

Official Report (Hansard)

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They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 September 2010

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Mr William Humphrey

Mr Speaker: The Chief Electoral Officer has informed me that Mr William Humphrey has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Belfast North constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of the Rt Hon Nigel Dodds. Mr Humphrey signed the Roll of Membership in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General in the Speaker's Office this morning and entered his designation. Mr Humphrey has now taken his seat. As I did yesterday with other new Members, I congratulate Mr Humphrey and wish him every success in his work in the Assembly.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the tenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format, which was held in Farnleigh House, Dublin, on Monday 5 July 2010. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have approved the report, and we make it on their behalf. Members will appreciate that this statement was agreed on 5 July and that some points have progressed since then.

Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson, and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Sammy Wilson, Minister of Finance and Personnel; Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning; Conor Murphy, Minister for Regional Development; Arlene Foster, Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Alex Attwood, Minister for Social Development; Caitríona Ruane, Minister of Education; Nelson McCausland, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; Edwin Poots, Minister of the Environment; Michelle Gildernew, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; and OFMDFM junior Minister Robin Newton.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD, who chaired the meeting. The following Irish Government Ministers were also in attendance: Brian Lenihan TD, Minister for Finance; Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Justice and Law Reform; Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for Transport; Micheál Martin TD,

Minister for Foreign Affairs; Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Social Protection; Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport; John Gormley TD, Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government; Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; Pat Carey TD, Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs; Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Batt O’Keeffe TD, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Innovation; Barry Andrews TD, Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children.

During the meeting, we had a comprehensive discussion of the fiscal challenges facing us and the measures that we are taking to consolidate budgets and prepare for economic recovery. In the current difficult economic environment, we emphasised the need to secure value for money across the full range of public sector expenditure. In that context, we noted and welcomed the ongoing discussions between the two Finance Ministers to identify potential cost savings through co-operation and sharing.

Ministers also discussed the significant level of co-operation that is under way to promote innovation to underpin economic growth and to create employment, including the introduction of innovation vouchers on an all-island basis, the funding provided through the programme for research in third-level institutions, cancer research, increased co-operation in securing research funding under the EU seventh framework programme, and the success of the US/Ireland/Northern Ireland research and development partnership.

The Council welcomed potential co-operation on the international promotion of joint capacity for research and development and encouraged work in the NSMC trade and business development sector on innovation, research and development, and on an all-island ecosystem for innovation. It was agreed that EU Innovation Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn would be invited to attend a future meeting of the NSMC in trade and business development sectoral format.

Executive Ministers raised concerns about the restructuring of the banking sector and about issues relating to the insurance sector. They also raised the issue of country of origin food labelling and noted that the relevant Ministers are discussing those issues.

The Council noted a progress report that was submitted by the joint secretaries on the

thirteen NSMC meetings that have been held since the previous plenary meeting in December 2009. The Council welcomed the mutually beneficial co-operation that is being taken forward, including that work is progressing well on the A5 Aughnacloy to north-west gateway and on the A8 Belfast-Larne road projects to meet the next key milestones — the publication of draft Orders — in late 2010 or early 2011. The A1 road works to complete the Dublin-Belfast link are nearing completion and it is anticipated that the new carriageway will be open to traffic in mid 2010.

Further progress is being made towards the approval of the business case for a new radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital, towards which the Irish Government have agreed, in principle, to provide a capital contribution and to fund the provision of cancer services for patients from Donegal.

Progress has been made on a range of child protection issues, including the establishment of the innovative North/South child protection website.

Exploration of a co-ordinated approach to reducing blood alcohol levels in both jurisdictions continues along with the introduction of the mutual recognition of driver disqualifications between the UK and Ireland on 28 January 2010. Work is continuing on the longer term objective of the mutual recognition of penalty points.

An all-island animal health and welfare strategy has been agreed. Steps have been taken to ensure the removal of waste from the sites at Slattinagh in County Fermanagh and near Trillick in County Tyrone. Work on the site is expected to start this summer and joint enforcement actions to target shipments of waste are continuing.

Progress has been made on the implementation of the EU Peace III and INTERREG IVA programmes. Projects already approved under Peace III have a total budget of €171.8 million and those approved under INTERREG IVA have a total budget of €103.7 million.

Since 19 April 2010, the new NSMC joint secretariat accommodation in Armagh has been fully operational and six NSMC meetings have been held there to date.

The board of the Middletown Centre for Autism has been reconstituted for a further three-year term and the centre is rolling out further training

packages involving around 4,000 individuals. Progress continues in the provision of advice and guidance to schools and to research and information services. A multi-annual plan is being worked on for the development of the Middletown centre.

The teacher qualifications working group has been reconstituted and progress made in taking forward co-operation in teacher education issues generally and in Irish-medium education in particular. Additional measures are now in place to strengthen co-ordination and co-operation to tackle educational underachievement, school leadership and Irish-medium education, including a commitment to share, where feasible, materials and resources to avoid duplication.

The Council agreed that recommendations in a report prepared for the St Andrews Agreement review group by an advisory panel of experts/advisers would be forwarded to Ministers who have responsibility for North/South bodies for their views. Consultation in Departments on the second and third terms of reference of the St Andrews Agreement review was noted, and the review group was expected to move rapidly to conclude its work when the consultation is completed. We also agreed to consider at a future NSMC meeting the outcome of consultation that is under way in both jurisdictions.

The Council noted that the Irish Government had facilitated a second consultative conference with the participation of social partners and other civil society groups from across the island. It noted that a joint meeting of the North/South parliamentary forum working groups was held on 21 June 2010 to discuss the proposed joint conference in early October. The working groups agreed that officials from both legislatures will continue to meet to refine aspects of the draft conference programme and report to their respective working groups with a view to finalising the conference programme. The Council noted that the establishment of a forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We approved a schedule of NSMC meetings to take place over the coming months and agreed that the joint secretariat, in consultation with relevant Departments, will arrange dates for each of those meetings before 31 August 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I thank the deputy First

Minister for his statement. Has any work been carried out on applying for joint funding bids from Europe or to encourage universities in Northern Ireland, or, indeed, in both jurisdictions, to apply for joint funding for research and development?

In the light of the fact that co-operation on economic growth was discussed at the meeting, did the Minister or any of his Executive colleagues raise the issue of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) and its potential implications for Northern Ireland's economy. The Minister's assessment would be helpful. Finally, will the Minister update us on the work of the St Andrews Agreement review?

The deputy First Minister: Co-operation on innovation and on research and development is central to growing the economy here. They are a primary focus of the Programme for Government, which is reinforced in an independent review of economic policy. The commercialisation of research and development and the transfer to market of knowledge from the excellent academic base here are critical to making that economic growth happen.

Matrix, the local science industry panel, sets out a road map to achieve that, with an emphasis on collaboration across not just sectors but across national boundaries to target global markets. The regional innovation action plan 2008-11 sets out more than 100 actions designed to support Government's effort to develop a more knowledge-based economy. Progress on the implementation of the action plan and the related Matrix recommendations has been positive.

We need to ensure that our new economic strategy sets out the steps necessary to encourage more innovation and puts support mechanisms in place to help potential entrepreneurs. Many will consider the appointment of Máire Geoghegan-Quinn to a vital Commission in the EU as something from which North and South can benefit.

10.45 am

In relation to third-level education, the Department for Employment and Learning's Strengthening the All-Island Research Base initiative represents a major investment in cross-border R&D collaboration and is regarded as a strategic initiative by both Governments. That has enabled our universities to collaborate with major inter-

nationally recognised research centres in the South that offer complementary strength and future opportunities for international collaboration.

Collaborative partnerships exist with, among others, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, National University of Ireland, Galway, University College Cork, the University of Limerick, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. The initiative is a flagship one within the funding for innovation stream, which will end in March 2011. The cross-border projects aim to be self-sustaining after that.

The impact of the NAMA on the ability of local banks to lend and its potential impact on the local property market are strategic issues. The Finance Minister continues to liaise closely with Brian Lenihan on that issue. Minister Wilson met the Northern Ireland advisory committee of NAMA on 23 August. That was the first of what will be regular meetings. We were assured again that assets would be carefully managed, with no fire sale.

It was announced on 23 August that tranche two had been completed; a total of €11.9 billion was transferred to the stage. Tranche two saw the transfer of some £360 million worth of loans that were based here.

One benefit of NAMA is that it gives important liquidity to the banks through the securities that it exchanges for the loans. Hopefully, that will help banks to begin to lend, which, as we all know from being lobbied consistently by the business community, is of vital importance.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement to the House this morning. What are the most up-to-date figures for the costs of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland? What effect will agreed efficiencies have on those bodies?

The deputy First Minister: We will write to the Member with the figures that he has requested. However, we all recognise that, at a time of great fiscal difficulty both North and South, there is a huge responsibility on all of us to be sensible about how we manage public funds. That is why the meetings that are taking place between Brian Lenihan and our Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, are of such vital importance.

It is absolutely critical that we consistently challenge ourselves to see what more can be done through sharing and engagement in projects that bring mutual benefit and do not compromise anybody's political allegiances. We are absolutely committed to pursuing that goal, but the mechanism for doing it rests principally with the two Finance Ministers. Obviously, they must report to the NSMC at one of its plenary meetings. We will write to the Member with the figures that he requested.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an leasChéad-Aire. I welcome the statement from the deputy First Minister.

Will he provide an update on the process for establishing the North/South parliamentary forum? I was pleased to note that the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat accommodation in Armagh has been fully operational since April. The OFMDFM Committee has decided to hold one of its meetings there in the near future.

The deputy First Minister: I very much welcome the progress that was made at the recent joint meeting of the Oireachtas and Assembly working groups to discuss arrangements for the North/South parliamentary forum conference, which they are planning to hold in October. Our Speaker is very much involved in those discussions, which is great. I look forward to the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum, which, of course, is principally a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas respectively.

The Member mentioned the opening of the offices in Armagh earlier this year, which is something that we are all very pleased about, because we know that it will be increasingly cost-effective to have as many NSMC meetings there as possible. That is a boost for Armagh city centre, for our work in the North/South Ministerial Council and the meetings of its subcommittees. To have that facility is tremendous.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the deputy First Minister for his report. I note with satisfaction that progress is being made in respect of the North/South Ministerial Council.

The deputy First Minister referred to the St Andrews Agreement review. He said that:

“The Council agreed that recommendations in a report prepared for the St Andrews Agreement Review Group by an advisory panel of experts/advisors, would be forwarded for views to Ministers”.

Will the deputy First Minister indicate whether that report will be published so that Members of the Assembly and the Oireachtas can consider it? Will he give more detail on it prior to its publication?

The deputy First Minister: At the June plenary meeting, we agreed to send the recommendations of the experts/advisers on the efficiency and value for money of North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland to the Ministers whose Departments sponsor those bodies for their information and views.

We also noted that Departments have been tasked with providing views on the second and third terms of reference of the review. Those relate to the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC where mutual benefit would be achieved and work on the identification of a suitable substitute for the proposed lights agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. It is anticipated that the review group will move rapidly to conclude its deliberations when responses to that request are received.

The NSMC will consider at a future meeting the outcome of the consultations that are under way in both jurisdictions. This is one of a number of issues from the St Andrews Agreement that will be considered through the work of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement working group that will meet soon. Junior Ministers Newton and Kelly will chair the working group, the members of which include Ministers David Ford, Connor Murphy and Edwin Poots and Dolores Kelly MLA. Any changes to the arrangements require the endorsement of the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

In relation to the recommendations, as I have already outlined, those relating to the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Limited are with the Ministers who have responsibility for those bodies. It would not be appropriate to release the report until the review group has had an opportunity to consider Ministers' views. I have already outlined the progress that has been made. It is important

that time is taken to consult Ministers in both jurisdictions and consider their responses on all elements of the review. I am sure that the Member understands that.

Dr Farry: I thank the deputy First Minister for the statement. In paragraph 4, the report refers to:

“the ongoing discussions between the two Finance Ministers to identify potential cost savings through co-operation and sharing.”

Will the deputy First Minister give us more information on the range of issues discussed in that regard and an assessment of the scope for savings, which is particularly appropriate in the current environment? Can he give us some examples beyond what is cited in the report of the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Area Hospital?

The deputy First Minister: In relation to the discussions on possible savings through mutual co-operation, given the budgetary circumstances in both jurisdictions, all of us welcome any opportunity to save money to provide effective public services. I understand that our respective Finance Ministers have been and will be discussing that matter. Members are aware that the terms of reference of the St Andrews Agreement review include the objective examination of the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived.

At this stage, it would benefit no one to put into the public domain the content of those discussions. When the two Finance Ministers come to their conclusions, it will be appropriate to apprise the Assembly.

Mr G Robinson: Will the deputy First Minister update the House on the cross-border co-operation supported by INTERREG IVa?

The deputy First Minister: That important work is continuing, and I thank those who have been involved. I understand that the multi-annual plans (MAPs) developed and provided by the five groups include the detail to inform a funding decision and that those groups were seeking significantly more than the €60 million, or £55 million, notionally assigned to that area of the programme. The groups agreed to submit individual project applications based on their MAPs, and, like all applications for INTERREG IVa funding, those projects will need

to be progressed through the agreed selection procedures.

The groups' projects must continue to meet quality standards and provide value for money if they are to be funded, but the groups are well placed to develop — and have developed — quality proposals. They have the experience. The groups have seen 17 projects to the value of €13.2 million, or £12 million, approved to date. All groups have now seen projects approved under the programme, and administrative costs for 2009-2010 have been agreed.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh milé maith agat. I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I particularly welcome the progress report on the proposed radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital, especially the financial capital contribution to be made by the Irish Government. Notwithstanding what he said about the discussions that will take place between the two Finance Ministers, will the Minister provide details of the discussion about possible savings that could be made by all-Ireland-based service delivery?

The deputy First Minister: I am sure that we would all welcome any opportunity to save money while providing effective public services given the current budgetary circumstances that prevail in both jurisdictions. As I said, our respective Finance Ministers have been and will be discussing the matter. That is being dealt with as a matter of urgency. Members will be aware that the terms of reference for the St Andrews Agreement review include the objective examination of the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived.

A number of Members have mentioned the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital. The Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, has indicated his hope that the additional radiotherapy capacity required should be made available at Altnagelvin Hospital through the development of a satellite radiotherapy centre. Appropriate access to safe and effective radiotherapy for local patients remains a high priority for the Health Service; however, the development of a satellite service at Altnagelvin offers the opportunity for meaningful cross-border collaboration in this specialty.

There has been significant North/South collaboration on radiotherapy provision. Patients from Donegal have been able to access

radiotherapy services at the cancer centre in Belfast since November 2006. The proposed development at Altnagelvin represents a significant advance on that arrangement and will require substantial and ongoing financial commitments from both jurisdictions.

An outline business case for the new development was submitted to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by the Western Health and Social Care Trust in April 2010. A number of matters of detail are still to be addressed, and the Health and Social Care Board is working with the Western Trust on those. Until the business case has been approved and the necessary funding is in place to deliver the project, the Health Department is unable to provide more detailed comment on the scheme.

Mr Bresland: What have the NSMC joint secretariat and various meetings in the current financial year cost Northern Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: The costs are fairly minimal in the grand scheme of things. A standing joint secretariat that is staffed by members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and members of the Irish Government's Civil Service, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, supports the North/South Ministerial Council.

Twelve OFMDFM personnel are employed in the NSMC joint secretariat in the North, and the budget for 2010-11 is £894,000, which includes staff salaries. The budget is net of the Irish Government's share of the running costs of the joint secretariat. The important thing is that most costs are shared on a 50:50 basis.

11.00 am

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned briefly the A5 and A8 roads. Will he confirm that funding remains in place to complete the Trans-European Network route? In addition, he indicated that a very extensive list of Ministers — 23, along with their entourages — attended the meeting. Does he agree that, given the expenditure difficulties that we face, it is important that money is spent very carefully to improve front line services? Some of those are being cut already. How can he justify such an extensive, costly meeting and proposals to establish —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to a question.

Mr Beggs: — yet another bureaucratic and expensive forum?

The deputy First Minister: I can justify the costs quite easily. When David Trimble was First Minister and Séamus Mallon was Deputy First Minister, the same number of Ministers attended plenary sessions of the North/South Ministerial Council. That was a minimal cost when one considers that it was a vitally important institution that was established under the terms of previous agreements. This is about how we can explore, among ourselves on the island and without prejudice to anyone's political allegiances, how we can gain mutual benefit through sharing. Given that there is now a heavy workload for people in that regard and that the projects in which we are engaged are delivering, that is of vital importance.

The Member referred to the roads situation. It should not be lost on anybody in the House that the Irish Government are prepared to pour hundreds of millions of euro into the construction of the new north-west gateway road from County Monaghan and a road from Belfast to the Member's constituency in Antrim. That will open up the eastern seaboard, which is vitally important for articulated vehicles. That is at a time when much criticism has been levelled at the poor state of infrastructure on that part of the eastern seaboard. All in all, the costs incurred as a result of those meetings are, in the grand scheme of things, well justified.

Mr O'Loan: I note that the Minister mentioned previous agreements, with reference to the Good Friday Agreement. There will be some wonderment about that. I noted his previous answers about potential cost savings through co-operation and sharing. Of course, I welcome that progress. Will he confirm that there will be no reduction in support from the First Minister and him for the work of the existing North/South implementation bodies, and will he elaborate on the brief reference to the banking sector, with particular reference to the availability of credit?

The deputy First Minister: At our discussions, as always, given the very difficult financial situation that exists North and South, we had a serious discussion about how businesses, in particular, are being affected by the reluctance of banks to lend at this time. That imposes incredible hardship on businesses north and

south of the border. At those meetings, it is critical that we continue to discuss and apply whatever pressure can be applied to the banks so that they recognise their responsibility to help businesses at what is a very difficult time.

As we go forward, we all understand that all of that represents a real challenge. The First Minister, all the other Executive Ministers and I have played a very constructive role, and the Ministers who choose to attend the plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council understand the value of working in a way that is mutually beneficial to our communities north and south of the border. As always, as we move forward in relation to the implementation bodies and almost everything else that we do in government, North and South, we now consistently challenge ourselves to see how we can make as many savings as possible without damaging the work in which we are engaged. Principally here, the big challenge for us will be to determine how we can continue to ensure that we grow our economy, protect front line services and help the most disadvantaged in our society against the backdrop of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. I am sure that the Government in Dublin face the same difficulties and challenges that we in the North face. Therefore, it is important to discuss those matters on an ongoing basis.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Given some of the questions that have been asked, this one may not seem as important as others; however, it is important to the agriculture sector. Reference was made to country of origin food labelling. What progress has been made on that? Many in the industry would like to see it being made mandatory so that the promotion of local produce can be helped.

The deputy First Minister: I know that there has been much discussion on that subject between the Agriculture Ministers, North and South. There have certainly been difficulties with how the matter has been proceeded with over recent times. I know that those discussions are continuing, and, along with everybody else, I hope that we see an outcome that is beneficial to our agriculture community in the North.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the deputy First Minister for his presentation. The expense of the event has been mentioned. At the moment, every Department is being asked to cut back and save. Given that and given the number of Ministers

who attend such events, the number of civil servants who are there to back them up and the transport that is necessary, would the deputy First Minister not consider using video linking? Would the costs of that not be much less than those for this particular trip and would it not be as beneficial?

The deputy First Minister: The costs of holding the NSMC meeting in plenary format on 5 July in Farmleigh House were, in fact, met by the Irish Government. Travel and subsistence costs for OFMDFM were approximately £550. Visiting Ministers and officials bear their own travel and subsistence costs. Including the First Minister, junior Minister Newton and me, 12 Executive Ministers were at the meeting, and, including the Taoiseach, 13 Irish Government Ministers were present. Eight officials supported us at the meetings, including two from the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat. Given those figures and the importance of the dialogue, discussions and decision-taking in which we were involved, those costs can absolutely be justified.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. In June, I met the Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey, in Dublin. We had a one-item agenda: the Narrow Water bridge project. Given that I was assured in June that the project was ongoing, was there any discussion of it? I also noted the reference to the all-island animal health and welfare strategy. Were any arrangements on the monitoring of the rapid alert system agreed to?

The deputy First Minister: The bridge at Narrow Water has been discussed at NSMC meetings. I do not recall whether it was discussed at the most recent meeting, but I have no doubt that the issue will come up again. Local government associations in the Louth area have been involved in some work on the matter, and we will be updated continually on that work. As many Members know, things are very difficult financially, but, as we go forward and when we are in a position to have the feasibility studies and all the works attendant on them completed, the NSMC will no doubt consider the matter again.

I absolutely welcome the agreement on the all-island animal health and welfare strategy, which was reached at the meeting in Hillsborough on 31 March. The strategy's agreement signals the start of a process of working formally with Dublin, London and Brussels towards the ultimate

objective of the free movement of animals on the island, and I am pleased to note that a cross-border stakeholder event on the all-island animal health and welfare strategy took place on 12 April 2010. EU Commissioner John Dalli spoke at the event and added his perspective on future EU developments on animal health and welfare. DARD officials will continue to work closely with their counterparts in Dublin on joint strategies for the improvement of animal health and welfare on the island. The island of Ireland should be recognised internationally as a separate unit for disease control purposes and for ensuring effective traceability of livestock in the event of a disease outbreak. Now that the strategy has been agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council Ministers, Minister Gildernew will be working closely with Minister Brendan Smith to secure that recognition from Brussels and London.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement and the economic co-operation that has been detailed, given the current fiscal challenges. On energy provision cost efficiencies, will the deputy First Minister update the House on whether the North/South interconnector was considered at the meeting and give his assessment of progress to date?

The deputy First Minister: I am aware of the public's environmental and health concerns over the planned line for the interconnector. Minister Foster met members of Safe Electricity for Armagh/Tyrone (SEAT), and Minister Poots announced recently that a planning inquiry will be held to consider those concerns in public. The second main electricity interconnector between Tyrone and Cavan is a major strategic project that will form a key part in upgrading the transmission network. A reliable and stable electricity supply is critical for communities, businesses and a modern economy. It will bring greater transmission capacity, encourage competitiveness in the single electricity market and improve consumer price choice.

The Utility Regulator has estimated that current interconnector constraints are costing between £18 million and £25 million a year due to restricting use of the most efficient generating plants in the single electricity market. The interconnector will play a key role in facilitating growth in renewable electricity generation and improve access to local sources of electricity at a time of international energy pressures and dependence on imported fossil fuels.

We have a duty to ensure that all consumers have access to a reliable electricity supply at the lowest cost necessary. There are significant technical constraints and additional costs associated with undergrounding high-voltage electricity cables, with such costs ultimately being borne by consumers.

British-Irish Council: Environment Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that junior Minister Newton wishes to make a statement.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): Mr Speaker, in compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, I wish to make the following report on the tenth British-Irish Council meeting held in environment sectoral format at the Dove Marine Laboratory, Newcastle, on Thursday 15 July 2010. Minister Gildernew has endorsed the report, and she has agreed that I should make the statement on behalf of both of us. As the Minister of the Environment was unable to attend, the Northern Ireland Executive were represented by me and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Minister Gildernew MP MLA.

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

The British Government were represented by Richard Benyon MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for the marine environment, who chaired the meeting. The Irish Government were represented by Michael Finneran TD, Minister for Housing and Local Services. Jersey was represented by Senator Freddie Cohen, Minister for Planning and Environment. Guernsey was represented by Deputy Peter Sirett, Minister for the Environment Department. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing. The Scottish Government were represented by Richard Lochhead MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, and the Isle of Man was represented by Mr John Shimmin MHK, Minister for Environment, Food and Agriculture.

11.15 am

The British-Irish Council was established under strand 3 of the agreement that was reached in Belfast on Good Friday 1998 as a forum for its members to exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant member Administrations. The meeting was part of an ongoing series of meetings of

the British-Irish Council since the first summit of 17 December 1999, which identified the environment as one of the issues for discussion.

The main focus of the meeting was on marine issues, and it was hosted by the Dove Marine Laboratory in Cullercoats, Newcastle. Ministers were given the opportunity to view the work of the laboratory and to be informed about the work of the Marine Management Organisation and Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership as part of a marketplace event. Ministers were also presented with update papers on Fishing for Litter and integrated coastal zone management.

The Marine Management Organisation, which is based in Newcastle, was vested on 1 April 2010. Chris Parry gave a presentation to outline the role of the organisation and how it will work. That was followed by a presentation from Dr Craig Wallace and Professor Dan Laffoley of Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership that outlined how the partnership works, the value derived from the partnership and this year's annual report card, which was launched at the meeting. The 2010 Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership annual report card includes updated climate impacts down to regional level using the most recent UK climate projections. Confidence levels for current and projected impacts and opportunities are clearly explained.

Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership also announced its next phase, which includes a programme of climate-smart working that will draw together and share adaptation experience from key marine sectors. An update on potential future areas of work was then given, and Ministers were able to discuss those ideas with the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership presenters and ask for an update at the next ministerial meeting in Wales. Ireland is currently investigating the feasibility of becoming a member of the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership.

Ministers also gave a brief update on the ongoing work in their member Administration and committed themselves to continue to work together closely on marine issues going forward. In particular, a commitment was made to work together toward good environment status in the seas around BIC members' coasts in the context of the EU marine strategy framework directive and to explore further the sharing

of research vessel resources and training opportunities.

The UK climate projections (UKCP09) were launched last year and reflect the fifth generation of climate scenarios. Roger Street, who gave a presentation to Ministers at the ministerial meeting held in Bangor, County Down, in 2008 came back to give the group an update that focused on the reception and take-up of the projections. The remainder of the discussion focused on what group members had been doing to develop and support adaptation programmes in their respective Administrations.

Ireland indicated that officials from the Irish and Manx Governments are working closely on a revised joint paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste. The paper will address current operations at Sellafield, the safety of those operations, the final disposal of radioactive waste and the control of environmental discharges.

Waste has been agreed as the theme for the next ministerial meeting in Wales. Ministers were provided with a paper that updated them on what different member Administrations were doing to address waste issues. Officials had provided Ministers with a list of potential areas for future co-operation and sharing of best practice. Ministers briefly discussed the most promising areas for joint working and tasked officials with putting those ideas into a work plan that could be taken forward and reviewed at the next ministerial meeting.

Ministers discussed the dates and themes for the next two meetings. They confirmed that the next meeting will be held in Wales in 2011 and that the theme will be waste. Ministers then discussed the meeting that will follow the one in Wales. Although there was support for the theme to be biodiversity, it was felt that some work should be done prior to the meeting in Wales to determine whether that is an appropriate work area. The timing of the meeting after the one in Wales will be dependent on that decision and will be confirmed at the meeting in Wales.

Ministers welcomed the continued close co-operation between member Administrations on environmental issues. An update on marine issues, in particular on co-operation on the marine strategy framework directive and improved working together in marine research, could be provided to Ministers at the next meeting. Officials will also work together on

the development and delivery of a work plan on waste issues for review at the next meeting in Wales.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions must be about the Minister's statement.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. What do the UK climate projections for 2009 indicate for Northern Ireland, and how are the projections being promoted and used here?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his topical question. The UK climate projections indicate that we are likely to see hotter, drier summers and warmer, wetter winters. That is likely to be coupled with an increased frequency of extreme weather occurrences such as heatwaves, dry spells, heavy rain and, unfortunately, flooding, of which people in my constituency, in Fermanagh and elsewhere are well aware. Some of the key conclusions from the climate change projections are that, by the 2050s, it is estimated that Northern Ireland will have an increase in winter mean temperature of approximately 1.7°C, an increase in summer mean temperature of approximately 2.2°C, an increase in winter mean precipitation of approximately 9%, a decrease in summer mean precipitation of approximately 12%, and an increase in the sea level for Belfast of 14.5 cm above the 1990 sea level.

The climate change projections were launched in Northern Ireland on 3 December 2009, and further awareness sessions and technical user interface training sessions were held in Belfast during January 2010. Officials from the Department of Environment and other Departments will be using the UK climate change projections to inform the development of a Northern Ireland climate change adoption programme.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Arís, cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement. I am drawn to the fact that the Minister of the Environment was not present at the BIC meeting in environmental sectoral format. Perhaps an explanation could be afforded for his absence. Indeed, he is absent from this morning's proceedings on the statement. Therefore, one would question his commitment to the project.

The statement contains a section on Sellafield and radioactive waste. Have there been any recent accidents at Sellafield? If the Minister does not have the information to hand, can we be furnished with it? Sometimes accidents are referred to as minor accidents and are underreported, but they are more than minor accidents.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his two questions. It is my understanding that questions from Members were to relate entirely to the statement. Indeed, you made that point in your opening remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member will be aware of the commitment of Minister Poots to the work in his Department. We all have extremely busy schedules. I refer the Member to the date of the meeting: July. That is a time when many Members are unable to be present due to other commitments such as family holidays.

The Member referred to concerns about the accident rate; I do not have actual figures. He referred to accidents happening that are not regarded as reportable because they are so minor in nature. I am not aware of the full reporting procedure and the technicalities around it. However, I am happy to refer the question to the Minister for him to provide a written report to the Member.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, thank the Minister for the statement. On the subject of our marine responsibilities, I know how disjointed our river management is. Does the Minister have any plans to put a pilot project in place in Northern Ireland in the near future to allow all the agencies and stakeholders to find out how to work together in the most efficient and effective way?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I am not quite sure what is meant by the reference to working in the most effective manner. My understanding is that there are no plans to establish a marine management organisation for Northern Ireland. The issue is not regarded as sufficient to have an organisation set aside for it. However, the Member will be aware that there are a number of cross-departmental working groups. Indeed, there is an integrated strategy to address the issue through that sharing of information.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the junior Minister for his very comprehensive and interesting statement, which highlighted the protection of the environment, in particular the marine environment and our coasts. The Minister

also highlighted Sellafield and said that a joint report between the Irish Government and the Manx Government is being prepared. Does the junior Minister have any insights into that report? Sellafield is a particularly contentious issue for many of us who regard it as posing a tremendous potential danger to the welfare of all our citizens on both sides of the Irish Sea. Will the junior Minister give any indication as to what is contained in that report or, indeed, the nature of the report?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I did indicate that the Irish and Manx Governments are working on a report. The concern that the Member raised about the safety of all our peoples around the UK is of paramount importance. Personally, I am in favour of nuclear energy. I believe that it will be needed as energy sources dry up. Much more serious consideration needs to be given to that issue than it has received in the past. How Northern Ireland addresses that issue will be an interesting debate.

I can say that the DOE is responsible for legislating and regulating on matters that relate to the management of radioactive waste, which is where the public's major concerns lie. The DOE's responsibility includes participation in the managing radioactive waste safety programme. That programme was initiated by the UK Government and the devolved Administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2001 with the aim of addressing the legacy of radioactive waste from a variety of different nuclear energy programmes in the United Kingdom.

The Department's participation in that programme recognises the need to ensure that Northern Ireland's interests are represented when developing the most appropriate and safest way forward for dealing with the UK's legacy of higher-activity, long-life nuclear wastes.

11.30 am

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for the statement. Was there any discussion on the various plans of the devolved regions for their own marine legislation to complement the UK-wide legislation? Arising from that, can the Minister give the House an assurance that our plans for a Bill, which will commence in 2012, and our local timetable will not in any way disadvantage us in respect of marine issues, whether regarding protection or new economic opportunities?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. The UK transposed the marine strategy framework directive on 15 July 2010. The directive requires a staged approach to achieving good environmental status in the marine environment by 2020. The DOE will co-operate with the other devolved authorities and the Secretary of State to implement the directive in a coherent way. The transposing legislation also places a general duty on DARD, DCAL, DETI, DRD, and the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission to exercise their relevant functions so as to secure compliance with the requirements of the directive. I have emphasised all along the need for a coherent, integrated strategy, and I think that that would be the strategy that Northern Ireland would best adopt in the future across all the Departments that I have named.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. What will the Northern Ireland marine Bill provide for marine nature conservation?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. If I refer to acronyms, I hope that he will forgive me. The Bill will create new powers to designate marine conservation zones (MCZs) in Northern Ireland's territorial waters to provide protection to nationally important habitats and species. The Bill will allow MCZs to be given the appropriate level of protection without the need for sites to be categorised as either more highly or less highly protected. That protection could range from a minimal level of protection right through to the highly protected, where no human activity would be permitted. MCZs will sit along the European marine sites — those are known as special areas of conservation and special protection areas — and areas of special scientific interest to form a marine protected area (MPA) network. That will fulfil our commitment to have an ecologically coherent network of well-managed MPAs in place by 2020.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement on behalf of the Environment Committee, and I welcome his indication that co-operation on environmental issues is constructive and productive. As we all know, our environment does not recognise borders, and, regardless of our own persuasions, it

is essential that it is addressed through co-operation. The junior Minister has outlined for us today the work that is ongoing to look at marine management across the UK and Ireland and his opportunity to look at the work of the Marine Management Organisation in Newcastle, England.

In the North, marine functions are spread across several Departments, and the Environment Committee has been calling for greater co-operation between them, with even the possibility of a single marine management body. Will the Minister comment on his experience of the work of the Marine Management Organisation? Does he think that such a body here in the North could deliver efficiencies and cost savings?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the junior Minister replies, I remind Members that all Chairpersons get leeway when they speak on behalf of their Committee. There is no difference whatsoever in relation to that.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his detailed question. In my answers to Mr George Robinson and Dr Stephen Farry, I referred to the need for there to be integration in Departments' thinking and strategy, co-operation between them and arrangements to work together. I mentioned DARD, DETI, DCAL and so on, all of which have an interest in this area.

I do not believe that Northern Ireland is large enough to have a special dedicated body of that nature. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will understand my vast experience in this area. I do not believe that it is the Minister's intention to establish a stand-alone body to address issues but rather to integrate Departments' work.

Mr T Clarke: The junior Minister referred to the feasibility of Fishing for Litter. Will he tell the House what information was provided and the cost of implementation of such a scheme in Northern Ireland?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, that is an area in which there is a great deal of concern. As I understand it, the amount of litter that is dragged from the sea nowadays as fishermen go about their normal duties is enormous. The problem is how to dispose of litter that is dragged onto boats. One can well imagine that a fisherman who is out fishing for his

product neither has time nor wants to deal with litter that comes aboard in his net. Therefore, initiatives to address that issue will have to be rolled out.

As has already been said, marine policy issues are the responsibility of several Ministers. For example, Minister Gildernew has responsibility for fisheries while Minister Poots takes the lead on marine environmental issues. Officials work closely together to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are taken into account when marine policy is developed. Minister Gildernew acknowledged the update that was provided on Fishing for Litter activities and fully supports the concept behind those schemes. Considerable progress has been made elsewhere on the introduction of Fishing for Litter schemes. Although Minister Gildernew has not been able to do so yet, she has asked her officials to work with fishing industry stakeholders with the objective of developing a scheme for the local industry. It has been recognised as important. I am sure that the Minister will take it forward.

Mr Beggs: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. He mentioned the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership. Can he elaborate on Northern Ireland's input to that partnership and whether we are represented in it?

As regards Fishing for Litter, I accept that there needs to be a mechanism for dealing with litter that trawlers bring onboard so that it is not simply offloaded again and is removed from the sea. Does the junior Minister accept that we must be careful about using public funds to simply fish for litter? We must determine the most efficient way to deal with the litter problem, which may be preventative work and funding such bodies as Tidy Northern Ireland. That must be considered as well as any other option to deal with litter in the seas in future.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his two questions. Litter in the sea is recognised as a major problem. Obviously, when they drag their nets on board and remove the fish, fishermen do not want to have to handle and start to process litter. They should not be expected to do that. I do not know what will be the final outcome with regard to a policy or strategy adopted by the Minister or Ministers in this area. However, the matter must be addressed.

I have already placed emphasis on working with other Administrations, and we will pursue a joined-up approach between the UK Government,

the Republic's Government and the other Administrations around the UK. That will be essential in managing the marine environment effectively. Preliminary discussions have taken place on marine issues generally and with officials in the Republic of Ireland, and I welcome the opportunity to share and exchange information via the British-Irish Council Ministers and with the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He has touched on both of the items that I am going to ask about. Fishing for Litter is a worthy project: will the Minister update the House on where it has been successful? I understand that there was a scheme in Scotland. It provides a good opportunity to highlight the problem of litter in the marine environment and will give fishermen and fishing vessels an opportunity to have days at sea to supplement their income.

What input will the Assembly have into the revised paper that has been drawn up on Sellafeld by the Twenty-six County Government and the Manx Government?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Minister for his questions. With regard to where the Government of the Republic go with their colleagues in the Isle of Man, I do not think that we are far enough advanced into that work. I believe that Northern Ireland will play a positive role, as will the other Administrations eventually. There is no sense in any one of the BIC Administrations trying to develop a strategy in that area on their own.

Progress of the strategy on tackling waste will depend on how the various Ministers tackle it. I accept that we cannot expect fishermen to handle waste. However, perhaps there will be a role for fishermen as the policy and strategy are adopted. We are conscious of the fact that, over the past number of years, the fishing industry has suffered grievously in respect of the number of days at sea. The Fishing for Litter project might present an opportunity for it, but only time will tell as the policies roll out.

Mr Lyttle: Given that the Northern Ireland Executive were informed of the UK Government decision to withdraw funding from the Sustainable Development Commission on the same day as the British-Irish Council meeting in environment sectoral format, did the Minister

take an opportunity to raise that important matter with his counterparts?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): That was not on my agenda for that meeting.

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to make a statement on the tenth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in health and food safety sectoral format, which took place in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Wednesday 2 June 2010. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Michelle Gildernew MP MLA, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. This statement has been endorsed by Minister Gildernew. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Harney TD, Minister for Health and Children, who chaired the meeting on this occasion, and she was accompanied by Barry Andrews TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Mary Harney and I used the occasion to launch the 2009 cancer consortium annual report, 'Transcending Borders for Better Health: Empowering the Future through Research, Education and Care'. That publication marks the tenth anniversary of the highly beneficial collaboration between our two jurisdictions and the National Cancer Institute in Washington DC, USA.

Under the heading of the health progress report, Ministers noted and welcomed developments on a number of issues, including suicide prevention; the all-island evaluation of applied suicide intervention skills training; the current position and projected timescale for the development of a new satellite radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital; and the operation of the service-level agreement on paediatric congenital cardiac services.

11.45 am

We also noted reviews that are under way on the response to the flu pandemic. Analysis of uptake in the two GP out-of-hours pilot projects will be used to evaluate the sustainability of the service. We welcomed progress on health promotion, including action to reduce tobacco use; progress on a drug prevalence study, which will also collect information on mephedrone and

so-called legal highs; and initiatives in physical activity and nutrition to help combat obesity.

Ministers also received a presentation from Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) on its role in implementing the EU structural funds initiative, the INTERREG IVa programme in health and social care, which comprises 12 projects promoting health and well-being and focuses on reform and modernisation.

The Council was updated on the work of the cross-border child protection group and its various subgroups. We noted the establishment of the innovative North/South child protection hub website and its planned launch in the autumn; preparation of a joint protocol dealing with children in care and those on the child protection register; and progress on the development of a draft joint communications strategy. We also welcomed ongoing work to address the very complex and sensitive issue of historical child abuse and the continuing collaborative work in both jurisdictions on the management of sex offenders.

In the food safety sector, the Council noted the promotional activities undertaken by Safefood — the Food Safety Promotion Board — and the current position on that body's scientific activities, including the completion of research projects on food safety, hygiene and dietary health and the initiation of a number of new research projects. We also welcomed the development of all-island knowledge networks of food safety professionals.

Ministers approved the appointments to Safefood's scientific advisory committee, including Dr Ken Baird as chairman and Professor Charles Daly as vice-chairman. We also noted the position of Safefood's annual report for 2009 and the submission of the draft accounts to the Comptroller and Auditor General in both jurisdictions. We then noted work carried out by Safefood in support of its legislative remit on the surveillance of food-borne diseases and the work of the scientific advisory committee in identifying a harmonised approach to that surveillance.

As part of the NSMC business continuity arrangements to deal with urgent decisions, we also approved a set of regulations made by the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

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

I welcome the Minister's statement, in which he highlighted the issue of child protection. The Committee has been quite concerned about the ease with which those who would be involved in child abuse can move across the border and back, sometimes without being detected. Will he expand a bit more on what his Department, in conjunction with the authorities in the Republic, will do to ensure that anyone who is involved in that despicable activity can be easily detected? There should be no question of such people simply moving across the border, either North or South, and moving off the radar. That is so easy to do, particularly in the border areas. What safeguards have been implemented to ensure that those people are tracked so that we know their movements and what they are up to?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

That is, of course, an area of constant surveillance and discussion, and a number of steps have been taken. Bearing in mind that there are two jurisdictions with separate legal codes and so on, the key element is to ensure that the border is not a barrier to the proper exchange of information and that such information is readily exchanged on a North/South and, indeed, east-west basis. We are constantly working on those issues. For example, we have a joint protocol to deal with children who are at risk. We share information on those children and ensure that we do so while not allowing the border to be a barrier. In the statement, I also referred to the child protection hub, which is an internet-based resource that provides information on anything to do with child protection. That information is available to officials within seconds, literally at the push of a button. It is the first in the UK, and I think that it is also unique in Europe.

Of course, sex offenders are the responsibility of the Department of Justice, but we have a memorandum of understanding through which we work in co-operation. I understand that there is very active North/South co-operation to protect the safety of the population in both jurisdictions, and the Department of Justice is taking the lead. Those are some of the things that we are doing. Sharing information is the key to ensuring that we know where children are if they move across the border and can effectively track children who are at risk as well as those who are liable to pose the risk.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the positive positions and developments in the Minister's statement, but I am disappointed that there was no mention of the North/South feasibility study, which, as the Minister is well aware, was completed over 18 months ago. Media reports suggest that it is clear in that report that there are significant benefits to the population of Ireland of working collaboratively across the island. Will the Minister confirm when he will publish the report and an accompanying action plan to take the positive work forward?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The feasibility study is not mine; it was commissioned by Paul Goggins, a direct rule Minister, before I got involved.

Mr McDevitt: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: What?

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the floor, so let him answer the question.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agreed with Mary Harney at the last meeting that it was not appropriate to take the North/South feasibility study forward at the moment. I did not publish it; it reached the media. I am assuming — in fact, more than assuming — that that came from a Dublin Government source and was put on the internet through Andy Pollak, meddling again. The point is that we have adequate bureaucratic structures to develop appropriate cross-border activities in that area, the key being actions that are of mutual benefit.

I am not going to get involved in a further bureaucratic structure. I am not going to get involved at this time in a further feasibility study that is going to put in place a raft of bureaucracy and bodies. In fact, if one looks at the publication one will see the priority actions that the feasibility study calls for. Those include radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin; paediatric cardiac surgery services; suicide prevention; GP out-of-hours services; reducing tobacco use and use of drugs; and child protection arrangements. All of that should be familiar to everybody here because I am taking action in exactly those areas and more. I take such actions on the basis of benefits North and South. I do it on a case-by-case basis. We have

made progress and will continue to do so. I do not need a feasibility study commissioned by Paul Goggins and Mary Harney in 2006 to do that. I will do it, and I will be answerable not to a feasibility study commissioned in 2006 but to the House.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. I share the Committee Chairperson's concerns about child protection. The Minister has spoken in the House before about constitutional issues in the Republic. Is he confident that the Government in the Republic have finally started to wake up to the issue of child protection and will do all they can to bring their level of child protection up to match what we have here?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is an issue that is constantly to the fore in all North/South discussions. Given the Ryan and Ferns reports and the Dublin inquiry and with the Cloyne inquiry still to report, the Dublin Government will be well aware of and very much up to date on the challenges involved. It is about us working together. We are part of a UK network that has an extensive system in place for child protection and for taking forward the proposals that resulted from, for example, the Soham case. That is about us — England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — sharing information. However, we, of course, have a land border with the Irish Republic, and we need to be able to share such information with it and to do so in a way that ensures that the border is not a barrier. Those are the steps that we are taking. I am confident that we are making progress, but we have a lot more work to do.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his paper. We in the SDLP have no doubt that health provision is the one area where the greatest benefits can be achieved for people North and South. In his statement, the Minister referred to the progress that his Department is making on the radiotherapy treatment unit at Altnagelvin Hospital. Will he tell the House the precise timescale for that unit and whether he is satisfied that he has the necessary resources at his disposal to take that forward in conjunction with his counterpart in Dublin?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have made clear my position on the satellite radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital time and again. I would very much like

to take that forward. I believe that the unit will add great benefit to the population of Northern Ireland, not least because our people need that capacity. Members should bear it in mind that the incidence of cancer on an all-island basis is rising at a rate of around 6% to 7%. The problem is the same North and South. By the age of 75, one in three people on the island of Ireland will have cancer. It is the most common cause of death, and that is why the unit is so important. The Western Trust is now developing a business case that is at a very advanced stage. I believe that we can demonstrate the need for the unit and how it will deliver value for money. However, as we sit through discussions about the Budget and about where we are going to be in October, my clear problem right now is exactly what my capital budget will be and how I will prioritise it. We are talking about, for example, a massive reduction of around 30% in capital. It should be borne in mind that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety did relatively badly for capital in the first three years because it got only around 13% of the total available and that the beneficiaries during that period were the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Education. My Department's allocation was to rise to 22% in the next three years. However, even if the block grant were reduced by 30%, which is what we anticipate and what the Finance Minister appears to be saying may come from London, and if we get 22% of that reduced capital, that will leave me with very little money for new developments.

Our estate is very old. Most of our hospitals are 50 to 60 years old, and many of our mental health units are over 100 years old. We spend around £100 million annually in maintenance alone just to keep those old buildings going. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the issue is the budget allocation. Do we need the radiotherapy unit? Yes. Should we build it? Yes. Will it represent value for money if we can provide it? Yes. Will it add great benefit to the population of Northern Ireland? Yes, it will. From discussions with my counterpart in Dublin, I know that the unit will also add benefit on a cross-border basis, because of the need in Donegal. Mary Harney has agreed to invest in the unit and to help pay for the running costs. Therefore, there is a sensible and important case to be made for the unit. However, I am in a dilemma about where the money for my capital budget will fall, and I will not know that for several weeks.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's report. I refer to the paragraph that deals with health promotion and the advances that have been made. One thing has clearly been omitted: alcohol abuse. I am surprised that that issue did not arise at the meeting, because, as we all know, alcohol abuse is a scourge throughout Irish society the length and breadth of the island. Efforts are being made to reduce the use of tobacco and legal highs. However, there has been no mention of alcohol. Will the Minister tell the Assembly whether alcohol abuse was mentioned or was simply swept under the carpet?

12.00 noon

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I assure the Member that I have great difficulty sweeping alcohol under the carpet. The issue is a challenge for all of us. The Member will be aware that I am looking carefully at the progress that is being made in Scotland through legislation on minimum unit price. The scourge of alcohol is caused by price, access and affordability. Alcohol is easily available and, in many supermarkets, beer is cheaper than water. That is the key issue. I am well aware of the challenge of alcohol. Policies are in place, including our drugs and alcohol policies, and we need to take the next step. Alex Attwood is looking at licensing and at how he can take the next step. We are working closely with him and are in discussions with him. I am looking carefully at the Scottish experience and at its legislative model for ensuring minimum unit price. That is another way of dealing with the issue.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned historical child abuse. Was abuse by elements of the Catholic Church discussed and the likely impact of that in Northern Ireland?

The Minister also mentioned pandemic flu. Was swine flu and its impact in the Irish Republic discussed?

Were the suggested £3 billion cuts by the Irish Government discussed? Will there be a reduction from the Irish Government in the North/South body on health because of that?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pandemic flu is the flu that is with us now and will return seasonally. That is why we are launching, through the Public Health Agency, a campaign to ensure that pregnant

women take the vaccine. It could be said that we got off lightly with respect to the forward planning that we undertook, given that the epidemiologist suggested that the virus would be worse than it was. I work closely with the rest of the UK and work cross-border with the Dublin Government. Pandemic flu is clearly a common challenge. The UK public inquiry, which was published, showed that our response was proportionate and effective. I am currently undertaking a review in Northern Ireland to look at lessons, and that review will be shared with the Health Committee and the Assembly very soon.

The Irish Government face similar challenges to ours with respect to their Budget. However, it is about making a business case and about determining priorities. Mary Harney's budget is much larger than mine by reason of the population size. However, it goes back to my earlier point to Mr Gallagher: I will worry about my money, and Mary Harney will worry about her money and about making her arguments.

In March 2010, I presented a paper to the Executive setting out options on child abuse. It is for the Executive to determine, through OFMDFM, the best way forward. I am still waiting for that. Our officials are working with those in other Departments to refine what each option would mean for the various Departments. However, I agree that the issue is urgent and needs to come forward sooner rather than later.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is also important that we commend the work that is being done by the cancer consortium across the island. A lot of positive, good work has been done.

The Minister will be well aware that there have been an increasing number of suicides in the greater Belfast area and in other areas over the past number of weeks. Considering that the meeting took place on 2 June 2010, it is important that we get a further update on suicide prevention and a copy of the evaluation.

Again, it is extremely important that we welcome the all-island work that is being done on child protection. People who systematically go out to abuse children do not recognise borders, so neither should we. It is also important to get more information on the child protection group, because if we look at the joint protocols —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Ms S Ramsey: If the Committee can have a copy of the joint protocols, we can at least learn the lessons regularly and learn from the mistakes that agencies have made across the island.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as sharing protocols is concerned, I am, of course, happy to share information. None of us has the answer to that challenge; that scourge of our society. We know that our strategy will not be a quick fix but is about persisting and about continuing to invest, to do work and to look for new opportunities to press down on the dreadful situation that we face. Work is being done on an all-island basis and on a UK-wide basis, so we have a common theme, and I am happy to share information as it becomes available.

As far as child protection is concerned, we redouble our efforts. Our links within the UK are very valuable, as are our cross-border links. As I said, the border must not be a hurdle, obstacle or barrier to the proper flow of information, in order that we can provide protection for our children, North, South and further afield.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware that World Mental Health Day 2010 will take place next month, and a campaign is to be launched next week to raise awareness of mental ill health issues.

Aside from suicide and the important cross-border work that is being done there, what other work can be done or has been discussed with the Minister's Southern counterparts to share best practice, facilities and resources? In these constrained economic times, there are simply not enough mental health nursing staff to cover many of the wards in our hospitals.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can provide nurses, buildings and so on for the population of Northern Ireland, but I need the support of the House and the Executive to get the required resources. As far as the Irish Republic is concerned, Mary Harney is in the same situation. We work on a case-by-case basis. The so-called feasibility study sets out a number of things that I am doing, and I am already doing many more things as well.

I will consider anything that provides mutual benefit, and the satellite radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital is a case in point. We get mutual benefit through investment and working

together, as far as provision of resources is concerned. However, if the House and the Executive insist on underfunding the Health Service here, it does not matter who we are co-operating with, because we will not have enough to do the job.

Mr McDevitt: In the light of his earlier remarks and given that there appears to be nothing of note in the feasibility study that the then Minister in his Department and Minister Harney commissioned, will the Minister confirm that he should publish the study? Furthermore, how can he justify not seeking to implement the study's recommendation that both Departments introduce joint procurement systems with a view to reducing costs, without affecting front line services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We do, of course, have different financial regimes, North and South. To start to try to dovetail with the Irish Republic's purchasing arrangements, particularly when it has a Health Service in which charging plays a very important part, is not the sort of issue that I as the Minister will be taking forward —

Mr McDevitt: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that is a Member who just cannot stop talking.

As far as publishing the feasibility study is concerned, I will, with Mary Harney's agreement, take it to the Executive, and, if the Executive agree to publish it, that is fine. Of course, the study has already been leaked. I assume that it was leaked — in fact, I am quite certain that it was leaked — by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, by the Iveagh House boys and girls who think that they are being smart by leaking it to the media. So, it is there for everybody to read, but there is nothing in it. It provides no way forward for us. We are in charge of our own affairs, and we will have to run our own affairs accordingly.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.10 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00pm

Executive Committee Business

Draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2010

Mr Speaker: This is a motion to approve a statutory rule.

Before I call the deputy First Minister, it might be useful to set out what this debate is about and not what Members think it might be about. It is about setting up a corporate board, with 10 members and a chairperson. That is what the debate should be about; it should not be about what might go on the site, now or in the future. That debate may take place somewhere else or in this Chamber at another time. Any Member whose remarks stray from exactly what the business is about will be called to order and we shall move on to the next Member who wants to speak. I hope that that is clear.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):
Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I beg to move

That the draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2010 be approved.

This is a very short draft Order with five articles and one schedule. If approved, the Order will establish and empower a development corporation to drive forward the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site.

The First Minister and I are grateful to the OFMDFM Committee for its work and for progressing this Order to the Assembly. If established, the key objective of the corporation will be to maximise the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site. Each element of that work will build on the work previously undertaken by OFMDFM and the unanimous report of the all-party Maze/Long Kesh consultation panel.

The draft Order and the complex issue surrounding Maze/Long Kesh have generated

considerable debate in the Chamber, in Committee and further afield. There is good reason for the high level of interest in the draft Order and its outworking. Many people, here and across the globe, are watching and are interested in what we decide today and will, I hope, derive benefit from a positive collective decision to approve the Order and establish the corporation to redevelop the site.

At 347 acres, Maze/Long Kesh is the largest regeneration site in the region. In planning terms, the site is recognised as a:

“Strategic Land Reserve of Regional Importance.”

It enjoys a unique strategic position at the Sprucefield interchange and the gateway to Belfast. It is a most exceptional opportunity for a regeneration site, especially one of such international importance, located at the intersection of our main North/South and east-west highways, giving easy access to ports and airports.

Let me be clear about its international role: Maze/Long Kesh is known across the world, and the prison and the site are part of history. We have the opportunity to show the world that this symbol of past conflict can now be a symbol of peace. That will be a key role for the new Maze/Long Kesh: a centre for the building and promotion of peace building and conflict resolution across the world as well as here, allowing others to learn from our journey as so many already do. The peace building and conflict resolution centre that the First Minister and I announced in July will become a physical symbol of our society's transition from conflict and division towards peace and a better future for all, and a new great beacon of hope across the world, building on the foundations of the peace process, supported by the EU and others and recognised by EU President Barroso.

The First Minister and I are acutely aware of the views of many sections of our community about the site's historic past; however, we have moved on, our society has moved on and the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh, with a major international peace building and conflict resolution centre at its heart, can show the world how we have moved on.

Maze/Long Kesh can also do much for our economy and society. Direct and speedy access to and from the major highways will make it attractive to institutional investors and to the

private sector. The site is ripe for investor and developer interest at a regional as well as at an all-Ireland and international level. Economic development cannot exist in modern society without delivering social benefit. We will ensure that the regeneration work will leave a lasting legacy of social betterment, including access to thousands of jobs, taking people off the unemployment register and creating openings for apprenticeships, especially during construction.

The majority of the site has lain dormant since it was gifted to the previous Executive. That is not sustainable. Today, we can change that position; we can choose to regenerate and transform. We have a unique opportunity to derive the maximum social and economic benefit from a major public asset that will, in turn, positively impact on many sections of our society, promoting economic development and social regeneration, and making a real contribution to peace building and conflict resolution internationally. In these difficult economic times, we will not be forgiven on any level or by any quarter if we do not proceed with this iconic and symbolic transformation.

I stress that, in these difficult times, the decision to regenerate the site transcends party politics. It is about creating employment and embedding peace. Initially we can help to secure our building industry and create many thousands of jobs in the short, medium and long term. We need jobs. A job is by far the greatest unit of regeneration. We need to support and strengthen our economy. We need more than ever to create prosperity and deliver social benefit from such strategic assets.

The actions of a tiny minority show that we cannot take peace and peace building for granted. There must now be a clear and collective priority to ensure that the site's historic value and reconciliatory benefits are maximised to benefit the whole community. We cannot and must not waste this chance. Let us grasp and benefit from this exceptional opportunity. We cannot afford not to. I commend the draft Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which I chair, considered the proposal for the statutory rule on 14 October 2009 and

indicated that it was content with the policy merits. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 25 November 2009, and resolved on that day that it be affirmed. The Committee again considered the statutory rule on 8 September 2010, and was advised that the only change would be the date of commencement. The Committee is in favour of the technical aspect of the statutory rule.

Over the past years, the Committee has kept a watchful eye on progress at the site. It has also been regularly briefed by the Department on the ongoing work and on the timetable for the regeneration of the site. Indeed, my Committee was briefed by officials on 2 June 2010 following media attention on the costs of the Maze/Long Kesh regeneration and what had been done by the Department to maximise the site's potential.

Officials advised that demolition is now complete, and that the final phase of remediation of the site, which is mostly due to oil pollution resulting from the site's use as an airfield, began in March 2010. Officials also advised that a lot of work has been done around the boundary of the site; that much of the security infrastructure, including the military gate, the tin sheeting and razor wire, has been removed; and that work is being done from a temporary office on site.

Officials advised that around £8 million will have been spent on decontamination and demolition by the time the project is finished. That figure is due to the large size of the site: 350 acres, as Members are aware. The Committee was also advised that a significant scale of development on the site could be achieved through a junction off the M1, without working on the motorway itself. The anticipated cost of that is around £30 million.

In June 2009, the Committee heard evidence from the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) on its plans for a centre of rural excellence incorporating an international exhibition facility at the site. The Committee, at its briefing from officials on 2 June 2010, was pleased to hear that discussions with the RUAS are ongoing and at an advanced stage, and that the RUAS is working towards a target date of 2012 for the relocation of the Balmoral Show to the site. It would be helpful if the Minister, in his winding-up speech, could indicate whether there is any further update to be given on that matter.

At the briefing on 2 June, officials advised the Committee that approximately £20 million may be available through the Peace III programme and that that money would have to be spent by the end of 2015. The Committee, at its meeting last week, agreed to write to the Department to seek further information on the application for European funding for a peace and reconciliation centre and whether the application will be progressed before the MLK corporation is operational in 2011. Therefore, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is content that the statutory rule be approved by the Assembly.

I will now make a few remarks on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. I am mindful, Mr Speaker, of your original advice to Members, although that seemed to be largely ignored by the deputy First Minister in his contribution. I may seek the same dispensation.

In general, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the creation of the Maze/Long Kesh development corporation. Ministers will be aware that the proposal was first suggested by my party leader, Sir Reg Empey, nearly two years ago. However, our proposal was for any corporation to focus on what are generally the basic functions of a corporation; namely, securing financial investment and bringing land into effective use for economic, social, recreational and cultural purposes. Those general objectives are outlined in article 16 of the Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

It now appears that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister want a conflict transformation centre to be the focal part of any regeneration. However, there are significant political disagreements about the potential nature of such a centre in the proposed location. I make a particular reference to the ongoing fears on this side of the House that it could turn into a terrorist shrine.

Mr Speaker: Order. As all Members will know, I am very patient. However, the Member is straying into an area that is outside the business under discussion. I remind the Member that he should try, as far as is possible, to speak to the motion that is before the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I acknowledge the advice that you have just given and your

original advice. My remarks were somewhat in response to those that the deputy First Minister made when he talked about the plans for a new conflict transformation centre. The Ulster Unionist Party does not want a situation whereby the new corporation, after being established, gets bogged down with that political issue. Therefore, it would be very unwise to drag an independent corporation into a largely political debate and process. It would be helpful if the Minister could inform the House whether his Office intends to give specific direction to the corporation on the issue of a conflict transformation centre, as is outlined in article 19 of the 2003 Order. It would also be helpful if he would reveal the specific content of those directions. If he intends to give directions to the new corporation, will he put them to the House before he does so?

We appear to have wasted a considerable amount of time, money and potential on the site, and, in many ways, it is ironic that the conflict transformation centre, having, in effect, stopped the stadium development, is now to be developed.

2.15 pm

Mr Givan: The Member might recall that, in 2004, a Maze consultation panel was established, which subsequently produced a report. David Campbell, the current chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, was the chairman of that body. I have the report, and, in his capacity as chairman of the panel, the chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party stated:

"They believed that the site would be an ideal location for an International Centre for Conflict Transformation and as such had the potential to play an important part in promoting a shared society."

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister:

I am grateful to the Member for his information. I refer him to the remarks of his own party colleague — indeed, his deputy leader — who warned of the potential for creating a terrorist shrine at the site. That is simply what I am highlighting, and I believe that Mr Campbell, as the then chairman of the panel and, indeed, as the current chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, would share my view and concerns about those issues. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the opportunity to place that on the record.

The Maze/Long Kesh site offers significant potential, particularly at this time of economic difficulty. However, we cannot afford to let the project be bogged down by political arguments. Therefore, although we are happy to see progress on the corporation, the creation of which we originally suggested, we want to see it done in a meaningful and positive manner.

Mr Spratt: As a member of the OFMDFM Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak, and I welcome the motion. This is a major project that will have a tremendous impact not only on the local community in Lisburn but, I believe, as do we all on these Benches, on the whole of Northern Ireland. It should be seen as a good news story for Northern Ireland.

If the Assembly approves the motion and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) approves the business case, the board of the corporation will be up and running by April 2011. The corporation will be responsible for the redevelopment the site. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister mentioned that a significant amount of money has been spent. However, there was pretty broad consensus on that spending, despite his remarks on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party that the money was spent on demolition and on decontaminating the land, which has, in fact, and as discussed in Committee, made the land more commercially valuable.

The site will include a peace building and conflict resolution centre. That is important and will provide economic, historic and reconciliation opportunities.

Mr Campbell: Does the Member agree that it is paramount to ensure that nothing in the site is permitted to misrepresent the past or to allow revisionism to take hold? Rather than remember the division and death of the past, we need to point forward to the future, which, I hope, the site will do.

Mr Spratt: I agree with the Member, and, according to what I have heard about the handling of the project, it will be inclusive and will recognise the past — everybody's past. The council that will be set up to look at the reconciliation site, and to which OFMDFM will be able to put its views, will be inclusive of the whole community, including members of the security forces and others.

Mrs D Kelly: This morning, I had a phone call from one of the victims of the Billy Wright murder campaign. On the day that is in it, is it not important that, today of all days, victims' voices are heard?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that this subject is difficult for Members as it can be emotional. However, interventions must relate to the business that we are discussing. Once again, I warn the House that Members must be careful — even with interventions — that they do not stray into the subject of what might be on the site now or in the future. The debate relates to the setting up of the corporation.

Mr Spratt: With regard to what the Member said, I understand that the council will involve everyone, including victims, in the process of deciding how the centre will pan out in the future. We should be heartened by the fact that everybody will be included, and there must be equality right across the board.

As Members know, the Balmoral Show and the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society are in my constituency of South Belfast. The Balmoral Show will become a showpiece for the site, along with the many other events that are held throughout the year, and that augers well for the future of the Maze development and should be welcomed. Many of my constituents in South Belfast will be relieved that some of their parking problems will be alleviated after 2012. My constituency office receives complaints regularly when the Balmoral area is blocked by the cars of those attending events. We must recognise that parking in that area is a problem.

With regard to the economic development of the 347 acre site, there is the tremendous prospect of around 6,000 jobs, and some of the contracts will include social clauses as regards construction jobs. In responding to the debate, I hope that the First Minister will be able to tell us that local firms and local jobs will be protected throughout Northern Ireland, especially in the present economic situation.

Overall, this is a good day for the Assembly. There is progress, and it shows that the Executive are moving forward. Fair enough, it has been a long process, and I see that Mrs Kelly is nodding. However, we have gone through a process to get where we are today. Despite all of the detractors and people who tried to hold the development back, the Executive have made progress and that should be recognised.

Let us start selling Northern Ireland plc with such projects and start moving the Province forward together as an entire Assembly, as opposed to engaging in the sort of sniping that we have already heard from the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee with regard to his remarks about the Ulster Unionist Party. Other parties have made similar remarks. Let us move the process forward positively to assist the corporation, and let us see it as a good thing for everybody in the Province.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. I am conscious that Members do not have a limit on how long they can speak, and they might go on a bit longer than they normally do.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Student Returners

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what initiatives he is undertaking to encourage students who study abroad to return to Northern Ireland to find employment. (AQO 30/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning

(Sir Reg Empey): The vast majority of Northern Ireland-domiciled students who attend colleges and universities choose to do so in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland rather than abroad. As a result, the Department has no initiatives that are focused on attracting that specific group of people back to Northern Ireland. However, services such as European Employment Services (EURES), although they do not specifically target people from Northern Ireland, help to raise awareness of employment opportunities throughout the European Union, including Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: Is the Minister not concerned that so many young people leave Northern Ireland to study elsewhere?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In 2007, I carried out a piece of work to establish why people left. Fewer people leave now than five to 10 years ago. Professor Osborne of the University of Ulster carried out some work on behalf of my Department. The report made it clear that people who left were what he described as “determined leavers”; in other words, they left because they wanted courses that were not available here or because they wanted to go to universities other than those here. A large number of people who were offered places at universities here chose to accept places elsewhere. We must remember, of course, that more than half of those people return to Northern Ireland.

As part of the C'mon Over campaign and when job opportunities were more plentiful, departmental officials and I travelled round university campuses throughout these islands to try to attract those people back. I assure the

honourable Member that I am conscious of the issue and that a policy is in place to deal with it, but we have had to suspend that process because of the lack of job opportunities at the moment. However, I am pleased to say that, compared with the situation 10 to 15 years ago, the percentage of people who choose to go to universities outside Northern Ireland has decreased.

Mr P Ramsey: One of the main reasons for students opting to go universities outside Northern Ireland is that there are not enough places in Northern Ireland; this year was no exception. Will the Minister outline to Members the rationale of his business case to the Executive and to the Finance Minister for increased student numbers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: No, because we must remember that we simply cannot go on funding university places for ever and increasing their number. We already have a target that 50% of people in Northern Ireland should go to university, which is well above the national average. We also have the highest number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in university — 41%, compared with the national figure of 29%. With the exception of the situation at Magee, about which I have given a specific undertaking, I have no plans to ask for an increase in the maximum aggregate student number. The number of people who are refused places in Northern Ireland universities and offered places throughout the United Kingdom is comparatively small.

One must remember that well in excess of half my Department's budget is spent on higher education. People also need essential skills and training, and we have to support the employment services, further education and other services in the Department. Therefore, I simply cannot allow a higher percentage of my Department's budget to be spent on higher education.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland can benefit from those who return after pursuing higher education in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland or abroad? Furthermore, does he agree that, although it is good for them to go, it is even better for them to come home?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with those sentiments. It is good for people to go abroad to learn and to come back

with new experience, perhaps even after having worked abroad for several years. A completely sealed system would become introspective. We need that flow in and out of Northern Ireland. However, the point that I tried to make to the original questioner is that the vast majority of people who go away do so out of choice. Of course, that situation could change, and we will have to monitor it if evidence becomes available that shows that that is not the case. However, the information from Professor Osborne is only three years old, and I believe that we are addressing it. Our performance and record on higher education is second to none on these islands.

University of Ulster: Sports Complex

2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline progress on the new sports complex to be located at the University of Ulster, Coleraine. (AQO 31/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposed new sports complex at Coleraine is estimated to cost £7.6 million, and my Department was initially to provide £6.9 million of the total funding. However, due to the Executive's revised spending plans for 2010-11, which have arisen as a consequence of budgetary pressures, my Department was subsequently unable to offer any funding for the project. The university has, therefore, suspended the project pending the securing of alternative funding. I understand that the university has proceeded to apply for planning permission, should the necessary funding become available, and I am further advised that it is confident that it will get planning permission in the very near future.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he know whether the university has had any conversations with the local council? I understand that the council intends to carry out a similar project, and it might be worth the council and the university having a conversation to avoid duplication and to have the one project between them both.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot argue with that point. I was not aware of that. I will ensure that that information is passed on, and I will write to the Member with the responses that I receive. At one stage, the university indicated to me and, indeed, announced publicly that it will proceed

with the project irrespective of funding from my Department. However, the Member will understand that, however worthy the project — it was a project that we were prepared to fund — the fact is that the funding is just not available at the present moment. I was not aware that the local council was embarking on a similar project, and I will ensure that that matter is drawn to the university's attention.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I take the Minister's comments on board. It would be much more beneficial if the agencies, the Department and councils could work together to improve the situation and get a facility on that site or on a site close to it. Could the Minister give us a breakdown of what sporting organisations will use the facility if money is put into it and the complex is built?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The facility supports the university's very strong position on sport. It is one of the leading universities in sport science and covers a whole range of facilities. The question of which organisations will have access to the facility will be a matter for the university; that is not for me to determine. However, if the Member is suggesting that a cocktail of funding from the university, the council and, perhaps, support through the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and other organisations is more feasible than simply funding it for the exclusive use of the university, again, I would have no objection. However, I am not aware of what other organisations plan to use such a facility.

University Places

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students domiciled in Northern Ireland had their application for a university place here rejected for the 2010-11 academic year; and, of these, how many attained a university place elsewhere. (AQO 32/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

According to preliminary data from UCAS, 19,600 individuals from Northern Ireland applied for a university place in the United Kingdom for the academic year 2010-11. Of those 19,600 individuals, 8,100 have accepted an offer from a Northern Ireland university, 4,400 have accepted an offer from a Great Britain university, and 7,000 individuals did not meet the application criteria and were

not offered a place by a university in the United Kingdom. Of the 4,400 individuals who accepted offers from Great Britain universities, some 700 were not offered a place at a Northern Ireland institution. Approximately, more than 2,000 were offered a place at a Northern Ireland institution but chose to accept a place at a Great Britain university.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. I wish to return to the issue of the MaSN cap being lifted to allocate more places in Northern Ireland. I am aware that a particularly important case is being made for the Magee campus, which is too small to serve the educational and economic needs of the north-west region adequately. Will the Minister provide detail on any provision or case that has been outlined or made by him or his Department with respect to raising the caps to allow for expansion at Magee?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Member will be aware that I have indicated to the House, the Committee and a number of Members that the case that the University of Ulster has made to me about Magee is being dealt with and is included in my departmental bids, as I promised it would be. However, Members must understand that the MaSN cap applies to universities and not to individual campuses. Therefore, the university has control over where places are located. That said, the Member must understand that the cost for every 1,000 places is between £8 million and £10 million a year. That is big money in the current circumstances, and, as I said to an earlier questioner, we have to decide whether we want continuous growth in this sector or whether we have to balance that against growth in and support for other sectors. We are at the tipping point, but I assure the Member that the position of Magee is being pursued, as I had indicated. I await the outcome of our discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister detail how his Department works with the Department of Education to provide young people with robust career advice to ensure that they have properly considered the appropriateness of higher education as a pathway to a career?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that the careers service has undergone significant expansion in the past couple of years and has engaged a further 23 officers. They engage with schools. Each school

area is allocated a careers adviser, and careers advisers work in the local jobs and benefits offices, where appointments can be made. For instance, people can walk into or make an appointment at the shop in Ann Street in Belfast to get careers advice. They can also get advice online, and the period after the examination results came out last month was one of the busiest in the careers service's history.

My Department works closely with the Department of Education, dealing with all sorts of issues, such as STEM subjects, of which the Member will be aware. We also work closely with schools, and we go into schools with the full knowledge, consent and support of the Department of Education. If the Member feels that further improvements can be made to that service, I will be happy to look at them.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an update on the widening participation strategy? From a briefing to the Committee for Employment and Learning, I understand that the draft policy should have been in place in June 2010 and been out to consultation this month.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Widening access is a success story in Northern Ireland. We have greater participation among people from socially deprived backgrounds than any other place in these islands. As I said in an earlier answer, 41% of students at university in Northern Ireland come from those groups. That compares favourably with circumstances elsewhere. A section in the Department deals with that full time, and a grade 7 official is in charge. I have had meetings with officials, and I expect the strategy to come to me next month. I will share and discuss it with the Committee in due course.

The University of Ulster runs a programme called Step-Up. This year, I attended the graduation ceremony for that programme at Jordanstown, and there was one in Londonderry. It is an absolutely first-class programme with an unparalleled success rate of between 98% and 99%. We have a very good track record in these matters, and I am sure that Members are proud of that.

2.45 pm

Universities: Funding

4. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance his

Department is providing to local universities to attract alternative sources of funding following his statement in August 2010 that it will not be possible for his Department to continue funding to universities along the lines of the last five years. (AQO 33/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department currently provides 42% of its overall funding for teaching, research and knowledge transfer. The universities, as autonomous institutions, have a responsibility to use that core funding from the Department to leverage additional resources from a range of public and private funding bodies, such as the UK research councils, Invest Northern Ireland, the European Commission, the Technology Strategy Board and charities and from industry directly.

Evidence shows that both Queen's and the University of Ulster continue to be very active and successful in those arenas. For example, the Queen's University Institute of Electronics, Communications and Information Technology has levered major investments from both Invest NI and the European Commission to augment my Department's capital investment. The UK's largest medical research charity, the Wellcome Trust, has also invested more than £400,000 in the pioneering no wires medical device research emerging from the University of Ulster's Nanotechnology and Integrated BioEngineering Centre, which is to be exploited commercially through one of the University's spin-out companies. That demonstrates the wider economic benefits associated with investments in higher education research and development.

Mrs M Bradley: I am sure that the Minister will agree that university education research and its links with industry are vital, especially in a time of recession. What assistance does the Minister's Department give to help universities to obtain EU funding?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In July 2010, I went to Brussels and had a meeting with Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn, who deals with innovation matters. I hope that officials from her office will visit the Department this autumn. More bids are being sought for the seventh framework programme, and the eighth framework programme is being prepared. It is most important that our universities benefit from those. I wrote to both vice chancellors last month and gave them details of the meetings that I have had. It is my intention to ensure that,

when the European officials come to Northern Ireland, they meet those universities to discuss the projects.

I say to the Member that this is vital, given the fact that our innovation funding, which has been very substantial in the last number of years, may not be available to my Department or the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the next spending round. The reason that I went to see the commissioner was to find an alternative source of resources to allow our research to continue at the levels that I believe are appropriate.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response to that question and to the question on widening access. When the Minister looks at funding for universities, where does the issue of student fees fit in? Are we looking at the possibility of an increase in fees, or should we look at the possibility of capping pay increases to senior university officials?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

With regard to the latter matter, I wrote to both universities — it was either earlier this year or towards the end of last year, I cannot quite recall — and raised the issue of the salaries of senior officials. I think that it was probably earlier this year. I have had responses from the chairman of the Queen's senate and the president of the University of Ulster's council, both of whom took the points that I made into account.

The Member will probably be aware that funding from my Department to the universities has increased by 21% in the last five years. During that period, all the income from the fees that were introduced some years ago has gone into the universities and is accumulating at the rate of about £80 million a year. In addition to that, the universities have secured additional resources from the research councils, philanthropic organisations and the private sector. On top of that, we have had significant capital investment. Therefore, higher education has had a good run from the Department and the Assembly over the past number of years.

As the Member will know, we carried out a review of fees. However, Joanne Stuart, who chaired the review, recommended that we await the outcome of the Browne review, which will probably come out early next month, before we proceed to consult on our own. The reason for

that is that there has been talk of introducing a graduate tax and of a substantial increase in fees etc. The issue of fees is on the table, but it is not clear to me whether London wants to move in the direction of a tax or in the direction of increased fees. That has an impact on Northern Ireland because Revenue and Customs told us clearly that it is not prepared to single out people in Northern Ireland to be treated differently from a tax point of view. Therefore, our freedom of choice may be limited by what London will decide, but we are not going to take any decisions until we see the Browne review and compare it with our review from Joanne Stuart. It will then be a matter for the Committee and, ultimately, the Assembly to take decisions when we see the outcome of those reports.

Ms Lo: Is the Minister aware of a University of Ulster policy requiring some international students with conditional offers to attend and pass a four-week English course at a cost of more than £900 plus £600 accommodation fees each before allowing them to begin their degree course? I understand that, this time, one third of them failed, and they had the option to study English in Magee campus for a full year or return home.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I was not aware of the specific detail of that issue, but I assure the Member that that is not a unique situation. When I was in Malaysia last year, the universities there insisted that students concentrate during the summer months on improving their English, particularly technical English. It is not just casual, conversational English that we are talking about; we are also talking about scientific English and technical English, and there is a problem.

The Member knows perfectly well that our universities like to attract international students because they get full fees from them. There is no point in bringing those people in if they cannot master the language; it is a bad decision for them and for the university. Although I was not aware of the specific details, I fully understand the rationale involved. It is an international thing. In a lot of universities, particularly in Asia, students are taught either by coming to a university in the United Kingdom or by UK universities setting up shop in Asia. In fact, Queen's University has a small site on the campus of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, this is an international thing. Basically, universities are saying to us

that, unless students have a command of the language at the start of their course, they will find themselves in great difficulty at a later stage.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister have any examples of joint projects that are equally funded by universities or further education colleges in Northern Ireland and universities or colleges in the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Member will be aware that the University of Ulster and I have been engaged for some time with the Letterkenny Institute of Technology. Indeed, I discussed that recently with Mary Coughlan, who is the Minister now responsible for the issue, and her predecessor. I am hopeful that some progress will be made, particularly in the north-west. I understand that Letterkenny is looking at improving its links with Sligo, but that should not in any way inhibit the ability of the University of Ulster and Letterkenny Institute to co-operate. It makes sense to do so where it is possible. There are also links at college level. Indeed, last year, I agreed with the then Minister in the Republic who was responsible for the matter to look at a series of issues whereby we might be able to enhance co-operation at further education college level. That work is ongoing. It was discussed by the North/South Ministerial Council at the meeting that preceded its most recent one.

Further Education Courses

5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures he is taking to reduce the number of students who fail to complete full-time courses at the Belfast Metropolitan College and other regional colleges. (AQO 34/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Improving quality and raising standards throughout all provision in colleges, universities, training and workplace learning providers is a key goal of my Department. Specifically in colleges, my Department challenges their rates of learner retention and achievement through each college's development and planning process. In addition, colleges are required to self-assess annually against key performance indicators, which include student retention, and provide an improvement plan against that assessment. The assessment is undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate to test robustness. After an inspection, colleges

have access to support for improvement from the Learning and Skills Development Agency in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for his response. I am surprised: I asked the question about Belfast Metropolitan College in particular. In 2006-07, 4,685 students dropped out during their final year of study. Three years later, when the college is supposed to have carried out an annual assessment and have an improvement delivery plan, that figure has risen to 4,918. That is the figure for one college. The number of students who drop out has also increased at the North West Regional College. Clearly, self-assessments and improvement plans are not having the desired effect. The Minister's Department must take much more robust action so that retention rates improve.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

People leave college for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons is that, sometimes, they get jobs. Of course, we welcome that. However, between 2006-07 and 2008-09, which is the most recent academic year for which validated data is available, the total number of people who failed to complete full-time professional and technical vocational courses in further education colleges reduced from 4,969 to 4,236. During that period, the average retention rate for the further education sector has remained largely the same at around 85%. Although the rates vary from college to college, they fall roughly into a band between 80% and 90%. When one considers that universities have drop-out rates of between 8% and 13%, I think that, in the current circumstances, further education is not actually performing too badly.

Any drop-out is a concern unless it is for a good, positive reason, such as to gain employment. My Department takes this seriously. We have ensured that further education colleges have put pastoral care arrangements in place aimed at promoting students' health and well-being and providing them with access to appropriate guidance and support while they remain at college. Therefore, the approach is multifaceted.

I say to the Member that there is no complacency that I can detect. As far as we are concerned, it is a waste of resources not only for the college, the Department and the taxpayer but for the student if he or she feels unable to complete a course. I repeat to the Member that people who leave courses do not always

do so for bad reasons: they move into work or, perhaps, their family circumstances have changed. Indeed, the Member will be aware that, unfortunately, a large number of people are full-time carers even though they are comparatively young. Sometimes, they are forced out of their training provision.

Mr Speaker: I will allow Mr Maginness to ask a quick supplementary question.

Mr A Maginness: I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the reasons why people drop out of college. However, those statistics are worrying. It is a high drop-out rate. I understand that there is a variety of reasons. Does the Minister propose to survey the reasons for that high drop-out rate and act thereon?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Obviously, any drop-out rate, particularly one that is around 15%, is a concern. The performance of colleges in Northern Ireland is relatively good and stable. The inspectorate carries out rigorous investigations for my Department on a regular, planned basis at each college. Of course, in the annual plans that we agree with colleges, where we detect a spike in such statistics, we ensure that we ask for reasons why that has occurred.

I will certainly bear in mind the point that a number of Members have made on that matter and draw it to the attention of our further education division.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Speaker: I wish to alert Members that questions 5 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Social Economy Enterprise Strategy

1. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's social economy enterprise strategy (AQO 45/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I launched the Executive's current cross-departmental social economy enterprise strategy (SEE) in March of this year. The strategy was developed in

partnership with the social economy network (SEN), which represents the sector, and other key stakeholders inside and outside government that have a role to play in supporting its development. The latest strategy continues the commitment to three strategic objectives: to increase awareness of the sector; to develop its business strength; and to provide a supportive environment in which it can prosper. Those continue to be highly relevant, especially in the current economic downturn.

A cross-departmental policy group continues to monitor the delivery of the strategy, and an independent evaluation of the strategy will be undertaken early next year to assess its impact on the sector.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for her reply. Due to the September monitoring adjustments, £50,000 has been taken out of the budget. Why was that the case? What is the Minister's best forecast for the rest of the year? Does she think that more effort is required in that important area?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I am a big supporter of the social economy sector. In fact, I was at its showcase event in Belfast; I think that that was about two weeks ago. I am a big supporter of the social economy sector, because I believe that it can do things that, perhaps, it has not done in the past, and, in so doing, help the Government to deliver on their objectives in a different way. I have had some interesting conversations with some of those bodies to see how they can help us at a time when we are having cuts to our budget. That is why I have had numerous discussions. I will continue to engage with the social economy sector. It is an important sector to us, and I assure the Member that he will not find me wanting when it comes to supporting the social economy sector.

Mr Givan: The Minister will know that the social economy is an important sector in Northern Ireland. In the testing times that are coming, funding will need to be available to assist that sector. Will the Minister outline whether any such funding is available?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

As I indicated in my answer to the substantive question, the social economy policy group has been helping to develop and implement the strategy across government. It consists of representatives of most of the

Departments that are involved. Although my Department is responsible for the policy and, through Invest Northern Ireland, has the very successful social entrepreneurship programme, it is asking other Departments to look in their current budget allocations to see how they can help it to meet the commitments in the strategy as published.

There is significant work to be done in relation to finding the budget to support the social economy sector, but Invest Northern Ireland's social entrepreneurship programme, which has a three-year budget of about £2.5 million, assists those social entrepreneurs to get started. In fact, between June of last year and March of this year, 46 new social enterprises were established with the creation of 107 new jobs. That is absolutely marvellous, given the type of work in which the social economy is engaged and the type of people with whom it is engaged.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers and her comments on the social economy. One part of the development process of the social economy will be its capacity to secure government procurement contracts. Is the Minister aware of any work that is being undertaken by Invest NI or her Department to ensure that that capacity-building programme is in place for them?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member, being the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, will know of the work that that Committee has done on procurement, particularly on the social economy element of procurement in Northern Ireland. The social economy sector is watching that situation very carefully to see how that work develops. There are four elements to the work that we do through the Invest Northern Ireland programme: to lead in development; to give core capability support; to have post-start strategic mentoring; and to provide mentoring support for transitional groups. In all those various stages, one can see that support is the key issue, and getting Government procurement grants will be a part of that support. We will wait to see what comes out of the work that the Committee for Finance and Personnel is doing.

INTERREG IVa

2. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the status of all outstanding applications for projects related to INTERREG IVa funding with which her Department is associated. (AQO 46/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is the managing authority for the INTERREG IVa programme, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is the accountable Northern Ireland Department for projects under the enterprise, tourism, telecommunications and energy themes. My officials are considering documentation on one tourism project that SEUPB presented to us at the beginning of September 2010. Further information on that case is still to be provided by SEUPB. I understand that SEUPB is processing approximately 10 enterprise and tourism project proposals, but those have not yet been presented to my Department for final consideration.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, although much good work is being done by cross-border projects, the number of projects that have not yet been through the entire scrutiny process and are being delayed is causing increasing frustration among applicants and project board members alike?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was certainly aware of frustration. At the end of last year, I met East Border Region Committee representatives, who said to me that they were hugely frustrated with the process. I gave a commitment at that meeting that my Department's officials would engage with each of the five cross-border partnerships to assist them in shaping projects so that they could reach the next stage of seeking approval. To date, however, my Department has approved 12 INTERREG IVa projects that are focused on enterprise and tourism development. The total value of those projects is £27.9 million.

I am pleased to see that that work has been done, but some other projects are still in the pipeline. The procedure that must be gone through is a long one, as I am sure the Member is aware. First, the project goes to SEUPB, and then we are made aware of it at the outline

business case stage. A full business case must then be made, as well as a final business case. We are involved with the projects every step of the way, but I accept that council members and members of the cross-border bodies feel frustrated at the length of time that it takes. All that I can say is that, for my part, my officials are engaging with the various bodies and will do all that they can to provide project promoters with the assistance that they need to put forward their projects.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for her earlier replies, and, indeed, for confirming the previous departmental and ministerial concern about some of the delays in the outworking of the programmes. Is she entirely satisfied that the Special EU Programmes Body has been adequately efficient and helpful to applicants?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That was the concern at the time last year. The East Border Region Committee was not the only organisation to express concerns. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) had concerns, as had other bodies. As a result, I met representatives of the East Border Region Committee and gave a commitment that my officials would try to assist them in any way possible. I also took the opportunity to meet Pat Colgan, the chief executive of SEUPB, to review progress on the number of projects that had been submitted for funding. That process has continued at official level, and officials have met SEUPB directors and programme managers and their economists. I am very keen that we do not lose out on any European funding that may be available to Northern Ireland because of delays. I will therefore keep a watching brief on the matter, because DETI remains the accountable Department in relation to government spend, and I certainly do not want to see us handing money back.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister assure the House that the protection of the marine ecosystem will be an integral part of the BioMara R&D work?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for giving me notice in relation to her question. BioMara is a very exciting project, as I am sure the Member will agree. It is in its second year and is making good progress across the four areas in which it is engaged. It is looking at the economic, social

and technical impacts of marine biofuels for local industrial and regional energy supply. It is also looking at the local strains of microalgae for their oil potential, which is very exciting too — getting oil from algae. The third area covers the use of macroalgae or seaweeds for anaerobic digestion and bioethanol, and the fourth area will be the development of downstream processing, which will not start until 2011.

Sustainability will be a very important element in the case for marine biofuels, as will environmental impact. I know that the Member is concerned about the impact there will be on marine life, and I give her the assurance that we will be preparing an environmental impact statement to make sure that there is no undue adverse effect on the marine ecosystem as a result of the work that is going on. I know that the Member agrees with me that it is a very exciting piece of work, but it will be done in a way that does not damage the ecosystem of the marine environment.

Mr Craig: There seems to be some slight confusion here. Will the Minister outline the respective roles of the SEUPB and DETI in the INTERREG IVa approval process? More importantly, at what stage does the Minister's Department actually get involved in those projects?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The SEUPB is the managing authority for the INTERREG IVa programme. It makes an initial assessment of projects submitted to the body and then presents those cases, if it deems them viable, to the accountable Departments, both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That is the stage at which DETI becomes aware of any particular project.

As I said to Mr Kennedy, my Department acts as the accountable Department in respect of enterprise, tourism, energy and telecoms. It was under the telecoms theme that the innovative Project Kelvin was able to proceed, of which we are rightly proud. Essentially, responsibility for expenditure rests with the Department. We therefore have to make sure when looking at the projects coming forward that they are projects that will stand up. Therefore, a robust assessment has to be carried out in relation to all proposals that come before us.

Corporation Tax

3. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues regarding the potential devolution of power to vary corporation tax. (AQO 47/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Fiscal policy is currently a reserved matter and is under the responsibility of Her Majesty's Treasury. Therefore, the devolution of power to vary corporation tax is not simply a matter for the Executive but for the United Kingdom Government. In that context, the Finance Minister and I met the Exchequer Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 19 August 2010 to discuss the proposed HM Treasury paper on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. One of the issues to be considered in that paper is the scope to reduce the level of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. The contents of the paper will be issued by Her Majesty's Treasury for consultation in the autumn.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her reply. The crux of my question was mainly concerning whether the Minister or her Executive colleagues have had any discussion around how that power, if it comes to Northern Ireland, may be used within Departments.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I think it is premature to have a discussion about how we are going to use the power until we see whether HM Treasury will give us the power. There is no doubt that a reduced rate of corporation tax could act as a significant incentive. It would certainly help my Department and Invest Northern Ireland when we go to look for foreign direct investment, and it would help our indigenous companies. However, we want the paper to look at not just the benefits of lowering corporation tax but some of the challenges. For example, there is a risk of firms "brass plating", whereby companies located in GB would simply move to Northern Ireland to benefit from a lower tax system but would not add significantly to the local economy. The Finance Minister and I have mentioned that issue. Of course there are ways of dealing with that, such as limiting it in a certain way and linking it to job creation.

3.15 pm

There are also issues around the unknown costs that introducing the measure might have to the block grant. The Treasury will know how much it will cost the Northern Ireland block grant and what the undoubted increase will be in administration costs for local government here and HM Treasury. There are, therefore, challenges as well as undoubted benefits involved in reducing corporation tax. We hope that all those issues will be dealt with in the coalition Government's paper, so that we can have a full discussion about it with them.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Minister reassure the House that she will take every opportunity to consult the Chancellor about the issue? Clearly, there is an irresistible argument that the lowering of corporation tax in Northern Ireland would lead to massive investment in the economy. We now have a golden opportunity, because the current Government are more sympathetic to devolving that power to this region. Will the Minister also reassure the House that she will make every effort to persuade the Chancellor in that direction?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Finance Minister and I met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury to deal with that issue. We are hoping that the paper, when it comes to us, will deal with corporation tax and the undoubted benefits that it will bring by attracting investment to Northern Ireland, as the Member indicated. We are also hoping that the paper will look at other measures that can be taken to increase Northern Ireland's competitiveness. For example, we hope that it will look at improvements to the research and development tax credit system, which manufacturing firms, in particular, have raised with me, and training credits for businesses. We also hope that it will look at rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy and the wider issue and will not put all its eggs in one basket.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell the House whether she or the Finance Minister put forward any proposals to the British Treasury to examine, at least, the potential of the North having a full fiscal toolkit for tax-varying powers rather than just limiting itself to corporation tax? Does she agree that any public sector cuts from the British Government next month will have —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish his question.

Mr McKay: Does she agree that those cuts will undoubtedly have a negative knock-on effect on services, SMEs and the wider local economy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The answer to the Member's first question is no. As for his second question about the impact of the Budget that will come our way on 20 October after the comprehensive spending review, we undoubtedly face difficult times.

The Finance Minister has spoken on record — I have his statement here from as early as 15 July, which was after the election and the emergency Budget — about the impact that the coalition Government cuts would have on Northern Ireland. Prior to the Westminster election, we warned that — I make no apologies for saying this — if the Tories were in a position to move forward with their agenda, which was put out before the Westminster election took place, this part of the United Kingdom would suffer disproportionately. That is still my concern, and it is one that the Finance Minister shares.

However, I want to reassure the House that we will be fighting very, very hard — some comment has been made about this lately — to make sure that, whatever comes our way after the comprehensive spending review on 20 October 2010, we deal with it in a way that causes the least harm to front line services and that we manage our budgets in a way that will not be detrimental to people who are in difficulties at the moment, and we know of such people across all our constituencies. I want to reassure the House that we will be looking at our budget from that standpoint.

DETI: Budget

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential impact of any budget cuts on her Department's programmes. (AQO 48/11)

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a ceathair. Question 4.

Lord Morrow: I take it that an interpretation would be needed.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have often said that Members may speak in any language that they

wish to speak, but that it is important that they finish in English.

Mr F McCann: I did say question 4.

Mr Speaker: I apologise, but I certainly did not hear you.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Details of the savings will be produced in the DETI savings delivery plan, which will be published at the same time as the draft Budget 2010. It is, however, too early to say what the potential impact of any cuts will be on my Department's programmes. DETI is, of course, working closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in the Budget process so that the Executive can make informed decisions, and I have provided a high-level prioritised list of savings and bids. Work is currently ongoing to identify the detail of potential savings and the impact of such savings. Savings of an individual Department should not be considered in isolation but in the context of an Executive-agreed strategic approach to the Northern Ireland block. Savings will, undoubtedly, be painful. However, it is important to keep focus on the economy as a top priority.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for her response. However, can she assure the House that any proposed reduction in her budget will not impact on vulnerable small and family businesses, such as those in the social economy sector?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes, I will make sure that that is the case. As I said in answer to question 1, the social economy provides us with a lot of opportunities in difficult times, and I am having proactive discussions with that sector. I certainly want to see the social economy flourish at this time, and I believe that it can.

Mr Kinahan: The Department anticipates a £62 million reduction in spending in Invest Northern Ireland over the next four-year period. Is the Minister planning a new strategic innovative programme so that she can better argue the case to win more funds?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The economy remains at the centre of our Programme for Government, and that priority was signed up to not just by my Department but by every other Department

in the Executive. That is one of the reasons why the economic subgroup of Ministers was set up, which was a recommendation of the independent review of economic policy. I think that the subgroup will provide us with a very strategic way forward, because it is coming not just from my Department but from all Departments on the subgroup and, indeed, will then be ratified by the Executive. The strategic themes coming through are rebuilding the economy — obviously we recognise that we are in difficult times — and rebalancing the economy by moving on to look at ways in which we can deal with the productivity deficit that differentiates us from the rest of the UK. Rebuilding and rebalancing are two themes that are appearing very strongly.

Mr O’Loan: As the Minister said, the economy is the first priority of the Executive. What happens in her Department is critical, and she has the support of this party as we enter into such debates. Given the budgetary reductions, does the Minister believe that she can protect the output of her Department? Does she see ways in which processes and programmes in Invest Northern Ireland could be altered to protect its output even with a lesser budget?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland is engaged in a reform programme for the body, the name of which I am struggling to remember — it may be as simple as “reform”. He is trying to achieve delivery on the objectives of the independent review of economic policy; to have a more streamlined approach to programmes; to have more interaction with small businesses, which is key; to deal with the social economy in a proactive way, although I would say that we are doing that at present; to streamline the interaction between my Department and Invest Northern Ireland and between DFP and Invest Northern Ireland; and to deal with the delegated limits.

Therefore, it is the case that the chief executive of Invest NI is involved with a streamlining reform programme, which I think that will very much help us to deal with the Budget cuts and to continue to deliver for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland businesses.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Employment: Engineering

6. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an estimate of the number of people currently employed in the engineering industry and how this compares with five years ago. (AQO 50/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The latest estimates from the Northern Ireland quarterly employment survey show that there were 21,190 jobs in the engineering and allied industries sector at March 2010. When compared with the same period five years earlier, that is a net fall of 4,590 jobs, or 18%.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for her precise and exact answer, but it was quite startling. It showed us that there is an 18% fall in those engaged in the manufacturing industry. The Minister is aware of the crisis in that industry. Indeed, she attended a meeting with me today about a firm that is in manufacturing, albeit of a different nature. Will the Minister outline what her Department is doing to encourage back into the workplace those people who have lost their jobs in the manufacturing industry? Does her Department have any new initiatives that she intends to put before the House in the near future?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I already mentioned the economic subgroup, and I will not rehearse that point. I want to be clear in saying that some people want to be negative about manufacturing. However, it continues to play a key role in the Northern Ireland economy, and it accounts for approximately 11% of employees in Northern Ireland.

Manufacturing covers a wide range of industries, and, as I know the Member will acknowledge, some subsectors have been impacted more than others. Indeed, construction and engineering, which can be found in mid-Ulster and south Tyrone, are the sectors that have been worst hit. However, the food, drink, tobacco and chemicals sectors have continued to perform relatively well. Therefore, there is a difference between the sectors.

There is better news in the engineering sector in what I call hard manufacturing, and I was delighted to see Harland and Wolff continuing to compete for and win high-value renewable contracts. Again, we go back to the green new

deal and green jobs, although I know that the Member may have a difficulty with those terms. I should say to Lord Morrow that we will perhaps call them something else on the next occasion.

In any event, the fact that there are jobs in that area of renewables really does present us with a great opportunity to use the manufacturing and engineering skills that we have in this country. In addition to Harland and Wolff, Kingspan Renewables in Craigavon announced the creation of 163 new jobs over the next five years. The Bangor engineering firm Munster Simms also recently undertook a £3 million investment in research and development. Therefore, firms are having to diversify. We will support them in that diversification, and we think that there are a lot of opportunities for manufacturing and engineering companies in the renewables sector.

There are also opportunities overseas. I had a very interesting meeting with representatives from Kurdistan last week. Our having construction and engineering skills and their absolute need for such skills to rebuild Kurdistan are a perfect fit, and I want to explore that further over the coming months.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a CheannComhairle. At a personal level, I thank the Minister for her involvement in a number of cases in my constituency. She rightly pointed out, as did Lord Morrow, the experiences and difficulties faced by engineering, especially in south and east Tyrone. Given that decline in the industry, are measures being taken to target investment at that area, which has suffered so much recently, by either attracting investment or working with other Departments on new skills programmes or other forms of investments to try to alleviate the problems that are suffered there?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I acknowledge the Member's thanks for the help that has been given to certain firms. It is precisely the matching up of skills and needs that Invest Northern Ireland is best placed to do. We will continue to match up companies with markets across the world. The Member will also know that Invest Northern Ireland has been very proactive in working with companies in the mid-Ulster area on some of the schemes that we have announced, such as the short term aid scheme and the accelerated

support scheme, in order that those companies can keep skilled workers in a position so that, when more orders come in, they are able to stay with their companies. If there are any individual companies that the Member has concerns about, I would be more than happy to speak to him about them, and I am sure that Invest Northern Ireland in his local area would also be happy to do so.

Executive Committee Business

Draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2010

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2010 be approved. — [The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness).]

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl maidir leis an ráiteas faoin Cheis Fhada. I welcome today's announcement about the development corporation for the Long Kesh/Maze site, even though the Order is in draft form.

I have had an interest in the site in more ways than one over the years. First, it is in my Lagan Valley constituency. I also resided there for a while, rather reluctantly. I also sat on the Maze/Long Kesh monitoring group, which came forward with the master plan for the site.

Today's announcement about this piece of legislation is welcome. I take on board the advice that you gave earlier, Mr Speaker, about Members straying in their contributions and talking about wish lists for what they want to see and what they do not want to see on the site.

As the deputy First Minister outlined, there has been a focus on the whole issue of conflict transformation and the peace building aspect of the site. Europe has been interested in that, as have people here. As people have said, the site is a contested one and it has many histories; somewhere in the region of 25,000 people — republicans and loyalists — served time there. Many prison officers and members of the British Army were there, and politicians and Secretaries of State visited the prison. So, the site has a history, albeit a contested one.

It has taken us a long time to get to the situation today where we have a framework for developing the site. People will focus on certain aspects of how the site could be developed, such as a conflict transformation centre. There were proposals for a stadium on the site, which I think was regrettable. As you said earlier, Mr Speaker, we should not play politics with the issue in today's debate, because there is a huge

opportunity to develop the site. In a sense, that opportunity symbolises the transformation from conflict to peace building. In addition to some of the proposals for the site, other things such as housing could be developed there. The RUAS's proposed move to the site is a welcome development, and there is potential to develop the site in other ways, not just for the good of the community in Lisburn and Lagan Valley but right across the North of Ireland.

We have other controversial development proposals in the area, such as John Lewis wanting to locate a department store in Sprucefield. There are some other proposals for developing the whole area that could be built upon in conjunction with the development corporation. So, all Members, no matter what difficulties they have with some of the proposals, should welcome today's development.

Raymond McCartney and I served on the monitoring committee, difficult though it was, for a number of years — particularly the years of direct rule, when we tried to get proposals. However, we got through all the difficulties and came up with a master plan.

I hope that the master plan will be built upon by the development corporation, and we will see the whole 350 acre site developed for the good of all the community and other proposals brought forward. Today's development is welcome, and I look forward to seeing the legislation in place, the corporation set up in April next year and the development of the whole site. It will be a good symbol for the way forward. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome this development and this motion.

This is a great opportunity for all of us to develop the Maze/Long Kesh site for the good of all the community. It is a very practical way of turning swords into ploughshares. It is a transformation of a site which for many years was regarded with great contention. It was the site of a prison which witnessed some very tragic and terrible events. Therefore, we have an opportunity to put the past into the past and build for the future. It is a great opportunity for all of us, at a political, economic and social level, to transform something which has tragic and difficult memories for all of us into something that is very good indeed. It is churlish of anybody to criticise this very significant step forward. For outside investors, it presents a

wonderful opportunity to build something good here and to benefit the whole community.

The SDLP wishes the corporation well and hopes that the corporation is successful in fully developing the site and realising its full potential. Geographically, the site is well situated in so far as the road network links it with North and South, other parts of Northern Ireland, the airports and the Port of Belfast. All of that adds to the merits of the site. It is a great boon, not just to the people of Lisburn and the surrounding district, but to the whole of Northern Ireland. It could become a regional hub for economic development, and we should bear that in mind.

I have to say that, in the past number of years, we have missed a wonderful opportunity to build a stadium on this site, and that is regrettable. We missed the opportunity to build a major sports centre which would have accommodated all three major sports in Northern Ireland and which would have at least united the sporting organisations and their supporters in using and sharing a common ground. That would have been a wonderful development for all of us. In particular, the London Olympics presented a great opportunity for us to use such a stadium in association with the Olympic Games. However, that opportunity has regrettably been lost.

It would be easy enough for Members from these Benches, the nationalist/republican side of the community, to say that this was all totally unnecessary and that people acted in a curmudgeonly fashion.

I understand the sensitivities surrounding the development of a conflict transformation centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site. It would be wrong for us to be insensitive to that. However, I think unionists got it wrong in that they misinterpreted what was being presented. Again, I hope that that is in the past, and that politicians on all sides have reached an understanding of how the transformation centre will be developed. I hope that they understand that the centre will not simply centre on one group or another; that it will not just be seen as a centre in which hunger strikers, for example, are the only centre of interest or attraction; it will be much more than that. It will take in the wider community and the widest dimensions of the conflict that tragically beset our community.

The past is the past. Now that we have hopefully got around those particularly contentious and

difficult issues and agreement around the conflict transformation centre has truly and genuinely been reached, my party and I see it as having great potential to help explain to the world how we achieved the peace that we have achieved. It can show that we can continue to build on that peace, and it will provide a greater understanding about the nature of our conflict and the lessons to be learned from it to people in the rest of the world. There are truly great lessons to be learned, and if that adds to international peace or the development of international peace, or the resolution of conflicts in other countries, then it will be worthwhile. I hope that it will be worthwhile, and that it will add to a greater understanding.

The victims of the conflict that we had to endure for so many years must not be overlooked in the conflict transformation centre. They must be given a proper place and context therein. I truly hope that the centre can become a means of peacefully resolving the problems that continue to affect our society and other parts of the world.

The RUAS's expression of interest in the site is a healthy contribution to the overall scheme that is to be welcomed and encouraged. One hopes that other organisations — indigenous companies as well as foreign investors — will also contribute to the development of the site. However, I have one question about the make-up of the membership of the corporation: how are they to be appointed? I assume that it will be done through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. How will those members be selected? How will that process take place? One hopes that people with a good business and investment background will be given a proper place on the board. I hope that the board will be balanced and will reflect the interests of the whole community.

I will end as I began: by wishing the corporation and the scheme well. I believe that it will be of great benefit to all our people.

3.45 pm

Mr Lunn: I welcome the draft Order. It is a good day for Northern Ireland, because we are finally making some progress, which has been a long time coming. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister will probably recall a meeting with Lisburn City Council representatives on 23 June 2009, when the project was to be progressed with all speed. However, we are where we are. If the corporation can be up and running by April

next year, that is fair enough. It is definitely time to move on with all speed.

As other Members said, it is a terrific opportunity for Northern Ireland. It always has been; it was in 2003 when the process started and it still is, and even more so, today. Without wanting to repeat what other Members said, I have a few questions. I wonder whether the intention is to give the development corporation any sort of planning powers, because I would hate to see marvellous plans being bogged down in the morass of our planning system, with judicial reviews, planning appeals, public inquiries, and so on. I hope that whoever puts together the corporation will consider that at least. The Maze site was described in the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) as a strategic reserve. If the corporation will not have planning powers, I hope, at least, that the site will be recognised as being strategically vital and will be dealt with by the Planning Service in that way.

I also wonder whether the development corporation will have control, or otherwise, of the much-mooted conflict transformation centre. It seems to make sense that the corporation should control the whole site and not have one section excluded from it, for whatever reason. A master plan is now to be produced, yet one was produced in 2006. It is probably still pretty valid, except for the fact that there is a huge hole in it where the stadium would have been. However, everything else on the list is still very relevant. I hope that, rather than start from scratch, the corporation can work with what is on the table already.

It is great that the RUAS has expressed strong interest in the site. However, I cannot help thinking that, had things moved ahead two or three years ago, it may have been even more interested. In the meantime, the value of the site that it has to sell at the King's Hall has probably halved in value. That may cause it problems. In addition, the RUAS is a member-driven organisation, and a vote of the membership will be required to enable it to make the move. I remind Members that it is, I think, 14 years since the same organisation considered a move out to Blaris, which is not far from the Maze, but the proposal was voted down by its members. I hope that it is happy to be involved. I hope also that it is big enough to be the anchor tenant. Originally, the intention was that the stadium would have been the anchor tenant and that RUAS would have been

happy to row in behind it. However, we will see where we go with that.

With some trepidation, I mention again the conflict transformation centre. I was asked, very late in the day, to join the Maze monitoring panel. I was there for the final nine months or so before direct rule put an end to it. Before we were dissolved, we looked at examples of conflict transformation centres around the world. There are more than 50 of them, and I am perfectly satisfied that there is no need for a conflict transformation centre to have a political dimension at all. If we look at examples from around the world and draw from them, which was the intention, we should be able to deal with the issue like grown-ups and come up with something that is valid and useful. I noticed that Mr Kennedy and Mr Givan crossed swords about how the Ulster Unionist Party changed its mind, but it is about time that people started to change their minds once in a while in this place. If people never changed their mind, we would get nowhere.

I was a fairly stern critic of all the delay, the changes of tack and the disappointments of the past seven or eight years with the project, but I now welcome it. Today is a good day, and I hope that we can move forward from here. In the words of the deputy First Minister, the project, from here on in, can transcend political considerations and move forward to be what it really is, which is a massive business opportunity for this country.

Mr Poots: I have probably spent more time on the matter than anybody else in the Chamber, and I have given a great deal of commitment to something happening on the site. Therefore, I welcome the proposals that are before us today, because they move the situation forward.

The site was always going to be difficult to deal with; it was always going to be a hot potato. I was landed with it by my party, but I do not mind hot potatoes. I have dealt with them before, and I will do so in the future. If you're not prepared to take the heat, you shouldn't go into the kitchen.

Therefore, I am somewhat perplexed and amused, but not surprised, by the Ulster Unionist Party's attitude to the situation. Mr Elliott, who is tipped by many of the big hitters to be a future leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, seems to have difficulty with the conflict resolution aspect of the project. That was reinforced by Mr Kennedy, who also has some difficulties. Mr Lunn

suggested that, on occasion, it was appropriate for people to change their minds. The Ulster Unionist Party is used to changing its mind, performing political summersaults and doing a few other things in between. A change of mind in the right direction is good, but when already pointed in the right direction, it is not good to go in the opposite direction.

I worked extensively on the issue with the chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr David Campbell. We spent hours and hours getting to the point of the conflict resolution centre, and that is what it is: a conflict resolution centre; not a shrine. It was never perceived to be a shrine, nor will it ever be a shrine —

Mr Speaker: Order. Perhaps the Member was not in the Chamber at the start of the debate, but I encourage the entire House, as far as possible, to try to come to the business that is before it. The debate is about setting up a corporation and a board. I listened to my learned friend Alban Maginness, and he strayed widely from the subject before weaving in what he should have been saying. I encourage Members, as far as possible — I know that it is not easy — to come to the subject matter that is before the House.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your gentle correction. We will ensure that the people who sit on the board of the facility would not countenance anything associated with the glorification of terrorism.

What is a conflict resolution centre about? In Northern Ireland, there have been 3,500 deaths, tens of thousands of people injured and hundreds of thousands of years wasted in prisons. “Never Again” must be above the door, and that is the message that the site must send out. It must not, and never will, be a shrine to terrorism. In that respect, Mr Kennedy and his friends are playing politics. The board has —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member please understand that we are on the same side? He seems to have some difficulty in understanding that. Let me make it abundantly clear that we do not want to see terrorists elevated in any kind of shrine at the Maze site or anywhere else.

Mr Poots: As Mr Lunn said, it is good for people to change their mind. Sometimes it takes years, and sometimes it takes minutes, so I appreciate the fact that Mr Kennedy did so in minutes. A short time listening to my advice assisted him,

and I appreciate the stage at which we have now arrived. I am glad that we are on the same side, and I ask others to stop playing politics with the issue, because there is a great opportunity to be developed.

The site has been identified as a strategic site. It is not a brownfield site, although some people have suggested that it is and that, as a consequence, thousands of houses could be built on it. Thousands of houses will not be built on the site, as that issue was dealt with by the development corporation. One of the difficulties we had at that time was that the Planning Service was allowing only 200 houses to be developed on the site. Those who have said that there will be mass housing have got it wrong.

It is a strategic site, and we need people on the board who have the skills and the ability to identify what is best for the site. Around 60% of the population of Northern Ireland can reach the site in 30 minutes and 80% can reach it in 60 minutes. It is in the east of the Province with the best routes to the south and the west of the Province and excellent routes to the north of the Province. It is well placed to take full advantage of flights in and out of Dublin Airport and of the eastern corridor, which has the population base to support significant events at the site.

We have an opportunity to develop something at the Maze site that is not currently in Northern Ireland, perhaps not even in the Republic of Ireland. We can do something of real significance and of real benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. By doing so, we can create thousands of jobs and tens of millions of pounds of investment. The naysayers want to grow dingle weed: they do not want to achieve anything but rather want to block things all the time. Opportunities exist to move the community forward and to create those thousands of jobs. Irrespective of the doubters, we must proceed, and we must make it work in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with the trend of the Member’s argument. Mr Lunn raised an interesting point, which was about giving the development corporation its own inherent planning powers. Is the Member sympathetic to that, and would the First Minister and the deputy First Minister seek to establish that?

Mr Poots: I am aware that that is being considered, and I am not resisting it. The site covers around 347 acres, which is a lot of land.

At one stage, one of the largest corporations in the United States of America was interested in developing the site. However, when a representative of the corporation looked at the site, he said that it was too small for the infrastructure that we were developing. He said that we needed 1,000 acres. Interestingly enough, the Blaris site beside the Maze contains 400 acres of land, and there is further land in between. A scale of land could be set aside for a development of regional significance. A master plan has already been drawn up for the Blaris site: it has gone through the planning process, and it would be subject to a full planning application. However, the master plan has been accepted in principle by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service.

There is the potential to identify that entire area for significant regional development, which could include housing on the Blaris side. Substantial and additional parties could be brought in to help to deliver the important infrastructure. If it is to be done, it needs to be done right, and if it is to be done right, we will have to spend the appropriate funds on infrastructure. Expanding the boundaries of the site for planning purposes, which would allow others to make an investment that would be to their advantage and to the advantage of the Maze site, makes common sense in my book and, therefore, we should work with the private sector to achieve that.

I look forward to moving the situation forward. I welcome the fact that the motion has come before the House today. I say to those who are trying to use the situation for political means to trip others up: wise up. Jim Allister is doing that job, even though he is not doing it particularly well. For others to join with that particular line of thought only demonstrates their negativity. They would be going against what their party has stood for years. Let us move on and take Northern Ireland forward, not backward.

4.00 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo chuid tacaíochta a thabhairt don Ordú seo, nó is Ordú tábhachtach stairiúil é. Tá seans againn an láithreán seo a fhorbairt, poist a chruthú agus aithne a thabhairt do stair an láithreáin.

I welcome and support the announcement that a development corporation will be established to carry forward the much-needed and long-awaited development of the Long Kesh site and that

the Order has been placed before the Assembly today. It goes without saying that a site of that size in that location will be regarded as a prime development site, and the interest in it shown by the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society and other developers is proof of that. I am particularly pleased that one of the key objectives set for the corporation will be to:

“maximise the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site”.

I have no doubt that that will be achieved, and I wish the corporation well.

Given the current economic climate, the need to ensure optimum development is all the more important and is crucial to economic stability and to much-needed future employment, particularly in the hard-pressed construction industry. I also welcome the inclusion of social clauses in the Order. It is important that economic regeneration should also have targeted social outcomes.

The site is of course one of historical significance, and, from the moment it became clear that the Long Kesh prison was to close, Sinn Féin contended and has consistently done so ever since that any development of the site should include recognition of its historical significance in a meaningful and purposeful manner. The first report of the Maze consultation panel, which consisted of representatives from the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP and Sinn Féin also gave due recognition to that, and the Maze/Long Kesh monitoring group that was established under direct rule also included Trevor Lunn of the Alliance Party. I do not remark on that to make a political point but to demonstrate that, through dialogue and hard work, consensus can be reached. Paul Butler and I represented Sinn Féin on that panel, and we are aware of the important work that was carried out by officials at that time and has continued in recent times through OFMDFM, to bring us to where we are today.

With the proposed establishment of the development corporation we can take the site forward, ensure that it becomes a place of hope and prosperity and bring much-needed economic regeneration to the area. Indeed, the economic benefits of the site will go beyond the immediate area and will have an impact right across the island of Ireland.

The listed and preserved buildings and the peace building and conflict resolution centre will mean that the site can also become a place of learning and understanding. Sinn Féin is encouraged by President Barroso's pledge to help with the creation of that iconic newbuild and welcomes the fact that it has been actively pursued by OFMDFM. In conclusion, the Long Kesh site can become a place for future generations in which our collective history is acknowledged and our determination to understand our past and build a better future can find voice.

Mr Givan: I support the motion tabled by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Many Members have touched on the history of the site and the conflict resolution centre, and, as we look to the creation of the new board that will be responsible for taking forward the development of the Maze site, it is appropriate for us to reflect on the past.

For many the Maze prison site is symbolic of the sectarian hatred that divided this society. That should never be forgotten. The conflict resolution centre that is to be built there should never allow people to forget how that prison came into being or the individuals who were incarcerated there.

We should also remember the prison staff who served there, and, unfortunately and sadly, 29 prison officers lost their life during the terrorist campaign. As I was preparing for today's debate, I looked over some of the stories of those individuals, and that brought back to me the memory of that period, which we all went through and never want to go back to. Prison officers were murdered in their homes, as they checked for booby trap bombs under their cars and in front of their wives and children as they left church. We should never forget the sacrifices that those individuals made. As a party, the DUP can give a guarantee and assurance that, regardless of what comes forward for development at the site, the board or any proposals that emanate from it will never trample over those sacrifices.

I was born in 1981, the year of the hunger strikes. I have two young daughters, and I do not want them to ever go through what a lot of people in this Chamber went through. We must build a legacy for children to enjoy and to prosper under. I believe that the site can be

a beacon for investment, as opposed to the symbol of sectarian hatred that it became.

As many Members said, the site is strategically located, and it can provide an opportunity to create many thousands of jobs. At a time in our economy when many people have lost their job, it is imperative that the Executive take opportunities that will address unemployment. The Maze site has the potential to do that.

The local community in close proximity to the Maze prison has endured a lot of problems and hassle for a long time. Residents in places such as Culcavy, the Halftown Road and around the Down Royal on the Maze side endured many years of security problems and harassment when the prison was in operation. As the site is developed, it is important that those people see real and tangible benefits. The board will need to engage with the community in the immediate proximity so that those people can see the real benefits of what is developed at the site. I hope that the First Minister will be able to provide some more information as to how that will happen.

The local firms in the wider community need to get some kind of payback. Hopefully, provisions will be in place that will ensure that those firms are able to benefit. Again, I hope that the First Minister will be able to discuss that.

Before it was a prison, the Maze was more commonly known as Long Kesh. I know that republicans seem to want to hijack that name and give it some kind of mysticism. However, long before republicans ever talked about it, Long Kesh was part of the vocabulary of the local community. Indeed, before it was a prison, it was known as RAF Long Kesh. Therefore, a strong British military history is linked to the site, and, again, the board needs to promote that. Some Members may not be aware that, during the Second World War, the visiting President Eisenhower landed at RAF Long Kesh. Winston Churchill also visited the site during the Second World War. Indeed, Her Majesty the Queen's first ever flight was to RAF Long Kesh. Therefore, the site has a great history, which all Members may not have been aware of. That is something that should be taken forward.

Mr McElduff: I simply want to seek assurance that the site will not become a shrine to the British Army.

Mr Givan: I think that we all need to recognise the history of the site and take that forward.

The site provides an opportunity that we must grasp and take forward to show that, as a community, we can actually build a future, move on and not go back to the horrendous days of the past and to what was inflicted on so many.

Mr Craig: As an elected Member for Lagan Valley, I also welcome the development, which I think will have huge benefits. Whenever I talk about the Maze, I am talking about my constituency. I know that it has a regional significance, but, in Lagan Valley, we face the same difficulties as any other constituency. In the past two years, the number of people in my constituency who are unemployed has doubled to more than 2,500. Whenever I look at the Maze project, I see the potential to deal with unemployment not only in my local area but in the wider region.

The Province will probably soon face one of the worst economic situations in its history; therefore, we should all look forward to the potential creation of 6,000 jobs. I want the potential to unleash economic growth through the Maze site to be implemented as quickly as possible. There are 347 acres of prime development land close to very good road infrastructures with inbuilt regional links. Major players, such as the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, are keenly interested in moving to the site. That would unleash huge economic potential for the area. That is all to be welcomed.

As the Member who spoke previously pointed out, there is a history to the site. It is an unfortunate history, and perhaps I went through it more than others. I lived only a mile up the road from the site, and, when numerous individuals tried to escape one night and jumped into a Mini and disappeared, I was locked in the house along with quite a few of my neighbours while security people ran about the country looking for those who had escaped. However, I was in little danger; my car was far too large for them. I did not have a Mini.

That aside, many of my school friends and colleagues suffered because many were employed as prison officers. Fortunately, none of them was murdered during that process. I remember being woken abruptly one night when a bomb went off underneath a neighbour's car. It was about the only time I ever woke up at night; I am a sound sleeper. However, it had a significant consequence for that family; they had to move out of the area, and their family life was

totally disrupted. The fear and intimidation that was applied on them was horrendous. That said, that part of our history — touch wood — is now over, and we need to move on and look forward.

As my colleague pointed out, the site has other historical significance. It was the major base for the Americans in Ireland during the Second World War. A significant number of sorties was sent out over the north Atlantic and as far as Berlin from that site, and many American troops were stationed there prior to D-Day. There is potential to set up an aircraft museum on the site. I should declare an interest, because one exhibit that will be put into that museum — this might give away my age — is an old Canberra bomber. When it was refurbished 20 years ago, it was one of the first projects that I worked on when I joined Shorts as an engineering apprentice straight out of university. I look forward to the development of that aspect of the site. I see huge potential to develop the links with the aircraft industry, the RAF, the American air force, the British Army and the American army, which was stationed on the site. Two major hangars have been left there, one of which is being used by the historical society. However, they are very large constructions, and there is potential to diversify the other hangar for other uses.

As my other colleague pointed out, other huge potential could be levered from the Maze site. If the site is developed properly, potential private development of more than 1,000 acres in that portion of Lisburn could be unleashed. I commend the motion as the first small step in moving the project forward not only for the benefit of the people in Lagan Valley but for the benefit of Northern Ireland as a whole.

4.15 pm

Mr G Robinson: For some time, the issue of the Maze site has been a source of tension in the Assembly. Today, we all have the opportunity to make a positive move forward by approving the draft Order concerning the Maze. On that site, we have the opportunity to create much-needed employment, bring top-quality sporting facilities, relocate the RUAS, build some new housing and so on. All of that can be done at a time when the construction industry and the economy are sorely in need of such a major boost. The development will be a win-win for Northern Ireland.

Today, the Assembly can decide to take a step forward in developing 360 acres for the benefit

of the people of Northern Ireland. To reject the motion would show that some parties in the Assembly and outside it still cannot cope with the realities of government. Therefore, it is an obvious choice for right-thinking and responsible Members to support the motion, and it is my sincere hope that they will do so. I fully support the development of the Maze site.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. It was, almost entirely, a positive debate. Some Members nodded in the direction of trying to stir up some controversy, but they went into retreat quickly, Mr Speaker, either as a result of your gaze at them or because of the passionate response of my ministerial colleague, who was on the Back Benches during the debate, and his recollection of the role of all our parties in taking the matter forward.

The draft Order provides for the creation of a development corporation to regenerate the Maze/Long Kesh site. This is a key moment for all of us in the Assembly. We now have before us the opportunity to advance the fortunes of our economy by adding to it this engine of prosperity and social good. In such straitened times, it makes obvious sense to maximise our assets, and I recall saying as far back as May 2008 that the site is far too valuable an asset to be left undeveloped. I stand by that comment, and I am glad that we have made some important progress and can look forward to the new regeneration framework to make the development happen.

Since the previous master plan was drafted during direct rule, good work has been done quietly and without fanfare. I acknowledge the excellent work that has been undertaken since then by the Maze/Long Kesh programme development unit. That has ensured that developers and investors are aware of the potential of the site and that necessary preparatory work has continued.

Part of that activity has involved key work with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, and we have all been delighted with that. Casting my mind back to my knowledge of history, I recall that, around a century ago, the Balmoral Show transferred from St George's Market to Balmoral, which was then described as being in the country. I suspect that it is getting even more rural with the prospect that it may move to the Maze/Long Kesh site, and I hope that that

can be finalised. In a moment, I will come to some of the specific points that were raised.

We need to build on the firm foundation laid by the Maze/Long Kesh programme development unit. We believe that creating a dedicated, focused and independent corporation that works at arm's length from government and has the freedom to work with the private sector is the right way forward. Speed of delivery is also important, and we want to realise the benefits of redeveloping the site as quickly as possible to help the economy.

I can inform the House — many Members may have heard the deputy First Minister indicate this at Question Time yesterday — that the business case to set up the corporation has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel. That development will send out powerful global messages, not least our desire to become a unique and significant contributor on the world stage to help other societies emerge from conflict. I am also acutely aware of the pressures on our Budget and the need to prioritise spending. That underlines the importance of spending money where it can deliver real and lasting benefit.

I do not intend to speak at length, but I will expand on some of the points that have been raised during the debate. I will begin with the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Mr Kennedy, who then spoke as a representative of the Ulster Unionist Party. I always prefer him when he speaks with his Committee Chairperson's hat on because he talks a lot more sense than on most other occasions. I was pleased to hear that the Committee is content to support the legislation.

During his comments as Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Kennedy asked for an update on the discussions with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society. The programme director is in discussions with RUAS, and those discussions are at an advanced stage. I can tell the House that indications are positive, and we hope that the discussions will conclude around the turn of the year. The application for EU funding is being developed by the programme delivery unit and will be submitted in January. There is no question of the process being delayed until the development corporation is operational in April 2011.

Article 19 of the Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland)

Order 2003 provides OFMDFM with residual powers to give directions of a general and/or specific nature to the development corporation. In addition, Ministers have set the policy parameters of the development. It goes without saying that there will be the maximum possible consultation as the master plan proceeds.

It will be an inclusive and transparent development. I can assure my colleague from East Londonderry Mr Campbell, who intervened, that that approach will ensure that there will be neither misrepresentation nor revision of our past on any part of the site. The deputy First Minister and I have sign-off, and both of us are committed to ensuring that, if the site is to be recognised and stand out for anything, it should stand out for its economic potential and its potential to make a contribution towards lasting peace here and in other parts of the world.

Mr Spratt and, later, his colleague and mine Paul Givan sought reassurance on how the development will benefit local people. I can tell them that the following key social clauses will be incorporated into procurement plans where that is feasible: a commitment to employ at least one long-term unemployed person and two apprentices per £1 million spent; a robust and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement; and the consideration of a community fund to engage those who may be marginalised by the development and delivery of the site.

I was pleased to hear the welcome from Paul Butler. He raised an issue about housing, which was touched on later by his fellow Member for Lagan Valley Mr Poots. In spite of your strictures, Mr Speaker, Mr Butler also managed to get John Lewis into the debate. I was surprised that Mr Poots did not respond to that when he was speaking. However, Mr Butler was positive and welcomed the proposal, as did the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness. He referred to some of the background to the site. Like many others, he felt that the process thus far had been tortuous and slow. However, the deputy First Minister and I will say that at least we have managed to deliver where our predecessors in office failed, and we are now making progress.

The conflict resolution centre was raised by Mr Maginness, who felt sure that it should never become a shrine. In fact, he indicated that victims must not be forgotten. I very much support that view in the telling of the story of

our past in Northern Ireland. The voice of the victims must be heard, and that is something that will be very strongly in the minds of those of us who are looking at those issues.

Mr Maginness also raised the issue of how selection is to take place and how people are to be appointed. The MLK development corporation board will consist of just six members and one chairperson, and the deputy First Minister and I will appoint them. The process will be regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. It will carry out the initial work and provide us with a slate of appropriate people. In doing that, we will be mindful of the skills that will be needed for the task ahead.

Mr Lunn, like Mr Butler, demonstrated his constituency interest in the matter. He raised the issue of planning powers, which was touched on by Mr Poots during his contribution. The head of the programme delivery unit has already made close contact with the Planning Service and has a key planner working in co-operation with the PDU. That approach was successfully used previously at Laganside.

The corporation has not been given any planning powers under the Order, but it is working closely with the Planning Service. Mr Poots indicated and the deputy First Minister and I indicated when we met the delegation from Lisburn City Council that this was an issue that we would look at but that we did not want to hold back the setting-up of the corporation because of the steps that would need to be taken. Therefore, we are moving full steam ahead with the corporation, but we will look very closely at how the planning processes work. I agree with the Member entirely: the last thing that we want with such a massive potential of a site is to have long delays on planning issues and people looking elsewhere in the world to carry out their development because of the slowness of our processes. Therefore, I hope that fast-tracking within the Planning Service will make it unnecessary to take other steps. However, if it is necessary to do so, we will take whatever steps we feel are important to get the thing moving properly.

The Member for Lagan Valley also asked how the corporation will control the peace building centre. The corporation board will take forward the development of the peace building centre on the site. The centre will eventually have its own management board and governance

model, which will be wholly in keeping with the requirements set down by OFMDFM. In passing, the Member asked who would be the main tenant, and I suppose the true answer to that is that none of us knows. It will, largely, be the task of the development corporation to see whom it can attract and who might be regarded as the main tenant. What we can say at this stage is that we want to proceed with the conflict resolution centre. We have high hopes that the RUAS, which would be a very significant tenant, will move onto the site. It has already been indicated that some use is being made of the site in relation to aviation, so who knows where it can lead? That is one of the exciting things about the scheme.

To enable the development corporation to fly as high as possible, we have not set parameters. The potential is limitless.

4.30 pm

The site is massive. I found it somewhat amusing to listen to some of my colleagues from Lagan Valley. Despite the site covering 347 acres and the fact that we are just starting to consider how it might be developed, they are already talking about expansion, extension and growing it to 1,000 acres. There is no lack of ambition in the Lagan Valley constituency or in Lisburn city about what can be done with the site. That encourages me because, as an economic opportunity, the site has massive potential.

The peace centre facility will have a campus-style use. I trust that people who are concerned that it might be seen as a shrine will have those concerns put to rest quickly. Apart from our oversight of the project, there will be a board whose entire purpose will be to extract the maximum potential from the site. The board will understand that it would not be in the interests of the Maze/Long Kesh to be identified as a terrorist shrine. Therefore, that is not our intention; nor will it be that of the board. None of us has ever opposed a conflict transformation centre. It has never been a matter of opposition to that facility. If there were concerns at any stage, they were about what might happen to the retained buildings and whether they might be used as a shrine in some way. There are clear parameters to ensure that that will not be the case. The story has massive, wide-ranging historical significance.

My colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has joined the proceedings early, not

only because he happens to be involved in the next piece of Assembly business, but to hear what is said in the debate. I hope that having listened to colleagues, particularly those who have local knowledge, he has been impressed by their outline of historical connections to the site. Had he not spent all that money on the Ulster Museum, he could have sited it at the Maze/Long Kesh. It seems that another museum is required. I am sure that he will put in a bid for it.

My colleague Edwin Poots made a positive and passionate contribution. He spoke knowledgeably and gave the hard sell for the project ahead. He said that there was room for people to change their minds. Mr Poots drew out from the spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party a change of attitude. The new attitude was much more positive and mirrored that of his party chairman, who has been one of the founding fathers of the conflict transformation element of the site. He recognised that the Ulster Unionist Party can take as much credit as any of the rest of us for the progress that has been made.

The development of the Maze/Long Kesh should not be a party political issue. It is in the interest of the Lisburn City Council area and the whole of Northern Ireland. The Member for Lagan Valley spoke about the site's attractive location. He mentioned its closeness to motorways and to the populations of the greater Belfast and Lisburn City Council areas. The travelling distance to the site is relatively short. As he mentioned, it is within an hour's drive for several hundred thousand people. The Member for Newry and Armagh would change his mind at least a dozen times during that period. It is, therefore, open to anybody in the Province to get to the site easily, and people from the Republic can use the motorway for easy access. It is an attractive site internationally because of its location.

I was pleased to hear Raymond McCartney speak about the scale of the site. He said that it was a prime development site. He is absolutely right; there are few places around the world, never mind in the United Kingdom or Europe, with a site of such massive potential so close to a city. He indicated that it had significant economic importance. He also made a telling point about the construction industry. We know about the difficult time that the construction industry is having with the contraction in the private sector, and we can look at what has the

potential to happen with the spending review and the contraction in public expenditure, which will contract the public sector capital programmes. To have a scheme such as this rolling out in this area is a lifeline to many in the construction industry. Therefore, I think that Raymond McCartney made a strong point.

My colleague Jonathan Craig bared his local credentials and gave us a history lesson on some of the past uses of the site. I was impressed to hear that Eisenhower, Churchill and Her Majesty The Queen had been at the site, but no one seemed to mention that Mo Mowlam had gone there. Therefore, there is a story to be told about the site. I understand that the hangars there have an impressive array of aircraft. I do not think that there is public knowledge about what is available on the site, but that would be part of the marketing that the new corporation would do.

I thank Members for their contributions. This is an exciting development opportunity that has enormous potential for our community and that is significant to our regional economy. As the chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party said of the Maze project:

“For 30 years the prison has been a symbol of conflict, division and the worst days of Northern Ireland’s history and troubles.

We are now able to offer a vision that is a symbol of hope for the future.”

I believe that the Assembly has shown a positive view of what can be grown and developed in this area. I also believe that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will give every support and assistance to the development corporation, and I know that Lisburn City Council will do likewise.

I commend the draft Order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2010 be approved.

Committee Business

Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion 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 Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its Inquiry into Participation in Sport and Physical Activity in Northern Ireland.

Thank you, Mr Speaker; go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Before commenting on the substantive matter that is before the House, I, as Chairperson of the Committee, would like to express my gratitude to the people and groups who contributed to the inquiry. I offer my appreciation to the Committee secretariat for its work in arranging the evidence sessions, formerly under the leadership of Dr Kathryn Bell, and, latterly, Lucia Wilson. I thank those Committee Clerks for helping to draft the report. I also express our appreciation to the Assembly’s Research and Library Services for the high quality research and analysis that it provided to the Committee, and I thank Hansard staff for their patient and accurate reporting of the evidence sessions.

The Committee is grateful to all those who provided written and oral evidence during the inquiry. I thank my Committee colleagues for their commitment to the inquiry and for the constructive and collegiate approach that they all adopted in trying to understand the barriers that hinder or prevent people from increasing participation in sport and physical activity and in trying to find ways to ensure that those barriers are overcome.

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

Sport and physical activity are an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. The Chief Medical Officer recommends that adults should engage in 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five times a week. However, that message is not necessarily getting through to the majority of

people. Leaders in the field of health and sport have found that, in this region alone, 2,000 deaths a year can be attributed to a lack of physical activity, a fact that was revealed during the inquiry when we heard from medical chiefs.

The Department of Culture, Art and Leisure's (DCAL) target under the Programme for Government 2008-2011 to halt the decline in levels of participation in sport and physical recreation is to secure 53% participation. That is to be welcomed, but it is clear that more needs to be done, as the inquiry found. In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee sought to identify and analyse the barriers and to consider the solutions to increase participation levels across the population as a whole, and, in particular, among groups with lower than average participation levels.

During the inquiry, a significant number of stakeholders informed the Committee that if the current situation pertains and continues, where there is no co-ordinated interdepartmental approach to tackle the low level of participation in physical activity and sport here, levels will continue to fall and the decline in the health and well-being of the population will have even greater economic and social consequences for this region as a whole. That is a worrying prediction that should concern us all.

As one of the witnesses put it:

"At government level, all Departments have a role to play in planning and working with education providers and the health and leisure industries. Indeed, they have a role in planning future housing, parks, road services and transport policies. All of those need to be integrated in order to impact on people and change their behaviour."

The Committee came to the firm conclusion that the Executive should prioritise the need to increase participation in sport and physical activity and, accordingly, should provide the necessary funding to implement 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019', in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. The Committee also concluded that the Executive need to champion participation in sport and physical activity and ensure that all relevant Departments are assigned targets for facilitating participation opportunities under the next Programme for Government. The Committee concluded that the Department of Health should invest more of its budget

in preventative health measures that involve participation in physical activity. The GP referral scheme, whereby patients are sometimes referred by GPs to leisure centre or gym provision where appropriate, is a good example of work in that field.

Although the inquiry focused on adults, the Committee recognised that a more focused and strategic approach needs to be taken to ingrain the sporting habit in children and young people. Research has found that if children and young people have a positive experience of sport and physical activity at an early age, the active lifestyle habit will be carried on into adulthood. In light of that, the Committee calls for more to be done by schools and sports clubs to encourage participation from early childhood until children leave formal education. As the inquiry progressed, we learned that there is a great deal of timetabling pressure in schools, meaning that physical education (PE) provision is often neglected or underprovided for. That is why the Committee has recommended that the Department of Education should assist schools to meet the target of providing two hours of PE every week and make it a priority for primary schools to meet that target.

4.45 pm

The Committee also engaged via video conference with Government officials from Finland, because the Finnish example is an excellent one; the Finns managed not only to halt the decline in sports participation but increased participation rates threefold. In learning from the Finnish example, the Committee hopes to enhance the sport habit in youngsters by calling on Sport NI, local government authorities, such as Belfast City Council and other district councils, and sports governing bodies to fund programmes to provide opportunities for families to participate as a unit in sport and physical activity.

Our Committee always welcomes presentations from the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the Irish Football Association (IFA) because they are such big players in the world of sport. I can point to good work being done in this area by the Gaelic Athletic Association as a model of best practice. There is an initiative I would like to draw attention to called Gaelic for Mums, which encourages mothers who drop their children off at underage training sessions to

remain and play themselves. That has become even more organised, and, in my own county, clubs such as Carrickmore St Colmcille's and Drumragh Sarsfields have excelled in providing opportunities for mums to play Gaelic sports.

As well as pointing to the need for creating a positive physical activity habit in our children and young people, the Committee came to the view that Departments, local government authorities and sports governing bodies need to do more to maximise the use of land and property under their control. Stakeholders gave details of how walkers, runners, joggers and cyclists could avail of land and properties under their control if permission were granted to open them to the public. That would enable people from lower-income communities and backgrounds — a group that the Committee found to have lower than average participation levels — to engage in informal and free physical activity, as well as other hard-to-reach groups.

In light of that, the Committee recommends that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and local government authorities continue to develop safe, well-lit walk and cycle paths, and we call on DRD to reduce speed limits on roads that form part of the national cycle network. The Committee also recommends that the Department of Education make school facilities more available to communities at evenings, weekends and during school holidays. Sports governing bodies should also maximise their facilities to encourage complementary physical activity.

The Committee recognises that employers have a key role to play in encouraging employees to participate; that should be incorporated into the wider focus on the promotion of work/life balance in the workplace. Investing in the promotion of physical exercise and health messages among employees not only increases physical health but a sense of mental well-being. I remember visiting the Royal Mail sorting office at Mallusk and thought that it was one of the best examples of employers providing employees with opportunities to participate, and many of them take advantage of that and come in an hour early to participate in sport and physical activity there.

The Committee recognises that there are hurdles to workplaces lending themselves to the promotion of participation. One witness said:

"In order for staff to do those things, there must be environmental changes to buildings, such as provision of showers, so that people who come to work by bicycle can shower and change their clothes if they wish. Therefore, many things must be integrated in order to encourage people at employment level."

As such barriers exist, the Committee recommends that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) provide targeted advice and assistance to employers in relation to the adoption of schemes such as Bike 2 Work and the altering of premises to assist in the creation of a work environment conducive to participation in physical activity. The Minister knows that we are lobbying her and her Department strongly to lead in that area as well.

It is clear that the importance of participating is not getting through to the majority of the population. The Committee heard worrying statistics that, in this region, 59% of adults are categorised as obese and 26% of children are categorised as either overweight or obese. As a society, we could be sitting on a time bomb if something major is not done to stop the increase in the sedentary nature of modern living, and we need to act now. Therefore, the Committee is in favour of a government-led advertising campaign that contains simple messages about how people can build organised sporting activity and informal physical activity into their everyday lives. Those messages need to be targeted, relevant and urgent.

During the Committee's evidence sessions, it heard that groups in our communities experience certain barriers and hindrances that cause them to have lower than average participation. Those groups include women, people with disabilities, older people, people with low incomes and ethnic minorities. The Committee recommends that Departments and local authorities do more to address specifically barriers to those groups in society and to create opportunities for them to have as equal an opportunity as the rest of the population to engage in physical activity.

As regards next steps, the majority of witnesses said that an interdepartmental co-ordinated approach is needed to tackle the decline in participation. All relevant Departments and their Ministers need to make new targets for creating participation opportunities under the next Programme for Government. If that is not done, the physical well-being of the public

will continue to decline until this region is left to face far-reaching economic and social implications. It is, therefore, in the interests of the public whom we serve to make that a priority in the new Assembly session. I assure the House that, as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I will endeavour to ensure that steps are taken to address the 24 Committee recommendations of the inquiry into participation in sport and physical activity. I commend the report to the House and seek its backing and support for the motion.

Aside from that, I commend the Minister, in the week that is in it, for sporting a Down tie.

Lord Browne: I welcome the Committee's report into sport and physical activity, and I thank the Committee Clerk and all the staff who put in many hours of hard work to produce an excellent report. The key components of the challenge to increase physical activity among the population are increasing access to good sports facilities and the public's awareness of them. I will, therefore, confine my remarks to one of the report's recommendations.

In many respects, the report addresses those components, which the Committee Chairperson outlined, and that is to be welcomed. Although the report identifies the fact that school facilities are part of the equation, I do not believe that it emphasises enough just how important they are. We know that many schools have dedicated sports pitches and facilities and that, in fact, many of them are required to have such facilities. However, in many cases, school facilities are of a better standard than neighbouring council pitches. For the past number of years, many schools across the rest of the UK have opened up their facilities for local communities to use. Generally, that has not been followed in Northern Ireland. There have, of course, been exceptions, some of which have been in my constituency, and I am sure that Members also know of other schools that have opened their facilities to the public. However, in many cases, far too many school pitches and classrooms have been left empty and unused while council facilities are becoming oversubscribed. Therefore, there is a lack of facilities for people to take part in physical recreation.

It is quite right that a considerable proportion of the report focuses on land in the ownership of Departments and local government. However, it does not really examine why schools have been

unable to make their facilities available to the local community before now. The failure for that does not lie entirely with the schools, and it may be due to the intransigence of the Department of Education and its Minister.

I am sure that Members are aware that, before the recess, I tabled a motion on this very subject. Whilst proposing that motion, I made the point that schools are expected, independently, to make their facilities available for community use. That means that for a school to open to the community it would have to spend a huge amount of time and resources on organising a programme, making the community aware of that programme and checking insurance issues and child protection legislation, all of which would divert valuable time and money from educating our children. That is why schools have not been able to make their excellent facilities available. I hope that the Department of Education will take note of that motion and help schools on those issues. Hopefully, we will then be able to implement the recommendations that are contained in the report. We are simply asking that the Minister of Education give guidance on how to do those things. It would then be easier for schools to co-operate and co-ordinate with local councils and to make their facilities available. The strategy, unfortunately, will not work unless schools are involved. However, schools cannot be involved unless the Minister of Education decides to help them. I hope that the Education Department will bring forward the strategy that the Assembly called for before the recess so that the aims of the report can succeed and so that society can benefit from it. Many excellent issues are contained in the report. I hope that the strategy will succeed and that people will become fitter and healthier.

Mr K Robinson: I, too, commend the report, and I thank the Committee Clerk and staff for all the hard work that they put in and all the patience that they have shown towards Committee members.

Although the Chairman gave very wide coverage of the body of the report, I want to concentrate my remarks on children and young people and the need to begin the process of physical education early. As most of us know, young children find no difficulty in expending energy in a variety of ways, some of which we would compliment them on and others which would give us the wobbles if we saw what they were

up to — climbing and running and diving and doing all sorts of strange things.

The report should act as a wake-up call to wider society. Although many of the recommendations that we have put forward focus on the governing bodies, Sport Northern Ireland and the wider sporting fraternity, its ultimate impact will be gauged by the number of people — the ordinary folk of Northern Ireland — who change their activity levels and lifestyles as a result of our recommendations and comments.

We all have a role to play in the process, and some Departments will find that their enthusiastic involvement and, at this early stage, a modicum of financial contribution will have a beneficial impact on the public's health, mental health and general quality of life. Financially, a small sum directed towards addressing our recommendations would have a substantial role in reducing Departments' future budgets and in addressing a variety of ailments and social inequalities. The Health, Education and Social Development Departments each stand to gain by joining DCAL to deliver on these issues.

There is strong evidence that the likelihood of adults taking regular exercise is influenced greatly by their experience of sport and physical activity as a child. Sadly, as has already been mentioned by the Chairman of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, only 17% of primary school children in Northern Ireland are provided with the recommended two hours of physical education a week. Obviously, there is scope for improvement, and PE must be given a higher status and a greater priority in our schools. I spoke to a school principal today about this, and he said that it would be very, very difficult to find the extra time unless some change is made in the Department of Education's approach to the primary curriculum. That was the downside. However, the upside is that he also told me that parents come to his school in the evening and that he sets aside space for them to carry out physical activity. That is an example of the family coming to one location and getting some sort of physical activity. The parents see the children learning and the children also see the parents learning. There is a cyclical effect, which could perhaps enhance future physical education levels.

5.00 pm

The Department of Education needs to be much more proactive and imaginative in assisting

schools to meet that two-hour minimum target. The Education and Training Inspectorate is a vital link in that. It goes in and inspects other areas of the curriculum; here is an opportunity to go in and reinforce the message that more physical activity needs to take place in schools.

The Minister of Education, who for a strange reason was mentioned again and again by Members, will get a mention from me, because she often tells us in other educational settings about the benefit of following the Finnish model and what Finland does best. Can I draw it to her attention that Finland is aiming at three hours of physical education in its schools? There is a model for the Department of Education to follow.

As well as setting aside the time, we have to be careful that an enjoyment factor is built into participating in sport and physical education generally, rather than the conscription that sometimes seems to overlay certain sports, whereby children who wish to engage in physical activity and use a certain sport as the vehicle to take that forward find themselves dragooned into a sport with which they have no affinity. Sadly, one sometimes gets the impression that not taking up that offer somewhat sets those children apart from the crowd. We need to look at that as well. Young people are entitled to follow the type of sport that they wish to follow.

Formal links between sporting clubs of all types and schools can help young people to make that transition between the primary school and secondary school and into adult life or further education. Some evidence suggests that there is quite a drop-off at that stage. We are entitled to physical education up to the age of 16; we would like to see that encouraged up to the age of 18, but we should also look at the gap between leaving that part of formal education and moving on to higher and further education or into the world of employment. Sporting clubs and schools could link together to make sure that more people carry forward their physical activities.

Sporting bodies need to put in place structures that facilitate lifelong learning and activity. The GAA, for example, reflects, as a person moves through their life cycle, the amount of activity in which they can safely engage, and then, as it goes over the peak, there is still physical activity in which they can safely engage as they reach the other side of the hill. We would like to reinforce that model of good practice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr K Robinson: Last but not least, we feel that the family that plays together stays together, thereby reducing many of their social problems. Therefore, we have encouraged Sport NI and local authorities to provide and expand a range of opportunities in which families may participate as a unit.

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

Mr K Robinson: I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr McCarthy: As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I support the report and recommend it to the Assembly. Like the Chairman and other members, I thank all the Committee staff, who were ever so helpful, as always, as we progressed through the report's findings. I also thank all the groups and individuals who responded to the consultation and the officials of the Department who helped. I welcome the presence of the Minister in the Chamber.

The Committee was aware of the shortcomings and inadequacies regarding participation in sport and physical activity across Northern Ireland. The report confirms that and makes 24 recommendations to put the matter right. Among them is the need to overcome barriers so that people are encouraged to become involved in some sort of recreation to improve their physical condition and mental well-being.

The report makes it clear that people from certain areas and backgrounds and from low-income families find it difficult to be motivated due to a lack of confidence, transportation, perhaps, and maybe even a lack of childcare provision. Those obstacles must be tackled to help people to get into healthy activity, which they would most certainly enjoy. We need programmes aimed at increasing participation among women, people with disabilities, ethnic groups and, of course, older people.

Our Committee leads by example. Members may recall that, when we started the inquiry some time ago, the Chairperson, Dominic Bradley and I set off to train, under the management of Ken Robinson, for Sport Relief. Due to Ken's expert management, Barry and I took part in Sport Relief. That shows that we lead by example and that, when people set their mind on something, they can do it.

I remind Members of another example of our leading from the front. Last week, a number of Committee members took part, very willingly, in the MLAs' football team. We were robbed after leading 2-0; we were absolutely robbed by May McFettridge. The Minister looks stunned: he does not believe me, but we were robbed after leading 2-0. Jackie Fullerton said that the man of the match was a 73-year-old goalkeeper. I know that I was man of the match, but I am not 73, so Jackie got it well wrong on that occasion.

Local government has a role to play, as councils could offer groups that experience barriers to participation the opportunity to use their leisure centres, perhaps during periods when there is a low uptake from the general public. The Committee recognises that all the issues mentioned affect people across our community, regardless of where they come from.

Chapter 3 of the report deals specifically with barriers to participation. Recommendation 14 suggests that Sport NI set targets for governing bodies to increase their participation rates as part of grant-funding packages. Perhaps Sport NI could consider that to encourage participation. As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I feel that it goes without saying that participation in sport contributes to a good, healthy lifestyle. We are aware that sporting bodies promote the healthy eating message, which can reduce obesity and other diseases that emanate from the lack of a healthy diet.

The Committee feels that there is a need for an interdepartmental policy, which has already been mentioned in relation to education.

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

Mr McCarthy: The report should be taken seriously by the Executive. As the Minister is here, I want to express my disappointment at the funding difficulties that have been experienced by Special Olympics Ulster. That is totally against the findings in the report. We want to see everybody participating in sport and recreation.

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

Miss McIlveen: The benefits of physical exercise have been well documented, as have the potential consequences of a lack of exercise. Regular exercise can assist in tackling the obesity problems that have been

increasing in the UK over the past number of years because of a much more sedentary lifestyle. Regular exercise has also been shown to help in the prevention of strokes, diabetes, osteoporosis and certain types of cancer.

In speaking about the report, I want to cover two broad themes: the need for a cross-departmental approach and developing employers' potential to increase their employees' participation in sport and physical activity.

Witnesses highlighted the fact that no organisation or Department has taken on the mantle of seeking to address declining levels of sporting participation and in particular physical activity, despite that clearly coming under the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The continuous household survey has revealed that 70% of the adult population of Northern Ireland are either inactive or are not taking enough exercise for it to be beneficial to their health. I declare an interest as one of those who make up the 70%. The result is that obesity levels have almost doubled in the past 25 years, and, according to Sport NI, 59% of adults in Northern Ireland are either overweight or obese.

The report before the Assembly shows the financial incentive that exists for Departments to address those problems. Witnesses from the British Medical Association advised the Committee that obesity causes around 450 deaths each year in Northern Ireland and drains the economy of around £500 million. Furthermore, the Committee was also informed that, were the problem of obesity to be addressed, it could save the Health Service in Northern Ireland £8 4 million and reduce work days lost to sickness by 170,000 days.

The report highlights the various barriers to participation, and there are ways in which our Departments can seek to overcome those barriers. It recommends that greater co-operation is needed across Departments and key stakeholders. It is essential that Departments such as DCAL, DHSSPS, DETI, the Department of Education, DRD, DARD and DOE be part of a cohesive approach to healthy living, physical exercise and associated issues across Northern Ireland.

DCAL's role is obvious, as it is directly responsible for sport. I have already highlighted the potential benefits of increased physical

activity to the Health Department. Responsibility rests with that Department to assist in the promotion of physical activity. It is also its responsibility to make it clear what levels of activity are required. The report also deals with the confusion surrounding the definition of physical activity. That also needs to be clarified.

The Department of Education plays a vital role in introducing physical activity and sport at an early juncture in our lives. We have heard that already from Mr Ken Robinson and Lord Browne. There is a huge sporting estate in Northern Ireland that could be opened up for wider use. That matter was brought before the Assembly by one of Mr Robinson's colleagues and by my colleague Lord Browne. A great deal of that estate is underused for large periods and could be used during the evenings, at weekends and during school holidays by the wider community.

The report highlights DRD's responsibility for the maintenance of the cycle network and safe walking areas, which are important to encourage more active means of travel. The report recommends that DRD seek to reduce the speed limit on roads that are part of the cycle network to improve safety and thereby encourage greater use of the network by cyclists.

DETI's role links in neatly with my second theme, which is the role of employers. The Committee recommends that DETI should promote the benefits of physical activity to employers. As I said, a huge number of work days are lost each year as a result of illness that could be prevented or at least minimised through adopting a much healthier lifestyle. It is of enormous benefit to employers to have a healthy, happy workforce. The Committee heard evidence on innovations by employers in Finland to enable staff to engage in sport and other activities, such as collaboration with leisure centres to give lower membership rates to employees and the establishment of company sports teams. Employers can further assist employees by making it easier for them to seek healthy means of travelling to work by installing changing facilities and providing bicycle storage.

Evidently, the various Departments have roles in increasing participation in sport, but it is very important that a co-ordinated approach be taken. Communication should ensure that there is no duplication of work and that funds and resources are wisely used. To do that, the Committee recommends that an

interdepartmental forum be introduced to develop policy intervention.

I thank the Committee staff and all those who contributed to the report. I commend the report to the House.

Mr Leonard: I endorse many of the points that my colleagues on the Committee made, and, in particular, I thank Committee staff, past and present, who have put so much work into the report. However, I do not endorse what seems to be a concentrated criticism of the Minister of Education. Yes, there are many issues about the schools estate that we must all take on board, but, given her sporting prowess and activity in sport, I am sure that the Minister will be very supportive. Perhaps if we set up ESA, we would get some funds to put towards this project.

5.15 pm

Let us put aside that little bit of politicking. In my remarks, I want to concentrate on the social marketing side of the report; that is, getting the message out. We can collate information from research, meetings and opinions, but, if we do not get the right message out successfully in the right way using the right methods, we could be in difficulty. There is much work ahead in deciding how to sell the message that people should increase activity in sport and general physical activity.

The social marketing side of the issue is about changing perceptions; it will not be about contributing to information overload. There will have to be some method by which we change perceptions. I will not rehearse the figures that my colleagues quoted, but they are startling. There needs to be a societal change of perception about the importance of the topic.

I recently heard on an RTE programme about the ever-growing number of people suffering from diabetes. There are many issues around that increase, one of which was activity levels among the population. The programme said that they had to be increased to combat diabetes.

The message must be inclusive; it cannot be germane merely to the main sporting clubs but must reach people who are involved in informal physical activity: the private person who walks or cycles or the family that goes hill walking at the weekend. It must embrace all those groups and individuals. We have to devise an inclusive,

straightforward message that gets home to everybody and is open to all.

We have to use all media to get the message out. We must stress that it is not about elitism; that point came out in the evidence sessions. It is not about expensive gym membership; increasing physical activity or engagement in sport is something that everybody can do. I can envisage a strapline and logo that could be embraced by the biggest GAA, rugby or soccer club in an area, but the same strapline and logo could be taken on by a private person who goes for a walk once a week, three times a week or every day. If we are to have a widespread effect, we must have an inclusive, punchy message.

Finland was mentioned, and I will briefly mention the Fit for Life programme, as we can take helpful aspects of its social marketing side. I am sure that there are other such schemes.

That brings us to the kernel of money. The report rightly recommends that the Executive fund the marketing message and advertising campaign. In recessionary times, our knee-jerk reaction is that there is not enough money. However, for the life of this and future generations, the money to market this idea could be an investment in health, well-being and in society at large. We have to look at it in that way.

Various Departments could contribute to the funding, as it concerns health, culture, arts and leisure, and education. Let us at this early stage, before we write the cheque, ensure that we do not get into departmental silos; the financial implications must be embraced by all Departments. If we get the right message across, using all the media, including the modern media that we have to engage with, that will create its own momentum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you draw your remarks to a close?

Mr Leonard: I will indeed. If we do that, the sporting fraternity, both clubs and private individuals, will embrace the message and sell it themselves.

Mr McCartney: Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an tuairisc seo. Most of what has needed to be said today has already been said, so I will not repeat it. I add my thanks to the Committee staff for their work and particularly thank those who gave evidence. I was particularly struck by the small conference that we held in the Long

Gallery. Not only did people come to promote their sport, they came with a view that they had to increase participation in sport, which I found very encouraging.

Contained in the report and in all the evidence that we gathered was the relationship between physical activity or sport and a healthy lifestyle. In many ways, it is a very obvious message. However, we received statistics throughout the inquiry that showed that participation in sport and physical activity among the adult population is decreasing. I found that a bit surprising given all the positive messages.

Last week, Kieran McCarthy was not man of the match, but he was certainly the surprise package. A number of bodies came together to ensure that a massive amount of resources have been put into what are excellent facilities. When the First Minister, Peter Robinson, opened the new facilities, he made the point that people who involve themselves in sport or physical activity automatically prevent themselves from using the health system unnecessarily.

One of the key messages from the report is that there should be co-operation among Departments. Although there has been a wee bit of it today, we should not see the matter as a finger-pointing exercise and blame this Minister or that Minister. If all the Ministers agreed that more money and resources should be put into sport and physical activity, we could save money.

Similarly, we should design our schools so that they are more usable by the community. The boards of governors have a responsibility, but school principals and staff say sometimes that they do not want communities to use their premises at night because classes can be disrupted the next morning. If we design our buildings in a particular way, they can be better used. We should call for better co-operation.

The report also looked at the idea of elite sports versus participation. I do not think that this is a case of elite sports versus participation or non-elite sports attacking elite sports. Where participation can be increased, elite sports should be encouraged to do so. Indeed, the presentation that the Committee received from Ulster Rugby, which is one of the elite sports, stated that attached to funding or any sort of programme should be targeted proposals for greater participation. That is the responsibility of Sport NI.

That is not to say that we should not finance elite sports; of course we should. Elite athletes are seen as role models by young people, and they will then get involved in physical activity. However, there is nothing particularly wrong or improper about asking elite sports, when they are putting together their programmes, to include proposals to increase physical activity. It comes back to the core point: as budget lines are being sought, we all see the massive strain on the Health Service. If we can come up with innovative ways — across Departments and with no Department feeling that it is immune or that the matter is the responsibility of another — of ensuring that we increase sport and physical activity, we will reduce the pressures on the Health Service and, in many ways, create more resources to spread about and keep the whole cycle going. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(Mr McCausland): I thank the Chairman, members of the Committee and Assembly staff for the time and effort that they put into preparing this important report. I also acknowledge and thank all the organisations and individuals who submitted evidence and views on this issue. I welcome the debate today and the contributions from Members.

As the Minister with responsibility for sport in Northern Ireland, I have, of course, followed the Committee's deliberations on the question of adult participation in sport and physical activity with considerable interest. I am aware of many of the presentations that it received as part of its inquiry. I was also very pleased and am grateful to the Committee for giving me an opportunity to make my own presentation to it on the subject, a fact that is well acknowledged in the report. Indeed, having received the report, I note straight away that I am quoted on a number of occasions. There are also frequent and extensive references to my recently published sports strategy, Sport Matters, which was developed by DCAL in partnership with the Department's arm's-length body Sport Northern Ireland.

I always welcomed the Committee's decision to undertake an inquiry into the causes of the decline in adult participation in sport and physical activity in Northern Ireland. Although physical activity — as distinct from sport and recreation — is not my responsibility, as sports Minister, I believe that the problems

of declining sports participation and declining physical activity are interrelated. I also believe that effective, well developed and properly constructed sports policies and programmes can contribute enormously to tackling the problem. That was one of the reasons why I was keen to put in place a new sport and physical recreation strategy for Northern Ireland that would set a clear framework for long-term development. In May 2010, after receiving Executive approval, I launched the strategy 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019'.

Since launching Sport Matters, I have established a Sport Matters monitoring group to oversee delivery and to approve and monitor action plans for implementation. The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Barry McElduff, spoke of the need for a cross-departmental approach, and I am sure that he will agree that the sort of approach that we are adopting for Sport Matters, in which a cross-departmental monitoring group will oversee delivery and approve action plans, is a good way forward. However, I was very much concerned by Barry McElduff's comment that I am sporting a tie that is in the colours of the Down team. In view of the fact that my tie is actually red, white and blue, one of two options must apply: either Barry McElduff needs to visit Specsavers or, possibly, Down intend to stride on to the pitch this weekend having abandoned their previous colours and bedecked in red, white and blue, which is something that Members on this side of the Chamber would welcome very much.

Mr McCartney: The Minister is right about the fact that they are going to change their colours, but, unfortunately, they are going to wear yellow.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: If the Member had said orange, I might have been happy. Certainly, red, white and blue would be even better.

I chair the meetings of the cross-departmental group, which brings together senior representatives of Departments and agencies with responsibility for sport, health, education, employment, social development and the environment; we really are bringing together quite a range of Departments. Already, the arrangements for implementing Sport Matters are being advanced, as is the preparation of detailed action plans for delivery. That

implementation and delivery is being co-ordinated by Sport Northern Ireland, which is also mentioned in the Committee's report and recommendations.

The question that may fairly be asked is: how does all that relate to the issue under debate, namely the evident fall in adult participation in sport and physical activity? In my foreword to Sport Matters, I identified the need to halt the decline in adult participation, and I stated that that was an early and key priority for the strategy. Beyond that and within the life of Sport Matters, I have set a target to increase adult participation rates by 3% from whatever baseline is established in 2011. That is an ambitious goal.

As Sport Matters makes clear and as the Committee report seems to recognise, no one person or organisation can single-handedly solve the problem of declining sports participation. A range of factors and societal issues contribute to the situation. If we are to succeed, we need a collaborative, joined-up approach, such as that recommended in the strategy. Moreover and as the Committee report also appears to suggest, one cannot separate the issues affecting adult participation rates from, for example, children's participation.

One cannot separate it from the challenges facing other groups that are currently under-represented, such as women, people with disabilities, those suffering socio-economic disadvantage and older people. One cannot separate it from our facilities deficit.

5.30 pm

In that context, it is pleasing to note that the Committee appears to have considered at least some of the more holistic issues affecting adult participation. The report refers to improving children's participation and improving facilities or places for sport and physical activity. Chapter 2 contains obvious references to under-representation among certain categories of people, and those themes are mirrored in Sport Matters.

It is important to make the point at this stage that low participation and under-representation are complex issues that go beyond section 75 categories: they are multifactorial. The availability and accessibility of facilities and services to all in the community, irrespective of categories, is an important factor and so is the quality of those facilities and services. Issues

with performance sport, sports science and coaching, none of which are directly mentioned in the Committee's recommendations, also have an impact.

Sport Matters recognises those realities. It makes the case for a fully holistic approach to the development of sport based on three key pillars: participation, places and performance. It insists that the problems, needs and failures are cross-cutting and that solutions must be widely owned. It identifies roles for central government, a range of Departments, local government, Sport Northern Ireland, sports governing bodies, the voluntary and community sector, the private sector, schools, coaches, athletes, sports science, the media and employers.

Obviously, no improvements can be delivered without effective and properly targeted investment. Up to now, I have been able to use Sport Matters to make the case not just for protecting existing investment in sport but for placing it on a stronger financial footing than previously. Even so, as everyone knows, we are now facing a much more challenging budgetary environment. My Department is likely to face considerable pressures and difficult policy choices in the near future. In turn, that pressure will almost certainly feed through to DCAL's arm's-length bodies, such as Sport Northern Ireland. It, too, may have to take some very tough decisions over the coming years on priorities and what needs to be delivered. Therefore, my Department is working with Sport Northern Ireland on planning scenarios on which decisions have yet to be taken.

Some Members may be concerned about the implications of all that on our ability to fully deliver, and I understand those concerns. However, the present financial situation makes stronger the case for the type of collaborative working and sharing of resources that Sport Matters and, as it now appears from the Committee's report, the Committee require. More than ever, Ministers, Departments and other stakeholders need to look imaginatively at ways of supporting each other practically and financially. I made that point in my evidence to the Committee inquiry last April, and I also outlined to the Committee some of the steps that I have already taken. I further suggested that the Assembly and its Committees have an important part to play in encouraging greater collaboration within government and between Departments on the issue of participation.

On that basis, I welcome the fact that the recommendations in the Committee's report are not solely aimed at sports organisations. Sport certainly has a vital role to play: however, so do many other sectors. The content of the report suggests that the Committee accepts and recognises that fact. Recommendations are aimed at Departments, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Clearly, the Ministers concerned must respond to those recommendations.

All I will say at this stage is that, if what Sport Matters envisages can be achieved, the benefits will be wide-ranging. The Committee report rightly places strong emphasis on the role of sport and physical activity as an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. Sport Matters also recognises that link. In fact, it sets out substantial evidence on the vital contribution that sport and physical activity can make to health and well-being.

However, that is not the only benefit. In addition to the health value, Sport Matters provides compelling evidence of the contribution that well-structured sporting activity can make to educational attainment, economic growth, tourism, combating crime and the development of communities. It also suggests that sport has an intrinsic value as a key part of our culture and that any decline in participation should, therefore, be of concern to us all.

I welcome Ken Robinson's point that we should also remember the enjoyment to be had from sport. Indeed, if people enjoy sport, they are more likely to take part in it and in other forms of physical activity.

Kieran McCarthy referred to the Special Olympics Ulster, and I assure him that DCAL has taken the lead on behalf of a number of Departments and prepared a business case for its funding. That business case has been circulated to other Ministers to seek their views on future funding — £2.6 million is required over four years — and on the way forward. That is another issue that requires a cross-departmental approach, and I hope that there will be support from all the Departments that are coming together on it. The Department is awaiting those responses.

I am delighted that the report is now available and that I received a copy in the past few days. The Committee has offered me an opportunity to respond to its recommendations by 12 November 2010. Given the circumstances and the importance of the issues that the Committee report raises, it is right to take time to prepare a full and considered response to those recommendations. I will give the report the attention that it deserves and provide my comments on the recommendations by the date requested.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Loan): At the outset, I apologise for the absence of my colleague Thomas Burns. He is a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and wanted to speak on the issue, but, for unavoidable reasons, he is unable to be here.

When listening to the little interchange about the colour of the Minister's tie, I think that I heard him say that he will give his full support to Down in the all-Ireland football final on Sunday.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Perhaps the Minister should hand up his tie for independent verification. *[Laughter.]* It looks very much like a Down tie from here; it seems to be red and black rather than red and navy. Tyrone are also playing on Sunday in the minor final, and if the Minister is not making use of his tickets, Willie Clarke, John O'Dowd and I would like to do business with him.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: If the tie is red and black, it is for Crusaders Football Club.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I thank the staff in the Assembly secretariat for their assistance. I particularly want to place on record my and the Committee's appreciation of all the organisations that provided evidence to the Committee as part of the inquiry. A wealth of experience and expertise was generously provided to the Committee by community groups, sporting bodies, Departments and local government, and it was all very useful. I trust that when those who gave evidence to the Committee read the report, they will see their comments reflected in it.

I also want to thank all Members who contributed to the debate this afternoon. In his opening

remarks, the Chairperson of the Committee, Barry McElduff, set the context well and touched most bases that are addressed in the report. He told the House, in rather stark terms, that 2,000 deaths per annum in Northern Ireland are attributable to physical inactivity, which makes us focus on the significance of the issue.

Lord Browne spoke about the importance of schools' facilities. He told the House that those facilities are often better than council pitches and called, as he has before, for them to be made more readily available to the public. I will not join him in his critique of the Minister of Education, as that has been adequately rehearsed.

Ken Robinson, when addressing the issue of children and young people, correctly told the House that directing a small amount of money to the recommendations of the report can make a big difference to its sought outcomes. No doubt he was reflecting on his experiences as a schoolteacher when he told us, again wisely, that the experience of children is critical and that it should worry us that only 17% of schools provide the recommended two hours of physical education and sport a week. He gave examples of the good provisions that are provided by a school that makes its facilities available to, and encourages, whole families to use them.

Again, he rightly emphasised that it is not only the amount of time that is spent on physical activities but the quality of the experience that is important; that will have a considerable bearing on whether children continue to be involved in sports as they make the transition to adulthood. Therefore, the likes and desires of young people must be closely examined. We note that that transitional stage is significant, and people often stop taking part in sporting activities during that time.

The report refers to some encouraging links between sporting bodies and schools, which are not always easy to maintain. By their nature, there happens to be some silo working there. That point is worth making, and such links should be encouraged.

Sporting bodies need to develop strategies for lifelong involvement in their sports. It is right that the GAA is cited as a model of best practice. Other sporting bodies could benefit from looking at that practice.

Kieran McCarthy rightly discussed the barriers to participation that particular groups face. Some groups are well known for low levels of participation, and he referred to women, disabled people, older people, those on low incomes and those from ethnic minorities. Local government can play a role, and Kieran referred to the possibility of them simply offering their facilities at a time when demand is, in any case, low. Some local authorities have used other mechanisms, such as reducing or removing charges for certain categories of people, for example those on low incomes. He approved of providing participation targets for sports bodies as a condition of funding. Another Member referred to the fact that Ulster Rugby advocated the setting and meeting of such targets.

Kieran made a special case for Special Olympics Ulster. I note what the Minister said about that, and I commend him for what he is doing. I hope that that can be carried through to eventual success in conjunction with other Departments.

Michelle McIlveen summarised well and persuasively the benefits of greater participation in sport in addressing obesity. She referred to the challenges that come from the sedentary lifestyles that many of us indulge in nowadays, the consequences of which are illnesses such as strokes, heart disease and diabetes.

She discussed the need for a cross-departmental approach and cited the seven Departments that are involved, with none of them taking ultimate and overall responsibility. She placed a particular responsibility on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. She was right to do so, because that Department has a particular responsibility and opportunity on that issue. Recently, there has been a significant shift towards a public health approach, and we now have a large Public Health Agency that places an emphasis on prevention rather than cure. There is also a focus on lifestyles and addressing issues such as smoking and drinking. I do not recall whether it is in the report, but celebrations in sports are often focused around alcohol, which is an issue that sporting bodies should address. There is a particular challenge for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Of course, that is another example of an invest to save process. The difficulty with invest to save processes is that although we make an

investment now, we will not see savings until, potentially, many years later. That is a real difficulty but not one that must turn us away from attempting to address the issue.

5.45 pm

The issue of who will co-ordinate the cross-departmental activity is significant. The Minister addressed that and referred to the cross-departmental delivery group that is already in place to deal with Sport Matters, the NI strategy for sport. We want some of our recommendations to find their way into public service agreements (PSAs) in particular Departments, which will then have responsibility for their delivery. In some cases, PSAs might be cross-departmental with a lead Department. However, I think that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister should have a residual role to ensure that Departments write those PSAs and deal with them.

Michelle McIlveen pointed out that simple measures, such as providing cycleways and safe walking spaces, are of real benefit. She enumerated well the roles that different Departments can take in that regard.

Our culture and lifestyle approach needs to be altered significantly, and achieving that culture change is not easy. Billy Leonard described that as social marketing and referred to the Finnish example, which is certainly very striking. We need to embark upon putting out that healthy message, and many different groups in our society, including sports organisations, have a role to play. Some of that does not need to involve cost. People can feed off others in the community who express messages about attitudinal change. Therefore, it is important that everyone who hears those messages passes them on loudly. Billy Leonard is right to point out that the Finnish example, which is quoted in the document, was an expensive campaign. That presents a real challenge. He also, rightly, pointed out that we have not recommended activity that involves elite sports and expensive gymnasiums only. Many of the activities that we are talking about need not involve great expense.

Raymond McCartney, essentially, endorsed a number of the same messages that other Members had spoken about.

I welcome the Minister's response. He was positive about the report, and we await his

formal response. Although today represents the conclusion of the Committee's inquiry, it is not the end of the matter as far as the Committee is concerned. We will look at his formal response with interest to see how he intends to respond to our recommendations.

In conclusion, the Committee hopes that the report has helped to highlight the need to address the decrease in participation levels in a much more targeted and cross-departmental manner. We call on the Minister to draw on the evidence that is collected in the report and to commit to new targets for creating participation opportunities in sport and physical activity under the next Programme for Government. I commend the report to the House and ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its Inquiry into Participation in Sport and Physical Activity in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.49 pm.



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