
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Petitions of Concern

Monday 7 December 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 10 November, an honourable Member for South Down Mr John McCallister claimed that the cost of asking Northern Ireland questions was £300 a question. Subsequently, I discovered that a Conservative Member of Parliament in the House of Commons had tabled 250 questions for written answer on one day. From the House of Commons, I have established that the cost of that was £37,250, but, in the course of establishing that, the House of Commons also informed me that the average cost of answering a question for written answer is £149. At some point in the immediate future, Mr Speaker, will you determine the precise or average cost of answering a question for written answer in the House to prevent any future misunderstanding or deliberate misinterpretation of the cost?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I will come back to the Member or the House directly on the issue.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I wish to advise the House of an approach that I intend to take with regard to petitions of concern. The issue of whether a petition of concern might be withdrawn was raised on 3 November by Mr Ford, who, I know, is not in the Chamber, following the outcome of the vote on the amendment to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission motion. I am grateful to the Member for raising the matter, because it is an important issue for the procedures of the House.

Petitions of concern are provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and their purpose is to provide a mechanism to safeguard the interests of a significant minority of Members. Standing Orders set out the procedure to be followed. However, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Orders are silent on the issue of whether a petition of concern may be withdrawn once it has been presented, and the Speaker has determined that it is valid.

The tabling of a petition of concern is a serious and important procedural step, which raises the bar in changing the vote from a simple majority basis to a cross-community basis. The use of a petition of concern should not be regarded lightly. Therefore, my ruling is that, once a petition has been presented and the Speaker has determined that it is valid, the petition may not be withdrawn. In addition, Members who have signed the petition may not withdraw their names from it after the point at which it has been determined as being valid. That is an important point. Once it is submitted to the Business Office, comes before the Speaker and is then validated, it remains very much alive from then on in.

I do not intend to take any points of order on the issue, but, if Members have any queries about my ruling, they should speak to the Clerks, the Business Office or me. We shall now proceed.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Resignation of Mr Francie Brolly

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I have received a letter from Mr Francie Brolly stating that he will resign as a Member of the Assembly with effect from 11 December 2009. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and I know that the whole House will share with me in wishing Mr Brolly every success as he steps down from the Assembly.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Agriculture Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in agriculture sectoral format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the twelfth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in agriculture sectoral format that was held in Agriculture House, Dublin, on Wednesday 18 November 2009. Junior Minister Robin Newton and I represented the Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with Mr Newton, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council noted the ongoing progress on the delivery of the draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy and the work that is in hand to finalise arrangements for a cross-border stakeholder consultation event in early 2010. Ministers noted the revised working group arrangements and looked forward to receiving a further progress report at the next NSMC meeting in agriculture sectoral format.

Ministers welcomed a presentation by the plant health and pesticides steering group of its comprehensive report on a joint strategic approach to plant health and pesticides. They noted that the report identified a significant number of areas of mutual interest that would benefit from an agreed framework for co-ordination and delivery. The Council agreed, without prejudice to the need for final approval, that the steering group should develop a work programme for consideration at a future agriculture NSMC meeting.

Ministers noted developments on the implementation of the common agricultural policy (CAP) health check agreement, the future of the CAP and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the challenges facing the agriculture sector, in particular in relation to greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, and the current situation in the dairy industry. They requested that officials remain in close contact on those issues and report developments to a future NSMC meeting in agriculture sectoral format. The Council agreed that its next meeting would take place in spring 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): I thank the Minister for her statement and note how timely it

is, given that it was this time last year that the Minister had to give the unfortunate news to the House about the dioxin outbreak. Thankfully, today is not about bad news.

I note that the all-island animal health and welfare strategy is continuing to progress, although there is little, if any, evidence of anything substantive arising out of the strategy other than meetings and more meetings. However, will the Minister provide us with three things: first, a timeline that details the targets for completion of the proposed piece of work; secondly, details of the types of actions that will arise from the proposed strategy; and thirdly, the positive impact that the actions will have in respect of the Northern Ireland industry. Those are the crucial matters.

Finally, will the Minister indicate why the challenges that are facing the industry, such as diminished farmgate prices, low profitability and compliance with the nitrates directive, have a lower priority at agricultural sector meetings than greenhouse emissions?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I would have liked more time to discuss a wider range of issues, but the meeting was time limited because of the need for people to move on to other meetings that day and the constraints of ministerial diaries. However, there have been a number of positive outcomes as a result of co-operation on animal health and welfare to date, although we did not go into them all in detail during the meeting.

To give the House a flavour of the amount of work that is ongoing, areas of co-operation include the development of a largely similar system of sheep identification on the island; the exchange of data to facilitate trade in bovines following the lifting of the BSE export ban; a broad alignment of border control policies aimed at preventing the introduction of animal disease; and contingency planning for exotic disease outbreaks, including agreement on a common chapter in epizootic contingency plans for foot-and-mouth disease, avian influenza and, most recently, bluetongue.

Agreement has also been reached on a protocol for animal welfare during transport breaches and on co-operation on testing regimes for TB and brucellosis in border areas. That strategic approach will enable the achievement of further positive outcomes over the next year, all of which provide for meeting the key aim of free animal movement.

Like me, the Chairman has frequently lobbied on some of the difficulties that remain with the all-island movement of animals, and the Department is keen to make progress in that area. It is important that we all work together and that all parties recognise the importance of the strategy so that it can be finalised.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Given the need for an all-island approach to the issue of

sheep electronic identification (EID), will she confirm whether that issue was raised at the sectoral meeting?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member will be aware, the European Union has set a compulsory implementation date for sheep EID of 31 December 2009, which means that member states must introduce the system for sheep born after that date. The purpose of sheep EID is to enable the recording of individual sheep movements.

The Department's public consultation on the new system closed on 6 November 2009, and the responses are being considered as the new rules are developed. Departmental officials are working closely with their counterparts in the South and in Britain to ensure that the systems that are established will minimise the administrative and cost burden on keepers here. The Department is also considering whether it can support keepers with the cost of tags and support markets and meat plants with the cost of reading equipment during the initial implementation of EID.

Mr Elliott: I also thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the all-island animal health and welfare strategy, and my question relates to the specific movement requirements between the two jurisdictions. When cattle transfer from farms in Northern Ireland to farms in the Republic of Ireland, the authorities in the South insist that that movement history is transferred electronically to their system, but there is no requirement for that information to be transferred if cattle move in the opposite direction. Has there been any discussion on that issue or any insistence by the Department on the creation of such a system here.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member has made a number of enquiries to the Department on the movement of animals, and he is aware that full co-operation on animal health issues on the island of Ireland has the potential to help to reduce and prevent the spread of animal diseases. It also helps to facilitate trade and improve the sustainability of farming in the North.

The ultimate objective of North/South co-operation should be a facilitation of trade through the free movement of animals on the island and an optimisation of the animal health status of the island through an alignment of policies to control animal disease. The island of Ireland should be recognised internationally as a separate unit for disease control purposes, because that would ensure effective traceability of livestock in the event of a disease outbreak.

12.15 pm

The Member is also aware that there are different brucellosis schemes, North and South, given that the South has brucellosis-free status and we are working towards such status. The South is nervous about our ability to export brucellosis and that is why the question

arises. However, the Member is aware that we are fixated on getting rid of brucellosis in the short term, and we are appealing to the industry to work with us to do that. I am anxious for us to be able to eradicate brucellosis as quickly as possible in order to facilitate the free movement of animals on the island.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I hope that the brevity of the Minister's statement does not reflect its content. Given the pattern of flooding throughout the island, did the Minister take the opportunity to raise the matter with her counterpart for the rest of the island? Have she and her officials given any consideration to an all-island approach to seek assistance to deal with the intensity of the floods across the island?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I presume that the Member is talking about seeking assistance from Europe. Last week, I told the Member about how serious the flooding had to be before Europe could help, and we are well below that threshold. However, we have tried to examine all the options available.

The competent authority that deals with flooding in the North is the Rivers Agency, and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) has responsibility for dealing with flooding in the South. Although the matter was not discussed at the NSMC meeting, we are working closely with the agencies on the other side of the border to maximise public money and how it is spent and to ensure that that work is enhanced by the development of co-operation in border areas. We work together closely, but the issue of flooding did not arise during the meeting.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to the future of the common agricultural policy and the World Trade Organization. Will she assure me that she and her Southern counterpart will avoid the temptation to take a protectionist stance in those talks, not least because there is a groundswell of support in both parts of the island of Ireland that wants to see proper international development, which means giving farmers in the developing world the opportunity to move beyond subsistence farming and to compete internationally on a level playing field?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I will certainly not be involved in anything that would make life more difficult for farmers in other parts of the world. However, my job is to try to make things better for farmers in this part of the world. Therefore, I must look carefully at what happens with regard to the CAP and the WTO.

The Member is aware that, during the negotiations last year with the WTO, the Dublin Minister and I were concerned about some of the likely outcomes from the WTO, and we all breathed a sigh of relief

when those talks collapsed. DEFRA's position on the WTO is not necessarily consistent with ours or with that of Scotland and Wales. We do not want to see any international agreements being made that would have a significant negative effect on farming in any part of Ireland.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Is there any indication of the make-up of the groups that will attend the stakeholder consultation event, and what benefit does the Minister hope the event will achieve?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The event, which will happen in the spring, will bring key stakeholders from both jurisdictions together to discuss the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy and to discuss the all-island strategic approach to animal health and welfare. Arrangements for the meeting are in hand, and we hope to have a suitable date early in 2010. Both Departments agree the cognisance that must continue to be taken of the views of stakeholders in the delivery of the strategy.

As the Member is aware, I have been very keen to emphasise the importance of partnership and of keeping in close contact with our stakeholders so that they know what is coming. We must operate on a no-surprises basis and work in conjunction to get the best for the industry. I do not have a list of stakeholders with me, but I will provide the Member with such a list at a later date.

Mr Burns: I have a question on the issue of animal health. Was there any mention at the meeting of the whereabouts of the cattle with tuberculosis that were stolen?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The answer is a very short no; those cattle were not mentioned at the meeting on 18 November.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she outline the steps that have been taken to deal with any future food-safety incidents, bearing in mind the experience of previous incidents?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As the Member is aware, after the dioxin incident in 2008, which occurred around this time last year, it was agreed that a rapid alert system should be put in place. An interim system has been put in place, and a long-term system will be developed following the reviews of the incident. We want to ensure that there is proper consultation on all those issues and that we are able to work in conjunction and with better communication to ensure that we learn from the past.

Mr McHugh: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. I thank her in

particular for her answer to Stephen Farry's question, which concerned the effect that issues affecting the developing world could have on the future of the agriculture industry here. My question concerns the World Trade Organization and the future of the common agricultural policy from this point on.

Even as we speak, farmers here in Ireland are under particular pressure because of the difference between retail and farm prices and the pressure that greenhouse gas emissions create, particularly methane emissions. Indeed, the Minister mentioned greenhouse gas emissions in her statement. People in many developing countries depend on meat and milk in particular for their staple diet. That should be taken into account when we consider the developing world. Ireland is an 80% producer and exporter, so the dependence —

Mr Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr McHugh: What impact will all that have on discussions about the future position of the CAP for Ireland and countries like it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We had a discussion on 18 November about the CAP and the WTO, and we reviewed the various decisions that both Departments made to implement the CAP health check agreement. We also looked forward to the forthcoming debate on the future of the CAP post-2013, and we considered the various issues that are emerging from that. Those include matters such as the size of the CAP budget, the future shape of the single farm payment scheme and rural development. We also reviewed the current position of the world trade talks and agreed that officials from both Departments should continue to keep in close contact on those matters. Clearly, both the CAP and the WTO will feature in future NSMC meetings.

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We can probably think of better ways to spend a Monday afternoon, but there we are.

With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in Dublin on Wednesday 18 November 2009. The Executive were represented by me and Robin Newton MLA, one of the junior Ministers. The Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, and Conor Lenihan TD, Minister of State for Natural Resources. The statement has been agreed with Mr Newton, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council welcomed a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency, which its chief executive, Mr Derick Anderson, presented. Ministers noted the importance and effectiveness of the Loughs Agency's conservation and protection work when salmon stocks are in decline; progress with the implementation of its marine tourism development strategy through the roll-out of projects supported by INTERREG IV; the successful delivery of angling development events and the engagement with the NI Tourist Board; the delivery of marine monitoring vessel the *Ostrea*, which was achieved with the support of EU financial instrument for fisheries guidance (FIFG) funding; and the completion of the delivery of the hardship package for the rationalisation of commercial salmon fishing.

The Council welcomed a presentation by Loughs Agency officials on the agency's collection of geographical information systems data. Ministers noted the practical use of that information and how it is applied in the field.

The Council approved two sets of regulations. One will extend areas in which angling is prohibited to protect vulnerable salmon, and the other will make it an offence to kill certain coarse fish, including roach, bream, tench, carp, rudd, perch and any hybrid of those fish after they have been captured with a rod and line.

Ministers reviewed plans to introduce commencement Orders, which are required for a staged and managed introduction of the new powers that are available to the Loughs Agency to develop and license aquaculture and

to protect the fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. They considered the agency's legislation implementation plan, welcomed progress on its delivery and noted that further regulations will require NSMC approval in early 2010.

The Council noted the revised 2009 business plan and budget provision for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, which awaited the approval of both Finance Ministers. Ministers also noted the Loughs Agency's annual reports and financial statements for 2007 and 2008, prior to their submission for laying before the NI Assembly and the Oireachtas. The Council agreed that the next meeting in aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in February or March 2010. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): The excitement is contagious. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I offer the Committee's unanimous support to the Department, the Minister and her officials in the forthcoming negotiations on fishing opportunities at the December EU Fisheries Council meeting. The cuts that are proposed, particularly those to the prawn catch and fleet, have the potential to devastate the industry. It is imperative that those proposals be negated as far as is possible. On a number of occasions, the Committee has offered to help the Department and, more importantly, the industry in whatever way it can. It is important to use this opportunity to highlight the importance of that issue.

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

I ask the Minister to apprise the House on three matters. First, what will be the cost of the new marine monitoring vessel? Secondly, have any problems arisen since its commissioning? Finally, can the Minister apprise the House on the details that are associated with the hardship package for the rationalisation of commercial salmon fishing? I am not aware of that matter's having appeared before the Committee, and we look forward to an update on it.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Under FIFG, the agency secured funding of £750,000 for the Ostrea. The vessel was second-hand and was sourced in New Zealand. The total cost, including purchase, refit, shipping, fees and expenses was between £810,000 and £820,000. The balance came from the agency's aquaculture and shellfish budget line. Members will be interested to note that the vessel is insured at its estimated European replacement value of £1.5 million.

I am aware that certain allegations have been made about the vessel's procurement. The allegations are under investigation by departmental officials, so it is

not appropriate for me to comment further until the investigations are complete.

I am aware that there have been some difficulties with the vessel after its refit in New Zealand. The agency has advised that all minor faults were repaired under a guarantee from the refit contractor. Some initial concerns about the engines have proved to be unfounded, and, at the NSMC meeting, the agency reported that the vessel was safely home and that the crew are being trained on it. It is anticipated that the Ostrea will be fully operational by the end of 2009.

The hardship package dates from 2007, but I will get back to the Chairperson of the Committee about that, because I do not have sufficient detail with me.

12.30 pm

Mr Molloy: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she explain more about geographical information systems (GIS)? I realise that the Minister has no direct responsibility for Lough Neagh, but would GIS benefit that region?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Geographical information systems use hardware, software and data to capture, manage, analyse and display all forms of geographically referenced information. The Loughs Agency uses GIS to collect information about the areas for which it has responsibility in order to manage them more effectively. The system has given the agency greater capability to deal with pollution incidents because it allows staff to deploy quickly and make interventions more accurately and specifically. It also facilitates more effective information sharing between the Loughs Agency and other bodies.

The agency intends to use GIS to benefit its customers by introducing a system that can be used by the public to access useful information on the Internet. The Department expects that to be of great benefit to the area's tourist industry, because a potential visitor from anywhere can conveniently access information about everything that the Foyle and Carlingford areas have to offer. Recognising that all politics is local, I presume that there would be a benefit if the system were available to Lough Neagh. It is not up to me to bring that forward, but the NSMC presentation was fascinating, and showed how technology can be used to our benefit in protecting water quality and fish, and by ensuring a positive experience for those who want to fish.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does the Department play any co-ordinating role among Loughs Agency staff, the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the Republic of Ireland authorities to help to prevent salmon poaching in the Foyle and Carlingford areas?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department works closely with other departmental bodies, and as the Loughs Agency is a cross-border body, information is shared with officials in the South. The Department employs several people who work antisocial hours to try to catch poachers. I recently reported to the House that two cars that were seized from poachers were of a high value. Therefore, the poachers were not acting out of financial hardship. There is a lot of co-operation across the various agencies to try to reduce poaching in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

I thank the Minister for her statement. Like Mr Molloy, I would be interested in more detail about geographical information systems. Following on from my earlier question about flooding, does GIS deal with water levels, and, if so, how might that affect the exchange of information with the Rivers Agency? I do not expect a detailed answer now, but I would be grateful if such information could be provided, because this matter is of interest to me and to some of the groups with which I work.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Rather than providing a long, convoluted answer, it may be beneficial, given that the two Members who raised the issue are members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, if Loughs Agency staff gave a presentation to the Committee on geographical information systems, because I learned a lot from the NSMC presentation.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her statement. With the ongoing progress at UK-wide level on the marine Bill, and the potential for the House to consider its own marine Bill in the near future, has the Minister had any discussions with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland on how marine legislation on the island of Ireland can be harmonised, bearing in mind that Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle share a national boundary with the Republic.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree entirely with the Member's sentiments on the matter. There needs to be as much co-operation as possible to ensure that the rules are harmonised, that we are able to work together and that there is no confusion for people who fish in the Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough catchments and, as the Member pointed out, cross the border to do so.

Although the Department of the Environment has the lead on the marine Bill, my Department also ties into that. The matter was not covered specifically at the meeting, but we will want to consider it in the future to ensure as much co-operation as possible.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement to the House this afternoon. In common with the Chairman, I offer her the Committee's support when she goes to Brussels. We are keen that the prawn quota is not reduced at all.

The Minister referred to the marine tourism development strategy, which is supported through INTERREG IV. Will she indicate whether money has been allocated for INTERREG IV projects under that strategy? Will other parts of the Province qualify for it?

Budget provision for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission awaits the approval of both Finance Ministers. Is that being held up unnecessarily? I want to ensure that the process is moving along.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As regards the marine tourism development strategy, the Loughs Agency reported at the NSMC meeting that the first project that is likely to be delivered is the pontoon and mooring facility on the Foyle, which has received planning approval. It is hoped that that will commence in early 2010.

The agency also referred to working in partnership with Newry and Mourne District Council and the Mourne Heritage Trust on two potential developments at Narrow Water and Mill Bay in the Carlingford catchment area.

Therefore, work is happening in Foyle and Carlingford. The money that we have talked about is being used for that work, but other funding streams are available to areas that are outside those auspices.

Mr Shannon: What type of funding?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Funding is available from the European fisheries fund. That is the route that I would go down for Strangford. Obviously, my Department wants investment not only in infrastructure but also in fishing villages and the entire area of aquaculture.

The Member asked about approval for the budget. The Finance Ministers' approval was not received in time for the NSMC to approve the business plan formally at its meeting on 18 November 2009. That approval was received on 23 November. Subsequently, the business plan and budget received formal NSMC approval at its meeting in education sectoral format that was held on 25 November. Therefore, the timing has worked out well. Approval was obtained, and we were able to process the plan and budget two days later.

I want to record my thanks to Minister Ruane for agreeing to add that item to the agenda of the meeting in education sectoral format. There is now full NSMC approval for the business plan and budget.

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

Earlier, poaching was mentioned, salmon poaching, in particular. Given the increase in poaching on the County Down coast, what extra resources will be put in place to deal with that major problem?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am working on the assumption that the Department has directed all the resources that it can to combat poaching. As I said, Rivers Agency staff work hard for long, antisocial hours to deal with the issue. The Member will be aware that the Loughs Agency, like other agencies, has had to make efficiency savings. I am not sure that there are extra resources to put towards the fight against poaching. We would appreciate any information that the Member can give us on those difficulties, and, in consequence, we may be able to deal with them.

Mr Savage: I also thank the Minister for her statement. She said that delivery of the hardship package for commercial salmon fishing has been completed. Who will benefit from that package?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Those who will benefit are the salmon fishermen who previously had licences but rescinded them in order to benefit from the hardship package. They are no longer fishing for salmon; they have been bought out of that activity, and they will benefit from the money.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Inquiry into Climate Change

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for the Environment on its inquiry into climate change; and calls on the Minister of the Environment, in liaison with Executive colleagues, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

It is important that the report is read in context, as I and many others believe that climate change is the single most important issue facing the world today. One has only to look at recent flooding in England and, closer to home, in the South of Ireland to see the effects that climate change has had already. In its 'Third Assessment Report: Climate Change 2001', the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that:

"There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities."

Scientists from around the world who sat on that panel said that, during the past 100 years, the world's surface air temperature increased by an average of 0.6°C. That does not sound like a lot, but the effects are clearly felt and the following are among them. Sea levels are rising, and, during the twentieth century, the sea level rose by about 15 cm due to melting glacier ice and the expansion of warmer sea water. Models predict that the sea level may rise by as much as 59 cm during the twenty-first century, threatening coastal communities, wetlands and coral reefs. Sea surface temperature has also risen. Warmer waters in the shallow oceans have contributed to the death of about one quarter of the world's coral reefs in the last few decades. Rainfall has become heavier, causing flooding in many regions, as seen throughout the UK and the Republic of Ireland. There has been an increase in extreme drought. Higher temperatures have caused a higher rate of evaporation and a more frequent instance of drought in some areas of the world. Ecosystems have changed. As temperatures warm, species may either move to a cooler habitat or die. Warming has also caused changes in the timing of spring events and the length of the growing season.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that climate change will impact on human health and that scientists consider that most of its health impacts will be adverse. In 'The World Health Report 2002', the

WHO states that climate change was estimated to be responsible, in the year 2000, for approximately 2·4% of worldwide diarrhoea and 6% of malaria in some middle-income countries. It states that warmer average temperatures, combined with increased climatic variability, will alter the pattern of exposure to thermal extremes and resultant health impacts in both summer and winter. The WHO states that, beyond the early recognition that such changes will affect economic activities, infrastructure and managed ecosystems, there is now recognition that global climate change poses risks to the health of the human population.

It would be easy for us, in the North, to leave mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change to the more powerful countries in the world, but the Committee's evidence, gathered over the course of the inquiry, shows that it is vital that we play a full part in the fight against climate change now. Indeed, members selected climate change as the subject of the Committee's first inquiry because they recognised its potential to impact in many ways on society today and long into the future.

The Committee agreed the aim and terms of reference of the inquiry at its meeting on 15 January 2009. The purpose of the inquiry was:

“To understand the implications of climate change for Northern Ireland and to make recommendations on government policies, in line with the Committee's earlier response on the UK Climate Change Bill, to mitigate the impacts of climate change, examine economic implications and identify suitable adaptation initiatives.”

12.45 pm

The Committee was presented with 45 written submissions and agreed to take oral evidence from 24 organisations, businesses and individuals. During the evidence gathering stage, it became apparent that organisations were concerned about a number of specific areas in the terms of reference. The Committee agreed that the report should focus on the following key areas: legislation and policy; targets and budgets; structures and accountability; costs; sectoral targets and action; and additional specific actions. The report contains 52 recommendations, but I am sure that Members will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to speak to all 52.

I will focus on the recommendations that the Committee feels are the most important ones to come out of the report. Recommendation 47 states:

“The Committee recommends that, as a matter of social justice, Northern Ireland government has a duty to recognise the global impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable people and places and this should act as a driver for the delivery of the recommendations of this report.”

The Committee recognises that the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable people in society is a matter of social justice and that it should act as a driver for Northern Ireland to develop its own climate change implementation strategy.

Members agreed with several correspondents who said that it should be a moral imperative for Northern Ireland to support and assist the developing world in adapting to the impacts of climate change and to urge action based on the principles of equity and human rights. Northern Ireland has a duty to recognise the global impacts of climate change on the developing world and should act as a driver for delivering the recommendations in the report.

Recommendation 6 states:

“The Committee recommends that Northern Ireland government should commit to Northern Ireland making a fair and proportionate contribution to the UK Greenhouse Gas Emission Reduction Targets required under the UK Climate Change Act.”

The Committee agreed that Northern Ireland should make a fair and proportionate contribution to UK greenhouse gas emission targets. It also agreed that that should be achieved by Northern Ireland urgently setting its own targets for greenhouse gas emissions.

In addition to long-term targets, Northern Ireland should set short- and medium-term targets on an annual or rolling basis. The Committee feels that the setting of targets needs to be underpinned by sound local research at sectoral level, which should provide sufficient information for setting challenging but achievable Northern Ireland-wide targets enabling sectoral adjustments to be made, where necessary, in response to local circumstances. The targets should encourage attitudinal change and reflect where the most cost-effective reductions can be made.

Recommendation 7, which is linked to the previous recommendation, states:

“The Committee recommends that Northern Ireland should underpin its contribution to UK Greenhouse Gas Emission Reduction targets by urgently establishing its own emissions targets based on sound local science. Long term targets should be accompanied by short and medium term annual or rolling targets which should be challenging but achievable, encourage attitudinal change, reflect local circumstances for each sector and based on the most cost-effective approach for Northern Ireland.”

The Committee heard from and agreed with the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside when it expressed concern that even if targets — such as the target to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2010 — are set, there is a risk that they will not be met. Research indicates that a major factor in the failure to meet that target was that too much time was spent talking and not enough time was spent on action. I am sure that a lot of Members agree with that point. The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside argued that that gives a clear signal that action on climate change must start now and that not everything has to be known about climate change before action can commence. The Committee very much agrees with that view. The time for talking is over; the time for action is now.

Recommendation 1 states:

“The Committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, Northern Ireland should develop its own climate change implementation strategy that encompasses both mitigation and adaptation and focuses particularly on opportunities contributing to economic growth and delivering multiple objectives. It should also identify and seek to minimise any risks of outcomes that will counteract Northern Ireland’s efforts to meet climate change objectives in the longer term.”

The Committee agreed that Northern Ireland should produce, as soon as possible, its own climate change implementation strategy, which should encompass mitigation and adaptation. Members felt it important that every opportunity be taken, when developing the strategy, to identify any beneficial aspects of addressing climate change and, in particular, where those could contribute to economic growth. The strategy should prioritise the obvious win-win opportunities, such as the potential for green jobs and the actions that will deliver more than just climate change objectives. For example, measures to improve energy efficiency could contribute to a reduction in fuel poverty, or, practices aimed at reducing agricultural emissions could lead to more efficient farming. Members agreed that the strategy should identify ways of ensuring that Northern Ireland avoids any potential perverse outcomes of addressing climate change, such as adapting to hotter summers by increasing the use of fossil-fuel powered air conditioning.

I highlight recommendation 15, which states:

“The Committee recommends that the Northern Ireland Audit Office should be tasked and funded accordingly, to assess progress on climate change objectives across government and report to the Public Accounts and Environment Committees.”

In the event of the efficiency review deciding to co-locate climate change policy and energy policy within a single Department, members noted that it is unlikely that the scrutiny role of the equivalent Statutory Committee would fulfil that role. In the interim, the role must continue to be carried out by the Committee for the Environment. The Committee recognised that that structure, which represents the status quo, is limited in its ability to perform cross-cutting scrutiny of other Departments and recommends that such scrutiny be added to the remit of the Audit Office, which is directly akin to the current arrangement for overarching financial scrutiny. The Committee believes that the Audit Office should be given the remit and resources to undertake the specialist role of the detailed assessment of, and reporting on, the achievement of climate change targets across government. The Audit Office would report to the Assembly’s Public Accounts Committee, but its reports would also be available for the Environment Committee to scrutinise more closely should that be necessary.

I want to express my thanks and appreciation to the Committee staff for their work in the compilation of

the report. I thank the specialist adviser to the Committee, and, last but not least, Committee members and the former Chairperson, my colleague Patsy McGlone, for their hard work on the report over the past 12 months. I thank the organisations and individuals who provided written and oral evidence.

The report marks only the beginning in the fight against climate change in the North, and I do not want it to become another inquiry report that merely gathers dust on the shelf. Following the report, the Committee will be commissioning its own research to better inform members on the cost implications of addressing climate change in Northern Ireland. Those costs are obviously very important. However, the cost of doing nothing will be catastrophic.

I welcome the Minister’s attendance at the debate, as climate change is too important an issue to ignore any longer. The Committee calls on the Minister and the relevant Departments to implement the recommendations in the report.

The climate change report is the first that I have introduced to the House since I assumed the role of Chairperson of the Environment Committee, and I have the greatest pleasure in commending it to the Assembly and in recommending its support by the House.

Mr Weir: In her opening remarks, the Chairperson said that there was a danger of too much talking and not enough action. Therefore, I will try to keep my remarks as brief as possible.

I add my thanks to those of the Chairperson: I thank the Committee staff, and, in particular, the previous Chairperson of the Environment Committee. Perhaps we, on this side of the House, will start a ‘bring back Patsy’ campaign. I thank all those who contributed to the report.

Undoubtedly, climate change, and how we, as a region, deal with that, is a very serious issue. Across the Chamber, and, indeed, throughout Northern Ireland, there is not necessarily a uniform view on climate change. However, to my mind, that is a red herring. Whether we like it or not, we all have to face up to the issues.

In Northern Ireland, we face two choices. We can drag our heels, kicking and screaming, and potentially have measures, which may not be conducive to local circumstances, imposed on us. Alternatively, as an Executive, an Assembly and a society, we can take a lead by providing a certain level of guidance on the key issues that need to be tackled. Undoubtedly, the second choice is the wisest, because it will enable us to find measures that are proportionate and finely tuned to the needs of Northern Ireland.

Mention was made of vulnerable people. Obviously, we are looking at the impact on vulnerable people

throughout the Third World, but we are also looking at the impact on the vulnerable in our own society. We need to ensure that our measures strike a balance to ensure that we have proportionate responses that are financially balanced and protect the environment and the most vulnerable in our society. Addressing climate change will not be confined to the lifetime of this Assembly or the next one; it will be an ongoing issue for decades to come.

Like the Chairperson, I want to touch on a couple of the areas that were covered by the recommendations. Recommendation 2 is particularly important in ensuring that we have progressive targets that are, initially, not legally binding and are based on sound evidence of the particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. The Committee found that the vast bulk of data was produced on either a UK or a worldwide basis. However, only a limited amount of data was Northern Ireland specific. Therefore, it is important that we get the facts right for Northern Ireland and, as an Assembly, tailor our response appropriately. That is important in ensuring that we have an informed debate.

As has also been indicated, we are part of the United Kingdom and should be playing our full role in it. Whatever actions are taken across the UK, Northern Ireland should, at the very least, play a proportionate role. Our level of contribution, and the level of the UK's commitment, will be a moving target. It is significant that we are having this debate when there is a focus on the Copenhagen summit, because the latter may adjust the agenda across the world. We are all hopeful that there will be some degree of settlement at the summit, although it may tee up a situation in which decisions can be made early in the new year. As a society, we have to play our role.

The Committee looked at the issues of structures and accountability. When looking at a cross-departmental issue, there is often a problem with allocating responsibility. If all the focus is on one Department, there is a danger that other Departments may simply ignore the issue. Alternatively, if responsibility is spread across all Departments, it may become a tick-box exercise without the required level of scrutiny. Recommendation 15 calls for the Northern Ireland Audit Office to focus on progress, which would be a useful device for accountability. At this point, I declare an interest as Chairperson of the Audit Committee. The Environment Committee visited Westminster and Whitehall to receive briefings from a number of government Departments on accountability and found that they had their own separate structures —

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

Mr Weir: We need to ensure that we have our own appropriate structures. The efficiency review will be an

opportunity to bring a lot of the subjects under the control of one Department. There are a lot of issues, which other Members will address. I commend the report to the House.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the report and thank the Committee staff for all their hard work. I also thank all the stakeholders who contributed to the report over the past year.

The publication of the report is quite timely, given the upcoming major summit in Copenhagen. There is a great deal of consensus on climate change, and I hope that all parties in the Assembly will call on the world leaders who meet in Copenhagen to strike a fair and binding deal to cut emissions and, as recommendation 47 states, as outlined by the Chairperson, mitigate against the impact on the developing world.

The list of recommendations is comprehensive — 52 in total — and many of them represent progress and should be welcomed. The Executive should take on board much of the report's content and more. I think that we should have set a legally binding target to reduce CO₂ emissions by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. That should be an Executive priority.

1.00 pm

We have heard that leadership has been demonstrated in other places, such as Scotland. We should not in any way shirk our responsibilities here. The report calls for the urgent setting of emission targets, specifically short- and medium-term annual or rolling targets, which will help us to establish an up-to-date picture of progress on our long-term targets.

The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 is now in effect. It sets an interim target of a 42% reduction by 2020, the power for which can be varied based on expert advice, and a target of an 80% reduction by 2050. The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in Scotland has set annual targets for emissions between 2010 and 2050. Such an approach is ambitious and demonstrates leadership. There is no reason why this Administration, when provided with similar expert advice, cannot take that same path.

Recommendation 52 recognises that the “green new deal” offers an opportunity to address climate change issues now and calls on all relevant Departments to make progress on that. There is confusion about which Departments — whether it be the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development or the Department of the Environment — are accountable for certain climate change issues. The report will provide more clarity on accountability and will, it is to be hoped, put more pressure on all Departments to make progress on climate change.

It is good that, if the recommendations are implemented, Departments will be required to take climate change implications into account when writing new policies. Legally binding targets should undoubtedly be set. That key demand has been set out by several groups in the sector, including Stop Climate Chaos, which held successful events in Belfast and Dublin at the weekend. That group rightly points out that the least that we can do is help to create the impetus to change behaviour and attitudes among the public and in the Government.

It is important that the majority of the report's recommendations be actioned. However, that is only a start, and, as the Chairperson said, when the Committee receives further local information, it should, from an informed position, push for the introduction of stronger measures. I welcome the report as an important first step, and I urge other parties to consider the major summit in Copenhagen this week, which Bairbre de Brún, as one of our local MEPs, will attend. It is important to agree a fair and binding deal to cut emissions there. I urge all parties to join us in calling on world leaders to strike a fair deal.

Mr Beggs: Given the commencement of the Copenhagen summit, it is timely that the report has been published today. I hope that, collectively, we can plot a way forward to mitigate global warming and to enable us to adapt to it. I urge all Members to take the time to read the report and the submissions therein to understand the basis of our recommendations.

I put on record my appreciation for the professionalism and hard work of our Committee Clerk, Committee staff and the special adviser who guided us through our evidence sessions. We received evidence from the EU and visited Westminster to consider legislative actions that are under way. It appears that Northern Ireland is lagging somewhat behind.

The report contains 52 significant recommendations. The Committee sought evidence from the public, which elicited 45 written submissions as well as oral evidence from 24 individuals and groups, which we appreciated.

Last night, while watching the Met Office forecast on 'Countryfile', I was struck by the statement that this autumn was the third warmest autumn since 1914 and that rainfall in the United Kingdom in the same period was 184% above the average expected. Those things were both predicted in the Met Office's climate change models. We rely on the Met Office for weather warnings, and it got the forecast right at the end of last week. We should take cognisance of its scientific evidence and the models that it uses to predict what might happen in future. We cannot just ignore that.

The report contains some significant recommendations, and I will focus on a couple of them. Recommendation 1 states that, as a matter of urgency, Northern Ireland

needs an implementation strategy to take into account our particular circumstances. It is not enough to do nothing; clearly, we need to take action. Recommendation 5 seeks the support of all Departments in the Executive. There is little point in having individual silos that do not contribute to the collective change that is needed in Northern Ireland. I hope that all Departments and their Ministers, including our new Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, will recognise that climate change is a serious problem that affects us all.

All but one of those who submitted evidence to the Committee recognised that the climate is changing and that scientific evidence points to the actions of man in contributing to that change. One individual who supports the view of our former Minister of the Environment stood out alone — Mr Hans Schreuder, a retired analytical chemist. He stated emphatically that he did not believe that mankind was having any effect on the world's climate.

If Members have the time they should read the Hansard report of Mr Schreuder's evidence session of 21 May 2009. Some of what he had to say was very interesting. He said:

"There are sections within the United Nations who are determined to have world domination."

I do not know where that came from in the middle of our inquiry. He also said:

"man has no influence on climate change at all ... It is so difficult to talk even to sceptical scientists. They still believe that man has some influence."

Mr Schreuder did not strike me as having an open scientific point of view. He said that "Man has zero influence", and, later on, he said:

"there are known reserves of several trillion barrels of oil. New oil is discovered all the time. Why is this? It is because the earth produces oil all by itself. Oil is not based on dead plant or animal material. There is not a single trace of animal or plant material in crude oil."

Mr Schreuder was the one climate change sceptic from whom we received evidence in the course of our inquiry, and who supported the views of the former Environment Minister.

The Committee was presented with very strong scientific evidence and also heard from a range of those who are concerned about the environment, all of whom said that climate change is happening and that man is contributing to it. If we are contributing to climate change, we should take action to minimise its effect so that we mitigate it and protect future generations from the damage that we could be doing.

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

Mr Beggs: We must ensure that the limited hydrocarbons that we have are protected for future generations to use.

Mr Ford: As yet another member of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the fact that the report, which has taken most of the year to produce, has been published. I thank the Committee staff, DOE officials and representatives of a huge range of NGOs who assisted us in our work. One of the most useful aspects of the inquiry was a practical visit to AFBI at Hillsborough to see the work that it was doing on renewable energy and on the remediation of methane production from ruminants. It was an example of where Northern Ireland could be at the forefront of the debate, but sadly, at the moment, is not.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that another important issue, which has not received enough coverage, is the fact that farmers can save money and protect the environment by carefully timing the spreading of slurry and artificial fertiliser so that nitrates are not wasted and given off into the atmosphere?

Mr Ford: I agree entirely.

It is clear from the report that we need to do much more about establishing targets than we have done so far in Northern Ireland. An 80% carbon reduction by 2050 is an ambitious target on one level, but on another it is almost useless as 2050 appears to be so far away. It is also rather unfortunate that, in answer to a number of questions that I tabled to every Department recently, it appears that so far there has been hardly any engagement between our 11 Departments and the UK Committee on Climate Change, which is where the expertise resides at a level that is available to all four nations of the UK and where that evidence should be being brought forward and implemented.

The 10:10 campaign, which is being supported by a large number of businesses and by local councils across the water, is committed to making a significant, urgent and immediate cut in carbon reduction. That is setting an example of what we should be doing. We need to establish targets that are not so far out there that people do not recognise the reality. We need targets that deal with the short and medium term and that are specific and sectoral. So far in Northern Ireland, we have failed to make any of that happen.

One section of the report deals with the structures that we need. In her introduction, the Committee Chairperson highlighted a potential role for the Audit Office, whereby it would look at environmental management issues as well as financial management issues and report to the Assembly through the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

I have some concerns as to whether we should have adopted the Westminster model of having a separate Environmental Audit Committee instead. Others took the understandable view that creating another Committee in the Assembly might not see it well staffed and able to focus on the issue. However, if we go down that

road, questions must be asked to ensure that the Audit Office is adequately staffed and able to engage across its double range of responsibilities and that the PAC similarly develops structures that would ensure that matters are dealt with properly.

It is clear that there has to be some structure that ensures the full basis of operation for every part of our environmental governance, which is not yet in place. The problem that remains is that responsibility for climate change is scattered across too many Departments. The DOE has a certain amount of responsibility, particularly through its climate change unit. Yet, that unit effectively has no clout whatsoever; despite his being diplomatic and tactful when he gave evidence to the Committee, the permanent secretary was unable to persuade me that it was anything other than a small unit within a relatively small Department, which is not being listened to across the range of government.

I suspect that we should be looking at an equivalent of the UK Department for Energy and Climate Change, which would have an overarching responsibility for all aspects of climate change policy alongside energy as the key part of that. Whichever Department has that responsibility, it is clear that the climate change unit that resides in the DOE must be part of the key Department. It must be strengthened and have the ability to manage across every aspect of government in a way that it is currently unable to do. That requires a political buy-in at Executive level to ensure that every Department recognises the expertise that exists in that unit, draws on it, listens to it and develops from it.

Towards the end of the recommendations, mention is made of sustainable development. Responsibility for that has been taken away from the DOE and placed within OFMDFM. There is no doubt that the expertise to understand sustainable development was in the DOE. OFMDFM has the clout to ensure that issues are dealt with across Departments, but that joined-up issue has not yet arisen. It seems that we have lost out because sustainability is not being addressed adequately in OFMDFM, given all the other problems that reside in that Department. If the report is to mean anything, it must mean joined-up government, ministerial involvement and drawing on the expertise that is available.

It is a matter of considerable regret that the report notes that, realistically, we could not draw up a Northern Ireland climate change Bill at this stage. We do not have the evidence; we do not necessarily have the expertise; and we need to work on a lot of factors, because there is no doubt that we are lagging behind Scotland and Wales, and we need to move forward on that agenda as quickly as possible.

1.15 pm

Mr Ross: I, too, thank the Committee staff who worked very hard to put the report together over past

months. As Members have said, it is a good time for us to discuss climate change, given that delegates are arriving for the Copenhagen summit today. Although there will probably not be any legally binding agreements made at that summit, I have no doubt that the UK Government will sign up to certain targets that we in Northern Ireland will have a responsibility to deliver. It is important that we have a strategy in place, and we have done some background work on how any such strategy should be implemented.

It is not lost on me that, over the next few days at the Copenhagen conference, more than £130 million will be spent and the carbon emitted will equate to the emissions of a small African country. The carbon footprint created as a result of meetings about carbon footprints is ironic. In recent weeks, the “climategate” scandal exposed scientists and academics who have massaged figures. In e-mails, they admitted to using tricks to disguise some temperature rises in recent years that were incompatible with the figures that they wanted. That sort of thing adds to public suspicion.

In recent days, a populist research poll showed that only 41% of the public are convinced by the science behind the claim that climate change is entirely man made. Therefore, it is a shame that we have not been able to have a sensible debate on the causes of climate change. Indeed, people who question the science behind it, not just here but across the world, have been labelled with loaded terms such as “deniers”. Over the weekend, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change said that those who questioned the science were “flat earthers” who should be ignored. That is not a sensible way forward; we should be able to have open discussion on the issues.

It is important to note that the Committee’s report was not an investigation of the science behind climate change. The majority of people who gave evidence to the inquiry were convinced that man is responsible for climate change, and they came up with practical measures that could be taken in their respective fields to target the problem. As Mr Beggs mentioned, the exception was Hans Schreuder, who outlined the difficulties that he could see with some of the models that are used to predict future temperatures and his belief that all the data do not add up. However, the majority of people who gave evidence are convinced by the science behind climate change.

The Committee focused not just on the climate change policies that we would have to implement but on the impact that those policies would have on the economy and individuals. It is noteworthy that those who gave evidence did not provide a lot of information about the costs of such policies. A lot of work needs to be done on how much some of the relevant measures will cost.

I do not want to go through the entire report, because Members should read it and see what has come out of the Committee’s inquiry. However, I will highlight a few of the issues that were raised during the evidence sessions. The Energy Saving Trust presented a win-win scenario in which people can save both energy and money. Manufacturers have a responsibility to produce products that use less electricity. Our phones, modems, Sky boxes, television and so on mean that our homes use more energy than before.

It is easy to get across the message that we can all make small lifestyle changes. However, other suggestions are much more challenging. The Institution of Highways and Transportation, for example, said that people should reduce the amount of travelling that they do. However, in my view, the fact that people can travel more freely now than ever before is one of the greatest advances in civilisation over the past 100 years. The Institution of Highways and Transportation talked about getting people out of their cars, charging them more to use roads, introducing road tolls in Northern Ireland and increasing car-parking charges in town centres. The people who will be hit hardest by those measures are those who can least afford it. We must be cognisant of that fact when we look at what —

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that it is very economical to use Translink? One day last week, I bought a return ticket from Carrickfergus for something like £3·50. Public transport is the most economical and environmentally friendly method of travel. People should use public transport and park-and-ride facilities where possible.

Mr Ross: I agree totally that we want more people to use public transport, but I do not want to use a big-stick approach. The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) told the Committee that charging people so much that they are discouraged from going into town centres would be counterproductive and that the figures for that approach do not stack up. My colleague from East Antrim has been vocal in the House about the importance of Planning Policy Statement 5 and maintaining our town centres.

At a time when many small businesses find it very tough to sustain themselves, it would be very damaging to have a policy that stops people going into town centres, parking their cars and spending money with the local retailers. That is something that we have to bear in mind when we come up with policies. If everybody went to out-of-town shopping centres, it would kill off our town centres.

We talked to the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU), and to the Rural Climate Change Forum in London. Those were very useful meetings. Given that agriculture is such a large and important industry, comments from Dr Rajendra Pachauri of the Intergovernmental Panel

on Climate Change (IPCC), who said that we should stop eating meat, really do not do anything to inspire public confidence.

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

Mr Ross: I will. Those sorts of suggestions would cripple the industry and cause major health problems across the world.

We also discussed a plastic bag tax. I know that the Members opposite are very keen on that. Evidence from NIIRTA and other organisations indicated that the voluntary approach is much more beneficial. The way forward is to incentivise people to stop using so many plastic bags.

The report makes interesting reading. All Members should consider it, but they need to make sure that they remain balanced between meeting our environmental needs and those of the economy. We must ensure that we do not cripple small businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member could have saved himself energy.

Mr Dallat: I will try to save as much energy as possible. Indeed, I did not put an awful lot of energy into my speech, given that I only joined the Committee at a late stage and the lever arch file was already pretty full. I acknowledge the work of the Committee staff, who have produced a very professional report. It will ensure that climate change is no longer a laughing matter. It is not material for any court jester or for a warm-up act at a conference. It is certainly not an issue to be taken lightly, no matter how superior one feels about the arguments for or against.

Like other Members, I am very conscious of the conference that begins today in Copenhagen. There is already any amount of newsprint about who is controlling it, and who is leaking the e-mails for and against. That makes me despair. Many of those who gave evidence to the Committee emphasised the need for leadership from our Departments, particularly in encouraging energy efficiency. However, I am astonished to find that our Departments do not work in unison; they do their own thing. From today onwards, that is not acceptable. I found it unbelievable that the work of the Carbon Trust, for example, does not include the public sector. It is truly astonishing that that body is not central to improving efficiencies across all Departments, rather than Departments working in isolation and using non-specialists to guide them.

I was disappointed with the Department for Regional Development because it has yet to order its first hybrid bus, which would use electricity as its main source of power. I do not hear of any plans for the development of electric trains. I worry, because

Translink buys and consumes millions of litres of heavy oil for buses and trains every year.

The evidence from the Department of the Environment makes for depressing reading. It certainly offers little incentive to the private sector to take climate change a great deal more seriously:

“The UK emissions reduction target has not been allocated to each country”

and,

“There has been no determination made in Northern Ireland as to what is a ‘fair share’ of UK emissions.”

To me, as a newcomer, that was astonishing. I wonder whether the sustainable development strategy target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by 2025 is achievable.

In addition, the Department indicated that there is no road map. However, what is the use of a road map anyway since the DOE is not in the driving seat? The recommendation that this Assembly should seek advice and assistance in setting sectoral-specific budgets, targets and action plans for Northern Ireland is no longer a topic for debate; it is something that must be done.

Climate change does not just affect far-flung places; it may well affect this part of Ireland much more than we imagine. Certainly, if we travel abroad, we can see the impact very clearly on places such as Africa or India, where I suspect that climate change is a direct cause of much of the famine and drought. Here, particularly in Fermanagh and Galway, questions are being asked about why climate change is so dramatic.

At the beginning of my contribution, I referred to the Copenhagen conference, where real power rests, and where truths and untruths will be told, information and misinformation will abound, and the art of lying with statistics may be the order of the day. However, here in Belfast, we must be mindful that we have a part to play, which, to date, has been less than convincing.

Let us hope that the report will bring reality to bear and that Northern Ireland will take seriously its obligations and commitments to global climate change, which will have devastating consequences for everyone, particularly those who are at the poorest end of this badly divided world. The targets that are suggested in the report are reasonable and achievable. However, in the past, targets have frequently not been checked. Therefore, the Audit Office has a critical role to play. I endorse the report entirely.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Committee Clerk and staff for helping to prepare the report. I am relatively new to the Committee for the Environment, and much of its work on this subject had been completed when I came on board.

Climate change is everyone’s responsibility, from individuals through to the business, agriculture and

public sectors. We must ensure that everyone who might be affected by any new policy is informed as soon as possible to allow them to plan for any future requirements. In the Senate Chamber, shipbuilding, linen and agriculture are depicted as Northern Ireland's three main industries. When adopting new policies, we should give due consideration to agriculture, because we do not want to eradicate the last of those industries.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I have already seen building control Northern Ireland initiate changes, and the savings that have been realised by enhanced construction methods have contributed to the win-win situation that we all desire.

The Planning Service should do the same thing. For example, just outside Portrush, the Planning Service approved an application for a concrete batch plant. There are no raw materials on site, so everything has to be brought in by lorry. When the concrete has been made, it must then be taken off site, creating in the region of 20,000 lorry movements a year. If the plant had been located near a quarry where all the raw materials were situated, fewer than half that number of lorry movements would have been required, thus reducing our carbon footprint. The Planning Service should also take that information on board when it is taking decisions.

Mr T Clarke: I notice that you are coming close to the end of your remarks —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should refer his comments through the Chair.

Mr T Clarke: Members will probably have noticed that the last SDLP Member to speak changed his opinion. I am glad that he recommended the report, because it recognises that nuclear power will be a necessity for Northern Ireland. I welcome that change — one might call it “climate change” — from the SDLP, which now recognises the need for nuclear power in Northern Ireland.

Mr McQuillan: Although progress may be slow, we should be aware of financial penalties or implications if objectives are not met. We should have a full verbal and written reporting system to assess each Department's progress in meeting its targets and to ensure that we do not avoid financial costs at the expense of our future environment. Realistic objectives that require inventive and attractive initiatives would allow this region to contribute to climate change policies. Any initiatives should be as cost effective and as affordable as possible and should allow each individual in Northern Ireland to take responsibility for his or her actions.

Mr Wells: As world leaders meet in Copenhagen to discuss this crucial issue, it is appropriate that the Assembly is having this debate. My message to the people of Northern Ireland is that we have to wake up, and soon, to the calamitous situation that the world is

in. I do not detect that sense of urgency from too many of the previous contributors, except Mr Ford. The Copenhagen conference is the most important meeting of world leaders since the end of the Second World War.

The statistics are irrefutable and extremely worrying. Before industrialisation, the atmosphere contained 280 parts per million of carbon. Today, it contains 435 parts per million, and, if present trends continue, by the end of the century, that figure will be 750 parts per million, which will produce an average temperature rise of 5%.

1.30 pm

The physics has been known for 150 years. It is self-evident that, if we pour vast amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, the temperature will rise. That is not rocket science. It disappoints me that there are still Members who feel that the physics is questionable. There are individuals who point to the fact that the University of East Anglia has a problem with statistics, but what about the other 1,999 climatologists in centres throughout the world who have come to the same conclusion on climate change? The science has been proved. An increase in carbon levels means dramatic climate change. If we allow that increase to continue, it will lead to droughts, massive rises in sea levels, mass migration and starvation. The situation is as stark as that.

We must stabilise our carbon emissions to achieve a level of 450 parts per million in the atmosphere to keep temperature rises to 2°C. Some Members may ask why Northern Ireland should bother. On the radio this morning, someone asked why Northern Ireland should bother given that China will put 12 million more cars on the roads this year and will build a coal-fired power station every week. We should bother for this reason: Northern Ireland, with its 1.7 million people, produces more carbon than most African countries with populations six and seven times larger because of its profligacy in energy use. Moreover, we in Northern Ireland cannot lecture countries and tell them to reduce their emissions if we continue in an upward spiral that means greater carbon output and more fuel waste.

Northern Ireland is split into three types of people: the believers, of whom there are not many; the agnostics, who make up the vast majority; and the sceptics. If the sceptics are right that this is all rubbish, that there is no climate change or that we are not responsible for it, what will happen if we implement new measures? We will develop new forms of alternative, renewable, clean energy. We will reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and on the Middle East for energy supplies. We will develop a new green economy that will bring about many thousands of jobs to which Northern Ireland is particularly suited because of its engineering skills, and we will save vast amounts of money through energy conservation. If I am wrong

and those who believe in climate change are wrong, that is all that will happen. If the sceptics are wrong, we face oblivion. It is as simple as that. It is a no-brainer. We must take this issue seriously. We should regard this as a wonderful opportunity for Northern Ireland's economy rather than something that will suppress economic revival when we come out of recession.

We heard Members say today that taking measures to address climate change will have a terrible impact on Northern Ireland's economy. We may even encourage or force people to use public transport. How terrible that would be. The Stern report mentions adopting a climate change policy that confines our carbon emissions to a 2% increase in temperature.

Mr Ross: I support efforts to ensure that public transport is good enough and to encourage more people to use it. However, does the Member agree that some low-emission vehicles use more fuel than other vehicles and that the carbon footprint of the new so-called environmentally friendly buses is, therefore, larger than that of old stock? That is a fact.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member for East Antrim simply does not get it. The argument is not about whether the buses travelling from east Antrim to Belfast should be bigger or smaller but about whether there will be a sea change in our society's attitude that can stop the impending chaos. It is as simple as that. All that we are asking of Western society is that it takes a 1% hit on GDP to bring a halt to climate chaos. I do not think that that is too much to ask.

However, I will agree with the Member for East Antrim about the total lack of action from the Department for Regional Development. When I was Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, we discovered that the split in the budget for transport in Northern Ireland is 69% for private transport and 31% for public transport. In three years' time, the figure will be 70% for private transport and 30% for public transport. There is no indication that there has been any sea change or turning of the tanker in Northern Ireland as far as climate change is concerned. Sadly, as the report states — I agree with Mr Ford on this point — there is no indication that we in Northern Ireland are taking the issue seriously. However, in 10 or 15 years' time, we will have no option but to do so.

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

Mr Wells: When we are hit by the climatic chaos that will undoubtedly occur if we do not take action, we will have only ourselves to blame.

Mr B Wilson: It is interesting to follow that contribution; I wish that I had made that speech.
[Laughter.]

I welcome the report and congratulate the Committee on its hard work, widespread consultation and comprehensive research. The report makes 52 recommendations, most of which I agree with, although I have some reservations. It is important that we recognise the global impact of climate change on the most vulnerable people and countries. We have a moral obligation to act. We are stewards of the planet, and we have a responsibility for future generations.

Although I welcome the report, I have some reservations. Some of the recommendations are vague and woolly and should be strengthened. Furthermore, the report does not give proper timescales. Some Members do not take the issue seriously. I am particularly disappointed that the report does not recommend a separate Northern Ireland climate change Bill, because the UK Bill does not specify targets for Northern Ireland. We must set our own targets and be able to reach them.

The recommendations are largely aspirational, and I question whether the Assembly has the willpower to implement many of them. We have passed motions on climate change and the promotion of renewable energy, but the willpower to implement or enforce those policies has been lacking. For instance, recommendations 28 and 29 call for the enhancement of building standards and the promotion of a renewable energy initiative. That is ironic, because, in its first Budget, the Assembly decided to abolish Reconnect grants, which were introduced to promote the development of renewable energy systems. The Budget also reduced building standards, which were designed to promote energy efficiency. Recommendations 28 and 29 call for measures to be taken in areas in which we are moving in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, when it comes to taking action, the Assembly does not always live up to its ideals.

Energy performance certificates were introduced to encourage householders to improve the energy efficiency of their houses. Any property that is sold, built or rented is supposed to have an energy performance certificate at the time of sale. The aim of the scheme is to encourage people to buy a property with a high energy performance certificate. In practice, that has not worked, and many sellers do not provide certificates until a property is sold. That is frustrating the aim of the energy performance certificates. There is no enforcement of that legislation, and, therefore, it has little impact on energy saving. We introduce legislation, but we do not enforce it.

It is also disappointing that the recommendations do not include specific targets and that they are vague. In fact, they refer only to Northern Ireland making a fair and proportionate contribution to the UK greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets. We do not have our own targets, and we should have.

I welcome recommendation 7, regarding the need for short- and medium-term annual targets. They are essential. Setting targets for 2020 or 2050 does not indicate urgency, and most of us will not be around to find out whether they are met. We need targets that we can meet, and annual targets would help us to plan more efficiently.

Leadership from the Assembly is important if we hope to get the public to take climate change seriously. I welcome recommendation 16 that the Northern Ireland Government show leadership and adhere to their commitment to a carbon-neutral estate by 2015.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is going to the climate change conference in Copenhagen. The Minister's support is essential for the development of the comprehensive strategy on climate change. The activities of the previous Minister of the Environment set a bad example and set back the Assembly's efforts to promote public awareness of climate change.

I welcome the report and broadly support the recommendations —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

A Member: Too late.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

That was a close shave. Well done for noticing that the Member had gone beyond his five minutes, and well done for keeping Mr McCrea out.

I thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for the Environment for their report, and I thank Members of all parties who contributed to the discussion. It is a particularly relevant report, as global negotiations on the issue commence in Copenhagen today, with the objective of coming to a legally binding global agreement on greenhouse gas emissions and other related climate change matters.

I believe the report to be a constructive attempt to chart a path forward on climate change, and I note in particular the focus on joined-up government and the need to put in place structures and oversight and accountability arrangements that are fit for purpose in delivering agreed reductions in greenhouse gas emissions; the identification of the need for a climate change strategy that focuses on what the Executive and Departments should address; the emphasis that fuller information is required if legally binding targets are to be put in place that achieve the proper balance between environmental protection and economic development in knowledge of the impacts on wider society; the reflection that the forthcoming efficiency review will provide a stable basis on which to consider the most appropriate position for climate change policy; and that we should do nothing that will compromise the good work of my departmental policymakers in the

meantime. That said, I do not believe that there is a one-size-fits-all model, and we will need to reflect constantly on what we need to achieve and how we are getting there as the science is updated and the international context develops.

I also think that the Committee will not expect a full response from me on the report at this time. The report became available only in the past two weeks, and I will need to take time and be respectful to the care put into it in considering its arguments and recommendations, as well as the further evidence set out by organisations and individuals in their written and oral submissions to the Committee.

My officials and I will take stock of the views of other Ministers and Departments on the report. Members will appreciate that there are issues in the report that fall directly to other Ministers or which are cross-cutting, and I will not respond to them in the absence of the relevant Ministers' considered input.

Much work is already under way across government to address the need for greenhouse gas reductions, and the latest indications, based on emission trends from 1990 and on policies that have been committed to or which are in the offing, are that we are likely to meet the targets set out in the Programme for Government to reduce emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by 2025.

We will continue that work. For example, after the Christmas recess, I will lay legislation before the Assembly for the CRC energy-efficiency scheme, which is a new cap and trade scheme for the UK. It could cut carbon emissions by approximately four million tons by 2020, which amounts to approximately 140 kilotonnes of CO₂ in Northern Ireland, and to reduce energy use in large non-intensive organisations, including Departments, saving the 5,000 participants up to £1.1 billion, which amounts to approximately £30 million across 80 participants in Northern Ireland.

In recent days, my Department hosted a significant event on adaptation to climate change, which engaged with interests across government and in society more widely. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been consulting on the deployment of more renewables, as set out in the draft strategic energy framework. There are many initiatives in other Departments that will reduce emissions and reflect well on joint working.

Many of report's recommendations consider governance, government structures and reporting arrangements. Progress is also being made there. Tomorrow, I will meet the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance to discuss public service agreement accountability arrangements in relation to public service agreement 22, which is aimed at delivering reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2025. It would not be

appropriate for me to discuss the details today, but Members should know that I intend to make proposals that I think will go some way to addressing the report's recommendations on governance.

1.45 pm

I want to comment on several of the points that have been raised by Members during the debate. For example, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment referred to social justice, and it is very important for us to deal with that issue. Universal agreement must be reached in Copenhagen, because an agreement that is not signed by countries such as China and America is not one that can deliver. Those two countries alone account for 50% of the world's carbon emissions.

It is important that we in Northern Ireland also play our part. We have reduced our carbon emissions by 13% since 1990, and we are on target to achieve the target of reducing our carbon emissions by 25% by 2025. Much of that was achieved by switching from coal-fired to gas-fired power stations and by switching from coal heating in homes. However, in China, one coal-fired power station is built every six days, meaning that the work that we have done over the last 10 years can be undone by China in two weeks. Therefore, if we are to deliver and to make a significant impact on environmental issues, it is absolutely critical that countries of that scale sign up to the agreement that is reached in Copenhagen.

Recommendation 6 of the Committee's report examines the Programme for Government targets and budgets, and the Executive must re-examine those targets when devising the next Programme for Government because those targets and budgets are already set. I assume that the Committee wants the Executive to set higher targets than the rest of the UK. That comes with a price, and it must have universal buy-in from all of the Departments. However, higher targets can be achieved.

Mr Ford and Mr Brian Wilson said that Northern Ireland does not have any short-term or medium-term targets, and, frankly, they are talking nonsense. For example, a target of recycling 50% of our waste by 2020 has been set, and two councils in Northern Ireland are already achieving that. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that that target could be achieved by all councils by 2020, and could be significantly exceeded.

With respect to recommendation 7 of the Committee's report, we must attempt to strike a balance between the setting of targets and economic development issues. If Western Europe sets high targets that are not being set elsewhere, factories could close here and across the rest of the UK and be relocated in India and China, which may set lower environmental standards. We

must ask what that would achieve. Whatever we do, we must ensure that we do not damage our economy or the environment by ensuring that goods that were once produced in Northern Ireland are not produced in another country with lower environmental standards and then shipped back here. That does not make sense; it does not help the local population and it does not help the climate.

With respect to recommendation 1 of the Committee's report, Northern Ireland already has an adaption strategy under the Climate Change Act 2008. If that is perceived as insufficient, it can be re-examined in due course.

Recommendation 15 of the Committee's report deals with the involvement of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and its cross-cutting functions. Further discussions must be held to ascertain the appropriate organisation to do that.

Mr McKay talked about Scotland opting to set a target that would see a reduction in carbon emissions of 80% by 2025. Could we do that? We could, but I am very interested to know how Mr McKay would achieve it, because when planning applications are made for wind energy projects, very often Mr McKay's colleagues lead the fight against them.

How will we achieve that reduction if, on the one hand, the Member is calling for it, but on the other, he is objecting to renewable sources of energy? We can produce enough tidal power in Northern Ireland to do away with our current power stations. However, given that most of the tidal power stations would be located around Tor Head and that area of the north Antrim coast, they would challenge Northern Ireland's natural landscape. Nevertheless, those types of difficult decisions will have to be made if we are to achieve the 80% target that Mr McKay referred to. Therefore, it is not simple motherhood and apple pie policies that need to be introduced; we need to introduce policies for which difficult decisions can and will have to be made and that will have real benefits for Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs talked about all Departments being involved. A consultation programme is going ahead with the sustainable development aspect of government.

Mr Ford referred to AFBI, and I am glad that the Committee has become aware of that body. I have been aware of AFBI's work for a long time. It is a tremendous organisation that has helped not only agriculture but the environment. Its special expertise should be harnessed and marketed properly across the world, because it is not as well recognised as it should be. Mr Ford referred to the short- and medium-term targets, which I dealt with. They exist, and if the Member looks for them, he will find them.

Mr Ross referred to the Energy Saving Trust and the win-win situation that that organisation clearly presents. I am a strong proponent of using renewable energy

because, first, it is good for the environment, secondly, we have it at source in Northern Ireland, and, thirdly, it reduces our reliance on bringing coal, oil and gas from unreliable sources across the world. We must look for win-win situations. The public in Northern Ireland do not want to see their lifestyles reduced dramatically as a result of our making significant decisions on the environment.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he accept that financial savings are a key contributing factor when people decide to make their houses more efficient and that a reduction in carbon emissions is not such a factor, as people try to suggest?

The Minister of the Environment: That is probably the case for many people, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, it galls me whenever the Government introduce punitive environmental taxes. Instead of offering incentives to insulate older houses better with solar power installations and so forth, the Government charge the full whack of VAT. If the Government were real, instead of introducing punitive taxes, they could introduce significant incentives to help people who wish to reduce their environmental footprint. Such incentives could mean a win-win situation. We can arrive at a situation whereby people still travel in cars that will happen to be electric, charged with energy that is produced from renewable sources. That is an example of a real win-win situation, and it can be achieved.

Mr Dallat criticised the Department of the Environment (DOE); he does not appear to think that it is doing anything. Perhaps when he has been on the Committee a little longer and comes to some understanding of the issues, he will recognise that considerable progress has been made. For example, recycling is now at 32% as opposed to 5%; there has been a 13% reduction in the carbon footprint; the 7% target of energy from renewable energy has been achieved and is heading for the 2012 target of 12%. If Mr Dallat wants a conversation about those matters, perhaps I could enlighten him.

Mr McQuillan talked about the road haulage industry and the importance of having a good transportation policy. Jim Wells referred to opportunities for the economy, which I also referred to. Brian Wilson talked about reduced building standards. That is wrong; we have much higher building standards than we did previously.

In conclusion, Members are asked today to approve the report and the timetable for its implementation.

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

The Minister of the Environment: We will commit ourselves to ensuring that the report is fully considered

in the context of international developments. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue today.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I wish to speak in favour of the motion and the report. It is clear from the debate that we have heard today and from the wide range of interest that has been shown in our inquiry — not just from a very strong green lobby, but from ordinary individuals and corporate businesses — that climate change is a hugely important issue for everyone in the North.

The breadth and depth of expertise that was made available to the Committee during its inquiry was invaluable. I reiterate the Chairperson's thanks to all the contributors — those who hosted Committee visits and those who willingly provided information about their Departments and organisations when asked — for some very open and informative presentations. I trust that when they have a chance to study the report in full they will be able to see their contributions reflected.

I am grateful to the members of the Committee who contributed to the debate, and for the way in which they have conducted the inquiry. I especially thank the former Chairperson of the Committee, Patsy McGlone, under whose tenure the inquiry was initiated. I also thank other members who made contributions to the inquiry but who have now left the Committee: Mr Trevor Clarke, Tommy Gallagher, and you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Economic realities have changed considerably during the inquiry, and during these difficult economic times it may seem more appropriate and realistic for one to focus more on the economy and jobs than on addressing risks posed by a change in climate far into the future. That was clearly recognised by the Committee.

The strong message of the inquiry is that we ignore climate change at our peril: peril for the economy, because it will cost more to catch up and repair than to prepare, according to the evidence we heard from business and industry; peril for jobs, because there are jobs associated with low-carbon living waiting to be created, which will be snapped up by other countries if we do not embrace new technology now, according to academics; and peril for life, especially for those already leading a vulnerable existence, both here and around the globe. During cold snaps, it is those who are in, or on the border of, fuel poverty who are affected the most. To take one example from recent times, the heatwaves in France a few years ago led to the deaths of many elderly people.

For every fraction of an inch that the sea rises, the more it threatens low-lying, poor countries like Bangladesh, according to those focusing on social well-being who gave evidence to our inquiry. The good

news, however, is that we can do something about it. The Committee believes that taking on board its recommendations today will be a good start. Before I refer to Members' contributions to the debate, I pay tribute to the Committee staff for bringing the report to us.

Mr Peter Weir spoke about the lack of a uniform view in the Assembly, but, whether we like it or not, we have to look at ways of dealing with climate change. The Committee is only too well aware of that. He also referred to the protection of the most vulnerable — and I certainly agree with that — and the need for local facts to tailor a local response, and said that there is a role for the Audit Office and for him and his colleagues on the PAC.

Mr McKay spoke about the timeliness of the report, but he would like to see legally binding targets, rolling targets and annual targets. He also urged all parties to encourage leaders to support events in Copenhagen.

Mr Beggs talked about this region being behind in legislation, which he has also mentioned on a number of occasions in the Committee. He also informed us that this autumn was the third warmest, and talked about the high rainfall. That was predicted by the Met Office, which has a key role to play.

He said that we cannot take the approach of doing nothing, and he said that Departments take a silo approach. It is a cross-departmental issue, and it must be approached in that way. He also reminded us of the scepticism of Mr Hans Schreuder, who made a presentation to the Committee. Anyone who was there that day will not have forgotten Mr Schreuder's presentation, particularly Mr Ross, to whom it took about half an hour to get an answer to a question. I hope that Mr Ross was well informed and well briefed by the end of that presentation.

2.00 pm

Mr Ford talked about the Committee's visit to the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. That visit was beneficial, and it was good for the Committee to see research into practical measures. He also said that the Audit Office should have a role in dealing with the issue, and he spoke about the need for the climate change unit to be strengthened.

Mr Alastair Ross talked about having a strategy to implement any required action, and the Committee agrees with the need for that. He also talked about how climate change will impact on the economy, and he said that there are win-win opportunities. That point was made in the Committee. He said that a big-stick approach was to be avoided and that a balanced approach should be taken.

Mr Dallat said that some Members have not taken seriously the issue of climate change, and he spoke about the impact that it has on continents such as Africa, which

suffer from drought. He also said that the Audit Office had a role.

Mr McQuillan said that the issue of climate change was everyone's responsibility and that solutions needed to be cost-effective and affordable, and we agree with that.

Mr Wells brought a bit of life to the debate. I am not sure whether he was asking the Chamber or the whole country to wake up. He said that the debate presents a unique opportunity, given the talks that are taking place in Copenhagen. He outlined the serious implications of climate change, including droughts, mass migration and floods. He also said that the Assembly does not take the issue seriously enough and that we will have only ourselves to blame. I do not think that Mr Ross is on Mr Wells's Christmas card list this year, although he should probably send e-mails rather than cards anyway.

Brian Wilson welcomed the report, but he had some reservations about the recommendations. He said that some of the recommendations were "vague" and "woolly" and that the report does not recommend timescales. He was also disappointed that the report does not call for a Bill or for specific targets.

I am grateful to the Minister for attending and participating in the debate. The debate represents the end of the Committee's inquiry into climate change, but it does not signal the end of our interest in the matter. The Committee recognises that a cross-departmental approach will be required to address the impact of climate change, and we ask the Minister to work with the Committee to ensure the implementation of the recommendations in the report. We hope that the report highlights the need for the Assembly to be proactive in its approach to mitigating the impact of climate change. I commend the report to the House, and I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for the Environment on its inquiry into climate change; and calls on the Minister of the Environment, in liaison with Executive colleagues, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Under 25s Not in Education, Employment or Training

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.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that one third of all benefit claimants are now under 25 years old and that one fifth of people aged 16 to 24 are classed as 'not in education, employment or training'; welcomes the study on this issue currently being undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning; and calls on the Minister to bring forward a cross-departmental strategy and programme, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to prevent these young people becoming a lost generation.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The growing number of young people who are facing unemployment and who are not in any kind of education, training or employment should concern all of us in the Assembly. It has an impact on those young people's health, education, aspirations and futures.

We have 47,000 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training. That is one in five of 16 to 24-year-olds, and it is a staggering figure. Of that number, 12,000 are aged 16 to 18. The Committee for Employment and Learning, which I have the honour to Chair, brought a similar motion to the Assembly. However, I secured this debate as a private Member, because it is time that we focused on this issue and the consequences that it has for our young people and communities. It is also time that we found out what action the Department and the Executive will take to reduce those numbers and get young people back into employment, education or training.

I welcome the Minister, and I thank him for attending the debate. Credit where credit is due, I also thank him for beginning to put in place a study to consider the issue and the impact that it has on those young people, who are known as NEETs — that is, not in education, employment or training. In my view, this issue is not the sole responsibility of the Minister or the Department for Employment and Learning; it requires a cross-departmental and Executive-led response.

There is a 12% unemployment rate for people who are aged under 25 in the North. That is four times the unemployment rate of those who are aged 25 and over. They have carried the brunt of many of the current job losses, and I assume that many Members will talk about personal experience and the experiences of their constituents. The reality, however, is that the current

recession has led to a 90% increase in job losses in the past year. We cannot afford to ignore that situation.

Failure to act the previous time that there was a big rise in youth unemployment meant that many young people simply became long-term unemployed. That meant that they went on to have children and brought up their families in a situation in which work was not part of their lives and in which their children grew up in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. That has partly contributed to the North's economic inactivity rate, which, at 29.5%, is above that in England. It is crucial, therefore, that we do not allow this generation of young people to be lost to such disadvantage and poverty.

There are serious costs, economic and otherwise, to failing to address the needs of young people who are not in employment, education or training. Being in such a situation is estimated to cost £100,000 over a young person's lifetime. Therefore, failing to help the 12,000 16 to 18-year-olds who are NEETs will cost the economy well over £1 billion. We cannot afford that sort of cost, and we cannot afford to fail to harness the talents of many of those young people. A cross-departmental approach is needed because the mental and physical health costs of those young people must be considered. A recent study estimated that some 10% of young NEETs would have died within 10 years of finding themselves in that situation.

Young people who are most likely to not be in education, employment or training are from disadvantaged communities, have become disaffected with school, have spent time in care or custody, or are disabled. Young people want to learn skills for work and independent living. There are clear links between young people who underachieve at school and go on to become a NEET. That makes improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for all children crucial.

It is also crucial that the Department of Education works with other Departments to address the underlying causes of young people's becoming NEET and to put in place an early prevention programme. There must be commitment to creating a programme in schools to target children and young people, some of whom I highlighted earlier, who are already known to be at serious risk of being categorised as NEET.

I understand that the Minister has asked his Department to undertake research on the level and nature of the issue. I register my support for his taking that action. Indeed, it shows that he is also concerned for those young people. I want to know when the study will be made available and what action is likely to come from it.

My main concern is why the kind of strategy and approach towards the issue that is taken in England, Scotland and Wales has yet to be taken here. In England, Scotland and Wales, there is clear public sector agreement to reduce the overall number of young people who are

categorised as NEET. In Wales, there is a target of 7% reduction by 2010. In England, the target is 2%. In Scotland, there is a specific commitment to reduce the overall number.

While I may think that some of those targets do not go far enough, there is no specific target in the North. It is crucial that one is developed in order to begin to clearly address the issue. I want to hear the Minister's view on the development of a specific target to reduce the number of young people who are categorised as NEET. I ask that, if that information is not available to him today, it is followed up in writing.

In England, Scotland and Wales, a strategy and associated funding has led to specific programmes being put in place to help young people back into training or the workforce. In England and Wales, there are guaranteed jobs, training or work placements for all young people between 18 and 24 who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. Again, I want to hear whether the Minister has considered bringing such a scheme to life here.

In England, Scotland and Wales, the future jobs fund, which is aimed primarily at young people aged between 18 and 24, has been allocated a total of £1 billion to create 150,000 jobs. At present, 95,000 of those jobs have been allocated. I want to find out the Assembly's current position on the creation of a future jobs fund and how the Minister might see that moving forward. Has the Department allocated specific funding? If so, how much and with what focus?

In saying that, I do not underestimate the nature of the problem or the scale of the task that the Assembly must address. We cannot afford to say that because there is a recession, it is not possible to begin to assist young people who most need it. If the North is not to produce another lost generation of young people, it is critical that the Executive act now to make that a priority and that the Minister is supported by his colleagues in developing a strategy as a matter of urgency.

The Committee looked at the matter and brought forward a similar motion. However, I was keen to debate the motion that is before the House so that, at least, the Assembly could obtain information from the Minister. As I said, I appreciate that the Minister has taken forward and asked for that study. I would also appreciate, if he has time in the debate, his answers to the questions that I have posed. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Buchanan: The motion that is before the House is more of a take-note motion that sets out the action that has already been taken by the Minister to produce a cross-departmental strategy and programme, with the Executive's support, to assist all of those young people who are currently on benefits and in the NEET category.

I welcome the initiative which the Minister has already taken and look forward to completion of the study

resulting in a strategic programme, which I hope will pave the way towards helping and encouraging young people to remain in education, employment and training programmes and wean them off the benefits culture that is prevalent in Northern Ireland society.

I ask the Minister to give the Assembly an indication of when he anticipates the study will be completed and the programme in place, and how he proposes to roll it out throughout Northern Ireland. Until that happens, we will not see a difference in the number of young people who are in that situation.

2.15 pm

The Committee for Employment and Learning, in considering why there seems to be such a large proportion of young people in the NEET category, received numerous briefings from a number of organisations, and I hope that the Minister and the Department are engaging with them on this same matter.

It is alarming that we have some 47,000 young people in Northern Ireland who are in the NEET category and who are not utilising their full potential in their youth. That will hinder them in the future. However, they may be divided into two categories. There are those who, for one reason or another, have no desire to undergo further training or get on the employment ladder. They are caught in what I call a "benefit trap". Equally, there are those who have a general interest in furthering their education and training to get into a place of employment, but, on account of some learning disability, difficulty or social circumstance, have disengaged from learning for a substantial part of their adolescence due to a lack of additional support.

That is why addressing the matter adequately requires a cross-departmental strategy. Incentives must be provided to encourage those in the benefit trap back into employment. We have a situation in Northern Ireland whereby some young people are better off financially in receipt of benefits than in employment. That creates a negative impact; it must be challenged and changed to give the young people the incentive to get back into the place of employment. Also, additional support must be provided for those with learning difficulties.

Our further education colleges are well placed and have a vital role to play in meeting the needs of young people in the NEET category. Some of the colleges are currently at the sharp end, working with and seeking to re-engage those young people to entice them back into education, employment and training by delivering essential skills, building confidence and helping them to get the vocational and professional skills that they need to make progress in today's society. For employers and local communities, those people are key partners in responding to the social and economic challenges that we face. Therefore, more work must be done with, and

support given to, colleges delivering for the young people in that situation.

In seeking to address this matter, the Scottish Executive realised that the more choice they provided, the greater the chance of getting young people back into places of employment. That is something that we should be looking at: the provision of more choice to encourage young people back into employment. I support the motion.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Members who proposed the motion and brought this important debate to the House.

The problem of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training is, unfortunately, persistent; it has been with us for some time. However, in the light of the financial crisis and recession, the problem has been exacerbated. Thousands of young people, both those who are qualified and those who are not, have found themselves outside the job market and education. There are increasing reports of a "lost generation" of young people, hit particularly hard by the recession. That is worrying, for there is evidence that periods of long-term unemployment early in life can have serious psychological effects as people grow older. Those who have suffered long-term unemployment early in life are more likely to suffer further unemployment as they get older. It is crucial that we tackle this problem with urgency.

I take note of the debate that we had on this very issue in November 2008. The Minister then made a commitment to take the lead in a scoping study to research further data on NEETs in Northern Ireland, identify the relevant actions in place across all Departments and recommend whether a cross-departmental strategy could achieve better outcomes for the group in the future. Today's debate gives the Minister an opportunity to update us on the progress that his Department has made, and I look forward to his response.

I note that the other devolved institutions throughout the United Kingdom have specific strategies in place to tackle the NEETs issue, and we must ensure that we maintain best practice here in the Province. Although I acknowledge that the Minister for Employment and Learning must play the lead role, Members should recognise that this is a cross-cutting issue, which the entire Executive have a responsibility to tackle. For example, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), along with other Departments, has a significant role to play in facilitating the recovery of the economy in the short term. We must always bear in mind that, no matter how keen and qualified young people are to work, if no jobs are available, the issue of NEETs will be a persistent problem. Therefore, I cautiously welcome reports that Northern Ireland's economy is now emerging from recession. We must do

all that we can to build on that positive news. I also welcome the Minister's reaction to the recession and the steps that he has taken, through his Department, to tackle that problem.

The Training for Success programme, which gives young people who have attained the minimum school-leaving age but who are under the age of 18 the training to develop occupational and employability skills, and, where necessary, essential skills training, is very welcome. I also strongly welcome the introduction of programme-led apprenticeships, which were launched in September as an intervention measure during the recession. The programme has proven popular among young people, as it gives them the opportunity to gain full apprenticeships and to prepare for the upturn when that arrives, which it undoubtedly will. It has reduced the number of NEETs, and for that it should be commended. Furthermore, initiatives such as Steps to Work and the work of the Careers Service should not go unnoticed.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development also have significant roles to play, because evidence suggests that more than half of all young people leaving care leave school without any qualifications. That is a statistic that must be addressed. The Department of Education could have the most important role to play in dealing with the entire issue. A significant percentage of young people who find themselves out of work and outside the education system when they reach 16 years of age has had problems with education at a much younger age. Like so many education issues, that issue really emerges when children are aged 11 and under. It is vital that young people get the support that they need at a very early age to ensure that they are engaged with learning and that they meet their educational potential.

I find it deeply regrettable that the Minister of Education has repeatedly delayed the publication of an early years strategy and has not published a strategy that is solely dedicated to tackling educational underachievement.

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

Mr McClarty: It is right and correct for the Minister for Employment and Learning to address that issue, and I look forward to his response. However, if he is not supported by the Minister of Education, I am afraid that this is a problem that he and our society will continue to deal with for some time. I support the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion that Sinn Féin tabled. As the motion states, the Minister has initiated a cross-departmental study, and, presumably, he intends to implement policies that are based on his clear recommendations. I say that because he has already introduced innovative proposals, including the Step Ahead initiative and programme-led apprenticeships,

which Mr McClarty mentioned. I commend the Minister on those initiatives.

I am sure that most people expected the Executive to introduce urgently a comprehensive Budget, a Programme for Government and an investment strategy to deal with the recession. Every other Administration in the world that I know of, including the other devolved Governments, have put in place holistic economic strategies to deal with the recession. That begs the question: why have our Executive not done so?

Northern Ireland's under-25s' workforce has been seriously affected by the recession. Many were in temporary positions or were agency workers and therefore were the first to lose their jobs when the recession hit. We know from our experience and knowledge that many people's situations and the social and economic environment in which they live have colluded to prevent them from entering employment.

Such people include lone parents, people with caring responsibilities, those with low educational attainment or low levels of work skills, and, of course, people with disabilities. Many other situations have been well documented, and those who in such situations become demoralised, demotivated and disconnected from economic life. They become dependent on benefits, and the route to work becomes risky and more difficult. As the motion states, people become "lost", and complex interventions are required, some short term and some long term, to allow them to contribute fully to society.

That is not to say that there are no opportunities now. There are programmes in place for adults with poor essential skills through the Department for Employment and Learning. Help is available to people to overcome barriers, and a range of training initiatives is available at different skill levels. DETI has a range of initiatives aimed at increasing employment and self-employment opportunities. On that point, I ask the Minister to provide an update on the Steps to Work programme in my constituency.

Whatever the barriers, we must ensure that they can be, and are, overcome. That will require action from many Departments. Such action should be led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and should be based on an overall anti-recession strategy. The greatest incentive for people to get back into training and education, to get over the barriers and become motivated, is the prospect of real work at the end of the process. History has taught us that there is nothing more demoralising for people than going through cycles of training, where hope is followed by unemployment, disappointment and cynicism. We must create a momentum of opportunity, inclusion and hope, and we must re-engage those people who are lost, whether they are 16 or 60.

That brings me back to my earlier point. The region needs an Administration that act competently; that provide vision and leadership; that design their strategies and actions on current global and local economic realities, and include everyone. The DUP and Sinn Féin are the establishment now, and it is under their system and during their watch that these problems are happening. The people of Northern Ireland cannot understand Sinn Féin and the DUP's refusal to produce a new Budget, a new Programme for Government and a new investment strategy. Those parties collude to ensure that they are the major power brokers. Therefore, is it not time that they started to use that power, on this and many other issues, to benefit the people, and in particular the young people, of Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, Members may take their ease until that time. The debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Kieran McCarthy.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Security: Dissident Republicans

1. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they have had any meetings with the Chief Constable regarding the security threat posed by republican dissidents. (AQO 492/10)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Over the past year, the First Minister and I have maintained regular contact with the Chief Constable and his predecessor on the security situation. Members will recall that we met the Chief Constable in the immediate aftermath of the killings of Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar at Massereene Barracks and Stephen Carroll in Craigavon in March this year. We met him again in May following the killing of Kevin McDaid by loyalists in Coleraine. We held a further meeting with Sir Hugh Orde in June and formally met the new Chief Constable, Matt Baggott, in early October. In addition, we both hold regular meetings with the Chief Constable and his senior officers in our party capacities.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he confirm whether the security advice that he has received indicates that elements in the IRA, who are dissatisfied with Sinn Féin's political strategy, are giving advice and support to dissident republicans?

The deputy First Minister: I have heard that asserted in past weeks. Obviously, I do not have any first-hand information on whether that is the case. However, people who were involved with or were supporters of the IRA would be very foolish to become embroiled with factions or groups that have no support whatsoever in the community. People in those groups are acting against the interests of the people of the island of Ireland. Remember, when the Good Friday Agreement was put to all the people of Ireland, they overwhelmingly supported it.

The people in those groups are totally out of step and are determined to drag us back to the past. They are determined to have more British soldiers returned to the streets and to have more death and destruction on the streets. Those people do not appear to live in the real world, which the vast majority of Members inhabit. As we move forward in our peace process, we travel in

hope that the will of the overwhelming majority of the people of the island will prevail over that of the tiny elements that have no support whatsoever in the community.

As far as we are concerned, the policy is steady as it goes. We all know from the history of the process that some people who were involved with the IRA decided that they could not accept the new arrangements. Those people made a huge mistake. The activities that they are engaged in are totally counterproductive. They take people's lives and will further no cause. At worst, their activities will undermine the image that we have presented worldwide showing that our society is moving forward from a bitter conflict to a better place in which our children can have a future.

Mr Speaker: I call Alex Maskey to ask a supplementary question. It is important that Members rise if they want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr A Maskey: I apologise. I thought that I had indicated my desire to ask a supplementary question a few minutes ago. I appreciate your direction on the matter.

I intended to ask the deputy First Minister to outline, on behalf of himself and the First Minister, the level of support for those micro-groups. I am pleased that he confirmed that those groups have no support or credibility in the wider community and that their actions serve no purpose. If the Minister wants to add to that, that is well and good; if not, I appreciate his earlier response.

The deputy First Minister: Clearly, those groups have no clear strategy, no plan and no public support. They make themselves relevant only by carrying out actions that, as I said, seek to bring us back to conflict. They do that at a cost to families. I think of the people who have been killed by such groups: two men in Belfast, Emmett Shields in Derry, the soldiers at Massereene Barracks and Stephen Carroll. Those actions were unnecessary and pointless, all the more so because they happened against the backdrop of the enormous achievement by the political establishment in Ireland, including all of us in the Chamber, when we engaged in the dialogue that brought about the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement.

Therefore, there is no prospect whatsoever that the activities of those people will achieve anything or contribute to the causes of justice and equality or to the realisation of Irish reunification. However, in one regard, they have united all the people of this island: they have united all the people of this island against them.

Mr A Maginness: Does the deputy First Minister agree that, when dealing with the campaign by dissident elements, all Members and parties have an important duty to make politics work in the House and in society? As democrats, that should be our fundamental answer to those people who seek to undermine, undemocratically

and anti-democratically, the settlement that was established under the Good Friday Agreement.

The deputy First Minister: Yes; it is incumbent on all of us to make politics work. The only way to do that is to continue the enormous political progress that has been made in the past 15 years, during which the parties in the House have contributed positively to agreements that have changed the political landscape for ever. The Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement have brought about changes that have made the activities of those groups absolutely out of order.

Politics has worked for a number of reasons. The then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was prepared to make progress in conjunction with the Irish Government, with the support of Bill Clinton and with the goodwill of political parties that were involved in various stages of negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement or the St Andrews Agreement. We have entered a new place, which is better than where we were 10 years ago. As I said at the celebrations to mark the tenth anniversary of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh city the other night, 10 years from now, we will be in a better place than we are at the moment.

We must keep our nerve. Those people can do outrageous things and carry out activities that take people's lives. Do they have the ability, the public support and the military capability to break the will of all the people of this island, who supported the agreements that were made by the political forces? Not in a million years.

Mr G Robinson: Did the meetings include discussion on the topic of maintaining front line policing numbers?

The deputy First Minister: A new Chief Constable, Matt Baggott, has been appointed, and the First Minister and I have met him, as many Members have recently. He is learning about our particular circumstances, and it is a huge challenge to move from heading a police force in England to doing so in the unique situation here in the North of Ireland. However, he strikes me, as he has struck most people, as someone with great intelligence, a great understanding of policing and, more than anything, a deep appreciation of the importance of community policing. He recognises the importance of gaining as much support as possible in the entire community for a police service that provides a service for the people whom Members represent.

As he said in recent days, he understands the importance of ensuring that he and his senior officers can move forward in the full knowledge that he has the wherewithal and resources to deal with attacks on the working of these institutions and with antisocial behaviour and other counterproductive activities in which a tiny minority of young people become engaged.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Childcare Strategy

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for an update on the proposed childcare strategy. (AQO 494/10)

The deputy First Minister: The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which is chaired by the junior Ministers, identified childcare as a priority and tasked members of its cross-departmental subgroup on child poverty to undertake an exercise to consider the issues. A preliminary report was completed in June 2009, and the subcommittee agreed that an economic appraisal be carried out on a range of strategic options. The economic appraisal is out to tender and it is expected that a consultant will be appointed later this week. Once the appraisal is complete, the project group can launch a draft strategy document for consultation, and further decisions on the way forward will be taken at that time.

Mr Hamilton: I thank Mr McGuinness for his answer. He will, I am sure, appreciate the importance of a good childcare system in getting people from welfare into work and in keeping in employment those people who are already working. I am sure that he is also aware of the threat to remove childcare vouchers and the campaign to retain them. Childcare vouchers benefit many thousands of people in Northern Ireland. Will the deputy First Minister guarantee the House that he and the First Minister will do all that they can, through the Executive, to lobby the Government at Westminster to ensure that childcare vouchers are retained?

The deputy First Minister: Yes, absolutely. I can give a commitment that the First Minister and I will do that. It is also important to point out that the ministerial subcommittee has done a considerable amount of good work on the issue of childcare. The purpose of the paper that was submitted to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people was to address issues such as the background on childcare, work on strategic policies and how they relate to the childcare agenda, and establishing the need for childcare provision. The paper also set the task of defining objectives for future childcare provision and its constraints, and of identifying a suitable range of policy options on the delivery of childcare provision.

Childcare is a big issue and is the subject of significant debate. A tremendous amount of good work has been done, and we all know and understand that children, particularly those who come from areas of undue social deprivation, benefit greatly from being part of a childcare system that takes care of their needs. I agree with the Member's first point, but I also want to stress that a considerable amount of work is being done by the two junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Kennedy: What practical actions, as opposed to long-term interdepartmental policy guidelines, has OFMDFM been able to take to expand the provision of quality childcare?

The deputy First Minister: I mentioned the economic appraisal and the fact that we will see more progress on that this week. The economic appraisal will have to assess current levels of childcare, gaps in provision and evidence in support of increased provision. There are seven main forms of childcare provision: childminding; the home care scheme; nursery schools; day nurseries; playgroups; out-of-school provision; and summer schemes and crèches. The new childcare strategy will seek to address, through the options appraisal, greater coherence and increased provision to reduce poverty and to promote the healthy development of children.

We believe that a cost benefit model of childcare delivery and outcomes should be developed. We should assess the costs of implementing each option, and we should determine which model of childcare delivery will be most effective in reducing child poverty, improving outcomes for children, and stimulating parental employment and the economy. The socio-economic benefits of childcare expansion should be made explicit, and, of course, the role of childcare in meeting United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child considerations should be addressed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister share the details of the economic appraisal of the childcare strategy that is under way, given the importance of access to employment for women and the reduction of poverty across the board?

The deputy First Minister: Now that we have moved forward decisively, under the tutelage of the ministerial subcommittee, we can endeavour to ensure that the process moves on with all speed.

We do so in the full knowledge that there is deep appreciation within the Administration that the issue of childcare must be dealt with in a satisfactory way, even in the face of difficult economic circumstances. One of the major tasks is to continue to ensure that we are attacking the child poverty levels that we all find unacceptable.

2.45 pm

Efficiency Savings: DHSSPS

4. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if proposed efficiency savings within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have ever been discussed at the Executive. (AQO 495/10)

The deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of any discussions that may have taken place at meetings of the Executive. Questions relating to efficiency savings in the Health Service should more appropriately be raised with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Easton: Does the deputy First Minister agree that, if Ministers are having problems meeting their efficiency targets and budget, they should seek advice from their Executive colleagues on how to manage that? Does he find it extremely strange that a Minister has created £36 million of extra efficiency savings for the CSR period 2010-11 above the 3% efficiencies that were agreed with DFP?

The deputy First Minister: Everyone will have a view on where savings can be achieved in any service. In reality, Ministers are responsible for the management of their budgets. It is for them to determine the areas where efficiencies can be achieved based on the advice that they receive. We are confident that all Ministers want to achieve the most efficient use of their resources. We are all aware that that will become more crucial in future years. Hard decisions will have to be taken on priorities. I do not think that there is one party in the House that does not understand that, as things tighten in the face of a worldwide recession, none of our Departments will be immune from the pressures that we are all living under.

Mr O'Loan: Given that the Government in the South of Ireland spends 35% of its budget on health, and that we spend 50p of every £1, does the deputy First Minister agree that there is great scope and necessity for much enhanced co-operation between the two parts of Ireland on health issues, and that there is the potential for significant benefits in efficiency and value for money?

The deputy First Minister: Few people in the Assembly would disagree that co-operation is mutually beneficial for the Administrations, North and South. It is sensible to work together. All parties signed up to that.

Although it does not relate to the issue of people's health, a terrible story came out of County Donegal at the weekend. A baby had died and had to be brought to Dublin by its parents to undergo an autopsy. In such circumstances, many people would wonder why we could not have some arrangement whereby that autopsy could have been carried out in the North. That may be an extreme example, but all sorts of situations arise. There may be legal difficulties in some cases, but those difficulties could be overcome with good, ongoing co-operation between the gardaí and the PSNI.

There is no doubt that, when it is mutually beneficial, whether in government in Dublin or Belfast, it is in all our interests to work together to ensure that we provide the best service possible with as much efficiency as we can deliver.

Dr Farry: I am sure that the deputy First Minister agrees that it would be unsustainable for one Department to be ring-fenced from efficiency pressures. Does he also recognise that the real challenge in dealing with the issue is through collaboration among a range of Departments? The only way that we can address the cost pressures on the Health Service is through collaboration on issues around health inequalities, which involve input from the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning, and other Departments.

The deputy First Minister: I agree that the Budget, and in-year adjustment to it, is a collective process for the Executive. The financial commitments that we face are a common challenge. Therefore, all Ministers, without exception, must engage in a realistic assessment of the options and the achievement of a fair outcome. Individual Ministers will want to make the strongest case possible; that is fair enough, and we expect no less. However, difficult decisions will have to be taken, and we cannot guarantee that any Minister's budget will be ring-fenced or exempt from the impact of efficiency savings.

Policing and Justice: Funding

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the status of the financial offer from the Prime Minister in the event that policing and justice powers are not devolved before the next Westminster election. (AQO 496/10)

The deputy First Minister: The British Prime Minister has made it clear to the First Minister and me that the package of financial support, which is set out in the letter that he published on 21 October 2009, is dependent on the devolution of policing and justice responsibilities. Its aim is to provide a secure financial foundation for a new Department of justice, which is important in ensuring confidence in policing and justice services across the community. The leadership of the Opposition at Westminster have also confirmed their long-term commitment to the financial package that was proposed by Gordon Brown.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Will he say whether the offer is subject to policing and justice powers being devolved by the start of the 2010-11 financial year?

The deputy First Minister: The offer is subject to policing and justice powers being transferred. If we are to be honest, it does not talk about a time frame. However, I remind Members that the First Minister and I communicated with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the basis that the transfer of powers would happen without undue delay.

Mr Campbell: In answer to an earlier question, the deputy First Minister indicated that we will be in a

better place in 10 years' time. Does he agree that, if we all work at creating community confidence, we may be able to have policing and justice powers devolved within his 10-year time frame?

The deputy First Minister: I do not think that that question even deserves an answer.

Mr K Robinson: Will the deputy First Minister indicate how he believes the devolution of policing and justice powers, or any other function, can be justified in light of the Executive's inaction and foot-dragging on council and public service reform, education, and the mounting black hole in public finances?

The deputy First Minister: I note that the Ulster Unionist Party takes every opportunity to try to portray our finances as being blacker than they really are.

All the parties here agree that the transfer of policing and justice powers would be a good thing, and they all want it to happen. Different parties perhaps approach the issue from different perspectives. However, people in the community overwhelmingly believe that it would be good to have a local Minister in charge, because that local Minister will be more acutely aware of the needs of the local community.

There are issues on which we are not agreed, but, as the First Minister has said on countless occasions in the House, there are many issues on which we are agreed. We are engaged in assessing whether the funding arrangements that we have agreed with Gordon Brown meet the needs of our Police Service and our Court Service. Both the courts and the police have clearly indicated that they believe that a good job of work was done.

Everyone now needs to move forward and engage in the process that will achieve the transfer of policing and justice powers, so that the funding that has been agreed by Gordon Brown can be given to the police and the courts to ensure that we have a better Police Service and a better Court Service. Determination will be required on our part over the next while.

I am passionate about these institutions, and I want them to work. The agreement on the way forward, which was set out in the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement, is one of the most important historical events that have taken place. It gives us a real opportunity to move forward in a way that ends the divisions that have been so detrimental to all of us over many decades.

I want this institution to work, and I want the North/South and east-west institutions to work. I want to work with all my colleagues in this Assembly in a positive and constructive way. To do that, however, it is very important that, whenever we make agreements and commitments over which two Prime Ministers preside, there is a binding duty on all of us to deliver.

Sinn Féin has delivered on many difficult issues in the process. I think that many Members on the Benches opposite thought that we would never have tackled those issues, but we have done so. We have not done it in a half-hearted way; we have done it in a fulsome way, because we believe that it is good for the people whom we represent and for the people whom they represent also.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. Will the Minister clarify whether the financial package will fall if there is a failure to agree on the transfer of policing and justice?

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I were involved jointly in a lengthy negotiation to secure adequate funding for policing and justice in the event of the transfer of powers. On 12 October, Gordon Brown wrote to us outlining his proposals. It has been reported that the settlement could have a value in excess of £1 billion. The proposals are solely and explicitly in the context of the transfer of powers to a local Minister. Therefore, the offer that is outlined in the letter will not be implemented in the event of failure to agree the transfer of powers.

Childcare Strategy

6. **Mr Craig** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their Department's work on the childcare strategy, including any work with other Departments. (AQO 497/10)

The deputy First Minister: As I said earlier, the work on childcare is at economic appraisal stage. Providing that the tenders are of sufficient quality, we plan to appoint someone within the next week to carry out the work. In relation to work with other Departments, the initial project group members met on a number of occasions to discuss the issues and provide input into the report that has now prompted the economic appraisal.

We see this as very much a cross-cutting issue. It is essential that all the key players are involved fully and are committed to taking it forward. An interdepartmental steering group, with representatives from the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department for Employment and Learning, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, has been set up to work with the successful candidate during the appraisal stage to ensure that they have access to any relevant information.

Obviously, it will take time for the appraisal work to be completed satisfactorily. In the interim, however, we expect that the interdepartmental group will meet to begin drafting an outline strategy into which the final appraisal will be incorporated.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Government are trying to get single parents back to work, but they face a huge difficulty in Northern Ireland because of the lack of a childcare strategy. They need to provide proper childcare facilities for those individuals. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be a joined-up approach by all Departments to deliver that service for those individuals? A lot of them want to get back to work.

The deputy First Minister: I agree absolutely. The absence of a way forward obviously contributes to unacceptable levels of child poverty. I believe absolutely that a joined-up approach is required, and our Executive recognise that fact.

Ministerial Code

7. **Mr Ross** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how alleged breaches of the ministerial code are investigated. (AQO 498/10)

The deputy First Minister: The ministerial code does not specify any procedure to be followed in relation to the investigation or determination of breaches, nor does it assign us any specific role in the matter. Section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Ministers to act in accordance with the provisions of the ministerial code. Any alleged breach of the code could be decided as a matter of law.

In addition, a failure by a Minister to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office may be the subject of a motion for a resolution of the Assembly. Such a motion can be moved jointly by the First Minister and me, or by an MLA with the support of a minimum of 29 other Members.

Mr Ross: The deputy First Minister will be aware that the Committee on Standards and Privileges conducted a long review into breaches of the Members' code of conduct. One thing to emerge from that review was that the public were concerned that no mechanism exists to deal with alleged breaches of the ministerial code. Does OFMDFM have any plans to review that issue?

3.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: Not at this stage. However, I remind the Member that, apart from the courts, the ultimate authority for breaches of the ministerial code resides with Members and the House.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning: Strategic Flood Map

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment what impact the strategic flood map has

had on planning decisions since its creation in November 2008. (AQO 507/10)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): The strategic flood map for Northern Ireland and, when available, other information sources such as local evidence and detailed study maps, are used by my Department to inform the planning process for managing development. When determining planning applications, if a flood risk is known to exist, my officials pay regard to the policy that is set out in policy planning statement 15, which seeks to avoid, whenever possible, development on flood plains. However, when there are compelling reasons for the development to take place, PPS 15 requires the developer to provide a robust flood-risk assessment and suitable mitigation measures. In most cases, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency is consulted for advice.

Mr K Robinson: What warnings, if any, did residents who were affected by flooding in recent weeks receive as a result of the information in the strategic flood map? Furthermore, in light of the recent floods in Belfast and Fermanagh, on how many flood plains has there been development, thereby removing the natural resources on which people relied in the past? Finally, how many households have been alerted to take action because they are situated in areas liable to flood?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member has asked the wrong Minister for an answer to some of his questions. I recall from my days on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development that approximately 16,000 homes are on a potential flood plain. That figure may not be precise, but it is my recollection, so the Member may wish to ask the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Information to let householders know about flood risks comes from the Met Office and is disseminated to local authorities, which then take action. Local authorities take the lead in emergency planning; therefore if there is a significant flood risk, the local authority issues warnings.

Mr Shannon: November saw the heaviest rainfall since 1951. Given that there has been much more flooding recently and that we seem to be entering a period in which there will be more problems as a result of flooding, how realistic is the strategic flood map that was created in November 2008?

The Minister of the Environment: Although annual rainfall levels are not significantly higher, it is evident that we now have greater concentrations of rain, which is why my Department is developing its sustainable urban development policy and, in particular, installing impervious materials around residential developments in built-up areas to ensure greater absorbency. As a result, water that is caught will be able to be released more slowly into water systems.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister will agree that the strategic flood map has been a useful education tool. However, does he agree that we should be moving on and that more clarity is required from the Planning Service about development on flood plains? Will applications for developments on flood plains be refused? Is that the end of the matter, or are such decisions still a grey area for the Planning Service?

The Minister of the Environment: The general principle is that planning applications for developments on flood plains will be refused. Where there are significant mitigating circumstances and a particular need is demonstrated, the applicants must demonstrate how they would deal with any potential flooding problems and ensure that the properties being built would not be subject to flooding. That is all dealt with in PPS 15, which is a fairly clear document.

Mr McKay: Admittedly, the map is not sufficiently accurate to determine the flood risk to individual properties at specific locations. Will the Minister look into the possibility of carrying out more detailed work, perhaps with other Ministers, in at-risk areas to identify such risks, particularly in parts of my constituency, such as the Glens and Ballymena.

The Minister of the Environment: Again, that issue is really one for DARD and the Rivers Agency. We consult DARD to identify the areas that are subject to flooding and it passes the information on to us; we make planning decisions and DARD make recommendations to do with flooding issues.

Single Waste Disposal Authority

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment, in establishing the single waste authority, what consideration has been given to the benefits of further cross-border co-operation on waste disposal. (AQO 508/10)

The Minister of the Environment: Waste management is about managing resources. One of the benefits of having a single waste authority is the potential to apply a more strategic approach to waste management. That will allow Northern Ireland to make best use of resources and maximise any opportunities, including those relating to cross-border co-operation on the disposal and treatment of waste. The North/South Market Development Steering Group (NSMDSG) was established by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) to identify areas of mutual concern and explore market development opportunities for target priority waste streams.

The NSMDSG is considering opportunities to exploit economies of scale in the market for recycled materials in both jurisdictions. The chairperson of the group is to make a presentation at the next NSMC meeting. Although

the work of NSMDSG is not dependent on the establishment of a single waste authority in Northern Ireland, such an authority should be beneficial in taking forward any cross-border programme that is based on specific deliverables of mutual benefit.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on the progress made. I am delighted to have been made aware of it. Will he give an assessment of the current levels of illegal waste-dumping, particularly toxic waste, in Northern Ireland? I am thinking of waste from fuel laundering, but there are other types of toxic waste. Some waste is dumped illegally in Northern Ireland, some is moved from Northern Ireland to the South and, occasionally, some is moved from the South to Northern Ireland. Will the Minister give us an assurance that there will be further restrictions on such activity?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member can be in no doubt that a substantial amount of fuel laundering has taken place in recent years. I recently asked for a report on what happens to the waste from fuel laundering, and I intend to put pressure on HM Revenue and Customs regarding the matter. Such illegal activities damage the environment and society, and they feed paramilitary organisations. I urge all Members to encourage others to let the proper authorities know where they are taking place.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister recognise the good work that the three existing waste bodies are undertaking through their own strategies? What impact will the creation of a single waste authority have on those strategies?

The Minister of the Environment: The work of the three single waste authorities demonstrates the efficiencies that can be achieved because the work that they carry out was previously carried out by 26 authorities. If we reduce the number of authorities from three to one, we will be in a far more powerful position as regards procuring and selling our recyclates. Northern Ireland can benefit significantly, including financially, from the creation of a single waste authority. We are here to deliver benefits for the people of Northern Ireland, which is why I am committed to that route.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Minister agree that we could create the single waste authority now rather than wait for the reorganisation of the councils? That said, I do not see how we can get round the fact that the three waste authorities disagreed over the different ways to treat waste, or how the Minister will get savings from that.

The Minister of the Environment: Should we not proceed with the 11 local authorities, we could proceed with a single waste authority. Therefore the answer to the Member's question is a clear yes. However, if we move ahead with the review of public administration,

as I hope we do, 2011 would be an appropriate time for the establishment of a single waste authority.

There are mechanisms to handle waste, such as pyrolysis, gasification, anaerobic digestion and incineration. We need to identify local solutions for local waste problems. I am not interested in super facilities on a single site to which waste is hauled for many miles to be dealt with. I would like to see processes to deal with local waste established locally.

Mr Speaker: Mr McGlone is not in his seat to ask question 3, so we proceed to Mr Dallat.

Illegal Dumping

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions for large-scale dumping were secured in each of the last three years, including the volume of the materials and the value of the fines imposed. (AQO 510/10)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) oversaw 68 successful prosecutions relating to illegal waste offences, which generated fines of £276,850; in 2008, fines of £117,100 were imposed in 72 cases against illegal waste offenders; and to date in 2009, 34 successful prosecutions have generated fines of £150,250. The NIEA does not record the volume of waste materials involved in every case that it investigates. Accurate volumes cannot be recorded in all cases due to the nature of the offence. For instance, the volume of waste materials cannot be recorded if the waste has been burnt or moved off site after it is put through a waste transfer station.

In instances where the NIEA can record volumes, they are usually noted on their files for the Public Prosecution Service and set in the context of the cost of removing the waste for legal disposal at a licensed facility — a figure that can provide a robust illustration of costs avoided and revenue diverted from the legitimate economy.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his reply. On the face of it, it looks impressive. However, calculations that I did recently suggest that people who dispose of waste illegally might be paying no more than £3.50 a ton. Does the Minister agree that as long as it is cheaper to dump waste illegally, the problem will continue? Does he also agree that as long as there is a huge difference between the cost of disposing waste in the Republic and of doing so in Northern Ireland, that gap will add to the problem?

The Minister of the Environment: It is unusual for me to agree with Mr Dallat, but I fully agree with him in that regard. Furthermore, the punishment needs to fit the crime; if it does not, individuals are encouraged

to engage in more crime. The decision on what penalty to impose on those individuals is for the courts, but I would encourage them not to be lenient with people who go out purposely to destroy our countryside by illegally dumping waste.

Mr McQuillan: Although fines are important, what can the Minister do to assure Members that the Department will take a more proactive approach to preventing illegal dumping?

The Minister of the Environment: The Department will deal with all reports of illegal dumping that it is informed about, and our crime unit is proactive in responding to complaints. The number of prosecutions over the past three years demonstrates the Department's effectiveness in that respect. However, we are happy to look at whether it needs to be supplemented or whether more work is required.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister said that the punishment should fit the crime. How will he tackle those who think that illegal dumping is a risk worth taking? What sanctions have been imposed, or will be imposed, on those who illegally dump waste?

The Minister of the Environment: Many people have been taken to court, and, over the past three years, that has led to fines of hundreds of thousands of pounds. That is an indication of how seriously the Department takes the issue. I would like to see heavier fines and greater punishments imposed, and, if people continue to engage in the activity, I would like judicial sentences to be imposed. However, that is a decision for a judge to make, after hearing all sides of the case.

3.15 pm

Local Government Reform

5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with his Executive colleagues about the cost of local government reform.

(AQO 511/10)

The Minister of the Environment: In my statement to the Assembly on 20 October 2009, I announced my intention to seek stakeholders' views on the economic appraisal of options for local government service delivery. That consultation recently ended, and I will discuss the outcome with the Department's strategic leadership board on 9 December. I have had some preliminary discussions with the Executive subcommittee on local government reform, and when I have considered the consultation responses and the strategic leadership board's views, I intend to have full and frank discussions with my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explore the implementation and longer-term funding

options that may be available, with a view to putting detailed proposals to the Executive in the new year.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his response. Is a case being made to justify spending millions of pounds on proposed reform of local government, only to end up in a situation in which the whole process may be disregarded because of the Minister's intervention over a little local difficulty?

The Minister of the Environment: I am not holding the process up; rather, I am driving it forward. If others wish to hold up the process by holding back Bills or local government orders, that is up to them. However, I wish to push the process forward, and I am surprised that the Member does not know that and has not acknowledged it.

Mr Neeson: What effect will the Westminster proposals to cut public spending have on the reform of local government in Northern Ireland? Is the Minister still as optimistic about the timescale's being achieved for the review of public administration?

The Minister of the Environment: The difficulties that the Member mentions about finances remind me of the song 'Money's Too Tight (To Mention)', and I will be speaking to the Minister of Finance and Personnel this week on that very issue. Obviously, when money is tight, it is difficult to obtain additional resources for that type of activity. Nonetheless, I am of the view that it is a central government initiative, which, as such, requires some central government contribution. I have to persuade the Department of Finance and Personnel on that issue. Ultimately, we are looking at investing £118 million to save £438 million. That makes economic sense. I think that we can do it for considerably less than £118 million, and councils need to be proactive in identifying where savings can be made.

I have been asked a number of questions about there being a single waste disposal authority and a business services centre, and I wish to make it clear that the identified savings in those two areas amount to more than £300 million. Therefore, Members who are being parochial by saying that they do not want a single waste disposal authority and that they are not sure about a business services centre can tell the ratepayers that even though £300 million would have been saved over 25 years, that will now be imposed on them as a tax or else services will not be delivered. Those Members should come back to me after they have told the public that.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister says that he is not holding anything up, and I accept his word on that. However, if he is not holding the process up, perhaps he can tell us who on the Executive is holding it up?

Is the Minister aware of the great uncertainty that exists in local government circles, not only among councillors but among local government employees,

who are uncertain about their future and wish to see a firm timetable established as soon as possible?

The Minister of the Environment: It is fairly evident who is holding up the Bill, which has been sitting ready to go out to public consultation since June — the deputy First Minister's office. A lot of toys are being thrown out of prams because certain people are not getting their way on a whole range of issues, and they are even threatening to pull down the institutions. However, they may find that threats and bullying do not work well with other folk in the Chamber.

Local Government Reform

6. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of the Environment what functions his Department intends to transfer to local councils under the review of public administration; and what assurance he can give that appropriate funding is in place to ensure a smooth transition on the transfer. (AQO 512/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The majority of planning functions are to be transferred from the Department of the Environment to local government. Those functions include development planning, control and enforcement. Planning staff in both professional and administrative grades will transfer to councils when the planning functions transfer.

The proposed planning reform Bill will deliver a reformed planning system and will transfer the majority of planning functions to district councils by 2011. The proposed Bill will provide for a more responsive planning system, delivered at a local level, with enhanced local political accountability; a streamlined planning system with a more meaningful level of community involvement; a better match of resources and processes to priorities; and improved value for money for all users of the planning system through more proportionate decision-making mechanisms.

The Department consulted on the planning reform policy between 6 July and 2 October 2009, and departmental officials are analysing the responses to that consultation. The officials aim to complete that analysis before Christmas, and I intend to circulate the final policy position to my Executive colleagues early in the new year. Subject to the agreement of the Executive, I intend to introduce a draft Bill to the Assembly in May or June 2010.

As for funding, as I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on 20 October 2009, I am fully committed to delivering local government reform in May 2011. That includes putting in place the necessary resources, policy legislation and practical arrangements to transfer a significant range of central government functions and staff to local government.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister has outlined the transfer of planning functions to local government, but will he assure the House that adequate funding will be in place to allow the councils to deliver a decent Planning Service, which is a body that has come in for quite a lot of criticism? Will he also give an assurance that when the Planning Service transfers to the councils, it will meet the needs of this century, particularly with respect to economic regeneration, and that we will have a Planning Service that is fit for the future?

The Minister of the Environment: I have met several of the transition committees and have spoken to them about the transfer of functions. I have indicated that it is my desire that finance will follow function. I am not trying to pull a fast one on local government and lead it into a situation in which the Department transfers a function to councils but does not transfer the adequate finances. The situation is quite the reverse.

Mr Speaker: I call Declan O'Loan.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you —

Mr Speaker: Members who wish to ask questions must rise in their places. They are looking up at the Table, nodding and doing everything but rising in their places. The Member may continue.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The measures that have been outlined will mean major changes for local government. Does the Minister agree that the various pieces of legislation will need and deserve full scrutiny? Will he assure the House that he will not seek to use accelerated passage for any such legislation?

The Minister of the Environment: That is why I wish to put the Bills before the Assembly. Other Members have talked about the use of accelerated passage because they want to deal with issues of equality and equity, but the best way to deal with those issues is to get them before the House, the Committees and all the relevant people so that the legislation can be interrogated and approved. I fully agree with the Member that accelerated passage should be used only in exceptional circumstances.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister believe that the type of expensive mistakes that have been made during the saga of the Planning Service's e-PIC system and the longstanding inefficient and ineffective —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member not to read his supplementary question.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister believe that the type of expensive mistakes that have been made during the saga of the Planning Service's e-PIC system and the longstanding inefficient and ineffective performance of Land and Property Services would be avoided if those functions were transferred to local government?

The Minister of the Environment: I honestly do not know whether that is true. Local government is not infallible, and it has made its own mistakes over the years.

Nonetheless, it is my view that planning policy would be better delivered at local government level, and that is why the Department is transferring one of its major functions to local government. We believe in local government and in its ability to deliver for the people whom it serves.

Mr G Robinson: What training will be given to councillors on the new reforms?

The Minister of the Environment: I am seeking to get the legislation passed so that I can put the appropriate training mechanisms in place. It is essential for local councillors to be given adequate and appropriate training. We cannot have a situation in which, for example, a councillor could say that a certain planning application should be allowed to proceed because he has known the people concerned all his life and that they are powerful, decent people. Planning applications must be dealt with on their merits and against the policies that are set. Ultimately, councillors will need specific training on that issue.

Road Safety

7. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to raise awareness of road safety during the Christmas period, given the number of people who have died on our roads this year to date. (AQO 513/10)

Mr McCartney: Ceist a seacht. That means question 7, although I know that the Minister needs no assistance with the translation.

The Minister of the Environment: I would insist on that assistance, regardless.

The Christmas and new year anti-drink-drive 'Hit Home' campaign commenced on 1 December 2009 and will continue throughout the Christmas and new year holiday period, ending in early January 2010. The campaign comprises a 30-second television advertisement, with washroom posters and glow boxes displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants across Northern Ireland, and an online activity carrying the strapline: "Never, ever drink and drive".

The television advert 'Shame', which was originally launched in 2002, will have special airings throughout December. It is a 60-second television advertisement carrying the strapline: "Could you live with the shame?" It will also be the second year of a radio campaign consisting of a portfolio of five 50-second radio edits. That campaign will run throughout December, targeting all road users with a mix of key road safety measures.

In partnership with the PSNI, DOE advertisements will appear on many Internet sites during the Christmas period and will run until February 2010. Those advertisements will be drawn from the current portfolio of digital advertisements, as well as new creations.

The Coca-Cola designated driver initiative, which is supported by my Department, was launched on 30 November. The scheme, which will be operational at 200 venues across Northern Ireland, offers three free soft drinks to designated drivers during the festive season.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

Given that the statistics show that the majority of road deaths occur on rural roads, is the Department doing anything in particular to focus on that issue as part of its campaign?

The Minister of the Environment: I met the PSNI recently to discuss that issue. Some 73% of road deaths happen in the south and the west of the Province, so there is clearly a major issue in those areas. I would like to see a greater concentration of police resources in those areas to clamp down on speeding and drink-driving and to target those areas where most road deaths occur.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's commitment to tackling this issue over the Christmas period. As the Minister knows, quite a few road deaths have occurred in my constituency, and it has been said already that there has been an increase in the number of deaths on rural roads. Will he assure the House that he will work with the police to tackle that serious issue?

The Minister of the Environment: Absolutely. At lunchtime today, the number of deaths on our roads this year rose to 107. Another home has suffered bereavement as the consequence of a road accident, which means that the total number of deaths on our roads this year is the same as that for the whole of last year. Unfortunately, for the first year in many, we are likely to see a rise in the number of road deaths. That will affect every home. Last year, almost 1,000 people were seriously injured on our roads, and that illustrates the significance of the situation. More than 100 people are dead and more than 1,000 have been injured. Those statistics will be available at the end of this year. Those statistics are sad, and the situation is hugely damaging to many families.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister join me in acknowledging and commending the considerable contribution of the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland, particularly at this time of year when it is promoting good initiatives that are helping with road safety at a local level through local committees?

Will the Minister comment on the funding arrangements for the Road Safety Council?

3.30 pm

The Minister of the Environment: Considerable work has been done over the years on involving local communities in the Road Safety Council and road safety committees. Before I entered the Executive, a decision was made to change the funding rationale and for that to be applied more directly to the road safety committees. I have spoken to people on a number of occasions since then to see whether there is a better way forward. We have not yet identified exactly what that might be, but, nonetheless, we all need to work together to reduce the number of deaths on the roads.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Under 25s Not in Education, Employment or Training

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes that one third of all benefit claimants are now under 25 years old and that one fifth of people aged 16-24 are classed as 'not in education, employment or training'; welcomes the study on this issue currently being undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning; and calls on the Minister to bring forward a cross-departmental strategy and programme, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to prevent these young people becoming a lost generation. — *[Ms S Ramsey.]*

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support this very important motion and thank the Members for bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly. I sincerely hope that every effort will be made by our Executive to make positive progress and secure a better future for all our young people. I have no doubt that the vast majority of our young people want to better themselves and to have an opportunity to be employed, but, unfortunately, they are being denied that opportunity.

Once again, the House is indebted to the staff from the Assembly's Research and Library Services and, indeed, to all other concerned organisations that have provided it with useful and important statistics and information. Some of that information makes very unpleasant reading, but Members have to be aware of all the facts so that those who hold offices of responsibility can make recommendations and take action to get our young people on the right track to further education and secure employment.

As has already been said, we had a similar debate in the Assembly last year, and, as I understand it, we are currently awaiting the Department's proposals. It is most unfortunate that, because of the world economic depression, so many people and businesses have been thrown into chaos, resulting in loss of employment on a massive scale. That state of affairs has had a devastating effect on our young people, particularly those leaving school, who now have little or no chance of gaining beneficial employment.

Youth unemployment in Northern Ireland has almost doubled in recent years, and, with the recession, it is significantly more difficult for our young people to get jobs. For those classed as not in education, employment or training (NEET) it is almost impossible to get any sort of work. Our young people simply cannot escape from that depressing predicament.

Members who have already spoken have given staggering facts and figures that must give all Departments immediate impetus to find solutions. I pay tribute to our Ministers for their endeavours to date, and I am glad to see Minister Empey here today. However, more

needs to be done, and the Assembly will support the Ministers in their efforts to improve the situation, if not eradicate the problem, at the earliest opportunity.

It is shocking to read that it costs Northern Ireland an estimated £500,000 a week in benefits, and there is nothing to show for it. Apart from the costs of providing funding for people who are caught in the NEET trap, research has shown there to be many detrimental effects, primarily for young people, such as poor mental health and involvement in criminal activities or antisocial behaviour. In the worst case scenario, some young people simply cannot cope and resort to self-harm. Unfortunately, in some instances, young people have taken their own lives. Our young people need and deserve better.

The Assembly should and must find ways to get all the young folk out of their beds in the morning and into further education or suitable training but, more importantly, into employment, if that is possible.

I remember a programme that existed some years ago called Action for Community Employment. It encouraged people of all ages to do community work and get training along the way. It provided enormous benefits, particularly to elderly people. In my opinion, that scheme was successful, and perhaps it could be resurrected in the future.

The Assembly cannot and will not accept any of our young people being part of a lost generation. All our young people will be supported and cherished for their whole lives, and it is up to the Assembly to make every effort to get them into education or employment. I support the motion.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the motion, and I congratulate the Members who secured the debate. I also congratulate the Minister for Employment and Learning on the progress that he has made in a number of areas, particularly in programme-led apprenticeships and other initiatives, including the study and survey of the situation that we are considering. We look forward to his responses.

Since 2004, around one in 10 people from the crucial 16- to 19-year-old age bracket have not been in education, employment or training. That indicates that a cross-departmental strategy and programme must be developed to challenge the issue. The issue is challenging, particularly when one takes on board the figures and statistics that the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and other Members gave.

As was discussed in a debate in April 2009, there is an annual requirement for the number of students who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Across all occupational areas, 1,350 recruits are needed just to replace the people who will retire in the next six years. In 2007, 2,500 people were recruited to the entire engineering industry, in which there

were 535 hard-to-fill vacancies. Those vacancies are estimated to have cost our economy £21 million in gross value added.

We hope that the Minister will put in place proposals to address and combat those issues. We cannot afford to have a lost generation. By working with his Executive colleagues and by implementing a cross-departmental strategy and, hopefully, a robust programme, the Minister could go some way to saving a generation. Employers are concerned that there will not be sufficient skills to provide for the next generation of scientists and engineers. They have good reason to be concerned, because jobs are available, but our people are not trained or sufficiently skilled to do them.

The higher an area's level of deprivation, the lower the proportion of school-leavers who go into further and higher education. Poverty in Northern Ireland is worse because more parents are on benefits, families are bigger, incomes are lower and the cost of living is much higher. Children in that situation are more likely to develop addictions, get involved in crime and become homeless. Therefore, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Minister Ritchie, Minister McGimpsey and, indeed, the entire Executive must become involved. If we want young people from deprived areas to be out working, poverty and social inclusion must be tackled. We know about the situations of homelessness, social deprivation, child poverty, poor mental health and so on that people can find themselves in.

Our young people are the future of our economy. To encourage investment and economic growth, we need a skilled, educated and readily available workforce. Young people say that they are not in employment or training because they do not have the right qualifications to progress, they do not get the right opportunities or the right provisions are not available. Therefore, I urge all Departments to get involved in developing a plan that would take young people off the streets and out of their homes and place them in employment and in careers that would improve their quality of life by giving them a sense of belonging and achievement. That will provide economic growth and will encourage foreign investment into Northern Ireland.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I support it, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. More than likely, all Members will support the motion. Indeed, there has been a number of debates on this issue.

It is estimated that young people who are not in education, employment or training can cost the economy here in the region of £250 million a year. The Programme for Government gives a commitment to tackling the difficult issue of education, employment and training.

Not only are we trying to address it here but research has been done and several papers have been written on the subject across Europe.

However, I sense that we are not taking the same approach as the Scottish or Welsh Executives or even the British Government. Although policies such as Steps to Work and New Deal are in place, there seems to be no overall strategy for dealing with the issue, given that unemployment in the 18 to 25 age bracket has doubled to 20% since 2007. The Minister has implemented schemes such as the apprenticeship programme, but there is a sense, particularly among young people, that we are not doing enough to tackle the issue.

Some Members praised the Minister, and I welcome that fact that some steps are being taken. However, Reg Empey gave an interview to the 'Belfast Telegraph' recently saying that some young people are like vampires because they do not get out of their beds until 3.00 pm after having been out on the streets all night. Such statements do not help, and I hope that he will clear that up today. Whatever he was trying to convey with that remark, it sent out the negative message that young people do not want to work or to be in training. I am not blaming Reg Empey, because, as he well knows, this is a complex issue.

David McClarty called for an early years intervention strategy. By the time young people reach the crucial age of 15 and 16, they seem to drop out of school and do not want to be involved in further education, employment or training. A lot of the problems are associated with the early years, and I agree that a joined-up approach is needed between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to address the issue. However, a series of issues must be considered, such as young people having disabilities or coming from broken homes. I know from dealing with young people over the years that unemployment is generational in that their grandfathers and fathers probably never worked, so there is no encouragement for them to go into either training or employment.

I was impressed with the Scottish Executive's more focused approach of tracking young people through to further education and of having a more interventionist strategy to get people into education or training. However, we obviously want them eventually to get into employment. In Britain, the Chancellor has guaranteed a work placement to all those who are aged under 25 who have been unemployed for a year. The British Government will introduce legislation to make education and training compulsory for people from the age of 17 from 2013 and from the age of 18 from 2015. We need to do that here.

It has been said that the youth unemployed and NEETS on this island are no different from those in

Britain, for example. However, our situation with such young people is behind that in the rest of Europe, and we are even behind that in the South of Ireland. A recent University and College Union study that compared people's qualifications here with those in Britain showed that we lagged behind in GCSEs. The Assembly must look at that issue. I hope that we hear some positive news from the Minister.

3.45 pm

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it. This issue affects everyone in the Province, from the taxpayer who pays for benefits for unemployed people, to individuals who have no sense of purpose and, in many cases, no sense of self-worth. We are all well aware of the issues. I am grateful, therefore, that the motion is before the House.

Often, in other debates, I have stated that we have a duty to prepare and equip future generations to take the reins of our nations and of the Province. For that reason, it is disconcerting to see a generation — perhaps a lost generation, although we hope that it will not be — that is unable to get work or education. One third of all claimants are under 25. That is not a statistic about which the Assembly can be proud. Rather than sweep the issue under the carpet, we must take affirmative action to change it. Hopefully, this debate will be the first stage towards effecting that change.

Tha Associashun O' Norlin Airlan Colleges goet in tuch wi' me in tha leed up tae this debaet. They represint aw six o' oor colleges, includin yin in mi' ain bailliwick tha sooth eastrin regin, an they hae prauvided me wi' sum intrestin bakgroun. Tha colleges er Norlin Airlan's maen knakky prauvider, attractin yin in three, sixteen an siventeen yeer oul schuill-lavers an prauvide fer sum 200,000 larners a yeer

The Association of Northern Ireland Colleges represents all six of our colleges, including that of my local area, the South Eastern Regional College, which has provided me with some interesting background on the issues. The colleges are Northern Ireland's main skills providers. They attract one in three school leavers who are aged 16 and 17 years old, and provide for some 200,000 learners each year. They have 47 campuses and 400 outreach centres.

Colleges employ 7,400 people, many of whom have expertise in working with people who are disengaged from work, education and training. They have a proven track record of delivering a high-quality service for learners, including those who need additional support. They are flexible and responsive to the demands of the economy and local communities. Colleges do all of those things. Therefore, clearly, their authoritative opinion must be taken into consideration in any report and proposed reform.

Northern Ireland's colleges are designed to be a gateway to re-engagement with education, training and, ultimately, employment. They have a fundamental role to build the skills and capacity of individuals, the workforce and the economy. There is no doubt that they are ideally placed to deliver increased flexibility and to target support at young people who are not in employment, education and training, making the most of their long-term and well-established network and links to the wider community.

Colleges have already demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness in meeting the demand for a new approach through programme-led apprenticeships. That was required due to the significant drop in employer-led apprenticeships. They currently provide some 3,300 programme-led apprenticeship places, which is a significantly higher number than their original target of 2,500. That is where problems have arisen. That positive contribution by colleges beyond their original target has created, by its very nature, substantial financial pressures. Concern is growing that the cost of delivery of programme-led apprenticeships is greater than what is provided through current funding mechanisms. That success has, therefore, created problems. The colleges are currently in discussions with DEL on that matter.

Any discussions to find a solution must ensure that adequate funding is in place to allow colleges not simply to continue to fund placements for current numbers, but to allow for expansion to much greater numbers. I am sure that that will provide many more young people with the experience that they need to secure jobs after their placements. I know that the Minister will want to respond to that issue in his remarks.

Ms S Ramsey: I appreciate the Member giving way and I thank him for doing so. I also appreciate his support for the motion and I thank him for that. In support of what he has said about the colleges' good work, I want to point out that a great deal of good work is also being done by the community and voluntary sector with young people who, for one reason or another, find themselves outside mainstream education. Therefore, the community and voluntary sector must also be included in any initiatives.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her intervention. She is way ahead of me: if she had given me another two minutes, I would have caught up with her on that point.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. We represent the same constituency. Given what he has just said, does he agree that it is absolutely diabolical that the University of Ulster is preparing to withdraw an important subject from our local Newtownards campus of the South Eastern Regional College? It would be to everyone's benefit, particularly that of

young people, if that course were retained for our constituents.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member and I agree with him.

The Prince's Trust carries out excellent work with communities and colleges. It is building relations with the community, colleges, and elected representatives. In Newtownards, we are blessed with a good grouping which does great work.

The Minister will be aware of concern, particularly at a time of increased demand, over funded learning units which underpin the delivery of further education courses. Will the Minister respond to those concerns? There seems to be a cap on the number of full-time higher education courses in some parts of the Province. That is part of the problem. Steps must be taken to improve rates of retention and success. There should be investment in a unique pastoral care service. SERC Extra is one of those schemes which help individual students to overcome difficulties. It is one of the good things we have done. To date, that particular scheme has saved £238,000 of public funds at the South Eastern Regional College over the last year. An increase of 76% in the last year is good news.

I hope that any report on this subject stresses that increased funding for the regional colleges is essential to any scheme. The colleges, and the services they offer, are essential to the welfare of this "lost generation". Let us not leave them a "lost generation": let us save them, and do the job now.

Mr B McCrea: We are coming to the close of the debate and we are waiting to hear what the Minister has to say. It is apparent from contributions thus far that many in the Chamber are concerned about the problem of NEETs, the problems facing our young people and unemployment.

I was struck by the contribution of Mr Butler, who chided the Minister for his inappropriate use of the word "vampire". He said that it sent out the wrong message. He then went on to explain to the House that many of the problems facing young people are generational and that there are grandparents and parents of NEETs who have never worked.

That shows that we should challenge some attitudes. How are we going to address the very real problems facing us? It is wrong to characterise and label people, but it is equally wrong not to address some of the issues.

Mr Butler: This is not just anybody, it is the Minister for Employment and Learning, who has responsibility for NEETs. For him to make a statement using the word "vampire" and saying that people will not get out of their beds until 3.00 pm the next day because they were out all the previous night sends out a message that young people do not want jobs or education. That

is a negative image, and the Minister has to be very careful about what he says.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the intervention, but sometimes things need to be said. It may well be that the Minister's language was colourful, but what I really want to see in the Chamber is a united stance that people must understand that education is important. It is the only enduring competitive edge. Far too often, young people come of age with no qualifications, no education and, therefore, relatively limited prospects. It is useful, sometimes, to draw attention to that and say it as it is. I am sure that the Minister will deal with the Member's point himself.

The statistics that we have to deal with are stark. In three years, between 2006 and 2009, unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds has doubled from 9.9% to 24.4%. That is a staggering figure — one in five. That highlights the seriousness of the problem. Young people under the age of 25 now comprise one third of all of those claiming jobseekers' allowance. However, the most staggering statistic that I have come across is that the average rate of economic inactivity for people of working age in Northern Ireland stands at 29.5%, which is significantly higher than the UK average of 21%. That is a real productivity gap that we, as a region, must address. Maybe Mr Butler and his colleagues will help us to address that. It is also the case that we are talking about real people who cannot get on the steps to prosperity. Not only is it a problem for society, it is a huge issue for the individuals concerned.

In looking at how we might deal with this, it is somewhat strange — remember, I was on the Employment and Learning Committee — that further or higher education somehow transforms into a sweep-all solution to try to lift or deal with the tail of educational underachievement. People who have been failed by the system to date have somehow been swept into that area. Sometimes, it is about trying to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted.

The problem of young people being underqualified does not begin when they start further education. It actually begins much earlier in life, when they are primary school age and pre-primary school age. In that regard, the Department of Education has a role to play. I am not alone in thinking that it is disappointing that the Minister of Education has not yet brought forward an early years strategy.

One Member said the critical age is between 15 and 16. However, I think that the critical age is four, because by age four, a child can be up to two years behind in educational achievement, and that is ground that can be never made up. The issue is about absenteeism in particular wards, and my colleague Mr Beggs has told the Assembly on many occasions that the children who suffer the most are the ones who do not go to school at

all. Therefore, we must try to find a way of resolving that issue so that it does not affect young people when they get to ages 15 and 16.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not know whether the Member has read the motion. However, in my contribution to the debate, I said that the issue is the responsibility of more than one Executive Minister and Department, rather than the sole responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning. However, we need the Minister to bring forward a strategy to address the issue.

I agree with the Member that the current education system has failed a lot of young people by labelling them as failures at a young age.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for her intervention. I hope that Ms Ramsey, for whom I have the greatest deal of respect as the Chairperson of the Committee, understands that I am trying to put forward my argument in a measured tone and that I am not having a go at certain individuals. Rather, I am pointing out the root causes of the issues that we face. Sometimes we have to say it as it is and, collectively, tackle such issues. If we come together, people will not be isolated and there will not be a tit-for-tat situation.

I do not want to detain matters any further, so I will conclude my remarks. When I met representatives from Mencap, they had nothing but praise for the Minister for Employment and Learning for the work that he had done to help people into employment. Therefore, good things are coming from this Minister as well as others.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): First, I thank the Members who tabled the motion. With the political hullabaloo that has been going on in the background, it is a pity that more Members were not here to participate in the debate, because the issue affects people who are suffering real hardship.

Rather than deliver the speech that I was going to make, I am initially going to address Members' queries, given that virtually every Member who spoke in the debate asked for some kind of assurance on, or background to, a particular issue. I will do that first, and if I have time, I will move to other issues.

I issue a note of caution about the statistics that Members have been quoting. We must remember that we are not working from the same page, because there are figures for 16- to 18-year-olds, for 16- to 19-year-olds, and for 16- to 24-year-olds. Therefore, there are all sorts of different definitions. If we do nothing else, we must get our heads around that and get some statistics that we all agree on. I will certainly consult my colleagues in the Department and in DETI, which deals with the labour force surveys on which many of those statistics are based.

I also wish to point out that the figures that we use to quantify the people who are not in education, employment and training are in three different categories. The statistics for Northern Ireland do not define and break down those figures in detail. The three categories are: the core figures, which represent those who are permanently in that category; the figures for students who are taking a gap year, which are included even though those students are not formally involved in education, employment or training; and the figures for those who are somewhere in between.

4.00 pm

Taking England as an example, we see that the figures for the 16- to 19-year-old category are worse than ours, whereas for the 16- to 24-year-old category, they are slightly better. Of those people, roughly 38% are in the core group, 22% are floating or undecided, and 41% are open to learning, on a gap year or waiting for an opportunity to arise. Therefore, there is no single figure that defines all those people.

Sue Ramsey asked whether the Department will set a target. Given what has happened over the past year to 18 months, any target that we might have set beforehand will be way off the mark. Again, I will use the example of England, where a target of 7.6% was set. At present, the figures are 13.4%, having risen from about 10.6%. Therefore, England is at almost double its target figure. There is not much point in setting a target until there is a general position from government.

As a member of the Executive subcommittee on children and young people, I can tell Members that co-operation is taking place. The scoping study, to which a number of Members referred, will be coming to me early in the new year — next month or shortly thereafter — and it is my intention to examine it to see where we go from there and to bring it to the Executive. As Members said, the Executive is where all Ministers are. As almost every Department has a role to play in this — the Department of Education, DHSSPS, DCAL and DSD are involved — the scoping exercise needs to go to the Executive. Any targets that we set would have to be incorporated into the Programme for Government. Therefore, it is my intention to bring the paper to the Executive.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning raised another matter concerning the Department for Work and Pensions future jobs fund. Resources for the future jobs fund, on the scale required to replicate the GB approach, are not available in the Department's budget. However, we have secured sufficient funds from our own baseline to test the future jobs fund concept in Northern Ireland. If the pilot proves successful, the Department will seek funds to offer similar schemes in other parts of Northern Ireland. We

are looking very closely at that, but, at present, we do not have the funds to roll it out.

Tom Buchanan referred to the extremely important role of the voluntary and community sector, and the scoping study has been informed by discussions with that sector. The Department has contracts with voluntary and community organisations to deliver its services. Therefore we are very much focused on that sector.

Pat Ramsey asked about the Steps to Work contract. The Member is aware that that has been an ongoing issue for a long time and that it is a concern to me. The contract has been subject to an unavoidable delay arising out of an ongoing dispute involving the proposed service provider, and until that matter is resolved, I cannot, unfortunately, comment any further. I am acting on legal advice, and I am sorry that I cannot be more open with the Member. However, the dispute must be resolved before we can move forward.

Overwhelmingly, Members expressed concern for the young people involved. Why would they not? As far as I can see, Northern Ireland is no worse off than England, except perhaps if the category were extended to include 16- to 24-year-olds.

If we take our position with 16- to 19-year-olds, we are probably slightly better off than the rest of the UK. At a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council the week before last in Dublin, I raised that issue when we were comparing figures. The Republic does not categorise things in the same way as we do. We have agreed to follow-up on that issue, which we will hopefully do at the next Council meeting in the spring. However, we recognise that unemployment among young people is a problem that everybody faces.

People ask whether a failure to act has resulted in a lost generation. People have chided me about my language, and we have to be careful about using terms such as "lost generation", because we are not dealing with a homogenous group of people. There are different groups and, although the figures are staggering, we are dealing with individuals in each category. Virtually no two people are in the same position. We have many arbitrary divisions and determinations in Northern Ireland to categorise people.

I will address Mr Butler's point: when I took on my ministerial post, I was staggered by the levels of literacy in this country. I cannot understand how we hope to succeed with young people if we are transferring substantial numbers of them from primary to post-primary school when they cannot read. I just do not get that. I think that Basil McCrea touched on that point. If any co-ordination or strategy is needed around this place, it has to be one to address literacy levels, because people are left stranded if they do not have the basic ability to read and write when they go to post-primary school. Lack of literacy leads to children being isolated, having

poor self-esteem and being easily used for negative purposes by elements in the community. Therefore, we have got to really work at our literacy levels.

Mr Butler referred to a term that I used. I was introduced to that term by community workers in west Belfast. It was not my invention and was used as a nickname or as slang to describe a subgroup of people who live certain lives. Such people are out there. The term was not meant as one of abuse; it was used to describe a particular subgroup of people. I have been in community politics for 25 years. I chaired community groups for a number of years, including one in west Belfast, and set up the Greater Shankill Task Force and the West Belfast Task Force. People in my Department know that I have made essential skills one of my top priorities, because I was so horrified by what I found when I came into the job. I had not appreciated the extent of the problem. My remark was nothing to do with people taking benefits. Incidentally, the sensational piece was not written by the journalist who interviewed me, which is not insignificant.

My task and that of my Department is finding what we can do. What frameworks can we develop to tackle the problem? What are we going to achieve as an Assembly and as an Executive? Are we going to create the circumstances in which people leave the system in a better way than they were when they went into it?

I visited a number of organisations that my Department has contracts with, which deal with people who faced difficult circumstances in care, may have been subject to abuse and may have been involved with substance abuse. A lot of people have not got a clue about what is going on out there. We can look at the busy city and town centres and the shoppers who pile into them, but we forget that it is the people who are not in them, rather than those who are, who we are worried about, because they are almost invisible in our community. However, they exist, and they are not being dealt with in a way that will enable them to participate. I take those matters extremely seriously, and I hope that we will make progress early in the new year.

Mr Shannon raised the issue of the contribution of further education. I am aware of the funding issue to which he refers. It is being dealt with at a high level in the Department. We are discussing that matter with the further education sector, but I do not know what the outcome will be. However, we are aware of the problem, and it is receiving attention. I hope that, before long, we will be able to assess whether we have a way to resolve it correctly.

The colleges have played, and continue to play, a significant role. They have responded quickly and innovatively, and the Department has introduced a number of initiatives. Nevertheless, I agree with Members that the issue will only be resolved through collective

action by the Departments in Northern Ireland. That will only happen if the Executive agree to take a decision on whether they intend to prioritise the matter across all Departments. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education can do so much. However, the total effect would be far more effective through a cross-government position. That is the thrust of what those who proposed the motion are trying to achieve. I assure them that the issue will receive the best and most appropriate attention possible, and I will be surprised if other Ministers do not offer a willing and positive response.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank everyone who contributed to this afternoon's debate and thank the Minister for his presence.

During the debate, Members said that we have already debated this topic. That is true; we are revisiting the issue. However, from listening to contributions this afternoon, it is clear that it is a live issue. As one Member said, it is a challenging and complex issue. Members' contributions were valuable in determining how to make progress on the issue. Repeated mention has been made of the need for a strategy, and Members' arguments on that point are valuable and coherent. If I understand correctly, the Minister agrees with that assertion. Several contributors thanked the Minister for the initiatives to date. I add my thanks to him for that.

I will outline why we proposed the motion today. Kieran McCarthy mentioned the valuable information pack that Members have, which contains different bits and pieces of media coverage from here and across the water. Although work has been done on the matter across the water, the issue has still not been sorted. I note that the British Prime Minister and others are being challenged at this stage. Early in the debate, David McClarty said that this is a persistent problem that has existed for a number of years. Therefore, it has not been sorted. I commend the Minister on his attempts to rectify that.

4.15 pm

I have read of examples of the gaps that exist in training provision. Recently, in November, the local press in my constituency printed a story about a 22-year-old man from Cookstown who applied to take up an apprenticeship. He got through the aptitude test but was unable to get a placement and had to abandon the course. I felt that something was wrong with that, because the programme-led apprenticeships, which were introduced by the Minister for Employment and Learning, have been in place for some time. Why did someone not explain the situation to that young man? The article stated that he had gone to the local job centre but could find nothing there. He had phoned round but could not find a placement anywhere.

That young man of 22 years of age is a parent, and he has worked since he was 16 in retail and as a postman. I wanted to share that example because it supports our view, and that of other contributors to the debate, that a strategy should be in place, and it shows that a gap exists. That young man did everything right, but he still could not get into training — not even into a job, but into training. There is something wrong there.

The cost of programme-led apprenticeships was mentioned, and I know that sorting out that problem and providing similar training programmes will not be cheap. They will be expensive, but money has to be invested in them. However, obtaining the resources that would be required to make those programmes a success is an entirely different issue. For example, I read the account of the principal of an education provider in Newquay who mentioned the cost of programmes that require intensive tutoring. We must examine the issue of resources and, in developing a strategy, as was mentioned a number of times in the debate, we must join up the departmental dots.

The Minister said that we have to get the statistics right. Sue Ramsey mentioned a figure in her opening remarks, and, if that statistic is accurate, it is, as the Minister said, staggering that 47,000 under-25s are not currently in employment, education or training, one way or the other. We have been talking about a cross-departmental approach, and that is the key to the problem, although some Departments will have more responsibility than others. Members quoted figures in the debate, but, if we were to give departmental officials a couple of figures and ask them how many under-25s are not in employment, education or training, I would be surprised if any of them were to come up with the figure of 47,000. Barnardo's is seeking a strategy on this issue, and, having listened to what the Minister said, it is clear that there are strategies in place. However, we have to tie everything together.

I want to comment on some Members' contributions, although the Minister has, to some extent, already done that. Paul Butler said that the cost of having so many young people who are not in education, training or employment is £250 million a year. He also made a comparison with what is happening in Europe, against which we are not doing that well. He also referred to the problem being cyclical. Everyone accepts that the issue is generational, and we should think about what we can do about that.

Several Members said that education is a key factor and emphasised the need to focus on education much earlier than at the age of 16. We accept that there are problems at earlier stages of education. Sinn Féin and the three Members who tabled the motion have no difficulty in accepting the fact that the problems go back to the early stages of education. Reference was

made to an early years strategy, which, I hope, will come to fruition.

However, the motion specifically refers to people who are under the age of 25. The three Members who tabled the motion are members of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and none of us has any difficulty with there being a more coherent approach to the problem. Basil McCrea stated that education is important. The way in which we deal with young people in bad situations is a problem for society. Those young people may have experienced family breakdowns and associated mental-health problems. We must consider how to deal with the whole situation. Members must bear in mind that it is not only statistics that we are discussing but individuals, as the Minister said.

I thank Members for their contributions. I did not refer to all Members because the Minister summed up their contributions.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister referred to the high percentage of young people who leave school without being able to read. Mrs McGill was a teacher. Was it her experience that people left her school, or any school in Northern Ireland, without being able to read? The Minister quoted a staggering figure.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Mrs McGill to draw her remarks to a close.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that one third of all benefit claimants are now under 25 years old and that one fifth of people aged 16 to 24 are classed as "not in education, employment or training"; welcomes the study on this issue currently being undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning; and calls on the Minister to bring forward a cross-departmental strategy and programme, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to prevent these young people becoming a lost generation.

Adjourned at 4.22 pm.

