

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 18 January 2011
Volume 60, No 2

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 January 2011

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Dogs (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to move the Consideration Stage of the Dogs (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

There are two groups of amendments, and we will debate the amendments in each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 8, 9, 11 and 12, which deal with Assembly control of Order-making powers and the amount of fixed penalty. The second debate will be on amendment Nos 2 to 7, 10 and 13, which deal with the control of dogs, including attacks on livestock, certain other animals and people.

I remind Members who intend to speak that, during the debates on the two groups of amendments, they should address all the amendments in each group on which they wish to comment. Once the debate on each group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4 (Fees)

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 8, 9, 11 and 12. The amendments deal with the Assembly's control of Order-making powers and the amount of fixed penalty. Members should note that amendment No 1 is a paving amendment to amendment No 9 and that amendment Nos 11 and 12 are consequential to amendment No 9.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms Gildernew): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 3, line 24, leave out from "and" to end of line 26.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 8: In clause 14, page 9, line 26, leave out from "in pursuance" to end of line 32 and insert

"to a district council in pursuance of a notice under Article 36 in respect of an offence to which Articles 36 to 38 apply—

(a) is the amount specified by the district council; or

(b) if no amount is so specified, is £75.

(2) A district council may under paragraph (1)(a) specify different amounts in relation to different offences.

(3) A district council may make provision for treating a fixed penalty payable to that council in pursuance of a notice under Article 36 as having been paid if a lesser amount is paid before the end of a period specified by the council.

(4) The Department may by regulations make provision in connection with the powers conferred on district councils under paragraphs (1)(a) and (3).

(5) Regulations under paragraph (4) may (in particular)—

(a) require an amount specified under paragraph (1)(a) to fall within a range prescribed in the regulations;

(b) restrict the extent to which, and the circumstances in which, a district council can make provision under paragraph (3).

(6) The Department may by order substitute a different amount for the amount for the time being specified in paragraph (1)(b).” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 9: After clause 14, insert the following new clause:

“Assembly control of orders made by Department

14A. For Article 54 of the Dogs Order substitute—

‘Orders

54.—(1) Except as provided by paragraph (2), orders made by the Department under this Order are subject to negative resolution.

(2) No order shall be made under Article 7(6), 8(4), 23(7)(b), 25(2)(f), 25(4), 25B(1), 28(3)(b), 29(5)(b), 33(3)(c), 35(2), 38(6) or 46 unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.’” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 11: In schedule 1, page 11, line 9, leave out paragraph (4). — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 12: In schedule 2, page 11, column 2, leave out lines 18 to 20 and insert

“In Article 8(4) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution’.

In Article 23(7)(b) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 25(4) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 25B(1) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 35(2) the words ‘subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 46 the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Before I speak on the first group of amendments, I take this opportunity to thank the Chairperson, his predecessor and members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee

for their very detailed and constructive scrutiny of the Bill. The amendments are the result of the Committee’s hard work and the efforts of the Office of the Legislative Counsel, legal advisers and officials in my Department. I thank everyone involved for their efforts. In particular, I thank the many stakeholders who contributed to the development of the Bill. Their advice and contributions have been invaluable.

I believe that the amendments that I tabled will strengthen the Bill, which, in turn, will further improve the dog control system established by the Dogs Order 1983. We have discussed and agreed the key elements of the Bill in the Chamber before: compulsory microchipping; a system of control conditions for problem dogs; an increase in the dog licence fee; and increased fixed penalties for offences under the 1983 Order. The amendments will not change those key features.

I will discuss the amendments in detail in a moment. First, I want to remind the Assembly why the Bill is before us. The Dogs Order 1983 was ahead of its time, establishing a system of local authority dog wardens funded in part by the licence fee. The system has significantly reduced the number of stray dogs, the number of attacks on people and livestock worrying. However, more could be done. Far too many owners still allow their dogs to stray, and far too many stray dogs impounded by councils are unidentifiable and owners unaccountable.

Amendment No 1 is one of a group of amendments — amendment Nos 1, 8, 9, 11 and 12 — that make changes to certain Order-making powers under the 1983 Order and to the system of fixed penalties for offences under that Order. I have agreed with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee that certain Order-making powers in the Dogs Order should be subject to approval in draft by the Assembly, as opposed to the negative resolution procedure. Previously, those powers were used to make Orders exempting the Prison Service and security forces operating in a public order role from various provisions of the 1983 Order. The Committee felt that those powers were too significant to be subject to the negative resolution process.

With that in mind, amendment No 9 introduces a new clause, substituting for article 54 of the Dogs Order 1983 a new article that provides that the draft affirmative procedure, rather than

the negative resolution procedure, will apply to any Order that exempts dogs used for specified purposes, such as police purposes, from certain requirements of the Dogs Order. To maintain consistency, Orders that previously were subject to affirmative resolution also need to be made subject to approval in draft. Amendment Nos 1, 11 and 12 make the appropriate consequential changes to the Bill. I am grateful for the Committee's contribution on that and on the other amendments that I tabled.

Amendment No 8 is the final amendment in the first group. Under the Dogs Order 1983, certain offences may attract fixed penalties ranging from £10 to £25. When the Bill was introduced, clause 14 proposed a penalty of £50 for all fixed penalty offences under the 1983 Order. However, the Environment Minister's Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill proposes a slightly different system to deal with dog-fouling offences, which, in many council areas, will also be enforced by dog wardens. The Committee suggested that the two systems should work along the same lines, and I was happy to table amendment No 8 to implement that suggestion. Amendment No 8 provides for councils to set fixed penalties at a level to suit local circumstances or, where they do not, for a fixed penalty of £75. The amendment also provides for councils to vary the level of fixed penalty for different offences under the Dogs Order and for reductions for early payment of fixed penalties.

Under the system proposed in amendment No 8, the Department may make regulations specifying a range within which fixed penalties may be set and regulating the reductions for early payment that I mentioned. Amendment No 8 also provides for the Department to make Orders altering the default amount of fixed penalty where councils do not set a limit. The amendment will improve the Bill's provision on fixed penalties. It allows for flexibility to suit local conditions, acknowledges that councils are best placed to identify particular problems facing their district and increases the maximum fixed penalty that can be applied. However, the Bill also retains an important provision that was introduced in May that allows councils here to retain the proceeds of the fixed penalty system for the first time. That will lead to a better resourced dog warden network and more effective enforcement of the law. Once again, the amendment, which has been agreed with

the Committee, will improve the enforcement of dog control here.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Moutray): As I will refer to local government councils during the debate, I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council.

I thank the members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Assembly and departmental Bill teams and supporting officials, those who provided evidence to the Committee and, finally, the Committee support team for the time and effort that they have put into getting us and the Bill to where we are today.

Mr Deputy Speaker, with your latitude, I will refer briefly to clause 2, which is entitled "Microchipping", which now stands part of the Bill. It is important to provide Members with a little clarity on that matter and to reassure them that the Committee consideration of that subject was not as fleeting as it was in the introduction of the Bill today. Rather, most of the debate on the Bill centred on that issue and whether we should have microchipping, whether there is there a need for licensing and whether dual systems are needed. The Committee concluded that microchipping would make a significant contribution to reducing the, quite frankly, disgraceful number of stray dogs euthanised in Northern Ireland each year. However, the Committee sought and has received agreement from the Minister and her Department that they will extensively consult local councils over the next 12 months to further assess the need for dual identification systems of microchipping and tagging.

This group of amendments will not only set the amount of the fixed penalty but, importantly, allow the revenue derived from that penalty to be paid directly to local councils and make a contribution to the support of dog warden provision in council areas. I emphasise that it will make only a contribution towards the supporting of council dog wardens because, frankly, it will not be sufficient, even with licensing revenues, to cover the costs of the service that is currently provided or that is required as a result of new enforcement obligations introduced by the Bill.

Despite what the Minister and her officials will claim, the licensing fee was originally proposed at a level of £50. However, following uproar from Committee members, that fee was

reduced to a more realistic level of £12.50, with exemptions for those on income support and for senior citizens. That might have been close to providing cover for the service, but the additional enforcement requirements will result in escalating costs for councils. For example, a licence will not be issued until a dog has been microchipped. That will require wardens to conduct checks on dogs to ensure that they have been chipped, and that will either require handling facilities at council premises or require wardens to undertake additional visits to examine dogs at owners' premises. Although the Minister and officials will claim that the fixed penalties will cover those additional costs, they do so with little evidence to prove their argument since the sourcing of those fixed penalties as revenue is a new concept introduced in the Bill. In addition, council officials have provided evidence that the number of exemptions to licensing being introduced may reduce the overall income below the current levels sourced from the £5 licence fee. The Committee has, therefore, recommended that the Minister and her Department consult council members to assess whether there are other revenue-raising sources that will allow for the discontinuation of the licensing regime.

The Department also originally proposed that the fixed penalty be set at £50. Members were aware that a similar regime was proposed in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, though it sets the level at £75 to allow councils to make abatement for prompt payment. Members agreed that, for consistency purposes, the same regime should be applied to this Bill. I am pleased that the Committee was able to get consensus on that matter with the Department.

Finally, I will refer to the amendment on Order-making powers. That amendment changes the process from negative resolution to the affirmative process for future subordinate legislation. Again, the Committee is content that that has been agreed to in this amendment as, in our opinion, it allows the House and the Committee a greater level of scrutiny. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development supports the amendments.

10.45 am

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee and the Committee staff for guiding

us through the Committee Stage. I also thank the departmental officials and the Minister.

My comments will be pretty brief, because many of the controversial aspects will not be discussed today. We dealt with aspects of microchipping, licensing, banned breeds and responsible dog ownership. At the Bill's Final Stage, we will probably get a better input from Members. The councils have a considerable lead time for many elements of the legislation, and it is important that councils and officials continue to engage in delivering the change. A huge responsibility will be placed on councils, and that has to be widely recognised.

Given that a lot of extra powers are coming from the Assembly to local authorities, one of the main issues was the need not to put financial burdens on councils. I declare an interest as a councillor on Down District Council. It is important that we mitigate the huge financial burdens on councils.

One of the main aspects of this group of amendments is increasing the fixed penalty from £50 to £75. I welcome that because it is a good opportunity for councils to use a carrot-and-stick approach and to bring people with them on the journey. We want responsible dog ownership and, at times, it is hard to convince the general public about what we are trying to achieve. The upper limit for severe cases is a useful tool for council officials and enforcement officers.

A wider debate on fixed penalties is needed, and my vision is to have a sliding scale, where people's ability to pay is configured in the fixed penalty. Someone who earns a huge amount of money — an MLA, for example — will be better able to pay than someone who is on benefits. A £50 or £75 fine or fixed penalty is huge for people who live on around £55 a week. Such a fine would be a huge chunk of their disposable income, but, for a person who earns £100,000 or £200,000 a year, a fine of £75 is less of a disincentive; they would just pay it. That wider debate is not for today, but the fixed penalty will give greater flexibility to councils, so I welcome the amendment.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a local councillor because, ultimately, the legislation will be enacted and worked on by local council officers, who will try to regulate dogs in each area. I suspect that the fact that some 9,000 stray and unwanted dogs were identified by

councils in 2009 and the associated problem of dog fouling, which is a big issue locally, are the reasons behind this attempt to increase regulation and give additional means of controlling dogs, as well as other aspects of public safety. An unacceptable number of dogs have had to be destroyed.

I read amendment Nos 1, 9, 11 and 12 as improving accountability to the Assembly, in that they widen the requirement for affirmative resolution, through which changes have to be brought to the House and approved, rather than the Minister's being able to introduce changes by negative resolution and the Assembly's having to pray within six months to overturn them. That is a welcome change.

Amendment No 8 enables councils to adopt fixed penalty notices on some occasions. That is another option for councils to consider. Fixed penalty notices can be brought in relatively quickly. They are also an efficient method of bringing about improvement at an early stage of that activity so that, hopefully, owners would adopt corrective action at a very early stage.

I have had occasion to provide evidence in court in other areas where fixed penalty notices have not been available, and I am aware of the huge amount of bureaucracy involved if an issue goes to court. It involves huge cost to the council and to the justice system. Therefore, the ability to use fixed penalty notices on occasions determined by councils and to have a low level of fine similar to that in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, which has been mentioned, is entirely appropriate.

As has been indicated, the fee could be retained by the council, but the biggest benefit would be the saving in council officers' time. They may be able to use much speedier means of addressing issues with owners whose behaviour is not as good as it should be. That improvement could be brought about without the involvement of the courts. If fixed penalty notices are not accepted, there is an option of going to court.

Mr Molloy: Does the Member agree that the idea of microchipping and the council being able to identify a dog can happen only if the dog warden can catch the dog? The fact that they have to put the scanner against the dog's body means that a lot of stray dogs will remain strays, because the idea that people have that a dog can be identified at a distance with a scanner is a bit of a myth. The problem will still

come down to the dog warden being able to catch the dog.

Mr Beggs: I will come to your point when I have finished talking about fixed penalty notices. Fixed penalty notices are an important tool in bringing about improvement in how the failings of dog owners are addressed. Hopefully, corrective action can be brought about without the involvement of courts and expensive bureaucracy. Therefore, it is that effective tool that I view as being the most important area and not the fact that fixed penalty notice fees would go to councils. If you were to count officers' time involved in any court action, you would quickly get a sense of where I am coming from.

Microchipping is widely recognised as being a good long-term method of identifying a dog. On occasions, tags fall off and dog owners become highly stressed if their dog goes missing. Therefore, I am sure that microchipping will provide a sense of security for any responsible owner who has lost their dog and wishes to find it again, as the dog will be more easily identified and can be brought back to them. Therefore, that aspect is to be welcomed.

I recognise that too many dogs are unlicensed, and anyone examining the detail of the Committee's hearings will see that tagging and microchipping were widely discussed to see whether there was a neat method of coming up with one system. However, until we reach the stage where councils decide not to license dogs at all, I do not see how we can move that way. There would need to be wider consultation on the issue and greater thought put into it before we take that drastic step, because it has its function. I am aware that that is what has happened in England and elsewhere, but we need to have that debate before we decide to remove our licensing system.

There is a need to ensure that there is better identification. The fact that dog breeders will be required to microchip their dogs in the future will increase the number of dogs whose owners can be easily identified. Right from the start, a dog will be identifiable. I expect that that will take time to build up. I suspect that there will be heightened activity to try to increase the number of licensed dogs. That work will largely fall to councils. I believe that the number of stray dogs has started to reduce. Neutering is playing an important role in that. Complex inter-relationships can work for and

against the identification of dogs when it comes to neutering. For example, will people come forward voluntarily to get their dogs neutered and microchipped? There is a huge question mark over whether they will. Nevertheless, on balance, a judgement had to be taken. The Assembly is going in the right direction at this time. In an ideal world, it might have been nice to do things differently. However, I support the direction of travel in the Bill and the amendments.

Dr Farry: I speak as a non-member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. However, I have considerable interest in the subject. Obviously, it is an important issue for the many dog lovers in Northern Ireland. Certainly, we all appreciate the importance of responsible dog ownership. We are also conscious of the importance of animal welfare issues and the avoidance of cruelty and difficult situations for dogs. There have been heavily publicised cases where things have gone badly wrong for dogs.

I want to comment particularly on issues that relate to licensing and fines, which are covered by the first group of amendments. It is important to stress that the primary purpose of a licence is to control and regulate dog ownership. Although revenue raising is important, it is probably secondary to that. There is clearly a problem with stray and unwanted dogs in Northern Ireland. It is worth commenting and reflecting on the fact that destruction figures here are much higher than in every other part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, in Northern Ireland, destruction figures vary massively among councils. It is important that the Assembly drill down and try to understand why that happens. There are lessons to be learned not only from elsewhere in the UK but from how one council deals with the issue differently from another. No one wants high numbers of dogs to be destroyed.

Dog ownership must be seen as a privilege rather than a right. Although it is important that the Assembly consider and reflect on the cost of a dog licence or microchip, if, indeed, it moves in that direction, that must also be considered as part of the annual and, indeed, lifetime investment required by dog ownership. The cost of a licence will easily be dwarfed by the amount of money that a dog owner will spend on, say, dog food. Obviously, the bigger the dog, the bigger the bill. The inoculations

that a dog should get will also cost money. Vets' fees can also be substantial. Therefore, lifetime investment in a dog can run into thousands of pounds at least. It is important that the Assembly consider licensing in that regard.

The most compelling point about licensing is that it is designed to maximise public knowledge about dog numbers, identification and owners. Therefore, if a lower licence fee can be helpful, that is certainly favourable. My party has perhaps gone further and suggested that it may even be better to consider, say, a £100, one-off cost for a dog licence, rather than to have an annual cost. That may be a cleaner administrative way to deal with licensing, and, indeed, it may produce a higher number of licensed dogs. My party colleague Trevor Lunn made that point at Second Stage.

11.00 am

I favour microchipping, because a microchip is much more modern than a licence and gives much more information. I noted with interest Mr Molloy's intervention on the need to catch the dogs. I am not aware of dog wardens having problems getting hold of a stray dog if they come across one. There are ways and means of doing those things. It is an art; in fact, it is a successful art for most of the dog wardens across Northern Ireland.

We also have to recognise that there is a financial aspect to the licence fee and that it is an important contribution towards council coffers. Our party is happy to support the amendment giving flexibility to councils over the level of fines. In the same light, the purpose of fines is to regulate behaviour and deter irresponsible dog ownership rather than to be a means of trying to raise revenue. Although we will want to encourage the maximum amount of licensing, we will, probably, want to minimise the level of fines that are imposed for unlicensed dogs, because if there is a high level of fines, it will mean that we are not being successful in ensuring that dogs are being registered.

I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. When commenting on the financial aspects of the issue, it is important to acknowledge that the revenue from licensing or fines will never cover the costs of providing dog wardens and investing in kennelling, regardless of whether those services are carried out by individual councils or collaboratively across

councils. A financial burden will, therefore, always fall on the ratepayers.

I was interested to hear the Committee Chairperson's opening remarks. He made comparisons with other legislation that is going through, such as the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. We can also cite the example of the Welfare of Animals Bill, which is causing a degree of controversy between the Department and councils. I am not going to dwell on either of those Bills, because we are not discussing those today, but it is worth making a general point that arises out of this Bill and which is, perhaps, held in common with those other Bills. There is a need for better understanding between central government and local government over financial matters. In a simple sense, it does not matter whether the cost is being borne by the taxpayer and worked through the Assembly, or borne by the ratepayer through councils, so long as the public service is provided effectively and cost-effectively with the relevant level of efficiency.

In the real world, particularly in Northern Ireland today, there is an ongoing tension between councils and the Assembly. That is probably accentuated in this difficult financial climate. Councils feel that they are being asked to take on more and more responsibilities, without the resources coming down from the Assembly. In some respects, it is, perhaps, reasonable to shift that burden from taxpayers to ratepayers. However, the fear comes from the fact that we have an Assembly that is trying to run a very tight budget and, suddenly, councils are being given additional pressures and functions, and costs go up, with a resultant burden on rates. All of a sudden, fingers are being pointed at councils for being inefficient, because rate bills are going up, but the real reason for that is the passing over of additional functions. If there was a degree of confidence that there was not going to be such finger-pointing between different levels of government and a reflection that everyone was working in partnership, the path would be smoother for councils taking on greater responsibilities, regardless of whether those responsibilities relate to dog regulation, the more general welfare of animals or clean neighbourhoods. It is important that we bear that in mind as we look to other Bills and at this Bill as it goes through.

We are happy to support the amendments as they stand. They could have been a bit more

creative in respect of a one-off £100 fee, but it is important that we focus on the goal of maximising our understanding and knowledge of dog ownership and regulating that. If the amendments before us today represent the view that that is the most effective way of doing that, I am happy to give our party's support.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. By and large, the comments this morning recognised the great work that went into the Bill to make good legislation. One of the most productive meetings that we had was at the start of the process when, in order to ensure a good piece of legislation, we brought dog wardens from all 26 councils in to speak to us about their ideas and the challenges that they face.

Members have been broadly supportive of the Bill. Although most Members who spoke declared an interest as a member of a council, I have also had to ensure that we recognise that the dog warden service is one that we all, as ratepayers, hold dear. Were it not for the dog warden service, we would have far more problems with stray dogs and dog fouling. The Bill is an attempt to ensure that not only the licence fee but revenue from fixed penalties goes back into councils. Stephen Farry spoke at length about the relationship between central and local government. The Bill recognises the important role of local government and ensures that resources are made available to enable our dog wardens to provide an even better service than they do already.

By and large, the tone of the debate has been very good. Members spoke about the practical operation of a system of microchipping, the level of the dog licence fee and other issues. I am very glad that we have been able to reach agreement on the way forward on many issues, whether or not through the agreed amendments that we are debating today.

I do not want to labour any points. Willie Clarke came to the crux of the Bill when he spoke about responsible dog ownership. That is what we want. We want to change the culture of decades and ensure, as Stephen Farry pointed out, that owning a dog is a privilege, not a right, and that it comes with responsibilities. If we get a change in the behaviour of dog owners, we will see an improvement in the behaviour of dogs and what they are allowed to do and what they

are controlled in doing. We recognise the need for tools to be available to wardens to bring about responsible dog ownership.

The Chairperson made the point that the identity of dogs — being able to know where a dog belongs — is very important in recognising that the dog is a problem and being able to do something about it by going back to the owner. The legislation needs to do two things: identify problem dogs that need to be dealt with; and reunite a much-loved and valued pet with its owner, as Roy Beggs pointed out. Things go wrong; people leave gates open and dogs get out despite every precaution. It can be heartbreaking for an owner who does not know where their wee dog — their companion, their life perhaps — is or what has happened to it.

Microchipping will help to do both those things: identify the problems and unite owners with their loved pets. It is a tried-and-tested way of permanently identifying an animal, and it will make it easier for council dog wardens to identify and return stray dogs and hold irresponsible owners to account.

We have all worked very hard together on the Bill, and I would not dismiss any of the issues that arose concerning it. There has been a great deal of debate and discussion among Members on increasing the amount payable for fixed penalties under the Dogs Order to £50 and for councils to retain the money accrued from that. The licensing fee is also an issue. At the beginning of the process, the media focused on the cost of a dog licence; nobody considered the other important elements of the Bill. Having discussed it with the Committee, we ensured that we talked about all the elements of the Bill and that people were not distracted by one particular part of it.

So, I again thank the Chairperson and all members, and some who are not members, of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I am very grateful for the Committee's contribution to this and the other amendments that I have tabled. I call on Members to support the amendments in this group.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 (Setting on or urging dog to attack)

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 2, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 3 to 7, 10 and 13. These amendments deal with the control of dogs, including attacks on livestock, certain other animals and people. Amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment Nos 2 and 3. Amendment Nos 6 and 7 are consequential to amendment No 5, and amendment Nos 10 and 13 are consequential to amendment No 3.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move amendment No 2: In page 4, leave out lines 16 to 31 and insert

“Attacks on livestock and certain other animals

28.—(1) *Any person who sets a dog on—*

(a) *any livestock, or*

(b) *any other animal owned by another person,*

is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 4 on the standard scale.

(2) *If a dog—*

(a) *worries livestock, or*

(b) *attacks and injures any other animal owned by another person,*

the keeper of the dog and, if it is in the charge of a person other than its keeper, that person is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.

(3) *This Article does not apply to a dog while being used—*

(a) *for police purposes;*

(b) *for such other purposes as the Department may by order specify.*

(4) *A person is not guilty of an offence under this Article by reason of anything done by the dog if at the material time—*

(a) *the livestock or other animal is trespassing on any land; and*

(b) *the dog is—*

(i) *kept by, or in the charge of, the occupier of that land; or*

(ii) in the charge of a person authorised by the occupier to remove the livestock or other animal from that land.

(5) The keeper of a dog shall not be convicted of an offence under paragraph (2) if he shows that at the material time the dog was in the charge of some other person whom he reasonably believed to be a fit and proper person to be in charge of the dog.’”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 3: Leave out clause 7 and insert

“Attacks on persons

7. For Article 29 of the Dogs Order (attacks on persons and worrying livestock) substitute—

‘Attacks on persons

29.—(1) Any person who sets a dog on any other person is guilty of an offence or, if the dog injures the person attacked, an aggravated offence, under this paragraph.

(2) If a dog attacks any person, then—

(a) the keeper of the dog; and

(b) if it is in the charge of a person other than its keeper, that person,

is guilty of an offence or, if the dog injures the person attacked, an aggravated offence under this paragraph.

(3) A person guilty of an offence under paragraph (1) or (2) other than an aggravated offence is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale or to both.

(4) A person guilty of an aggravated offence under paragraph (1) or (2) is liable—

(a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or to both;

(b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to a fine or to both.

(5) This Article does not apply to a dog while being used—

(a) for police purposes;

(b) for such other purposes as the Department may by order specify.

(6) A person is not guilty of an offence under this Article if at the material time—

(a) the person set on or attacked is trespassing on land; and

(b) the dog is—

(i) kept by, or in the charge of, the occupier of that land; or

(ii) in the charge of a person authorised by the occupier to remove that person from that land.

(7) The keeper of a dog shall not be convicted of an offence under paragraph (2) if he shows that at the material time the dog was in the charge of some other person whom he reasonably believed to be a fit and proper person to be in charge of the dog.’” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 4: In clause 8, page 5, line 11, leave out sub-paragraphs (c) and (d) and insert

“(c) Article 28(1) or (2) (dog attacking livestock or certain other animals); or

(d) Article 29(1) or (2) (dog attacking person).” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 5: In clause 8, page 6, line 12, at end insert

“(f) that the keeper, with the dog, attend and complete a specified course of training in the control of dogs before the end of the period of 6 months from the date on which the notice takes effect.

(2) In paragraph (1)(f) ‘specified’ means specified, or of a description specified, in the notice under Article 30A.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 6: In clause 8, page 6, line 30, leave out “30B(e)” and insert “30B(1)(e) or (f)”. — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 7: In clause 8, page 7, line 27, at end insert

“(9) If a control condition imposed by virtue of section 30B(1)(e) or (f) is complied with to the satisfaction of the council, the council shall—

(a) remove the condition from the notice served under Article 30A; or

(b) (if there are no other control conditions imposed by the notice) cancel the notice,

and shall notify the licence holder in writing of that fact.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

No 10: In schedule 1, page 11, line 6, at end insert

stakeholders and Members. Some supporters of the measure, including the previous Committee Chairperson during debate on the Bill's Second Stage, argued that in some cases a warden might want to require that a dog and its owner receive training.

Amendment No 5, therefore, introduces a requirement to attend a training course as a possible control condition. More precisely, it introduces a requirement for the dog and its keeper to undergo training. Members will agree that, often, dog-related problems need to be addressed by improving the behaviour of the owner rather than that of the dog. The necessary training must be completed within six months of the date on which the condition was imposed.

Amendment No 6 provides that, in the event of an appeal against a notice that imposes a control condition that requires attendance at a course of training, notice shall not come into effect until the appeal has either been determined or abandoned.

Amendment No 7 provides that a control condition requiring attendance at a course of training shall be removed from the dog licence once it has been complied with to the satisfaction of the council.

As with all the other control conditions, failure to fulfil the terms of the condition is an offence that carries a maximum penalty of a fine at level 4 on the standard scale, which is £2,500. Of all the proposals in the Bill, the system of control conditions had the most widespread support from stakeholders and consultees.

The amendments increase the scope of development, which will be widely welcomed, and I urge Members to support them. Hopefully, the amendments will reduce the number of fatal dog attacks, examples of which we have seen across the water. If a dog is showing behavioural problems, the amendments will allow us to do something about it before it goes on to attack. That is something that the House is very keen on, so I urge Members to support the amendments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: As the Minister said, the amendments will introduce offences for attacks by dogs on people, other dogs and, of equal importance, other animals. Those controls are necessary as they directly

confront the heinous crime of dog fighting and give the legislative power to bring criminals involved in that despicable practice to justice. That is something that the Committee, and I have no doubt every Member, will want to support the Department and the PSNI in stopping.

However, when considering the Bill, the Committee believed that the clause was too restrictive and concentrated on setting or attacking another dog, a person or livestock. The Committee asked for that to be extended to include other domesticated animals, and I am pleased that that was agreed to by the Department.

This group of amendments will also introduce control conditions that can be applied to a dog licence. That will afford greater security and health and safety to the public and to other animals. However, there was an important aspect that the Committee wanted to change. The Committee was concerned that although the controls focus on the dog, much of the fault lay with the owner. The Committee therefore recommended that the keeper of the dog could be obliged to attend a training course. The Department has agreed to that amendment.

That will allow for the imposition of that condition on dog owners who continually allow their dogs to stray, and, therefore, may help to reduce the number of strays and the number of dogs that are euthanised each year in Northern Ireland. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development supports the amendments.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome amendment No 2 to clause 6, which extends the offence of setting a dog on another dog, a person, or livestock to include other pets. The setting of dogs on cats and other animals, such as pet rabbits, can have a devastating impact on the owners of those pets. Very often, dogs are the main attackers of cats, and, although they are natural predators, it is outrageous to set a dog on a pet.

All Members will be aware of incidents in their constituencies in which a child's pet has been mauled by a dog owned by unscrupulous people. Large dogs have been set on cats that have no opportunity to escape. I know of a number of cases in which that happened to pet rabbits as well. Such incidents can have a massive impact on people's well-being, particularly that of young children. I am also aware of an incident in Castlewella in which a number of dogs were set on a pet that belonged to an

elderly constituent who was dying of cancer. That incident had a devastating impact on that person's well-being in the final days of their life. In those situations, a £2,500 fine would not be enough.

I welcome the fact that the legislation is being extended. There has been talk that a £2,500 fine is draconian, but it is a disgusting thing for an irresponsible dog owner to set a dog on livestock, a pet, a child or an adult. The £2,500 fine may not be the proper amount, but it certainly goes a long way towards being a deterrent.

The introduction of control measures is very welcome, as has been outlined by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. The issue of control has little to do with the dog, but centres on irresponsible dog owners who allow their dogs to run amok, be aggressive and attack people. I welcome amendment No 5, which allows council wardens to impose control conditions on an owner's licence. According to those conditions, the owner has to undertake training within a six-month period. That will lead to the building of better relationships between wardens and dog owners, including those who own a number of dogs, so that wardens can ensure responsible dog ownership. I welcome the amendments.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendments.

Originally, it was an offence to set a dog on another dog or a person. The Committee rightly identified that there are other animals and pets that could be set on by dogs belonging to irresponsible owners. That has been recognised in amendment No 2. During the Committee's discussions it was identified that there was a risk that a homeowner who was being burgled or attacked and who allowed his dog to drive off the criminals could be prosecuted. It is right that an exemption has been added to the Bill that covers incidents in which a person acts against a trespasser on private property. That exemption makes the Bill better, because it would be a gross injustice if, as a result of court action, a burglar ended up with a small penalty while a homeowner, who had been burgled, faced the penalty of imprisonment. It is appropriate and follows natural justice that the amendment is made.

Amendment No 3 is in a similar vein. I see amendment No 4 as a technical adjustment.

Amendment No 5 relates to a very important area. It was suggested by the Committee, and

I am pleased that the Minister has identified it as a useful tool. It sets an option whereby dog owners have to be trained. Therefore, instead of court action or issuing fixed penalty notices, appropriate training might be the best solution, which would lessen the likelihood of repeat offending. As others said, frequently, the dog may not be at fault, and there may be a need for additional training and interaction between owner and dog with additional levels of control possibly being required. I view this as a very important and lesser earlier intervention that will, I hope, correct inappropriate behaviour of dogs at that earlier stage and therefore lessen the future need for intervention by dog wardens and other statutory agencies.

Amendment No 6 is another technical amendment. It provides for an appeal mechanism if someone objects to a training requirement. Amendment No 7 indicates that, once training is complete, the issue is over with. However, unless other control mechanisms have been specified by councils at the time, there may be a need to retain such information on file for a period. It gives an option to councils, at the time of setting a training requirement, depending on the level of the original offence, to deem that the issue is not over and done with completely. In general, it will be over and done with, but councils have an option.

Amendment Nos 11 and 13 are technical adjustments. I support the proposed amendments.

Mr Burns: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council.

When the Dogs (Amendment) Bill was first introduced to the Assembly in May 2010, little did anyone believe that it would turn out a number of contentious issues, especially given that Committee members agreed unanimously that amendments were required to the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983. The Order has not adequately dealt with all the problems caused, not only by dogs, but, in the main, by irresponsible dog owners. Some of the issues dragged on so long that there were times when, in the interests of progress, some members used the term "reluctantly agreed" in order to avoid further delay.

The main principle of the Dogs (Amendment) Bill is the microchipping of dogs to protect the public and animals from attack and to improve control by dog owners. There is no disagreement about the need for tremendous improvements

to be made to the Order to protect innocent people from out-of-control dogs. Some dogs are absolutely on the loose and no one knows who owns them. Microchipping will improve the situation greatly by introducing a means of tracing the ownership of the dog.

My original speech was probably more to do with the earlier amendments, but I support the amendments to the Dogs (Amendment) Bill to improve the safety of everyone as regards dogs.

Some dogs are beautiful pets. Their owners treasure them and they will not in any way attack anyone or cause interference. However, unfortunately, there are a few dog owners who do not abide by the rules and keep the dogs as vicious animals that wish to attack.

When the owners do not have those dogs under control, they put absolute fear into residents and into people who are in open parks or forests and see fierce dogs bounding towards them, out of control. It is an impossible job for council dog wardens to trace the owners of those dogs, but microchipping will help to improve that. I support the amendments.

11.30 am

Dr Farry: Before speaking on the second group of amendments, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

I warmly welcome the prospective strengthening of the regime. We need to be mindful of two particular situations. One is dog fighting, which is an absolutely heinous and barbaric practice. It is utterly beyond me how anyone gets any enjoyment from dog fighting and anything that we can do to crack down on it is extremely welcome.

We also have dog-on-dog attacks or, indeed, as we are now talking about, dog attacks on other animals. The law in Northern Ireland has had a major gap in that regard over the past number of years. We are all aware of well-publicised cases of pet dogs being mauled by other dogs, around which there is a sense of almost utter impunity. Indeed, there is a real sense of frustration among elected representatives due to the inability of councils and dog wardens to take action. The law simply does not provide for an answer to that.

There was a very well-publicised case only a few months ago in Ballywalter in the constituency of my colleague Kieran McCarthy. Those are the

cases that we read about in the newspapers and hear about on the radio and television, but there many other cases right across Northern Ireland daily. It is important that people who own dogs are able to keep their dogs under control, whether on or off a lead. Any owner should have 100% control over their dog and ensure that it does not inflict harm on anyone else.

I do, however, have a couple of reservations about how the amendments are worded. I hope that the Minister will address that in her response. I am slightly concerned about what comes across as a 100% defence in the case of a dog-on-dog attack or a dog attack on a person if the dog or person who is attacked is viewed to be trespassing on land. There needs to be some sense of proportionality. That is a very black-and-white approach, but there can be a whole host of prevailing circumstances. For example, a dog wandering on to land that is owned by someone else could be a quite benign incident. A person could be walking their dog through the countryside, keeping it under reasonable control, when that dog happens to wander on to someone else's land. The trespass may not cause any harm or threat, but my reading of the amendments is that, if that dog is attacked subsequently, the application of the law provides 100% exemption. I do not think that that meets the sense of natural justice.

Similarly, take Mr Beggs's scenario in which a person, a burglar perhaps, invades a home. Again, we have to have a sense of proportionality. The instinct is to want to see the maximum use of force against anyone who invades a home. That force may take the form of a householder using some sort of weapon against an intruder or setting a dog on an intruder. There may well be circumstances in which the courts deem that to be an appropriate response. However, I do not think that you can argue for a blanket exemption. There may be situations in which setting a dog on a person who is trespassing is an utterly disproportionate response.

Let me give one possible example: a person with Alzheimer's or dementia who has no sense of where they are could inadvertently go into a house where they pose no threat but in which they are trespassing. If they were, in turn, attacked by a dog or, even worse, if a dog were set on them, most reasonable people would view that as utterly wrong. However, my reading of the legislation is that such a situation would not be regulated. We need to reflect, perhaps at

Further Consideration Stage, on the aspects of and the exemptions to the law on trespass and to think through some of its subtleties rather than having what appears to be a black-and-white presentation.

Mr Gibson: As a sheep owner, I declare an interest and support the second group of amendments.

Dog ownership is, of course, cherished by millions. Dogs occupy a special place in the affections of many, and no other animal has the relationship with humans that they do. Nevertheless, dog ownership is not to be taken lightly. It is a serious business. The privilege of owning a dog comes with the responsibility of controlling it. Unfortunately, too often a minority fails to exercise adequate control over its dogs. Some even regard their dogs as chattels to be used and abused.

Many of us will recall the excellent documentary shown some time ago that lifted the lid on the murky world of dog fighting, which is an affront to any civilised society. Society is looking to the Assembly to take a lead on the control of that heinous offence. The amendments will increase public consciousness of just how seriously dog ownership should be taken.

Too many people ignore the potential of uncontrolled dogs. Like many sheep owners, I have been on the receiving end of uncontrolled dogs, and sheep mutilation caused by such dogs is not a pleasant sight. Sheep worrying is a control, welfare and economic issue. There have been occasions when the very livelihood of sheep keepers has been threatened because of uncontrolled dogs and the failure of certain dog owners to keep their dogs under control. Hopefully, the Bill will help to bring the annual ritual of sheep worrying to an end.

Dog ownership has many benefits: to an elderly person living alone, a dog brings companionship; to a blind person navigating a busy street, a dog brings direction and confidence; and to a shepherd on a bleak mountainside, a dog may be invaluable. However, the message must go out to the public that keeping dogs is a serious business, and the amendments will help to do that.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate and the Chairman

of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. It is clear from listening to comments made this morning that this group of amendments has the support of many Members in the House today.

I want to clarify the point that Stephen Farry made. People should not be penalised because a dog has been allowed to stray onto their land. We looked at that issue, and, a lot of the time, it is not black and white. If a dog strays onto somebody's land, the same controls would not be used. The difficulty that we have is that we are trying to get legislation that is common sense and works. As I said earlier, one thing that we had to change was the offence of a person being attacked on somebody else's land versus in their own home. There was a difference in the seriousness of that. However, in recent years, we have seen that children are attacked by dogs mostly in their own homes or those of their grandparents and by dogs that are owned by somebody in their family. If, for example, an uncle has a dog that has inappropriate strength and temperament and that dog has access to children in the home environment, we had to ensure that those attacks were seen in as serious a light as others. We have looked at all the detail of that to ensure that we get clear and useful legislation.

Issues came up around dogs attacking other domestic animals or pets. Many Members have alluded to the fact that we need to understand that those attacks frequently cause great distress to pet owners and, when they find that no actual offence has been committed, huge frustration. I have heard complaints from constituents, as I am sure that many Members have, that dog wardens cannot do anything because the legislation is not there. Therefore, I was very keen that we bring in legislation to enable dog wardens to do their job and to ensure that those offences are included.

It needs to be said that the legislation is not about penalising the natural behaviour of dogs. It is about discouraging and penalising irresponsible owners who fail to control their dogs. That distinction has to be made. We see dogs' natural behaviour, but owners know what is not acceptable in society and should not allow their dogs to be involved in behaviour that can cause risk to other people.

Obviously, there has been a lot of interest in these issues today. The whole point of dog

control legislation is to deter irresponsible or negligent dog ownership. I firmly believe that the law should allow for the robust punishment of owners whose negligence results in injury to other people. Therefore, setting the same maximum penalty for those offences allows the courts to take the specific circumstances of individual cases into account.

At this stage, I should say that this is about dog control for all dogs. Dog fighting is specifically covered in the Welfare of Animals Bill, which will see tighter controls and higher penalties for that. The Committee has been scrutinising that Bill, and I look forward to working with them on that and bringing that Bill through the Assembly.

I am grateful this morning for the opportunity to table the amendments, which, I believe, will make the Bill, as introduced, much more robust. The Executive Ministers have agreed to the changes that they made to the Bill, and I have tabled those at the request of, and in agreement with, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Therefore, I urge Members to support the amendments in this group and the Bill itself.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7 (Attack by dog on a person or another dog)

Amendment No 3 made: Leave out clause 7 and insert

“Attacks on persons

7. For Article 29 of the Dogs Order (attacks on persons and worrying livestock) substitute—

‘Attacks on persons

29.—(1) Any person who sets a dog on any other person is guilty of an offence or, if the dog injures the person attacked, an aggravated offence, under this paragraph.

(2) If a dog attacks any person, then—

(a) the keeper of the dog; and

(b) if it is in the charge of a person other than its keeper, that person,

is guilty of an offence or, if the dog injures the person attacked, an aggravated offence under this paragraph.

(3) A person guilty of an offence under paragraph (1) or (2) other than an aggravated offence is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale or to both.

(4) A person guilty of an aggravated offence under paragraph (1) or (2) is liable—

(a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or to both;

(b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to a fine or to both.

(5) This Article does not apply to a dog while being used—

(a) for police purposes;

(b) for such other purposes as the Department may by order specify.

(6) A person is not guilty of an offence under this Article if at the material time—

(a) the person set on or attacked is trespassing on land; and

(b) the dog is—

(i) kept by, or in the charge of, the occupier of that land; or

(ii) in the charge of a person authorised by the occupier to remove that person from that land.

(7) The keeper of a dog shall not be convicted of an offence under paragraph (2) if he shows that at the material time the dog was in the charge of some other person whom he reasonably believed to be a fit and proper person to be in charge of the dog.’ — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Clause 7, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8 (Control conditions on dog licences)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment Nos 2 and 3, which have already been made.

Amendment No 4 made: In page 5, line 11, leave out sub-paragraphs (c) and (d) and insert

“(c) Article 28(1) or (2) (dog attacking livestock or certain other animals); or

(d) Article 29(1) or (2) (dog attacking person).” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Amendment No 5 made: In page 6, line 12, at end insert

“(f) that the keeper, with the dog, attend and complete a specified course of training in the control of dogs before the end of the period of 6 months from the date on which the notice takes effect.

(2) In paragraph (1)(f) ‘specified’ means specified, or of a description specified, in the notice under Article 30A.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 6 is consequential to amendment No 5. Amendment No 5 has already been made.

Amendment No 6 made: In page 6, line 30, leave out “30B(e)” and insert “30B(1)(e) or (f)”. — *[The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 7 is consequential to amendment No 5. Amendment No 5 has already been made.

Amendment No 7 made: In page 7, line 27, at end insert

“(9) If a control condition imposed by virtue of section 30B(1)(e) or (f) is complied with to the satisfaction of the council, the council shall—

(a) remove the condition from the notice served under Article 30A; or

(b) (if there are no other control conditions imposed by the notice) cancel the notice,

and shall notify the licence holder in writing of that fact.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Clause 8, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 9 to 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 (Amount of fixed penalty)

Amendment No 8 made: In page 9, line 26, leave out from “in pursuance” to end of line 32 and insert

“to a district council in pursuance of a notice under Article 36 in respect of an offence to which Articles 36 to 38 apply—

(a) is the amount specified by the district council; or

(b) if no amount is so specified, is £75.

(2) A district council may under paragraph (1)(a) specify different amounts in relation to different offences.

(3) A district council may make provision for treating a fixed penalty payable to that council in pursuance of a notice under Article 36 as having been paid if a lesser amount is paid before the end of a period specified by the council.

(4) The Department may by regulations make provision in connection with the powers conferred on district councils under paragraphs (1)(a) and (3).

(5) Regulations under paragraph (4) may (in particular)—

(a) require an amount specified under paragraph (1)(a) to fall within a range prescribed in the regulations;

(b) restrict the extent to which, and the circumstances in which, a district council can make provision under paragraph (3).

(6) The Department may by order substitute a different amount for the amount for the time being specified in paragraph (1)(b).’” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 9 made: After clause 14, insert the following new clause:

“Assembly control of orders made by Department

14A. *For Article 54 of the Dogs Order substitute—*

‘Orders

54.—*(1) Except as provided by paragraph (2), orders made by the Department under this Order are subject to negative resolution.*

(2) No order shall be made under Article 7(6), 8(4), 23(7)(b), 25(2)(f), 25(4), 25B(1), 28(3)(b), 29(5)(b), 33(3)(c), 35(2), 38(6) or 46 unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.’” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 15 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 (Minor and consequential amendments)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 10 is consequential to amendment No 3, which has already been made.

Amendment No 10 made: In page 11, line 6, at end insert

“2A. In Articles 25C(2)(a) and 33A(1) for ‘29(1A)’ substitute ‘29’.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 11 is consequential to amendment No 9, which has already been made.

Amendment No 11 made: In page 11, line 9, leave out paragraph (4). — *[The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]*

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Repeals)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 12 is consequential to amendment No 9, which has already been made.

Amendment No 12 made: In page 11, column 2, leave out lines 18 to 20 and insert

“In Article 8(4) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution’.

In Article 23(7)(b) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 25(4) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 25B(1) the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 35(2) the words ‘subject to affirmative resolution,’.

In Article 46 the words ‘, subject to affirmative resolution,’.” — [The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 13 is consequential to amendment No 3, which has already been made.

Amendment No 13 made: In page 11, line 21, at end insert

“The Dangerous Dogs Article 4.

(Northern Ireland) Order Article 7(3) and (4).”

1991 (NI 21)

— *[The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).]*

Schedule 2, as amended, agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Dogs (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Executive Committee Business

Construction Contracts (Amendment)

Bill: Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill [NIA 16/09] do now pass.

The Questions on the amendments emptied the Public Gallery, and I do not know whether this Bill will bring people racing back in. Nevertheless, it is quite an important Bill as far as the construction industry is concerned.

I introduced the Bill, comprising nine clauses, to the Assembly on 26 April 2010, and the subsequent processes of scrutiny and debate have been extremely thorough and productive. I want to record my gratitude to the Committee Chairperson and former Chairperson, as well as the members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, for the work that they undertook in considering the Bill. I also want to record my gratitude to all other Committees and to Members for their contributions at previous stages of the Bill's passage.

The Bill is an important and necessary piece of legislation. It addresses measures in the Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 that were required to be improved. It will enable Northern Ireland to maintain parity with GB following legislative changes that have now been enacted at Westminster. It contains eight miscellaneous provisions requiring primary legislation. The provisions include measures to increase the transparency of the process and to improve payment practices in the construction industry.

The Bill allows for greater access to adjudication on the resolution of disputes about contracts. It will also help to facilitate contractors in exercising their right to suspend work when they have not been paid. It will not have any overall quantum effect on public expenditure in Northern Ireland.

No amendments were tabled at Consideration Stage, which I am sure Members were pleased to hear. I anticipate that Members who engaged in the legislative process will support the Bill as

it clears its Final Stage. Therefore, I commend the Bill to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has highlighted the purpose of the Bill, so it is up to me to give the Committee's view on it. The reforms aim to further improve payment practices and to address restrictions on access to adjudication on contractual disputes in the construction industry.

The Committee actively examined the policy intentions behind the Bill at an early stage. It received briefings from Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials in June 2008, prior to the public consultation on the draft proposals and the consultation outcome in September 2009. The Bill was introduced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 26 April 2010, and it was referred to the Committee on completion of its Second Stage on 17 May 2010. Following commencement of Committee Stage, a public notice was placed in the main newspapers on 19 May 2010, inviting written evidence on the Bill. The Committee also notified a number of key stakeholders that had responded to the Department's earlier consultations.

Given the pressure on its work programme, the Committee sought the Assembly's approval to extend the Committee Stage to 26 November 2010. However, I am pleased to report to the House that the Committee was able to complete its deliberations well within that time.

Although the Committee received no written evidence and no comments were made on any of the clauses after the Committee's public call for evidence, members sought clarification on the House of Lords judgement in the case of *Melville Dundas v Wimpey*. Committee members also requested more information on how reviews of the scheme for construction contracts might impact on the legislation. The scheme is a set of measures that are complementary to the Construction Contracts Order 1997, which, if amended, would require corresponding amendments to be made to the scheme. DFP officials advised members that it would be necessary to amend the scheme here before the Bill, once passed, could come into effect. The officials also informed the Committee that any proposed amendments would be subject to further consultation. That will take place once

agreement has been reached on the scheme in Britain.

During Committee Stage, members received assurances from DFP officials about the prompt payment of subcontractors. The Committee welcomed measures that are being introduced in conjunction with the Construction Industry Forum (CIF) through a revised code of practice for government construction clients and their supply chains. The code includes a fair payment charter. The Committee will examine further the issue of prompt payment before the end of the mandate. I emphasise that the Committee felt that that was a very important issue because although main contractors were receiving prompt payments, some of the subcontractors — perhaps the smaller ones — were not, and that was having an effect on some businesses.

I thank DFP officials for their positive engagement and the timely assistance that they provided to the Committee. I also thank Committee members for their time during the consideration of the Bill. On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I formally support the Bill's Final Stage.

Mr O'Loan: I support the Bill, which has been well addressed in Committee, as the Chairperson said. I do not think that there are any significant concerns. Obviously, the construction sector is a very important part of our economy. It is also important to the public sector, because government is a major client on many occasions.

It is important that there is a good framework of law to facilitate the delivery of construction contracts, big and small. It is also important that there is a proper level of fairness between the client and the contractor.

12.00 pm

The matters that are presented in the Bill have been well tested, particularly through experience in Great Britain, which this proposed legislation follows. The response to the consultation was quite modest. I notice that there was broad agreement, although there was some divergence of opinion and some strongly expressed views. However, I believe that those have been taken on board and addressed through certain clauses.

The Bill states that construction contracts may still be enforced even if they are not in writing. That is a good provision and has received support. As the Minister said, there are clauses that ease the process of adjudication and give a

contractor the right to suspend work if payment is not made. Those are sound provisions. Taken as a whole, I am happy to support the Bill.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. It has been a short one, which is an indication that there is widespread agreement that the improvements are necessary, timely and address the issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee raised the issue of prompt payments to contractors, which is especially important as there is a lot of pressure on small and medium-sized firms in Northern Ireland. The Committee has drawn that issue to my attention in debates about procurement. For example, in reports on procurement, the emphasis has been on how we can ensure that the cash flow for small businesses comes through. The Bill provides for improvements in cash flow in respect of the presentation of payments that are due, enabling firms to remove their services from a scheme in which payments are not being made as they should and making adjudication cheaper and easier for firms that are in dispute to access.

This is a short but necessary piece of legislation. It will increase the transparency of the process. It will, as I said, improve payment practices. It consists of separate amendments that relate to various measures contained in the original Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. By facilitating access to the process of adjudication, the Bill will allow disputes to be resolved without parties having to resort to more costly arbitration or litigation. However, we have to accept that there will be occasions when firms will have to go beyond adjudication and use the more costly ways of dealing with disputes. The legislation will not do away with that necessity in some cases in which disputes are complex and perhaps require going to court.

The measures will improve cash flow by improving the transparency of the procedures and removing ambiguity on issues of notices of payment. They are intended to resolve a number of the shortcomings that have been observed in the working of the originating legislation in GB and have been replicated here in the 1997 Order. The proposals relate to important issues and, if enacted, will provide real and practical benefit to the construction industry in Northern Ireland.

As Mr O'Loan pointed out, some people said that there should be no regulation and that

it should just be a free-for-all, and others believe that the regulation should be tighter. Nevertheless, we believe that we have got the balance right, and the fact that, when the Committee looked for responses, there was not a huge outcry or a huge number of people wanting to talk to the Committee about the Bill is probably an indication that they were happy with the legislation as proposed.

I hope that I have gone through most of the points that were raised. On that note, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 16/09] do now pass.

Committee Business

Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill: Accelerated Passage

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move

That the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

I am sorry for my late arrival, Mr Deputy Speaker, but we were busy with other business upstairs.

Members may recall that a motion seeking accelerated passage for the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill was tabled originally in June 2010. However, it was not moved because a number of parties were seeking further information on the implications of changes to the existing allowances regime. Those issues have now been clarified, and Members will recall that, on 13 December 2010, the Assembly approved the Assembly Commission's 'Report on the Financial Support and Pensions for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (December 2010)', which included the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Expenditure) Determination 2010. That determination makes provision for allowances to replace those repealed by the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill and for it to come into force at the earliest opportunity. The Commission wishes to seek accelerated passage for the Bill.

The policy content of the Bill is very low, because it is just one part of a package. It is a relatively technical Bill which repeals existing provisions so that we can put new provisions in their place through the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Expenditure) Determination 2010 until such times as an independent financial review panel is established. The Commission has not taken its request for accelerated passage lightly but feels that, as the Assembly has already approved the Commission's report and determination, it is wholly appropriate that we move to repeal the Allowances to Members of the Assembly Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 now that a new determination on allowances has been agreed. The consequences of not proceeding by accelerated passage are straightforward: the proposed calculations for allowances outlined in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Expenditure) Determination 2010, agreed by the Assembly in December 2010, would not have effect.

Members will note that the Commission introduces legislation only when required to do so and in line with its obligations under section 40 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Members should note that the Commission is currently bringing forward the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill to establish an independent body to set Members' future salary, pension and expenditure arrangements. That Bill is currently in Committee, and we have not sought accelerated passage for it. At Second Stage, I will explain the background to this Bill and outline its provisions in more detail.

In summary, the use of accelerated passage will ensure that this technical Bill can give effect to the agreed allowances, as detailed in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Expenditure) Determination 2010, in preparation for the establishment of the independent financial review body.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak on behalf of the Committee today.

The Assembly Commission originally wrote to the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 4 June 2010 advising that it intended to seek the Committee's agreement to accelerated passage for the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill. The Committee understands that that issue was referred to it for consideration primarily because the predecessor Finance and Personnel Committee handled the original legislation in 2000 and, that being the case, a precedent exists. In addition, it did not seem practical to set up an Ad Hoc Committee simply to consider the issue of accelerated passage for this short Bill.

Concerns were raised by some members about a potential conflict of interest in Committee members considering the Bill and about the request for accelerated passage. However, advice on that issue confirmed that the Assembly's code of conduct does not set out any requirements that either prevent or limit a Member's ability to discuss matters that relate equally to all Members of the Assembly. The Committee also noted that, under the existing legal framework, only the Assembly can consider the matter.

The Committee took evidence from a representative of the Assembly Commission and

senior officers of the Assembly at its meeting on 16 June 2010. The witnesses explained the reasons why accelerated passage was necessary to repeal the existing legislation. They also explained that that would pave the way for the Assembly Commission to take forward further legislation to establish an independent statutory body to determine future pay, pension, financial support and allowances to former Members if the Assembly so agrees.

During the session on 16 June, confirmation was also provided that consultation had been undertaken with political parties on those issues. The witnesses also assured the Committee that the related legislation to establish an independent body would be subject to full Assembly procedures for public legislation, including the Committee Stage. Following the evidence, the Committee agreed that it was content to support the Assembly Commission in seeking Assembly approval for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage, having been satisfied by the explanations and assurances provided as per Standing Order 42(3). However, the motion was not moved on 21 June as expected.

Members will be aware that the related legislation to establish an independent body, the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill, was introduced to the Assembly on 15 November 2010 and is currently in Committee. At its meeting on 12 January 2011, the Committee noted correspondence from the head of the Commission's support and compliance unit that advised that, following approval for the Assembly Commission's report on financial support and pensions for Members of the Assembly on 13 December 2010, the Commission intended to move forward with the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill.

I should also point out that the Finance and Personnel Committee's considerations have been confined to the issue of accelerated passage. It has not been involved in the wider policy development work in that area, the lead responsibility for which has rested with the Assembly Commission. Moreover, the Finance Committee has not had detailed briefings in that regard. I will not, therefore, speak on behalf of the Committee during the Second Stage debate immediately following this motion. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion that

the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill be granted accelerated passage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill [NIA 27/09] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

12.15 pm

Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill: Second Stage

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill [NIA 27/09] be agreed.

Given that the Bill's Second Stage immediately follows the motion to agree accelerated passage, Members will be familiar with some of my comments, but I trust that they will bear with me as I address the Bill's proposals in greater detail.

I shall provide some background to the Bill. The current framework for paying allowances to Members of the Assembly is governed by sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 47 of the Act allows the Assembly to make provision for allowances for current Members of the Assembly, and section 48 allows the Assembly to make provision for payment of allowances to or in respect of any person who has ceased to be a Member of the Assembly; that is, a former Member. Three such allowances are provided for in the Allowances to Members of the Assembly Act (Northern Ireland) 2000, and they are referred to as the 2000 Act allowances. They are resettlement allowance, ill health retirement allowance and winding-up allowance. Under section 40 of the 1998 Act, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission is required to provide the Assembly with or ensure that the Assembly is provided with the necessary property, staff and services for the Assembly's purposes.

The Commission has recommended changes to the 2000 Act allowances in its report on financial support and pensions for Members, which was agreed by the House on 13 December 2010. In that report, the Commission recommended changes to the existing calculations used to determine resettlement allowance, ill health retirement allowance and winding-up allowance as proposed by the Senior Salaries Review Body. The Bill itself does not make any provision on the new allowances. It repeals the Allowances to Members of the Assembly Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 and makes consequential repeal to the Statutory Rules (Northern Ireland) Order 1979.

Members will note that the Bill details commencement on 1 September 2010, as the Bill was originally printed for consideration before

last summer's recess. Prior to Consideration Stage, the Commission intends to table an amendment to change the commencement date to the date of Royal Assent. On that date, the replacement allowances provisions, as agreed by the Assembly on 13 December 2010, will also come into operation.

As Members are aware, the Commission also proposes that the Assembly pass a Bill establishing an independent statutory review panel that will determine the future pay, pension and financial support arrangements for Members or former Members of the Assembly, including any allowances for former Members, similar to the 2000 Act allowances. Such a body cannot be empowered to pass primary legislation for Northern Ireland and, therefore, could not itself repeal the 2000 Act. The repeal of the 2000 Act is, therefore, a necessary step in the process to establish and empower such a body.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill [NIA 27/09] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Allowances to Members of the Assembly (Repeal) Bill.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet on the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.19 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Planning Bill

1. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of the Environment whether there will be sufficient time for the Planning Bill to progress through all its stages in the Assembly before dissolution, given its size and complexity. (AQO 808/11)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

Yes, there is sufficient time for the Planning Bill to progress through all its stages before dissolution.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for his brief answer. Given many local councils' grave concerns about the time available to make a meaningful contribution to the process and given the fact that the Minister believes that the Bill will be implemented, can he advise us what measures he proposes to take to capacity-build and train councillors in the working of the new planning arrangements? Can he clarify the position on third party appeals?

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Bill will come into force, and councils will receive responsibilities only when I deal with the local government issues. Those include the establishment of codes of practice, ethical standards regime and all that. All being well, that legislation will be introduced early after the election, and we are currently consulting on it.

We will offer training to local councillors, and RICS, which is a professional organisation, has offered its assistance. Therefore, we are very keen to ensure that councillors are properly trained in those issues.

Mr Kinahan: Can the Minister give a breakdown of the resources that are necessary to help councils to take on planning responsibilities?

The Minister of the Environment: Very simply, finance must follow function. The Planning Service is receiving subsidy from other parts of government, which was not the case for a number of years but is necessary now because

of the downturn in planning applications. To compensate for that, we are reducing the number of Planning Service staff, because there are now 19,500 applications instead of 28,000 applications. We are also looking at a different fee structure, and we hope to raise an additional £3 million to £4 million from that. When responsibility for planning is handed over to councils, we want to ensure that the Planning Service is fit for purpose and financially capable of supporting councils.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Recycling

3. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on how Northern Ireland is performing in meeting the targets under the European Union directive on recycling. (AQO 810/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The latest official data indicate that, in 2009-2010, Northern Ireland achieved a 35.6% household recycling rate, which was up from 34.4% in the previous year and is a significant improvement on the 4.9% rate achieved in 1999. Based on historical trends, Northern Ireland is on track to meet the 50% EU household recycling target by 2020. I am aware that, in 2009-2010, a number of councils met or are close to meeting the 50% target; namely, Magherafelt District Council at 50%, Banbridge District Council at 49.6% and Antrim Borough Council at 47.5%. However, several councils are achieving rates well below that and below the Northern Ireland average. All councils must achieve sustained improvements in their recycling performance if we are to ensure that we meet the 50% EU target.

I am pleased to advise that I have allocated more than £5 million of funding through the Rethink Waste fund in this financial year to assist councils. Through that funding, it is estimated that an additional 27,000 tons of household waste will be recycled each year by councils across Northern Ireland.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for that answer. There will be penalties if we do not achieve the targets set by the EU, and the Minister referred to council areas that are potentially falling behind. How will penalties be imposed? Will they be imposed regionally, where Northern Ireland as a whole will have to pay, will they be

imposed on a UK-wide basis, or will each area be dealt with individually?

The Minister of the Environment: Setting aside the additional penalties for a moment, councils that underperform already impose a penalty on their ratepayers, and they will continue to do so. By 2013, it will cost roughly £100 a ton to tip waste into landfill sites. Therefore, it is in the interests of councils and ratepayers for that waste to be diverted either to generate energy or to be recycled. If some councils achieve 50% now while others achieve only 27% or 28%, people should recognise that there is a significant gap to be filled. If it comes to the point where Northern Ireland as a whole ends up being fined because councils are lagging behind, we will have to look at fining or imposing that burden on particular councils to incentivise them to meet the targets that are set.

Mr Speaker: Members need to rise in their place if they want to ask a question; that is what they must do. I am pausing proceedings to give them the opportunity to do that.

Mr McDevitt: Clearly, we were on holiday for too long, Mr Speaker.

Given the excellent progress that has been made in meeting recycling targets, is it now time to fundamentally review landfill policy? Can the Minister give the House any indication of whether, in the months and years ahead, he anticipates approving fewer landfill sites? If so, would that be a major part of his efforts to continue to incentivise councils to recycle more?

The Minister of the Environment: I have made it clear on a number of occasions that landfill is the last option that I want to use. I want to reach a position in Northern Ireland where less than 10% of waste is sent to landfill. That will be good news, because landfill produces leachates and methane. Although the sites can be properly managed and facilities can be well run, instead of producing those unpleasant effects, materials can be much better used either to recover energy or to be recycled.

Vehicle Testing

4. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to consider privatisation of the vehicle testing scheme. (AQO 811/11)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to consider privatisation of the vehicle testing scheme.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is very clear. Can he outline how the cost of the MOT test for a private car in Northern Ireland compares with the cost in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Minister of the Environment: In Northern Ireland, the cost is £30·50, whereas in GB, although the private test fee varies, a statutory limit is set at a maximum of £54·85. The test is carried out in 20,200 separate private sector garages. I have always had the view, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Although the system is operated by government in Northern Ireland, I think that it works particularly well. Test centres are open at night and on Saturdays. People can book their cars in quickly. It is done at a reasonable cost, and it leaves a modest return for government. It will be up to the Executive and others to decide whether they wish to privatise that service. I think that the service performs well and that it should be retained in the Department.

Mr O'Loan: I note what the Minister said. He has taken a very definitive position. Does he consider that it would be at least worthwhile to look at other places where the MOT system is carried out well in the private sector and to recognise that privatisation offers the possibility of financial gain for the Executive? If he looked at that, would he not feel that governance and regulatory issues could be addressed that would assure the customer that a quality service would be available to the public that, perhaps, offers better value for money?

The Minister of the Environment: I see that Mr O'Loan has clearly put his cards on the table in favour of privatisation. I will seek to resist that. He asked me to look at other areas where there might be examples of better practice. I lay down a challenge: show us an area where it is done better, and we will certainly look at that. In comparison with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has a better system that performs better for the public. It is a public service. It is delivered by the public sector. We are doing it well and very cost-effectively. Therefore, I challenge the Member to show us where it is done better.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I warn Members that they must rise in their place if they want to

ask a question. A number of MPs are in the Chamber; if Members watch some of the MPs in the House, they will see how it is done.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As you know, Sinn Féin MPs do not take their seats in Westminster, so we are not used to that type of system.

I am curious about whether the Minister can provide any detail. The findings of the PAC's report on the issue a while ago were favourable. Have comparisons been made to determine whether additional jobs would be created if local garages were to carry out MOTs?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not know about additional jobs. We want to ensure maximum efficiency, so that the public do not have to pay through the nose for additional staff to hang around. I am keen that the service be carried out efficiently.

In the Republic of Ireland, testing is carried out under the auspices of the National Car Testing Service and outsourced to a Spanish multinational called Applus+, which carries out vehicle testing in various countries on five continents. The company has a 10-year contract in the Republic of Ireland, and its test fee is €50. Once again, therefore, people who live in Northern Ireland get a much better deal than those in the Republic.

Councils: Adverse Weather Conditions

5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the preparedness and response of local councils to the adverse weather conditions experienced during the Christmas period. (AQO 812/11)

The Minister of the Environment: In my judgement, councils were highly effective in responding to the adverse weather conditions and in providing humanitarian assistance to communities affected by the severe weather and subsequent water crisis. I had been monitoring the growing weather and water emergency, and I was concerned about its impact on the public over the Christmas period. As my unease grew, I asked councils to activate their emergency response plans on 23 December 2010 to ensure that emergency reception centres were available to people who needed urgent help. It was fortunate that action was taken, because we witnessed people queuing for water and bottled supplies being delivered to the elderly

and vulnerable. Council staff assisted in those deliveries. I understand that agencies are reviewing the level of response, as lessons must be learned. However, in my view, councils played a fundamental role in planning, co-ordinating and responding with lead agencies to aid recovery at a local level.

Mr Givan: I commend the Minister for his action in the run-up to the thaw and for ensuring that councils were put on an emergency footing and preparations put in place. People in Lisburn were particularly hard hit, and I put on record my thanks to the mayor, Paul Porter, for his work in leading the council's response.

When the thaw took place, what measures did the Minister take to monitor how councils were implementing their emergency plans? How was their response managed and monitored after the Minister had placed them on an emergency footing?

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister share with the Minister for Regional Development the information from the current review, so that he can learn from the good practice in DOE?

The Minister of the Environment: Throughout the crisis, I was in regular contact with my officials, who monitored the situation through the local government emergency management group. They then reported to the meetings of OFMDFM's civil contingencies group and the multi-agency tactical group, and I was briefed on the collective outcomes of those meetings.

During the crisis, I also took the opportunity to visit Belfast City Council's emergency operations room to see the practical responses being made at a local level across the city. I have commended them by letter, but I put on public record my thanks to Belfast City Council, in particular, for its tremendous response to the crisis and to councils across Northern Ireland. Their response was in stark contrast to that of the Water Service. The difference between the response of councils and local government and that of DRD and Water Service was preparation. Preparations were made in one place but not in another. We must be prepared to meet crises as they arise.

Mr Lyttle: I join the Minister in recognising the sterling work of Belfast City Council during the recent water crisis. However, will the Minister

take further action to create clearer agreements between councils and DRD on footway and road gritting?

The Minister of the Environment: The gritting of footpaths was not an emergency but an inconvenience that was eventually resolved, again by local government. There should have been greater preparation so that local government could respond more quickly. There is a gap in responding to crises in general, and it is for the new Assembly to take up the challenge in May by looking at the development of a civil contingencies Bill and by putting the correct structures in place — they are in place in other jurisdictions — to enable us to respond better, with clear, definitive roles for people in the future, to other crises that may arise.

2.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Before the adverse weather conditions, what discussions did the Minister have with the Minister for Regional Development with a view to having some degree of harmony between Departments and right across the board to ensure that there was proper preparation for the poor weather? What discussions have been held since on preparation for similar circumstances in future so that we can avoid the debacle that there was, with Departments criticising each other, and ensure that the really important factor — the people — are looked after?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for elevating me. I am just the Environment Minister; I am neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister and, therefore, do not have that responsibility. However, since I have responsibility for local government, I sought to ensure that local government was well prepared to respond. It is for OFMDFM to lead on those issues and to deal with DRD.

War Memorials

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of whether war memorials represent a vital element of our natural heritage which deserves protection. (AQO 813/11)

The Minister of the Environment: War memorials are an important part of our national heritage. They stand as symbols of past sacrifice and are often very beautiful and moving structures. They

are held in high regard by the community, which ensures that most are well maintained. That is the best form of protection that a historic structure could have, and I am supportive of their continued preservation. Moreover, my Department has protected the most special examples by statutory listing. There are 26 listed war memorials in Northern Ireland, with others protected either as part of a listed building or because they lie in a conservation area.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will be aware that there are many hundreds of war memorials across Ulster that pay tribute to the courage of the men and women from Northern Ireland who served in the cause of freedom and protecting this country. Is the Minister aware that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a publicly funded scheme for the preservation and restoration of war memorials? Will he consider the establishment of such a scheme in Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland Environment Agency?

The Minister of the Environment: As I said, most war memorials are well preserved and looked after. We can look at the issue and have an open mind on how those pieces of our history are properly and adequately protected and cared for. The Department will be happy to work with Members if they bring forward proposals for looking at those and ensuring that there is proper and adequate protection for them.

Planning Decisions

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's policy on releasing information about any future planning decisions. (AQO 814/11)

The Minister of the Environment: In announcing decisions on article 31 major planning applications where I am the decision-maker, I follow a standard procedure, which is to inform in writing the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Chairperson of the Environment Committee and all Members. A copy of the letter announcing my decision is also placed in the Assembly Library.

My Department also follows a standard procedure in relation to information about future planning decisions on non-article 31 planning applications. Following an internal development management group meeting, at which a preliminary opinion will be formed indicating the

likely decision, the Department's opinion on the proposal is made available when the application is presented to the local council on a publicly available schedule or list of applications. When a planning decision issues, the nature of the decision and the reasons for it will be provided to those who commented on the application during the planning process. All information relating to the process of a planning application, including the Department's decision, can be viewed by appointment with the open file unit in each divisional planning office.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister accept the finding of the Audit Committee report that the Planning Service is not fit for purpose? Given that that is the case, will he give an undertaking to the Assembly that, when he is issuing information about planning decisions, he will consult the Assembly Committee and the Assembly itself in advance in order to restore confidence instead of going on a solo run?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member is suggesting that the Planning Service is not fit for purpose, that does not concern this issue. Over the past number of years, we made substantial changes to the Planning Service. A Planning Bill is also before the House, which will make further considerable changes.

In the decision-making process, we have professional planners who view sites, take advice from the NIEA, Roads Service and all relevant bodies and make recommendations. Article 31 applications come to the Minister for final decisions, so I make those decisions. I will not fluff about for months on end going backwards and forwards to those who want to play to the lowest common denominator and to engage in publicity shows that are not in the public interest. I will engage in the public interest and have decisions made in this country.

Mr Campbell: The Minister takes a deep interest in trying to progress major planning applications across Northern Ireland. However, will he assure the House, with major uncontroversial planning applications with which other Departments and agencies may have outstanding issues — for example, Roads Service or local councils — that his Department and others will make every effort to ensure a speedy resolution?

The Minister of the Environment: Absolutely. Other Departments have response targets, and they have a number of working days to

achieve those. Predominantly, Roads Service and the NIEA have poor records, but they have been improving, Roads Service in particular. However, there is room for further improvement. We will continue to press for timely responses, having given proper consideration to the issues raised. We want timely decisions that allow our economy to grow.

Ms Lo: Did the Minister notify the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment before his decision to increase the cap on seats for sale at Belfast City Airport?

The Minister of the Environment: I will notify the Chairperson when I make decisions on article 31 applications.

Local Government Reform

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment whether the draft Budget 2011-15 will have an impact on his plans for the reform of local government. (AQO 815/11)

The Minister of the Environment: I do not believe that the draft Budget 2011-15 will have an impact on the Executive's plan for the delivery of the local government reform programme, and I remain confident that the programme will proceed and deliver a more effective, efficient and responsive system of local government for the people of Northern Ireland. That is why, with the agreement of the Executive, I have brought the Planning Bill before the Assembly, and I am consulting on policy proposals to underpin the reorganisation of local government.

In June 2010, at the Executive's request, I sought local government's view on its willingness to pay for the local government reform programme. Local government indicated its willingness to do so, recognising the fact that the considerable savings and other material benefits that will flow from the delivery of local government will accrue to local government and ratepayers, not the Executive and taxpayers.

My Department will continue to support local government in the delivery of reform by managing the reform programme, working with the Departments and organisations due to transfer functions to local government and providing the necessary legislative framework to facilitate the transition from the existing 26 councils to the 11 strong and effective new councils.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is a Budget proposal to reduce net current expenditure by 6%. With that cut in mind, does the Minister think that he will have the proper resources to implement local government reform, including planning reform?

The Minister of the Environment: We must recognise where the cut came from: our friends to my right here are aligned with the Conservative-Liberal coalition that imposed that cut on the people of Northern Ireland. We must all play our part in meeting the swingeing blow that that source landed on our community.

Can we do it? Yes, we can, because we will prioritise and ensure that sufficient resources are available to achieve local government reform. We have already made considerable savings in our budgets. We will continue to do that. Unfortunately, we will have a smaller Department and fewer staff as a result, and it will be ever more challenging. However, we will meet whatever is required to achieve it.

Mr Ross: How will local government meet the considerable upfront costs associated with the reform of local government? What practical support can the Minister and the Executive offer?

The Minister of the Environment: The local government sector is engaging in the improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme. That programme is about how councils can work better with each other to ensure that there is sufficient funding to achieve all of that and to accrue benefits post-amalgamation. There are real savings to be made, and we continue to work with local government to press them to bring the ICE programme proposals to a conclusion so that they can start to be implemented. There are 7.5% savings to be achieved, and the local government sector agrees. Many of those savings can be achieved up front before we engage in the amalgamation process.

Mr Cree: The Minister has partly answered my question. Will he detail what hurdles remain before he can be confident enough that the reform of local government will go ahead?

The Minister of the Environment: Obviously, we still have Bills to complete. The Local Government Finance Bill is going through the House. We still have the Bill on local government reorganisation to complete; it will be introduced to the House early in the new

term. We also have the boundaries issue to bring to the House. Those are the issues that need to come before the House. Once those have been dealt with, it is a matter for the Executive, in conjunction with local government, to decide when is the appropriate time to start to transfer powers.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the Minister agrees that the reform of local government has been about for a very long time. To update us, will he give us an idea of how many millions of pounds have been spent on RPA? Can that be justified?

The Minister of the Environment: The RPA programme is still ongoing. It is much better to get the programme right instead of having a rush through to the elections this year without having everything in place and without having the councils adequately prepared.

The Member must remember that there were £118 million of upfront costs, which the House did not have, unless he knows of some magic pot of money that has been hidden away. The local government sector also indicated that it did not have that money.

We will be in a much better position if we can start to get efficiencies driven through and savings derived before the responsibilities are passed over and build in a package whereby the ratepayer can remain unaffected by the amalgamation. Perhaps the Member wants to have areas where there are 15% or 20% rate rises that hit the public hard. It is the wrong time to hit the public hard. In the time that we are in, we should ensure that people have modest rate rises.

Development: Protected Areas

9. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any plans for the protection of coastal towns and villages affected by inappropriate and unbalanced development. (AQO 816/11)

The Minister of the Environment: All proposals for development within coastal towns and villages are considered taking account of my Department's regional planning policy statements and the provisions of the relevant local area plan, both of which are prepared within the strategic context provided by the Department for Regional Development's regional development strategy, which is under review.

Members may be aware that I recently published an addendum to PPS 7 entitled 'Safeguarding the Character of Established Residential Areas'. That has introduced greater control over the conversion of property to flats and apartments, including properties that are converted to enable multiple occupancy. The addendum has also reinforced existing policy by ensuring that new residential schemes are sensitive in design terms to people who live in existing neighbourhoods and are in harmony with the local character of the established residential areas, villages and smaller settlements. I am confident that the addendum will have a positive impact on settlements across Northern Ireland, including coastal towns and villages.

In addition, my proposals to return key planning powers to councils under planning reform and local government reform will provide locally elected representatives with the opportunity to bring forward specific proposals through new-style local plans, which may assist in the protection of coastal towns and villages.

2.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Speaker: Questions 1 and 8 have been withdrawn. Questions 5, 6 and 7 have gone to other Departments for answer.

VAT

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has discussed the implications of the recent increase in VAT with the Treasury or with counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQO 822/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): The way you are going, Mr Speaker, I will not have any questions left to answer today.

Value added tax is a reserved matter. Therefore, I carry no responsibility for it, nor does the Assembly or the Executive. The most recent discussions with the Treasury took place during the British-Irish Council meeting in December when we met the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. We discussed the economy, the impact of spending cuts, the spending review and areas of mutual interest, but the VAT increase was not raised.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. The recent VAT hike resulted in a 14% increase in the amount of tax paid on many items of necessity. Given the impact of VAT on inflation and consumer spending and the fact that it hits the poorest the hardest, does the Minister agree that if any party actively joined the Tories in denying plans for that hike, it is something that it should now regret?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are many things that have been a source of regret in the past for those parties that allied themselves to the Tories and sought to be their franchisees, and will be regretted in the future.

The Member is quite right. Any indirect tax tends to have a regressive impact, and, therefore, hits the poorest and those on low incomes hardest. That will be the case with the VAT increase and I am sure that many families in Northern Ireland will find that their real income is reduced as a result. However, because it is a reserved matter and is an issue that the Government have decided is a means of helping to reduce the deficit, it is not within the competence of the Assembly. I do not believe that the Westminster Government intend to change the direction in which they are going. Some people will, perhaps, argue that there are other ways in which that money could have been raised, such as a more effective tax on bankers' bonuses, rather than taking it from the poorest in society.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. I ask him to consider raising this matter once again with the Treasury and the British Government. In particular, I ask him to talk to the Government about a variation of VAT for Northern Ireland. Along with some other fiscal instruments, it would be very useful in trying to stimulate, for example, the construction industry here, particularly in relation to extensions and refurbishment.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes a very good point. Sometimes, targeted changes in VAT could have an impact on the construction industry, to use the Member's example. Opportunities to speak with the Treasury should be taken to try to effect change in things that can be changed. From my experience and from the responses that I have had from the Chancellor, I do not believe that there is any chance of getting a change in VAT. There are other specific taxes that have a local impact on Northern Ireland that I need to pursue

with the Treasury. Any conversations that I have with the Treasury will be about the aggregates tax, for example, which is very important to the construction industry in Northern Ireland, and about ways in which the Barnett consequential have been applied, whereby very real money can be made available for spending here. If we get opportunities to speak to the Treasury, it is much better to target areas from which we can get some return and some prospect of change, rather than national policies that will not be changed.

Mr Speaker: The Member is not in his place to ask question 3.

Rates: Lone Pensioner Allowance

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money has been paid out under the lone pensioner allowance since its introduction. (AQO 824/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since the introduction of the lone pensioner personal allowance on 1 April 2008, the total amount that has been awarded to eligible persons is £11.082 million.

The scheme is available to all pensioners over the age of 70 who are living alone, and 28,000 pensioners across Northern Ireland have benefited from it since 2008. It is probably a saving of about £160 a year or £3 a week, which is a welcome respite for those who are on pension income. It is not means-tested. It allows for a 20% allowance on rates bills, and we seek to make the application for it as simple as possible. We have worked extensively with the voluntary sector and others to try, as far as possible, to make pensioners aware of the scheme and the allowance available.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his answer. The figure of £11 million worth of benefit to lone pensioners is fantastic. In my constituency, over 1,500 pensioners have benefited from lone pensioner allowance. Does he agree with me that this policy intervention has been one of the best that the Assembly and the Executive have brought in during this mandate to help some of the most vulnerable people?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I agree. Not only have we introduced the scheme, but my Department and Land and Property Services (LPS) have worked very hard to promote it. That is why, according to the indications that I have

been given, there is about an 80% uptake of the benefit, which is very high. I have been involved in some of the roadshows that LPS has put on in my constituency, in community centres, etc. Great enthusiasm has gone into promoting the scheme and, as a result, the uptake has been high, and working with voluntary and community groups in getting the information out has been helpful.

Mr Callaghan: The Minister has mentioned the figure of, I think, an 85% uptake of the lone pensioner allowance. Does he agree with me that it would make more sense to make an automatic trigger apply to the allowance? Will he inform the Assembly what consideration he has given to making it and various other rates reliefs automatic?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have no record of the number of people who are over 70 and live alone. That is the first reason why it is difficult to have an automatic trigger. Secondly, in certain circumstances, we will make it available to lone pensioners who have a carer living with them. That is a variation on the scheme. It sounds like a contradiction to say that a lone pensioner can have a carer living with him or her, but I am sure that the Member will appreciate what is meant. For that reason, it has not been possible to make the benefit automatic. Obviously, it would be much more desirable to make it automatic, but there are good reasons why that has not been possible. That is one reason why we have put a lot of effort into promoting the scheme through the voluntary and community sector.

Government Property

9. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the adequacy of the proposed expenditure of £16.8 million on the Civil Service estate in year 4 of Budget 2011-15, and whether he would consider private finance for this purpose. (AQO 829/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: So many questions have been withdrawn that I am having difficulty in finding my brief.

I can only respond to the Member about the property owned and leased by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and that means the Government office estate, which is managed by the properties division of DFP. We have an accommodation plan that focuses on two areas.

The first is reducing the overall footprint, and, therefore, the operational cost, of the estate. That means that we vacate premises where, for example, it is possible to increase spatial densities and get more people working in the same amount of space, and, therefore, we can find that properties are redundant.

Secondly, within the budgetary constraints that we have, we prioritise the upgrading of the poorest accommodation. That, in turn, reduces the running costs of those properties. We have identified a number of major works that we want to carry out over the medium term. The DFP budget for that is fairly constrained. People ask me whether I, as Minister, show favouritism to my Department when it comes to the bids. The figures show that that is not the case. A bid was made for £50 million this year, but, because of the capital situation, £16.8 million was all that we could grant.

Mr Dallat: I would be the last one to accuse the Minister of being Mr Moneybags. The Minister explained where he has tried to make better use of property, and none of us can disagree with that. However, where it is absolutely necessary to upgrade or to provide decent accommodation for our workers, has he considered the private sector as a source of funding?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have. In fact, if the Member recalls, we indicated during the Budget process, and in the announcements, that part of the capital that we hope to have available will come from looking at the government estate. Sale and lease back, for example, would enable us to get properties upgraded and to rent them back from whoever has taken them over. There are opportunities for that. It had been anticipated that Workplace 2010 would treat about 70% of properties in that way. That was not possible because of economic conditions, judicial reviews, etc, and did not happen. However, we are now looking at whether we could do it with individual parts of the estate, thereby improving accommodation, reducing the amount of accommodation that we need and getting better value for money. There is a downside in that, although that might release capital for us, there will be revenue consequences for Departments in the longer run.

Dr Farry: It has been said that the Minister is a much better Minister of Finance than he ever was a Minister of the Environment, but he has made a few mistakes in past weeks. Will the

Minister report to the House on what steps he is taking to promote energy efficiency in the government estate, particularly in light of the declining Budget and the need to find savings wherever we can?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I dispute the Member's assertion that I am a better Minister of Finance than I was a Minister of the Environment. I showed as much care for the environment as I do for the public purse. Let me put that on the record before the spurious myth that the Alliance Party is trying to spread about my role in the Department of the Environment some time ago gets around.

We already look at how we can improve energy efficiency. I do not have any figures for what we have done in respect of energy costs. However, regardless of one's views about global warming or whatever, it makes good economic sense to conserve energy and not to waste heat and energy in our buildings. That is one of the ways in which we can reduce the energy bill. One of the benefits of improving the quality of the public sector estate — the route that Mr Dallat tried to take me down with his question — is that we can include in the buildings the latest technology that will help us to conserve energy and to reduce Departments' running costs.

Adverse Weather Conditions

10. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will make funding available to Departments to help address the problems created by the recent adverse weather conditions. (AQO 830/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is up to the individual Ministers to decide on, and identify, any additional funding that is required to address the adverse impacts of the severe weather conditions that we had before and during the Christmas and new year period. If costs have been identified, it is up to Ministers to see how the demands for additional expenditure might be met from within their existing budgets.

If costs have been identified, there is also the option for Ministers to put in bids in the February monitoring round for whatever resources might become available. However, given the experience of the past number of years, there is not likely to be a huge amount of money available. Indeed, even if there is money

available, I know of pressures that Departments have already identified. I would, therefore, not be hopeful about that option at this stage. I want to point out that no Minister has yet come to me with demands for additional cash. However, even if additional needs were to be identified, we cannot guarantee that those could be met in the February monitoring round.

2.45 pm

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister somewhat pre-empted my supplementary question. I was going to ask him to outline whether Minister Murphy in particular had sought any money for road repairs. Notwithstanding the difficult financial and economic constraints that exist, will the Minister outline where some of the inescapable pressures will be for Departments?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The detail of that question would be better answered by the Minister for Regional Development. However, I will say that — again, I hope that I am quoting correctly from memory — £3 million was made available to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) in the December monitoring round for structural maintenance. That brought the total available to DRD for structural maintenance in this financial year to £50 million. We have all seen the ravages and the impact of the severe weather on the roads in our constituencies, and the Minister has one or two options open to him. He may either reallocate money within his budget or make an application in the February monitoring round for additional money.

Traditionally, DRD has benefitted greatly from capital money that has been available at the end of the year, because it is one of the few Departments that is capable of spending large amounts of capital in the short time that remains after every February monitoring round. That has been the normal approach in the past. However, I do not know whether such a bid will be made or whether huge amounts of resource will be made available as reduced requirements in February. Nevertheless, that mechanism and approach are available to the Minister should he identify a need for road repairs.

Ms Lo: I wish to ask the Minister a question about the longer term. The recent water crisis was very much due to years of underinvestment in the water infrastructure. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be more investment in that? Does he also agree that it would be

imprudent for the Department for Regional Development to cut investment in Northern Ireland Water by 25% in years two and three?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I point out to the Member that the severe weather conditions experienced were unprecedented and were bound to have an impact on the infrastructure. Not all the burst pipes were old. Indeed, I remember looking at footage of some of the new infrastructure that was also affected by the severe weather, which had an impact on the water in the pipes and, thereby, caused damage. Therefore, let us not put it down purely to a lack of investment in the infrastructure.

There is, of course, a requirement for investment in the infrastructure. Indeed, the Utility Regulator has pointed out that work needs to be done. European demands will also mean that work will increasingly need to be done. I point out to the Member that Northern Ireland Water surrendered, I think, £24.9 million worth of capital in the December monitoring round, because that had not been spent in this financial year. DRD faces some pressures in years two and three of the next four years of spending because of severe reductions in capital. However, the allocation of capital moneys to DRD is still quite generous, and that Department is one of the better equipped when it comes to capital spend in the next four years. Of course, the Minister has the flexibility to move money around if he deems that investment in the Water Service has a higher priority than investment in some of the other areas for which he is responsible.

DFF: Staffing Reductions

11. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the anticipated level of any job reductions resulting from his departmental savings plan and how these reductions will be achieved. (AQO 831/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As set out in the Department's consultation document, which was published — let me make this very clear — on 22 December 2010, within the five-day deadline for savings plans laid down by the Executive, the latest forecast is a reduction of 90 posts as a result of the savings that are required over the next four years.

Of course, there is a difference between discontinuing a particular post and a member of

staff losing his or her job. Some of those posts will be lost through natural wastage or through turnover of staff due to retirement, resignation, moves to other Departments, and so on. Our statisticians have worked out that although we will shed 90 posts over the four-year period, we should not have to make any compulsory redundancies.

Mr O'Loan: I congratulate the Minister on getting his departmental spending plan out so quickly and on the fact that it was such a substantial paper. As an aside, the variation in the style, content and manner of the different departmental papers is a concern.

I will confine my remarks to the Civil Service, rather than commenting on the whole public sector. The non-filling of vacancies and redeployment raises questions about maintaining the integrity and quality of service across the Civil Service. How does the Minister feel that that can be managed over the next two- or four-year period? Will he give some assurance that we will get a better quality Civil Service, despite the financial constraints?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is always a conflict between trying to retain the people who are already in jobs and making every post available for general advertisement and competition. That has always been the case and is not particular to this point in time. However, even with a freeze on recruitment, Departments can still make the case that if specialist staff or staff with the required skills cannot be found in the available pool of labour, those posts can be advertised. Indeed, from reading the newspapers, one can see that although we have encouraged Departments not to advertise all posts publicly but to try to reallocate or allocate posts internally, there are occasions when Departments have to advertise posts.

The organisation is big enough to ensure that there is enough movement and churn within it to get the people with the proper skills. However, there is always a safeguard. That is why there has been no general declaration on freezing all recruitment. Where specialist skills are required, it would be foolish for Departments not to look for them.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made a statement that if he had to make the cuts that are coming from the Tory/ Liberal Democrat coalition, up to 4,000 Health

Service jobs would be lost. Has the Minister had an opportunity to assess the validity of those 4,000 job cuts, and are they, in his opinion, as in mine, pie in the sky?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At present, it is the job of all Ministers to try to be as responsible as possible in the face of what is a difficult economic situation. All Ministers have a responsibility, but especially one who belongs to a party that advocated voting for the Conservative Party, which imposed the cuts. He probably has a double duty to react responsibly.

A Minister cannot, on the one hand, walk down the street canvassing for a party that cuts costs and spending, and, on the other hand, doff the cloth hat and join the trade unions in protesting against those very cuts. The public sees through that.

The Member's question would probably be better addressed by the Health Minister. However, I become extremely uncomfortable when a Minister talks about enforced redundancies, especially for 4,000 people, but, when asked to give some detail, talks about it being a rough calculation. That does a disservice to staff, who become worried about whether their job is one of those 4,000 to be cut based on a rough calculation.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions for oral answer to the Minister of Finance and Personnel because the Members who were to have asked questions 12, 13 and 14 are not in their place. I have warned party Whips that Members, from whichever party, who put down questions should realise the resources that go into researching answers. If those Members fail to turn up in the House to ask their questions, they are treating the House — *[Interruption.]* Order. They are treating the House with total and absolute contempt. I have to say that. I have warned Whips of that in the past. Even today, questions were withdrawn, and Members did not turn up in the House and did not give the House a reason. That is wrong, and it has to be condemned.

Committee Business

Young People (16-24) Not in Education, Employment or Training

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

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

That this Assembly approves the findings and recommendations in the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into Young People (aged 16 to 24) who are Not in Education, Employment or Training; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to ensure that the findings and recommendations within the report are reflected in the NEET strategy which is being developed.

It gives me great pleasure, as Chairperson of the Committee, to bring forward the report on its inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training, or NEETs, as such young people are collectively known. "NEET" is not an attractive label, but it is useful for the purpose of abbreviation.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has gained a reputation not only as one of the Assembly's hardest-working Committees but as one that actively seeks to move issues on and to develop policies in co-operation with the Department that it scrutinises. In short, this inquiry will move the issue of NEET young people on and has resulted in a strategy being started for them, which potentially makes it one of the more significant Committee inquiries undertaken in this mandate

I thank the Minister for attending the debate and his predecessor, Sir Reg Empey, for responding to our call for the issue of young people who are NEET to be addressed. I also thank the Minister's officials who assisted the Committee and numerous stakeholder groups that contributed to the inquiry and built up significant momentum on the issue. My thanks also go to the Committee staff, who

worked tirelessly to ensure that the inquiry was thorough and insightful.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) was informed and involved by the Committee throughout the inquiry, and it accepts that it must take the lead in any cross-departmental NEET strategy. With the Executive's support, DEL officials have begun dialogue with other relevant Departments to start work on a NEET strategy. A stakeholder forum has been established that will feed into the strategy being developed by Departments, which provides an inspiring example of how effective an Assembly Committee can be.

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

Over the past couple of years, the Committee received briefings that highlighted the plight of young people who are NEET. Members were regularly presented with evidence that that group is continuing to grow, a situation exacerbated by the economic downturn and one that is not likely to improve significantly, even when the economy begins to recover more noticeably. That and other factors prompted the Committee to begin its NEET inquiry in February 2010.

I am not a fan of speeches that drip with statistics. However, it is worthwhile sharing some figures. The economic cost alone of youth unemployment in Northern Ireland is approximately £250 million a year. A Prince's Trust report concludes that unemployment in the 18-24 age group costs the UK economy upwards of £90 million a week. Youth crime presents a bill of a staggering £1 billion for the UK taxpayer each year. Depression caused by under-achievement at school may cost the NHS in the UK between £11 million and £28 million a year.

The latest Labour Force Survey (LFS) figures for people aged 16 to 24 in Northern Ireland show that 18% of them are not in employment, government training schemes or full-time education.

3.00 pm

However, not only is there a financial cost, but there is a human cost. Members are acutely aware of the frighteningly high rates of youth suicide here. It is clear that those issues are linked. An unacceptably high proportion of our care-experienced young people also end up NEET. The essence of the inquiry has been to discover who NEET young people are, why they

find themselves in that situation and how best they can be helped and supported. Stemming the growth in the flow of NEET young people will ultimately reduce the pressure on resources later, when those young people may become economically inactive adults.

The Committee has been deeply moved by the stories it has heard, particularly when young people recounted their own experiences. From the beginning, the Committee realised that the core of any NEET strategy must involve Departments looking beyond their own remits towards greater collaboration. The NEET strategy must be about co-ordination, co-operation, multi-agency working, referral and collective accountability. All stakeholders must work together within a framework. Duplication is not always identified and dealt with.

Against a backdrop of spending cuts, the Committee is acutely aware that it is unlikely that significant additional money will be made available for a NEET strategy. Obtaining additional finance was not the Committee's focus when beginning the inquiry. Members wanted to create awareness and momentum and to build consensus on the way forward for a NEET strategy. Simply securing additional funds for individual groups to continue to work in isolation was neither the point nor an option.

Although the Committee draws conclusions and makes recommendations in the report, it will be the Departments and the stakeholder groups who will work out the fine detail of a NEET strategy and the framework that needs to be developed. The Committee believes that there is a window of opportunity that will close soon and must not be allowed to go to waste.

It is clear that NEET young people do not form a homogeneous group. It is also clear that being NEET has a tremendous knock-on effect on young people. It affects their self esteem, emotional stability and overall well-being. They are likely to be less happy with friendships, family life and health than those in education, employment and training. The characteristics and experiences of young people who are NEET and the barriers that they face are many and complex.

The inquiry highlights serious issues in our education system, which sees so many young people leave compulsory education with few, if any, qualifications and with a negative attitude towards mainstream, structured education or training provision. The home environment

and community context in which a child or young person exists is also likely to have a considerable impact on their attitudes and behaviours. Community representatives contributing to the inquiry suggested that deficiencies in parental support for education are a cultural issue. The situation is exacerbated by young people leaving school without any effective identification of their skills, options or opportunities.

Interventions for NEET young people should focus on general basic skills, with technical skills being introduced gradually as appropriate. Provision should also include personal and professional development skills and a preparation-for-work approach related to market or job opportunities. Interventions will generally be more successful when they are tailored to the needs of the individual.

Members also heard from a number of respondents who suggested that the current provision of careers advice and guidance in our schools and colleges is not always consistent or adequate. The Committee heard from the Careers Service, which has traditionally focused its efforts on pupils in year 12. However, there needs to be more intervention with younger pupils, particularly those in year 10 who are making decisions about their GCSE subjects. It was acknowledged that the tracking and monitoring of young people who are NEET is also an issue. The Committee was pleased to hear that the Careers Service is working closely with the Department of Education to try to overcome difficulties in sharing data.

We must undertake a transformation of the learning environment to make it more stimulating and to offer more flexible, personalised learning opportunities with appropriate recognition; greater recognition of underachievement and its causes; greater support for learners; more focus on developing employability in our young people; and a focus on outcomes.

The Committee has highlighted possible structures to bring together government and stakeholders to develop the NEET strategy. Those structures are relatively simple, comprising a forum for stakeholders, with the same structure for Departments and their agencies and bodies. The forums would feed into a steering group that would then develop and implement a NEET strategy.

The Committee makes 41 recommendations in its report, and I want to highlight a few key ones. The Committee recommends that those who develop the NEET strategy ensure that the pivotal role of mentors, key workers and support workers be deeply embedded in the systems of the strategy. The NEET strategy should contain robust systems for measuring, monitoring and assessing the achievement of its aims. The Careers Service should have access to all post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland, including those in alternative provision and in colleges. Access should not be denied by schools, because that reinforces an inconsistent and unequal approach to the provision of careers advice and guidance.

The Department for Employment and Learning should re-examine its programmes as part of the development of the NEET strategy and assess whether there are gaps in its provision that should be addressed. That should be done with reference to relevant stakeholders. Volunteering can and should be a key element of the NEET strategy, and the Committee recommends that those who develop the strategy examine its potential for incorporation.

The Committee recognises that study for GCSEs and A levels is not appropriate for all our young people. As a result, members recommend that those who develop the NEET strategy examine the reasons behind pupil disengagement in our schools and consider whether a 14-plus vocational route for young people in schools should be developed. Such a route should be regarded as equal in quality to the academic route and should contain agreed levels of English and STEM subjects. That route should connect with a continuation of education or training at college or university.

As well as making recommendations, the Committee reached a number of conclusions in its report. I will outline the key conclusions, beginning with participation and joined-up working. A NEET strategy must be based on the development of structures that encourage co-operation, collaboration, co-ordination, multi-agency working, well-considered referral, signposting and collective responsibility. The Departments, their agencies and other bodies must work with the community and voluntary sector and the various education sectors, including further education and higher education, and, indeed, business. That is

the only way in which a NEET strategy can be properly developed and managed.

Strategies without an action and implementation plan can easily wither on the vine. That is why the Committee will expect those who are involved in developing the NEET strategy to create such plans.

On educational experience, significant evidence was presented to the Committee that suggested that a negative experience of education was a primary cause for young people disengaging from the system. Members were encouraged to look at ways in which education in school could be made more relevant and stimulating for young people. To that end, a number of respondents to the inquiry suggested that a 14-plus vocational alternative to GCSEs and A levels be examined, as I mentioned.

I turn to social and economic factors. Young people who are NEET are not a homogeneous group. They are also more susceptible to external social and economic factors, and a strategy must take that into account. Interventions must not only be about individuals, but must encompass families and communities. Often, the barriers that young people who are NEET face are cultural and inter-generational. It may be the case that there is no family history of further or higher education, and, in some cases, unemployment can span the generations.

On mentoring and key workers, the provision of role models and the consistent presence of a key worker or support worker has made a huge difference to a large number of young people who had disengaged from the system. Young people who are NEET may not have any other significant adult in their life, and they desperately need that type of support from someone whom they trust and respect. Those role models must be at the heart of provision for young people who are NEET.

There is a real need for counselling and pastoral care provision to be improved in schools, colleges and universities. Often, at key transition points between sectors of education or between school and employment, young people are not able to find the necessary support that might help them to remain engaged.

Poor careers advice and guidance at transition points can result in wrong choices, which cause young people to disengage. Professional careers

advice and guidance should be available to all young people.

The Committee received overwhelming evidence during the inquiry that early intervention to support young people who may be at risk of disengagement at a later stage is sensible and cost-effective. Members suggest that prevention is considerably cheaper than the cure. Support in primary schools for those with literacy and numeracy difficulties is likely to pay dividends later.

Departments and stakeholders need to give consideration to information sharing and data protection and find ways that allow better recording of the interventions that young people receive, as well as better tracking of their progression. For a NEET strategy to work, there must be proper information sharing that allows a more complete picture of the interventions that a young person has received.

The Committee saw some excellent examples of the use of volunteering as part of NEET strategies in other jurisdictions. Members are aware that volunteering is used here, but the Committee believes that there is considerable scope for volunteering to be better used as part of a NEET strategy.

Where spending cuts and duplication are concerned, the current squeeze on public finance will be a further complication for those who are working on the development of the strategy. As I indicated, the inquiry is not designed to be an exercise in drumming up more funds for provisions for the group of young people in question. It is about collecting evidence of the need for a strategy, and, once that is secured —

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: — it is about becoming more focused on what a strategy should contain.

Education maintenance allowance must be protected for those who are most in need. There I end my remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Weir: As with a number of other members of the Committee, I was not there at the start of the inquiry; I joined the Committee in April 2010. However, I got a strong flavour of what was involved. I commend all those who have been involved in the production of the report. As

the Chairperson indicated, it is very substantive, with, I think, about 41 recommendations that cover a wide range of areas.

As the Chairperson indicated, the first step is to look at why the NEET issue is so important. Like the Chairperson, I do not favour the term “NEET”, but it is a lot better than the term “status zero”, which was used elsewhere. That seems to be an incredibly insulting term. As was indicated, once we get behind the statistics, we see that there is a very major incentive for us as an Assembly and a society to deal with the issue. That is because massive societal issues arise from NEETs. As was indicated, there is a whole host of reasons why the matter is vital. For example, young people are deprived of the ability to contribute productively to the economy, and there is an impact on issues of crime and suicide and on the Health Service and our education services. Beyond the impact on society as a whole, as the Chairperson indicated, the impact on individuals should be considered. Indeed, falling through the net and remaining outside the system can lead to a horrendous life for people and to a destruction of their life chances. That is why we need to tackle the issue.

A wide range of issues is covered in the report, so I will touch very briefly on a few. Where co-ordination is concerned, it is clear that a range of agencies need to be involved. In the first place, however, we need to get a clear indication of the scope of the problem. Although work in that regard is happening already, we need to see further improvement. There have been major advances in recent years in monitoring, particularly through the careers service, but we need to ensure that something is there to cater for everyone who is affected. We can do that only if we have robust data to allow us to deal with it in the first place.

Secondly, from a societal, an individual and even an economic point of view, it is undoubtedly the case that early intervention pays dividends in the long run. It is genuine investment to save. The links in the careers sides of DEL and the Department of Education are particularly important. As a lot of the evidence that was given to us indicated, young people who are likely to fall into the NEET category can be identified at a very early stage. Early intervention in primary schools, which, again, is happening but needs to be built on, can lead to the prevention of problems at a later stage.

3.15 pm

It is also undoubtedly the case that there is no magic-bullet solution to the problem. There is no particular thing that will, overnight, deal with all the problems facing NEETS. A cocktail of measures is required. In particular, one piece of evidence that became clear to the Committee is that a lot of good initiatives are happening on the ground. It is about sharing a degree of knowledge. In particular, in Northern Ireland, we saw — I think that it was representatives from the Strangford constituency, and my colleagues may refer to them later — good outreach systems in schools to tackle the problem. Again, there is a knowledge barrier. We need to make sure that information about good practice and what happens well in one area is spread across Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Committee conducted brief visits to a range of bodies in Scotland and Wales. There are initiatives that are happening outside Northern Ireland that we can draw experience from. We should not be so arrogant as to believe that all the solutions are available in Northern Ireland. We can learn from best practice elsewhere; perhaps, at times, we can learn what to avoid from the mistakes of others. It is critical for the future of the next generation that there is a commitment across the Assembly to tackling the issue properly. The report was drawn up with a high level of co-operation among all parties and everyone on the Committee and, indeed, with the co-operation of the Department.

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

Mr Weir: Consequently, I commend the report to the House, so that we can start to focus and bear down on what is a very difficult but important issue for society.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Committee staff, the departmental officials and those from the community and voluntary sector for their help, support and guidance in the course of the Committee's inquiry into this important subject. I also want to give special mention to the young people who worked closely with the Committee over the past number of months. Without their input, we would not be able to put a human face on the issue. We could talk about statistics all day long, but talking to those young people

had a serious impact not just on me but on the whole Committee. We realised that, whatever they were going through, there is always hope because of the work done by the Department and the community and voluntary sector.

Like other Members and, I assume, the rest of the Committee, I welcome the report, because the Committee took on board the fact that the NEETS inquiry was one of the most critical and crucial pieces of work that it has done in a while. As the Chairperson said, we are not shy about coming forward on some of the social justice issues that impact on our community. On the back of what Peter Weir said, the NEETS issue is not just about young people not in employment, education or training; it is about the serious knock-on effects that that has on constituencies. It is about people having the sense that they have no future and no hope. I know from my constituency that you can touch on the devastating effects of suicide on some of these young people. So it is a bigger issue which touches a lot more people and issues.

Too often, we talk about young people not in employment, education or training as though it is their choice. It sometimes comes down to a personality clash with a teacher. Some people have issues in their home life, some are in care, and some go down the road of antisocial and anti-community behaviour and into criminality. So, when we talk about young people not in employment, education or training, it is not just a matter of young people who are bad. There are other reasons why kids are there. The issue is the lack of hope for the future, which leaves them prone to being targeted by people who want them to get involved in criminality. They can be prone to alcohol and drug misuse and so on. The devil makes work for a lot of idle hands out there. We need to target and focus on that.

It is not an easy task to reach out to young people or to people who come through second and third generation unemployment, but it is a critical one. The Minister has said a few times over the past few days that he believes that DEL is the “engine room” for the road to economic recovery. It is crucial that we look at the amount of young people who are NEET. If we talk about the engine room of economic recovery, we cannot afford to forget about this generation. In 20 or 30 years, those kids will have families, and, unless we break that cycle, there will be another cycle of young people who have no hope and no future and who do not see the benefit

of going into apprenticeship schemes or further and higher education.

The Chairperson mentioned a number of statistics and mentioned the more than 40 recommendations. It is important. The issue is not just a DEL one. Unfortunately, DEL has to deal with much of the fallout. It is important that there is an Executive response. I commend the previous Minister, Sir Reg Empey, who was open to all this. I know that the current Minister, Danny Kennedy, is willing to take it forward, but it is important that all Ministers play their part. We, as a Committee, are well aware of the fact that all Ministers need to play their part.

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

Ms S Ramsey: Career advisers need to get in at an early age and give proper career advice. That is not a DEL issue, but DEL can take the lead. As a Committee member who has been there from the start, I am proud to be part of this inquiry, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Lyttle: I also commend my colleagues on the Employment and Learning Committee for their work in bringing this important matter to the Assembly’s agenda. I agree that the collaborative work that the Committee has facilitated between the Department and service providers is a good example of how the Assembly and its Committees can contribute to better outcomes for our community. I reserve particular recognition for the significant contribution made to the report by Committee staff.

We have heard that the consequences for our young people of disengaging with education, training and employment are severe. They include increased economic inactivity for society but, most importantly, have serious detrimental effects on individuals’ health and well-being and lead to an increased risk of depression and criminal activity. I find the term “NEETs” less than flattering. The last thing that young people in this position need is further stereotyping, which unfortunately, has been exemplified by some.

It is right that our welfare system is a safety net and not a replacement for the positive benefits of education or employment. However, our elected representatives need to provide leadership on that issue, not demonise our young people. I am glad that our current Minister, as has been mentioned, is demonstrating a positive approach

to that serious matter. For all those reasons, it is only right that my colleagues on the Committee for Employment and Learning have shown leadership for our young people by conducting a full inquiry to better inform the Assembly as to how we might improve interventions to help young people to fulfil education, training and employment opportunities.

The Committee for Employment and Learning's NEETs inquiry has found that many community and voluntary sector organisations conduct exceptional work on behalf of our young people, and there have been some great success stories. Barnardo's and the Prince's Trust are obvious examples of such organisations, and, in my constituency, some great work is going on to connect young people with creative industries such as gaming and programming as ways to link skills acquisition with relevant and rewarding employment for our young people.

As has been mentioned, the key feedback from the inquiry is that, despite all this great work, we need improved co-ordination by Departments. There is significant support for the key recommendations of the report and agreement that, if we are to give our young people the assistance that they deserve, we need a cross-departmental strategy that sets clear aims and objectives and timescales in which to achieve them as a matter of urgency.

The report makes a number of specific proposals for the relevant Ministers to consider. It is clear from the feedback that improved early intervention in post-primary education is essential in identifying and addressing why a pupil is becoming disengaged at an early stage.

Another key piece of feedback was on the need for improved careers guidance. That has been mentioned a number of times, and the Department for Employment and Learning seems to have a robust menu of options for careers guidance teachers and professionals. However, concerns remain about how well those are being utilised across the board and about the lack of monitoring and tracking of the educational, training and employment outcomes that result. As has been said, that will, by definition, require co-operation between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education.

A NEET steering panel is a further recommendation of the report, and the community and voluntary sector has recognised

the need for a more collaborative approach at sector and government level, with the potential for improved outcomes. As was also mentioned, we will not resolve disengagement or youth unemployment overnight, and the report may not have all of the solutions. However, it is high time that we caught up with our counterparts in Scotland and Wales and made sensible arrangements for an improved and more co-ordinated response from our Government.

Put simply, our young people are the future of this society, and we have to provide them with leadership and with the opportunities that they need to make a contribution to it. Therefore, I join my Committee colleagues in calling for the Minister to use the findings and recommendations of our report to lead the delivery of a NEET strategy for Northern Ireland without delay.

Mr Newton: I thank the Committee, the Minister and the Department for this valuable report. I am pleased to say that, when I was on the Committee, I made a small contribution to the initial work. I come to the debate as an East Belfast MLA, as someone who is passionate about addressing the issues and, indeed, as someone with a real concern about the young people who have fallen out of the system and are in danger of becoming long-term economically inactive.

The statistics show that Northern Ireland has the highest level of economic inactivity in any region of the UK, and we cannot allow another generation of young people to be condemned to a life of inactivity and poverty. That is why I particularly welcome this inquiry and report by the Committee for Employment and Learning and the priority that has been given to the issue under the lead of the Department for Employment and Learning. I agree with the earlier comment that the importance of DEL must not be underestimated. It is an engine for driving the economy in the future.

The issues involved are complex and many, and preventing our young people from becoming NEET through better education and qualifications should be the driver for all of us to give them the confidence and desire to follow pathways out of their situation. That and tackling the barriers that prevent young people, such as those with a disability, from entering the workplace are just some of the key challenges that the report identifies as requiring action.

That will involve a range of Departments and the cross-cutting work of the Executive.

All research suggests that there are three significant factors in young people's becoming NEET: having few or no educational achievements; living in a household in which there is long-term poverty and long-term unemployment; and having a disability. Those are also the factors that make it most likely that a young person who is NEET will move into long-term economic inactivity. Of the young people who are most at risk and have experienced long-term poverty, 50% are still economically inactive after five years.

The Executive's key priority is to grow the Northern Ireland economy. The building of a better, brighter and shared future for all in Northern Ireland necessarily entails ensuring better opportunities for young people in education and training.

3.30 pm

Young people are the future business leaders and entrepreneurs who will drive the economy. Time and time again, it has been clear that the qualities and strengths of our workforce bring investment to Northern Ireland. The quality of our young people attracts that investment.

We cannot afford to ignore the cost that was highlighted by the Audit Commission. It suggests that every young person who is not in education, employment or training costs £160,000 in lost revenue and benefit costs. We cannot ignore that. We need to address the issue as one of economic development. That is why we need to ensure that the training and apprenticeship opportunities that we offer young people are relevant and will create economic growth.

Peter Weir spoke about the potential of the massive societal issues. We need to address those issues or we will see their outworking in the future. There is a link between child poverty and young people who find themselves not in education, employment or training. That is why I want to see the NEET strategy developed to feed into the child poverty strategy so that no child, young person or family is left behind.

The proposed new social investment fund could be used to develop projects that work with young people who are not in education, employment or training, to develop proven models of good practice, to re-engage young

people, and to make a tangible difference to young people in the most disadvantaged communities. The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people could act as a vehicle to co-ordinate whatever mechanism the Minister for Employment and Learning develops to move the strategy forward.

I thank the Committee and the Minister. The report is valuable, and I lend my support to it. I wish the Committee and the Department well in taking it forward.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the report on the inquiry into young people who are not in education, employment or training. The report was initiated on the basis of the economic downturn and the high incidence of youth unemployment. Graduates who have first-class honours degrees face long-term unemployment. Youth unemployment doubled from 10% in 2006 to 20% in 2009-2010. It now accounts for the biggest percentage in the overall unemployment figures.

Not everyone grasps the term "NEET", as it is a mixed group: some are graduates, some have long-term illnesses or disabilities, and others are not in education, employment or training because of family break-up. I hope that the Minister takes on board that the issue of young people not in education, employment or training needs to be tackled. Hopefully, arising out of this report, the North of Ireland will have a strategy similar to those in Wales, England, Scotland and the South of Ireland.

Young people who are not in education, employment or training and who have no route into employment are left with a permanent scar, not just a temporary blemish. I fear that some of our young people face many years of unemployment.

The Assembly must address that. The Committee's focus in its report is not primarily financial. It is about trying to get systems in place to monitor and track young people. However, financial assistance and incentives, such as the educational maintenance allowance and the future jobs fund that operates in England, need to be available. The Labour Government committed £1 billion, I believe, to set up that fund. I am not sure where it stands now under the Conservatives. Such a fund is needed here.

There are also social costs to being NEET. A director general in the Department for Children,

Schools and Families put forward a telling statistic, and although it applies to England, it aptly describes the social cost here. His Department had carried out research over 10 years. He said that that research had made one profoundly shocking finding. Of those young people who were long-term NEET — those who were outside the system for a long period because they had been excluded permanently or had simply dropped out at the end of compulsory education — after 10 years, 15% were dead as a result of suicide or ill health. That is the social cost of being NEET.

We, as politicians, have a responsibility to try to address the problem of many young people disappearing from the education system, as some Members, such as my colleague Sue Ramsey, pointed out. The system needs to keep track of those young people. It can end up not knowing where young people in the NEET category are because they have dropped out. A cross-departmental strategy is needed. Many issues arise during early-years education. Some issues arise due to poverty and ill health. I hope that the Minister will take on board what is said in the debate and that we will see positive developments.

Mr S Anderson: I fully support the motion. I congratulate all my Committee colleagues for their hard work and achievements on this important issue. I also want to place on record my thanks to the Committee secretariat and to other officials, including those from the Department for Employment and Learning, and all those who presented evidence to the Committee during its lengthy consideration of the issue.

Northern Ireland, quite rightly, prides itself on its high academic standards. On this side of the House, we wish to see those standards maintained. However, there is another side to the coin. Like many Members, I do not like the term “NEET”. Nevertheless, it has caught on. It is a label that is now widely used to describe the growing category of young people who leave school to face life without any qualifications, skills or career prospects.

If things were bad enough when the Committee began its inquiry into the issue, they are now worse as the economic recession bites. Young people who are aged —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to clarify his last point. Not all young

people who are NEET leave school without any qualifications. The Committee received a presentation — I believe that it was before the Member joined the Committee — from a young girl who had achieved something like nine A grades in her GCSEs. Therefore, some people who are NEET have great qualifications.

Mr S Anderson: I certainly take the Member's point. I believe that I can recall the presentation that she mentioned. Young people who are NEET find it much more difficult to attain skills. Any who achieve those skills are, certainly, to be congratulated. They need that great help.

As I said, the recession has made the situation much worse. Latest figures reveal that 18% of young people who are between 16 and 24 years old are categorised as NEET. That is totally unacceptable. It is also frightening. It leaves thousands of young people in utter despair. Social exclusion causes some to turn to drugs, drink and crime, and, tragically, as has been mentioned, to suicide. The Committee took evidence on those situations, which was moving and challenging. A NEET strategy is long overdue.

In the limited time that is available to me, I will concentrate on a couple of the Committee's key recommendations and conclusions. We have to face up to reality. In these times of austerity and cuts, the levels of funding that we regard as desirable will not be available, so we have to think more strategically. However, a lot can be done without additional funding. In that context, it is vital to have a joined-up approach at all levels. As Assembly Members, we and the Executive have a duty to set a good example. Key Departments must pool resources and work closely together and with agencies on the ground, and someone must co-ordinate and lead. The junior Ministers of OFMDFM are best placed to do that.

The inquiry also highlighted the need for early intervention. The Welsh NEET strategy correctly recognises the fact that there is clear consensus that, because most young people do not become NEET overnight, early identification and preventative work can reduce vulnerability and the need for future support.

Schools have an important role to play, and we should not wait until pupils get to secondary level. Primary-school teachers can identify literacy, numeracy and other learning difficulties at an early age, and remedial programmes, including pastoral care and counselling, can be

put in place. Such interventions would surely help to address some of the problems that manifest themselves later.

Greater care must be taken in secondary schools to maintain a counselling and careers advice regime that is designed to help young people to choose the right courses of study. I am keen to encourage our young people to attend university but I accept the fact that it is not for everyone. Sometimes, our schools are more concerned with league tables and such things than with what is best for our individual young people. Perhaps that is a bit harsh, but I am sure that Members know what I mean. I remember school advisers in my school days. We need more of that to guide our young people towards trades such as plumbing, electrical work and general building.

The conclusions and recommendations of the Committee's report mark the beginning of what could be a productive process, but it requires action. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Mr B McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the report. As Members will know, I am not a current member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, but I was a member for some time. The Committee has been investigating a particularly important issue. I read the report with interest, and it was extremely helpful. Members will have accepted the fact that the current Minister, my party colleague Danny Kennedy, and Sir Reg Empey previously have been enthusiastic in contributing to and supporting the issue. It is an exemplar as a way forward for Committees and Ministers to work together.

Young people who are NEET do not suddenly emerge at the age of 16. Many of them have been travelling right the way through the process. We have to take action at all levels. Education is a key steer to help people, and, in that regard, I have just had a discussion with the Minister of Education about budget challenges. The Assembly must deal with the issue in a joined-up manner. The NEET issue does not fall only to DEL, although that Department may provide leadership.

One of the most disconcerting statistics that was presented to me was the fact that today's young people who are NEET are tomorrow's parents and that we run the risk of another cycle of NEET individuals. When we get some

good news about an economic upturn, we must recognise the fact that many people will undoubtedly have missed out completely. We must find a way to deal with that.

I will put this gently because my party colleague is the Minister concerned: aspirations are all well and good and identifying the problem is helpful, but the challenge is to find money to tackle the issue. Many Members pointed out the long-term loss and the annual cost of a NEET individual. If we are to act strategically, we need to allocate appropriate funds. That will require delicate, or perhaps robust, negotiation among Members from different parties as we try to find the appropriate resources.

3.45 pm

I am struck by the fact that recent figures show that 15% of 16- to 19-year-olds in Northern Ireland are NEET. That is significantly lower than the 25% in Wales and the 19% average across the United Kingdom. I know that other Members have used the statistics for 16- to 24-year-olds, in which case the differences between Administrations narrow slightly. However, it is still unacceptable that some 20% — over 45,000 — fall into that category, and we need to find a way of doing something about that.

Finding employment is the key issue. Who of us in here has not been inundated by people who come along with good qualifications and ask for a job placement or for this, that or the other? Everybody is trying to get some form of experience. The real problem for those who we might traditionally perceive to be NEET — it may be the point that was made across the Benches — is that, when the upturn comes, those with good qualifications, good education and good contacts will undoubtedly suck up the first jobs available, and those without any education, with few contacts or with a disability will be left behind. That is a really serious problem for us.

I will make the point for the sake of argument — I have been asked to make it — that not everybody who is NEET actually needs our attention. Some people are taking gap years, for example. We need to make sure that when we identify the amount of money that we put to this matter, we target it appropriately. All in all, the only real way to tackle the issue is to find some way of getting coherence and cross-cutting initiatives across Departments. We have to take the matter seriously, and I have no doubt that the Minister will do that.

While I was reading the Committee's report, in addition to the report that was previously prepared and presented by the Department to the Executive Committee, I was really pleased to see that there was a general recognition of the problem.

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

Mr B McCrea: That is the key issue, and if Northern Ireland produces its own specific plan for dealing with the issue, it will have the wholehearted support of me and my party.

Mr P Ramsey: Like other Members, it was a privilege to participate in and contribute to the inquiry over recent months. This is an opportunity to thank the Minister and Sir Reg Empey for their full co-operation and the departmental co-operation throughout the inquiry and also to thank our Committee staff for their diligence throughout. More important — as other Members have said — was the significant contribution from the voluntary and community sector, which, across so many different areas and difficult circumstances, tries to make a difference to young people's lives and to get funding for its operations. We have heard about the cocktail of funding that is required to do that.

We now have a report, and we spent considerable time looking at options and at recommendations. It is clearly not an issue for the Minister for Employment and Learning alone to deal with. It is for the wider Executive, collectively and collaboratively working together, to set the action points and delivery.

Young people under 25 have borne the brunt of the recession and have seen unemployment rates treble in the past year. Too many young people, even those with excellent qualifications, find themselves unable to gain employment and having to seek unpaid and voluntary work to gain experience until there are signs of economic recovery. It is clear now that that is a long way off. Wider youth unemployment should concern us all in the Assembly, because it can have devastating effects and consequences for individuals, their families and communities. The last time we saw unemployment levels like this, we lost a generation of young people to long-term economic inactivity, and it is essential that we do not let that happen again.

It is also essential that the Executive prioritise youth unemployment and are seen

to be prepared to address it. However, youth unemployment and being NEET are not one and the same. A proportion of young people are unemployed and do not have qualifications, skills and experience that are likely to lead to employment in the near future. During the recession, they may well have taken less-skilled and lower-paid jobs or be undertaking those jobs part-time while gaining further qualifications.

However, the young people for whom I have most fears are those in the core group of young people who are NEET — young people who face multiple barriers and difficulties, and for whom, without additional help, economic recovery is unlikely to bring improved outcomes.

Mr Callaghan: Does the Member agree that the community and voluntary sector has a particularly useful role to play in that type of intervention, especially given that it can provide cost-effective, timely and early interventions in tackling issues around youth unemployment and other problems identified in the report?

Mr P Ramsey: Most members of the Committee would concur with that. We saw a range of models of good practice across Northern Ireland that make a difference for young people. The Member's point is well made.

The most vulnerable young people who are NEET will not re-engage without additional help and support. However, we say to the Minister that it is not for him alone to deal with the matter. It is for the wider Executive team to come together in a meaningful way to make a difference to vulnerable young people across Northern Ireland.

The Committee felt that a mapping exercise was important in some areas, looking at an audit trail. We have good mapping exercises at present, but as a result of the NEET inquiry, we need a proper and effective strategy to look at mapping to ascertain the full scope and to determine the provision of interventions required.

Some Members raised the issue of the education maintenance allowance. It was clear from a number of contributions from the same groups that make that difference in Northern Ireland how hugely important the education maintenance allowance is for them. We heard about the financial difference that it makes in encouraging and stimulating young people back into education, and particularly the difference that it can make to young people at risk and their families.

I understand that the Committee will tomorrow hear a briefing on the review of the EMA from officials from the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. We look forward to that. The SDLP will strongly urge and insist that the education maintenance allowance continue to attract and to give assistance to the most vulnerable families and young people to help to provide a significant incentive for them to re-engage.

We heard how important access is for young people in rural areas. Specific challenges put them at risk of being NEET. The NEET strategy must be consistent with that. Transport was a difficulty for them. Financial support for going to further education colleges, particularly in rural areas, was hugely important, as were IT facilities. Broadband access and mobile phone coverage were highlighted by a number of young people throughout the inquiry. Childcare was another hugely important issue.

It is reassuring to see our Minister, Danny Kennedy, here.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I know how passionate he is about the subject, but we need the wider Executive to make a difference.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The report on young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training is very important. Other Members made that point, and I certainly want to concur with them.

I want to commend, as other Members have done, all those who contributed to this sizeable report. It runs to something like 1,300 pages. An awful lot of work went into it. The Committee Chairperson and other Committee members referred to that point. The Committee heard briefings and presentations from many groups. The briefings from young people were particularly insightful. I also commend the Committee staff for the two large volumes that have finally appeared in print.

I want to touch on a couple of issues. The rationale for the inquiry, which is in the report's executive summary, was that the Committee wanted evidence to bring to the Executive so that the Executive would take control of this, see the importance of it, see the importance of

developing a strategy and, more importantly, see the importance of bringing that strategy to some type of fruition that would be meaningful for those young people who are not in employment, education or training. That was the rationale, which is, very helpfully, referred to in the executive summary.

Sir Reg Empey, the previous Employment and Learning Minister, has already been mentioned. The executive summary states:

"This need was also recognised by the former Employment and Learning Minister, Sir Reg Empey, who took his Department's ... scoping study to the Executive to seek support to the Executive to seek support for joint action, subsequent to the Committee beginning its Inquiry. The positive reaction from the other members of the Executive has allowed the Department to proceed. The Committee is pleased that the structures to organise those who will develop the ... strategy are beginning to establish themselves."

This is an important point, and it may have been referred to by the Chairperson. We might hear about it in the winding-up speech and in the comments from the Minister. What stage is that process at? It is important to know what stage that is at.

It was very positive that the scoping study was brought to the Executive. Junior Minister Newton was present earlier and made a contribution, which, in itself, was one practical step in bringing the strategy to some kind of positive fruition. Indeed, in the Committee's report, the very first recommendation on strategic issues is:

"OFMdFM Junior Ministers should fulfil this role as Children and Young People fall under their remit".

So, the Committee thought that out and made it the first recommendation on strategic issues. That is very important. The Employment and Learning Minister, Danny Kennedy, is also present. So, there has been some collaboration, even at the early stages.

I want to comment briefly on the situation in education. Throughout all the briefings and presentations that we had, there was a clear theme that something is not right in the education system. Many of the references were to post-primary education, but there are clearly some issues before it gets to that stage.

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

Mrs McGill: I just want to finish on this point. There is reference in the report to some young people who said that there was no respect —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member needs to finish.

Mrs McGill: No respect for them within the school system and elsewhere. That is a big indictment.

I very much welcome the report and commend it to the House. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Miss McIlveen: The debate has focused on the very many young people in our community who have found themselves not in education, training or employment and the serious consequences of that for their physical, emotional and mental health.

I am not a member of the Employment and Learning Committee and never have been, but I have an interest in the area. As the last Member to speak before the Minister responds, and in an attempt to avoid duplication of what has been said, all of which I welcome, I want to specifically focus on a group of young people who face significant barriers and are at the highest risk of becoming NEET.

Recent research by the Department for Education in England found that young people who were NEET for more than a year were twice as likely to have a disability and that disabled young people who were NEET were at greater risk of moving into long-term economic inactivity.

That clearly links to the greater levels of poverty faced by families with a disabled child or adult.

4.00 pm

I very much welcome the Committee's inquiry report and the ongoing work undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning to develop a NEET strategy. It is critical that the strategy links to good practice that is already in place and learns from it in moving forward. Last week, I visited Dr B's Kitchen, which is a social economy project run by Barnardo's in the heart of Belfast. It has been in existence for the past 20 years and provides training and employment opportunities in the catering industry for disabled young people who would otherwise be NEET.

According to the young people there, the key difference between Dr B's and other

programmes that they had been on is that it is not just the usual training situation in a contrived kitchen in a college but is, in fact, a working cafe that is open to the public. In Dr B's, the young people are expected to be able to cover all aspects of the catering trade, be it cooking, front-of-house duties or safety and hygiene. That gives them an opportunity to decide what they want out of life while their training hones in on their individual skills.

Dr B's has also given those young people the opportunity to undertake basic skills training and gain qualifications. It is essential that they are enabled to gain the independence that will allow them to find employment. Once they have gained confidence and a level of skill, all the young people can broaden out into other employment placements. They also have the support and assistance of a mentor, which is vital. The placements are as diverse as the young people themselves, with contract caterers and others in some of Northern Ireland's most prestigious hotels and restaurants.

I was impressed by the commitment and the enjoyment of the young people who I met. They all wanted to do better. They had entered catering competitions and had been successful, and, although that meant giving up their Saturdays and Sundays, they did not care, because they were doing something that they thoroughly enjoyed. Those young people had been disaffected and disengaged. Over 83% of the young people who go through the doors of Dr B's will leave and remain in stable employment. That is the kind of success rate that we need from programmes that work with young people who are NEET. It is clearly achievable with the right model and the right approach.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Daisies Café in Newtownards, which is in my constituency. It is a similar social economy enterprise, which provides training and employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties and mental illness. Again, the outcomes of personal development and opportunities and increased self-confidence and self-esteem are truly amazing. I encourage Members to visit both projects to see for themselves the great work and dedication of the trainers, to meet the trainees and, obviously, enjoy a cup of coffee.

As Members have recognised, the strategy is about addressing the outcome of educational underachievement. In that vein, I look forward to the recommendations from the Committee for Education, which is looking specifically at underachievement in our schools. The need for early intervention has been spoken of time and again in the Chamber, and, to cite an old adage, prevention is better than cure. I welcome the inquiry report and hope that it will lead to a strategy that will make a difference for the greater number of young people who are NEET.

The Minister for Employment and Learning

(Mr Kennedy): I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to this important motion and support it. Before I begin, I want to express my thanks to those members of the Committee for Employment and Learning and other Members who contributed to the debate on what is a vital issue for all our futures. I particularly appreciate the recognition in the report and in the remarks of Members of the work of the officials in my Department and my ministerial predecessor, Sir Reg Empey. As the report says:

"The momentum that has built up behind this Inquiry has been tremendous".

I commend the substantial work that was done by the Committee in articulating concisely the mountain of evidence that was provided throughout the inquiry. The thoroughness of the Committee's investigation and its pursuit of information and meaning in what is undoubtedly a complex area are also to be commended.

I am also gratified that the NEET scoping study into the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training, which was drawn up during 2009 and 2010 and which Reg Empey took to the Executive, has also been acknowledged as supporting the production of the Committee's report. I am very pleased to report that, based on that scoping study and with the support of Executive colleagues, my officials have already begun work with other Departments and stakeholders' groups to develop a strategy that will align well with the report's recommendations. I hope that that addresses some of the points that were made, particularly Claire McGill's. I will say more shortly about where we are and where we plan to go with that strategy.

I also applaud the progression from the scoping study to the Committee's report and the practical

work that is already under way in constructing a strategy. All that earlier work has helped to get us to the point where we can have a debate that is as constructive and well focused as today's. The House is at its best when Members of the House and the Committee, Ministers and departmental officials all work together. There are clear lessons for us there.

The report rightly makes the central thrust of the strategy abundantly clear. It:

"must be about co-ordination, co-operation, multi-agency working, referral and collective accountability."

It will require:

"all stakeholders to work together within a framework".

That is also my intended continuing focus going forward. I firmly believe that it is evidence of a spirit of collaboration, which is the bedrock of a successful strategy. The collaboration between Departments and the voluntary and community sector, among voluntary and community sector organisations themselves, and between my Department and the Committee, augurs well for the future success of the strategy.

I have no hesitation in agreeing with the motion. Moreover, from my perspective as the Minister for Employment and Learning, I will reflect the Committee's findings and recommendations as a strategic framework emerges and is developed further. Indeed, I will go further and suggest that we have already begun to formulate the strategy, which will take into account as far as possible what we have learned through the Committee's work. As an example of the two-way progression, my officials briefed the Committee in September and in return attended a consultation event in October that the Committee organised. As Members are aware, I am progressing our strategic approach on behalf of the other main Departments that have a key role to play in reducing the numbers of young people most at risk of falling into this category. It will be important to seek those Departments' views on any recommendations that fall to them, and I will ensure that that happens.

I turn to the Committee's report. My Department's overall aims and objectives help to set the scene for my initial response. DEL's role is:

"to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy."

Our objectives are:

“to promote economic, social and personal development through high quality learning, research and skills training and to help people into employment and promote good employment practices.”

I believe that those are all very relevant to the subject that we are debating today, as is much of our current provision. That includes, for example, programmes such as Steps to Work; Training for Success; the work of the Careers Service; work with the Department of Education on the 14-19 curriculum; further and higher education provision; employment brokerage, advice and guidance through the employment service; and support for essential skills, which is very relevant for those young people facing this type of barrier.

Although we have a major role to play, we are not complacent, and we realise that there is more work to be done to help our young people. We also realise that we need to do that with other Departments. That was a consistent theme among all Members who spoke.

The strategic framework that we are formulating takes the DEL scoping study, which I mentioned earlier, as a major starting point. The study outlines the wide range of activities that are already being undertaken by Departments, the community and voluntary sector and other organisations such as local government, which the Committee report rightly references. The Committee’s recommendations on how to take the strategy forward through a co-operative and collaborative approach dovetail very well with the work that is already under way.

Since the Executive endorsed my Department’s lead in July 2010, the Department has undertaken a considerable amount of work. My officials have undertaken a series of bilateral meetings with the principal service-delivery Departments to elicit their views on the mechanism and development of a strategy and action plan. Those meetings have been positive and confirmed the recognition that greater coherence is required across Departments and delivery organisations to maximise their impact on reducing the number of young people in this category. Further, more detailed, contributions from other Departments now flow from that engagement. My Department has also engaged substantially and productively with representatives of the community and voluntary

sector, whose constructive and insightful contribution has, in turn, been very welcome.

Aligning our comprehensive emerging work with the Committee’s recommendations will, of course, require further work and consideration. The report contains a great deal of information and many recommendations — 41 in total. I will highlight three of the report’s key findings, which give an overall flavour of where we are heading as regards reducing the numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training. Initially, I will concentrate on generic recommendations about the content of the strategy that deal with building a potential framework for further joint working.

Even at this point, I stress, and I hope that you are beginning to see, that our work so far has already put in place many of the building blocks. We will consider the recommendations positively as the strategy develops. I also want to emphasise the crucial issue of collaboration. As I have indicated previously, my officials are involved in successful collaborative working arrangements or relationships with the community and voluntary and sector, which has been very enthusiastic and receptive. We are all engaged in building that collaboration further with encouragement and support. That is being done, in particular, through a NEETs strategy forum that is being facilitated by Barnardo’s.

As the report indicates, that work is crucial in dealing with the issues, as non-governmental organisations have a key role in reaching individuals whom mainstream organisations find hard to reach. Indeed, almost by definition, those who are alienated from the institutions may be reached only by those who operate outside formal government agencies. In constructing the emerging strategy, we are building on that vital and practical work, and we will continue to do so.

We have planned a pre-consultation meeting with the forum as part of our process of engagement and participation. That should be organised and take place over the next few weeks. Moreover, my officials have been in contact, individually and collectively, with organisations that work in the sector, including Children in Northern Ireland, the Youth Council, and Participation Network. As highlighted in the Committee’s report, we anticipate that the work of the sector will be crucial to the better co-ordination,

sharing, and collaboration that is required and, ultimately, to the success of the strategy.

Collaborative work is vital when we take one of the main factors into account: young people who are not in education, employment or training are not a homogeneous group. The Committee makes that point clear again. The barriers that they face can be multiple and compound, often involving complex personal circumstances. We will target the causes for those at most risk to better co-ordinate effective actions.

4.15 pm

The Committee report proposes structures comprising a forum group for stakeholders, with the same structure for Departments and their agency bodies to help to co-ordinate those actions. The findings and recommendations are broadly consistent with current departmental thinking. However, they will, of course, be subject to consultation and further consideration in the formulation of the strategy to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

I will quickly touch on the issues of information and tracking that the Committee rightly highlighted. Rigorous and meaningful information will make a crucial contribution to informing us as we look at ways to further reduce the number of people who are in the NEET category. We need to know better which young people are most at risk of disengaging and about their history, characteristic and needs, and then, as far as possible, support them individually. Given the importance of that strand to the strategy, my officials are investigating the current data requirements of the tracking system used in Great Britain. I want to see what similar information is available in Northern Ireland and where information gaps exist.

I agree that a lot of the evidence, not least from the scoping study, supports the fact that the circumstances that affect young people's participation between the ages of 16 and 19 often have their roots much earlier in life. That was a point well made by a number of Members. Most people readily agree that young people are strongly influenced by the aspirations and norms of their families, peers and communities. That indicates that, if we are to reduce the number of young people who are not in employment, education or training, we will need to take into account prevention measures.

I have reams of speech-making material. However, I wish to quickly thank Members for their contributions, all of which were very constructive and useful. Specific points were mentioned by, in particular, the Chairperson of the Committee, who led the debate, Sue Ramsey and Chris Lyttle. I was pleased at the contribution from Robin Newton, albeit in his capacity as an East Belfast MLA. However, given that he is a junior Minister, I think that that means that we can look forward to co-operation and collaboration with other Departments. I also thank Paul Butler, Sydney Anderson, my party colleague Basil McCrea, Michelle McIlveen and Claire McGill for their contributions.

I believe that we will move forward together. I intend to bring this report to Executive colleagues, because it is important for other Departments to have an opportunity to consider the recommendations. When we have completed our draft strategic approach document, I also plan to take that to the Executive to gain their agreement before releasing the document for public consultation as soon as possible thereafter. I am confident that we are well on track to produce an agreed, successful strategy. I thank all those who have worked with the Department on this important issue. I commend the Committee for its good work and look forward to working with it in the future.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Bell): A lot of what has been said could be characterised by our saying to young people that we are taking them very seriously and are offering them a second chance, because we believe that no young person in Northern Ireland should have to live without self-esteem, inspiration and the motivation of proper training, education or employment. That is the goal that we strive for. We recognise the sense of shame felt in Northern Ireland because of the fact that almost one in every five young people is not in education, employment or training, which is wrong.

To me, devolved government is at its best when it recognises a problem, does not shy away from that problem and tries to bring about solutions. If we make a difference to any one of those one in five young people out there, and create the conditions, which I have no doubt that Northern Ireland has the skills set to create, to bring them back into education, back into training and into sustainable employment, the House will have done its job.

The Chairperson, with her customary eloquence — indeed, fragrance — outlined where there are many deficiencies in parental support for our young people and correctly identified the issue of young people in our care system. Many young people are in care through no fault of their own and have been victims of sexual exploitation, emotional abuse and neglect. In many cases, that drives young people psychologically to go in one of two directions: in the direction of overachievement or, sadly and more often, in the direction of underachievement.

The Chairperson brought to the forefront looked-after children, who are key among our young people not in education, employment or training. She also mentioned research into the pathways for young people at the age of 14. The careers that young people who do not go down a purely academic route at age 14 choose are equally valid, equally necessary and play a role of equal importance in our society as those chosen by young people who do go down the academic route.

I put on record our thanks as a Committee to the Chairperson, Dolores Kelly, and to Sue Ramsey, who chaired the Committee in my initial time on it. I also thank the former Minister, Sir Reg Empey, and Minister Kennedy. I also thank the Committee staff, who themselves have a skills base, knowledge and experience from their previous careers, which they brought to the table with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. They made comfortable the young people who came to speak to the Committee and, therefore, helped with the person-centred nature of our report, which, as Sue said, is based on what the young people told us and on their real experiences. It was their skills set that brought validity and authenticity to the report. We thank them for that.

Mr Weir talked about scoping the problem and achieving robust data. As Mr McCrea pointed out, it is not just about missing out those children on a gap year or volunteering programme, but about getting a robust system in place so that children stay in focus. If they drop in, we will know when they have dropped in, and if they drop out, we will know when they have dropped out. That way, we can measure effectively and come back with data.

As a former Chairperson who led the Committee, Sue Ramsey mentioned that the needs of young people must be front and centre. When I had the privilege of coming to the House, the

first Committee meeting that I attended was in Lisburn at the Lagan Valley Island Conference Centre. There, we met a young person who had educational skills and the certificates to prove it. However, the problem is that some of our young people are self-medicating, whether that be with cocaine, temazepam, diazepam — the blues and yellows — or alcohol. Young people, even those with real educational ability, can get caught up in that, and it is those young people whom we must look towards. The joy of Lisburn that day was that we saw a young person who had been caught up in that, but who had, with help and support, managed to come out of it and get back into full-time training. That was an inspirational time.

Sue brought to the table the idea of the poverty of aspiration. Some of our young people, whom many of us worked with in previous careers as social workers, teachers, and so on, aspire to disability living allowance (DLA), aspire not to work and, at times, aspire to create the symptoms of mental illness to achieve DLA. That is the poverty of aspiration that Sue mentioned, and that is what we have to tackle head-on. That is where the Minister is absolutely correct in his response, and where DEL has been proactively working to ensure that those young people are placed at the engine room of economic recovery.

As has been pointed out, it is not a question of whether we can afford this report in these straitened times. With youth unemployment costing £250 million a year, it is more a question of whether we can afford not to have it. Chris Lyttle warned against demonising young people, many of whom, whether or not in the care system, are more sinned against than sinners. It is not a question of giving them a handout; it involves their non-demonisation and the leadership, which he talked about, in giving them a hand up.

It is welcome that both junior Ministers are present for the debate. However, junior Minister Robin Newton hit the nail on the head when he said that this society cannot afford to lose another generation. If the report only gathers dust, that is all that it will have done. We must move now. As someone said, if it takes a week to cut down a tree, two days should be spent sharpening the axe. In this case, the axe has been sharpened, and we must use it.

Our future businesses and entrepreneurs are, in many ways, key, and the necessary skill sets will be found in the creativity and ability of young people currently defined as NEETs. If the report's recommendations were followed, we would love to say to so many of those young people that, to quote Alan Sugar: "You're hired".

Junior Minister Robin Newton brought the child poverty agenda directly to the table. We have to look at that and at the good work that has been undertaken by Save the Children and others. The Minister asked not for yesterday's problems but for solutions, and there were some solutions in what he said about addressing the social investment fund. As Paul Butler said, not doing so will become a scar on the lives of many young people. The social cost of depression is estimated at between £11 million and £28 million. That includes the social cost of young people without hope who self-anaesthetise on all forms of chemicals, and, sadly, some young people commit suicide. That is why Sydney Anderson said that we needed to look to the Welsh model, to co-ordinate what we do and to intervene to address the key strategies of literacy and numeracy.

Basil McCrea was correct to say that we should target resources directly where they are needed, with a proper map to get young people out of the system. Pat Ramsey underlined the relevance of the social and voluntary sector, and we can all quote many examples. In my area, that includes the Link Family and Community Centre; the work of family and childcare social workers; the work of the community-based Youth Justice Agency; and the churches, with their BBs, GBs, Sunday schools and youth clubs. All provide something that says to those young people that they have something of value. Whichever church, social or voluntary organisation is involved, often at their own expense, whether in the north, the south, east or west, we salute their work.

Claire McGill brought into focus the practical steps needed to take forward such work. Michelle McIlveen brought to bear her expertise in addressing how disabled young people end up in poverty. It is not, as she rightly said, a question of reinventing the wheel. It is a question of learning from good practice, of which there are numerous examples. One such example is that of the young girl who gave a good presentation on how she came out the other side. She did so by finding the mentoring support to work in the

Kitchen bar in Belfast. She got at job at which she was talented and the hours of which suited her creativity. In her, we saw a young person whose life had been transformed through education, employment and training.

It is, as Minister Kennedy said, about taking that proactive approach to employment and learning. It will be warmly welcomed that DEL is ahead of the game in being receptive to the report's recommendations, which, as he said, reflects the House at its best and recognises the work of non-governmental organisations.

Today, I plead that we seize the day and the opportunity — the sense of *carpe diem* that the report provides — by allowing our government to be joined up so that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing right across Departments.

We appeal to the parents, grandparents, caregivers, uncles and aunts, foster carers, social workers and church leaders who support and help young people.

4.30 pm

I was inspired by a story from when Minister McGimpsey was Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It centres on the 'Unlocking Creativity' document; I do not know whether Members remember it. A professor of education lectured on it, and I will never forget him saying that he was going to give the example of a person that everyone knows, a highly successful millionaire comedian. The professor related the story of that person's educational underachievement at school. He related how a teacher had told him that he had something of value and that, instead of disrupting the class, perhaps he should write down his jokes and use his creative skills to record them. That young person decided that he had something of value, because someone told him so. A teacher recognised that spark of creativity. The professor asked people to raise their hand if they knew of Lenny Henry. Everybody put up their hand. He then asked people to raise their hand if they could name the English teacher who told him that he had something of value. Nobody could.

People in Sunday schools, the BB, the GB, youth organisations or cub scout movements tell our young people today in their schools and homes that they have something of value and that they are making a difference. We encourage that collective and holistic approach.

We will hear more tomorrow about the educational maintenance allowance. That issue was underlined by Pat Ramsey. That point, as many of us who have worked with young people know, can make the difference between a young person deciding to stay on at school or not. We appreciate that the Minister has been given a smaller cake than he might have expected and there are only so many ways that he can slice it, but, as Pat Ramsey said, we need to look at that very carefully.

We are in the age of second chances. The House can make a difference and provide a devolved response to the one in five of our young people who are affected. We will not look away from the cost of youth crime, estimated at £1 billion a year, and we will not spend £250 million keeping them out of employment when we could redirect resources into bringing them back into it. We will help to signpost them; we will provide them with all possible career guidance; we will put the pastoral, emotional and mentoring support all around them. We will recognise volunteers in our society and provide sustainable opportunities in the future.

It is now for us to take the report and put legs on it and continue to drive it at every part of government. We must ensure that, at the end of our time, we will not be looking at statistics of one in five of our young people not in education, employment or training.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the findings and recommendations in the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning on its inquiry into young people (16-24) who are not in education, employment or training (NIA 32/10/11R); and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to ensure that the findings and recommendations within the report are reflected in the NEET strategy which is being developed.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Glengormley Town Centre Regeneration

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr McCausland: The debate has been prompted by the concerns of traders and businessmen in the Glengormley area. It has also been prompted by the publication of a draft Newtownabbey regeneration strategy and by recent meetings in the Glengormley area at which the issues raised by traders and businessmen in the community were discussed.

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

The village of Glengormley was once a thriving business area. It was once a strong, vibrant village with a strong commercial core. Since then, we have seen an immense amount of housing development in the surrounding area as Glengormley has expanded. However, at the same time, the range of businesses in the heart of Glengormley and the available retail offering there have declined. Even in the past few weeks, shops in the area have closed and businesses have moved.

We have seen a proliferation of hot food outlets in the area. Although those are businesses and they are welcome, it is not a healthy retail mix when there is such a concentration of hot food outlets. Driving or walking around the area, one can also see the number of vacant premises. That, again, is a sign that things are not as they should be. The remaining traders and businessmen are concerned about the retail offering and the future viability of the area.

One of the issues that impacts on Glengormley is the number of major shopping centres nearby. There is a major retail concentration in the Abbey Centre area, as well as shopping provision at the Northcott shopping centre. We all know the impact that such major shopping centres can have on adjacent or nearby smaller commercial centres. There is a tendency for business to be drawn into the major centres and

out of the smaller retail areas. That has been exacerbated by parking difficulties in the area. We are in an age when people want to be able to park almost outside the door of a shop. That is the big attraction of the shopping centres: people go into the car park, and they are there outside the shops.

It is clear from looking at the area that there has been a lack of investment over the years, and there is a feeling among traders that the area lacks a sense of identity and focus. A number of those things have been picked up in the draft regeneration strategy. In November 2009, the previous Minister for Social Development announced funding for a regeneration strategy for Newtownabbey, Glengormley and Ballyclare. Since then, the Department, Newtownabbey Borough Council, Glengormley Chamber of Commerce and Ballyclare Chamber of Commerce have been working together to bring that strategy to the point of near completion. It is in two complementary parts: one for Ballyclare and one for Glengormley. There seems to be a consensus that the Ballyclare element is fine and appropriate and that people in that area are satisfied. However, there are some concerns about the Glengormley section, and some little bits of work still need to be done.

There are some very good things in the strategy. For example, it identifies clearly the opportunity to develop a focus on leisure. It recognises the opportunity for Glengormley to become a leisure-focused area that meets the needs of the very large area adjacent to it, namely north Belfast. That is highlighted in the strategy, and it is an area for potential opportunity and growth. The strategy also acknowledges that Glengormley would become a leisure and service destination, rather than a town centre. It would become, as the report says:

“a destination of choice and a focal point for the surrounding communities, providing an accessible and convenient range of high quality leisure and entertainment, banking and professional financial services.”

It is clear that there is already significant leisure and entertainment provision, including a cinema, bowling and so on. There are also quite a number of professional financial services. That is legitimate, in so far as it goes. However, I suggest that, although the report is overwhelmingly good and to be welcomed, there are some weaknesses that could be addressed to make it even better. There should be some

reference to a strong statement about a shared and better future for the area. In the past, there were difficulties around sectarianism and so on. Fortunately, those have diminished substantially, but a strong and positive commitment to the creation of a shared and better future in Glengormley would enhance and strengthen the report. That should be a cross-cutting theme across all areas of activity.

There are some errors in the report that need to be corrected. Reference is made to a restaurant and bar outlet called the Thunderdome, with the suggestion that it should move across the road to another location. However, the owner indicated that he does not want to move; he is quite content where he is. There is also mention of the PSNI station being a development opportunity. At the last meeting, the police stated clearly that they intend to remain there. Correcting those minor errors would enhance the report.

References to the future retail offer need to be refined. It should be more than just local services, financial services and convenience stores. We should not sell the area short. We acknowledge the fact that some types of store will gravitate towards the major centres. Nevertheless, there is a market for niche shops that could be met in Glengormley. For sustainability, a good diversity of shops is needed to ensure a good retail offer.

There is also a failure to acknowledge one of the advantages of Glengormley. The report states that the two centres are interrelated hubs that draw on a single catchment area. It is true that there is a common catchment area, but, as was already mentioned, Glengormley also has the benefit of being able to draw on north Belfast in a way that Ballyclare cannot for leisure and retail markets. I have lived most of my life in north Belfast. To be honest, we would not normally think of shopping in Ballyclare because it is some distance away. However, someone who lives in north Belfast may well think of shopping in Glengormley. Many people do. That additional advantage that Glengormley has requires greater acknowledgement.

Nevertheless, it is clear in the report and from meetings with the traders that some things could be done very quickly. Certainly, work needs to be done to improve the appearance and attractiveness of the area. Mention was made of cleansing, lighting, the general

appearance and the shopfronts. There is an opportunity to link into the fact that Glengormley is a very short distance away from Belfast Zoo, which is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Northern Ireland. Day after day, it draws a huge number of people throughout the year. If people visit the zoo, perhaps they will wish to do other activities in the area afterwards. Glengormley should seek to draw on that.

Marketing, branding, a central focus and a sense of identity are needed. At the moment, the sense is of some place that one drives through, not of a place with a sense of community identity. That is to do with the appearance, available activities, marketing and branding of the area. That could be addressed in the short term.

Traders are concerned. A number of them have said that they cannot afford to wait. One trader stated clearly that, if nothing is done, Glengormley could become a ghost town in two years' time. Surely there is a sense of urgency in that plea. There are also medium-term considerations. It has been indicated that a report could be produced on the parking needs, the road network, the walk-ability, the need for good design and the importance of Glengormley being safe and attractive for pedestrians and drivers. Surely, work on a report focusing on parking and the roads network could be accomplished within the next 12 months.

4.45 pm

There are also long-term development opportunities, especially around the leisure offer, and there are important development sites with the potential to bring greater vibrancy and life to the area. The Living Over the Shop (LOTS) project could bring more life to the area and increase the viability of shops so that the owners of premises would have income not just from retail businesses on the ground floor but from renting out flats above. If work could be done to ensure that the Planning Service was more accommodating to the Living Over the Shop scheme, it would benefit traders and bring life to the area.

The local business community must be at the heart of what is done to regenerate Glengormley town centre. The local council, Newtownabbey Borough Council, has a central role to play, as do several Departments, including DSD, with its remit for regeneration; DOE, which is responsible for certain planning issues — the

proliferation of hot food outlets has been highlighted as an issue by traders; and the Department for Regional Development, which is responsible for roads and lighting. Furthermore, we should look outwards, possibly towards opportunities for European funding for some of the projects identified in the strategy. Therefore, a holistic and co-operative approach is required from local traders, the council and Departments, and we should also look to benefit from opportunities in Europe.

I wanted to highlight regeneration issues in Glengormley, and the opportunity for all political parties to contribute to the debate is a good thing. We cannot allow the area to become marginalised. We want to keep the focus on it, and I believe that the opportunity afforded to us by the draft strategy and its implementation will be good for Glengormley.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Owing to the number of Members who wish to speak, each Member's contribution will be confined to four minutes.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Member for securing the topic for debate. He gave a full and accurate assessment of the master plan. I also welcome the attendance of the Minister for Social Development, Mr Attwood. I appreciate his interest.

The point has been made that Glengormley is an established and well-defined community. However, it is in need of a strategic commitment from the Assembly and local government, and Newtownabbey Borough Council has indicated that it is ready and willing to introduce some short-term programmes that will be good for the morale of the area. However, we are realistic enough to know that that is not the answer to all the problems.

In a sense, we have a 1960s-style development — 50 years old — so there is an argument for improving infrastructure and traffic management arrangements, which are seriously detrimental to the long-experienced and entrepreneurial dynamic in the community. Local people have demonstrated that they can do business and that they can meet challenges, including the general challenges of the economic downturn. However, they are being let down by services that can be delivered only by government, and government resources can be marshalled only by operating in line with a strategic commitment. Clearly, none of that can be fixed overnight.

The master plan identifies strengths and weaknesses, and Mr McCausland pointed out a number of elements that were criticised at public meetings. However, it would have been surprising if the master plan had avoided those local dynamics. In a sense, it has already achieved its first strategic objective in that it has created and encouraged a very lively debate and a breadth of opinions and solutions.

Glengormley needs to see a demonstration that the Government have a vision of growth there. As well as investment in business — not cosmetic change but investment in the infrastructure that will support and encourage further investment — the area needs the community to grow. We need social housing as well as private housing, and we need to give Glengormley its own character, not just as an adjunct of Belfast or, indeed, north Belfast. People there view themselves as somewhat distinct. Encouraging developments in Ballyclare should not be seen as a threat to Glengormley but as an encouragement, because of the vision that has been deployed. I congratulate all who were involved in that process, including those who brought forward substantial investment in the roads infrastructure as well as in housing. If practical measures such as those were also applied to Glengormley, they would provide very significant benefit.

I welcome the Minister. I am watching the clock and will not abuse the patience of the Deputy Speaker. However, I am glad about today's debate and about the wide attendance of Members from both Assembly constituencies that have a direct interest in the well-being of Glengormley. I give my personal commitment to continue to work in that direction.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome Minister McCausland's raising this matter. All of us here see similar problems throughout many other areas in our patch, whether in Crumlin, Doagh, Antrim or Ballyclare. I urge people in Belfast who do not think about it to come to Ballyclare to shop. Now that a great chunk of Glengormley is no longer in my patch, I want to say, "Glengormley, we miss you".

Many of us have heard much about the master plan and much about the problems that there are. Glengormley is one of the main routes through to Belfast for those who are avoiding the motorway, and, since I was a child, I have watched it change from a thriving neighbourhood

to what it is today. In the past, people drove through it; now they can bypass it. It is too easy to forget what is there. We know that there are 48 takeaways there and that another two are planned. We know that it has many parking problems. We know from other people that it has overzealous traffic wardens, with one side trying to keep the other side happy. We know that there is little there for the youth. We know that there are many problems there, yet we know that it still has high rates.

My concern about a master plan is that we do not want it merely to raise hopes. We want it to be a master plan that drives and succeeds. It should not be there as a placebo to show that we are trying, as an election gambit for all of us or as a dream. It should be there for all of us to work together to change things. During my brief experience in politics over the past six years, I have seen many master plans. However, very few of them get down to the detail. Many of them miss out on speaking to everybody. We have heard great things about this master plan and heard about many people in the community who have been talked to. However, there are always people who are left out or missed. Whether through the council or the Department, we have to find ways of talking to and listening to everybody. That is a challenge to all of us. We must keep reviewing how we are doing it to make sure that we are getting to everybody. Departments need to keep reviewing the consultees, and councils need to keep thinking about how to get to people. For example, in Doagh, the council tried to speak to everybody and found it extremely hard. We needed evening meetings, day meetings and complete and thorough door-to-door leafleting there. The council did not have the resources or the time to do that. However, it illustrates the point that we must get to everybody, listen to everybody and make sure that we succeed in the end.

Some 20 years ago, I got involved with a group called the Prince of Wales Community Planning Body, which was led by the very able John Thompson. He had helped to sort out a chunk of East Berlin and other planning areas in Vienna, London, Aberdeen and, much more importantly, on the Shankill. They had a system that I would like us to think about when considering how we use a master plan in that they got all the people who can make the decisions into a building over five days. That included planners, those responsible for water, the Housing Executive and community groups. They did that so that they

could discuss everything and carry it through. They discussed in groups until 3.00 am until they had a plan that everyone owned. That happened quickly.

We heard that one of the traders said that we cannot afford to wait. We need to look at how we can do things a bit more dynamically and a bit faster so that we achieve the end product. The master plan system is fantastic —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Kinahan: — but it needs a really good wind-up, because we want to ensure that we really achieve things. Let us keep reviewing and see how we can do it better.

Mr Burns: I thank Nelson McCausland for bringing the debate to the Floor of the House. It affects the two constituencies of North Belfast and South Antrim, although what we used to refer to as Glengormley village is in North Belfast. The days when anyone referred to Glengormley as Glengormley village have long since past; it is very much a suburb of Belfast and is on one of the main arterial routes into the city. It links the Sandyknowes roundabout, going right down the Antrim Road, into the city. It is part of a major bus route, with regular Metro buses.

Traders in Glengormley are getting it extremely tight, and the recession is biting deeply in the area. Nelson McCausland said that we do not want Glengormley to turn into an area purely for hot food carry-outs. The traders who are trying sell goods during the day do not want Glengormley to have only a night-time economy. The whole place shuts during the day, and, at around 4.00 pm, it all reopens into hot food carry-outs.

It is not that there are not enough people in Glengormley. The one thing about Glengormley is that it there is a huge population in Glengormley itself, as opposed to Ballyclare or, to a lesser extent, north Belfast. I refer to Glengormley's uniqueness. There are enough people there, but there are huge shopping centres, including the Abbey Centre and the Northcott shopping centre.

One of the things that I find difficult about Glengormley is parking. I welcome the master plan, and I know that a lot of work is being put into it and that parking is being considered as part of it so that Glengormley is not made into

a drive-through area. People will stop and shop there, but they should not see it purely as a place for driving through.

The zoo is a huge tourist attraction. People have to feel that they are able to go into places in Glengormley, and I am not talking only about McDonalds. People take their children to the zoo, go to McDonalds and drive home. There has to be something more to attract visitors to Glengormley and spend money so that the traders can make a living out of it.

I support those traders, and I do not want to see them go out of business. They have a genuine problem, and they see that they need investment in Glengormley and a new master plan to spruce it up and make it more attractive.

5.00 pm

Mr Ford: As someone who has been representing Glengormley in this place from 1998 and will do so until May 2011, I congratulate my North Belfast colleagues, especially Nelson McCausland, for having recognised the existence of what will now be part of their constituency. In doing so, I declare my interest as a business tenant and ratepayer in Glengormley, where my constituency office is located, though I may have to move it after May.

Any regeneration scheme has to look at a number of key areas: it has to encourage a thriving local community; it has to protect and restore the local character of an area; it has to support existing local businesses at the same time as encouraging new businesses; and it has to create a safe and secure environment for shoppers, shop owners, local residents and people who use the other services. The work that is being done in Glengormley seeks to do that, and I welcome that.

Nelson McCausland outlined at great length the key points of the regeneration proposals, which are vital to seeing the master plan carried through for the benefit of Glengormley and all its people. We need to pay close attention to one point that he highlighted, which is not in the master plan, and that is the need to develop Glengormley as a shared space, as part of our shared future.

People who live in the general Glengormley area come from a wide variety of backgrounds. They come from a number of different areas in the sense that Glengormley is a mix of old

Glengormley, with people who remember it when it was a small village surrounded by fields and farms, of people who moved out around the 1950s, mostly from Belfast, and of people who have come from further afield in more recent years as it has developed as a suburb. However, one of the key things about Glengormley is that it is an area where people from different backgrounds mix, as those of us who canvas the streets of Glengormley find by the political responses that we get on different doorsteps. That is to be valued and welcomed, and it is something that the regeneration of the village should continue to play a key part in.

Significant issues need to be addressed. I am not going to repeat everything that colleagues have said, but there is clearly a significant need to build up private investment from outside and from existing businesses. However, in the unlikely event that we will see things such as rates relief for people who invest in an area such as Glengormley, there will also need to be public realm investment, whether through DSD, whose Minister is here today, or through some of the work that needs to be done by DRD or other Departments.

There are significant planning issues. We have already seen the problems that have arisen from the excessive number of hot-food takeaways, but there are other issues that need to be addressed by the Planning Service. The retailing policies that have allowed the overdevelopment of places such as the Abbey Centre to the detriment of existing town centres such as Glengormley are a continuing problem.

We need to see further developments through the Living over the Shop initiative to help to develop a mixed-use area, which is vital to ensuring that there is a business buzz during the day and at night. We need to address issues such as parking and traffic management. All those key issues will have to be addressed if we are to make progress in the Glengormley area.

Recent public meetings have brought traders and others together with public representatives and with those who provide services, which is a good sign of what is possible. The most recent meeting that I attended was probably one of the most encouraging in respect of constructive engagement, rather than what can frequently happen, which is that a meeting degenerates into rows with officials. That has to be welcomed.

Glengormley suffers because of its proximity to Belfast and the Abbey Centre, yet, as the natural centre of a community of more than 30,000 people, it ought to be capable of developing, and the master plan should show the way forward. The people of Glengormley, especially the traders, deserve better than they are getting at the moment.

Mr Humphrey: I congratulate my colleague Nelson McCausland for securing this afternoon's debate. For many years, the area in and around Glengormley has been suffering an onset of creeping dereliction and blight, and that has started to accelerate at some pace, with the loss of established family businesses. Most recently, a large supermarket chain pulled out of the area. A concerted effort to get to grips with and to seek to address the area's problems is, therefore, not before time. I welcome the fact that the Department for Social Development, in collaboration with Newtownabbey Borough Council, has brought forward a draft regeneration strategy for Glengormley. I, too, welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber.

The fact that the plan is being put in place is positive in itself. It will provide a planning context, albeit more of a guideline, to support interventions by the public and private sectors in the area. The plan will also provide a context to ensure that key stakeholders in both the public and private sectors are engaged in a common cause for Glengormley's future.

Rightly, the draft plan highlights a number of key issues that must be addressed if Glengormley is to prosper as a destination. The dominance of the roads infrastructure in the area is a major obstacle to people who want to use local shops and amenities. The proposal to introduce a more walkable local environment is extremely important. The availability of accessible car parking is vital in that context. I understand that the Minister for Regional Development will visit the area in the not-too-distant future, and I welcome that. The intention to improve the streetscape with public art, and so on, is also welcome, as that will significantly enhance the sense of place and provide a feeling of community safety.

Recognition of the area's potential as a "go to" leisure destination, which builds on the strengths of existing successful businesses, such as the Movie House cinema, the bowling alley, and so on, combined with several strong

local eateries, is also extremely welcome. However, as other Members said, there is a proliferation of such eating houses.

Perhaps of greatest importance is the identification that Glengormley lacks a sense of place. As it does not have a town centre, it does not have the type of focal point that is common in town centres, such as the square in Ballyclare. As Mr McCausland said, the distinctive marketing of Glengormley is essential. It is, however, with some concern that I continue my contribution. The current suggestion is that a local focal point be created at the top of the town at the junction of the Antrim Road, the Ballyclare Road and the Hightown Road, which is known as the "old centre". That would support local retail services, and a larger leisure destination would be created by the redevelopment of the industrial estate and adjacent lands at Glenwell Road to the south of the town. It is critical that the leisure destination element of the plan supports the focal point area, so that retail outlets and other businesses located in the north can benefit from the generation of visitors in the area.

To that end, the current suggestion that Thunderdome, which is extremely successful, should be moved into the leisure area flies in the face of all reason. There is not enough room to locate all the complementary businesses on the Glenwell Road site. Why, then, would we even countenance moving it there? Indeed, as Nelson mentioned, the owner of the cafe opposes that proposal.

The many vacant properties on the eastern side of the Antrim Road, from Church Road onwards, include the Lidl store, which closed recently. There is also an expanse of derelict land on the opposite side of the road. That provides a perfect opportunity for making a sense of place. Such an opportunity should be explored as part of the process as it moves forward.

The current draft of the plan undersells Glengormley as a destination of choice. The document's emphasis is on how Glengormley functions as part of Newtownabbey. With respect, that is somewhat short-sighted. As other Members mentioned, 300,000 people visit Belfast Zoo. Glengormley should be marketed as part of north Belfast and the greater Newtownabbey area. The basin that surrounds it provides great opportunities. It is important that traders, council and government collaborate to the benefit of people in the area, particularly the traders.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I suppose that the nature of Adjournment debates is that there is quite a lot of repetition. I will try valiantly not to do too much of that. I want to thank Nelson for bringing the topic to the House, and I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. Many Members who are present today attended a good meeting with traders. Traders have had a forum for some time, and, at that meeting, I suggested an inclusive association to strengthen their lobbying of government.

It is significant that Glengormley is on the border of two constituencies and that we have so many at this debate. The master plan has great potential. The other day, someone said to me that the difficulty with master plans is that they are a wee bit like confetti: there are a lot of them about. I think that Danny Kinahan pointed to that as well. We have to try to get into the detail, but there are difficulties with the lack of detail.

Nelson McCausland centred on leisure and the ability of the area to become a centre for leisure to which people could travel. Housing is also a substantial part of this, but it is not clear whether the plan is talking about private, social or mixed housing. Perhaps the Minister will make that clear.

Over the past few years, developers have done a lot of private development in the Glengormley area and in other parts of north Belfast. However, we have quickly found that, as they were doing so, they did not deal with the infrastructure. That, therefore, led to sewerage problems and a lack of drainage, for instance, in parts of north Belfast and in other places in the North. That made things difficult. There was also a lack of other amenities, which a number of Members have mentioned.

A number of Members mentioned interfaces. We have been lucky in this area. A lot of hard work is being done. Some Members, councillors and interface workers have worked hard to ensure that we do not have the same type, or at least the same magnitude, of problems that there have been in other areas, but there are still issues. The approach to dealing with those issues, at a strategic and a local level, is with multi-agency working. Such an approach has worked, and is working, in other areas. We should approach the issue from that point of view. The meeting that I attended was an example of that. A number of statutory bodies,

as well as all the political parties, came along to try to move the process forward. That is the best way to go forward. Out of that, we need to realise that there is a need for youth work and community cohesion. Other Members have mentioned the need for more intercommunity action and dialogue in different forms, and that can be in respect of shared spaces or a shared and better future. Those developments are clearly what we need to move this process forward. We have an opportunity, and the meeting that I was at showed the possibilities.

Will the Minister address whether the master plan was an inclusive process? We are talking a lot about parking. I have written to DRD about the roads network and about the Minister going up to have a look at it. Were other Departments involved? The traders and others talked a lot about planning. Part of the concern about housing is that they cannot open up the area above shopfronts for apartments, for instance. I argue for that.

A number of issues were raised about fast food and the associated cleaning, policing and job creation, among other issues. All that is down to how we approach this. I think that Danny Kinahan mentioned bringing everyone into the same room and trying to move the process forward in that regard. If we move together, we can make a big difference to this area, so let us do that.

One last point: there are no councillors in the Chamber, but there are some ex-councillors. The issue of rates was mentioned on a number of occasions. People at the meeting said that they could try to bring in all the trade that they wanted to Glengormley, but that it becomes a difficult prospect if there are lower rates in Belfast.

5.15 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank Nelson for bringing this topic to the Chamber for debate. I think that I have heard Glengormley mentioned more times this evening than it has been in the past 12 years. *[Interruption.]* I know that David disagrees with that.

There is an opportunity to engage on aspects that are of benefit and interest, not only to the traders, but to the community. The opportunity to bring forward this draft plan, as it is now, has allowed the debate to take place.

That said, I can only reiterate and agree with some of the points that were made. However, one aspect needs to be addressed: lack of car parking is a major issue in Glengormley. There is a 30-foot wide footpath in one area of the town and no car parking along that side. That could be looked at in co-ordination with the public realm approach to deal with aspects that we dealt with in Ballyclare in the past. We need to look at Glengormley to see whether we can make it an attractive place for people to invest in.

It is not all doom and gloom. There have been positives, and we welcome major investment into Glengormley. Recently, there was major investment of more than £7 million in the development of a garage space with retail units in the centre of town, and we welcome that. However, street lighting needs to be improved. Those issues need to be discussed with the relevant body to ensure that we bring them forward in a cohesive and deliberate fashion.

A plan was produced several years ago that has sat on a shelf since. I would like to think that the draft plan that we are discussing today will, when the relevant amendments have been made, become a working document, not just an aspiration, and will deliver substance and benefit to the area.

Glengormley has suffered from having a major road driven right through the middle of the town, and there are issues that need to be looked at, such as creating a one-way system or pedestrianising certain areas. Other areas seem to be no-man's land — unkempt places for which nobody is sure who has responsibility. Do they belong to the Department for Regional Development, the council, the Housing Executive or Roads Service? They need to be tidied up to make sure that they do not add to broken-window syndrome: if a broken window is not repaired, there will soon be several more.

I speak as a representative of Newtownabbey Borough Council. We have some commitment from the council that it will take on board some aspects at a very early stage to try to tidy up. I have some concerns about the process that DSD engaged in with traders in Glengormley and the funding that allowed that project to go forward. I know how we did it in Ballyclare. It was taken on board and delivered by elected representatives who spoke with the traders on a one-to-one basis. I cannot say that the same

happened in Glengormley. It seems to have been bought into by a small number of people.

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

Mr Girvan: We need to look at how that process was carried out.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the debate. The problems affecting Glengormley arise from three different sources. One is that it has fallen between two stools geographically — between the greater Belfast area and Newtownabbey. It has become, in effect, a commuter town. Therefore, it has lost its sense of identity and sense of place, which Mr Humphrey mentioned. Moreover, it has been the subject of unplanned and piecemeal development. A lack of good planning has resulted in a mishmash of development, and the real commercial and retail centre of Glengormley has been lost through bad planning.

The one thing that is required is a strategic plan to address that issue.

For many years, Glengormley was a good and successful retail centre. However, developments in the greater Belfast and Newtownabbey areas, the Abbey Centre in particular, have drawn custom, and retail trade has declined in the Glengormley area. One is not criticising the Abbey Centre; that is just a consequence of its success.

Therefore, Glengormley must, in many ways, reinvent itself. The master plan being developed by the Department for Social Development, in partnership with Newtownabbey Borough Council, should and, I think, will be the driver for the strategic redevelopment of Glengormley. I wish it well, and, under Minister Attwood, it will be a priority, and it will be driven forward. Newtownabbey Borough Council, which has played an important role in all of this, is strongly committed to the development of Glengormley. Importantly, at least two important statutory authorities, the Department for Social Development and the council, are driving that agenda.

Newtownabbey Borough Council is to spend £100,000 on a range of short-term measures to promote the commercial centres of Newtownabbey, Ballyclare and, in particular, Glengormley. That is, perhaps, not a tremendous amount, but at least it is money to be spent on upgrading Glengormley.

I wish the master plan well. I hope that it will be unveiled soon and implemented vigorously by the Department for Social Development. I am confident that, with ministerial support, it will be driven, and it will bear fruit.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood): I join my colleagues in thanking Nelson McCausland for tabling the Adjournment debate. I also thank all those who contributed to the debate. It is probably pretty rare for 10 Members and four Ministers to contribute, in one way or another, to an Adjournment debate. That should at least give a higher profile to the development of Glengormley village.

One consequence of being the Minister for Social Development — it was the same for my predecessor and will be the same for my successor — is that I get out and about around the towns and urban centres of Northern Ireland, which enables me to see the ongoing difficulties for trading opportunities on the front line. I understand the difficulties that the Glengormley traders are suffering, because I have seen them in many other town centres around the North.

I am a firm believer in master plans, much more so than before I became Minister. If we are to achieve a balanced regeneration of Northern Ireland and a prosperous community and economy, master plans must be a key element of the strategy. Master plans are essential for a number of core reasons. First, the retail experience and conditions have changed in the North over the past number of years, especially after the ceasefires. Since then, there has been growth in out-of-town trading opportunities and greater investment in city centre trading opportunities. As a consequence of that change in the retail pattern, there is a risk that town centres could be put under pressure.

Secondly, I asked officials to outline how many of our town centres that suffered grave damage as a consequence of the conflict have master plans. There is a very strong correlation between the town centres that now have master plans and those that suffered as a consequence of the bombs and terror that went on for 30 years. Master planning and the regeneration of town centres is a legacy of conflict and should be understood in that circumstance. For those reasons, and for all of the reasons that have been outlined in respect of the Glengormley

trading experience, I am a very firm believer in master plans.

However, there is a multitude of master plans; upwards of 24 or 25 around the North. That demonstrates a commitment by government — the Executive and DSD — to the need to regenerate out-of-town centres. It is a strategy that is beginning to work. In Newcastle, because of the public realm, footfall has increased by 300%. In the public realm outside the Guildhall in Derry, the public realm in Ann Street in Belfast and those in Armagh, Downpatrick and Antrim, one can see how public realm and town centre investment has improved the trading environment, has improved footfall — including tourist footfall — and has led to new businesses opening and old businesses being sustained.

Mr Humphrey: My intervention is about the example that the Minister gave of Ann Street in Belfast. There has been tremendous improvement to the streetscape there, but I am sure that the Minister will agree that the work took a huge amount of time and caused a lot of frustration for traders. It is important that, whenever the work is done, it is done in consultation with the traders and is done to a timescale that is favourable to business and trade.

The Minister for Social Development: I acknowledge those points, as well as those made previously that town centre renewal, or Belfast city centre renewal in this case, needs to be expedited and needs to accommodate the ongoing trading opportunities as well as plan for the future.

The Ann Street example is a good one, because a prominent businessman in Northern Ireland realised that there was going to be an improvement in the public realm in Ann Street and opened a pizza parlour there around the same time as the work on the public realm had finished. He did that because he realised that there would be more footfall and a better environment and his business opportunities might be assisted as a consequence of the improvements. That is a small example — one of many — of how investment in public realm is a key economic driver.

Town centre renewal and city centre renewal, on a pound-for-pound and job-for-job basis, is one of our primary economic driver and needs to be considered in the context of all the economic interventions, whether they are through INI or

any of the other initiatives. What is the hard and real value of town centre renewal as an economic driver? Is it one that should, as I believe, be considered for a greater profile?

There was nothing in any of the contributions that I could argue with. The profile and character of Glengormley has significantly changed. As Members have indicated, a lot of that is down to the growth in housing. I will pass the points that junior Minister Kelly made about housing to the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD). Issues with sewers, water supply, planning permission and how all of that fits in with the character and profile of an area are relevant, given that the substantial housing development in the Glengormley area has been private rather than social in nature, and I will pass them on to the DRD and the DOE.

5.30 pm

The point about Glengormley is that, given that the profile and details of the issues that are faced in that area have been well outlined, including the comment that the area lacks a sense of place, it invites a necessary response from government, the council, the local chamber of commerce and others. That is why my predecessor initiated a master planning process for Glengormley even when it was clear that the master plan for Glengormley village needed wider ownership, given that concerns had been raised by local traders.

My Department, the council and other stakeholders went back to the traders in the latter part of last year, and others have done so in the early part of this year in order to hear their views, accommodate their interests and try to re-profile the draft master plan in a manner that would get approval from the local councils and be a good way to move forward. That process demonstrates that the particular and acute needs of Glengormley are being acknowledged and that the draft master plan is being reconfigured to acknowledge the needs of the trading community in the area. I hope that, after Newtownabbey Borough Council goes through its necessary approval processes — I hope that that will happen this month — it will endorse the master plan, and that, in the early days of next month, we will be able to issue it.

I want to make some upfront comments about where we are going to go. First, as Members have indicated, there are a number of sites in

Glengormley village where businesses have stopped trading or the sites have been left vacant. I am actively looking at extending the reStore initiative to Glengormley village so that, although we wait for the day when there may be more private investment in the neighbourhood, we profile the frontage of the village in a way that makes the area more attractive and may stabilise the trading environment.

Secondly, I will make a commitment that, in going forward post-master plan, we will undertake a transport assessment. It is self-evident that, given the roads profile in the area, there are a lot of issues to do with the roads, car parking, traffic flows, signalling, car-parking bays and the full spectrum of car and pedestrian issues. In the context of the master plan, we will undertake a transport assessment to determine what the consequences of development would be and what other interventions there might be to assist in mitigating the car parking and traffic issues in Glengormley village.

Thirdly, I want to acknowledge that the council is up front in investing some moneys in environmental improvements. That is a very healthy intervention and will be a useful way of going forward.

Fourthly, I noted that one of the contributors to the debate recorded the fact that the Minister for Regional Development is going to visit the area in the near future. We will work with the Minister for Regional Development on any wider traffic initiatives that may be necessary to accommodate the trading environment in Glengormley.

There is a healthy understanding in all the towns and areas that now have master plans and in those that will have master plans that they are not quick fixes. They are programmes and agendas that are rolled out over five, 10 or 15 years. In the context of the capital budget that all Departments face, the acknowledgement that master plans have a lifespan of five, 10 and 15 years needs to be more fully appreciated. However, I will be making announcements about a number of master plans for other towns around Northern Ireland over the next two or three months. Given the comments that I have made about Glengormley, I hope to be able to ensure that those initiatives, as a first phase response to the master plan as outlined in this debate, will be taken forward.

I want to acknowledge the comments about shared space and public realm. Glengormley, on one or two occasions in the past, has had an unfortunate reputation. The comments in respect of shared space are well made, and I will reflect on them further.

I welcome this debate. It is timely for Glengormley and gives some greater profile to the issue of master plans generally. I look forward to the release of the master plan in the early days of next month. I have made commitments tonight; I will try to honour those and move them forward. As to the Budget over the next four years and the wider roll-out of the Glengormley and Ballyclare master plan, in the remaining days of my life in this Ministry, I will pay due regard to any and all of the proposals therein. I trust that any successor will do the same.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.



Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

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www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325

Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited

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ISBN 978-0-339-50453-0

