister have for transforming the qualifications of those who work in that sector?

The Minister of Education: First, an inequality exists in the funding of statutory and voluntary/private providers. As we all know, the earlier the intervention in a child's life, the greater the chance that the barriers to learning can be removed and special educational needs addressed. We are working closely with others as part of 'Every School a Good School', and the Member will know that we have extended the consultation until 31 January 2010 because an enormous number of submissions has been made.

The original question did not refer to the issue of special educational needs, but the Member introduced it, and it is relevant to early years provision. The Member knows that, as far as special educational needs are concerned, the earlier that we intervene, the better. We have had 14 public consultations, and I want to give everybody an opportunity to make a representation. We will study carefully all the proposals and comments on the 'Every School a Good School' review of special educational needs and inclusion.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister will agree with Members that a child's early years are very important. How does the

admissions process fit in and work with the recently completed Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) child poverty inquiry, which identified that the Department of Education has a clear role to play in addressing that issue?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for that supplementary question, and he is absolutely right. We are working closely with OFMDFM. I am a member of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, and early years provision is one of its areas of focus. We had a meeting last week at which early years provision was discussed. It is a matter not only for OFMDFM but for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has a key role to play. The Education and Health Departments obviously need to work closely together.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to the role of the boards of governors and managing committees, depending on the circumstances, and their responsibility to set out their admissions criteria. Can the Minister provide examples of the criteria that are used to select children?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Tá réimse tosca ann ar féidir le naíscoileanna glacadh leo.

Nursery schools may adopt a range of factors when selecting children. For instance, a child's selection may be based on the board of governors' opinion that he or she has special home circumstances; that one of his or her parents has a serious illness, for which medical evidence is required on the application form; that one or both parents is deceased; proximity to the school; previous attendance of siblings; or whether the child is a child of a permanent member of staff.

Léiríonn an taighde gur dóchúil go mbíonn níos mó deacrachtaí ag páistí ó chúlraí atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste sóisialta ag scoil ná a bhíonn ag páistí eile.

Research has shown that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children do. For example, if they were not given priority, children with July or August birthdays may otherwise not receive any education provision until they were five.

Education and Skills Authority: Controlled Sector

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education why her Department has not established a sectoral body to represent the interests of the controlled sector under the proposed new education and skills authority arrangements. (AQO 448/10)

The Minister of Education: Fuarthas iarratais le haghaidh maoinithe ó eagraíochtaí atá ar lorg comhlachtaí tacaíochta eárnála a bhunú roimh shamhradh na bliana 2008. Go dtí seo, ní bhfuarthas aon iarratas ó eagraíocht atá ar lorg bheith ina comhlacht tacaíochta eárnála do scoileanna atá san eárnáil rialaithe faoi láthair.

Applications for funding from organisations seeking to establish sectoral support bodies have been received since before summer 2008. To date, no application has been received from a body seeking to become the sectoral support body for schools that are currently in the controlled sector. However, given the nature of the role that sectoral bodies will play, it is not for the Department to establish them; they must, by their nature, be independent of the Department and the new education and skills authority.

The Department of Education invited interested parties to attend an initial scoping discussion in June this year. Invitations were extended to all those in education and library boards; those who had responded to consultation on the sectoral support policy; and other individuals who were suggested by members of the Committee for Education. Several dozens of people attended that and subsequent discussions. From those discussions, a number of individuals have continued to pursue the prospect of forming such a body. Officials from my Department have continued to offer advice and support for their efforts. However, politicians should not be allowed to hijack the Transferor Representatives' Council's genuine concerns for their own narrow political interests. I have met the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) on several occasions, and it is in the interests of everyone that it is involved in education.

I understand that, following a further meeting that was held last Wednesday, an application for funding may soon be submitted to the Department. I assure the Member that that and the other applications already received will be considered on an equal basis. The establishment of such support bodies will be a valuable component in the reform programme that I am determined to implement for the benefit of all pupils, parents and the wider community.

Mr Hamilton: It is difficult to be lectured on narrow political interests by the Minister. What investment is the Minister prepared to put into any proposed sectoral group to ensure that it is on a level playing field? Will the Minister commit to ensure that the proposed ownership body is genuinely representative and that it includes representation from the TRC?

The Minister of Education: Rinne mé soiléir é go mbaineann an t-athbhreithniú ar riarachán poiblí le coigilteas a dhéanamh a dhíreofar ar an eárnáil oideachais, go háirithe ar sheirbhísí túslíne.

[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I have made it clear that the review of public administration is about generating savings that can be redirected within the education sector, specifically to front line services. Although no final decisions about funding have been made, I will ensure that the total envelope for resources that are available to sectoral support bodies will also show that my priority lies with the classroom.

Support for all sectoral bodies, including the body that the Member asked about, will be modest and will reflect the focused role that I expect those bodies to play. I assure the Member that all sectoral support bodies, including the one to which he referred, will receive funding.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cén uair a thioctas an Bille a bhunófas an t-údarás um oideachas agus scileanna faoi bhráid an Tionóil.

Will the Minister tell the House when the Consideration Stage of the Education Bill, which provides for the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA), will take place? What actions will she take to ensure the continued administration of education here after 1 January 2010?

The Minister of Education: Everyone in the House understands the importance of the establishment of the education and skills authority — none more so than me. Indeed, each month, I chair a very high-level group that is made up of the chairpersons and representatives of the boards and other bodies that will merge into the ESA.

It is essential that we establish the ESA to deal with the inequality in the education system and with the number of young people who are currently being failed by it. Far too many of our young people have been failed by our education system, and that is simply not good enough.

It is no secret that there are those on the unionist Benches who cannot deal with change in any context, even when their ministerial colleagues have signed up to it. Despite agreements that the DUP has made, it has continued to block and stall the process.

I will make a detailed statement to the House tomorrow, and I will not pre-empt it. However, it is in all our interests that political agreement on the ESA is reached and that money is made available for front line services.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister tell the House whether she feels that all sectors were treated equally and that the outcome for all sectors was the same during the development of the Education Bill? If that was not the case, what steps will she take to address that situation, and will those steps involve taking matters to Westminster?

The Minister of Education: I assure the Member that equality is foremost for all sectors and that the Department adheres to all its equality duties. No sector will be disadvantaged, and all sectors will be treated on the basis of the Department's equality duties.

School Buildings: East Londonderry

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the upgrading and replacement of post-primary school buildings in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQO 449/10)

The Minister of Education: Beidh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt, agus an Roinn, más cuí, ag bualadh le hionadaithe ó na cúig iarbhunscoil i gceantar Chúil Raithin le plé a dhéanamh ar na riachtanais a bheidh ag an cheantar i gcoitinne san am atá romhainn sula n-ullmhófar breithmheas eacnamaíochta ar na moltaí le haghaidh soláthair iarbhunscoile sa cheantar.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board and the Department, as appropriate, will meet representatives from five of the post-primary schools in Coleraine and its hinterland to discuss the future needs of the area as a whole, before an economic appraisal is prepared on proposals for post-primary provision in the area. In parallel, an economic appraisal that examines the future requirements of Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine High School is due to be presented to the boards of governors of those schools soon.

Mr Campbell: Is the Minister aware of the deteriorating condition of many school properties along the north coast, particularly those in the Coleraine and Limavady areas? Following the receipt of the economic appraisal, how urgently will she act to ensure that the pupils in those schools receive the type of accommodation they deserve?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister answers, I remind Members that the question relates to a constituency issue.

The Minister of Education: I am aware of the condition of many of the school buildings throughout the North of Ireland. The Department has a very good capital budget, and its use will ensure that the inadequacies in the system are dealt with. I look forward to the support of all parties for my capital programme. It is very important that the Department's minor-works and capital budgets are not affected.

2.45 pm

The Member may be interested to note that my Department spent £2.3 million in 2008-09, which represents 99.1% of the gross capital budget allocated. Previously, under direct rule, a substantial amount of the capital budget was handed back. Thankfully, our Department now manages its budget very well, and it

is getting money to where it is badly needed. However, it is unacceptable that a large number of our schools are in substandard condition, and I look forward to the Member's support when I look for money for capital from future Budgets.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What has caused the delay in the proposed amalgamation of Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine High School?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Dhírih an breithmheas eacnamaíochta ar na roghanna atá ag Institiúid Acadúil Chúl Raithin agus ag Ardscoil Chúl Raithin araon. Ar cheann de na roghanna sin bhí cónascadh an dá scoile.

The economic appraisal focused on options for both Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine High School, one of which was to amalgamate the two schools. However, the education committee of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) expressed the view that the economic appraisal should have a wider focus and consider the future of other post-primary provision in the Coleraine area.

The NEELB and the Department met in September 2009 and agreed that the economic appraisal could be presented to the boards of governors of both schools shortly. The presentation of the economic appraisal will be the first stage of a process towards addressing future needs in the area.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the continuing use of huts or prefabs is more reminiscent of scenes from the Second World War than of a modern society that offers equality and cherishes our children equally? Does she also agree that smaller schools, such as St Paul's College in Kilrea, are seriously disadvantaged in their expansion plans while the capital money is not available? What does she intend to do about those situations?

The Minister of Education: I agree with the Member's first point. Our young people need new buildings that are fit for purpose and a stable environment in which to learn. That is why we are bringing forward dynamic proposals, for example, for the Lisanelly campus among others. The Department spent £2.3 million in 2008-09, and it spent 99.1 % of its budget. We need to continue to invest in the education estate, and I look forward to the support of the Member's party when I bring forward proposals for my budget.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Education and Skills Authority

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Education if she will extend the life of education and library boards,

if the education and skills authority (ESA) is not in place by 1 January 2010. (AQO 451/10)

13. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Education how she intends to administer the education system if the education and skills authority (ESA) is not in place by 1 January 2010. (AQO 459/10)

The Minister of Education: A Cheann Comhairle, tabharfaidh mé freagra ar cheisteanna 5 agus 13 le chéile. Beidh a fhios agat, a Cheann Comhairle, gur iarr mé cead ráiteas a thabhairt don Tionól ar an ábhar seo. Tuigim go bhfuil am á chur i leataobh don ráiteas sin amárach.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 13 together. You will be aware that I have requested permission to make a statement on the matter to the Assembly, and I understand that time will be made available for that statement tomorrow. Therefore, I am constrained in how far I can go at this point without risking the wrath of the Chair by providing the details that I wish to impart in the statement.

The simple reconstitution of the boards is neither practical nor desirable. Many board members rightly state that they have done their part and that it is time for others to step forward. To simply reconstitute the boards would be contrary to the Executive's objective of a radical reform of education structures and would only cause further uncertainty for staff and schools. I do not see value in simply extending the entire board membership again for a transitional period. I will use existing legislation to ensure that structures are in place to ensure the seamless running of our education service to schools, youth services and society.

Ní mór do na polaiteoirí sin a chuir bac leis an reachtaíocht ról a imirt lena chinntiú nach n-imrítear cluiche na polaitíochta leis an mhoill a chruthaigh siad; ní mór dóibh a chinntiú go n-úsáidtear an mhoill sin mar am trasdula mar maithe le seirbhísí oideachais túsline..

Those politicians who have blocked the legislation must now play their part in ensuring that the delay that they have created will not be used as a political football, but rather a transition run in the interests of front line education services.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for partially answering my question, but I would like her to re-answer it in view of what I am about to ask. As the Minister hinted, many people are going to be leaving the library boards either because of retirement or because they are coming to the end of their time. Will the Minister guarantee that her new system is going to work and that the education system will be fully functional next year?

The Minister of Education: We all have to ensure that the transition to the arrangements that we put in

place, which I will be talking about tomorrow, is as seamless and smooth as possible. We have worked hard to keep staff informed about what has been happening to help allay their fears. For the majority of staff, the establishment of the ESA will not immediately change their job or location.

It is essential that the education of children is not affected by the delay. As I said, we all have a responsibility to ensure that smooth transition. That includes those politicians who have delayed progress. I will be working with all of the boards, other organisations that are affected, and all the educationalists, to ensure that we have as smooth a transition as possible. I will be making a detailed statement on that tomorrow morning.

Lord Morrow: Do we assume from the Minister's reply that the penny has finally dropped with her? She is now telling us something that most Assembly Members have known for 12 months. The Department of Education stands on the verge of meltdown. Is the Minister now confirming that she is going to put in place new regulations to ensure that the Department does not go into free fall from 1 January 2010, something she has been well warned about in the Assembly?

The Minister of Education: I think the free fall is in the Member's imagination, with respect. There is no free fall in the education system. There will be a smooth transition from January 2010. The Member needs to ask himself and his party a question. Despite agreements that were reached last year, the DUP continues to block and stall the process. The people that they need to answer to are those whom the system is failing. They need to answer to the working class communities in the Shankill, Coleraine, the Waterside, Armagh, and in the Member's own constituency.

The party opposite may be content to try to block and delay reforms, but at the end of the day the people who are being hurt by that are the working class children from the catholic and protestant community and the newcomer children. The education and skills authority is about streamlining, cutting bureaucracy and putting money into the front line. As Minister, I will not be deterred, and we are going to continue with the reforms, but the Members of the party opposite need to examine their consciences.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In relation to the previous comments about chaos, mayhem and confusion in the education sector, I certainly have not come across that during many visits to schools and education centres. If there are schools in the constituencies of the Members opposite —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Members opposite have schools in such conditions in their constituencies, they have a duty to inform the Minister as to where those schools are located.

The Minister of Education: I absolutely agree with John O'Dowd's comments. I have visited hundreds of schools. Teachers, principals and administrators of education are professional people. They can see exactly what is happening. They understand exactly who is trying to block reform. They know that buses will run and classes will operate, and they know that we are bringing about much-needed change, because they are the educationalists and they understand that getting rid of the 11-plus is for the benefit of children.

They understand that we should not be spending so much money on the bureaucracy and administration of education, but that we should have a much more coherent and consistent approach. They understand that money should be going into the front line — into the classroom — to deal with special needs and early interventions. Blocking and saying no all the time is not the way forward. We are reforming the education system, and that reform will continue.

Mr Cree: I was interested to hear the Minister's answer. What message does she have for parents, teachers and educationalists across the community who no longer have any confidence that she can deliver a sustainable outcome on the issue or on the ongoing transfer debacle?

The Minister of Education: My message to all parents, teachers, educationalists and children is that we are building a first-class education system for all, and not just some, children. We are putting equality at the core of the education system, and we are putting a targeted, strategic focus on underachievement, because I am not content to allow the level of failure that has existed in the system to continue.

Last Wednesday, I attended a North/South Ministerial Council meeting at which my colleague Reg Empey was also present. He raised the issue of the 16,000 so-called NEETs: people who are not in education, employment or training. If the Members opposite are happy with that, that is up to them; I am not, and I know that Reg Empey is not. I welcome his highlighting the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. I am focusing on the creation of a world-class education system, and I will continue to put equality at its core.

Department of Education Budget

6. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Education what budget pressures her Department currently faces.

(AQO 452/10)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhabhta monatóireachta i mí Mheán Fómhair chláraigh mé brú de thart ar £21.9 milliún ar an mbuiséad acmhainní.

In the September monitoring round, I registered pressures of £21.9 million on the resource budget. That was for funding to help to address the backlog of maintenance in the schools and youth estate; access to end-year flexibility for schools and education and library boards; and funding for administrative pressures. None of those pressures was covered, and, in addition, my Department is to contribute £11.3 million recurrent and £2.1 million to fund swine flu pressures faced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That adds to the pressures that my Department faces.

Mr Molloy: What effect will the delay in the establishment of the ESA have on this year's budget?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin, nó is ceist an-tábhachtach í. Mura féidir tús a chur leis an údarás um oideachas agus scileanna ar 1 Eanáir 2010, níorbh fhéidir na héifeachtúlachtaí a rabh dréim leo a sholáthar.

If it is not possible to achieve a start date for the ESA of 1 January 2010, it will not be possible to achieve the efficiency savings that were to be secured, and that will have a knock-on effect on service delivery as those resources have already been removed from the education budget. That is not good for education.

In addition, the £21 million of funding over a three-year period that has been surrendered so far will have to be made available for education when needed. Those resources were surrendered on the strict understanding that the funding would have to be restored to the education budget. The centre has benefited from the re-profiling of those resources, and I will demand that they be restored to my budget before the ESA is set up.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister referred to her Department's budget pressures. As she is aware, Magherafelt High School is getting a newbuild. Has she finalised that process to ensure that that no longer causes a budget pressure?

The Minister of Education: I will write to the Member about Magherafelt High School. I wrote to a DUP Member about the school, although I cannot remember which one. It is one of the capital projects that the Department is actively considering, and the Member will know that I am reviewing all capital programmes. All projects will be evaluated against departmental policies, including 'Every School a Good School', area-based planning and the entitlement framework.

Mr O'Loan: The Minister will know that three schools in Ballymena that provide special education amalgamated three years ago. It is accepted that Castle Tower School urgently needs a new single building, although we hear that the school might not receive its new building for some years. Is that the result of

budgetary pressures, or is the project not being properly managed?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Education: I visited that school, which is a very important school for our projects. As I said, the Department is reviewing all capital projects in line with its policies.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Redrock Engineering Ltd

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance his Department has offered to the Armagh-based engineering firm Redrock Engineering Ltd. (AQO 462/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department has a range of programmes to help businesses to deal with their recruitment and training needs.

My officials met the company on 6 November, when it was agreed that they would co-ordinate and manage an on-site redundancy clinic. That was held on Thursday 19 November, and helped those who were affected to process applications for statutory redundancy repayments and to start the process of finding retraining opportunities or alternative employment. Advice from the Department and relevant partner organisations was provided to current employees and to those who had been made redundant. The Member will be aware that I met him, Danny Kennedy, Mickey Brady and Cathal Boylan on 9 November on this subject.

Mr Irwin: Given that approximately 50 people have lost their jobs in the run-up to Christmas, will the Minister assure us that those who are entitled to redundancy will receive their payments as soon as possible?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is a well-established process whereby my Department can, if there is a need, process redundancy payments. Sadly, exactly the same situation pertained about this time last year.

In this case, however, a company is in administration, and attempts are still being made to sell it on as a going concern. Therefore, we are in slightly different circumstances this time. However, I assure the Member that should that arise, every effort will be made to process any applications as quickly as possible. However, that very much depends on the state of the company's records and whether it is clear what is owed. Of course, the Department also has to establish

that the company has no assets that it can use to pay for redundancies in the first place.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his interest in this important matter. Will he ensure that his Department and officials continue to give whatever assistance is necessary to all Redrock Engineering workers to ensure that they will be properly provided for in the run-up to Christmas, and afterwards?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: So far, 47 applications for redundancy and other insolvency payments have been received. The Department is working closely with the administrator to process applications and to make payments as soon as possible. As I said, much depends on the quality of the records. However, we are always very conscious, coming up to Christmas, of the need to ensure that entitlements are made as quickly as possible, especially as we understand that this is a very difficult time of year for people. That goes without saying.

The redundancy clinic has been held, and in attendance were the local college, Invest Northern Ireland, the Social Security Agency, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, Armagh Business Centre, and the Department's staff. That makes the point that every effort is being made to ensure that the workers at Redrock Engineering are receiving the best attention that the Department and its sister agencies can deliver at this time.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a CheannComhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sé dúinn go dtí seo.

I thank the Minister for that information. Given the problems facing Redrock Engineering, and the downturn in the agriculture and construction industries, what further action is he contemplating to safeguard employers and employment in the rural economy?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: From the Department's perspective, whether a company is in a rural area or not does not alter the level of service that we try to provide to that company.

If the opportunity arises, we automatically seek to hold a job clinic in the company's facility if possible. Although most companies facilitate that, there have been occasions when some have simply shut everything down and sent in liquidators. In such cases, we have had to direct people to their local jobs and benefits offices instead.

I have visited Redrock Engineering Ltd and toured its factory. Therefore, I know it well. I understand that its location in a rural area is a particular concern, as is the loss of the welding and engineering skills that I saw on display there and its well-known brand name in that sector of the market. I am conscious of all those issues.

The Department is also conscious of the huge impact that the loss of 50-odd jobs at any time has on such an area, where that figure is disproportionate when compared with similar job losses in urban centres. Therefore, although the Department cannot discriminate on the basis of where a company is located, it must take into account the implications for the particular area. Earlier, I listed the agencies that attended the job clinic, which included the Armagh Business Centre.

It is clear that the Department takes the matter seriously. However, it must be fair to everybody.

Apprenticeships: East Londonderry

2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students have enrolled in apprenticeships in the East Londonderry constituency in each of the past three years.

(AQO 463/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Between 1 September 2006 and 31 August 2009, the Department supported 895 apprentices whose given addresses were in the East Londonderry area. Annual figures for the period from September to the following August for each training year are as follows: in 2006-07, it was 144; in 2007-08, it was 272; and in 2008-09, it was 479.

I advise the Member that although those apprentices reside in the East Londonderry area, they may or may not have enrolled with training providers in that area and may or may not be employed by companies in the area. The Department is not in a position to break down enrolment figures by constituency. All that I can say is that those are the numbers of apprentices who gave addresses in the East Londonderry constituency. Some of them may operate outwith the constituency, just as others whose addresses are not in East Londonderry will operate in it.

Mr Speaker: I call Sue Ramsey to ask a supplementary question —

I am sorry; it is Mr McQuillan's turn to ask his supplementary question.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the average weekly wage that an apprentice should receive?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is no guaranteed, specific weekly wage for apprentices. For apprentices who are in employer-led schemes, wages are part of the contract between them and their employers.

Previously, on a number of occasions, Members have raised the issue on the basis of the national minimum wage. Technically and legally, it does not

apply to apprentices in all cases. The Low Pay Commission is preparing a report, which will be published soon. The Department intends to look at it closely to ensure that there is fairness. In some cases, the national minimum wage does not apply directly to apprentices. I believe that that is the matter to which the Member is referring.

I hope that the report, which we expect to receive in early 2010, will give us the opportunity to see the commission's view. The unit has carried out work on the subject. I am hopeful that immediately after the report is published, we will be able to take a view. I have no doubt that at that stage, I will discuss the matter again with Members, many of whom have written to me on it.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Second time lucky.

The Minister will be aware that the Committee takes a keen interest in apprenticeships. I understand that at present, we are talking about constituency figures. Will the Minister indicate what proportion of the figures that he presented earlier relates to apprentices who are aged 25 years and over?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot answer the Member's question directly at present. However, I am happy to write to her in that regard with information that relates specifically to East Londonderry.

If the Member wants the latest overall figures for apprentices, I will happily write to her in that regard. I do not want to be held to a specific figure, but, if I recall correctly, 40% to 41% of apprentices, or thereabouts, are in the 25-plus age range. I will write to the Member with the details as soon as I can.

Mr Dallat: On a positive note, programme-led apprenticeships have been highly successful, based on information that I have received, and they have made a good contribution in a constituency that has been devastated by job losses over the past three years. Can the Minister assure us that, in the period following recession — if it is safe to say that — if there is continuing demand, programme-led apprenticeships will continue?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member may be aware that I visited his constituency last week. I went to the Coleraine campus of the Northern Regional College and met a number of young people in the joinery workshop who were on programme-led apprenticeships. There were 17 apprentices in the room, and only one had a job with an employer, whereas, last year, it was the other way around. That demonstrates that whatever our reservations — I have them as well — about programme-led apprenticeships, the fact is that 2,600 to 2,700 young people are actually

participating in the scheme. Therefore, they have voted with their feet.

When I made a statement to the House on programme-led apprenticeships, I announced that we would keep the scheme under review, and I will most certainly look at it at least annually to see how it is progressing. We also have to be conscious of when the market is going to lift, because, if the market lifts and employers are in a position to take apprentices on again, that will lead us back to the path of employer-led apprenticeships. We are not there yet, but I will keep it constantly under review.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister outline what the Department is doing to assist the north-west generally?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that, in the past year, we have held four job fairs in the four council areas that I consider to constitute the north-west. The Member will also be aware that I am proposing a gathering of those four councils, my Department and other stakeholders in those areas to find out whether, in their opinions, the policies that we are pursuing are helping in their particular areas and whether there are more things that the four councils, the Department and its other agencies could be doing together. I hope that that will take place very shortly. My Department will also receive a delegation from Derry City Council in the next few weeks.

The Member will be well aware that I have made it public that I believe that the north-west has taken a disproportionate hit during the economic downturn. Therefore, we are very focused on the area, and we are also looking closely at what investments we can make. We have a couple of significant investments in Londonderry through the further education college there, and, together with the Department for Social Development, we are looking at developments in the Waterside area. Therefore, quite a lot is happening up there, but no one is under any illusions that the area has not taken a bad hit, particularly with the closure of Seagate and other high-profile closures in the past year.

University of Ulster

3. **Mr Dodds** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the University of Ulster regarding its plans for re-organisation in the greater Belfast area. (AQO 464/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The University of Ulster announced its development plan for the Belfast campus in February, and it submitted an economic appraisal, which is being reviewed. Officials have met senior university representatives on several occasions to discuss the contents of the economic appraisal. Recently, a delegation led by one of the pro

vice chancellors met with the acting permanent secretary and other senior officials to update them on the university's development plans for the Belfast campus.

3.15 pm

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for his update about where things stand on those proposals. I would be grateful if, in discussions that he or his departmental officials have with the university, he could take on board the concerns of many of my constituents on student accommodation. That is a factor in discussions on those proposals. The Minister does not need to be reminded of the situation in the Holylands area, and people in my constituency are keen that those problems are not repeated. Will the Minister bear that in mind when he and his officials discuss the subject with the university?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is aware from my public comments that I share those concerns. I have spoken about those matters to representatives of the council of the University of Ulster in the presence of the vice chancellor.

I suspect that an accommodation element may form a part of the development process. Student accommodation is frequently provided by private sector organisations. That is certainly the pattern in other universities. However, in Northern Ireland, we are in a slightly different position in that students have the opportunity to go home because travelling distances are not as great. Therefore, there is a different market for private sector accommodation, but I believe it could be important.

In the Member's constituency, in the area around the proposed campus site, there is no suitable student accommodation whatsoever. There is private sector accommodation, but it is not of a suitable character for students.

Many University of Ulster students live in the Holylands area and travel to Jordanstown, and there is also some accommodation in Jordanstown. Accommodation will form a significant part of our view of any formal proposal.

Ms Anderson: The Magee campus is the only one that is earmarked for expansion. Will the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with Magee on its plans to expand? In particular, has the need to expand the maximum student number (MaSN) cap been discussed?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member travels some distance from the topic of the university's plans for the greater Belfast area. My expertise in geography is limited, but it is not so poor that I cannot see that. However, I will answer the Member's question. She knows that we are dealing with two different issues.

The University of Ulster decides its own strategy and shares that with us. We do not micromanage its strategy. The Member will be well aware that I have discussed the issue with the vice chancellor and the council of the university, and there are ongoing discussions with my Department. We are considering whether we can put together a case to bid for resources in the next CSR round, which has already been delayed. It should have taken place in the early autumn, but Lord Mandelson, in another place, decided to postpone it for whatever reason. It will come back in a few months' time, and we will then have to address it. The subject is in my mind, and we have had some preliminary discussions about it. There will be further discussions, and I know that Mr Speaker will have no interest in them whatsoever. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister knows that the plans for Belfast have major implications for other regions of Northern Ireland. Martina Anderson spoke about the Magee campus, and the Minister referred to it at a recent Committee meeting. There has been a disproportionate hit on the economy of the north-west, and the social and economic regeneration plan most likely to receive the approval of the Executive is the development of the Magee campus.

How does the Minister intend to deal with the high skills deficit in Derry and the north-west, which is well documented in various recent economic development plans?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: That was a slightly different approach to an imaginative use of the question, and it was well done.

We all know that that skills deficit is a serious issue. I have repeatedly and publicly made it clear that the north-west has particular problems. There is no point in sweeping that matter under the carpet.

The skills deficit is not confined to the north-west, but we understand that problems have accumulated there. The Member mentioned a range of issues, including the MaSN cap, which is purely a financial control mechanism that sets a cap on student numbers for each university. Multi-campus universities, such as the University of Ulster, decide where to place students, and we decide the total number. We are prepared to re-examine that issue and how it affects the Magee campus as part of a bid in the next CSR round.

As a rule of thumb, every 1,000 students cost the Department £8 million in student support and university contributions. That is big money. Members should not forget that that contribution of £8 million is made year after year. It is not a one-off cost; it is £8 million per annum. Members should also consider the cost of the average student who attends university for three or four years.

In Northern Ireland, the figures for university participation are good, as are the figures for the number

of people attending university who are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. We are doing well in that regard and are well ahead of the rest of the UK.

Several groups have lobbied me on the subject, and a number of Members, including Mr Ramsey, have written to me about it. I assure them that the matter is receiving serious attention. I have spoken to the vice chancellor and the council of the University of Ulster, and we will work together to see whether we can formulate a bid that will stand up to the rigours of the next CSR round, which is only a few months away.

Mr K Robinson: I am a Member for the constituency that adjoins Jordanstown, as opposed to the far-flung constituency of the two previous Members who asked questions.

Does the Minister agree that it is important that all campuses provide some on-site student housing. I draw his attention to the fact that Jordanstown, which sits on a leafy greenfield site near Loughshore Park in Newtownabbey, has an ample campus. He will know of my disappointment at the University of Ulster's decision not to expand that site but to move to constricted sites in north Belfast.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Mr Speaker, you will have heard:

“Cannon to right of them, Cannon to left of them”.

I now have cannon behind me. The Member has drawn that matter to my attention on a number of occasions. The University of Ulster's campus at Jordanstown, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently, will continue to operate, albeit on a slightly different scale. The Member knows that the position of the buildings in that area gives rise to many issues, and many of the original buildings are in need of renewal.

If there were accommodation on each site, that would be ideal. Even if the Belfast campus expands, the accommodation in Jordanstown will still be used and needed, because there is none at present. However, it should be remembered that some universities insist that students spend their first year in student residential accommodation. To make that viable, that sort of accommodation will have to be provided.

However, the universities told me that the geography of this place makes that harder to enforce. The situation is different in the rest of Great Britain because many students have to travel hundreds of miles to attend university. However, greater Belfast is a kind of “drive around” area. It will be harder to follow the Member's suggestion, but I am sympathetic to his view, and, if possible, it would be desirable to achieve that.

Redundancy Services

4. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many employers and employees

have contacted his Department for advice on redundancy services since April 2009. (AQO 465/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: From 1 August to 20 November 2009, the Department's employment service was notified of or identified 73 employers who proposed making redundancies affecting 6,366 workers. Not all of those employers require a redundancy service from the Department's employment service. Unfortunately, in some cases, a business may have closed before an offer of support could be made. Through the network of jobs and benefits offices and job centres, redundancy advisory clinics are provided on request from employers, and 32 have been held since April 2009. The aim is to provide a tailored, co-ordinated and structured intervention that meets the needs of businesses and workers.

My Department also funds the Labour Relations Agency (LRA), and I can advise that from April 2009 until October 2009, approximately 1,500 employers and 2,250 employees sought advice on redundancy issues through the LRA's helpline. There have been 3,900 website downloads relating to redundancy and layoffs, and LRA client advisers have dealt with more than 400 cases with a redundancy element.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for his answer. Unfortunately, it sounds as though the Department is more reactive than proactive in providing redundancy information to employees. Therefore, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that his Department is more proactive? Can he also outline what input the community and voluntary sector has in the process, given its role in providing advice in our communities?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I disagree with the Member that we are being reactive. As regards the technicalities of helping people with redundancy payments, the Department is notified of redundancies only when the employer submits a HR1 form. The Department has certain statutory obligations to get money from the National Insurance Fund in circumstances in which a company does not have the resources itself. That safety net is always there.

Recently, we produced a number of leaflet packs with details of every service that is available to employers and to employees. We are developing a scheme whereby dedicated members of staff will visit individual companies and help them with their skills profile, and I hope to make an announcement on that in the new year.

The community sector does give advice, but do not forget that we recently announced the introduction of a scheme with the community and voluntary sector that has the potential to create 1,000 six-monthly job placements, with the employee having a contract of employment with a voluntary organisation. That scheme is specifically designed to ensure that someone

who has been out of work for over 30 months can get access to a job for the first time in a long time.

We are trying to do lots of things. A range of advice is available, free of cost, as well as the provision of management and leadership courses, and other schemes are already in place to help companies to deal with redundancy.

Mr Shannon: One issue that has come to my attention, and, I suspect, to the attention of many Members, involves part-time employment. Does the Minister have a policy to cover the redundancy of part-time workers as against the retention of agency staff or subcontractors?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member knows, we have had many discussions in the House about the rights of agency staff.

Redundancy is redundancy. There are certain technical issues regarding redundancy and when my Department can intervene through the National Insurance Fund, one of which is that there now is, I think, a maximum pay of up to £380 a week. We are notified by the employer of the number of redundancies that they intend to make. There is a legislative framework in place that makes a distinction between what part-time workers are and are not entitled to. It is quite a complicated area, and much depends on the number of hours worked. There is a lower limit for hours worked, and people who fall below that limit do not have the same rights as they do above the limit. I am very happy to write to the Member to give him the latest information.

Mr O'Loan: Has there been evaluation and refinement of those programmes in light of experience?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes, and that will always be the case. All the programmes are tested. No policies are just introduced and left; they are subject to continual review. In the past 12 to 14 months, we have turned things almost upside down to see whether what we are doing is adequate. That is one reason why, in answer to a previous question, I told Members that I wanted the university councils in the north-west to work with the Department to see whether our programmes in the area are suitable.

We introduced programme-led instead of employer-led apprenticeships, because the current policy was not working. I have also introduced management and leadership courses that are free of charge to companies as a response to the economic downturn. Therefore, everything is looked at again and again; it will be ever thus.

3.30 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

North/South Co-operation

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises that North/South co-operation and implementation can deliver economic, social, infrastructural and other benefits for the people of Northern Ireland; notes the ongoing North/South review examining (i) the efficiency and value-for-money of existing implementation bodies; and (ii) the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived; calls for immediate publication and public debate of all elements of the review; and further calls for an acceleration of the development and enlargement of North/South opportunities, including, *inter alia*, a response to the economic downturn on this island. — [*Mrs D Kelly.*]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “recognises” and insert

“that balanced North/South and east-west co-operation can deliver benefits for the people of Northern Ireland; notes that the ongoing North/South review has yet to conclude; and welcomes the efficiencies imposed on the implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd.” — [*Mr Ross.*]

Mr Kennedy: I begin my contribution with a quotation:

“all-Ireland arrangements are essential for nationalists who want to share the life of the rest of the island. Those balances are essential for unionism, too, in order that unionism has an agreed relationship with the rest of the people of this island. However, if one begins to pick and choose, and have an *à la carte* approach, one must understand that that is beginning to unpick requirements that are essential for longer-term stability and prosperity on this island.” [*Official Report, Volume 37, No 5, p260, col 2.*]

That is a quotation from the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood in the debate on a DUP motion that called for a reduction in North/South co-operation.

I agree with the analysis of North/South arrangements that arose from the Belfast Agreement. It is crucial that we recognise that North/South co-operation is sensible for practical reasons and necessary for political stability in Northern Ireland. However, as Mr Attwood outlined, balance is required for unionists. The North/South arrangements are not an embryonic form of united Ireland, and unionism was very careful to make sure of that in the 1998 negotiations. We fought long and hard to ensure that North/South co-operation was practical and not ideological. We fought for that balance, and we feel that it was right.

Mr Attwood cannot have it both ways: he cannot proclaim that the Belfast Agreement is Holy Writ and then table a motion that ignores it. The Belfast Agreement contains provision for the possible extension of North/South co-operation in mutually beneficial

areas. The motion's call for enlargement is based on nothing more than ideological predisposition. The Belfast Agreement protects against that; it protects unionists from ideological solo runs, particularly those from the SDLP, for "North/Southern". It also protects against creeping North/South integration against the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland.

A review of North/South arrangements is ongoing. Some might wonder why the review team is yet to report, given the extended period — nearly two and a half years — that it has had. Therefore, background motions such as the one before us and the one tabled by the DUP earlier in the year are premature. In many ways, the debate is abstract without the findings of the review, which will report on possible new areas for co-operation. Any areas that are identified will be subject to great scrutiny in this place and in other places, as were the original areas of co-operation that were agreed in Castle Buildings. That is how that arrangement for government in Northern Ireland works.

The SDLP knows full well the intricacies of North/South co-operation. Mr Attwood outlined them in February when it suited him to argue for no change; he cannot turn that argument on its head in November when it suits him to expand co-operation. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party will support the amendment.

Mr Spratt: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. Departments operate on the principle of value for money. Do the North/South bodies really offer value for money in these particularly difficult economic times? Those bodies need to make efficiencies, as do all areas of government. We need to consider how much could be saved by those bodies.

I accept that cross-border co-operation can be mutually beneficial, and I am aware that a number of such projects have been positive for both jurisdictions. However, as a unionist, I have to distinguish between cross-border co-operation and North/South co-operation. For example, I know that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has established a cross-border group of officials to examine child protection and children's services issues. It would be beneficial to include such matters in the work of the British-Irish Council as well. Specific issues being raised include vetting, barring, research and Internet safety. A lot of work has been done on those issues, and it crosses many different barriers, not only between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic but across the United Kingdom and Europe.

Members will know that, last week in County Fermanagh, the Department of the Environment (DOE) launched the Christmas drink-driving road safety campaign. That co-operation takes place year after year, and it is only right that such co-operation exists. The border does not respect victims of road

traffic accidents, and the grief that is caused by such accidents knows no barriers. Co-operation is right and proper when it comes to child protection and Internet grooming, and it is important. Police services throughout Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have been involved in such co-operation for many years. The sex trade has caused problems in Belfast in recent times. Similarly, it knows no borders, and it is right and proper that co-operation takes place on that issue.

However, as a unionist, I cannot support the creation of all-Ireland institutions, and I suspect that it is the intention that North/South bodies will lead in that direction. That is the perception on this side of the House. In July 2009, the 'Belfast Telegraph' reported that the Irish Government were considering a report that suggested making savings on North/South projects. It says a lot about the value that the Irish Government place on some of those projects, and the Assembly should take cognisance of that.

We have to weigh up whether the North/South bodies provide value for money. Mr Attwood in particular has called for the establishment of various types of bodies. Last week, during the debate on the Department of Justice Bill and in other places, I have heard him call for North/South bodies to be established in relation to policing and justice powers. He calls for such bodies, which are similar to the Policing Board and others, but never puts a financial cost on them. That is the big issue: we cannot afford any more of those bodies.

The bottom line is that we are in difficult economic times, and now is the time to examine all those bodies so that we can see exactly where we are getting value for money. There should be no trouble with co-operation, providing it is for the benefit of both places and for the whole of the United Kingdom.

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

Mr Spratt: On that note, thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Neeson: I did not think that I would get a chance to speak today, particularly after the Assembly Commission's report was pulled earlier on. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the motion.

The Alliance Party supports the motion. We have always been open to the realities of the need for North/South co-operation, leaving aside the politics of the issue, and to allowing people to decide their futures through the idea of consent. We accept that considerable economic and social consequences arise from having a border on the island of Ireland. Similarly, in an increasingly global and competitive world, we must recognise that there may be opportunities that neither Northern Ireland nor the Republic of Ireland can seize alone. Co-operation on North/South issues is critical to

ensuring that we take full advantage of issues that are to our mutual benefit and do not have any missed opportunities.

The Alliance Party has never thought of North/South co-operation as being about institutions first and issues second. Our perspective is framed around the importance of tackling the issues. On occasions, an institutional approach may be required; on other occasions, it may not. For some parties, discussing North/South institutions may be about making a political point. For us, it is about making benefits for all. We have no fear of engaging in these kinds of arrangements. We are open to the identification of further areas of co-operation if the opportunity arises. However, the area must be issue-driven rather than process-driven.

The Alliance Party is clear that the sector, as in other aspects of public administration, should be subject to the same regime of efficiencies. One area in which we have seen close and beneficial co-operation is on energy. We now have the single electricity market, and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are joined by a natural gas pipeline. That has been of benefit to people north and south of the border.

Another area that has seen major progress is tourism, following the establishment of Tourism Ireland. In many ways, it has enlarged the promotion of the island of Ireland, North and South. Tourism Ireland produces a great deal of promotional material. I mentioned in the House a week or so ago the Tourism Ireland advertisement in the national papers. The advertisement strongly promoted Carrickfergus castle, and that is important.

I welcome the increase in east-west co-operation, particularly on the INTERREG programme. I am a member of the Mid-Antrim Museums Service, and we and Scotland are engaged in an INTERREG programme. When considering the motion, it is important that all other issues be considered as well. However, in no way should that detract from the original motion.

We must consider the wider issue of efficiency. The North/South Ministerial Council has been underplayed. All that we get at the moment are short statements that allow us only to ask a question of the Minister. No full-blown debates on the issue have taken place. Given the limited agendas at North/South meetings, I am not convinced that the processes are effective enough to ensure that we are discussing with our counterparts in the South all issues of mutual benefit.

Finally, bearing in mind the present economic climate, North and South, an opportunity exists to develop co-operation on the green economy.

3.45 pm

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and oppose the amendment. I listened carefully as Mr Ross lamented the absence of any reference to east-west relations, and Mr Neeson picked up on that point. However, the title of the motion is “North-South Co-operation”; that is the topic that we are discussing.

It is impossible to deny that, prior to the Good Friday Agreement, the economy on the island of Ireland was characterised by two economies that were competing for business and that had separate development goals and strategies. The economic activity between the two islands, the east-west dimension, was the developed part of the economy; the deficiency was in the lack of opportunities for all-Ireland economic activity. That deficiency was addressed comprehensively by the Good Friday Agreement and buttressed by the St Andrews Agreement. I look forward to the publication of the North/South review, which refers to ongoing work, and to discussion of the relevant issues.

We should avoid retreating to ideological or party political positions, particularly given the economic decline. There are significant trading, economic and financial links between east and west. We recognise that that has been so since partition, particularly in the post-war years and up to the present, and we accept that such opportunities will continue. There is no resistance to that situation on this side of the House. However, North and South, we were cutting off our nose to spite our face by ignoring the existence of differing fiscal policies and economic policies, wasteful duplication and the complete waste of money caused by two small economies competing against each other.

The idea of all-island economic development makes sense, because it is mutually beneficial. No one can argue seriously or credibly that there is any disadvantage in building and developing North/South links. Objective academic and economic studies, commissioned by both the British Government and the Irish Government, consistently conclude that more development is needed and that we are ignoring opportunities. At a time when we are struggling to enhance economic recovery by developing stimuli, we are ignoring opportunities for indigenous companies. Why should we deny ourselves the opportunity to build on what has been achieved since the Good Friday Agreement?

Let us have competition, and let us see who can provide the best value for money. However, given the horrendous levels of social and economic deprivation in our community, let us not cut off our nose to spite our face. Let us seize every opportunity to deal with regional and subregional disparities to the benefit of everyone.

Mr Shannon: I support the amendment. We have probably all used the well-known saying that “no man is an island”. The meaning of that saying is abundantly clear: no man can stand on his own. It is the same for the Province. We are a strong nation, but our strength has its foundations in the strength of the British empire and our links with other nations, such as the Republic of Ireland.

We are not so delusional as to think that we do not need help. We do, and we will take all the help that we can get when it is offered. For that reason, I am ever thankful to my colleague Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, for the work that she does in foreign nations to encourage business investment. The trips that she has made to Germany and Japan, among other places, in the last year have not been in vain. Any benefits that can be derived from links with the Republic of Ireland should be welcomed in the same way as benefits from any other foreign investment.

That is the way in which we must look at all things. We cannot and have no need to take on the burdens facing the Republic currently, given our precarious economic position. I point to my colleague Jeffrey Donaldson's remarks during the conference entitled ‘North South Relations After the Boom: The Impact of the Credit Crunch on Mutual Relations and Understandings’. According to forecasts made by the First Trust Bank in March, Northern Ireland's economy will contract by 1.5% in 2009. The Economic and Social Research Institute recently forecasted that the Republic of Ireland's economy will contract by 3.9% in 2009. However, the predictions for the Republic appear to be getting worse. A recent article in ‘The Economist’ predicted the downturn to be more severe, with a contraction of 6.5% this year.

Clearly, the Republic's downturn is predicted to be a lot more severe than that in Northern Ireland. For example, unemployment south of the border stands at 7.7%, compared to 5.7% in Northern Ireland. The claimant count measured in the Republic is a lot higher, at 10.4%, so that is a very worrying undercurrent. Official statistics indicate that the Republic's economy shrank by 7.5% in the last three months of 2008 compared with the same period of 2007.

My reason for including those statistics is to point out that, in agreement with the wording of the motion, we need an alliance that is mutually beneficial. Unfortunately, that is not to be found in the Republic at this time. Indeed, we need to focus our time, efforts and economies on more profitable areas, such as is being done in other Departments. Those efficiencies must be enhanced, with money going where it is needed most. This is not political point scoring. The issue is whether to enhance something that is of no tangible benefit to the Province.

The report on the North/South bodies is yet to be published, and it is pre-emptive for the motion to be on the Floor at this time. However, here it is. We are imposing efficiencies on every Department, and I have no idea why the North/South faction should be any different. In my opinion and, I suspect, in that of many of the unionist tradition whom my party and I represent, it is more important to have money going into something that will produce something rather than throwing good money after bad. A balanced approach is needed, which I fully support the amendment. If there were a time for us to be self-centred, it is most certainly now. We must look after the people who put us in the Assembly. That is our first priority.

We need to ensure that every penny spent benefits the people of the Province and returns to the Province in some form. By that — I make no apology for saying so — I mean that, if possible, we should buy local produce, hire local people and focus primarily on ourselves at this time. That principle applies in this regard: it is good to be a good neighbour — nobody denies that for a second — but we must save money on things that are non-essential. The North/South bodies are certainly non-essential.

It may be a different story when the report is concluded, but, as things stand, we must only spend out on things that bring in. The North/South bodies are not one of those things. Consequently, I support the amendment and hope that the House does likewise.

Mr Elliott: I am pretty relaxed about the concept of mutually beneficial cross-border arrangements, provided that they are of benefit to both jurisdictions and do not impose the will of one on the other. That is the reality, and it is for that reason that my party and I will support the DUP amendment. We believe that the motion goes too far.

It is unfortunate that the SDLP is attempting to out-green Sinn Féin. The motion does not help North/South bodies or relationships, because it pre-empts the ongoing review by calling for the deeply partisan expansion of those institutions. It places political expediency above what is beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr McElduff: Does the Member agree that two separate approaches should not be taken in the area of health and in planning future acute service provision on the island of Ireland? There should not be back-to-back planning. This is an island of six million people, so it is most sensible to have one plan and one delivery system for acute service hospitals, given these days of specialties. Does the Member agree that that is not about expediency but practicality?

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

Mr Elliott: We are talking about two different institutions that cannot possibly work together because the rules that govern them are not the same. There is no reason for them not to co-operate broadly; however, they cannot act as a single entity.

I welcome the positive economic benefit that price differences with the Republic are having for the retail trade in Northern Ireland. For many years, the price difference in vehicle fuel worked in the opposite direction, whereby — I do not declare an interest — many people from Northern Ireland visited the Republic for cheaper vehicle fuel. I was not one of those people; I have only been informed that that was the case.

In the midst of all the talk about co-operation, I am concerned because the Education Minister in the Republic of Ireland is discriminating against Protestant schools there. Although he might say that it is none of my business, he should review the situation, because the Government there have a duty to look after the Protestant minority.

If parties treat the North/South bodies not as an opportunity to improve relations and services between the two jurisdictions but as a political vehicle to promote narrow agendas, there is a danger that the bodies will become meaningless. Unfortunately, there are already too many examples of that. For instance, I am unwilling to countenance the abuse of North/South co-operation that went on at Middletown, when a vulnerable section of society was used as part of a clandestine ploy to save Middletown convent. Nearly £8 million has been expended on an idea that was cruelly flawed from start to finish. Let me be blunt: in nowhere that I know of do autism experts advocate taking vulnerable children from places as diverse as the Ring of Kerry, the north coast, the Wicklow hills or the Fermanagh lakes — in other words, the children's familiar environment and surroundings — to a strange and isolated location for an unsettling five-week period and then dumping them back home where the damage that would have been inflicted on them would have to be undone. To embark on such a programme would be statutory cruelty and institutional madness.

Unfortunately, our Minister of Education thinks it opportune to take advantage of those on the autism spectrum for narrow political gain. No matter that, after six years, the plan has not come to fruition, her partnering Department in Dublin has recognised its folly and pulled back, and parents do not want it. Motivated by selfish ideology, Sinn Féin is willing to exploit children from across the island. Such political savagery is unforgivable. If there is a justifiable use for the convent site at Middletown, so be it, but it is nothing short of an abuse of rights to preserve the site in the way that has been proposed. It is beyond ridicule that cross-border co-operation should be so exploited. I

wonder what the Comptroller and Auditor General is doing about the situation.

It is unreasonable to expect the situation to progress, and I do not want to hear that a training resource can somehow be cut out of a hole in the hedge. There are already two outstanding teacher training colleges in Belfast — St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College — which, like St Patrick's College in Drumcondra and St Mary's Marino Institute of Education in Dublin, offer established, credible and capable teacher and teacher-related training.

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

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled the amendment for highlighting the issue.

Mr Gallagher: The SDLP is 100% behind all the North/South Ministerial Council's arrangements and 100% in favour of the jobs that have been delivered to date, especially those in the west, which the unionist representatives from Fermanagh and South Tyrone have failed to acknowledge.

I support the amendment because the amendment acknowledges the benefits of those jobs —

4.00 pm

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: Yes, I will.

Mr Weir: I wonder whether the Member wants to correct himself because, although we greatly appreciate his support for the amendment, I suspect that that is not what he intended to say.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Member for that timely reminder. I stand corrected: I do not support the amendment; I support the motion. The amendment is an attempt to slow down the working of the North/South Ministerial Council and gloss over some of its arrangements.

I am sure that every Member is well aware that the North/South Ministerial Council has a standing committee, under which there are six implementation bodies, which is not found with the east-west arrangements. I support the east-west arrangements as well, but, without dwelling too much on past difficulties, we should remind ourselves that one reason why the SDLP supported the North/South arrangements during the talks was that the unionist representatives regarded the Northern Ireland political identity as one that should involve arrangements only in the east-west arena. Such a view did not reflect anything of the aspirations of the more than 40% of nationalists with whom they have to share government in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: No, I am not giving way again; I have already given way.

There have been economic benefits for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. For example, within a couple of years of the Assembly's being set up, Waterways Ireland had established 60 office jobs in Enniskillen. Under direct rule and other previous arrangements, we were told that that could not be done in Enniskillen because the infrastructure did not exist and the finances to provide that infrastructure were not available. However, Waterways Ireland was there within two years. Today, it employs 70 people in office jobs, and an additional 10 or 12 people work on the lakes in and around Fermanagh.

A couple of years ago, a local contracting firm provided the design and build contract worth between £2 million and £3 million for new premises for Waterways Ireland that are now in place, which also added significantly to economic activity in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. As I said, previously, we had been told that the necessary infrastructure did not exist, central government could not provide it, we did not have the roads, and there was no money to build the roads. We still hear some of that, but, fortunately, under North/South arrangements, we have a significant number of jobs that make an important contribution to the local economy. The same line was trotted out recently in relation to the Bain report. From the point of view of people in the west considering all those issues, it is clear that the North/South arrangements make an important contribution.

I welcome the review. There are already six implementation bodies. In my view, there should be more. The biggest issue facing everybody on earth in the twenty-first century is the environment, and it is regrettable that we do not have a North/South implementation body for the environment. There are a number of good reasons why we should have that. Obviously, climate change is one, and the disposal of illegal waste is another, because that was a big problem a few years ago for both jurisdictions. That was tackled seriously only when both Governments worked together on the issue. They jointly formed a forum for waste enforcement, in which they brought together the authorities in both jurisdictions that were responsible for the issue and those responsible for law enforcement. That has made a significant difference.

We all know that issues relating to the wider environment do not stop at the border. Air can carry pollution from one end of the island to the other in a couple of hours, and our rivers criss-cross the border. Both Governments are working closely together to deliver river basin management plans in order to comply with EU directives, but there is much more work to be done. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which, in the current economic situation, is good and timely. I am looking across at the unionists, who are sitting with their backs against the wall. When will they wise up and take on board the reality of an island economy and recognise that partition gives us an even smaller jurisdiction here in the North? When will they start to build on the structures and the infrastructures that can be built across the border to ensure that we put together an economy that can develop the island of Ireland and one from which both can benefit?

I ask Members to look at the industry that has been attracted to the Twenty-six Counties and the industry that has been attracted here. A combination of effort to bring a cross-border dimension to that will help everyone involved. When will unionists wise up and take their places at the table in unity and with confidence in their ability to be strong enough to stand up to whatever else is on the table? Unfortunately, unionists seem to go to the table, cap in hand. If whatever is on offer is good enough for them, they will take it. If not and if it is going to cost anything, they are not interested.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member acknowledge that the creation of additional bodies does not necessarily mean the delivery of additional benefits and that it merely creates additional bureaucracy? If there are ways in which we can co-operate for mutual benefit, it is better to do so without additional costs. What aspects of the amendment does the Member find offensive? Does he accept that if we can gain efficiencies from the implementation bodies, there will be more money for health, education and a range of other services?

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

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, I ask him to look at the situation from the opposite point of view. The establishment of a structure that goes across the island will reduce the bureaucracy and the double-jobbing that happens on both sides of the border. There is a Health Service and an education sector on both sides of the border. That duplication could be done away with, if there was co-operation. I am not asking anyone to sign up to a body or to co-operation that would be of no benefit. I am asking them to come to the table, make their argument, put their business case for the structure or body that they are suggesting and state the benefits that will be gained from it.

We heard the Member for East Antrim Mr Ross say that the South of Ireland was a basket case in Europe. Who is providing the new road to Larne, which is in his constituency? Is the Southern economy not providing that? Who is providing the upgrade of the

A5 across the centre of the west? Let us look at where the basket case is and at who is begging from whom.

There are structures in place. Unionists want co-operation, but it is one-sided; they want everything one way. They will take it if it will be of benefit to them, but they do not want anything to do with co-operation that might benefit everyone else.

We always heard the arguments that were used for security back in the bad days, but they are being used now as well. Unionists say that they want co-operation on policing and that they want the border to be secured. They want everyone else to be looking out for and protecting them. However, they will not take policing, justice and security into their own hands and have some say in it. We need to look at that.

We have seen the benefits of tourism, North and South. However, unionists want to have tourists coming into the North, but nobody going out of it. They are happy when shoppers are coming across to Newry, but they were not happy when the shoppers were going the other way to buy cheap diesel. They cannot have it both ways.

There needs to be co-operation in fishing. The need for co-operation in inland fishing is evident in the situation with eel fishing in Lough Neagh. In the old days, unionists opposed the co-operative that was set up to secure the fishing in Lough Neagh. We have to build on such co-operations.

Energy is another area. There is a common wind, which could be used as an environmentally friendly source of electricity. However, because it might be seen as green energy, the unionists want to put up a shield to stop the wind going across the border so that they can keep it for themselves. The wind is coming from the opposite direction, and the Members opposite are still trying to stop it.

Another area is the Health Service. We have seen the work that has been done by Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) right across the border. That work has developed resources and moved them backwards and forwards to the benefit of both communities. We could use that work to build a Health Service that can provide and build resources and services, such as cancer services at Altnagelvin Hospital, which would be of benefit to the people in the North and the South. We must look at good examples.

The motion sets out very clearly a mechanism whereby cross-border co-operation could be expanded to the mutual benefit of both communities, and I can see no reason why Members would not support such a motion. However, rather than extending that co-operation, the amendment cuts off those areas of mutual benefit. Members opposite are cutting off their nose to spite their face.

I repeat my call for unionists to come to the table with confidence and set aside their old worries and concerns. Do not continuously look to Westminster for reassurance. Instead, take on the power and resources that we have in our own hands and build on those resources. We should also take on policing and justice so that we get that power back in our own hands.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Hamilton: The DUP's position on cross-border co-operation is well known. It is not something that has been made up in recent times but has been on the public record for many years.

Like my party, I very much support cross-border co-operation where a genuine mutual benefit can be derived and where it is not politically motivated. I want to see more shoppers coming from the South and shopping in the retail outlets in Northern Ireland, more Northern Ireland companies procuring contracts across the border and more Northern Ireland companies selling their goods to customers in the South. I have no hesitation in saying that. The question is not whether we should have cross-border co-operation, it is how we should have it, and this fixation on maintaining costly and unnecessary artificial structures to achieve that co-operation baffles me.

We learned very early in today's debate, during Mrs Kelly's contribution, that having the cross-border structures in place had nothing to do with efficiency, effectiveness or actual delivery. Instead, it is all about the aspirations of Irish nationalists, and no unionist will ever agree to the expansion of those structures on that basis.

The DUP has previously made sensible suggestions about making the work of organisations such as the Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and other bodies more effective, and it has been told by nationalists that no progress will be made without their agreement. I wonder when the penny — or the cent — will drop with the Members opposite that they will not get an inch further on cross-border co-operation without the assent of unionists. That is a fact that seems to be lost on them.

Just moments ago, the House heard from Mr Gallagher that his party was 100% behind the current cross-border institutions. That is slavish blind devotion to the current institutions, without any question whatsoever about their efficiency, effectiveness or what they are actually delivering. Mr Gallagher went on to suggest that the reason he supported the current institutions was that they had created some jobs in his constituency. However, that is not a sufficient argument. It is not about whether jobs are created in Enniskillen, but whether the jobs should exist at all and whether they are delivering anything effective in a mutually beneficial way.

There are many areas where cross-border co-operation takes place —

Mr Gallagher: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not.

Justice is a good example of where cross-border co-operation takes place on a daily basis to detect child sex offenders or the perpetrators of organised crime.

4.15 pm

Recently, the Minister of Finance and Personnel had discussions with his counterpart in the South on the issue of NAMA — an important issue in Northern Ireland — and about two years ago, there was an agreement in respect of the financial services sectors between the then Finance Minister, Mr Robinson, and the then Finance Minister in the South, Mr Cowen. Of course, things have gone a little differently in that sector since then. However, those areas share a common characteristic, which is that none of them lies within the current bailiwick of the North/South Ministerial Council or any of its implementation bodies. Therefore, cross-border co-operation on practical issues of mutual benefit is possible outside of the current structures.

The review referred to in the motion has not even been published, so it is a bit previous. Nevertheless, the SDLP has well and truly made its mind up. Not only does it want the cross-border co-operation in the current structures to be retained, it wants that increased and accelerated. In the past, we had been told that the division of expenditure on the cross-border bodies was two thirds by the Irish Government and one third by the Executive. It is easy to call for things to be accelerated and increased when Irish taxpayers' money is being spent. Given the previous references to the recommendations in the McCarthy report that cross-border bodies be looked at as a way of saving money for the Irish taxpayer, I am sure that it will not be as enthusiastically welcomed or given 100% support by TDs and Senators in the South as it might be given by members of the SDLP and others.

It has been said that there are a lot of inefficiencies, so let us have one structure for, say, health. Instead of having two health systems, let us have one. I agree with that. Let us have one structure for health, and other services as well. It may take some time —

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

Mr Hamilton: It may be difficult and costly. However, I am sure that we could subsume the Republic of Ireland back into the United Kingdom —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: If people want one structure for health and other things, there is a way to do it.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to reiterate the commitment of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to mutually beneficial and practical North/South co-operation. I am also happy to reinforce the message that North/South co-operation can deliver economic, social, infrastructural and other benefits for the people of this island. I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about the real benefits.

First, however, I want to pick up on the references to the ongoing review of the North/South bodies arising from the St Andrews Agreement. At its plenary meeting on 17 July 2007, the North/South Ministerial Council agreed to take forward the review of the North/South implementation bodies, including Tourism Ireland Ltd, and the areas for co-operation as provided for in the St Andrews Agreement. The terms of reference for the review are as follows:

- “1. To examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of existing Implementation Bodies;
2. To examine objectively the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived; and
3. To input into the work on the identification of a suitable substitute for the proposed Lights Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.”

The review is being taken forward by a review group of senior officials and an advisory panel of four experts and advisers. The St Andrews Agreement review formed part of the discussions of the last North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting in July. The Council noted that the review group is continuing with its consideration of the report on the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. The Council confirmed the intention to conclude the St Andrews Agreement review process before the end of 2009 and has instructed the review group to accelerate its work on all remaining elements of the review so that a final report can be brought to the next NSMC plenary meeting.

It is intended that, on conclusion of the review, the recommendations that emerge will be referred to relevant Departments, North and South, for consideration and appropriate action. Any changes to the existing arrangements will require the endorsement of the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

Members have asked specifically for the immediate publication and debate of all aspects of the review. However, it would not be appropriate to release the report on the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, as the review group is continuing its consideration of that report. As the review is being carried out under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council,

any report or other outcome of the review is a matter for the Council. The Council intends to meet again in plenary format in December, and it would not be appropriate to pre-empt the Council's conclusions on this matter.

We continue to take forward mutually beneficial and practical co-operation, particularly on infrastructure, trade and business, energy, tourism, agriculture, education and health, including through the work of the North/South bodies and other areas of co-operation.

The key issue facing both jurisdictions is the economic downturn. We continue to keep a close watch on the impacts of the economic downturn on local people and businesses, and it remains a standing item on the agenda of Executive meetings. Furthermore, since the downturn began, discussions on economic issues have featured prominently on the agendas of the North/South Ministerial Council.

At the NSMC plenary meeting in January 2009, the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Executive Ministers outlined the steps that are being taken to mitigate the effects of the downturn, including access to credit and establishing the cross-sector advisory forum. In turn, the Taoiseach and the Irish Government Ministers outlined the steps that they are taking, particularly on infrastructure, innovation and banking. It was agreed by all that there was a need for continuing practical and mutually beneficial North/South co-operation to assist in government efforts to deal with the challenges of the downturn.

At the subsequent NSMC plenary meeting in July 2009, the First Minister and deputy First Minister had a broad discussion with the Taoiseach and Irish Government Ministers on the economic challenges facing both jurisdictions and our respective responses to dealing with the downturn and its impact, particularly on the banking sectors. At the NSMC institutional meeting earlier this month, we had a discussion with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, on practical, mutually beneficial co-operation in the context of the current economic and budgetary challenges facing both jurisdictions.

Co-operation extends much further than high-level discussions about the economy. Work being taken forward by the North/South implementation bodies in some of the other NSMC areas of co-operation makes a significant direct contribution to economic development. Through the North/South Ministerial Council, we are continuing to take forward co-operation to deliver real benefits, particularly on infrastructure, trade and business, tourism and education, and to tackle major issues that confront us all, such as child protection, which was mentioned by a number of Members earlier, suicide prevention, barriers to mobility, the environment, and transport.

North/South Ministerial Council meetings focus on practical co-operation, with good open discussions between Ministers. To maintain momentum, Ministers at the plenary meeting in July agreed a schedule of 15 NSMC meetings to take place up to the end of this year, which will further support the positive outcomes of the work being done. Most of those meetings have taken place, and another plenary meeting is planned for December, as I mentioned earlier.

I fully recognise the value of North/South co-operation on transportation issues, and that is reflected strategically in the reviews of the regional development strategy and the regional transportation strategy. Co-operation between both Governments has been enhanced through bodies such as the North/South Ministerial Council and the cross-border steering group.

An example of how cross-border aspects can be delivered can be found in the recently completed A1/N1 Newry to Dundalk dual carriageway. That level of co-operation is being further enhanced through delivery of the A5, the north-west gateway to Aughnacloy, and the A8 Belfast to Larne road improvements. Members will be aware that the Irish Government have reiterated their intention to make available funding for major roads programmes on the A5 western corridor and on the A8 Belfast to Larne route, which was mentioned earlier.

Those projects highlight how progress is being made between both jurisdictions to develop the strategic road network for the benefit of the whole island of Ireland. They will result in substantial improvements in road links, which will enhance the potential for economic development and tourism. It is not just about physical links; trade links are crucial. InterTradeIreland does vital work to boost economic co-operation across the island and to create an environment that makes it easier to do business and to increase the competitiveness of individual companies in the global marketplace.

Tourism, which makes an important contribution to our economy, is another area in which the NSMC, through the work of Tourism Ireland Ltd, is producing good results. Tourism Ireland has worked very successfully to promote the whole island as a tourist destination, and continues to do so at a very challenging time for the tourism industry. That work is, in turn, complemented by the work of other NSMC bodies. For example, Waterways Ireland is taking forward an NSMC decision to proceed with the restoration of the eight-mile Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal in light of the Irish Government's offer to cover the full capital cost of that, which is estimated at around £35 million.

Practical co-operation extends into one of this island's most important industries — agriculture. Work is progressing to deliver the draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy, and to finalise arrangements for a cross-border stakeholder consultation event early next year.

However, let us not forget that the work of the NSMC is not just about trade and infrastructure. It is about making people's lives better, for example, in relation to co-operation on road safety.

The continuing downward trend in road deaths in Ireland is encouraging, but the increase in fatalities in the current year to date in the North is a matter of considerable concern. The authorities here and in the rest of Ireland are considering the possibility of introducing new lower drink-driving limits and are exploring the potential for co-ordinating their approaches to the implementation of any new limits that are agreed. The mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the North and South of Ireland and, indeed, Britain, should be in place shortly, and the mutual recognition of penalty points will be considered after that process has been completed.

Work is being taken forward on important issues such as Traveller education and special education, including the Middletown all-island centre of excellence for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder.

The NSMC work on child protection is another important area of collaboration that was mentioned by a number of Members. Cross-border groups that were established under the current procedures continue to meet regularly to examine areas of mutual co-operation, and work is under way to finalise a range of cross-border advice and guidance materials for parents, carers, employers and anyone who has concerns about a child. Along with Southern colleagues, we are developing a joint protocol to deal with children who are looked after or whose names are on the child protection register and who go missing or move between the two jurisdictions, where there are concerns. Officials are also considering how best to raise awareness around Internet safety and social networking.

Good co-operation also takes place in the area of suicide prevention. Suicide and self-harm respect no borders, and many of the issues that we face here are also challenges for government, local communities, families and individuals in the South. Therefore, it is vital that learning and best practice from both jurisdictions is shared. An all-island action plan on suicide prevention has been in place for some time, and it is encouraging that that plan continues to develop and expand. For example, the deliberate self-harm register that operates in the South is now being piloted

in the North. It provides valuable data to help to inform policy and service delivery.

The north-west gateway initiative is another good example of cross-border co-operation that brings practical benefits for people locally and strategic benefits for the island as a whole. Since the formal announcement of the initiative in May 2006, the task of officials has been to find ways to enrich the Executive and the Irish Government working in co-operation to attract new employers and other economic benefits to rejuvenate the region. A large number of projects is under way, and further progress on those will, individually and cumulatively, bring economic, environmental, tourism, health and social benefits, which will improve the quality of life in the north-west region.

Strong and focused co-operation across all sectors of business and government is key to the success of all North/South co-operation. A good example of that is Project Kelvin, the international telecoms link, which perhaps epitomises the global benefits that can flow from North/South co-operation.

I am sure that Members will appreciate that I have provided only a brief flavour of the range of ongoing North/South co-operation. Undoubtedly, however, that co-operation is delivering mutually beneficial outcomes for all the people. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Weir: The debate has been relatively good natured, albeit somewhat predictable, with the exception of Mr Gallagher's brief and inadvertent support for the amendment.

The one contrast in the debate has been between the SDLP and Sinn Féin. On previous occasions, they competed to say who has betrayed Ireland the most, and they may return to that during tomorrow's debate on the Department of Justice Bill. However, today, they have had a competition to see which is the greenest party in the ongoing struggle towards the next election. Mr Gallagher said that he supported the North/South arrangements 100%, and I was surprised that a Sinn Féin Member did not claim to support them 110% or 120%, such was the competition. I suspect that I may have started a bidding war in that regard.

Whether through the honeyed words and more subtle approach of Mr McLaughlin, or the sledgehammer approach that Mr Molloy and Mr McElduff took, we got the same message.

4.30 pm

Several Members described the debate as premature. It is not difficult for unionists to understand the motivation behind it. If I may fall back on a classical analogy, "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes" — beware of Greeks bearing gifts. Some Members opposite and Mr Shannon are not the only ones who are bilingual.

We on these Benches can see a Trojan Horse when it is wheeled out in front of us. The motion and the support for it have little to do —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I have a relatively short time. If the Member is brief, I will give way.

Mr McElduff: Is the Member guilty of introducing a non sequitur into the debate? Is he arguing *ad hominem*, as opposed to addressing the merits of the issue?

Mr Weir: I am tempted to comment on the Member's schoolboy Latin.

A Trojan Horse is being wheeled in, because the motion has little to do with mutual benefit. It aims to advance an all-Ireland agenda, as various Members admitted. We are told that we should move towards a more all-Ireland economy. If the Celtic tiger were taken to the vet, it might be in danger of being put down.

As Mr Ross said, the Irish economy is something of a basket case. I will use another analogy: during the First World War, the Germans complained that being allied with the Austro-Hungarian Empire was like being shackled to a corpse. If we were to consider greater economic intervention from the Republic of Ireland, we would be shackling ourselves to a corpse. Why on earth would we want to do that?

In contrast, the remarks by unionist Members were consistent and practical. Various Members spoke about value for money and said that North/South co-operation should be practical and mutually beneficial. There is no ideological resistance to co-operation, but it must be based on mutual benefit.

The view of this side of the House is that North/South co-operation must be efficient, and the amendment takes account of that. There is no point in trying to drive out inefficiencies from our system if we simply ignore them in North/South matters. Co-operation must also be based on economic practicalities. At a time of recession, it is not realistic to suggest that we consider a massive expansion of North/South activities, because the money is simply not available for that.

We must also bear in mind opinions North and South of the border. There is a great commitment to North/Southern, but when there is a practical implication, such as the North/South interconnector, some of the Members opposite fight tooth and nail against the nature and route of that project. When it comes to practicalities, the South makes cuts in its budget for North/South bodies.

Although the South may occasionally want to talk the talk, is it prepared to walk the walk? Mr McElduff and other Members mentioned acute hospitals. I would be interested in which Health Minister would be willing to announce the closure of hospitals in border

areas of the South. I cannot see anyone having that political courage. Are we prepared to abandon the new hospital for Enniskillen in the south-west?

There is also the issue of variable economics. I accept that there can be good practical co-operation between North and South. Many examples that have been mentioned happen outside the North/South Ministerial Council through good practical arrangements.

However, there are also instances of east-west co-operation. The junior Minister Mr Kelly mentioned the co-operation on sex offenders that goes beyond jurisdictions. Mr Gallagher mentioned environmental issues. The Kyoto protocol is based largely on nation states, and Mr Gallagher is right to say that the environment does not recognise a border. However, it does not recognise the Irish Sea or the North Channel either. There is, therefore, a range of issues on which to co-operate.

There should be practical co-operation on matters that are mutually beneficial. Whether the co-operation is North/South or east-west, it must be balanced and practically driven. That is why the DUP supports the amendment.

Mr Attwood: At the outset, it is important that I state the SDLP's core political purpose in the debate. Next month, it will be 10 years since the North/South Ministerial Council's (NSMC) first meeting. It is appropriate to mark that event by taking stock, and, more importantly, to voice the anxiety that exists that the aims that are described in my party's motion could, for wider political reasons, be frustrated.

I do not know what motion DUP Members were reading, but it was not the one in the Order Paper. The motion was crafted to address how unionism might face up to its contents. That is why it seeks:

“additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived”.

That is why my party did not prescribe certain implementation bodies that it believes should exist; it calls for the development and enlargement of North/South opportunities. Therefore, the entire motion is crafted in a way to break through the political fog and narrow politics that sometimes prevail on the Floor in order to break through the present impasse on North/South co-operation.

As junior Minister Kelly said, the review of North/South co-operation is due to be discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council in two weeks' time. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have told the Assembly time after time that the first phase of the review would look at existing bodies and that the second phase, which would look at future arrangements, would report in two weeks' time.

There is grave danger that in the current political turbulence, opportunities that the review may present will be frustrated and sidelined. The SDLP's view is that mutually beneficial opportunities that could be developed will be lost and we will all lose out as a result. That is the purpose of the debate: to pull back from what passes for politics in order to identify how the Assembly, its parties and Ministers can grasp the opportunities that may be presented in the next two weeks.

The debate is not about a united Ireland; not once did Dolores Kelly mention a united Ireland in her speech. That will be confirmed in the Hansard report. However, there is nothing wrong and everything right about nationally minded people such as the SDLP and Sinn Féin wanting to share fully in the life of the rest of the island.

That is not, however, what the debate is about. Its aim was not to reframe the nationalist wish for a united Ireland but to acknowledge the cost of partition. Before partition, there were not two Administrations, economic units or public services on the island. Before partition, all the people of the island, regardless of their political identity, agreed that there was one public service, one economy and one system of administration.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will take an intervention from Mr Kennedy if he wants to make one.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. Will he agree that, before partition, Ireland operated under the auspices of the Crown, which provided its economic basis and welfare?

Mr Attwood: Whatever sovereignty resided in Ireland before partition, there was one economy, one administrative unit and one public service. Neither unionists nor nationalists on the island felt threatened or at any peril because of that; they accepted it.

The motion argues that unionists recognise that we are not trying to railroad them into a united Ireland but to undo the costs of partition, which would bring real benefits for administration, the economy, public service, and for the border counties in particular.

That is the thinking behind the motion. If we do not take the opportunity that may present itself in the NSMC review, which is meant to be discussed in two weeks' time, there may not be a breakthrough. We will wait to see whether it is discussed in two weeks' time, because, in the current political climate, some people will be tempted to put that on the back-burner as well.

Members rightly outlined where we can avail ourselves of some opportunities. In proposing the amendment, Alastair Ross said that sometimes he comes to the Chamber and is presented with a one-page statement on a North/South meeting. He was

right about that, but he did not analyse the reason for it. Reports on North/South meetings are sometimes very narrow because those North/South sectors are still working to a programme of work that was agreed seven years ago, in 2002. Who, in 2009, in any area of politics, is working to a programme that was agreed in 2002?

The review, and we will wait to see whether this happens, needs to determine whether the work programme of the existing bodies can be liberated in order that it can be updated to enable the bodies to do more and better work after 2009. That is why reports that come out of North/South meetings are so narrow.

Barry McElduff and others touched on the second test of the review. Some 48% of the North's Budget is spent on health, while 25% of the South's Budget is spent on health. However, that does not take into account all the South's spending, because part of it is done outside its Department of Health and Children. In the round, up to 35% of every euro and pound on this island is spent on health. Is there not a better way in which to do things?

Mr Kennedy said that the motion was informed by some ideological predisposition, but he and the Ulster Unionist Party should go and speak to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is sitting on a report that was commissioned by the two Departments, North and South. The report makes 37 recommendations about how primary and acute healthcare on this island can be delivered better. That is not some ideological predisposition. Those 37 recommendations would make people on this island's health better, would save money and would make healthcare more efficient and effective. Where is the threat in that?

If I were a member of the Irish Government listening to some of what the DUP said today, I would be tempted to pull the money. In spite of their economic turmoil, they have not withdrawn one penny or euro from subventions to the North. They rightly asked for 3% efficiencies on North/South bodies, but the DUP's amendment offensively referred to that as "efficiencies imposed". That was not imposition but was done through consent and in agreement with the Irish Government. However, at the same time, the Irish Government did not reduce by one penny the millions of pounds that they subvent to the North, including to finance the Derry to Aghnacloy road, the border road, Waterways Ireland and all the stuff in Fermanagh to which Tommy Gallagher referred.

The DUP's amendment is a slap in the face for the Irish Government. In spite of their own economic conditions, they remain generous and committed to North/South development. Therefore, put the amendment aside.

We did not welcome the North/South review. If it produces positive proposals, they should be grasped. They should not be surrendered. Contrary to what Members may think, the review will say that about implementation bodies to date.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is surrendered.

4.45 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 45; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Ross and Mr Weir.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mr P J Bradley.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that balanced North/South and east-west co-operation can deliver benefits for the people of Northern Ireland; notes that the ongoing North/South review has yet to conclude; and welcomes the efficiencies imposed on the implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd.

Adjourned at 4.56 pm.