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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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

Monday 1 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Ministerial Appointment: Minister for Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: I have been notified that Sir Reg Empey has tendered his resignation as Minister for Employment and Learning to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in accordance with section 18(9)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The resignation was effective from 27 October 2010.

In accordance with section 18(10) of the Act, the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Tom Elliott, has nominated Mr Danny Kennedy to hold the office of Minister for Employment and Learning. Mr Kennedy affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, as set out in schedule 4 to the Act, in the presence of the Deputy Speaker, Mr Francie Molloy, and the Director of Clerking and Reporting on 27 October. I therefore confirm that Mr Kennedy has taken up office as Minister for Employment and Learning.

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: I have received the resignation of Mr Danny Kennedy as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The resignation took effect from 27 October 2010. The party's nominating officer, Mr Tom Elliott, has nominated himself as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, also with effect from 27 October, and has taken up the appointment. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met, and I confirm Mr Tom Elliott as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with effect from 27 October.

Public Petition: Student Loans

Mr Speaker: Mr Pat Ramsey has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Speaker, I thank you and the Business Committee for allowing me to present the petition.

On 14 May 2010, the Russell Group presented proposals for student loans across Britain. A campaign was launched at that time in opposition to those proposals, particularly the one that stated that graduates should be asked to start repaying their student loan earlier and at a much higher interest rate. I want to present this petition to you.

Mr Ramsey moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Employment and Learning and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Ministerial Statement

Ministerial Visit to USA

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

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the United States/Northern Ireland economic conference that took place in Washington DC on Tuesday 19 October.

I attended the event with the deputy First Minister, Minister Foster, former Minister Empey and the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Alban Maginness. I join others in thanking Sir Reg Empey for the role that he performed as Minister for Employment and Learning. He always acted enthusiastically and in the best interests of the community as a whole. I wish him well in the future. Privately, we have already congratulated and welcomed the new Minister for Employment and Learning, Mr Danny Kennedy, and we look forward to working with him.

As Members are aware, the Executive have placed growing the economy and tackling disadvantage firmly at the centre of our Programme for Government. Our goal is to grow a dynamic, innovative economy, and we are investing to further that ambition. The increased globalisation of economies and the current economic downturn are creating enormous challenges for all Administrations. If Northern Ireland is to be competitive, we must respond positively to those challenges by exploiting our strengths and capitalising on all new opportunities. It is equally important that we maximise the opportunities for international collaboration, particularly in crucial markets such as the United States of America.

North America is the second largest market for our manufacturers. Annually, over \$1.8 billion of goods are exported to North America, which equates to 20% of all our exports. We have sought to deepen our important economic relationship with the United States where inward investment, trade and tourism are concerned. The appointment of Declan Kelly as the US economic envoy to Northern Ireland has helped to fast-forward that engagement.

In furthering our economic agenda, the deputy First Minister and I travelled to Washington DC to participate in a series of high-profile business events focusing on encouraging trade, investment and collaboration in research. The purpose of our visit was to participate in the US/NI economic conference, hosted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and in other business and research and development-related events that Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Bureau organised.

Prior to the conference, the deputy First Minister and I participated in a joint meeting of the US and Northern Ireland working groups that support Declan Kelly's mission, whose members include representatives from the private sector, the universities and commercial organisations. We acknowledged the important role that both groups played in raising awareness and in helping to increase trade and investment between the US and Northern Ireland. Their ongoing support is crucial, and we are grateful for the time and energy that those groups gave and still give to supporting our work.

We were delighted that the economic conference was hosted by Secretary of State Clinton at the United States Department of State. Business leaders representing some of the largest international companies already operating in Northern Ireland, including Allstate, NYSE Euronext, Liberty Mutual, Caterpillar, Citi, Tyco International Ltd, Coca-Cola, Terex Corporation, Seagate and many others were in attendance. The calibre of attendees from potential investors was also exceptional and included several Fortune 500 companies, almost all of which were represented by global heads, chief executives or board chairpersons. Several of the companies represented are multibillion-dollar corporations, and it was estimated that, in total, over \$1 trillion of commercial power was represented at the conference.

Secretary of State Clinton delivered the opening remarks and spoke with great conviction about Northern Ireland and its potential for US investors. She expressed her strong personal commitment and that of the President to encouraging investment and reiterated the Administration's support for our goal of promoting prosperity and opportunity in Northern Ireland.

At the conference proceedings, Maria Bartiromo, the leading financial commentator with CNBC, moderated two round-table sessions, which gave

existing investors the opportunity to comment on their experience of doing business in Northern Ireland and their rationale for choosing Northern Ireland as an investment location. All the company executives spoke positively about their experiences, and their testimonies were most compelling in highlighting why investing in Northern Ireland makes sound commercial sense. A key element in their decision to invest and to expand their businesses centred on the people of Northern Ireland, the young, well-educated workforce and their loyalty to the companies that employ them. The business leaders also spoke about the quality of the education system, the important role played by our universities and Invest Northern Ireland and the reasons why Northern Ireland was a business-friendly environment. We were particularly heartened to hear investors speak in glowing terms about their relationship with Invest Northern Ireland.

The conference also featured sector-specific breakout sessions. Those were co-chaired by members of the US and Northern Ireland working groups and focused on financial services, global services and technology and creative media. The discussions proved fruitful in identifying issues that could help to make Northern Ireland more attractive and competitive. It also assessed the benefits that Northern Ireland can offer to US companies in addressing the challenges that many corporations are facing during these difficult economic times.

We were delighted to be able to make two investment announcements during the conference. First, the Dow Chemical Company, one of the largest chemical companies in the world, with annual sales of \$45 billion and 52,000 employees across the globe, will establish a design and modify supply chain centre in Belfast. That will create 25 new high-quality jobs, which will generate almost £1 million in salaries annually. Secondly, the Terex Corporation will create 35 new high-skilled jobs in County Tyrone through a £1.7 million investment. That investment involves Terex locating its European global business centre in Northern Ireland and is an acknowledgment of the value placed on our local capabilities and the support that Invest Northern Ireland can offer.

It is worth noting that those job announcements were agreed before the conference began and were not as a result of it. The deputy First

Minister and I held initial discussions with senior executives from the Dow Chemical Company about investing here as recently as June this year. The investment announcement at the conference, which came a mere five months later, sends out a positive message to investors that the Executive are very much pro-business, proactive and can turn around an investment in a short time.

The deputy First Minister, Sir Reg Empey and I also hosted a joint working breakfast with the Governments of the United States and the Republic of Ireland to acknowledge the success of the US-Ireland research and development partnership. The partnership, which was established after the 2002 US-Ireland business summit, aims to increase the amount of collaborative research and development among researchers and industry across the three jurisdictions. The partnership is playing an important role in advancing research in the fields of diabetes, cystic fibrosis, nanotechnology and sensor technology. We were delighted to use the occasion to announce funding of almost \$7 million for a new research project on cystic fibrosis, which is of great importance for healthcare globally. That is the seventh project funded to date under the partnership, which now represents a total investment by the three Administrations of some \$19 million, all focused on issues of genuine socio-economic priority.

We were also delighted to announce a new agreement involving the US National Science Foundation, which will allow the partnership to extend into two new research areas: telecommunications and energy/sustainability. That ongoing commitment to research collaboration is a strong reflection of the close relationship between leading academics across the jurisdictions and the strategic importance of our relationship with the United States. It also underscores the importance that the Executive attach to research, development and innovation.

I am confident that the activity supported under the partnership will lead to real economic benefits through the creation and exploitation of new products and to further vital improvements for society in disease prevention and healthcare.

12.15 pm

While in Washington, we were also able to lend our support to the local aerospace industry. As Members are aware, the Executive are committed to that sector. We have given our

support to help secure the design, development and manufacture of the composite wing for Bombardier's new CSeries aircraft for Belfast. The sector is vitally important to the Northern Ireland economy; it already employs more than 8,000 people and accounts for some 11% of our manufactured exports.

In a bid to increase business between Northern Ireland and the US in the aerospace sector, we facilitated a business seminar at which nine local aerospace companies met major US aerospace companies. That provided the opportunity for our companies to meet buyers from four major US aerospace firms. Those one-on-one meetings proved very successful in enabling our companies to showcase their world-class expertise in a bid to gain new business and to increase trade partnerships with the US.

In the political sphere, we used our visit to further build on our important relationship with the American Administration. We had a very positive and constructive private meeting with Secretary of State Clinton, followed by a joint press conference. We updated Secretary Clinton on developments in Northern Ireland and discussed how we could best progress our economic and social agenda and further our links with the US. The Secretary fully endorsed our condemnation of the recent violence by dissidents, and she underlined the US Administration's support for the rule of law here.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our deepest sympathy to the family of our official photographer on the US visit, the late John Harrison MBE. John was well known and highly respected by many here today, both as a great photographer and as an exceptional human being. He will be sadly missed.

In summary, our visit to the US enabled us to participate in an important series of high-profile events to promote Northern Ireland as an international location for investment and for collaboration on research and development. The conference was an outstanding success in giving us an unprecedented opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland and to promote our business model to a select, highly targeted group of senior executives from some of America's most successful and best-known companies. Senior business leaders spoke in glowing terms about the strengths of the Northern Ireland workforce; the competitive

cost base, such as the competitive cost of office space; the robust infrastructure; the business-friendly environment; and the world-class reputation of our universities and research institutions.

The conference would not have been possible without Secretary of State Clinton's personal commitment. We are grateful for the amount of time that the Secretary devoted on the day. Her ongoing involvement and interest demonstrates very clearly the importance that she personally and the US Administration at the highest level place on Northern Ireland. I would like to acknowledge the role of the economic envoy, Declan Kelly, and to express our thanks to him and his team for the outstanding enthusiasm and commitment that they have shown. I would also like to express our appreciation to the US consul general in Northern Ireland and her colleagues in the State Department for their invaluable assistance. I also want to put on record our appreciation to Norman Houston and his staff at the Northern Ireland Bureau for all their work and the enthusiasm that they bring to the task.

The conference has laid an important foundation for future investment opportunities. Invest Northern Ireland has developed a strategic follow-up plan to maximise the opportunity that has been created by the conference. Investment arising as a direct result of the conference could take up to three years to come to fruition. We are confident that other positive news will emerge as the result of our visit, and we will keep the Assembly informed.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for the update on the American economic conference. I welcome the announcement of two investments during the conference. Does the First Minister expect that the conference will ultimately lead to further announcements of jobs in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: I can say with some certainty that it will. There have been follow-up activities already. We have had very positive conversations. Clearly, not all can be turned around with the speed that we turned around the Dow Chemical Company jobs. That should not be underestimated. Sometimes, I listen to the naysayers and doom-mongers that we have on television from time to time, who say: "You know, 25 or 35 jobs, well that's not much, is it?". The one thing that we found is that, if

we can get American companies into Northern Ireland, not only do they stay in Northern Ireland, they reinvest in Northern Ireland. Seventy per cent of the companies that we have brought here have reinvested, and that is a marvellous statistic to convince people to come to Northern Ireland. It shows that people, having tasted what is here in Northern Ireland, want more.

We have that initial investment from the Dow Chemical Company, and I have every expectation that there will be further investment once they see the quality of the workforce that we have here. So, aside from the announcements that were made at the conference, I expect that there will be further announcements within weeks and months.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. It is important to keep up the work of building ties with our business partners throughout the world, especially in America because of the investment opportunities that we have there. Will that work continue? Do we know how many jobs that could realise over the next number of years?

The First Minister said in the latter part of his speech that it could take up to three years, but do we know how much investment money in total that could bring to the North? That is a very important issue, and it is important that we continue to do that work. I would appreciate the Minister's views on that.

The First Minister: My colleagues the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment and Learning are not present, so I can speak with more freedom. The one thing that came out of the various meetings that we had in Washington, especially from the US investors who are already here, was that the major selling point for them was the relationship between the universities and companies and the backup support they got from Invest Northern Ireland.

Our Departments very often do not get the credit that they deserve. Officials are beavering away all the time in encouraging those jobs to come in. The work will continue. There is that good relationship between Invest Northern Ireland and those companies. I know that it was the experience of the deputy First Minister as well that, if you were permitted to be proud, you could not have sat through the sessions of that economic conference without a sense of pride about the people of Northern Ireland and how

highly they were regarded by the investors who were there.

It is the first time, I think, that we have had a conference of that type. On previous occasions, we had an Ideal Home Exhibition-type of conference, where you open the doors, showcase things, encourage people to come in and hope that somebody somewhere will see something and decide to come back. That is very much a hit-and-miss affair. This conference had a much more targeted approach. We looked at big companies worldwide that could make a difference and which we knew would be investing over the next number of years in the sort of areas that we have been trying to attract to Northern Ireland. We got the global senior players there, and that was down to the Administration, particularly the President, the Secretary of State and Declan Kelly using their influence to ensure that the top people were there. I understand that the airport was filled with the business jets of dozens of companies whose CEOs and board chairmen were at the gathering. Therefore, we were talking to high-quality personnel, and I have no doubt that having such high-grade decision-takers there will bear fruit. I look forward to being part of the announcements that will be made in the weeks and months ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred on three or four occasions to the quality of education and research at our universities. If our brightest and best are to continue to play their role in drawing in investors, what does the Minister feel about the university fees situation on the day that is in it? We should continue to have ability to learn rather than ability to pay.

Are there plans to have similar conferences or links with other, evolving world powers, such as China and India?

The First Minister: I will not get embroiled in the issue of university fees, but I will emphasise the importance of third-level education. In winding up the session, I made the point that our US investors emphasised the importance of universities, the links that they have with them and, even more so, the positive nature and willingness of the universities to collaborate with them. It seems that the relationship that we have between government, companies and the universities is unique to Northern Ireland, and that was attractive to them. I made the

comment there, so I am not being forced to make it now: when the Executive start to look at their Budget and areas in which they have to look for cuts, they should use only a light touch — if they touch the Department for Employment and Learning at all — particularly in this area of expenditure, because it pays back dividends.

The Member mentioned emerging countries, such as China and India. Whether we will have links by way of conferences in those countries is an issue, but I know that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been in both those countries, encouraging investment in Northern Ireland, and we have seen some fruit from those visits.

Dr Farry: I thank the First Minister for his statement and recognise the political leadership of the Obama Administration, including Secretary of State Clinton and Declan Kelly. I am sure that the First Minister picked up from his visit that the outsourcing of jobs is a major issue in the current US midterm elections. To what extent was that issue raised by the companies concerned? In a similar vein, did the companies raise the issue of a lower rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland as something that would further encourage them to invest here? In light of the problem of potential double taxation that US companies face, would a lower rate of corporation tax here mitigate that problem for them?

The First Minister: I will take the latter question first. The issue was raised at a session by way of a question from one of our colleagues. The answer given was that the rate of corporation tax would not make any difference. However, the person who answered the question was someone who takes their product back to the United States, and, therefore, it would not have made any difference to them. When the committee looked at those issues, one of the work groups came back very quickly with the opposite view. The overwhelming view was that a reduction in corporation tax would be an added attraction. I think that that was probably the more settled view of the conference.

I have forgotten the first part of the Member's question.

Dr Farry: I asked about the outsourcing of jobs.

The First Minister: Outsourcing is an issue in which government is going to be more interested than companies. Companies look at

their bottom line and at where it is most cost-competitive to be. If it is cheaper for them to get a product elsewhere, they will get it elsewhere. The only factor that we have to build in is whether there are any regulations or constraints imposed on them. It is a two-way process. I recall going with the deputy First Minister to visit a major company in Northern Ireland that was taking 1,000 jobs to the USA. A Northern Ireland company was starting jobs in the USA. That is what a relationship and partnership is about: it benefits both sides of the partnership.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Following the recent US conference, will the First Minister consider the East Londonderry constituency to be a priority for US inward investment due to the devastating job losses in recent weeks and months? I am not being parochial, but we have suffered a big blow.

The First Minister: I think that each Member will make a case for their own constituency. Our job is to encourage investment in Northern Ireland and, where there is mobile investment, to try to encourage people to take that investment to the areas where it is most needed. I assure the Member that East Londonderry is never out of my mind, and I trust that there will be such a spread of jobs.

12.30 pm

Let us be clear: from one end of Northern Ireland to the other is a very small distance, especially in American terms. If jobs are created in one place, they are freed up in another. Jobs are mobile. They can be moved. I will not do a Lord Tebbit and tell people in East Londonderry to get on their bikes. However, I will say that there is nowhere in Northern Ireland that could not comfortably be reached in a day's journey. I recall the Member for Mid Ulster telling me about all the civil servants from Cookstown and so forth who come down to Belfast for their jobs. If we can get jobs into Northern Ireland, that is advantageous to all its people. Clearly, if they are not specific-location-based jobs, we can take them to where there is greatest need. Ultimately, however, when investment is sought, it is investors who will decide, for their own peculiar reasons, where their businesses will be best placed.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The First Minister said that the working groups identified issues that could make the North more attractive and competitive,

and that the issue of corporation tax was raised regularly by a number of companies. Can he elaborate on what the other key issues were?

The First Minister: I talked about how the conference differed from previous conferences. The difference was that it was a much more focused event. We looked for individuals and brought them in, rather than simply casting our net widely.

The other great difference with the conference was that we brought with us leading companies that have already come to Northern Ireland from the United States. We allowed them to speak and to describe their experiences to their US colleagues. The deputy First Minister and I could have spoken day after day about the benefits of Northern Ireland, which is what everyone there would have expected us to do. We would say that, would we not? Therefore, it is much more convincing for people whom they know, whose businesses they respect and who have gone to Northern Ireland, to give details of the messages that they bring back. Overwhelmingly, those messages are about Northern Ireland's young, well-educated and highly skilled population and low churn rate. One businessman gave the example of a business that he had set up in India: it had had a 44% churn rate. That means new people had to be trained into those jobs, with the additional costs and disruption that that caused. In his business in Northern Ireland, the churn rate is less than 5%. That loyalty factor is a major contribution.

In telecommunications, we have very good links and broadband compatibility, and we are now going for the next generation of broadband. Project Kelvin and the data transfer rates that we can get between here and North America are particularly important for companies in the finance sector.

Perhaps the chief point is the fact that the Government are business-friendly and it is easy to do business with them. From an investor's point of view, that is important. Many businesspeople do not have direct access to Government. In Northern Ireland, they have that direct link. Because it is a small country, the Government can afford to do that. Northern Ireland's "six Cs" are often mentioned by Invest Northern Ireland: first, it is cost-competitive; secondly, it is culturally compatible; and, thirdly, it is close to the customer. Northern Ireland is a base that gets people close to Europe and to

any European customers that they might have. Regardless of the issue of corporation tax, Northern Ireland has a good product to sell.

Mr Humphrey: With regard to the ongoing Budget review, how many areas are being considered for potential inclusion in the cuts scheme?

The First Minister: The Programme for Government's commitment to economic growth still stands. As I said this morning — in a party context, but it is just as relevant in this context — for people to get fixated, as we look at the Budget, simply on looking at where to make cuts will do nothing for our strategy to move society forward and to stimulate the economy. We have to recognise that we are having cuts imposed on us, and we have to deal with the new set of circumstances that we face, although we will still fight in some areas where we believe it is right to do so.

At our awayday at Greenmount College, the Executive took two factors into consideration. First, we recognised that we need to continue with a policy that will grow our economy and, secondly, we recognised that, where there is a downturn or a recession, predictably, the people who suffer most are those who are already suffering, who are in poverty, who are experiencing deprivation or who live in areas of disadvantage. We need to have programmes to deal with those issues so that the lot of those people does not get more difficult to bear.

The Executive have not reached agreement on the Budget but they have agreed the timetable that they have to commit to. The Executive's policy review group is looking at what the steps should be, and I expect that, within the next couple of weeks, I will be in a better place to answer the kind of question that the Member has asked. However, when it comes to growing our economy, I do not believe that we should slice the knife too deeply, because that will cause real damage to Northern Ireland's future ability to grow the economy and to stimulate the private sector.

Mr McCallister: When the First Minister spoke about the aerospace industry, I hope that he was including what could be looked at for Kilkeel, given the important reliance that we in South Down have on the industry.

The First Minister said that the conference was a targeted one. What follow-up does he see as

being vital to building on the networks that have been made? Will he build corporation tax into a strategy to develop and to get the most out of the conference and the obvious interest that the US still has in investing in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: I take the Member's point about Kilkeel entirely. We have a very good example in the South Down area of a company that is based in — he will forgive me for saying this — a remote location yet is a leader in the work that it does in the aerospace industry, taking around one third of the sector that it is involved in. It does not matter how rural a business may be, there are still opportunities if there are people with the drive, enthusiasm and ability to take it forward. Those people are an example. Indeed, I think that they were present at the event that we hosted in Washington.

I have long been a supporter of having a lower level of corporation tax. Our economy is out of kilter and needs to be rebalanced. The public sector is far too dominant. We need to encourage the private sector. That is also recognised by Her Majesty's Government. The Secretary of State consistently talks about the fact that we need to rebalance our economy in Northern Ireland. However, the one way not to rebalance the economy in Northern Ireland is to take 40% of capital spend out of the Budget, because it is that, more than anything else, that will stimulate the economy, as the infrastructure investment programme is vital to doing so. I believe that we should have a lower rate of corporation tax.

We have not seen the detail, and very often we find, particularly with the Treasury, that the devil is in the detail. If it is going to give us the power to reduce corporation tax, does that mean that all the benefit will go to the Treasury when the tax take increases? Does it mean that we will have a reduction in our block grant in order to offset state aid from the EU? We do not know the answers to those questions. Another question that we still do not know the answer to is whether the Secretary of State has more influence than the Treasury in that matter. We know that the Secretary of State is for it and the Treasury is against it.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his statement, and I also thank the deputy First Minister, Minister Arlene Foster, Minister Reg Empey and my colleague Alban Maginness for their efforts in the US. We should all be

justifiably proud of that effort and hope that the fruits of it come home.

If I may, Mr Speaker, I would also like briefly to take the opportunity to thank Reg Empey for his efforts over the years as Minister for Employment and Learning, and I echo the sentiments of the First Minister in that respect.

I come to my question. The First Minister mentioned how the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership advances research and spoke of a project on cystic fibrosis. Will any of that research be locally based? Will the First Minister give us his assessment of the economic potential that lies in life and health science? We have a massive health sector in our universities and hospitals, and I would like to see a lot more commercialisation in it. What are the First Minister's views on that? Does he feel that, after this conference, we can squeeze more job prospects and wealth creation out of the vast health resources that we have?

The First Minister: That is not just the case in relation to health. It was interesting to be present at that breakfast event and to hear the professor who was making the presentation indicate the steps that are being taken. There is very considerable room for further work and development in that area.

One thing that Northern Ireland has been good at is innovation. Throughout the years, quality, innovative products have come from Northern Ireland. We have led the world in many different areas. This is a good base for research and development. It is interesting that some of the newcomers are basing their R&D in Northern Ireland. That speaks highly of the people who are coming out of our university system.

I am glad that the Member referred to the overall work of the team, because it was very much a team. I suspect that, if someone at that conference did not know the individuals involved, they would not have known of any party difference between us. All of us acted as a team working for Northern Ireland. I thought that the whole team made a very powerful presentation during the visit, which shows that, working together, we can make a difference, and we will see rewards coming from that.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the First Minister's report on a successful journey to the United States, the benefits of which we are all starting to see.

I am sure that the First Minister has heard, as I have, criticism here of the role and the job performed by Invest Northern Ireland. Will he tell the Assembly what he has found on this journey, and on previous visits to the United States, as to the view that is taken of Invest Northern Ireland by investors who are already spending their money in Northern Ireland and those who are looking to come here?

The First Minister: In relation to foreign direct investment, those who spoke during the conference — to a man and woman — praised Invest Northern Ireland. They spoke of Invest Northern Ireland as giving a better performance than other agencies that had been in touch with them. Over the past couple of years, the deputy First Minister and I have seen at first hand that there has been a massive improvement. I have to admit that, a lot of years ago, I was very critical of Invest Northern Ireland. I saw opportunities being squandered and lost. However, that is not the case now. Invest Northern Ireland has a very good reputation. With financial support, it can do even more than it does at present. In their contributions, every US investor based in Northern Ireland spoke about the education system, the relationship with Government and the first-class job being done by Invest Northern Ireland.

Mr Moutray: Will the First Minister indicate what he believes to be the strongest selling points for Northern Ireland in relation to international investment at present?

The First Minister: I leave aside the ministerial presence on these issues. It is not any one factor, but the fact that we have a package that performs better than anybody else's and puts us in the lead. I have talked about the high quality of education. Northern Ireland's pass rates at GCSE are 10% higher than those of England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland. We have Queen's University, which is part of the Russell Group, the Ivy League of universities. The University of Ulster walks away with top prizes and various awards. We have a workforce that is loyal, stays in employment and has a low churn rate. Another point that came over during the conference was that our workforce can be trained more quickly than those in other areas in which people had invested.

12.45 pm

Employers who are looking to countries to complete their product may find that some are

attractive because labour costs are low, but that is only the start of the story. Such countries may have massive churn rates or there may be difficulties with communication. We have a linguistic and a cultural compatibility with North America, which is very good. There is also a good standard of living for people coming to Northern Ireland. There are many good points.

We have a very strong telecommunications base when it comes to financial, business and ICT services. We have 100% compatibility in broadband as we have now moved on to the next generation, and we have Project Kelvin. So, we are in a good place. We can offer a competitive deal with which to encourage people to come, and we can give assistance through financial support.

Review of Youth Justice

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish to make a statement on the review of the youth justice system. As the House is aware, the Hillsborough Castle Agreement included a commitment to undertake a:

“Review of how children and young people are processed at all stages of the criminal justice system, including detention, to ensure compliance with international obligations and best practice”.

That action is reflected in my Department’s addendum to the Programme for Government, and I wish to provide Members with information on the processes and personnel involved in delivering that review. In doing so, I thank members of the Justice Committee for the advice that they gave when my officials brought them our initial thoughts. I have given careful consideration to the matters raised, and have been pleased to take account of those thoughtful observations in structuring the review.

To put the review in context, the youth justice system in Northern Ireland has seen much change for the better over the past 10 years, following the criminal justice review. We have much to be proud of in what has been achieved. However, it is important to stand back and to take a critical look at where we are and what we need to do in order to further refine and improve our approaches to addressing youth offending.

We do that in the new context of fully devolved arrangements for justice and policing, now firmly embedded in the Northern Ireland Administration, and a financially challenging future, as well as in the context of the challenge that I have already set of reshaping and rebalancing the justice system to see less offending, fewer victims and safer, more confident communities.

To that end, I am commissioning a review of youth justice, the terms of reference for which will cover: existing processes, partnerships, interventions, structures and strategic linkages; legislation relating to the various statutory interventions; the balance of emphasis among prevention, effective intervention and reintegration and the associated systemic and cross-cutting issues; good practice in Northern Ireland and beyond; and information sharing and

management arrangements between agencies and the measurement of outcomes.

The review will give particular regard to the statutory aims of the youth justice system, international obligations in that area, best practice in Northern Ireland and beyond and the effective use of available resources. It will be expert-led, wide-ranging, consultative and comprehensive, and will cover all aspects of the youth justice system from the age of criminal responsibility through to more effective measures to prevent or to address offending among young people.

Outline terms of reference for the review have been considered by the Justice Committee and have been made available to Members together with a transcript of my statement. The terms of reference are described as “outline” because I see them as a necessary framework to support the review process while remaining sufficiently flexible to incorporate any changes that make sense as we open up the debate.

In considering how the review should be taken forward and by whom, I consider it vital that we achieve an appropriate balance between independent experts and those who know the current youth justice system in Northern Ireland, its history and development. I am, therefore, establishing a three-person review team for this purpose. In doing so, I have listened to the clear advice of members of the Justice Committee.

The review will be led by John Graham, who is the director of the Police Foundation for England and Wales. John’s long and distinguished career includes research and policy posts with the Home Office and the social exclusion unit. As associate director of the Audit Commission for England and Wales, he was responsible for developing a criminal justice strategy and for leading a national assessment of the impact of the Government’s youth justice reforms. He has worked as a consultant to the United Nations, and he was a trustee of the charity Communities that Care UK. He is also a visiting professor at the centre for crime and social change at the University of Bedfordshire.

Joining John on the review team will be Paula Jack and Dr Stella Perrott. Paula, as the newly appointed chief executive of the Youth Justice Agency in Northern Ireland, will bring fresh perspectives on the functioning of the youth justice system, together with a forensic understanding of the process, from her

background as a senior lawyer in the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). As an assistant director, she led the busy PPS northern region of the service before joining the Youth Justice Agency in September 2010. She is a member of the Criminal Justice Board, and she now chairs the inter-agency group on tackling delay in youth cases. She has lectured at the University of Ulster in criminology and criminal justice.

Dr Stella Perrott is a former head of the care and justice division of the Scottish Government. She held responsibility for youth justice policy, the development and implementation of the reform programme for children's services and the Scottish children's hearings system. Prior to that, she was the deputy chief inspector of the Scottish Social Work Services Inspectorate with responsibility for children's services. Stella has led or participated in several major Scottish reviews, including those covering youth justice, child protection, sex offenders and women offenders. She brings an intimate understanding of the issues that are likely to emerge during the review, coupled with a proven track record in providing strategic leadership in the fields of youth justice, children's welfare and social services.

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

To support the review team and to provide access to other sources of advice, I am establishing an independent reference group that will comprise individuals who are drawn from a range of backgrounds and from across jurisdictions. That group of key individuals will include academics, senior policymakers and experienced practitioners from areas such as children's rights, social policy, criminology, youth justice, prison studies and criminal justice inspection. The reference group will also be a resource to support other key strands of the Department of Justice's work, and its membership will reflect that. I will also invite the review team to consider whether there are additional experts that it believes should be added to the reference group to bring wider expertise to its work.

The review team will commence work immediately, and, guided by the outline terms of reference, it will develop the review programme. I envisage that the programme will include commissioning research on relevant issues; inviting written evidence; reviewing best practice in Northern Ireland and beyond; and consulting key

stakeholders, including children, young people and their families. As part of that process, I will establish a broadly based stakeholders' group to allow us to hear as wide a range of views as possible. My aim is to ensure an inclusive, open and transparent process through which we can bring forward recommendations that will deliver real improvements. I have written separately to ministerial colleagues to advise them of the initiation of the review and to seek their active support in addressing some of the complex cross-cutting issues that are associated with offending on the part of young people.

Although we can do much to address youth offending in the justice system, it is critical that we also tackle the issues that are associated with such offending and that we provide opportunities that will rehabilitate and redirect youths away from crime. As the Committee for Justice also stressed, a joined-up approach across Government will be crucial if we are to make real progress in reducing youth offending. The review team is tasked with preparing a report that is to be issued for public consultation by March 2011. That is a challenging timetable, but it will concentrate minds and ensure that the matter will be taken forward with energy and purpose.

Our youth justice system has benefited from a period of significant change and improvement over the past 10 years. Our levels of youth crime and the number of young people who are held in custody are relatively low in comparison with other UK jurisdictions and, indeed, many other parts of the world. I believe that we have developed a proportionate, progressive and restorative approach to youth justice. Our reputation for innovation and effective practice in some areas of work, such as our youth conferencing service and the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, is rightly recognised nationally and internationally. However, there is more to be done. We cannot, and will not, be complacent. The inclusion of this review in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement provides us with the opportunity to reassess, reshape and further develop our systems. In so doing, we will take particular account of emerging best practice elsewhere and of our need to comply with international obligations and children's rights.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice (Lord Morrow): I thank the Minister for his statement and I welcome the fact that he has taken account of issues that Committee

members and some key stakeholders raised about the composition and perceived independence of the team tasked with carrying out the review of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. He has changed the make-up of the team accordingly, which we readily acknowledge.

What time commitment will each of the three independent members of the team give to the review, particularly the new chief executive of the Youth Justice Agency, who, I assume, already has to contend with a full-time job? Will each member work on the review part-time or full-time? Will the Minister also outline the reasons for the timescale of March 2011 for the review team to report? Given the importance, scale and cross-cutting nature of the review, the timescale in which to undertake an appropriate level of consultation and debate and to ensure that a comprehensive approach is taken appears very short. If the review team indicates that more time is required, will the Minister commit to being flexible about the end date?

Does the Minister also accept that, as the Justice Committee pointed out, March 2011, which coincides with the end of the present Assembly's mandate, is not the most appropriate time to undertake a consultation exercise on the findings of such a major review?

Finally, will the Minister outline what budget and resources will be available for the review team's work?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Lord Morrow for his comments. The point of Committees in this place is to advise and to assist Ministers, and I welcome the constructive engagement that my officials had with the Committee as we refined the terms of the review.

I understand that the time commitment for the three members of the review team will be in the region of around 20 days over the period. Therefore, their commitment is part-time rather than full-time, although they will be supported by a full-time secretariat drawn from the Department, who will ensure that the work proceeds between meetings of the three team members.

I entirely accept the Chairperson's point that March 2011 is a challenging timescale. However, the youth justice position is very different from, for example, that of prisons, in that we have a youth justice system that is functioning well and to which we seek to make

refinements in order to improve rather than to change fundamentally. I am also conscious of the fact that the issue was very much included in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement of February last. In that context, there is an expectation of us to seek to produce a response in time to inform the deliberations of the next Assembly and its Justice Committee. However, in line with his comments, if the review team were to feel that an extension is necessary to ensure that the job is done properly, I will certainly listen to any points that it makes.

I cannot give precise details of the budget allocated, but I assure the Chairperson that an adequate secretariat is provided in the Department and that there will be access to necessary research findings. That, I believe, will be adequate to carry out the required tasks.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire a n-aontaíonn sé liom go bhfuil sé thar a bheith tábhachtach do chainteoirí teangan go mbeadh rogha leathan leabhar agus áiseanna foghlama ar fáil sna leabharlanna i dTuaisceart Éireann?

I thank the Minister for his statement, which I welcome. I also welcome the fact that he has established the review team. I echo the Chairperson's comments, who welcomed the Minister's acceptance and recognition of the need for the balance of the team to be shifted towards independence in the way that he has. I further welcome the fact that the Minister has accepted that the terms of reference are in outline form, which, in itself, will build in a welcome degree of flexibility. I particularly note that he has written to his Executive colleagues. Does the Minister intend to table a paper at the Executive? The Committee asked for a joined-up approach to be taken and for a particular emphasis to be placed on health and education in input to the review.

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McCartney, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, for adding his welcome to that of the Chairperson.

It is important that a body that is set up to advise is seen to be fully independent. As the Member pointed out, the terms of reference are regarded as being outline terms, and I will listen to any suggestions from the review team that they should be extended.

1.00 pm

On the subject of presenting a paper to the Executive, as we finalise the reference group, I will seek to ensure that education and health interests are represented fully and that they inform the Department's work, not only on the review but on wider issues in which the reference group will have a role. I imagine that the logical point at which to take the matter to the Executive for full discussions on cross-cutting issues will be when the review team's findings emerge in its final report. As the team carries out its work, I hope that there will be full input from, in particular, Health and Education but possibly also from other Departments.

Mr McNarry: I welcome the Minister's statement and thank him for it. Will the review team explore the role that restorative justice might play in the youth justice system? Furthermore, I will pick up on Mr McCartney's question about the Ministers and ask the Minister of Justice whether he has heard anything from the Ministers. Finally, has the Minister discussed the review with Include Youth?

The Minister of Justice: I note that Mr McNarry carefully managed to get in three questions. The answer to his first question is that restorative justice and any other issue relating to youth justice are open subjects. If Mr McNarry and others look at the review's terms of reference, they will see that they are already extremely wide-ranging and extendable. I have not been in direct discussions with Ministers about the reference group; however, in seeking to finalise the membership of the reference group, my officials and officials from relevant Departments have been in contact to ensure the fullest possible representation of other interests. My officials discussed the matter with Include Youth, and, indeed, I met representatives of Include Youth last Thursday afternoon, and the review featured strongly in discussions.

Mr A Maginness: Along with colleagues on the Committee for Justice, I welcome the Minister's statement, which was most helpful. Does the Minister agree that particular emphasis should be placed on preventing offending and subsequent reoffending? A more detailed strategy to deal with that aspect of the youth justice system is needed: without it, the review will not be successful. Nevertheless, I wish it well, and I welcome the Minister's statement

and hope that there will be a positive result in March next year.

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Maginness and his Committee colleagues for their welcome of the review. He talked about the need for a strategy aimed at preventing offending and reoffending, and he is absolutely right. The point of the review is not to see how the Committee for Justice, the review team or the Department produce suggestions to deal with offending; it is about prevention and the rehabilitation of offenders to prevent a cycle of reoffending. That is an issue on which, in recent years, we have seen strong and positive moves in Northern Ireland through some of the work of the Youth Justice Agency, which is why we have low levels of offending and of young people in custody. Nonetheless, it is an area that we clearly need to develop, because, as I said, the greatest protection for society is to reduce offending and reoffending, so I hope that that will feature strongly in the review team's work.

Dr Farry: I also thank the Minister for his statement, and I recognise the way in which the review has been developed in conjunction with key stakeholders and the efficiency with which the Minister is delivering on commitments from the Hillsborough agreement, although, of course, it is a good thing to do in its own right. To what extent would the Minister encourage the review team to explore the interface between youth justice and the speed at which justice tackles avoidable delays? Given young people's rapid development, speedy justice is important to establish a clear link between offending and the timescale in which outcomes are seen to happen.

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for making it five in a row to give a general welcome to the review. As he highlighted, the Hillsborough Castle Agreement contained a significant number of commitments, on which the Department of Justice is engaging with as much speed as is possible in order to ensure that matters are handled efficiently and properly. That also relates to the issue that he raised about the interplay between reoffending, in particular, and the speed of justice. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that, when young people are not made amenable for crimes that they have committed within a reasonably short timescale, they can frequently end up not knowing what it is they are in court for at some later date. Indeed, in many cases, they

will either have gone further into a spiral of reoffending or will have started to rehabilitate themselves before delayed court hearings happen. That is work to which Paula Jack, given her previous experience with the PPS, brings particular expertise. I certainly hope that there will be a strong recognition of the necessity of ensuring speedy justice to ensure an end to the reoffending cycle, not just among young people but among older offenders.

Mr Givan: We will look at the outcome of the review in March before deciding whether to welcome it. The Minister will know that the review comes at a time when some young people have absolutely no respect for law and order and no fear of the consequences of their criminal activity. Does he believe that the review team has the necessary skills to bring back the fear and respect that our young people should have for the forces of law and order to help prevent them from ever wanting to commit a particular type of crime? Will he give an assurance that the age of criminal responsibility will not be raised as a result of the review?

The Minister of Justice: I will deal with the final point first. There would not be much point in setting up a review to look at all kinds of issues, including the age of criminal responsibility, only to give a predetermined statement today on what the outcome of that part of the review will be. I will give no such guarantees. I will await the results and see what the review team has to say.

Mr Givan is correct to highlight the fact that we have problems with a small number of people. However, let us not exaggerate that or demonise young people in general. Let us recognise that, when we are talking about offending, we are talking about a small minority of young people. Mr Givan talks about ensuring that young people fear and respect the forces of law and order. I certainly want everyone in society to respect the forces of law and order, but I do not want people to fear them.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that we are dealing with a small minority of young people and his contention that we should not demonise everyone under 21, 16 or whatever age. A small number again of that minority of young people end up incarcerated as punishment for their crimes against individual citizens. Will the Minister assure the House

that, as part of the review, the review team will look at custody requirements for young people? I am hearing reports that some young people are being locked up for 23 hours a day and that, as part of their punishment, some are not being allowed to phone home to their parents. *[Interruption.]* I heard someone across the Chamber say, "Good". What sort of society do we want to be running here? Is the Minister aware that there is a concern — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please take your seat, Mr O'Dowd. I again remind Members not to shout across the Chamber. I need to hear what is said.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that concerns exist following reports by the Prisoner Ombudsman to the Committee for Justice that young people are dissuaded from making complaints about their treatment while being held in custody?

The Minister of Justice: I hear the points that Mr O'Dowd makes. I am not aware of anyone in custody having been persuaded not to make complaints to the Prisoner Ombudsman. If that is the case, that will cause me concern. He also talked about custody requirements. There are a small number of people for whom custody is appropriate. In recent months, the Department has sought to ensure that the most appropriate place for custody is found for young people, and that has meant an enhanced use of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, a reduced number of people being sent to Hydebank Wood young offenders centre, and the use of some of the professional skills from Woodlands at Hydebank Wood. Efforts are already being made, and it will be a matter for the review team to make recommendations on whether it has further expectations in that area.

Lord Browne: I very much welcome the Minister's statement. Given the Home Secretary's commitment to abolish ASBOs in England and Wales and the consistent condemnation of them by human rights bodies, will the youth justice review examine the use of ASBOs? Can the Minister give a commitment that a priority of the review will be to reverse the over-representation of children from care backgrounds in the criminal justice system?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Lord Browne for his comments. At the moment, there is no direct initiative on the abolition of ASBOs in Northern Ireland in parallel to what is happening in England and Wales. ASBOs have been used

much more sparingly in Northern Ireland than in England and Wales, and it appears to me that they have been used much more effectively. However, the review team can comment on that. We should remember that not all ASBOs are awarded to young people, and it may be more appropriate to address that issue in the context of the review of community safety.

I entirely take Lord Browne's point about the over-representation of children in care in the criminal justice system. Given my professional background in social work, that has concerned me for years, and we need to pay close attention to it. That is one reason why I want to ensure that there is strong representation from the health and social care sector on the reference group. That will enable a joined-up approach to be taken to those issues.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's announcement. Will he assure us that the review will not be office-based but will tap into the innovative approaches that have been used in many areas to tackle serious crime?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McCann for that question and assure him that, as far as I am concerned, the team has been asked to be wide-ranging. It has wide-ranging terms of reference and has been encouraged to not simply carry out an office-based review. There is little point in simply reviewing the literature, and it is important to draw on all the available expertise. I trust that the review team will do so in Northern Ireland and further afield.

Mr Buchanan: I note that the independent reference group appears to exclude people from the health and education sectors. Why is that? Furthermore, what assurances can the Minister give the House that the review's findings will be fully implemented and that it will not simply become another paper exercise?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Buchanan for his points. The reference group specifically does not include representatives from the health and education sectors. As we finalise the reference group, I will seek to ensure that there is representation from those sectors to enable the joined-up government that is necessary to deal with the matter.

Mr Buchanan asked for a guarantee that the findings will be implemented. If he could persuade his colleague the Finance Minister to

guarantee all the funding that might be required, I might be in a position to give such a guarantee. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have already reminded Members not to shout across the Chamber.

Mr Bell: Although it is appropriate to take independent advice, we do not want to walk over diamonds to look for another dime. There are many examples of excellent good practice, such as the work of Dorothy McGrath and Mike Smyth in the Towers Project in Newtownards and Phelim Breen's work in the Abbey Project in Bangor. Those groups have reduced reoffending among young people and have a proven track record. Can we ensure that the existing good practice, which has helped young people by giving them a hand out of the criminal justice system, is continued and implemented in the review? People sometimes say that using consultants is like having a watch and asking someone else to tell you the time.

The Minister of Justice: I assure Mr Bell that I will not pay anybody vast sums of money to tell me the time on my own watch. I will repeat the point that I made to Mr McCann: we are looking for examples of best practice in Northern Ireland and beyond, and I am fully aware of some of the issues that he talked about. There is a good story to be told in Northern Ireland, and we should not suggest that the review is under way because there are major problems. The issue is about learning the lessons that exist and applying them as widely as possible.

1.15 pm

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I support the review. Prevention must be the major plank in addressing youth offending, and the Department of Justice cannot do that alone. Will the Minister actively involve the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development?

The Minister of Justice: Yes, I assure my colleague that we will seek to achieve the widest possible co-operation, initially through the reference group and, ultimately, through other areas. For example, some of the work on disaffected young people involves strong co-operation between the Department of Justice and the Department for Social Development. I am fully aware that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education

and the Department for Social Development have much larger areas of responsibility for the early stages of prevention than the Department of Justice. Therefore, it is vital that all Departments co-operate so that there is a fully joined-up strategy that, ultimately, will benefit not only young people but all our people.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you and to the Minister for missing the beginning of the statement. Like many colleagues, I welcome the fact that the review has eventually become a lot more independent than what was proposed initially. Will the Minister take the opportunity to say, here and now and specifically regarding the terms of reference, that it is not his desire that the review team recommend that we continue to imprison young men under 18 in this part of Ireland?

The Minister of Justice: The simple point has been made a number of times in the Chamber that the great majority of us wish to see fewer young people locked up. However, we also recognise that it is necessary, unfortunately, that some young people are locked up at times. The Member talked specifically about imprisonment, and I have already highlighted the balance between the use of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and Hydebank Wood young offenders centre. I fully support fully the work to date and what seems to be the thrust of his question, which is that we should seek to reduce the number of young people in custody. That has to be done on the basis of prevention at various stages, through restorative work when offences are committed early and by ensuring that we use all the community-based alternatives to enable young people to become better citizens without requiring any form of incarceration.

Executive Committee Business

Debt Relief Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Debt Relief Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Debt Relief Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper relates to Statutory Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr George Savage replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Mr Billy Armstrong replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; and that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Billy Armstrong as a member of the Committee for Social Development. — [Mr Armstrong.]

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next motion relates to Standing Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Armstrong replace Mr George Savage as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Armstrong.]

Private Members' Business

External Consultants

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

Mr P Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to review the use and cost of external consultants; to develop further in-house consultancy resources; and to identify the necessary skills within the Civil Service to undertake more consultancy work.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for selecting this motion for debate today.

We are living in one of the most financially trying times. However, that is not our fault; rather, it is mostly the fault of successive British Governments and Governments around the world, because of the way in which they have run their finances and have treated us: the taxpayers and legislators. The Government and bankers have left us with a deficit that we have to address, and that is one reason why Sinn Féin put forward an economic paper a number of weeks ago. We hope that it can address the gap in finances and challenge the cuts that the Tory Government have imposed on us all. I welcome the paper that was put forward by the DUP today. I am sure that there will be a discussion about it and other papers in the next number of weeks.

If our motion is supported by all parties and taken on board by the Executive, it will hopefully go some way towards helping us to reduce costs and save money on payments to consultants. I hope that that money can then be used to secure front line services. The motion simply calls on the Executive and, therefore, all Departments to review the use and cost of external consultants and to develop further in-house consultancy resources. We want to see civil servants get the skills necessary to enable them to undertake more consultancy work for themselves.

In a three-year period, the 11 Departments spent £50 million of taxpayers' money on consultancy costs. Since 2005, over £1 million

has been spent on external private companies. In some cases, retired civil servants on Civil Service pensions were paid hundreds of thousands of pounds to carry out that work. In some instances, Departments need specific expertise from consultancy firms. However, it is too easy for senior civil servants and Departments to pay for that work to be carried out for them instead of by them. I recognise that there has been a reduction in the use of external consultants by some Departments in recent times, and I hope that that trend continues. However, the amount of money that Departments spend on the use of external consultants is still far too high.

In 2007, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) published a report on the use of consultants. Some of the report's findings were startling, and I imagine that a lot of the problems identified were down to bad management and the ignorance of direct rule Ministers, who flew in from England a couple of times every month and did not care about the amount that they spent on consultants. They should have insisted on better management and on more of the work being carried out internally. What was allowed to happen was shameful, and it set a bad example for the Civil Service. I hope that the Executive can start to wean the Civil Service off that bad practice.

The report stated that the Civil Service here is in danger of becoming dependent on consultants and is at risk of losing the ability to be an intelligent client and to purchase services efficiently. The first recommendation in the report was for DFP to work with Departments and produce a formal strategy to reduce their dependency on external consulting. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister today about how that is progressing in his Department and the other Departments and how they are dealing with that matter.

I am sure that people in the Departments have the skills, and I imagine that, when individuals are recruited for senior posts in the Civil Service, they must demonstrate what skills they have to enable them to carry out consultancy work as part of their remit. If that is not the case, how can some of them suddenly find the necessary skills and charge the Departments thousands of pounds for consultancy work and the provision of advice as soon as they leave their post through retirement or move on to bigger and better things in the private sector? I

imagine that Ministers must be scratching their head when a senior member of their staff who was promoting the use of external consultants to the Department takes a career break and starts their own consultancy firm or gets employed by one of the consultancy firms that have carried out work for the Department. That is quite interesting, and checking out the levels of that would make for a great piece of research work. It would be intriguing were one of the consultancy firms to do that work free of charge.

It is clear that, if the expertise does not exist in Departments, they must upskill their employees to a level that enables them to carry out their responsibilities and duties on consultancy matters. I urge the Minister to start a trawl of the Departments' employees to find out whether they have the necessary skills for consultancy work. That could be done by a simple survey through an e-mail to staff. It would also be interesting to check senior civil servants' job application forms to see how many of them included that skill in those forms and their CVs.

External consultants should be engaged by Departments only when absolutely necessary and on the basis of a sound business case having been made that ensures value for money. Such expenditure in Departments should require ministerial approval, and I am aware that some Departments, including the Sinn Féin Departments, have begun that process. The target should be not to use external consultants unless it is justified by exceptional circumstances. That can be achieved by considering individual business cases and approving only those that are absolutely necessary.

The Executive need to look ahead. The Programme for Government sets out the majority of work for Departments for several years. Senior management should identify the consultancy needs, look for the skills in-house and implement a strategy to meet those needs and demands. It is vital that we get value for money, no matter what we are spending it on. However, in some cases, Departments have set a bad example of not ensuring that value for money is obtained by failing to prepare business cases, even though the cost exceeded the £75,000 threshold. They did not obtain ministerial or DFP approval but sought retrospective approval for that bad practice. That type of approach must stop, as it sets bad precedents and will not deliver value for money.

In West Belfast, the area that I represent — I am sure that it is the same in many other constituencies — millions of pounds have been spent on consultancies and on strategies. Many of our community organisations have offices filled with the results of consultancy work, yet it seems impossible to get delivery. In some cases, it is easier for Departments to put a project on the long finger or for senior civil servants to deliberately stall projects by simply saying that they will get a firm of consultants in to talk to the community and to produce a document and that the Department will take it from there. I assure all here that I have seen that happening in West Belfast on many occasions at a cost of millions of pounds, but there has been very little action taken by the Departments to deliver the strategies that stem from the consultancy work that has been carried out.

The Executive need to spend more time and effort on delivery to make every penny count. There are many vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our communities, and we need to look after them. If we continue to pay out millions of pounds every year — in some cases to very wealthy consultancy firms — and to neglect our disadvantaged communities, we have failed. I urge all Members to support the motion and let us make a difference to the way that the Executive operate on consultancy work.

Some of the main points that, I hope, I got across today include the need to stop the routine practice of officials using consultants for a range of services, especially business cases, and the need to look at all the facilities and skills in the Civil Service and what upskilling needs to take place to allow a greater number of consultancies to be carried out in-house rather than externally.

1.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: I welcome today's debate and the opportunity to concentrate on one area of public expenditure, that of consultants and their use.

Over the past number of years, particularly since the return of devolution, consultants were viewed as a bit of an easy option when it came to cutting costs. Looking at the matter objectively, I can see that that is attractive. Statistics show that £50 million was spent on consultants over a three-year period, and expenditure on consultants rose from around £10 million in 1998-99 to £32 million in 2007-08, but fell to £25 million in 2008-09.

The success that there has been in reducing expenditure on consultants to that level should be noted and acknowledged. However, some would argue that the figure is still too high. Therefore, it is attractive to target consultants and their fees as an area in which savings could be made.

Another point that needs to be stressed, and which the Member who proposed the motion did not make, is that, over the same three-year period, local government in Northern Ireland, which is much smaller in size and scale than central government, spent £23 million on consultancy. We can rightly criticise excessive expenditure in central government. However, we should also be mindful of what is going on in local government, where there is, proportionately, a much higher spend on consultancy.

At constituency level, individually, collectively or in our Committee work, it is grating to see former public servants dispensing the work that they used to do — often having been trained to do so at the expense of the public purse — as consultants. Perhaps that is a contribution to rebalancing the economy. However, it grates on me, and on a number of Members, to see that that is happening all too frequently.

Although attractive, the orthodoxy that everything to do with consultants is big and bad is not that easy to pull off. There is an old saying that using a consultant is similar to giving someone your watch and asking them to tell you the time. There is another joke about a farmer and a consultant, which I do not have time to go into. However, the point is that consultants are much derided for what they do and for the fact that, sometimes, they are seen to be doing things that organisations could do themselves. That is where in-house training and in-house consultancy work really comes in, and there is a need to grow those areas.

I find it rich being lectured, as we frequently are, by representatives from major consulting firms in Northern Ireland on the size of government and the need to rebalance our economy and to grow the private sector, given that many of those firms are very much dependent on public sector work for income. Some major consulting firms have done very well out of public sector work and have made massive profits from that.

Notwithstanding that, consultancy is not all bad. Our figures are not as bad as those in

the Republic of Ireland, where, in the past year, around €1 million a week was spent on consultancy. We could do better in comparison with some of the other devolved regions in the United Kingdom. However, there are jurisdictions that are performing much worse than we are.

Sometimes, there is a need to inject independence into the assessment of what is done by government. That cannot always be provided by what might be considered vested interests in the Civil Service and, therefore, may be better provided by outside eyes that are fresh to the situation. However it has developed, we have to accept that the Civil Service has a gaping lack of expertise and experience in certain areas. That must be corrected. Take the example of infrastructure projects. If we want to carry out a construction project and invest in our infrastructure, but do not have the relevant in-house experience in the Civil Service, that expertise will have to be brought in from outside. Sometimes, some of the work on such projects is done by architects. Are we saying that we should start to employ vast numbers of architects at high fees?

It is not as though the £50 million that was spent over three years can be suddenly reduced. If all consultancy work were carried out in-house, it would still be at a cost to the public purse. Therefore, this is about reducing expenditure rather than wiping it out. Sometimes, consultants can save the public purse money, if they make sound and solid recommendations that are implemented. If we put our hands up and be honest, we can all say that we have seen how consultants and their work are used, sometimes, as convenient cover for making tough decisions; whereby recommendations on difficult subjects are made, which would not have been the case if politicians or public servants had been involved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: The DUP position, particularly in the context of the cuts, is that there should be more reticence to call in consultants and that there should be targets for reducing their use. The party also feels that there should be a need for increased ministerial approval for the use of consultants.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Hamilton: There should also be a 25% cut in expenditure for the use of consultants over the spending review period.

Mr Beggs: I also support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. It is particularly pertinent, and the comprehensive spending review means that it is even more important for us to ensure value for money in everything that we do.

Over the years, some Departments seem to have become almost dependent on external consultants, and one must question the degree to which they have been used. We must acknowledge that there are specialist areas in which consultants can play an important role in key initiatives and there are areas that are so specialist that the specialised and up-to-date industrial knowledge, for example of the IT sector, may not be present in the public sector. We must improve how money is spent, reduce the amount of money that is spent on external consultants and look at the quality of our staff and their ability to handle such projects. However, we must also recognise that there are specialist skills that can be used to benefit the public sector, and it is important that we are balanced in what we do. Staff should be trained and the amount of money spent on consultants reduced, but we should not rule out the use of expertise from outside the public sector.

Given the salaries of some of the upper echelons of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, I must question why many of them are so reliant on external consultants. What are they doing to earn those large salaries? Do they have the right skills? If they cannot make basic decisions, something is missing in the skill mix in the public sector. Departments must strengthen those skills so that senior civil servants do not rely on the crutch of someone else taking their decisions for them. There will be occasions when they have to do that, but there are others when they should take decisions.

However, civil servants cannot be blamed for all the expenditure on consultants, because politics has also wasted money. Millions of pounds were spent on the redevelopment of the Maze and on the RPA. The political system did not secure value for money and those funds were wasted.

Some Departments need to avail themselves of consultancy firms more than others. However, if the figures are correct, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)

spent £763,000 on consultants in 2009-2010, while the Department for Regional Development (DRD) spent more than £4.2 million in the same period. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) was a major contributor to external consultancy fees, with £30 million spent over a five-year period and £10 million spent in 2006-07 alone. There must be a way of regulating the use of that money.

One of the difficulties is single-tender consultancy projects, which have been used by OFMDFM among others. There must be rigorous regulation and control of the award of such contracts to ensure value for money. Departments seem to be dishing out millions of pounds every year to external consultants when staff, who should be equally competent, are available in-house, and, with extra training, should be more than capable of taking decisions.

A Public Accounts Committee report of 10 January 2008 highlighted that consultancy had doubled over a five-year period and that there was a need to reduce dependency on it. It also highlighted the need to develop an in-house consultancy service, and I look forward to hearing an update on that.

A compliance report by DFP in June 2009 considered whether the awarding of 195 single-tender actions was really about achieving value for money. Indeed, only 93 of those actions had accounting officer approval.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: The report also showed that in two out of 22 single-tender actions, there was inadequate justification of the business case. We must be more careful about how we spend our money so that we can benefit the public.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle; thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. When speaking on this topical issue today, we have to be conscious that taxpayers' money is paramount. I am sure that the Minister will tell us that. However, many of us who have sat on various Assembly Committees do not feel that taxpayers' money is being spent either prudently or wisely. In fact, in a series of Assembly questions, not including those from this year, I unearthed that £116 million was spent on a variety of consultants over a five-year period. I was absolutely shocked at those figures. I recognise that Departments need to deliver to the highest standards — I will touch on that point later — and that that means bringing in

expert opinion on occasions, but I am worried that the high level of consultant spending is not providing value for money.

There is an impression that high-ranking civil servants bring in outside consultants to certain projects to cover their backs if things go wrong and so that they can hide behind those consultants' opinions when they come before the Public Accounts Committee, of which you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I are members. That means that we need more value for money, not only in consultancy spend, but in the wages that are paid to civil servants already. We could be forgiven for thinking that some senior civil servant management posts have been privatised in all but name, such is the extensive use of consultancy throughout the Civil Service.

The public are rightly very concerned about where tax pounds end up. My constituency office has been inundated with constituents who are annoyed about that high spending when their children cannot get jobs when they come out of school or university. They believe that, in many instances, the money could have been much better spent on front line services in health and education, on roads and, particularly at this time, on job creation. People feel that those at the top need to take a lead on these matters.

Many of us who have asked for detailed information on spending on consultants have been provided with inconsistent information. Indeed, about eight months ago, the Minister's party colleague Mr Craig and I discovered that a number of Departments provided inconsistent and, indeed, grossly inaccurate facts and figures on many occasions. Those Departments did not even know how much was being spent and could not provide either of us with accurate figures in response to the same question. That provides me with a lot of concern.

The motion outlines the need for more in-house work. Courtesy of the Minister, I have been provided with rates from the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) for the construction-related services that it provides. Early rates vary from £72.11 for a principal professional technical officer to £40.44 for a professional technical officer. The Central Procurement Directorate needs to look carefully at what it is doing and the amounts that are being paid to other Departments. That is the same Central Procurement Directorate that,

coincidentally, gave PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) £30,000 to tell the world that Northern Ireland Water, which, also coincidentally, is one of its biggest customers, was a centre of procurement excellence. The Minister for Regional Development later decried that by saying that there were single-tender actions totalling £28.4 million, including one to PWC, which was the very same company that was propagating the idea of Northern Ireland Water as a centre of procurement excellence. The same company, again at the behest of CPD, twice awarded Translink the status of a centre of procurement excellence. However, that organisation cannot even find any record of a tender process for solicitors that is estimated to have cost £480,000.

I venture to say that the aims and objectives of the motion are laudable in that the public purse needs to be looked after scrupulously at this time, and moneys that could be spent excessively or, in fact, wrongly elsewhere need to be spent properly. However, if that is to be done in the public sector, the Civil Service and the Central Procurement Directorate, we have to be satisfied that the Central Procurement Directorate is up to the task.

1.45 pm

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party also supports the motion. I notice that two of the proposers and several Members who made contributions are, like me, members of the Public Accounts Committee. The wording of the motion links easily to the recommendations of the 2007 PAC report.

That report stated that the cost of external consultancy had doubled in five years and looked like it was “out of control”. It recommended the development of in-house consultancy services, in particular that the Northern Ireland Civil Service should identify ongoing large-scale consultancy work and provide the skills necessary to deal with that type of work in the service. The report also commented strongly on post-project evaluations or, indeed, the lack of them in 88% of cases. It commented that those evaluations should have the potential to result in fees being recovered from consultants who had not performed and, perhaps, to remove consultants from framework agreements.

During the evidence session on that PAC report, the then permanent secretary in the Department of Finance and Personnel confirmed that, at

that time, he could not give an example of a consultant having been “fired” — that was my word, not his. In response to a question from me about recovery fees paid, another witness acknowledged that it was unsatisfactory that, if a contract was terminated, the Department should waive its rights of recovery of fees where appropriate. However, that is exactly what happened in the case of the Belfast to Bangor railway line, which cost the public purse a fortune.

There has also been a history of contract extension without proper validation of single non-tendered contracts in excess of prescribed limits. It is hard to escape the view that, for years, the relationship between companies performing those services and the Departments has been a bit too cosy and not businesslike enough. It has been too easy for the Departments to take the easy route; Mr McGlone mentioned that issue. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, in those circumstances, costs escalated.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate. He has a difficult enough job at present to balance the books, and he should, therefore, welcome the suggestions in the motion, which mirror the PAC report recommendations.

Surely it is simply a question of sensible business practice. A good start would be to insist on an appropriate business case, a proper tender process for all but the most minor expenditure and the necessary COPE and framework processes for bigger contracts, followed by a post-project evaluation that has teeth. If we have to use consultants on larger projects, we should learn from the experience and develop the required in-house skills for the next occasion.

That is all predicated on the absolute necessity for the work in the first place and the inability to do some, if not all, of it in house. Given the size of, and experience in, the Civil Service, I am sure that work could be done in that area. Perhaps it is a matter of confidence or, as Mr McGlone said, failure to take responsibility, not wanting to incur a liability or even to face the wrath of the Public Accounts Committee.

I have no problem with using outside expertise or receiving advice, solicited or unsolicited. If we are paying for it, however, it really has to be the only option. I support the motion and

hope that the Minister can update us on all the improvements that he has made since 2007.

Mr McQuillan: Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have been poured into external consultancy over the years. It is expensive, and we must clamp down on it, given the difficult economic circumstances in which we find ourselves.

There are many well-qualified people in the Civil Service who are capable of carrying out such tasks. Spending that sort of money is scandalous. A Department of Finance and Personnel report in response to the findings of the PAC report found that the Departments in Northern Ireland had spent £31 million on external consultants in 2007-08. Out of a total of 896 projects, 137 required DFP approval because it was estimated that they would cost over £75,000. Those 137 projects cost the taxpayer £28.5 million. That is 91% of the total expenditure for that financial year covering only 15% of the projects for that year. Some £11.25 million of that total cost came from the use of external consultants by arm's-length bodies or quangos. The primary purpose of employing external consultants for 2007-08 was for management consultancy work. I find that to be ridiculous. What do we employ people in human resources for? Furthermore, only 79% of the total consultancy cases were put through a tender process using the Central Procurement Directorate. The tender process is there for a number of reasons, primarily to prevent corruption, as well as to introduce competition into the equation in order to reduce expenditure.

A report compiled by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and published in 2004 identified external consultancy costs on the increase, with costs rising by 75% from 1997-98 to 2002-03. The report focused on value for money and the need for Departments to implement procedures to make use of guidelines with regard to the use of external consultants. Furthermore, the Audit Office found that there was little appraisal of the business cases for employing external consultants. In fact, very few Departments were found to have a business case. Few contracts for consultancies were found to have been tendered, with only two thirds being put through tender.

It is my belief that the Assembly should ensure that the majority of consultancy work is carried out within the Civil Service. During these difficult economic times, it is important that we save as

much money as possible for the Government to put into front line services, which, ultimately, because of the comprehensive spending review will be hard hit for cash. We should and could be using the money more wisely to benefit the people whom we represent. I support the motion and commend it to the House.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I am speaking as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. Given the current economic climate and the challenges that are facing the Assembly, achieving value for money in the use of consultants is absolutely essential, particularly in securing public confidence. This is not the first time that the topic has come under scrutiny. The Public Accounts Committee held an evidence session on a report that was produced by the Comptroller and Auditor General's office in February 2008. The use of consultants has featured recently in the context of the CSR findings and the pressures that are on the Executive funding programmes. The public expects that the issue will be addressed seriously by the Assembly.

The February 2008 report highlighted concerns about the way in which consultancy expenditure was planned, managed and monitored by the Civil Service. It identified key issues and outlined recommendations — I think that there were 17 recommendations in all. It showed that the cost of external consultancy to Departments had almost doubled in a 5-year period, and it looked like it was out of control. Spending on consultants amounted to £42 million in 2006-07 alone — I think that the figure was something like £116 million over the 5-year period, and that included the £42 million. There may be some evidence that the figure is beginning to decline.

I welcome the presence of the Minister. I am sure that he will address these issues in his usual robust style. There may be some progress, and it is important to take note of that. Among the failings that we as a Committee were addressing was when consultancy projects were not being effectively designed to ensure that skills were transferred from the external consultants to in-house staff. There was no strategic focus on building up capacity. In the absence of a strategy to plug medium to long-term skills gaps, there was a danger of the Departments becoming ever more dependent on

external consultants. Some may feel that that threshold has already been crossed.

The statistics on consultancy expenditure are unsurprising, given that the Comptroller and Auditor General had reported that Departments had, to a large extent, been ignoring DFP's guidance on the use of consultants. It is not as though no efforts were made to provide guidance and support; it appears that that guidance was disregarded. Again, I suspect that the Minister will want to address that.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report highlighted a significant number of cases where Departments did not undertake economic appraisals, tender competitively or conduct post-project evaluations. In almost three quarters of the cases that were examined, no business case was completed. More than 10% of consultancy contracts were not competitively tendered at all. In 88% of contracts, no post-project evaluation had been completed. Therefore, no attempt had been made to learn lessons and to feed them into the Assembly's institutional memory.

The Committee was amazed to find that 45% of contracts that were examined by the Comptroller and Auditor General had actually been awarded extensions or experienced cost overruns. The Committee's view is that extending contracts in that manner sends out a clear signal to consultancy providers that any attempts to generate additional and, perhaps, unnecessary work could well meet a positive response from Departments — positive, that is, from their perspective. It would hardly be a positive response from the point of view of those who are concerned about value for money.

With regard to management information, the report also highlighted concerns that Departments were unable to provide comprehensive and consistent information on consultancy expenditure in response to Assembly questions. Departments seemed to experience much confusion in distinguishing between external consultancy expenditure and other similar types of expenditure, including contracted services and staff substitution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McLaughlin: The DFP guidance deals with those topics. I urge Members to support the motion and I urge DFP to begin to examine how

it can enforce those guidelines and make them happen.

Mr Frew: I welcome the debate and the motion. I hope that the Assembly supports it.

This is something that needs to be looked at. It is essential that we do so and that there are checks, balances and openness. With openness comes responsibility in the wider public and in media circles not to grab headlines with how much consultants cost without looking at the entire picture. Money that is spent on consultants is only a small part of that picture. More importantly, the question that needs to be asked is whether we are getting value for money. Are we getting expert advice that is much more valuable than simple pounds and pence? Can we expect people in the public sector and the Civil Service to be experts at everything? Of course, the answer is no. However, each Department should continually monitor its use of consultants in order to ensure that it engages with them only when absolutely necessary and when they can provide value for money.

I agree with my colleague about the amount of money that has been spent on consultants by local government. However, if we look deeper, there are sound reasons why that is the case. For example, if a major build or project is undertaken in any council area, in order for them to do things properly, they will have to engage consultants. If they want to glean, attract or draw down money from outside bodies, or even from Europe, they have to do the thing right and get the business case right.

Another thing that muddies the waters is the use of civil engineering consultants. They are absolutely essential to the implementation of policies or major projects and builds. No major building can be built without input from architects and electrical and mechanical consultants. The use of civil engineering consultants, therefore, muddies the waters in that regard. When they see the headlines, people do not realise that all that has to be taken out. When one looks at the amount of money that is gleaned in grants, particularly by local government, and how much has been spent on consultants in order to get proper business cases and to get major projects off the ground and in service, one gets a much fuller picture.

Departments will be no different in that regard. I hope that, in his response, the Minister will tell the House whether he is satisfied that all

Departments are using proper business cases to implement their policies and projects. That would be an interesting line to hear from the Minister.

2.00 pm

Are we spending money wisely? I do not think so, given that there are 12 Departments, with each Department seeking out its own consultants for its own advice. We need to move to a position where we can reduce the number of Departments, but, again, we would probably need consultants for that also. We have to make sure that we do things right, spend money wisely and achieve value for money, but we are not experts at everything; any politician who tells people that he is is certainly not telling the truth. It is the same for the heads of the Civil Service; they are not experts at everything, nor should they be. It is right and proper at times that they engage consultants. It is a case of value for money.

Mr Elliott: The use of consultants is a big issue, particularly in these times of huge financial constraint. Consultants can actually help to save money at times, but often we see the opposite. I listened to Mr Frew on that point. What really concerns me is that consultants are sometimes used by government — local government or regional government — as a reason to do nothing. Officials bring in the consultants to draw up a report so that they do not have to take a decision. That is the wrong way to look at it.

We should ensure that each individual case is value for money, because often — I hope it is not widespread — people accuse consultants of just doing what the chief executive or permanent secretary wants them to do. The consultant's report will bring out what was initially supposed to be the officials' report, and they will use it as a tool to stop progress. What frustrates me and many in the private sector is that they will use a report just to slow down or stop progress. It is quite normal for a civil servant to blow the dust off a report that is maybe a few years old and tell the Minister that there is a paragraph in it that states that he or she cannot do something. That is what really frustrates the private sector.

We need to look at how we recruit civil servants into the higher echelons of that service. The private sector is not recognised well enough in that. A lot of the people who draw up those reports or those within the Civil Service do not

recognise how the private sector works and operates. In some instances the consultants can help in that regard, but in many other instances they fail to help the private sector to progress and build the economy. We in government rely on them to build the economy, and there is huge frustration in the community.

I do not think that anyone is calling — I certainly am not — for an immediate cessation of the use of all external consultants; that would be unwise. We need to look pragmatically at how we can deliver a better system for delivering the required reports and gain the required expertise within government. It is about shifting the balance. We have heard about shifting the balance in the economy, but we also have to shift the balance between how consultants are used and how much is done in-house. Sometimes there is a lack of initiative in government. Maybe that is a lack of confidence in ourselves or in our system for tackling those issues.

I know the amount of money that is being spent on consultants in the A5 road project that is currently being developed. Some of it may be necessary, but I am not so sure that it all is. I note the response to a freedom of information enquiry, which shows the very large amount that is paid monthly to one consultancy firm. There are questions to be asked about how that money is being utilised and whether it is being utilised in the best way.

It is a credit to the Ulster Unionist Party Ministers that their Departments have consistently spent some of the lowest sums on consultancy, even though their budgets are the largest. Last year, the Health Department's spending on consultants was £700,000, and DEL's expenditure was just £9,920. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion. Clearly, this issue needs to be addressed through a strategy.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion. The use of consultants remains an area of concern. As mentioned in the motion, a review of that use and a shift from the use of external consultancy are desirable objectives.

The core test of any consultancy exercise or proposed exercise is whether the work can be carried out internally without the use of consultants. The specialist skills and know-how may not be available internally, or an independent view may be required. I will return to that point. There is no great confidence that that test is applied rigorously. There is a feeling

that much of the money spent on consultancy is wasted. I once heard of a large company that had a large advertising and marketing budget. It believed that half of its budget was wasted. The trouble was that it did not know which half. The story is much the same in relation to consultancy. Many of us share a gut feeling that all is not well in the consultancy environment. It is hard to distinguish between what represents value for money and is sound and necessary and what is wasted. Most certainly it is not all wasted, as other Members have said. Some of that consultancy and expertise is necessary, and the task is to identify which is which.

The rules and regulations that we might expect around this matter are, to a significant degree, already in place. At least, they are there in words. There is DFP advice that:

"Before deciding to engage external consultants, departments must be sure that the benefits...will outweigh the cost and that all in-house alternatives have been fully explored".

Those are exactly the words that we would want to be there. Business cases and approvals have to be in place for consultancy contracts over £10,000. Nonetheless, there is widespread dissatisfaction.

The debate we are having today is not a new one. There has been a plethora of investigations and reports in the consultancy arena over the past number of years. The Assembly's Public Accounts Committee issued a report on the matter in 2008 and, since then, the Department has reintroduced an annual compliance report. That is where we should be looking to get the up-to-date state of procurement of consultancy, but I do not think that we find it there. I found the report of 2007-08 rather disappointing; it was written at the level of generality. Nonetheless, even it manages to describe overall departmental performance as "generally acceptable". When it uses that language, we can be fairly sure that the situation is probably worse than that. I see it as damning with faint praise. The report goes on to say that:

"in some instances, departments have failed to provide evidence of robust procurement of consultancy."

I found a more direct commentary on the real state of the procurement environment in a National Audit Office report issued last month on central government's use of consultants

and interims. I will not go into the interims. The findings are that there has been:

"Limited and inconsistent progress...against recommendations made in previous...reports."

They tell us that Departments are not smart customers of consultants, that they do not adequately define the outputs and benefits that they want to achieve, that they do not assess the benefits delivered, that suppliers are not held to account through contracts and that Departments have not done enough to identify and plug core skill gaps by using more cost-effective alternatives to consultants, a point also referred to in the motion. That report is Westminster-based, but many of us may agree that the same would apply here.

The basic test for any proposed consultancy exercise is whether we need it at all. The process to approve projects in our Executive structure is too long and complicated, with too much of a belt-and-braces approach being taken. Insiders would quote that, and they would be accurate in so doing. It is often said, with a degree of veracity, that civil servants can be risk-averse and thus use consultants as protection against future criticism. In my experience, a significant amount of consultancy is wasted on projects that do not go ahead. I could cite as examples the Maze stadium and the decentralisation of public sector jobs in the Minister's Department, on which significant money was spent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Loan: That was about a lack of clear political direction.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr O'Loan: Our civil servants are not responsible for that.

Mr Girvan: Many of the points that have been made are common sense, and we should be looking to take such an approach.

We cannot throw the baby out with the bath water. Many Members would wish to do so, but there are occasions when it is important and necessary to employ consultants to give advice to those who are spending money in order to back up their decisions. Unfortunately, a number of senior civil servants use that as cover for not

making a decision. I see a necessity for major savings to be made in local government.

To say that there has been no improvement would be wrong. In 2006-07, the cost of consultancy was £42 million, which was reduced to £31.8 million in 2007-08. Spending on consultants is now down to £25 million. That must be welcomed.

It is important that a proper business case be made when consultants are called in. Unfortunately, that is not being done on occasion, and a small, select list of consultants is being put forward to tender for work. Many of those are from consultancy firms that have seen a niche market set up that is nice and handy and easy to jump into. People retire from the Civil Service, get their pension and end up working as consultants, telling people what they already know in many cases.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I know that the Minister will look into the matter, but it is important that all Departments make proper business cases. It is not just one Department; it is happening throughout the Civil Service. It is endemic in public spending. The people who make the decisions feel that it is not their money and so can spend it however they want. The days of willy-nilly spending without accountability are over. Spending has to be measured and must stack up.

Mr Frew said that we have 12 Departments. If we wish to reduce that number, we will probably need consultants to tell us so. Dear knows how much that would cost: probably more than it costs to run the Departments. However, it is important to welcome the fact that that reduction has taken place. A further reduction of 25% would not be out of order. I feel that that percentage reduction is achievable and would still allow us to be covered. I support the motion and welcome the fact that Members across the Chamber are taking a similar stance.

2.15 pm

Mr Spratt: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate, although I do not want to cover again matters that have already been discussed in the Chamber. Consultants have their place in many areas, and, as someone said, we should not throw the baby out with the bath water. I have particular concern about arm's-length public bodies, which are spending

substantial amounts of public money. The Northern Ireland Policing Board's budget is almost £10 million a year. Government and the Department need to look closely at how money is spent in those bodies because there has been a tendency for people in those organisations to use consultants more or less as an insurance policy whenever decisions about major issues have to be made. Over the past five years, the Policing Board has spent some £700,000 on human rights legal advice from one lawyer. The Department needs to look critically at that area.

Another area that causes me considerable concern is single-tender actions. They, as with the awarding of any contract, could be open to exploitation. The Department needs to keep a close eye on arm's-length bodies and their spend. Single-tender actions were used on 195 occasions in the financial year 2007-08, but accounting officer approval was obtained only for 95. The Department has since issued guidelines to remove some of the confusion around those areas, but I am not sure about the checks that are in place for single-tender actions. The Department needs to delve into the single-tender actions of arm's-length bodies, given the considerable funding that some of them receive from the public purse. There are far too many single-tender actions, and they need to be checked regularly. I urge the Minister to address single-tender actions in his response and to assure the House that they will be examined very closely by the Department in future.

Mr McDevitt: Like many colleagues who have spoken, I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue. I declare a past interest: I made my money selling consultancy services to the Executive and others over the past decade. I may be able to bring an insight to the debate that we may not have had to date.

There is no question that there is a place in government for expert advice; however, there is a cultural deficit in consultancy and government in this region. We have become all too accustomed to outsourcing decisions at certain times and at certain layers in our bureaucracy. We find it all too easy to outsource decisions to individuals who can be contracted to assist with providing a system, Department or agency with an option on which to progress that the permanent system may not be willing to suggest. I guess that most people will say that

that is fair enough, but is it necessary? Is that the point of consultancy in the first instance?

There is a broader cultural issue, which relates to some of the points that Mitchel McLaughlin and other colleagues made about whether the consultancy and expert advice that is brought into a system, bureaucracy or private enterprise is, in fact, brought in to build up the capacity of that organisation to do what it has asked the consultancy to do. In other words, it is about providing a learning opportunity for that organisation. If that is so, that is great, but, of course, that is not the point of most consultancies, and it is certainly not how government contracts with consultants. In my experience, it is rare to be asked to provide advice and training. Consultants are generally asked to provide advice, which they give and then step back to let the system continue as it was.

In the aftermath of the debate, it will be important to explore those issues. If there has been a decade of managerialism in our public service and the priority has been to pursue a particular type of measurement in government — a target-centred type of government — and if it has been all about trying to define performance in certain ways and to measure different aspects of government output in ways that they have not been measured before, maybe there would have been or might have been a skills deficit in establishing such processes. However, there cannot be a perpetual skills deficit in working that type of system. So, what has gone wrong that has led to us continuing to need to employ so-called expert advice to meet a particular type of management structure in the Civil Service?

It has not stopped there. It has pervaded down. If we look at the community and voluntary sector, we can see that the culture that has emerged there is one of seeking external advice in order to be able to tender for future grants, develop business plans and build capacity to move into a new business or service area. That is the big issue in how government relates to its external advisers. Does it relate to them as external advisers who come in to offer advice and leave or should it relate to them as individuals and organisations capable of adding some degree of institutional knowledge and expertise that government retains, so that, a year or six months later, it does not need to go and buy the same service again?

The debate that we may want to have in the next couple of years is whether to invest wisely but invest once, so that we do not need to continue to ask the same people again and again and again to do the same type of work again and again and again. It is my sad experience that I was asked all too often to do the same job over and over and over again, when probably, in all honesty, if the advice had been absorbed once, it would have been enough.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will respond.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Questions 2, 4, 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Children's Services

1. **Mrs McGill** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration the Executive have given to carrying out a strategic review of services affecting vulnerable children as part of planning for the next Programme for Government. (AQO 367/11)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Mr Newton to respond.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. I understand the concerns of many Members about this issue. It is a matter of great concern for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Following the Budget announcement on Wednesday 20 October, Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials have been finalising the implications of the Budget settlement for the Northern Ireland block and will bring forward recommendations to Executive colleagues. I am sure that the Member will understand the need for all Ministers to engage with the Finance Minister on departmental budgets.

A major element of the discussions on the Budget, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will be about how the Executive can address issues affecting the most vulnerable, especially those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including, of course, vulnerable children. The Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion, of which the Member will be aware, has asked officials to undertake work with colleagues from other Departments to progress priority actions

that will benefit those individuals and groups in greatest objective need.

We are also developing a child poverty strategy, which will be laid before the Assembly by 25 March 2011 and will set out the Executive's plans to work towards the eradication of child poverty. For example, childcare has been identified as a major barrier to people joining or rejoining the workforce. Work on that initiative will, we hope, benefit vulnerable groups, such as lone parents and low-income families and will contribute to efforts to reduce child poverty, which is a matter of concern to us all.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank junior Minister Mr Newton for his response. Given the criticism by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, can the Minister assure the Assembly that a consistent process will be put in place to allow for the identification of expenditure on vulnerable young people?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I assure the Member that that will be the case. In fact, the Executive's commitment to tackling child poverty is clearly outlined in public service agreement (PSA) 7 in the Programme for Government document, which includes commitments, not just to work towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020 and to reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010, but to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012. The proposed method of measuring severe child poverty will, hopefully, be submitted shortly to the Executive for consideration. It is based on a mix of income plus a material deprivation definition that will produce a headline figure that can be monitored over time. All Departments will also have to consider how best to target the most vulnerable groups. Once agreed by the Executive, the method will be used to measure and monitor, and, hopefully, we will see the eradication of child poverty.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Mr Elliott: Mr Newton mentioned the child poverty strategy. Given that the Executive are not meeting their Programme for Government target on child poverty issues, what mechanisms do the Department and the Ministers hope to put in place to meet those targets? What cognisance will be given to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's report on child poverty?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): If my information is correct, we may appear before the Member. I understand that he will chair the OFMDFM Committee. Is that right?

The First Minister: Yes; it was announced this morning.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which is chaired by both junior Ministers, identified childcare as a priority and, indeed, tasked members of its cross-departmental subgroup on child poverty to undertake an exercise to consider the issues. A preliminary report was completed in June, and the ministerial subcommittee agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options. The consultancy company FGS McClure Watters was appointed to carry that out and has now completed its policy and economic appraisal.

A paper on the report, which outlines the appraisal's key findings, has been prepared for the Executive. When the Executive have considered it, the next phase of the work on the development of the childcare strategy will begin. That will require consultation, and the work will be carried out in a cross-departmental way, with an identified lead Department. The Member will be aware of the Child Poverty Act 2010 and will know that it became law in the UK on 25 March 2010. It provides a statutory basis for the Government's commitment in 1999 to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Its stated purpose is to give impetus to the Government's commitment and to drive action across all Departments and the devolved Administrations.

Miss McIlveen: The junior Minister mentioned childcare in a number of answers. Will he explain in more detail the impact that childcare can have on poverty and, perhaps, give a timescale for the publication of the childcare strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for that important question; I know that she has a great interest in that area.

As I said in response to the original question, that subject goes to the very heart of the problems for many individuals and families throughout Northern Ireland. We firmly believe that the best way out of poverty is through a job with a reasonable wage. The lack of affordable childcare has been identified in a range of reports and research as a significant barrier to

employment, and the promoting social inclusion report on lone parents identified a lack of access to affordable care as a key contributing factor to poverty. That was enhanced by the lack of sharing of parenting responsibilities. That is why OFMDFM has stepped in to prevent the closure of the PlayBoard schemes, which deliver affordable quality provision in areas of highest disadvantage. However, we are also aware that a lack of affordable childcare has a significant impact on working couples, and research indicates that it increases pressure on a parent to find affordable care and to move into employment.

Mrs M Bradley: What discussions have taken place with the Executive about the next Programme for Government?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. The first meeting of the ministerial-led group on poverty and social exclusion and, indeed, the stakeholder forum took place in June 2010 and was co-chaired by the two junior Ministers. The original sectoral membership, namely across the Departments, was retained. At that meeting, there was, quite rightly, a lobby to allow an additional two members to join the group, one from Gingerbread and one from Barnardo's. They were subsequently permitted to join the group.

That was the right decision. At that meeting, it was agreed to amend the terms of reference for the forum to reflect the introduction of the child poverty strategy, which I referred to in my reply to Mr Elliott. It is planned to hold the next meeting of the forum in a few days' time to tie in with the next Executive subcommittee meeting on poverty and social exclusion.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Public Expenditure: Vulnerable People

3. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work the Executive are currently undertaking to ensure that the most vulnerable people are protected in the context of budget cuts. (AQO 369/11)

The First Minister: There are often withdrawals from horse races when it is raining and the going is soft, and we have certainly suffered from that today.

The Assembly will be well aware of the ongoing efforts that the deputy First Minister and I are

making to ensure that the Budget settlement for the people of Northern Ireland is fair, that it protects our Programme for Government commitments and that, at the same time, it reflects the austere financial environment in which we find ourselves. As part of the spending review process, we bid for specific funding to target some of our most disadvantaged areas. Our aim is to address deprivation, sectarianism and poverty in a strategic way and to enable families, including lone-parent families, through a pilot programme, to increase the amount of money that they are able to earn through part-time work without affecting their income support. Subsequent to that bid, the outcome of the comprehensive spending review was announced on 20 October, and officials in Departments are now working through the detailed implications of the Budget settlement.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for his response. Will he provide an update on the progress in developing the proposed community renewal scheme?

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister and I have had many discussions about that programme, which we are both committed to. We have not finalised the details, but such was the timing of bids being required for the Budget that we made a bid for £30 million for revenue and £30 million for capital.

The principle behind the proposal is that we will look at areas of deprivation and which have been impacted by the conflict. We will look to see where there is educational underachievement and where there are people who are unemployed, particularly areas where there are many long-term unemployed people. We will look at the barriers to employment, the physical infrastructure of an area and the facilities and the provisions that are available. We will look in a holistic way to see how we might be able to give support. We will want to do that in partnership with local communities, and, hopefully, we will have the scheme at a stage where we will be able to bring it to our Executive colleagues, get support for it and get funding through the Budget process.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Chéad Aire.

Will the First Minister outline any additional revenue-raising initiatives that are being explored or examined by the Executive?

The First Minister: I would not dare, because, as soon as I was to mention them, they would become proposals. We are considering a significant number of revenue-raising initiatives, some of which will be hair-raising as well as revenue-raising. I do not wish to start panic in the community, because the likelihood is that many of them will be rejected. It is right that, in these circumstances, the Executive look at all the possibilities. We will have to look at reducing costs, increasing revenue and trying to get more done for the same amount of money or less. Those are the options that are open to the Executive and, clearly, the obvious areas are those such as the regional rate. I can tell the Member that there is no consensus for raising revenue through water charges.

Ms Lo: A lot of the services that help the most vulnerable people are delivered by the voluntary and community sector. Will the Minister assure us that those services will not be cut disproportionately?

2.45 pm

The First Minister: I assure the Member that I am a strong supporter of the community and voluntary sector. It does tremendous work and does so at a much lower cost than the state ever could. Over the past few days, I have had the opportunity to go out to see some of the work in which it is involved. The extent to which the people involved give up their time voluntarily, and the fact that they do so enthusiastically, indicates that the sector should be expanding rather than contracting at this time of difficulty.

Mr Speaker: Questions 4, 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Disability Discrimination

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment they have made of the effectiveness of the legislation in relation to disability discrimination. (AQO 373/11)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Robin Newton to answer this question.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his important question. The Member raises an extremely serious issue, which impacts on not just the individuals concerned but their wider family. For that reason, we are considering the options for legislative reform.

We continue to legislate in order to provide legal protection against discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. Since the restoration of devolution, we have introduced legislation to strengthen and to improve the rights of individuals in a number of different areas.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland had a statutory duty to prepare and to publish a report on the effectiveness of the disability duties. It published a report on 23 December 2009 that provided an evaluation of the progress that public authorities and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland had made to date in implementing the disability duties. The report also sets out the commission's recommendations from that evaluation. However, it is vital that all legislation, not just that relating directly to disabled people, take account of disabled people's needs. Departments must continue to lead by example through the comprehensive use of proofing and monitoring systems to ensure that legislation and policy reflect disabled people's interests.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the junior Minister for his in-depth response. Can he assure me that the Department will set aside a leg of its operations for investigating cases of disabled people being discriminated against who may not have the necessary powers and thus may have to take cases to court?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I can give the Member that assurance. The report provides an evaluation of the progress that public authorities and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have made to date in implementing the disability duties. The report also sets out the commission's recommendations in response to the evaluation. The Equality Commission should, therefore, seek to achieve change by bringing about more effective coherence of section 75 duties and the disability duties legislation. It should seek to make enforcement powers more robust through the process of legislative review.

Mr Easton: Will the junior Minister assure the House that legislation in that area has been updated and will be updated until the end of this mandate?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has a specific interest in the subject.

In answer to Mr Gardiner's question, I said that it is vital that all legislation, not just that relating

to disabled people, take account of disabled people's needs. We have introduced a number of changes to disability discrimination legislation to improve the lives of disabled people here. For example, we have amended the definition of "disability" so that people with progressive conditions are deemed to be disabled from the point of diagnosis. We have also made it unlawful to treat a disabled person less favourably than others, for a disability reason, in the disposal or management of residential, commercial and other premises. We have also imposed new duties on public authorities and private clubs to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people and have made it unlawful for transport operators to discriminate against a disabled person.

I get a sense of the Member's concern from his question, and I know that he has an interest in affordable childcare. We are continuing to look at areas to ensure that disabled people are not discriminated against by any Department. The legislation will ensure as best it can that the rights of those people are the same as those of any able-bodied person.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the junior Minister reassure me and the many throughout Northern Ireland whose family members have communication difficulties as the result of a stroke and who believe that they are being discriminated against as they cannot get the fundamental access to speech and language communication skills that that issue is being addressed?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. Again, from experience, I know that he has an interest in that area.

At the risk repeating what I said in response to Mr Gardiner and Mr Easton's questions, I reiterate that we are working towards ensuring that there is no discrimination against anyone, regardless of their impediment or disability. We believe that the rights of those who are deemed to be disabled should be equal to those who are able-bodied.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Child Abuse

9. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans on a way forward in dealing with institutional child abuse. (AQO 375/11)

The First Minister: On Thursday 22 July of this year, the deputy First Minister and I met a group that represents victims of institutional abuse. A second group has since been in contact, and a meeting between advisers, officials and that group has also taken place. The group that we met wanted to discuss a range of issues, such as an apology on behalf of the state, establishing a public inquiry and getting an assurance that no child would be put in a similar situation today.

The Member will appreciate that some complex legal and relationship issues are involved with this matter. In light of that, and as a follow-up to the meeting of 22 July, we have asked our officials, pending an Executive decision, to urgently co-ordinate the taking forward of the issue with other relevant Departments.

Actual policy responsibility for such institutions here is split across what are now the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. Although mindful of the legal constraints that need to be identified, and given the age of some of the victims and the time that they have carried this suffering for, we are determined to move on the matter as quickly as possible. Consequently, the deputy First Minister and I have agreed that our Department will take the lead in progressing the matter and will form a working group with the Departments that have operational responsibility for the issue.

Pending the outcome of the working group, we have directed officials and advisers to arrange a meeting with the group to identify its needs and how some of those may be met in the short term; to examine ways to provide financial support to the group as it acts as a conduit for those who suffered institutional abuse; and, in conjunction with the group, to bring forward proposals about the shape and form of any inquiry and to engage with all concerned on its terms of reference. That work has commenced.

We wish to ensure that the way forward will be the right one for all those affected by this extremely difficult and sensitive matter.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his detailed response. I think that we all note the sensitivities and legal complexities that are involved in this situation. Will the First Minister reassure the House and the victims of institutional child abuse that efforts will be made to speedily bring about the proposals that

the First Minister talked about and that action will be taken sooner rather than later?

The First Minister: I give an absolute undertaking on that matter. The deputy First Minister and I found it difficult to listen to the experiences of the people we met. After the meeting, we were in no doubt that we needed to take action and that we could not hang around in doing so. I understand that, since then, a number of meetings have taken place between the group and our officials. I believe that there have also been interdepartmental meetings. Therefore, the work is ongoing.

As I said, a second group has expressed an interest in talking to us about those matters, and we will take on board the issues that it raises. I suspect that many will be similar to the issues raised by the group that we have already met. There will be no sweeping of the issue under the carpet; we intend to deal with it and to give those involved as much assistance as possible. All that will be done within the context of recognising how sensitive and hurtful an issue this is for many of those involved.

Mr Bell: Given the pain of child sexual abuse, does the First Minister agree that it is critical that procedures are in place today that allow those who have been victims of child sexual abuse to receive the healing therapies that they deserve, to ensure that they are never again subjected to any vows of silence, and to ensure that alleged perpetrators can be properly investigated rather than moved around so that they can abuse other children?

The First Minister: I appreciate the Member's experience from his previous employment in which he dealt with such issues; he knows the trauma that abuse causes. We saw that trauma first-hand when we met people who had lived their lives with the impact of abuse in their early years: it destroyed their lives. Therefore, it is vital that people know that help is available. If people have information about others being abused, the PSNI are ready to take that information and to act upon it.

Mr Speaker: Questions 10 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Supporting Life's Journeys

11. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline how their recently launched programme Supporting Life's

Journeys will assist voluntary groups working with people in hard-to-reach communities to access education programmes which help them to find employment. (AQO 377/11)

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member came today. We are running out of questions and will be in trouble if we go much beyond this one.

Supporting Life's Journeys is a UK-wide campaign run by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation and sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions as part of 2010's European year for combating poverty and social exclusion. On 11 October 2010, at the invitation of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, junior Minister Newton and junior Minister Kelly launched the Northern Ireland campaign at an event in the Long Gallery in Parliament Buildings. The Supporting Life's Journeys campaign aims to raise awareness of the benefits of mentoring and befriending and to highlight the opportunities that that offers to support some of the most vulnerable people in the community. The campaign is seen as an excellent opportunity to promote volunteering and to provide a platform for volunteers and service users to explain how volunteering can change lives and communities for the better.

The Executive are keen to advance programmes or initiatives that target the most vulnerable, including the most disadvantaged communities. To that end, the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion is progressing work on priorities that address issues relating to the overall map of poverty and social exclusion here.

Mr Campbell: I thank the First Minister for his response. Will he ensure that liaison and discussion occurs between departmental officials in his Department and, for example, those in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL)? Excellent work is being done by mentoring organisations, particularly by a group in my constituency. Those organisations particularly want to get hard-to-reach communities involved so that educational attainment and job prospects can improve. However, that can happen only if there is close co-ordination and liaison between Departments.

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member has identified that. The concept of joined-up government is not new. However, it is not best served by the territorial departmental splits that we have in Northern Ireland. Now that the

Member has drawn it to our attention, I will ensure that we have good co-operation between Departments on this issue.

Border Areas

13. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work the Executive are undertaking with the Irish Government to assist people living in economically disadvantaged border areas. (AQO 379/11)

The First Minister: He hopes that this is it.

Two EU programmes, Peace III and the INTERREG IVa cross-border co-operation programme, include Northern Ireland and the border region. Both programmes operate over the period 2007-2013.

Peace III has a budget of £302.6 million, or €332.3 million, and INTERREG IVa has a budget of £232.7 million, or €256 million. Those programmes include impact on poverty as a cross-cutting theme.

3.00pm

Programme implementation conforms to the principles outlined in the relevant anti-poverty strategies in each jurisdiction. The impact on poverty cross-cutting themes ensures the targeting of effort and resources towards people, groups and areas that are, objectively, shown to be the most socially disadvantaged. The theme is reflected in the project selection criteria for both programmes as agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Irish Government's Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs are taking forward, as co-accountable Departments, the rural development sub-theme of the EU INTERREG IVa programme. That sub-theme was developed to build on the success of the INTERREG IIIa rural development measure. It will, more specifically, support the economic regeneration of disadvantaged rural areas in the eligible programme areas of Northern Ireland and border counties of Ireland and western Scotland. Applications are under assessment.

Arising from discussions between Executive and Irish Government Ministers at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, the joint-secretariat is taking forward work on a number of new and emerging cross-border mobility issues that impact on those in the border region. Those

include access to welfare benefits, taxation issues, the mutual recognition of vocational qualifications and access to vocational training programmes.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Museums

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to develop a local museums network.

(AQO 382/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(Mr McCausland): A number of networks exist across the local museums sector that allow the sharing of professional expertise, best practice and the general exchange of ideas. For example, through the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC), local museums have links to various national and international networks. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) draft museums policy also reinforces the need for good communication and networking across the whole museums sector.

I have requested that my officials undertake a review of all arm's-length bodies funded by my Department. That will include consideration of National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) and the Northern Ireland Museums Council, and the necessary mechanisms will be put in place to deliver any changes needed to ensure that, wherever possible, front line services are protected in the current difficult financial climate. Any improvements that can be initiated to the current networking processes as part of that review are most welcome.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to develop local tourism is to ensure that local historical finds are located in local museums and interpretive centres close to where they were found?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

There is no substitute for having artefacts in museums. That is what people go to museums to see, and they are what give museums added value and attraction. When artefacts are in a local place, they have particular importance and significance.

Mr Neeson: One of the best local museums in Northern Ireland is in Carrickfergus, and the Minister is very welcome to come to visit it.

Mr A Maginness: Are you sure? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Neeson: Will the Minister's Department include the development of maritime heritage as part of its museums strategy?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: We have been working on the museums policy; we have had the consultation period and are now looking at the results. The intention was that there would be an overarching museums policy and that other sectors would be considered under that policy. One of those sectors is maritime heritage, which is very important.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that the Minister will appreciate the contribution made by smaller, independent museums. Through the review process, and from his own perspective, has the Minister taken a view on the role of the Museums Council in developing those small, independent museums? Is he aware of any pitfalls that he wants to address on an ongoing basis?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have a particular interest in the work of the Northern Ireland Museums Council. I indicated to the council's chairman in May 2010 that I am content to extend the organisation's funding until March 2015, subject to budget cover being provided by the Executive. That is discretionary rather than statutory funding. At the moment, the work of NIMC is part of the review of arm's-length bodies, which also involves the national museums. That review is absolutely essential.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell us what funding will be cut from the museums budget now that the comprehensive spending review has been completed?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It would be premature to give specific figures at this stage. Work on the CSR is ongoing. The process that will determine the amount of money and how it will be distributed in the Department is not yet complete.

Mr Humphrey: Does the Minister agree that, although the development of museums across Northern Ireland is important, it must be based on them being quality and attractive museums, bearing in mind the key issue of the running costs and sustainability of such museums?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

If museums are to have a future, they need to bring people in through their doors. That means that there must be high-quality exhibits and programmes that have a broad appeal. That is the way to get more people in. On a recent visit to America, we visited museums in several places. I was impressed by how much emphasis those museums place on meeting and addressing the needs of the community and making the museums as popular as possible.

Libraries: Irish Language

2. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the policy for the provision of Irish language books and materials in public libraries and the review procedures in place to address any inadequate provision.
(AQO 383/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I thank the Member for his question. Libraries NI is responsible for the provision of all public libraries stock and has had a stock policy in place since April 2009. As Minister, I wish to ensure that our libraries contain relevant, appropriate and sufficient stock levels, as that is an essential component in the maintenance of successful and vibrant libraries. Libraries NI takes its responsibility to provide appropriate stock for our community very seriously. Its stock policy is overarching in nature rather than specific to an individual language, whether that be Irish, Polish, Portuguese or Ulster Scots. A key stock policy objective is the promotion, through stock provision, of cultural awareness and varied cultural expressions of the arts, scientific achievement and innovation. I would be pleased for my officials to forward a copy of the Libraries NI stock policy to the Member for his information.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Library Authority have any plans to mark Irish language week, which will occur in March 2011? What are those plans?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Libraries NI facilitates a number of activities to provide services for Irish language speakers. Among those activities is the celebration of Irish-language week. Falls Road library hosts annual Christmas concerts and plays that are performed in Irish by an Irish language school in the area. There are also performances by Irish-speaking theatre companies, and so on.

Mr Buchanan: What percentage of library issues are Irish language materials? Given the current economic climate and the fact that Irish is a minority language, does the Minister not agree that we need to be careful about what we spend money on?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Library Service's Irish-language collections are based in locations where there is an identifiable community need — for example, where there is a Bunscoil, a Gaelscoil or a known Irish-speaking community. Our libraries have 11,684 items of Irish language stock, which represents 0.004% of the total library stock.

The significant figure is that there were 2,352 issues, as against total library issues of 4.7 million. That works out at 0.0005%, which is below what might be expected on the basis of library stock. There is certainly a need to be careful with budget expenditure, but it is modest, and the uptake has not been as great as might have been expected.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister agree that, given the economic conditions, his Department ought to be concentrating on using its resources to benefit the entire community and to show value for money? Will he also advise on what is stopping the Irish language bodies from investing some of their funding in events or books?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

As I indicated in an earlier answer, there is not a specific policy for the Irish language. What we have is a policy for languages, developed by Libraries NI. If we were to go down the road of saying that a particular language should pay for its books, we would have to apply that across the board, and I am sure that the Member would not want to see us extend that to the various ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. However, there is a recognition that we need to be careful in the expenditure of money, and I am sure that Libraries NI will be careful in that way. It is a modest provision, and the uptake has been very modest.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire a n-aontaíonn sé liom go bhfuil sé thar a bheith tábhachtach do chainteoirí teangan go mbeadh rogha leathan leabhar agus áiseanna foghlama ar fáil sna leabharlanna i dTuaisceart Éireann?

Does the Minister agree that it is extremely important for speakers and learners of languages,

including the Irish language, that libraries in Northern Ireland have an up-to-date and wide stock of teaching and learning materials available to the general public?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I indicated, a policy developed by Libraries NI is in place, and Irish-language collections are located in areas with a community need. As I indicated, however, the uptake has not been as great as might have been expected.

Mr Speaker: As indicated earlier, question 3 has been withdrawn.

Angling

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the proposed audit of the angling estate. (AQO 385/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I understand that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee report on its inquiry into inland fisheries in Northern Ireland, carried out in 2000, recommended an audit of the DCAL public angling estate. Since then, my Department has regularly reviewed the condition of all waters in the public angling estate, with particular regard to access, facilities and fish stocks. The exercise plays an important role in informing and prioritising the annual work programme for the maintenance, improvement and development of the public angling offering.

DCAL inland fisheries staff make regular inspections of all public angling estate waters, and those are vital to identifying matters that require urgent attention and those that need longer-term enhancement. There is also regular liaison with individuals and angling clubs, which is invaluable in gathering the views of the angling fraternity on how it feels the public angling estate should be improved and developed.

In particular, significant strides have been made in providing facilities for disabled anglers, and my Department is grateful for the input from that group in developing those. DCAL inland fisheries staff have a detailed work programme for the public angling estate, which delivers the maximum benefit despite increased pressures on resources. That programme ensures that all works are completed to the required standard and within agreed time frames. In that way, the DCAL inland fisheries group strives to provide a public angling estate that is affordable and

accessible and offers a range of high-quality angling experiences.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his response. Angling is a very popular pastime in Northern Ireland, and an attraction for tourists.

I was not quite certain whether the audit that I referred to in the question was continuous. Is the information that is gleaned from that audit made available on a widespread basis, or is it simply something that the Department gathers and holds to its own? I think that it is important that that information is given widespread publicity.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department has a total of 63 individual fisheries in the public angling estate (PAE). Those include loughs, rivers and canals. As I indicated in my initial answer, the estate is reviewed regularly. I can come back to the Member with further information about how frequently that happens, the availability of the information and its circulation. The information is vital in informing the Department's work programme.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire fosta.

Will the Minister provide some clarity on the role and remit or interest of The Honourable The Irish Society in either increasing or decreasing access for anglers?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are certain waters in which the society has a particular interest. Again, I will come back to the Member with further information on that; I do not have it to hand.

Miss McIlveen: How much does the public angling estate cost the Department?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A certain cost is involved, but, as I indicated, there is a range of reasons why it is important that we have the public angling estate. Some of those reasons have been identified. In 2010-11, the DCAL inland fisheries group has allocated £283,000 on PAE costs. That includes £126,000 direct spend on the public angling estate; £52,000 on rents and leases; and £115,000 on Movinagher fish farm. Those figures do not include staff costs, which are estimated at around £600,000 for 2009-2010, or administrative overheads, which are estimated to be approximately £140,000 per

annum. In 2009, DCAL received a net income of £270,000 from the sale of permits.

Mr Gardiner: How much damage has been caused to the angling estate in the past 10 years by pollution incidents? To what extent has their impact been reversed?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It may be slightly optimistic on the Member's part to expect me to be able to produce figures for the past 10 years. That is the sort of information that is more suitable for the Library. However, pollution incidents pose a serious risk to fish stocks in PAE waters. DCAL staff work closely with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which is the lead agency on those matters, to investigate potential pollution incidents and to gather evidence to take prosecutions. Confirmed pollution incidents resulting in fish kills in PAE waters are, thankfully, rare. There have been only two such instances in recent years, but there were several instances of fish deaths that were due to environmental stress, which can be caused by a number of factors, including weather conditions, the temperature of the water and the levels of oxygen in the water.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister acknowledged the tourism potential that the angling estate has throughout Northern Ireland. Does he agree that, in this age of electronic communication, it is disappointing that it is still not possible for anglers, wherever they come from, to secure their fishing permits through an online provision?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I take note of the Member's suggestion.

2012 Olympics: Athlete Training

5. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department is doing to attract athletes to local training facilities in advance of the 2012 Olympics. (AQO 386/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A pre-games training camp subgroup chaired by Sport NI has been established. It has representation from DCAL, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), Invest NI, Disability Sport Northern Ireland and local government. Although a number of national Olympic committees and national Paralympic committees are considering Northern Ireland as a destination for their 2012 pre-games training camps, it is important to be realistic about the sorts of countries and sports

that we are likely to attract and the benefits that are associated with them.

In any case, it is unlikely that final decisions will be made earlier than spring 2011. The subgroup is working closely with sports' governing bodies, local authorities and key contacts to ensure that Northern Ireland's facilities are promoted appropriately. In the current financial climate, I will consider the need for all expenditure in my Department carefully.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that his Department has been more than slack in exploiting the potential of the 2012 Olympics, particularly with regard to the low uptake of training facilities' potential and the opportunity to showcase the North for activity tourism?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: No. I do not agree. I want to make two points in response to the Member's question. First, it has to be accepted that some people may have had unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved. Secondly, although my staff have been working hard with Sport NI in that regard, it is unrealistic to expect very great returns, particularly as, at present, it is difficult to say what the final outcome will be. As I said in my answer to the Member's initial question, it will be spring 2011 before we know the final number of teams that will come here. We have worked with some countries, such as Jordan, and it tends to be that type of country that considers Northern Ireland. The top Olympic countries will look at venues close to London and close to the main locations in England.

Mr O'Loan: I understand what the Minister is saying. However, concerns have been raised, which I share, about the effectiveness, efficiency and timetabling of the elite facilities programme. Will he address those concerns and present a more optimistic picture than he has presented in earlier answers on that issue?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In fact, I have not answered any questions on the elite facilities programme. Therefore, I do not know how the Member can draw conclusions from earlier answers. The Member should realise that I answered questions on pre-games training camps, which is different from the elite facilities programme. Work is ongoing on the latter, and a number of venues are being considered. Business cases are being looked at.

As regards pre-games training camps, a number of venues exist in Northern Ireland and featured in the brochure that was sent out. Those venues are available. We do not have to wait for additional elite facilities to draw teams here. Northern Ireland has 26 sports facilities in the pre-games training camps guide. Eight facilities were included in the pre-games training camps guide for the Paralympic Games.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What plans does he have to develop sports provision through public interest in the Olympic Games?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The answer is to continue to implement our Sport Matters strategy, which was launched earlier this year. That is the mechanism by which to take that development forward in a comprehensive, cross-departmental way. Undoubtedly, events such as the Commonwealth Games, the Olympic Games and the World Police and Fire Games result in increased participation in sport. Some time ago, I visited a gymnastics club in Bangor. It reported an increase in the number of young people who came along simply because a gymnastics team had won 'Britain's Got Talent'.

Commonwealth Games

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department intends to celebrate the success of the Northern Ireland team at the Commonwealth Games. (AQO 387/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Before I answer the Member's question, it is appropriate that I mention the tragic and untimely death of Liam McGuinness. Liam was a talented young boxer who, at only 19 years of age, had already won a number of titles at Ulster and international level. I am sure that all Members will join me in expressing our condolences to Liam's family at this difficult time.

I personally met the team on their return from Delhi to welcome them home after their great success in winning 10 medals and reaching number 13 in the medal success rankings at the games. Members will also be aware that I hosted a reception in the Great Hall in Parliament Buildings on Wednesday 20 October to celebrate the outstanding achievements of Northern Ireland's athletes at the 2010 games in Delhi. Having attended the games myself, I witnessed first-hand the hard work

and determination that went into the team's performances by athletes and officials.

It is worth remembering that the Commonwealth has a population of 2.1 billion, and with 71 teams taking part, comprising 4,000 athletes, we can be justifiably proud that Northern Ireland did so well. I, therefore, take this opportunity to once again convey my warmest congratulations to every member of the Northern Ireland team on their participation in Delhi.

Mrs M Bradley: We would all like to be associated with the remarks made about the young boxer Liam McGuinness to his family.

Does the Minister agree with me that the success of our athletes, particularly the boxers, can be attributed to their heroics rather than anything else? Does he agree that the Government would need to provide much better infrastructure and a lot more financial assistance to local amateur athletics in order for them to advance at the Olympics and at other future major competitions?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Again, I do not agree with the Member. I believe that the success at the Commonwealth Games was down to a number of factors. First, to the dedication, determination and skill of the athletes; secondly, to the hard work throughout the year by coaches and trainers, many of whom work on a voluntary basis — volunteering is very important. The third big element was the way in which we have already improved the infrastructure to support our top-class athletes. We need to increase participation — that is essential — but one of the other elements of Sport Matters is an emphasis on performance and improving the performance of our top athletes. The Commonwealth Games result was an indication that that is really starting to pay off.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister outline to the House what he feels to be the significance of the success of the Northern Ireland team at the Delhi Commonwealth Games? Does he agree with me that seeing medals being won — whether bronze, silver or gold — gives a lot of hope to young people, and that people such as Wendy Houvenaghel, who is from my constituency, give that hope to prospective cyclists for the future?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The success in Delhi was very significant. It is important to recognise that Northern Ireland has

a stand-alone team and that it achieved major success in an international sports competition. Secondly, the results need to be set against the performance at the Commonwealth Games in 2006, when we won our lowest number of medals since 1962. In the space of four years, our Commonwealth athletes have managed to turn that around to achieve our best performance at the Commonwealth Games in 16 years.

Furthermore, medal success at the Commonwealth Games in Delhi was a specific target in my sports strategy, Sport Matters, which set that as one of its key requirements. It required Northern Ireland to win at least five medals at the Delhi games, which was considered to be extremely challenging in light of the result in Melbourne. Our athletes have managed to achieve 10 medals, alongside a number of personal bests, top-10 finishes and season's bests. Again, I congratulate all the Northern Ireland athletes, the team coaches, support staff, governing bodies, the Sports Institute, which was one of the important elements in improving the top athletes' success, Sport NI and the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council. It is an achievement of which everyone can be justifiably proud.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his compassionate remarks in regard to young Liam McGuinness and his family, and I associate my colleagues with those remarks.

This is obviously a proud opportunity to be able to give praise and to pay tribute to all the sportspeople who made such remarkable achievements, particularly in boxing, my own field of interest. Will the Minister further elaborate on what wider support he may be able to give to the boxing fraternity in the time ahead, given that boxing is resurgent and is one of our most successful sports?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The success of the boxers in the Commonwealth Games was very encouraging. It shows that we have considerable potential. I want to take that forward in the context of 'Sport Matters', because that is our overarching strategy for all sports. Obviously, where there is really strong latent talent, there is much to be gained through that.

Arts and Creative Industries: Employment

7. **Ms Ritchie** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to stimulate economic growth and to create jobs through investment in the arts and creative industries.
(AQO 388/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Investment in the arts and creative industries directly strengthens the Northern Ireland economy through the emergence of creative people, services and enterprises. There has been significant investment in the arts in recent years, particularly in arts infrastructure. That investment will continue into 2010-11, with both the Metropolitan Arts Centre and the Cultúrlann projects. Those projects, while continuing to stimulate growth in the arts sector, will also continue to provide employment in the construction industry. They will result in first-class cultural venues, enabling organisations to maximise the benefits from the growth in cultural tourism.

Approximately 36,000 people are employed in the creative industries or in creative occupations in Northern Ireland. That is around 4-6% of the workforce. The creative industries and, in particular, the digital content sector can boost job creation and help to lead economic recovery in Northern Ireland. Significant success has been achieved in attracting major film and television productions to Northern Ireland, and my Department will work closely with other government and industry stakeholders to encourage creativity and innovation and increase the sector's ability to compete and succeed on the world stage.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Flooding: East Belfast

Mr Speaker: I received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20 to the Minister for Regional Development from Mr Chris Lyttle.

I advise the House that, generally, when dealing with questions for urgent oral answer, only the Member who tabled the question and the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of the relevant Committee are called. However, given the issue, I have agreed that party representatives with a constituency interest will be given an opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions his Department is taking to prevent future flooding in east Belfast following the floods on 29 October.

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Early on Friday 29 October, Roads Service, NIW and Rivers Agency responded to forecasts of heavy rain by checking key infrastructure. Roads Service arranged for areas that are prone to flooding to be checked and gully gratings cleared, specifically in areas where leaf fall had taken place. Additional gully crews were put in place to deal with reports of flooding, and additional staff assisted in the supervision and operation of our normal and after-hours telephone system.

For Rivers Agency, routine maintenance on high-risk grilles in east Belfast had been carried out that morning in advance of any potential heavy rainfall. Additionally, Rivers Agency teams attended those areas affected and utilised contractors to check that high-risk grilles in east Belfast remained clear. Rivers Agency continues to carry out regular maintenance on grilles and designated water ports in east Belfast to ensure free flow.

The flooding was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of storm-water gullies or the road drainage system; the road drainage infrastructure was overwhelmed by the deluge of rain that fell during a relatively short time. In addition, I have been advised by NIW that it does not believe

that the surface flooding experienced in parts of east Belfast was a direct failure of its assets. NIW will continue to maintain its assets in east Belfast, including through inspection of waste-water pumping stations and combined storm overflows. It has staff and contractors available on a 24/7 basis to respond to any incident of flooding reported by customers through either the water line or the flooding incident line.

For the future, the Rivers Agency's east Belfast flood alleviation scheme, in partnership with the Connswater Community Greenway Project, will provide east Belfast with an integrated environmental improvement scheme incorporating flood alleviation works. Although those flood alleviation works will help to provide a level of flood protection from rivers and the sea that meets national standards, there will still be risks of flooding from extreme flood events that exceed the design standards of the new works and from surface water. An announcement on the tendering process will be made later this week.

The broad preventative strategy lies in the implementation of the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations 2003, which place obligations on government to identify areas of potential and significant flood risk by undertaking preliminary flood risk assessment of all river basins and coastal zones by December 2011 and producing flood risk management plans by December 2015. The plans will focus on prevention, protection and preparedness and will detail objectives and measures to reduce significant risk in those areas. The Rivers Agency will take the lead in implementing the directive in the North. That directive represents a shift to a more integrated, proactive and holistic approach to reducing flood risk, and it places an emphasis on sustainable flood management.

Mr Lyttle: I sincerely thank the Minister for attending to the question. Will he give an update on the major flood alleviation schedule for the Montgomery Road and Ladas Drive area of east Belfast, which has a recurring flood problem? Will he also clarify the best way that elected representatives can help residents in such emergencies? Will the Minister clear up, in particular, whether Roads Service can make sandbags available for homeowners in emergencies?

The Minister for Regional Development: I am not sure that I have specific details on

that project, but every reported incidence of flooding since 2008 has been investigated. Remedial measures have been introduced in many locations, and investigatory work is continuing in others. For example, since 2008, Roads Service has carried out flood alleviation schemes in Orangefield Lane, Merok Crescent and Tudor Drive; new gullies have been installed in Sandhill Park and Earlswood Road; and replacement gullies have been installed in the lower Ravenhill area. I am not sure whether that addresses the Member's point; if it does not, I will respond to him in writing.

One element of preparedness and assistance is the flood hotline, to which more than 120 calls were made on Friday. Just under 50 of those responded to were from east Belfast. A Met Office warning was made to Roads Service and other agencies early on Friday morning. It responded by sending out teams before the rain started to ensure that some of the hot spots and places that had flooded previously were checked. In most cases on Friday, flooding occurred in areas that had not flooded previously. Areas with a history of flooding were checked, as were gullies, since, at this time of year, they are prone to collecting leaves. Grilles in rivers in east Belfast were checked by DARD.

A great deal of preparatory work was done as soon as the severe weather warning was given. Roads Service, the Rivers Agency and NIW, through the flooding hotline, are available to help people with sandbags and other assistance. Fortunately, on this occasion, there were no reports of damage to property because of the flooding.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement and acknowledge that some progress has been made in the programme to alleviate flooding in east Belfast. However, serious flooding occurred in the Clonduff estate on 12 June 2007, and that problem has not been solved to date. Will the Minister assure me that this will be addressed urgently, as householders there live in fear every time heavy rain is forecast? Will he also confirm whether progress has been made in implementing the sustainable drainage strategy?

The Minister for Regional Development:

Again, I will have to respond to the Member in writing about the Clonduff area in order to tell him exactly what is happening there. The name is familiar to me, and inspections were

done on Friday in areas where there had been flooding previously to ensure that there was no recurrence. People were aware that there are issues there and were on top of it; they are keeping an eye on those areas to make sure that flooding did not recur. Fortunately, there were no reports of flooding in those areas on Friday.

Several agencies are involved in this very complicated matter. I have had many meetings with elected representatives from east Belfast and have looked at the issue in depth. A very complicated drainage system operates in, around and underneath east Belfast, and a number of agencies are involved in that. There are plans afoot, as I said, such as the Connswater project, but there are also areas that both Rivers Agency and Roads Service are looking at improving. If the Member wants answers on a specific area, he should forward the details to me. Alternatively, I will review Hansard and give him specific responses.

Ms Purvis: Given that 40% of our capital investment budget has been misplaced by the Tory coalition, will the Minister tell us how that may impact on his Department's commitment to implement the east Belfast drainage area plan?

The Minister for Regional Development:

I do not accept that that is the case. The First Minister and deputy First Minister intend to engage with the British Government about that issue, specifically around the commitments that were given on the capital budget. That affects other Departments as well as mine, but it has a substantial effect on my Department. There is not an acceptance that that will automatically be the case.

The plans that are afoot to deal with flood alleviation issues in east Belfast will go ahead. There are directives from Europe that push us in that direction anyway, so there is a requirement to go ahead with examining flood alleviation measures and to bring in appropriate responses where possible. However, people should bear it in mind that the infrastructure that we build, even when working at full capacity, will, on occasions, not be able to cope with the deluge of rain. Should we wish to create an infrastructure to cope with such conditions, it would probably use up all our capital budgets for many years to come.

Mr Newton: I know that the Minister appreciates how difficult a problem this is to solve in east Belfast. He made reference to the Connswater Greenway project and the flood alleviation scheme.

Will he confirm that an agreement between himself and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was reached to implement fully that flood alleviation scheme? If it is introduced at the point at which the project commences, it would save something like £5 million to £7 million against its implementation at a later stage.

The Minister for Regional Development: DARD is taking the lead on that scheme, and we are very happy to co-operate with it. My information is that the combined project is programmed to commence in the autumn of this year, with completion during the 2013-14 business year.

Private Members' Business

External Consultants

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to review the use and cost of external consultants; to develop further in-house consultancy resources; and to identify the necessary skills within the Civil Service to undertake more consultancy work. — [Mr P Maskey.]

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I thank all the Members who took part in the debate. It was very timely. Members' contributions were very balanced and raised a number of issues. I welcome the fact that we have had the debate because the briefing raised issues that were new to me. They caused some alarm, which Members expressed, and they need to be addressed.

Members pointed out that it is not a case of having or not having consultants, and not all consultancy and all spending on consultancy is bad and wasteful. Mr Hamilton, Mr Beggs, Mr Lunn and Mr O'Loan recognised that there will be occasions when it is necessary to engage with consultants because independent scrutiny is needed of decisions and actions that Departments wish to pursue. Sometimes, there will be a lack of skills in the Departments, and investing in those skills would not be worthwhile for what may be a one-off piece of work. Therefore, external consultants will be brought in to do the work. However, given the scale and the drift that there appeared to be — many Members mentioned it — towards what is almost a default position of bringing in consultants, we had to move away from that culture. Members have been very helpful in suggesting some things that could be done.

3.45 pm

I am not trying to wash my hands of the matter, but this is not purely an issue for DFP. Paul Maskey made that point in his opening comments. Of course, we issue the guidance on consultancy, procurement and everything else, but this is an issue for all Ministers right across the Executive. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party did not do himself a great deal of good when he tried to indicate that his party's hands were clean, that his two Ministers spent very little on consultancy, that everything was, therefore, OK in the Ulster Unionist household

and that all the rest of us have to deal with this. It is an issue right across the board, and, of course, some Departments will, naturally, spend more on consultancy because of the very nature of the work that they do and the kind of projects that they undertake. Therefore, it is an issue right across the Executive.

A number of Members, including Paul Maskey at the start of his speech, asked about the scale of spending on consultancy. That spend has been falling quite significantly. Between 2007-08 and 2008-09, there was a reduction of 17%. The fact that we were able to reduce the spend by 17% probably indicates that a lot of the consultancy work undertaken could, perhaps, have been done in a different way. Some areas have seen a bigger fall than others. Management consultancy was reduced by 18% and financial service consultancy by 44%. I have asked my Department's accounting officer to focus on ensuring that new consultancy commissions are kept to a minimum, and, if necessary, all proposals will be considered by the accounting officer and the senior management team prior to approval. I hope that is what all other Ministers will do in their Department, and I will certainly encourage them to do so.

As well as asking about the scale of the problem, Members asked what is being done to proactively reduce our dependency on consultants. As a result of the PAC report, DFP undertook a comprehensive development programme, which included the enhancement of services that are provided internally through the business consultancy service. Through the permanent secretaries' group, we have also undertaken work to assess the potential demand for internal consultancy services across the range of professional skills areas. In many cases, it may well be that there is not sufficient demand in one Department. However, were we to consider the demand across all Departments, we might find that expertise could be moved and shared between Departments as the occasion arises. We also want to consider improving the use of skills in such areas of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Departments have been given guidance — Mr McDevitt talked about this — on building up capacity. Perhaps when we bring in consultants, we should also look at the training element. I noticed what Mr McDevitt said; I wrote down his words. He said that, when he was on the

other side of the fence, before coming to the Assembly, he was asked to do the same job:

"over and over and over again".

I bet that he charged over and over and over again as well, mind you. It may be that we should be scrutinising some of the jobs that he was involved in and looking for a return of the money, since he was just doing the same old job time and time again. However, he and other Members made an important point: why bring someone in to do a job but not leave any skills behind? The guidance encourages Departments, when making contracts, to look at what transfer of skills there might be.

Of course, the business consultancy service can make help available to Departments, as can the Departmental Solicitor's Office, which can save people going out to look for legal consultants when a lot of that expertise is in-house. As well as that, NISRA makes its statisticians available to Departments, which, again, helps to provide information. Therefore, when it comes to gateway reviews, professionals can be released to undertake them, and the increased skills can be used across Departments.

People ask us what standards are laid down to determine when it is appropriate to engage external consultants. Again, the Department's guidance is that services should be commissioned only when the required expertise is not available in-house, value-for-money expenditure is demonstrated or consultants can provide benefits to Departments by bringing specialist skills and knowledge, an independent perspective and innovative thinking. That brings me to another issue that Members raised: the question of how we assess whether consultants are required and, when they have completed it, whether their work has been worthwhile. It is the one area that caused me a degree of concern. As the PAC report highlighted, when it comes to procurement, it is evident that guidance on evaluating business cases has not been followed. The response to Mr Frew's question is that some Departments are more guilty of that than others. He asked me whether I would name those Departments: I am more than happy to do so, and I probably will as I go through the report.

First, when a proposal exceeds the threshold, Departments need to present a business case to DFP. For two projects that required a business case — involving DHSSPS and, I think,

OFMDFM — no business case was presented to DFP, so we have written to the Comptroller and Auditor General to confirm that expenditure on those projects was irregular. I hope that the fact that we give that assurance indicates that Departments that do not follow the rules cannot simply pass under the radar but will be dealt with and will need to explain why they took certain decisions. In other situations, when expenditure is below the delegated limit, DFP does not require a business case to be submitted. However, that does not mean that a business case should not be provided internally; it is only by providing one that it can be determined whether work is necessary and will give value for money.

When we drilled down into 90 cases in which expenditure on consultancy was below the delegated limit, we were somewhat disappointed, because no business case could be provided for 11% of them. The answer to Mr Frew is that the chief Department at fault was OFMDFM, which could not provide a business case in nine out of 10 projects involving expenditure below the delegated limit.

The second issue concerns tendering. I love the term “single-tender action”. We find all sorts of words to obscure what is meant. In plain and simple language, “single-tender action” means that a job is given out without there being any competition. “Single-tender action” sounds very nice, but let us spell out what it actually means. A number of Members, such as Mr Beggs, pointed out the difficulty that we could not be sure whether we were getting value for money and that other people may feel that they are excluded from the process.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister take up that point with his colleague Minister Poots in relation to local government? Despite the fact that it is recommended in many councils that legal services be tendered for, in many instances such services are not tendered for across the 26 councils in the North.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The same principle should apply to councils. There are occasions when it is not appropriate; in some cases, perhaps, the amount of money concerned is very small, the work has to be done quickly, or similar work has already been done by a consultancy firm. However, I was surprised that, in 44 projects for which there was single-tender action or no competitive

tendering, the relevant departmental accounting officer's approval was not even sought. The contracts for those 44 projects amounted to a large value, and the same Departments — DCAL, the Department of Education, the Health Department and OFMDFM — appear regularly. It is important that Ministers get on top of that.

The Westminster Government are looking at whether contracts above a certain level — even though they may be below the delegated level — should be subject to ministerial approval. That is something that, perhaps, the Assembly may find worth investigating. I want to talk to Executive colleagues about that. At least we would have a point of accountability where the Minister has to decide whether to go ahead with a contract.

The other concern that Members mentioned is the evaluation of contracts once they have been given. It is important that evaluations take place. I am pursuing with DRD the evaluation of two contracts that, together, are worth about £9 million. They have not yet been evaluated, and the Minister for Regional Development needs to look at that.

The debate has been useful. I trust that what I have said today shows that DFP is taking the matter seriously. We want to get the bill down and make sure that money is spent effectively; that we get the best value for a contract; and that a contract, once it is in place, builds capacity in the system so that we become less reliant on consultancy services in future.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and ask the Assembly to do likewise. I commend the proposer and my colleague for securing the debate.

Although I am sure that all Members, especially those who are dealing with complex issues in Committees, appreciate that there is a need to seek a wide range of opinion and specialist thinking on specific subjects, it is how that information and those appraisals and opinions are gathered and the associated costs of gathering that information that the Assembly has to evaluate and justify.

Expenditure for 2007-08 shows that Departments spent £31.68 million on 896 projects. Some Departments spent more and others less, depending on the size and needs of projects, but expenditure averaged just over £3.5 million. The question for the Assembly is whether that cost

represents value for money. Are Departments paying for services that can be performed by highly capable civil servants already within their remit or, indeed, in the Assembly? The quality of the work of the excellent Assembly Research and Library Services in this Building suggests that the answer is yes. I am sure that Departments also have very capable employees in-house who can undertake many of those projects.

Of course, from time to time, a subject may be so unique that professional and specific detailed information and guidance must be sourced. However, first preference should be to source information from, and to use the experience and expertise in, the Civil Service. Necessary training should be given. The Minister mentioned the expertise in the Departments. That should be shared.

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

4.00 pm

The motion has not been brought to the Chamber because of the cuts that the Minister of Finance and Personnel seems so desperate to pursue. On the contrary, it is a sensible call to enable savings in the annual Budget year-on-year. Each Department has been called on to eliminate waste and duplication. The use of resources to collate information rather than using external consultants is one option to do that. The savings can go some small way to compensate for the attack on our public funds by the British Tory Government and their partner, the Liberal Democrats.

Consultations are, of course, an important process in our work and are necessary in order that a clear, comprehensive and transparent knowledge informs our decisions and enables us to take the correct decisions. However, we must ensure that we do not take the easy option of calling in external parties when we can use the highly capable resources that are already in place.

I will now turn to Members' comments. The debate has been worthwhile. The proposer of the motion started off by talking about the trying financial times. I agree with him. The motion is about how we look at the present Budget process and how to save in every possible way. We need to look at what we can do in each Department, and a reduction in external consultancy is one way to make savings. As the

proposer said, that money should be transferred to those people who are in most need and are most vulnerable. He mentioned upskilling in the Civil Service. As the Minister is well aware, there has been a freeze on recruitment. Therefore, how do we find the balance between savings and training? Given the freeze on recruitment, where will we get that expertise?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have outlined some ways to do that. First, in contracts, we are asking people to look at how the skills could be transferred from the consultants to people in the Department. Secondly, through the business consultancy service, in which 26 people work, we are making that expertise available across the Civil Service. Moreover, we are making people available through other organisations, such as the Departmental Solicitor's Office and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Therefore, there are ways to transfer existing skills and, even in light of the recruitment freeze, to use consultancy services to build up the skills in the Civil Service.

Mr Boylan: Thank you, Minister.

Simon Hamilton made a very good point when he said that local government has spent £23 million on consultants. There is an impression that the public sector is easy pickings for consultants. We need to get rid of that impression. Roy Beggs mentioned specialist areas for consultants, and I agree with him. He talked about the special skills base, and the Minister has outlined how we will achieve that. There needs to be rigorous challenge to that, and the Minister talked about the guidance and the checks and balances.

Patsy McGlone talked about the £116 million that has been spent over the past five years. He said that the Civil Service hides behind consultants; I think that that is the truth. He also mentioned the Central Procurement Directorate. That body needs to be monitored, because it hides behind making decisions. The Assembly needs to start to look at that. Trevor Lunn talked about contract extensions without validation and mentioned a cosy relationship. The Assembly needs to look at the relationship between the Departments and consultants. Adrian McQuillan talked about saving money and pumping it into front line services. I support that.

Mitchel McLaughlin said that there is no strategy to address the skills gaps, and the Minister

has responded to that in part. As the Minister alluded, we need to look at the lack of post-project evaluations. He also informed me that the Audit Office is reviewing the use of consultants. That will maybe extend into the next mandate. The Assembly needs to keep an eye on that.

Paul Frew said that councils need consultants. I agree with that. The Minister mentioned one-off situations, and there needs to be proper guidelines for local government and proper checks and balances in place. I know that decisions have to be made on that, and we need to keep an eye on the situation. A lot of money is spent in local councils, and we need to ensure that there is value for ratepayers at that level. Tom Elliott talked about hiding behind consultants and the cosy relationship that exists. He said that there was a lack of initiative in government, but I do not know whether he was referring to the two Departments' not having used as many consultants as anyone else. Perhaps that was what he was trying to get at.

Declan O'Loan talked about DFP advice. I agree that advice is available, but it needs to be implemented completely and fully checked and challenged. Paul Girvan, who is not in the Chamber, talked about a common sense approach, which is sometimes not seen in either the Assembly or the Departments. We need to look at that. Paul Girvan also talked about proper business cases, to which the Minister alluded. When prioritising and looking at proper business cases, Departments should look at their means of dealing with them.

Jimmy Spratt used the example of the Policing Board as an outside body, and we need to look at where the money is being spent. He mentioned the single-tender action, and the Minister gave a good explanation of that. That also needs to be looked at and checked. Conall McDevitt stole the show; I do not think that he was refusing the money every time that he was asked to give the same advice. He is right to say that there is a cultural deficit in advice, and we need to look at that.

All in all, it has been a good debate, and I think that the Minister will agree that we need to explore all avenues before we decide to go to external consultants. However, in closing, I will say that although his ministerial colleague Minister Poots got a big piece of consultancy work done by PWC, we will now lose the benefit

of those efficiency savings over 20 years. I hope that, in time, that is not wasted. Perhaps the Minister will take on board that we need to see rewards for that piece of work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to review the use and cost of external consultants; to develop further in-house consultancy resources; and to identify the necessary skills within the Civil Service to undertake more consultancy work.

Private Members' Business

University Funding

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

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Browne and Stuart reports on the funding of third-level education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Executive to ensure that publicly funded higher education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay; rejects any increase in the cost of student loans; and opposes the coalition Government's plans to adopt the Browne proposal to remove the cap on student fees.

I thank the Business Committee for allowing the motion to be tabled. I congratulate Danny Kennedy on his appointment as the new Minister for Employment and Learning, and I wish him well in the future. We look forward to his co-operation and his attendance at the Committee.

I move the motion on behalf of the SDLP on a hugely important issue that has come to the fore in recent weeks. The Browne proposals make recommendations on a number of themes, including the strategic management of universities, accountability, and so on. However, it is the proposals on lifting the cap on fees and changing the interest rates on loans that are causing deep concern among parents and students alike.

The SDLP is not in a position to support the amendment. It is clear that the matter is a point of principle, given that this morning, Mr Deputy Speaker, I presented the Assembly with almost 10,000 signatures of not only students but parents and constituents from your constituency and that of every Member in Northern Ireland. They have signed a clear petition through all the campuses.

The Russell Group proposes to ask graduates to start to repay their loans at an earlier stage and at a higher interest rate. On principle, we will

never agree to that. The Joanne Stuart report makes the case for no additional fees, and the SDLP believes that that is the correct approach. The Browne report will, of course, represent a challenge to us all, because if the fees here stay as they are but the English and Welsh universities gain a higher income from higher fees, our universities would be put at a further funding disadvantage. It is also likely that there would be an increase in the number of students from Britain applying for places here to avoid higher fees, and that would put a further squeeze on our already highly contested places.

I remind colleagues that a key aim of the Programme for Government is to put the economy at its centre. This region's future success depends greatly on the development of our knowledge-based economy, which, in turn, depends on a highly skilled labour force and a strong research and innovation base. That is why we require a strong university sector. If the Browne report goes through, it will put barriers and obstacles in the way of learning and will ensure that higher education — as our motion states — is not based on the ability to learn but on the ability to pay. We fundamentally oppose that, and I suspect that all Members of the House do, too.

I want to turn to the negative impact of higher fees. Annual fees of at least £6,000 would deter many people from going to university and would have an impact on lower- and middle-income families in particular. Such an increase, coupled with living expenses, would increase a student's debt to at least £40,000 on the completion of his or her degree. If students were to come out of college with no assets and debts of £40,000, they would — make no mistake about it — be placed under serious financial hardship.

An increase in fees would mean that more students would seek to study nearer to home in Northern Ireland, which has the smallest higher education sector per capita compared with other regions in the UK. Currently, one third of Northern Ireland-domiciled students attend universities outside Northern Ireland. Therefore, if fees were increased, many such students would be more likely to be crowded out of places in Northern Ireland.

The argument that students benefit financially from education throughout their working lives and should, therefore, contribute differentially does

not apply to other sectors of public expenditure. For example, there is no requirement on former beneficiaries of healthcare or social security benefits to make repayments once they have established an income. Therefore, why do we attach that philosophy to higher and further education students? Surely almost all wage earners are either graduates or benefit from the skills, knowledge and custom of graduates. All of us benefit from having graduates in society, from their importance to the economy to their delivery of services. Therefore, the fairest social policy should be that we all share the burden of the cost of education.

Some universities are arguing for higher levels of funding so that they can compete internationally with other universities involved in research. The additional money required is for research, not teaching, and that is fair enough. However, students, particularly undergraduates, benefit only marginally from university research. The quality of the research carried out by a particular institution may carry a certain kudos and add value to its degrees, but most undergraduate learning is based on existing materials, not on pushing the barriers of knowledge. What is important to most undergraduates is the quality of teaching, not the quality of research. Therefore, why should an undergraduate pay for a university's research when most of them are not allowed near its state-of-the-art research facilities until they study at postgraduate level?

4.15 pm

If we were able to make our own decisions about taxation, the SDLP's position would be very clear: the whole of society benefits from university education. Therefore, society as a whole should pay for university education from public expenditure through a progressive taxation system. Given that we do not have the liberty to set our own tax rates and that we are dependent on decisions made in London by a Conservative Party with a neoliberal economic philosophy, we are faced with difficult funding decisions.

The SDLP urges the new Minister, Danny Kennedy, and the Executive not to allow an increase in student fees under any circumstances. The SDLP is aware that such a decision would have resource implications and would affect other budgets. The decision, like others, will require political determination and realism.

Today, several hundred students from every constituency in Northern Ireland attended a major rally outside this Building. On what was a horrendous day, and on top of the 10,000 signatures that they helped to obtain, we heard the students telling us clearly, as politicians, that they want the fees kept, they do not want Browne and they want circumstances in which they are able to have the quality of life that other students had. A number of them are in the Building, and they want to ensure that future generations of young people in Northern Ireland have the opportunity to access education at a higher level. They do not want circumstances in which there are barriers. That applies not only to lower-income families but to middle-income families.

I know that an amendment has been tabled, but it is important that we have unity in the Chamber at this time. Our motion would erase the Russell Group's proposals, but we will not have unity if the amendment is made. The amendment would soften the SDLP's approach on university fees, which is unfortunate. The House may divide on the issue. Given the SDLP's role leading up to and being part of the campaign around the Russell Group's proposals, and the issues around the elitism of universities across Britain and some in Northern Ireland, we cannot, under any circumstances, accept or tolerate the amendment. I appeal to Members on the other side of the House to think carefully and to let us unite behind the motion. We must remember that we have almost 250,000 students in Northern Ireland at any given time.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I ask Members to reflect on whether their university education would have been available to them and whether their families would have had to make difficult decisions about which one of their children to send to university if what the Russell Group has proposed had been in place in the past.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for her intervention.

It is very clear that that today's rally was a challenge from the several hundred students from every campus who travelled here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: The students do not want the Russell Group's proposals to be accepted and

they do not want Browne. I ask Members to support the motion.

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

“ensuring that third-level education in Northern Ireland remains affordable; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward recommendations on how students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds can be assisted; and rejects any proposal to remove the cap on student fees which could lead to a two-tier university system.”

I add my congratulations to Mr Danny Kennedy on his elevation to the role of Minister for Employment and Learning. He is taking on that role at a difficult time. I have known the Kennedy family for a long time; they made a distinguished contribution to education. He comes second only to his brother Billy who plays a distinguished role in Linfield Football Club.

Two principles must characterise this debate if, in the future, we are serious about providing quality education for our young people and enabling our children to access universities. Those two principles must surely be fairness and quality. One cannot divide fairness from quality, and vice versa.

I agree with the sincere sentiments that were expressed. However, in some parts, I suggest that they are sincerely wrong. This House must try to achieve a future in which we still provide for a richly educated population and not an educated rich. I hope that, when the SLDP received its 10,000 signatures, it informed those students that, as part of the Labour Government, it took £1 billion out of further and higher education. Perhaps that was glossed over.

We have to look at what options we actually have. Can we stand still and let the rest of the world outpace and out-research us while we export students from Northern Ireland to world-class universities elsewhere? Am I exaggerating the position when I say that it is a make or break situation for our universities? I am not. There are many, such as Dr Wendy Piatt of the Russell Group — I will come to some of the points that Mr Ramsey made about that organisation — who strongly suggest that if we stand still, we will break Northern Ireland's current position of having not only one of the top British universities but a world-class university. Standing still sends us backwards.

We exist in a global marketplace. Many students, particularly those from Asia, are prepared to pay up to £25,000 up front to study here. That is the value that they put on a world-class degree from a British university. Our world-class further and higher education sector is second only to that of the United States. We have to ask whether we can allow the international market to move on with its cash injections while we hold back.

As a Liverpool supporter, I am hesitant to mention the word “premiership”. However, we are out of the drop zone, so I will. The reality is that, unless our universities get a cash injection, Northern Ireland will move from the premiership of world-class universities to the third division.

How do we do that? The SDLP had its chance when it held the Ministry, which perhaps appropriately was, at that stage, named DHFETE (Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment). The SDLP could have scrapped fees altogether, but it did not. With respect to the Member, we can no longer deal with the SDLP economics of here today and gone tomorrow. We can no longer write cheques for our universities that will bounce. Greece taught us what happens when the markets realise that they can no longer have confidence in somebody's ability to pay. We need to look at the situation as we find it and not the situation as we want it to be.

I agree with Mrs Kelly. I went to university under a full grant. My parents made sacrifices to send their children to university, before later taking degrees themselves through distance learning. I know what it is like to be a working-class student and to receive those benefits. I want to ensure that we continue that fairness. Northern Ireland leads the rest of the United Kingdom in putting more socially disadvantaged students into its universities. We must maintain that. However, we must look at the world as it is.

Mr Weir: The Member referred to his university education. I have the good fortune to remember that education, having been at Queen's with him.

Mrs D Kelly: But he was a Tory then.

Mr Weir: He has been a Tory, an Ulster Unionist and a member of the DUP. He is a bit of a social butterfly.

Does the Member agree that, when we and others were at university, there was much more

of a fully funded grant system? However, does he also agree that that was affordable perhaps because university education was restricted to less than 10% of the school quartile? Now it is nearly 50%. If, as I am sure that everybody in the House wants, we are to see much wider access to university education, it simply cannot be funded in the way in which it was 20 or 25 years ago.

Mr Bell: The Member makes his point very well. In the Northern Ireland of today, and not the Northern Ireland in which we once were, over 50% of 18- to 25-year-olds go to university. Surely we do not want to regress from that position.

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member aware that his views are at variance with those of a senior member of the University of Ulster who stated in the media last week that levels of access to university in Northern Ireland are increasing, and that the way to maintain that increase is to keep fees at their present level and to cap them?

Mr Bell: We could create a situation in which we stand still, but that would stop the universities being world class.

Mr Weir: I presume that Mr Bradley is quoting Professor Barnett, the vice chancellor of the University of Ulster. Indeed, I see him nodding in agreement. Mr Bell was with me last week when the Committee for Employment and Learning visited Magee College. He will know that, when Professor Barnett was specifically asked whether there should be no increase in student fees, he indicated that there needed to be some increase. Therefore, does the Member agree that Professor Barnett, whom the SDLP is very keen on quoting, is at variance with that party's position?

Mr Bell: The honourable Member makes his point very well. We can dumb down the universities and our system. We could also take 40% of the students out, as Mrs Kelly suggested, and have it the way it was when I went to university, but that will not take away from the position. The reality is that 41.7% of our young full-time undergraduates in Northern Ireland came from a socially disadvantaged background. The DUP wants to maintain and enhance that position and have fairness built into the system.

However, we must work on the system that we have. The Northern Ireland Council for

Voluntary Action showed in its recent report, commissioned by Oxford Economics, that, by 2012, every household in the UK will carry a debt of £47,000, with every person in the UK carrying a debt of £19,000. We can forget about the £153 billion, because no one understands that figure.

Mr McDevitt: I hear what the Member says, but it is at odds with his party's calls during the past few weeks for the House to unite against what the British Government are trying to pass off as the economic reconfiguration of this region. Perhaps the Member should reflect on the words of the Scottish Tories, who disagree with the proposals for education. Indeed, Liz Smith, the Scottish Tories' education spokesperson, said that the Scottish Government should reject up-front fees and a pure graduate tax. How does that fit with what the Member has told us today?

Mr Bell: I always welcome an intervention from the voice from South Belfast. However, stronger voices in South Belfast are saying that to keep a world-class Russell Group university in South Belfast will require a cash injection. The point about that £19,000 debt is that it must be serviced before money can be provided for health and education. Increasing the debt burden and mortgaging future students is a betrayal.

Let us look at where Northern Ireland stands internationally. One in every two pounds of our further and higher education funding is spent on providing bursaries, which means that we are paying more than the United States, Germany, Sweden, Norway and Australia. Some 53% of the further and higher education budget goes into bursaries to help students to come through.

Let us also look at the economic benefits of having a degree. We must accept the reality that when those with a university degree are compared with those with two A levels —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Bell: Are you giving me an extra minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Mr Bell: OK. I thought that you would, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would not have taken all those interventions otherwise. *[Laughter.]*

The choice is between either having world-class universities and access to them or dumbing down.

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

Mr Bell: We should go for world-class fairness and quality.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to take a different approach and to commiserate with the new Minister on taking up his new job at a time when hard decisions need to be made. *[Laughter.]* However, having known Danny for a long time, I think that those hard decisions will be made as soon as possible. I hope that the Minister makes those decisions based on fairness and quality, which the previous Member who spoke mentioned.

I welcome today's debate and give credit where credit is due to those Members who secured it. I also formally welcome the Minister to his first debate as the Minister for Employment and Learning. I commend the students who came out in the pouring rain today. Students from Queen's—who were late—*[Laughter.]* I wanted to get that on the record. Those students joined others from St Mary's and the University of Ulster.

To me, it sends out a clear message that any changes that have been made in our society in 40 years have been the result of the student movement taking to the streets to campaign for those changes. It is great to see the student movement on the march once again.

4.30 pm

For the record, I tabled an amendment to the motion: to be honest, I was being a bit crafty. However, the Speaker turned it down. My amendment was in line with our party policy that student fees should be scrapped, but it did not get far. Sinn Féin is well known for its opposition to student fees. The Committee for Employment and Learning discussed the proposed increase in student fees in line with inflation, and I made the argument that, given that I oppose student fees, why would I agree to them being increased in line with inflation? Jonathan Bell touched on that issue, and I ask the SDLP Member who will give the winding-up speech on the debate to give us more information on how we got to the point of student fees being introduced. We can get into the politics of the matter, but Carmel Hanna's name keeps coming up, and I appeal to my colleagues to give us a wee bit of background.

The former Minister, Reg Empey, said that we were all opposed to student fees, and I called

on him to reject the British Government's review of student fees. In fairness to Sir Reg, he approached the issue with an open mind and did not come down on one side or the other. Sir Reg was easy to work with, and he worked quite closely with the Committee. I am building Danny up now.

Joanne Stuart's review represented one of the better ways forward. She was proactive in going out to speak to all the stakeholders, and she raised some valid points. However, her review was put on the shelf. For me, that raises concerns about whether we are ready to make these decisions, and it allowed us, the Department and the Minister to put making a decision on the long finger and enabled the Browne review to come out.

One of the key points that Joanne Stuart raised is whether the current university fees benefit students. Do students get additional resources, top-of-the-range libraries, sporting equipment etc? It is a valid question. I have no doubt that people do not mind paying if they get a service in return. However, the question is this: where does the money from student fees go? Does it go towards paying universities' running costs? Does it go towards paying additional salaries to lecturers and whoever else, or is it spent to benefit the students? I do not know whether such information exists, but I remain to be convinced that student fees benefit students.

Jonathan Bell made a point about fairness and equality. Education should be free at the point of delivery and is a basic right. That is fairness, and that is equality. If we increase student fees here, students will look to the rest of the world. We will be forcing people to emigrate because we cannot provide education here. A lot of our students do not want to go away. It is up to us to embrace the opportunity to keep our students here. The previous Minister said that, without doubt, higher education plays a significant role in strengthening the economy.

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

Ms S Ramsey: As Pat Ramsey said, the economy is one of the key elements of the Programme for Government, as is social inclusion. I will do my utmost to continue to support this cause, and I ask the new Minister to commit to it.

Mr McClarty: I, too, congratulate my colleague Danny Kennedy on his elevation to the Executive. He will find the Department in very good order following Sir Reg's three years at the helm. If one thing stands out from Sir Reg's time at the Department for Employment and Learning, it is his dedication to continuously ensuring that people from socially deprived backgrounds are given every opportunity to enter higher education. The figures speak for themselves: almost 42% of entrants to Northern Ireland universities in 2008-09 came from less well-off backgrounds. The corresponding figure in England was 32% and only 28% in Scotland. It would be a disaster if all our recent gains were squandered; that is why we need to discuss and resolve university and student funding sensitively.

Northern Ireland is incredibly privileged to have the standard of universities and students that it does. Queen's University and the University of Ulster have proven their success. We need only look at last year's research assessment exercise to see their ability, with both institutions once again moving up the ladder so that they now sit in the top quarter of universities throughout the United Kingdom.

Research and development, innovation and knowledge transfer, although not the sum of modern higher education, play a pivotal role in the modern economy. If Northern Ireland is to grow its private sector and maintain a competitive advantage in certain fields, the continued success of our universities is crucial. That brings us to the crunch of today's debate. In light of current financial constraints, how do we balance the need for excellence in our universities with the need not to overburden students with fees that will turn young people off higher education?

Although the Browne report has no legislative influence in Northern Ireland, it would be foolish to ignore it. It would simply not be a sustainable path for higher education in the Province to pretend that changes to the funding of universities in England would have no implications on this side of the water. As well as not being practical, it simply would not be workable. Since our two universities operate in a UK market, there is no "ourselves alone" solution to university funding. For the benefit of our students, our economy and our wider society, our universities must be able to compete in a UK-wide context.

In Great Britain, Members of Parliament who have the privilege of not being in government can engage in all types of scaremongering, but it is worth noting that, although today it is calling for a graduate tax, it was the Labour Party that introduced tuition fees in the first place. However, we are where we are.

Although graduates from our universities make an invaluable contribution to our economy and public life, we must not forget the immediate financial consequences that higher education has on the Executive. University funding makes up almost 60% of the DEL budget; it accounts for some £0.5 billion a year. After the recent CSR, that expenditure will be even more painful. Lord Browne's report challenges us all, and I urge Members to take a responsible approach. I hope that Members recognise that the previous means of funding for universities will have to change.

Last Monday, every party agreed to produce a budget in light of the CSR. From today's debate, I assume that the SDLP and Sinn Féin, in rejecting the possibility of a rise in student loans, will bring forth proposals to reduce spending in other Departments. I look forward to those proposals, especially those for the Department for Social Development and the Department for Regional Development. Let us be clear: if the parties opposite are serious about what they say and are not merely playing to the gallery, without such proposals their words today are empty and hollow. I support the amendment.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the debate on this important matter and have listened carefully to the arguments. I came here with an open mind, but I have not found the DUP argument sufficiently persuasive, so I support the motion. There is a fundamental problem with arguing the need for a cash injection, given that the local evidence-based Stuart report has yet to find evidence to support a link between increased fees and improved quality in our higher education. I have not found that argument sufficiently persuasive.

It is vital to thousands of people and to our regional economy that we respond decisively to the Browne and Stuart reviews. Put simply, higher education changes lives and life chances. It is essential, therefore, that the Assembly and its Executive use their devolved authority to get the best funding structure possible for

our universities, if we are to maintain our good record of promoting social inclusion through widening participation and if we are to maintain the teaching and research excellence necessary to educate the highly skilled workforce that we will need to grow a modern, knowledge-based economy in this region.

The Alliance Party has, therefore, called on the Executive and the Minister for Employment and Learning to fund higher education in a way that allows our students to access university on the basis of their ability to benefit from the learning experience that is given, rather than on their ability to afford the degree.

Ms Lo: Students are currently eligible for a full grant of £2,900 if their household income is below £25,000. The Browne review seeks to double tuition fees, but it recommends increasing the student grant by only £300 to £3,250. Does the Member agree that that will no doubt deter students from poorer backgrounds from entering higher education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I agree. Participation in higher education should be on the basis of someone's brain, not their bank balance. The Browne proposals have not taken that fully into consideration. The Alliance Party, therefore, opposes any proposal to remove the cap on student fees. Estimates suggest that removing that cap will require our graduates to take on debt in the region of £40,000, effectively creating a situation whereby people from low-income backgrounds will be deterred from going to university. We must not allow a two-tier, class-driven university system to develop in this region.

We do, however, recognise the serious pressure on our public finances, as well as the need to consider the impact that any changes in Scotland, England and Wales could have on our universities. On that note, it would be dishonest not to suggest that any increased cost in student loans being forwarded by HMRC would be a battle that we would have to take on, given that HMRC currently has the power to extend that system across the UK. If I am not wrong, that is what answers to previous Assembly questions suggested. Therefore, it would be dishonest of us not to raise that as an issue.

We must, however, seek to balance widening access to success and maintaining quality, not least considering that the teaching and research capabilities of our universities will be one of the key economic drivers in this region. Although we categorically reject any notion of having uncapped tuition fees in Northern Ireland, the Browne report made a number of proposals that merit consideration. Those proposals could help us to review the traditional vision of higher education in favour of a more modern and efficient mode of delivery.

The Alliance Party welcomes Browne's proposals on the introduction of a student charter for universities, setting out minimum standards, commitments on teaching times and class sizes. We also welcome the extension of student finance arrangements to part-time students, given the increasing number of students who must work to fund their studies and given the need to up-skill our workforce. Calls for universities to consider new modes of teaching, such as two-year degrees, distance and virtual learning, and closer co-operation with further education colleges, are also worthy of consideration.

As was mentioned, Northern Ireland has a good record of increasing participation in higher education, yet, as was also mentioned, the HE sector is still the smallest in the UK. Therefore, we welcome the Browne proposals on additional places.

4.45 pm

The Alliance Party is committed to the fundamental principle that universities should be free at point of delivery; that we must protect access by students from low socio-economic backgrounds; and that an appropriate student financing system must be put in place to ensure that our universities are open to all and can continue to deliver a highly educated population. Higher education must take centre stage of any strategy to deliver high value-added jobs and economic growth in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Lyttle: In line with the motion, I hope that the new Minister will be prompt with an update on the findings of the group that his predecessor established to review the impact of Browne on the Stuart report. The Assembly and the Executive should grasp the opportunity to

show devolution at work by confirming that we will not be abolishing the cap on student tuition fees in this region.

Mr S Anderson: I support the amendment, because, although I share some of the concerns expressed in the motion, I feel that we need to inject some reality and flexibility into the debate. Our universities maintain the high standards that are set by our schools, and we have every right to be proud of the fine tradition of third-level education in our Province. They faced many problems during the decades of violence and civil unrest, when it was hard to attract students from outside Northern Ireland. Many of our young people, mainly Protestants, tended to want to escape to universities elsewhere. That brain drain had a detrimental impact on our struggling economy. Our young people — I repeat, mainly Protestants — left our shores to go to university. The sad thing is that few returned, and we are still reaping the sad harvest of that today. Thankfully, times have changed. More and more young people are choosing to stay in Northern Ireland and to attend our local universities and colleges. In addition, we are delighted to welcome growing numbers of undergraduates from outside our Province.

At one time, only the wealthy could afford to attend university. Then the doors were opened, and a means-tested grant system ensured that young people from across the social spectrum were able to attend university. Today, it has changed again, and the tuition fees and student loan arrangements mean that young people continue to have access to higher education, but they are left with a heavy burden of debt after they graduate. The proposals to remove the cap on tuition fees will significantly add to that burden. There is a danger that we will create a two-tier system and that the clock will be turned back to the days when only the children of the rich attended university. The comprehensive spending review proposes shifting the burden of university spending from the state to the student. I understand that, nationally, the budget for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will decline by 25% and that university funding will be cut by a massive 40% by 2014-15. That is based on the assumption that graduate contributions will broadly offset reductions in the teaching grant. We will have to wait to see how the Department for Employment and Learning responds.

I was interested to hear of David Cameron's recent announcement that over £200 million will be invested in the network of innovation hubs to improve links between universities and businesses. That is to be welcomed.

I agree with the sentiments of the amendment. If we have limited resources, we must target them carefully and try to make sure that they are directed towards those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Today, it seems as though there is little hope of meaningful employment unless you go to university. A young history student who was interviewed by the BBC said that you need a good degree to get anywhere in life and that you have to go to university or everyone will look down their nose at you. I sometimes wonder whether too many young people simply drift into university. Are there better options than university for some people? Do all universities focus on the types of course that will enable graduates to find work?

The Programme for Government rightly places the economy at the centre of its plans. I place on record my gratitude for all that the First Minister and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister are doing and for all that the outgoing Employment and Learning Minister has done to attract high value-added jobs to our shores. I also take this opportunity to congratulate Danny Kennedy on his appointment as the Employment and Learning Minister and wish him well in his new role. At present, those Ministers have a difficult task. However, foreign investors are looking for a well-educated, well-trained and highly skilled workforce. That is vital, which is why universities are so crucial. Money that is spent on higher education is not money wasted. On the contrary, it is significant investment in the future. All of us — politicians and universities — must think strategically.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. My party colleague Sue Ramsey has already outlined Sinn Féin's position on tuition fees: we oppose them. However, the publication of the Browne and Stuart reviews provides an opportunity to raise awareness about what is happening in universities. My party colleague Sue Ramsey referred, as did other Members, to the student experience in universities and whether it is what it should be. During recent weeks, we heard stories about what happens with tutoring, teaching and guidance or, indeed, the lack of

them. The debate provides the opportunity to address issues that arise from such a situation.

I want to touch on three areas: student debt, student experience and widening participation. I commend Adrian Kelly and Gareth McGreevy, who briefed the Committee formally, and Ciaran Helferty, who did so informally. They presented the Committee with written and oral briefings, which were extremely helpful. I welcome that.

As regards student debt, I spotted the following figure: the total outstanding debt at the end of 2009-2010 was £1.35 billion. What would happen to that figure if the cap on tuition fees were removed and some of Browne's other proposals were implemented? That figure is startling: £1.35 billion at the end of 2009-2010. Who would suffer most if the cap were removed and interest on loans increased? As others said, it would be students from low-income families. If fairness and equality are to be the hallmark and benchmark of higher education provision, the Assembly would fail if it were to implement the Browne proposals in some shape or fashion.

Mrs D Kelly: I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. She is right to point out the difficulties that would be faced by families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Does she share my concerns that families that are described as "middle income" — the sons and daughters of nurses, doctors, police officers and other ordinary workers — would also be adversely affected?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for her intervention. I said that fairness should be the hallmark, which covers the point that she made.

I have already referred to the student experience of teaching and tutoring. During the week, certain examples were quoted to me. I will not go into details. However, I must say that they were not flattering. In her report, Joanne Stuart makes the point that it is difficult to link additional income from variable fees with improved student experience. A number of Members touched on that issue. I reiterate the point that I made at the beginning of my remarks: the debate gives us an opportunity to look at what has been happening in universities.

Finally, I want to comment on widening participation. We await a strategy from the Department. We also await a report from Sir Graeme Davies. I must say that I was extremely disappointed with his briefing at Magee College last week; it amounted to next to nothing. Joanne Stuart is looking at her own review. All those strategies and reviews together provide us with an opportunity to look again at what is happening and make sure that whatever system is in place is fair, that there is equality and that there is not an elitist system.

Lord Browne: I support the motion and the amendment. I will also take this opportunity to congratulate Mr Danny Kennedy on his appointment and wish him all the best in his new post.

Today I had the strange experience of listening to dozens of students chanting "down with Browne". I only hope that, if I pass any of them on the way out this evening, they do not mistake me for Lord Browne of Madingley, who published the report, otherwise I may be in a little bit of trouble.

Tuition fees have become a fact of university life for students. No matter how we personally feel about them, they are an important source of funding for universities. The key thing is to ensure that, so long as they exist, they are affordable. There is no doubt that the cap on fees plays an exceptionally important role. It gives students and prospective students certainty about what they will have to pay and prevents fees reaching unattainable levels. I firmly believe that the cap must remain.

I know that many people, including the Browne review, have claimed that a market approach is the solution to the problem of higher education funding. Although it would certainly solve any problems of funding, a market model would inevitably lead to a system where admission was based solely on wealth and not on merit. I ask anyone in the Assembly who supports removing the cap on fees to seriously consider how that could fit with the Assembly's desire to create a society based on equality of opportunity and the principle of merit.

One does not need to be an economist to realise that, if a market solution is applied to the issue of fees, it will ultimately be based on the principle of supply and demand, meaning that the price of a degree will be solely determined by what the richest students

are willing to pay. The greatest burden in the current system is shouldered by students who are caught in the position of not being disadvantaged enough to apply for grants and, at the same time, cannot afford to pay off the fees quickly. If the cap were removed, those middle-class students would be put in the impossible position of deciding between missing out on a degree and taking on a massive debt that is potentially not repayable.

If we believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to access higher education, we have to realise that a market-based approach will never allow that. It is clear that a balance must be struck, and devolution puts us in an excellent position to do that. I am sure that the new Minister for Employment and Learning will take a lead in that. The education future of an entire generation rests in his hands, and we cannot afford to let him shy away from his responsibility to keep a system that offers equality of access to all, regardless of the ability to pay. I await the outcome of his review in the hope that we do not decide to sacrifice our future for the sake of short-term and short-sighted savings.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I too wish to begin by wishing our new Minister, my colleague Danny, well in his new job, and I pay credit to his predecessor, who skilfully managed the Department for the last three and a half years.

I am glad that we are having this debate because, having had the privilege, over a lengthy life, of reading for six university degrees, I speak not from an academic point of view but from personal experience.

5.00 pm

Having started my academic career when fees were very limited, I still remember getting a cheque in my first year for £25, and that was the support that I got. I had come from a working-class background, dropped out of grammar school, and served my time as a motor mechanic. Therefore getting even £25 was something. However, the urge to learn, to get on and to get a university degree overrode everything else.

Northern Ireland's academic institutions are second to none. By becoming a member of the prestigious Russell Group, Queen's has been recognised as one of the top universities in the United Kingdom. However, the nature of education, as I have known it over the past

50 years, means that we cannot stand still or become complacent. We cannot ignore the fact that the current financial climate means that the manner in which universities are funded is changing across the whole of the United Kingdom. We ignore that at our peril.

In order to compete in a UK-wide market, our universities must be comparatively and sustainably funded. It is worth reflecting that our recent success has, in no small measure, been built on increased funding to the tune of 21% in higher education over the past five years. The Browne report reflects changed fiscal reality and, consequently, asks us all difficult questions about how to balance the need to maintain excellence and investment while ensuring that people from all walks of life, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, choose university.

My party is extremely proud that participation in higher education is greater in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom, and we will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that that remains the case. In light of the Browne report, considerable anxiety has been expressed in recent weeks not only among the student population but among parents and the young people who, in the next few years, could make the transition from school to university.

I recognise those concerns, but we cannot shy away from reality. It would be irresponsible and disingenuous to suggest that Northern Ireland can exist in a vacuum on this crucial issue. If we reject any increase in student loans, in the light of the financial constraints that face the United Kingdom, proposing reductions in the budgets of other Departments is the only feasible option to fill the considerable funding gap that will be created. As I have said on other occasions, when we bring these demands before the House, we should bring the answer to how we can fill the vacuum.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that this report was long planned and has its roots in the Higher Education Act 2004. The Assembly faces difficult choices.

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

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I support the amendment, as it is the best way forward.

Mr McDevitt: I support the motion.

I thank Members on all sides of the House who added their names to this morning's petition. It is an important petition that seeks to define us for who we would like to be: a region with education at its heart, which does not look to social class or ability to pay to decide who should get the opportunity of third-level education, but looks simply to the potential of every student, whether school leaver or one returning to education much later in life, and to their ability to learn and to understand the great opportunity, as the Reverend Robert Coulter put it so eloquently, that education provides for all of us.

The petition was started in order to send a clear message, not just to us as a collective, but to the rest of these islands, that we in Northern Ireland understand the progress that has been made in the past decade. We know how much things have changed from the days when Mr Bell, Mrs Kelly and others in the House were in university. We appreciate that many thousands of young students who have the opportunity to have a third-level education today would not have had that opportunity then. We do not want to turn back the clock or to unpick those tremendous achievements. We want to defend and to build on the progress that has been made.

An interesting and important part of the debate is understanding the difference between funding the teaching of undergraduate degree courses and funding research in our universities. We should aspire to make both our major universities major research universities. We should make it a priority of economic policy to invest in research, but that is not the job of undergraduate students. Regionally, we have to work through a conversation about how to continue to support the undergraduate education that is necessary to transform our region while supporting better and stronger research in the areas that will help to rebuild our economy.

Nevertheless, we should have the courage to say that it is our desire that when our children or our parents, cousins, nephews or friends want to be part of higher education, they can do so in a genuinely affordable way. That is why the motion requires that fees be capped. It is also why we say that no mechanism should be put in the way of people's ability to afford those fees. Therefore, we must understand that there is a correlation between seeking to cap the cost of university education and capping the cost of funding that education.

It is entirely understandable that colleagues across the House want to amend the motion to try to protect them and us from future potential expenditure commitments, but we have been talking for the past month about the need to unite against what we feel is an incorrect and inappropriate approach to budgeting in Great Britain. Here, today, we have an opportunity to do that our way, just like the Scots. I quoted the Scottish Conservatives' opinion on the matter earlier. It is not that of the London Conservative Party, but that of the Conservatives in Scotland.

Mr Bell: Is it not the case that Scotland is about to review its case and increase student fees? How does the Member respond to the news in the 'Irish Times' today that the Irish Republic is to put an extra €1,500 on to students to raise the €80 million that it needs? Finally, if it comes down to a choice between a cancer bed in the City Hospital or student fees, how would the Member pay?

Mr McDevitt: I will avoid the last question; it is an unfair choice, and I will not fall into that dilemma. If this was Dáil Éireann — it might be some day — *[Interruption.]* — I would be standing here saying that we should unite anywhere on this island against the type of politics that suggest that it is a good idea to burden education.

I end with a few words that are accredited to a gentleman called Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University. They are the words by which — I welcome the new Minister to his portfolio — we should all approach education policy:

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

The Minister for Employment and Learning

(Mr Kennedy): I thank all the Members who contributed to this important debate. I also thank the Members who passed on their good wishes to me as I undertake my new responsibilities. I pay a warm and genuine tribute to my predecessor, Sir Reg Empey, for the outstanding contribution that he made as Minister for Employment and Learning and as a member of the Executive. I have a very hard act to follow. I think that the whole House recognises the huge contribution that Reg Empey has made to the work of the Assembly and the Executive.

I welcome today's debate. Lord Browne's report on higher education funding, which was published last month, proposes a revolution in how we

as a country think about our universities. As Members are aware, on the day on which the Browne report was made public, we published our review of student fees in Northern Ireland, the Stuart report. Taken together, they ask hard questions and provide us with some very real challenges as we seek to plot the best course for future funding of higher education in Northern Ireland and to provide the best possible opportunities for our young people. Indeed, it was recognition of the issue's importance and the need for early engagement that led my predecessor to make a statement to the House on the day on which the reports were published. It is now up to the Assembly and the Executive to think through those hard questions and challenging answers and to create a "made in Northern Ireland" approach to the issues. I very much hope that we can meet those challenges in a mature and responsible way.

I was encouraged by the tone of the debate. I am prepared to overlook a little bit of the political grandstanding, which came particularly from those Members who tabled the motion and supported it. As my predecessor indicated on 12 October, Joanne Stuart, to facilitate a better informed debate, has been asked to update her report in light of Lord Browne's report. That is in keeping with the recommendations that are contained in her original report. Therefore, I cannot accept the assertion from, I think, Claire McGill that there was an attempt to put Joanne Stuart's report on the long finger. It has to be read very much in the context of the Browne report. Joanne Stuart has agreed to undertake that update. I hope and expect that she will have completed that work by the end of the year.

To expedite that, and so that we are aware of the initial views of key stakeholders in the new context in which the higher education debate is now taking place, I have asked my officials to meet, in the next few weeks, the external steering group that supported Joanne Stuart in carrying out the review here. I recognise the critical importance of all the key stakeholders being fully engaged as we move forward. We need to build consensus, because there are difficult challenges ahead for all of us. I was, therefore, grateful for the opportunity to meet a number of student representatives earlier today at my request to hear their views and concerns. I assured them that they will remain fully involved in the process, because I recognise and value the contribution that they make. I have also taken the opportunity today to have a discussion

with the vice chancellors of the University of Ulster and Queen's University and Joanne Stuart. I know that the universities, like other stakeholders, are concerned about the future. I look forward to engaging them further.

I welcome and pay tribute to the Committee for Employment and Learning's responsible and measured input to date, particularly following the launch of the Browne and Stuart reports, when it stated:

"We need to determine how to balance the difficult equation of how much student fees should be and how much public finance should be given to the universities."

I look forward, therefore, to an early meeting with the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and other members of the Employment and Learning Committee.

5.15 pm

The reports from Lord Browne and Joanne Stuart will help us to think through the challenges outlined, and I will consider Lord Browne's report in conjunction with Joanne Stuart's update and the spending review outcomes — that is an important emphasis — before bringing forward a public consultation on those important issues. I tell the House and every Member of it that, as Minister, I am fully committed to ensuring that access to higher education in Northern Ireland should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

However, we must also recognise that, in funding higher education, we need to achieve the right balance between contributions by government and by those who benefit from a higher education in the context of the current financial and economic realities. Members will be aware of the budgetary issues following the recent comprehensive spending review. Indeed, following the emergency debate in the House last Monday, Members will be all too aware that the details provided by the Chancellor in the comprehensive spending review provide the context in which we must take difficult decisions.

I do not expect Members to come to any firm conclusions on the changes suggested by Lord Browne until the full details of the spending review implications for Northern Ireland are

known and spending priorities have been established by the Executive. Some may question the relevance to Northern Ireland of Lord Browne's report and will suggest, perhaps, that we should simply ignore it or dismiss it completely. That is not the real world. Higher education funding here is a devolved matter, and we do not operate in a vacuum. Our universities and students compete in a UK-wide market, and the Executive get the block grant from Westminster. We simply cannot stick our head in the sand and pretend that those facts do not exist.

Therefore, before we take decisions, we must carefully consider Lord Browne's report, the coalition's response, although not yet in, the updated Stuart report, and the implications of the CSR. It is for those reasons that I cannot support the motion in its outright rejection of the Browne proposals. Although I support its sentiment of access to higher education for all regardless of ability to pay, the interests of Northern Ireland's universities and students are not served by basing our response to Browne on ideology rather than facts.

I thank Mr Weir and Mr Bell for their amendment, which strikes the right balance as we consider how to move forward in a very difficult context. As Members wrestle with those issues in the coming months, it is worth reflecting that the higher education sector in Northern Ireland has seen a funding increase of 21% over the past five years. We should also reflect on the successes that that additional investment helped to create. In recent years, we have witnessed a dramatic expansion in our university population: in Northern Ireland, almost half of our 18- to 21-year-olds now participate in higher education.

Importantly — an achievement in which we should take great pride — we have the best higher education participation rates in the UK by those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2008-09, a significantly higher proportion of Northern Ireland's young full-time, first-degree entrants were from socio-economic classes 4 to 7; it is 32.4% in England and 28.2% in Scotland. Therefore, one can say, accurately, that the existing fees regime has not impacted adversely on our participation rates. Such an extension of opportunity helps to strengthen our economy and has greatly benefited our society, and I hasten to add that I am committed to protecting those benefits. I hope that that gives some comfort to Sue Ramsey. There is no doubt that the Executive will, ultimately, have

to face difficult choices. Nonetheless, one of my concerns is to protect as far as possible Northern Ireland's position in leading the way in the UK on increasing participation rates and widening access to higher education.

Research and development has been identified as an important contributor to economic development at both UK and Northern Ireland level. As the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will testify, that was a key theme at the recent investment conference in Washington. As the major suppliers of research in Northern Ireland, our universities have a vital role to play in producing quality research and in translating that research into the market through knowledge transfer. By supporting world-class research, development and innovation, we can build a dynamic economy, which is the top priority of the Programme for Government.

Over the past number of years, my Department has invested significant levels of research funding in our universities through a variety of mechanisms. The amount invested by equality-related research funding has risen from nearly £40 million in academic year 2005-06 to more than £50 million in academic year 2010-11, which is an increase of more than 35%. The success of that investment has been clearly demonstrated by the performance of our universities in the most recent research assessment exercise in 2008. The results confirm that research undertaken in Queen's University and in the University of Ulster is of world-class quality. It is imperative, therefore, that we do not lose sight of the fact that R&D and innovation lie at the heart of Northern Ireland's economic recovery, so I very much want to maintain research funding at the appropriate level.

I shall now address Members' contributions. Mr Ramsey opened the debate by advocating a progressive taxation policy, which would no doubt be popular with the wider public. However, he made a mistake somewhat by focusing his criticisms on the Russell report. In our context, it is important that we consider the Browne report and the Stuart report. Let us work on those reports as we move forward.

I agree with Jonathan Bell that fairness and quality should be the mark of our approach, and we want our universities and students to retain their world-class status. Sue Ramsey offered sincere commiserations, so I thank her for that. Like her colleagues, she laid out Sinn

Féin's position, which is to scrap student fees. However, if we simply scrap student fees, an £80 million gap would be created immediately and would have to be funded from the Executive or the block grant. Other Departments and Ministers, including those who are her party colleagues, may well have a view on that. I thank David McClarty for reminding us about the widening access campaigns for Northern Ireland universities, which are working successfully. Indeed, they are a tribute to the hard work and dedication of Sir Reg Empey.

I was slightly disappointed by Chris Lyttle's approach. Although he reminded us, on behalf of the Alliance Party, that we have to live within the financial constraints that are being imposed on us, he went on to produce a long shopping list of issues for me to fund. We have to wake up and smell the coffee. Talk is cheap; it takes money to buy whiskey. *[Laughter.]*

Sydney Anderson welcomed the increase in access and the approach of finding high-value jobs. Claire McGill did not address the £80 million gap that would be created.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: No. I am sorry; I do not have time.

Lord Browne said that it was "down with Browne" that concerned him. I assume that most of the students are not from east Belfast. The House would do well to listen carefully to the words and wide experience offered by Dr Coulter. I hope that Members, after some reflection, will support the amendment.

Mr Weir: First, I join with others in congratulating the new Minister on his elevation. He is a man who, in his own words, has had an overnight success after 25 years. He is welcome to the post.

The debate has looked at a very difficult subject that we have to approach with realism and responsibility. We do nobody any favours if we give people false hope, or pretend that, simply by closing our eyes, we can wish away the Browne report or the context from which it emanates. Although a lot of the sentiments are the same across the Chamber, we have fundamental differences when it comes to the wording of the motion. It is, in part, inaccurate. Even in the last line, it refers to:

"the coalition ... plans to adopt the Browne proposal to remove the cap on student fees."

I am no great fan of the coalition, but it is fairly clear that they have been backing off that proposal, as was highlighted by Nick Clegg not that long ago. The Minister is right in proposing that we need to look at how best to tackle the issue in Northern Ireland. There has to be a detailed examination of the issue. However, if we adopt the motion, we will prejudge that outcome and take it at the beginning of the process rather than at the end.

Rather than prejudicing the outcome, the amendment addresses four principles that should apply to any final agreement. First, that third-level education in Northern Ireland remains affordable; secondly, that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds must be assisted; thirdly, that we are opposed to and reject the removal of a cap on student fees; and, fourthly, that we are opposed to a two-tier university system. Those are four principles on which we should be in a position to unite.

As the Minister quite rightly highlighted, this is about balance. It is about getting a balance that is fair to the students of Northern Ireland, to the students from Northern Ireland who are studying in other parts of the United Kingdom and who have largely been ignored, and to the universities. The proposer of the motion effectively castigated the universities here for the amount of money that they are spending on research and development, but that is vital if we are to put the economy at the heart of what we do.

Let us be realistic: if we adopt the SDLP's position, instead of striking a balance, we will be left with one of two situations. Either we will massively underfund universities here and Queen's University and the University of Ulster will sink not even into the third division, as Mr Bell put it, but into some sort of non-league status, or, we suck in vast amounts of money from other Departments to help to subsidise the changes. There is no other way of squaring that circle, and I have yet to hear an answer from the SDLP as to which approach it is going for.

To be fair to Sinn Féin, its position on student fees has been absolutely consistent: it may be consistently unrealistic, but at least it has been consistent. I take slight exception to a remark that Sue Ramsey made when she was castigating the former Minister Carmel Hanna and the SDLP for their role in effectively ensuring that student fees remain. That was fundamentally wrong. It was, in fact, Séan Farren

and the SDLP who brought that in. Sue Ramsey should check her facts —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Unfortunately, I have got only another minute and a half.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way for accuracy's sake?

Mr Weir: For accuracy's sake, the SDLP's position on the review of student fees was brought in by Séan Farren. I do not have the time to give way. I am trying to sum up, and Mr McDevitt has had his chance to speak. He will not get another in this debate.

I am most disappointed and puzzled by the position of the Alliance Party. I agreed with a lot of the content of Chris Lyttle's speech. He highlighted the need to ensure that things were affordable for students in Northern Ireland. He highlighted the need to protect people from the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. He indicated, as I would, that he was strongly opposed to the removal of the cap on student fees, and he specifically mentioned that we do not want a two-tier university system.

He commended all four points in the amendment and then said that he was against it. Beyond that, he told us that it would be dishonest to suggest to people that we have room for manoeuvre to implement effectively what the SDLP is saying. Therefore, he supports all the elements of the amendment and says that it would be dishonest to say that it will not be very difficult to implement the SDLP ideas, yet —

5.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: Yet he opposes the amendment and supports the motion. I find that difficult to understand.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Weir: The only responsible way forward is to not prejudice the outcome, support students and universities and support the amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will begin by emphasising the House's agreement on congratulating the new Minister. Given that he is from almost the

same townland as me, I add my congratulations to those of the House. Perhaps he will be remembered today for one expression: he said that talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy whiskey. I hope that he did not have a few before he arrived here today.

Pat Ramsey began the debate and emphasised the importance of third-level education in building a knowledge-based economy and a highly skilled workforce. He outlined the negative impact of higher fees and said that they would deter people from attending university, impact especially on middle- and lower-income families and place a huge financial hardship on students as they leave university. He also made the point that higher fees would lead to fewer local students in our universities. He said that we should all bear the burden of the cost of higher education, because society as a whole benefits from it.

Mr Ramsey said that the extra money from an increase in fees would be used to fund research and not to fund teaching, and he said that it is not the role of students to fund research. He urged the Minister not to increase fees and referred to the students who attended Parliament Buildings today to protest and to present 10,000 signatures. He said that those students want to make sure that future families have the access to university that they and their families have had. He refused to accept the amendment and called for unity on the SDLP motion.

Jonathan Bell emphasised his view that access to university education should be based on fairness and equality. I agree with him. That is why he should unite with us behind the SDLP motion. The DUP amendment will not bring fairness and equality to university entrance.

Sue Ramsey commiserated with the Minister on taking up his appointment when hard decisions have to be made. However, she gave him credit for his past record and said that she hoped that he would come to the hard decisions quickly. I hope that he comes to the right decisions quickly. Sue commended the students who came to Parliament Buildings and questioned the SDLP record on higher education. I want to point out to Sue that, when the SDLP held the Ministry through Seán Farren and Carmel Hanna, it provided the best package that was available to students anywhere on these islands. That was recognised not only by this House but by

all the student unions. I hope that that answers Sue's questions; I am happy to clarify that for her.

David McClarty presented us with statistics that showed that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to university in Northern Ireland than in England and Scotland: 42% in Northern Ireland, 32% in England and 28% in Scotland. He also outlined the important role of universities in developing the economy. He argued that we should follow England, and one wonders what the point of devolution is if we cannot make our own decisions for the good of our own people here rather than slavishly following what is laid down for us elsewhere.

Chris Lyttle said that he had come to the debate with an open mind. He was not persuaded by the DUP, and he must have been wooed by the SDLP's arguments. He expressed his support for the motion, and I am grateful to him for that. He called on the Minister for Employment and Learning to fund higher education to ensure that access to university should be based not on the ability to pay but on ability only. He said that we should consider some of the proposals of the Browne report, and he mentioned the student charter and finance arrangements for part-time students. His comments that the Assembly should show devolution at work on that issue echo mine.

Sydney Anderson expressed his agreement with many of the sentiments in the motion. I thank him for that, but it is a pity that he did not go the full way and support us. Claire McGill spoke about the student experience at university and said that the Stuart and Browne reports provided the opportunity to examine student experience. She emphasised that the current level of student debt, which amounts to £1.35 billion, would increase further if the cap on fees were to be removed.

Lord Browne dissociated himself clearly from the other Lord Browne, and he emphasised that the "down with Browne" slogans were not directed towards him. He agreed that the cap should remain. He was firm on that, so we will not say "down with Browne" to him on that issue. He said that a market-based approach will not work to gain equality of access to all, and we agree with him on that point.

Reverend Coulter paid tribute to Sir Reg Empey, and I am sure that we will all join in that. The Reverend Robert collects university degrees, and he probably has more of them than many of

us have had hot dinners. He is proud of the fact that participation levels in higher education are higher here than elsewhere.

Mr Weir: *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: I heard that one, Peter.

He supported the motion as amended.

Conall McDevitt referred to the student petition, and he said that it sent a clear message to the Assembly and, indeed, further afield. He said that we should defend the progress that has been made and build on it. He emphasised the importance of research and development but said that it is not the role of undergraduates to pay for research and development. I totally agree with him on that point, and I am sure that that will not surprise you. He said that there is a need for us to unite against inappropriate budgeting coming from across the water. He ended his speech with a quotation from Derek Bok of Harvard University, who said:

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

The Minister opened his speech with a very warm tribute to Sir Reg. I almost thought that Sir Reg had gone to the House of Lords already. The Minister said that there needed to be a unique Northern Ireland approach to the challenges, and I have emphasised that in my speech. There should be a unique Northern Ireland approach that protects our students and does not place an increased financial burden on them. The new Minister rather pompously accused those who tabled the motion of political grandstanding, and I hope that he has not caught the Ken Maginnis virus; I do not think that Michael McGimpsey yet has a cure for that.

The Minister is fully committed to access, and he believes that it should be based on ability rather than on ability to pay. We agree with him on that point, and we hope that his words will be reflected in his actions.

Mr Deputy Speaker, my time is coming to an end. I thank all the Members who responded so warmly to my speech. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 29

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, LordMorrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McClarty and Mr Ross.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Burns and Mr A Maginness.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 29

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McClarty and Mr Ross.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly,

Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Burns and Mr A Maginness.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Browne and Stuart reports on the funding of third-level education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Executive to ensure that publicly funded higher education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, ensuring that third-level education in Northern Ireland remains affordable; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward recommendations on how students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds can be assisted; and rejects any proposal to remove the cap on student fees which could lead to a two-tier university system.

Adjourned at 6.02 pm.



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