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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Weir, Peter (North Down)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to raise a matter that was raised last week in the House by Mr Allister and, subsequently, Mr McCrea. I think Mr McCrea was raising it on behalf of Mr Allister. It is around the whole issue of the speaking order in debates in the Chamber. I know some Members have quoted Standing Order 17(5). First, I refer Members to Standing Order 17(4), which requires the Business Committee to consult the Speaker about general arrangements for debates, including the order of speaking and the number of speakers in any debate in the Assembly, as mentioned in Standing Order 17(5). The arrangements for the order of speaking and for the number of speakers in any debate were agreed by the Business Committee some time ago.

I have to say that, sometimes, I think Members are raising that particular point of order out of ignorance of the business of the House. That disturbs me. Some Members have been here for some time, and I know that there are Members who are newly elected to the House, so, maybe, they still have to learn the procedures of the Assembly. To date, the Business Committee has not consulted with me under Standing Order 17(4) about any proposals to change those arrangements.

Let me say as well that Members who raise issues about the length of debates in the House and, continually, about who should speak in the House, must know that all those arrangements are made through the Business Committee in consultation with the Speaker. Members who are members of the Business Committee need to raise it in the Business Committee. There is no point raising it in points of orders in the House. If those arrangements need to be changed, that should be raised in the Business Committee.

Let me also explain the arrangements for speaking order in the House. In the first round of speakers, parties with two or more Members will be called in order of party strength. *[Interruption.]* Order. After that, the order of speaking will reflect the proportions of parties' strength in the Assembly. That has always been the case. Whenever I am in the Chair, I am always very mindful of trying to get the balance of parties in the Chamber to where we need it. Sometimes that is not always possible, but I would like to think that, as far as possible, most, if not all, the parties do quite well when it comes to speaking on any item of business in the House.

Finally, I hope that Members will accept that it has been the practice of all of us who have sat in the Chair in recent years to use our discretion in allowing single-Member parties and independent Members to contribute to debates. Let me say that that will always be the case. Let me also say that I must tell those Members from single-Member parties that it will not always be possible to get them in. We have Members who believe that, every time they put their name down on a speaking list, they should automatically get in. In fact, they go so far as to demand to get in. *[Interruption.]* Order. We also have Members who abuse Standing Orders by raising this issue continually, and then we have Members who challenge the authority of the Chair. Let me say that, from here on in, any Member who continually abuses Standing Orders will be dealt with, and any Member who continually challenges the authority of the Chair will equally be dealt with. What I mean by "dealt with" is that those Members will not be called to speak for some time in any debate in the Chamber. So, I do not want party leaders or Chief Whips coming to me to make a case for a Member who will not be called in the House for some time.

I hope that I, as the Speaker, have made my position absolutely clear this morning. If there is any issue that any Member is not sure about or

does not understand, they should please come and talk to me outside the Chamber. I will not take any points of orders on this issue this morning.

Mr Allister: I wonder why.

Mr Speaker: Order. I warn the Member that he is sailing very close to the wind in challenging the authority of the Chair. If the Member continues, he will not be called to speak in any debate in the Chamber for some time. I warn the Member, so I hope that he understands exactly where I, as Speaker, am coming from.

Ministerial Statements

FM/DFM: US Visit

Mr Speaker: The First Minister, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, intends to make a statement to the House.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for the opportunity to report to the Assembly on the successful visit to the United States that the deputy First Minister and I undertook from Monday 12 September to Friday 16 September. We were accompanied by the Invest NI chief executive, Alastair Hamilton, and, for the Los Angeles leg of the visit, by the NI Screen chief executive, Richard Williams.

The key purpose of our visit was to promote the local economy through a series of high-profile engagements, and we had direct engagement with senior American executives. The visit brought us to Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Chicago and New York, and our programme concentrated on three sectors of our economy: creative industries; information and communication technology (ICT); and business services. Those sectors have been gaining significant momentum in recent months and have stimulated the interest of potential investors in the United States. The objective was twofold: to promote the tremendous potential that we have in these sectors, and to bring new jobs to Northern Ireland.

Over the past six months, there has been a concerted effort by Invest Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Screen and the Northern Ireland Bureau to highlight the best that we have to offer in the creative industries. While in Los Angeles, we met with senior executives representing industry leaders in film and television, video gaming, and mobile applications companies. We presented the Northern Ireland proposition for television and film to Warner Brothers, Sony, Disney and Fox, while consolidating our existing relationship with HBO. We also broadened our discussions, which, until now, have focused on production work, into the realm of post-production with Technicolor and Deluxe. On the video-gaming front, we established new contacts with household names such as Activision Publishing Incorporated, who are looking for just the type of game developers who are beginning to emerge from our universities.

The culmination of our time in Los Angeles was our delivery of the keynote address at the Irish Technology Leadership Group's Innovation in Entertainment event at Sony Pictures Entertainment. An audience of nearly 300 executives, ranging from film studio presidents to the leadership of global telecom companies, was exposed to an interactive technology showcase of Northern Ireland products, followed by presentations in which the deputy First Minister and I highlighted the dynamic talent pool that exists here.

On the political front, we were welcomed to city hall by Los Angeles mayor Villaraigosa, who was keen to discuss economic development and green technology and share best practice in dealing with disadvantaged youth. There are already close contacts between the PSNI and the Los Angeles Police Department, and this was an opportunity to explore additional links at political and community level.

It is also worth noting that we had a very productive meeting with Chancellor Gene Block and his senior colleagues from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The chancellor has put forward a proposal to establish links between UCLA, Queen's University and the University of Ulster on conflict resolution. There have been a number of instances of ethnic and religious tensions on campus, and he indicated that there is much to be gained from a relationship with Northern Ireland.

In Silicon Valley we met an existing investor, Hewlett-Packard, and promoted the ICT opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland at an Invest NI-hosted event involving senior business people in the technology sector.

In Chicago, our focus shifted to the development and cultivation of the business/financial services sector, when we met potential and existing investors, such as Allstate. We also met the chief executive officer of United Continental Holdings Incorporated to re-enforce the importance of the Newark-Belfast route to Northern Ireland.

In New York city, we opened First Derivatives plc's new office in the financial district. First Derivatives plc, which is headquartered in Newry, counts among its customers many of the world's top investment banks, brokers and hedge funds. The opening of the New York office is a clear demonstration that locally grown companies can compete at the top of the

financial services ladder. We concluded our visit by attending a meeting with senior executives from the New York Stock Exchange Euronext, which is an important and high-profile investor.

Throughout our visit, we engaged directly with some of the most senior business executives in those sectors that offer the greatest potential for investment in Northern Ireland. We were also able to emphasise our personal commitment to each company and to assure it that the Executive are united in their objective of supporting inward investment.

We are hopeful that the continuing efforts of Invest NI and the time commitment that we made will be rewarded in the near future with the creation of new, high-quality, sustainable jobs.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the First Minister for that update. Was there any discussion of the promotion of jobs and businesses to Northern Ireland because of the possibility of the lowering of corporation tax, or at least the possibility that Northern Ireland may be able to vary the rate of corporation tax? My question comes on the back of Minister Wilson's suggestion last week that corporation tax may not be reduced for four years, although at least the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said later in the week that it may come earlier. I assume, and hope, that the First Minister will confirm that. It will be a huge attraction to the US.

Mr P Robinson: Virtually every company that one speaks to is keen to establish what progress is being made in relation to Northern Ireland having the ability to set its own level of corporation tax and become more competitive. That would be a distinct advantage for us. We have a package that is already competitive in the global market; making a dent in corporation tax would make us unbeatable.

As to when we might be in a position to do so, the Government are considering the consultation responses, which were overwhelmingly in favour of Northern Ireland having the power to lower corporation tax, and they will then announce their next steps.

10.45 am

In relation to the Finance Minister's statement, I think that the Member needs to look more carefully at what the Finance Minister said.

He indicated that there would be a lead-in time, but I suspect that there will be no delay if the Executive have satisfactory opportunity to take over corporation tax powers. However, they might well determine that there will be a delayed or phased start. Therefore, the financial implications for our Budget would not be felt until the tail end of the present comprehensive spending review period.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his statement to the House this morning. Will he recount the feedback that he received directly from senior US executives on their experiences of investing in Northern Ireland? In particular, will he outline any views expressed about Invest Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: I might not always have been able to make this kind of comment, because, for many years, there were a lot of criticisms of Invest Northern Ireland and its predecessors. However, I have to say that every single investor that we meet who has been dealing with Invest Northern Ireland speaks glowingly — and I do not think that I overstate the case — of the interaction that they have had with it. I have watched the team as we have gone around the US and other places, and I think that we have the highest standard of personnel involved, and they serve us well.

I should also add that we have a first-class team at the Northern Ireland Bureau in the United States, and this gives me an opportunity to put on record our appreciation to Norman Houston, who will be leaving that job soon. He is the most diligent worker, apart from the fact that if you visit the United States, he can arrange 4.30 am wake-up calls and keep you until 1.30 am the next morning with dinner engagements. He has been a tremendous asset, and the Department that gets him when he comes back to Northern Ireland will be well rewarded.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I especially welcome his remarks regarding creative industries and disadvantaged youth. Will he assure us that when he is looking at the development of any future investment in creative industries here, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and disadvantaged youth in particular, will be given equal opportunity of access to, and employment in, those industries?

Mr P Robinson: Creative industries have a wide span, and although some elements might be

place-specific, others, quite frankly, can be done anywhere. Sound, special effects and some digital work can literally be undertaken in a back room, provided that you have data access, in this case, to north America. Therefore, there are opportunities for every part of the Province to benefit. We have people coming out of our universities with skills that are in tune with what is being required, particularly in the west coast of the United States.

As regards film and television, companies already in Northern Ireland, such as HBO, are using skilled people at every level, whether it is carpenters, gardeners, or whatever, as part of their production team. Therefore, there are opportunities for every section of our community. Where there are opportunities for people who have been unemployed or for those who earn low wages, I think that we will want to jump all over those opportunities and ensure that people get the chance to really step up.

Mr McDevitt: I acknowledge the First Minister and deputy First Minister's reaching out to the gaming and creative industries, their reconnection with existing investors, and their celebration of the success of local companies operating in the United States during their trip. However, that will really mean something back home in Northern Ireland only if real jobs are brought over. Can the First Minister tell the House how many jobs were secured for Northern Ireland during the last trip to the United States?

Mr P Robinson: There is an opportunity for some Members, when asking questions, to show what they know about a subject and for some Members to show just how little they know about a subject. I thought that somebody standing for the leadership of his party would know a bit more about what time lag means for investment. Any opportunities that arise from our visit to the United States —

Mr McDevitt: None. Zero.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: — will probably not be seen for many months to come. Any company that is taking an investment decision will look at a variety of issues. It will want to test the market in various parts of the globe. I think that our record is second to none. Indeed, had the Member taken a bit of time to do his research, he would have found that, London excepted, Northern Ireland has attracted more foreign

direct investment than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Mr McDevitt: Answer the question.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: We have a first-class record in bringing jobs back to Northern Ireland. The presence here of companies from the United States, such as the New York Stock Exchange Euronext, Citi, Terex Corporation and Dow Chemical Company, bears testimony to the good work that has been done. I have very real hopes that new jobs will come to Northern Ireland as a direct result of the visit, and I look forward to announcements about those jobs.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for his statement and welcome the positive engagement with investors in the US. He mentioned the video gaming sector and discussed helping disadvantaged youth. He will be aware of alternative education programmes in his constituency that develop the skills of young people from that background. What plans does he have to connect those young people with opportunities in the sector that may emerge as a result of the visit?

Mr P Robinson: A number of existing companies, not just in East Belfast but in many parts of the Province, will benefit from jobs in the creative industries sector. I recently visited a company in my constituency that provides score and background music for film and television. The real benefit of a number of the digital and sound technology elements is that they can be done at remote locations, which gives us the opportunity to be able to do work in Northern Ireland and to transfer that quickly to where it is required.

Invest Northern Ireland will, of course, look at opportunities, and our task will be to ensure that our universities can take up those opportunities as they come by using the existing pool of skills. The Invest Northern Ireland team is always able to point to the level of skill that is available in Northern Ireland. We have the best-educated young people in the whole of the United Kingdom. Statistically, that is a proven fact. One will find a younger population in Northern Ireland than in almost anywhere else in Europe. Some 60% of our population is under the age of 40. We have two leading universities in the Province, the skills from which are first class. Therefore, the opportunities to plug in are there and will continue to be there. If the

Member has any specific issue that he wants to raise on the matter, I hope that he will contact either me or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we will be happy to make connections for him.

Mr Ross: I thank the First Minister for today's statement. The House will know the importance, not only for tourism but for business, of the transatlantic link between New York and Northern Ireland. The First Minister indicated that he met the CEO of United Continental Holdings on the US trip. Will the First Minister update the House on his understanding of the latest position with air passenger duty and tell us whether we will see some progress made on that issue soon?

Mr P Robinson: I think that everybody in the House knows just how important that direct connection is. It has been a selling point for Invest Northern Ireland and Ministers on their visits to the US. It was an important factor in the New York Stock Exchange's coming here, as it was for other companies, including Bombardier. On my return visit, using that Continental route, I was approached by some Bombardier staff who were coming back to Northern Ireland. It is a regular business route for a number of key investors in Northern Ireland.

As I indicated in my statement, during the visit, we met the CEO of United Continental. We appreciated the fact that, like Northern Ireland people, he is the kind of person who expresses clearly what his views are on issues. I must say that he is exactly the kind of person who I would want as CEO if I were investing in a company. He made it clear that air passenger duty was making that route unprofitable for him. We made immediate contact with the Secretary of State and the Minister of State. The progress that we have made on that issue is an excellent example of the good working relationship between the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. We had immediate access to the top. We had instant action from the top. Indeed, I believe that a favourable statement from the Chancellor is anticipated later today. All who support the preservation of that route will welcome its continued existence.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Chéad Aire inniu. Given the ongoing concerns of the House over ever-rising energy prices and the

recent indication by GlaxoSmithKline that any further expansion by it on this island is as reliant on the availability of affordable energy as on low corporation tax, can the Minister confirm whether the Executive accept that rising energy prices are a potential major obstacle to attracting foreign direct investment and whether they will take immediate action on that issue?

Mr P Robinson: Anything that increases the cost of doing business in Northern Ireland has an impact on the overall attractiveness of the Northern Ireland product. Clearly, therefore, it is having an impact, particularly on those companies that are heavily reliant on energy. As far as the Executive are concerned, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, obviously, has direct responsibility for the issue. Of course, there are difficulties in interfering or involving the Executive in issues that are, effectively, private sector matters. However, on the edges, steps can be taken. Anything that can be done will be done by the Minister and the Executive.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for his statement. I, too, support his comments about Norman Houston and the work that he has done consistently for Northern Ireland in the United States. Can the First Minister inform the House about the work that Northern Ireland Screen has done in the United States to benefit Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, the work of Northern Ireland Screen goes on not only in the United States but in other parts of the globe. Its success and that of the Department more generally can be seen in the success of bringing Universal Studios and HBO to carry out work in Northern Ireland and in the fact that not only was the pilot and the first series of HBO's 'Game of Thrones' filmed here but filming has started on the second series. When we spoke to HBO, it was clear that it sees 'Game of Thrones' as one of its great success stories. Obviously, its positioning in Northern Ireland will be advantageous in the long term. The great advantage of that from Northern Ireland Screen's point of view is that it has a product that it can showcase to other people in television and film. The Executive are very pleased with the progress that has been made and opportunities that have been derived. We wish Northern Ireland Screen well in attracting key producers to Northern Ireland in the future.

With regard to the general role of television and film in Northern Ireland, I might also add that, several years ago, Northern Ireland was probably the last destination that any film or television company would have considered.

11.00 am

We should not underestimate the importance of stable political structures and peace in Northern Ireland in attracting those people in particular. Politicians who think that it is good politics to go out and rubbish Northern Ireland and try to create instability have a direct impact on the jobs that are available to people in Northern Ireland. Those who try to drag us back, as some do, even some in this House, should think twice about the impact of that, even in their own constituencies.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister for his statement and his good work in promoting Northern Ireland abroad.

Like many others, I am particularly keen to see the creative industries boosted. Looking ahead to the arrival of the MTV Europe music awards next year, has the First Minister had an opportunity to assess the potential damage from the news that the pop icon Rihanna was foiled in her filming ambitions yesterday, which were no more sinister than to appear in a field dressed in red, white and blue?

Mr P Robinson: I am pretty sure that there was no problem with the colours involved. I take it that the Member has a field on his estate, so if she needs an alternative filming location he will be happy to offer her that.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his statement. All of us wish well the progress on investment for all of us in Northern Ireland that could be brought about by such visits. I suspect that, if the First Minister and deputy First Minister had gone to America with a lower rate of corporation tax in their back pockets, or at least the promise of it in the near future, there might have been greater attendance and greater interest. Will the First Minister comment on that? What is his assessment of the potential for Northern Ireland in relation to the creative industries?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is right: if a lower level of corporation tax were part of the Northern Ireland product, it would become much more exciting for many. We have to recognise

that there are some business opportunities out there that are not reliant on corporation tax, because they will be back-office and their profits will therefore not be realised in the UK. There are some types of business that will be very tuned in to what is happening with corporation tax, although even our present rate of corporation tax is lower than the rate paid by many in the United States.

As far as the creative industries are concerned, it is evident from the large numbers of people who have come forward to be part of the HBO and Universal experience and who have looked for the 600 or 700 jobs that have been created that there are massive opportunities, which is why we are moving ahead with the building of the second studio at the Titanic Quarter. That is also why we look at the opportunities for satellite locations: HBO uses about four locations in Northern Ireland, which, again, helps the local economy. It is bringing millions of pounds of spend into our local economy.

That is just film and television. The big opportunities lie in digital technology, sound effects, music and all of those areas. One might even include politics in the creative industries bracket. There are massive opportunities for improvement all round. A lot of young people need to start looking at doing STEM subjects in our universities so that we have people coming forward to take the jobs that will be created as a result of those new opportunities.

Mr Dickson: I thank the First Minister for his statement and his encouraging words this morning about the transportation links to the United States, given the number of users of those links in my constituency, particularly FG Wilson, which has strong trade links with the USA.

First Minister, given the emphasis that you put on the film, TV and video-gaming industries, did you receive any firm commitments or strong indications that the companies that you met intend to invest in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to go into detail about specific companies. There are companies that we had follow-up meetings with that look very hopeful. The opportunities are there, and until the propositions are over the line it is better to say very little about them. There are also opportunities in financial services that are close to the line and we look forward in the next number of months to seeing the fruits of this visit.

Mr Cree: I also thank the First Minister for his statement. It is, indeed, very important work. I note the three sectors of the economy that were covered in his statement, but will the First Minister identify whether any Northern Ireland niche industries were of particular interest to our American cousins?

Mr P Robinson: As I go around the United States, we no longer have to argue about the skill set that is available in Northern Ireland; it is taken almost as read by every investor you meet. The word spreads in the United States. People look at the companies that are here. When Ministers from Northern Ireland go to the United States, everybody would expect them to tell people just how good Northern Ireland is. However, the best selling point that we have is that over 70% of the companies that come to Northern Ireland reinvest in Northern Ireland. That means that they have tested Northern Ireland, found it beneficial and decided to invest again. That simple statistic is the best selling point that you can have when you go to any investor in the United States. The other thing that we always do is try to team them up with companies that have come to Northern Ireland.

As far as niche areas are concerned, for a very long time Invest Northern Ireland has been looking at financial services, business services, ICT, the creative industries and the new green economy. Those are the areas where there is a concentration by Invest Northern Ireland and where the value-added jobs will be found that will increase the GVA of Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Givan: I commend the First Minister for the work that he is doing to drive forward that particular area of our economy. In his time as Finance Minister, significant funding was allocated to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to develop the creative industries. He has shown a clear commitment over the past number of years, and has taken forward that in his role as First Minister. Following his meetings in the United States with HBO and Disney, can the First Minister tell us how much of a deterrent to major US TV productions' coming to Northern Ireland is the UK Government's refusal to extend tax credits to TV in addition to film productions?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure I would use the term "refusal", because the United Kingdom Government have been ahead of most other countries in the film tax credits that they give.

There is an opportunity for the United Kingdom Government to substantially increase the level of television production in the UK, and we in Northern Ireland would probably benefit more than most if they were to do that.

The deputy First Minister and I spoke to the Secretary of State Owen Paterson about that issue just days ago. We hope that the sector itself will be putting a paper to the Chancellor on the issue, and we would very much support that. A distinction can, perhaps, be made between giving tax credits to television per se and giving them to certain types of television work. Perhaps it is best defined by the amount of money that is spent on a series. We are not talking about giving tax credits for 'EastEnders' or 'Coronation Street'; we are talking about doing it for major television series, and we will press that issue with the United Kingdom Government, as I think the sector will. That is an area of opportunity, and it is not so much a refusal by the Government as their not yet having agreed to it.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for his statement. I note that, during the visit, Chancellor Block of the University of California outlined proposals to establish links between the University of California, Queen's University and the University of Ulster. Will the First Minister outline what collaboration exists between the United States and Northern Ireland universities? What potential is there for the future?

Mr P Robinson: Most of the major US companies that are based in Northern Ireland already have contacts with the University of Ulster and with Queen's in relation to research and development work. Our two universities are probably ahead of the field in having a good working relationship with companies, not just in R&D work but in ensuring that their students come out with the kind of skills that companies are looking for.

UCLA has a particular interest in conflict resolution. We told it of our exciting proposals for the Maze/Long Kesh, which have excited a lot of people who deal with conflict resolution. We want to ensure that the site will attract international as well as local use. UCLA is looking at a particular project, as it has some tensions on campus, perhaps more on an ethnic than religious basis, that it wants to address proactively. It sees the kind of work that has been done in Northern Ireland as fitting comfortably with the kind of work that it needs to do. We are

looking at direct contact between the universities, and politicians in Northern Ireland will be asked to play a part in that project.

Mr Allister: I was tempted to ask the First Minister whether it was something that he said or did in the United States that caused his partner, the deputy First Minister, to look for alternative employment.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say that the Member really does push the barriers. I have said in this House for some time — *[Interruption.]* I have said in this House for some time that questions sometimes grow legs. Quite obviously, that is what the Member intends this morning. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I will now move on. *[Interruption.]* Order. The Member needs to learn the lesson that there are protocols, Standing Orders and conventions of this House that relate to him, as they do to any other Member.

Mr Allister: Only to me.

Mr Speaker: Order. I now say to the Member directly that the Member will not be called in any debate in this House for some time.

Mr Allister: You are doing your master's bidding.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: Your peerage is safe.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will not be called to speak in this House for some time.

Mr Allister: This House is a disgrace to democracy.

Mr Speaker: Order. Take your seat and sit down.

Mr Allister: This House is a disgrace to basic democracy. There is a voice, and it will be heard whether you, Mr Speaker, like it or not.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know what the Member is trying to do: he is almost trying to be a martyr. I know exactly what the Member is trying to do. The Member should take his seat and be quiet. We will now move on.

Order, Members. That ends questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister's statement. We now move on to a statement from the Minister of Health, Social Services —

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like you to look at the remarks made by the Member for North Antrim, who squeaked in on the eighth or ninth count without reaching the quota.

Mr Allister: What about East Belfast? What about Westminster?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: He claimed that you were “doing your master’s bidding” and that “your peerage is safe”. Those contemptuous remarks need a response, and I ask you to look at them.

Health and Social Care Services

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on the review of health and social care (HSC) services. In June, I announced a review of health and social care here to examine the future provision of services, including our acute hospital configuration, the development of primary healthcare services and social care, and the interfaces between sectors.

I initiated the review to set a new reform agenda that will give new and much stronger momentum for progress towards my vision and purpose for health and social care in Northern Ireland, which I think is widely shared and supported. Everyone wants the best possible service. There is also very wide recognition of the need to focus on health and well-being through prevention and a strong public health agenda, not just on services. However, those aspirations have not had enough impact on our ways of working and the benefits that can be delivered for the population. Given the current economic context, that is even more important than previously.

11.15 am

I want the review to ensure that health and social care services are focused, shaped and equipped to improve the quality of care and outcomes for the population and to provide value for money in financially challenging times. It is clear that the delivery of the full range of services in Northern Ireland is unsustainable in its current form if we are to deliver the best outcomes for citizens and maintain the highest level of quality and safety of services.

Here, as in all parts of the Western World, we face a combination of demographic change with an ageing population, advances in medicine and technology, and rising public expectations. The effect is to make it necessary to continue the reform journey of the NHS model of universal care.

The three key principles are that health services are generally free at the point of delivery, funded by taxation and promise that the best available cost-effective treatments or services will be provided. I believe that the Assembly is fully committed to those principles, but we have to recognise the fact that the

rising level of need for health and social care services, the need to focus on outcomes and the increasingly constrained financial context make it increasingly difficult to hold to those NHS principles. I believe that we can continue to deliver those principles only if we support a radical programme of service change and reconfiguration, and act strongly and corporately in the interests of all the people whom we serve, even when that means making difficult decisions at constituency level.

I want that to be the main backdrop to the planning process that we must undertake and the decisions that will have to be made over the coming years. Fundamentally, the largest element is that there needs to be a shift from the hospital setting as the key focus of health service provision to the community.

I want the review to be led by the vision that I have summarised and by the need to secure the quality and safety of services for all parts of Northern Ireland. I expect and hope that leaders across health and social care services will speak up and contribute to leading the process of change. It is not just about cost cutting, although there is a need to adjust to a very challenging budgetary context. I believe that if we address the key issues, we can and will find a way forward that can meet the needs and aspirations of our community.

We face challenging times, not just in the health and social care sector but with the economy in general. The Executive provided the health and social care sector with some protection through the Budget settlement by increasing spending by 8% from £4.3 billion in 2011-12 to £4.6 billion in 2014. That may sound generous, but given the increasing demands faced by the health and social care sector, it is a very difficult settlement indeed.

England faces the unprecedented challenge of delivering cost improvements of £20 billion, or 4% a year for four years. The position here is similar. If the same level of service provision was delivered in the same pattern as previously, we would face an estimated shortfall against assessed needs of approximately £800 million in 2014-15. It is incumbent on us all to make the best use of every penny of taxpayers' money that is provided for health and social care services here.

Let me be clear: I fully acknowledge the difficult economic climate in which we operate, and, within that context, my primary focus is on

quality, accessibility and safety of patient care. We must, therefore, focus on using resources in the right way and spending our money on the right things. My vision for the future of health and social care services is that we drive up the quality of care for clients and patients, improve outcomes and enhance the patient and client experience. In part, that must involve improving productivity and ensuring that the resources are used wisely. That should not come as a surprise to anyone.

We should always strive to deliver efficient and cost-effective services in every area of public service. We need a greater involvement of front line professionals in decision-making and service development. Local commissioning of services should have an increasingly important role to play in future in driving change, innovation and service improvement. I would also like to see increasing involvement of the charity and voluntary sectors in providing services.

I have stated that I want to see a shift in care from hospitals to the community. We have to be responsive to the world we live in and treat patients at a time and place that is convenient for them. I want to see patients being treated in the right place, at the right time and by the right people; that means limiting and, where possible, eliminating unnecessary hospital admissions. Too much work is being carried out in hospitals that should be carried out at primary care level. It will mean ensuring the provision of good intermediate care, rehabilitation and community support.

We need to promote the use of multidisciplinary community teams for chronic conditions such as heart failure and chest disease. Through managing such long-term conditions in the primary and community sector we will provide the information, support and early interventions that will enable people to manage their conditions better and maintain their independence. We will also reduce the number of avoidable hospital admissions. People who are provided with that type of support are more likely to experience better health and well-being, use their medicines effectively, remain at home and have greater confidence. They will also have a sense of control and better mental health.

The recommendations of the health and social care review will provide a firm basis on which we can proceed in the planning, development and delivery of services. Part of our success will

be judged by the extent to which we are able to challenge the status quo, stop doing what does not work and acknowledge that the current design of some of today's services is no longer fit for purpose. We need to be innovative in our approach, build on what is good and learn from our experiences.

We also have to take account of evidence on how the arrangements for the delivery of services in the Republic of Ireland and in other parts of the United Kingdom have operated, and to identify opportunities for co-operation with service providers there in helping to realise the objectives for health and social care here. Although we have to live within our means, the focus and motivation of the review is not about saving money. It is about improving the quality of services, the outcomes for service users and the overall patient and client experience.

Changing the configuration of how, where and when services are delivered is only one part of the equation. We need to encourage greater personal responsibility among members of the public for their own health and well-being in relation to what they eat, how much alcohol they consume, how much exercise they take and the way in which they look after their own health and well-being. That will require a sustained and growing investment in public health, early diagnosis and early intervention services to support individuals to make healthier choices.

We must also manage demand and expectations by ensuring that usage of the health and social care services is appropriate. Accident and emergency departments in our hospitals, for example, should be dealing with accidents and emergencies. They should not be used as a surrogate for services already provided by GP's and other primary care providers. The Ambulance Service should be called only when genuinely needed.

In moving forward, I want to promote greater involvement of front line professionals in decision-making. They know better than anyone else what is working particularly well in their ward or clinic, what needs fine-tuned and where broader improvements can be made across the service. Their input is vital to successful delivery of safe and effective services.

I believe that the voluntary and community sector has an important contribution to make in offering services and assisting health and social care to find solutions to complex issues. You

would have to travel a long way to find a more dedicated workforce than the nurses and other staff in Northern Ireland's health and social care services. However, elements of the third sector also have a strong track record in specific areas such as mental health, dementia, brain injury and learning disability. We should embrace that and benefit from it.

I will not shy away from using private providers too, where it makes sense for us to do so. Our small population means that the private sector will only ever play a relatively minor role compared with Great Britain, but it is still a crucial one in relation to nursing home provision, for instance. I will not be setting out to use independent providers for the sake of it, but where there is a clear case that they can deliver a high-quality, safe service for a lower cost to the taxpayer, it would be irresponsible of me not to make use of them.

The review is necessary to ensure the realisation of my vision for health and social care. Difficult choices must be made and priorities set. We must stop doing what does not work, become more assertive in challenging out-of-date practices and acknowledge that some of today's services and their current design are no longer fit for purpose.

I believe that reconfiguration of service delivery is needed to protect patient safety and enhance effectiveness. I also believe that it is a powerful means of improving access to and equality of services for all our citizens who need and deserve them.

I published the review's terms of reference on 25 August. I have asked John Compton, chief executive of the Health and Social Care Board and acting in an ex officio capacity, to lead the review, which will draw on external expertise in the form of an expert panel whose membership is drawn from a variety of relevant backgrounds, including health and social care, policy, clinical business and academic work. The panel comprises Professor Chris Ham, chief executive of the King's Fund; Professor Deirdre Heenan, provost and dean of academic development at the University of Ulster; Dr Ian Rutter, a general practitioner; Paul Simpson, a retired civil servant; and Mark Ennis, the executive chair of SSE Ireland.

I have made it clear that the review must be evidence-based, with robust analyses and conclusions on future service delivery. The expert panel will provide independent assurance

on the approach, methodology, analyses and conclusions of the review. I am confident that the review will benefit immensely from the experience and knowledge of the expert panel members. I have set a challenging timescale for the completion of the review, because it is important that clarity is provided urgently on the future direction of health and social care here. I have asked the review team to provide me with a report by 30 November 2011. Health and social care cannot continue to operate as it has done. There are simply not the resources to do so, and action will be required to ensure that we provide safe and effective services to the people here for the future.

I have also made it clear that I want the review to be conducted in an open and transparent manner. To facilitate that, I have asked the review team to ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for public consultation and engagement with key stakeholders. Where appropriate, I will also consult on the implications of the final review report. We face difficult challenges, and we need an evidence-based debate on how we move forward. It is important that there are opportunities for effective consultation with the public, and I want anyone who feels that they have a contribution to make, or who wishes their voice to be heard, to be able to provide comments. Those who have a view on how we can face all those challenges have the opportunity to make their case to the review, and they should do so.

It will not be possible for the review team to hold separate meetings with every interested group, particularly in view of the timescales for the work. The review team has set up a website to receive comments and to disseminate information relating to the review's progress. The website will signpost interested groups and individuals towards a range of ways that they can express their views. I am confident that the review's findings and recommendations will enable me to plan and ensure that money is spent on the right things at the right time in the right place, while enhancing overall quality of care and patient experience. A key aspect of that will be the delivery of more services in the community and in people's homes.

For the medium to long term, decisions on reconfiguring health and social care will be based on the outcome of the review, and my longer-term priorities and objectives for HSC will be informed by it. Members should note

that I expect to have to make some necessary and tough decisions. However, I will not make any long-term decisions or set any long-term priorities or objectives for health and social care in Northern Ireland without the full range of information being available to me. There will be consultation with stakeholders and the public on any major reconfiguration of services proposed in the light of the review's recommendations. Nothing has been agreed or ruled out at this stage, and nor should it be. I can state with certainty that we face unacceptable risks if change does not happen.

I intend to report back to the Assembly and the Health Committee on the progress of the review of the HSC service in due course. I thank Members for their support in taking the review forward. We need to provide strategic leadership in progressing this important work. It is vital, particularly in these challenging times when hard decisions must be taken, that we all pull together for the good and the health of the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the statement to the House.

Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh míle maith agaibh, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Given that his budget is double what it was 10 years ago, there is certainly scope for managing that budget better without impacting on front line services.

I have a couple of points to make. The terms of reference for the review indicated that consultation would not happen. I welcome what seems to be a shift in that position.

I imagine that the Minister will face some resistance from consultants, who have benefited from the prioritisation of hospital work to date. That group has managed to extract £11 million in bonuses every year from the Department. How does the Minister plan to get that group on board, in order to achieve his priorities?

11.30 am

Mr Poots: The enhanced bonuses that consultants have received will not happen again this year. Most people enter the medical field because they have, to a greater or lesser extent, a passion to help others. People who become consultants generally leave school with many opportunities to go into a variety of fields, in some of which they could earn considerably

more money, such as business or legal areas of responsibility. Many of them choose to become doctors because they care for other people and want to help them. In Northern Ireland, we need the support of everyone in the health and social care sector to make improvements. Many consultants want to move things forward and recognise that we really need to change and challenge things. I have had the opportunity to speak to many of them, and they recognise the importance of changing the service.

I note that the Chairperson of the Committee recognises that there is a strongly held desire to bring more care services to the primary care level and move them away from the acute level, to deliver a better kind of service to the public. Most consultants recognise that also.

Mr Wells: The Minister has clearly outlined perhaps one of the most significant documents to have appeared on the health scene in Northern Ireland for at least a decade; only 'Developing Better Services' in 2002 is more significant. He has outlined what will happen between now and 30 November. Will he outline in detail what input the public will have once the document is published? Will the document be the subject of a debate in the Assembly?

Mr Poots: It certainly will. The document will go through a process, and public consultation will take place. There will be opportunities for the public to write in and express their point of view. There will be opportunities for interest groups, including the trade unions and the various representative bodies of professionals, to make their case as to what should and should not happen in future.

How we proceed after the review is concluded will be down to ministerial choices and decisions. We will decide whether we will implement the review and how we will do so. I am minded to implement it. It is my duty as Minister to consult the House, the Health Committee and the public on key decisions that affect them. Once the review is completed, there will be public consultations on those decisions.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement and the acceptance that there was an £800 million shortfall, about which there seemed to be some dispute. He put strong emphasis on the need to encourage greater personal responsibility among members of the public and engage with them about their health. I am fully supportive of that. Before the election,

his party expressed a commitment to double spending in that area. How does that sit with its recommendation to do away with the Public Health Agency or merge it into the board? If the review wants to keep it, will it or his election manifesto take priority?

Mr Poots: The £800 million shortfall exists if you do nothing. There may have been Ministers who thought that sitting for four years doing nothing was a good policy. That may have been the view of previous Ministers, but it is not the view of the current Minister. I will take actions to ensure that we do not have an £800 million shortfall and will change the health service to accommodate public finances.

The public health agenda is critical. As Minister, I will not get any personal benefit from investing in it, but I am wholly committed to it. We need to make a challenge to bring about a generational change. Indeed, this morning, I was in Craigavon with representatives from NIPPA and CAWT launching an initiative called 'Healthier Families, Healthier Choices'. It is about educating children from the earliest years about lifestyle choices, the diets that they choose, good exercise and obesity. Those are the things that will reduce the burden on the health service in the future, and future generations will get real benefit from the actions that we take now.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure that he will concede that, if there were a ward for review fatigue, it would be quite full. This is the second day that the public are to be informed of cuts across the public sector.

The Minister talked about a shift from hospital care to community care. That is a long-standing principle that goes back to the Thatcher years. Will the Minister assure us that the money that is saved from the closure of hospitals will go into resources in the community before the hospitals are closed?

Mr Poots: That is an interesting comment, but I am not sure whether the Member is right. She talked about going back to the Thatcher years and about closing hospitals, but no one has mentioned closing hospitals. We are talking about improving services and living within our budget. We need to offer a different kind of service to achieve that. We can make considerable savings by having fully equipped diabetes clinics and chest clinics to ensure that many people do not end up needing hospital

care. The shift from acute care to primary care is absolutely necessary, and, in the first instance, we need to establish qualitative primary care, where people do not require to go to hospital. We are not about closing hospitals but about providing the right level of care at the right location and having the need matched with the service. Let us get the proper requirement for the community in the first instance and then take whatever happens thereafter.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. It contained a lot of detail, but there was also a lot of waffle. The Minister said:

“it is not just about cost cutting”

and:

“the review is not about saving money”.

He also said:

“We must stop doing what does not work”.

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

Mr McCarthy: I am coming to it, but this is very important. The Minister will know perfectly well what works, namely minor injuries units and the services provided by chemists and pharmacies up and down the land, which are threatened. Those services keep people away from GPs and out of hospital. Will the Minister give an assurance that the review will consider properly how we can address demand pressures through a full consideration of prevention and early intervention with public health? I draw his attention to his officials —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCarthy: I could go on.

Mr Poots: The Member’s point on pharmacists is puerile. I made my position on the public health agenda clear to the previous Member who spoke.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I am encouraged that the review is to include consultation with the public and with stakeholders. I agree with the Minister that a big change is required in the delivery of service in Northern Ireland. Should the review find a need for redundancies, will that be done in consultation with the unions?

Mr Poots: We have not had any redundancies heretofore. We were told and the public were

told earlier this year that there would be 4,000 redundancies this year to enable us to live within our means.

Mr Wells: Who said that, John?

Mr Poots: I cannot recall who said it — well, I can. However, I have not had to make any compulsory redundancies. Let us be clear about that: we are not about doing away with people’s jobs or making compulsory redundancies. The review team will consult the unions because they are important stakeholders in the review. They have a significant role in the future planning, commissioning and delivery of health and social care services, and they will have the opportunity to provide their analysis during the review. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the review; let us see what happens. However, I certainly regard the trade unions as key players in helping us to draw our analysis for the review, to understand the needs of HSC and, indeed, to deliver a quality service to the public thereafter.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Minister, there is a particular focus on moving services from hospitals to a community setting. We need to hear that the budget is shifting along with that. The fear out there is that more services will be delivered privately and the quality of care will slip. How do you intend to address that?

Mr Poots: We will see what the review comes up with, but, at this stage, my view is that we need to provide the quality services in the community setting first. You cannot cut hospital services, transfer the money over and expect to get an outcome. You need to provide the alternative service first and act on what is needed thereafter. So, we need a significant investment in community services. I have my ideas on that, and we will see whether the review team’s ideas coincide with mine or whether new things come into play. We have an expert panel of people who have huge expertise on the issues and have worked on them in many other scenarios. I want to hear their views, put them to the House and, hopefully, be in a position to adopt them.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. How will stakeholders, patients, clients and carers benefit from the review?

Mrs D Kelly: Longer waiting times.

Mr Poots: Again, the Member tries to make a glib remark from a sedentary position. We are

not about looking at longer waiting times; that will not benefit people. Let us see whether we can deal with people in a more appropriate way. I sometimes think that Members just want to blank out reality. There are certain realities. Some people think that we should go down the South American route, where you ignore the fact that you have a budget, keep spending and, at the end of the year, expect the UK Exchequer to come up with more money. That is the most undesirable option for people and staff because it would end up with services not being provided, people not being paid and our system grinding to a halt immediately. Others, including the previous Minister, went for the Castro option, whereby health was such an important issue that we invested in it to the detriment of everything else. My view is that we need an all-encompassing Budget that ensures that all services move forward in Northern Ireland. If you do not take either of those options and have a particular budget to live within, you look at how you can do things better and how you can make better use of your money.

Other Members may not wish to drive out waste. I intend to drive out waste. Other Members may not wish to initiate change because it might cause difficulties in their constituency. I intend to drive through change irrespective of those difficulties. At this point, we need people with a little courage, and, if you cannot stand the heat, Members, get out of the kitchen. If we do not initiate and embrace change in the health service and ensure that we provide a quality of service to the public, we will not deliver. I am not about not delivering. We are a party of delivery, as people well know. The electorate judged us on that.

11.45 am

Mr Gardiner: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the Minister's shift towards primary care, with large primary care centres to act as a triage for hospital admissions. Will the Minister put in place the necessary training in such centres so that triage work will be effective, and will he explore the deployment of GPs with special interests?

Mr Poots: The Member has got to the nub of what we should be about, and I thank him for his question. We will make better use of primary care centres by more often getting under one roof GPs and allied health professionals working closely together to develop their skills, with

specialist GPs within a wider group of GPs, so that a series of specialisms is available to the public. That will deliver a better service, closer to people and more cost-effective. Some people may have difficulties because it is more cost-effective, but I think that it is good to deliver a better and cost-effective service. You call that a win-win. Perhaps that has passed some Members by.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank you for your statement, Minister, in which care in the community was mentioned a lot. Over the years, many documents have been published, such as 'Putting People First' and 'Care in the Community', that came to nothing. The reality is that some trusts have cut meals on wheels services. In a day, pensioners might have contact only with the person delivering those meals. That service is being cut; people are being asked to pay for it. The Minister also talked about multidisciplinary community teams. Will he ensure that the proper support infrastructure is put in place for those who want to remain in the community but cannot for health reasons? People are living longer, but they are not necessarily living healthier. By 2020, our ageing population will have doubled.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Brady: Will the Minister ensure that the proper infrastructure is put in place for the most vulnerable people in our community?

Mr Poots: The Member usefully brings us to the social care aspect, and it should be remembered that this is not just about health; it is about social care. He expressed concern about some problems. There have been reductions in meals on wheels and so forth. We need to look at that because, if this review is to do what I outlined and if we are to encourage people to live in the community, we have to assist them to do that. We cannot take services away on the one hand and, on the other, say that we want more people to be treated in a community setting. That will ultimately lead to such people ending up in an acute setting. So, we have to radically look at and address how things are currently done, because we cannot achieve the outcome of reducing need and stress on the acute care sector by moving people to the community at the same time as we cut the community sector. Therefore, I

thank the Member for bringing that issue to the Assembly's attention.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Speaker, the Minister told the House that it was time for a generational change and time to challenge the status quo, and you will not find me disagreeing with that statement. However, I will ask the Minister specifically about the role that the private sector may play in the future of our health service. He tells us that economies of scale do not exist at a regional level to deliver proper private sector involvement. However, they would exist on an all-island basis. If we are really up for change, I ask the Minister directly: will he start to look at how the private sector across the island of Ireland can contribute positively to the future of our health service?

Mr Poots: I understand why the Member likes the idea of generational change, but I do not want to get into his SDLP leadership aspirations. He was talking during the statement. Perhaps, had he listened, he would have noted the comments about the opportunities of working outside the Northern Ireland jurisdiction with both the Republic of Ireland and other parts of the UK.

Northern Ireland does not have the scale of population necessary to provide all services. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to look at how we work with others to ensure that quality services are provided. If, for example, we can provide good quality services in the new hospital in Enniskillen in County Fermanagh and those services can be sustained and supported by the Republic of Ireland buying some of them, I will be very happy to look at that, and, indeed, the review will look at that. As I indicated —

Mr McDevitt: Hear, hear. He has seen the light.

Mr Poots: If the Member had been listening to my statement, he would have picked that up.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. How can he ensure that this will not simply be another costly exercise with little delivery, such as those we have seen in the past? Will he tell the House how much is being paid to the chairman and other expert members of the review panel?

Mr Poots: That is a reasonable question. However, the ranting on the sidelines is unreasonable. Let us be frank: the review will set how we do things for the next 10 years, which will include a spend of around £50 billion.

I know that you all think that I am brilliant in the House and that I have so much ability and knowledge myself that I do not need any help or advice. I am sorry to bring you all down a level: I will make mistakes, and I will get it wrong. However, I greatly appreciate the advice and support that I receive in trying to make the right decisions and the right choices. Therefore, asking people who have particular expertise to assist us in doing that is not foolish. There will be some financial cost in having an expert panel of advisers, and we are looking at around £52,000. A £52,000 cost to help us spend £50 billion indicates that there is a reasonable economy of scale if it helps us to make the right choices and right decisions on the way forward.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to the importance of the work being carried out at primary care level and the need to use medicine effectively and help people to remain at home and have greater confidence. Do those statements not directly describe the vital services provided by local pharmacies — for example, personal dispensing trays? Will he give an assurance that pharmacists already in position will be taken into consideration as regards the services he is talking about transferring to third-party suppliers, community services and suchlike? We have a very strong, well-educated, well-trained pharmacy team already in place that can help out in any future development.

Mr Poots: I know that the Member is new to the Assembly. Perhaps he was not aware that decisions on pharmacy were made by the previous Minister, a member of his party. That pharmacy decision was challenged by Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) in April, when it got leave to take a judicial review. When I took up my position, my hands were tied on entering negotiations because there was a judicial review of the decisions made by the previous Minister, who belonged to the Member's party. There is no point in the Member crying over the spilt milk that his Minister left on the floor. When the judicial review is complete, I will have to pick up the pieces and try to ensure that the damage that has been done does not lead to the consequences that the Member has described.

Ms Lewis: I welcome the Minister's statement and the review of health and social care services. Will additional resources be required to implement the review's findings?

Mr Poots: With regard to resources and looking at the review findings, it is important that, as we move forward, we identify how we can make things happen with minimal impact on our resources. We will take account of the resources available in the Budget settlement, and there may be capital and other cost implications to enable the services to be significantly reconfigured. That may involve looking to the private sector for assistance, particularly with the capital budget. We do not have enough in our capital budget to carry out the works that are needed in the health service. It is an area that we need to address strongly. I hope that those issues will be identified in the review report so that we are in a position to action some of those works in the very near future.

Mr Beggs: In his statement, the Minister mentioned the importance of good intermediate care and rehabilitation and community support. Does he recognise that the close involvement of family and friends plays an important part in people's recovery and ultimate discharge and that locating rehabilitation units in the community facilitates the involvement of family and friends, thus enabling early discharge? When, therefore, will we have quality health and care centres in Larne and Carrickfergus?

Mr Poots: The Member should note my comments to Ms Lewis. The set budget will not enable us to build such facilities, even though they would form a key part of challenging the current situation, remove the need for such extensive acute care facilities and bring more care to the primary and intermediate sector. That is why I said that we needed to look to the private sector for help in delivering services, such as primary care clinics, thus enabling us to make a real difference to the quality of people's lives and to the management of conditions that will mean that they avoid having to go into hospital and to ensure that we do things more cost-effectively.

If I may give one example, I had a good conversation with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, Dr James Reilly, who indicated that a new diabetes clinic had opened just north of Cork with 1,400 clients. In the past two years, no amputations have taken place. The fact that diabetics are not having amputations is really good news. It means that the condition is being managed better than was the case heretofore. Moreover, that, of course, saves the Government money. Those are the win-wins that we need to

see. Nevertheless, we must never lose focus of the fact that, in that equation, quality of care must come first.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the review. However, given that the panel will report back to him by 30 November, is it not a bit too hasty to close the A&E department in Belfast City Hospital in the same month that the review is ongoing? Should more effort not be made to keep the A&E department going until the review is completed?

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's decision to close Belfast City Hospital's A&E department temporarily was based on safety and quality of care. I cannot interfere in such decisions. When clinicians say that there are safety issues, it is not the role of politicians to interfere. However, if we are to do things right in future, we need to identify and plan the way forward. We need a situation in which we, as public representatives making decisions that affect the people on behalf of the people, give leadership to ensure that conditions are not such that decisions such as the one made at Belfast City Hospital have to be made. It is regrettable that the number of consultants in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area is insufficient to man all the trust's hospitals, thus necessitating the bringing together of two services to ensure the consistent availability of senior staff, so that trauma units are not operated continuously, night after night, by junior doctors. What was happening was not acceptable or satisfactory.

Private Members' Business

Rural Businesses

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

Mr McQuillan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.

The motion is an issue of major importance to my constituents in East Londonderry, where local businesses in a rural environment are the lifeblood of the economy. Not only do they provide a service, they create jobs. Up to 50% of the population of East Londonderry lives in a wholly rural area or a part-rural, part-urban area. The rural economy is, therefore, central to my constituency.

Although the focus of the motion is on road signage, as is noted in the detail, the issue of supporting rural businesses stretches across a number of Departments. The draft rural White Paper published by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) identified five key themes as a means of supporting rural communities. The priority of theme 4, "Sustainable Rural Economies", was:

"To provide rural businesses with appropriate support to ensure the development of dynamic and innovative rural economies".

Although the majority of that theme focuses on the businesses that are associated with farming and identifies the agrifood sector as a major contributor to the local economy, little or nothing is said about local businesses such as small retail outlets. Those types of businesses employ small numbers but are worth a lot to the local community. Only in small rural towns can we see small locally owned shops remaining intact. That includes bakeries, fruit and vegetable shops and independently owned newsagents. In more urban areas, such shops have been taken over by large corporations.

One little improvement that could be made is road signage, which is important to local rural

business owners as it provides directions to customers who might be looking for a specific business or who may be passing by conveniently, resulting in unexpected trade. In my experience, the Planning Service has been and is being far too restrictive in preventing local businesses from erecting signs that simply promote their business in some of the most rural areas of Northern Ireland. As business, especially the retail sector, centres on the capital city of Belfast and major towns, owners of small shops have little or no chance of securing that trade. For them, never mind locals, their business is their lifeblood. Their businesses offer not only a service to the local community but employment, which is important, given the harsh economic conditions that we face.

In Northern Ireland, the agency with prime responsibility for controlling advertisements is the Planning Service. Article 4 of the planning regulations states that no advertisement may be displayed without the consent of the Department of the Environment (DOE). However, consent for signage does not apply to advertisements that have "deemed consent" under planning regulations or to advertisements of particular classes, including those:

"(i) announcing any local event or activity of a religious, educational, cultural, charitable, political, social, or recreational character; or

(ii) relating to any temporary matter in connection with an event of local activity of such character;

not being an event or activity promoted or carried on for commercial purposes."

Signage for the purpose of providing direction has been described as follows:

"to guide road users to their desired destinations, via the most appropriate route, at the latter stages of their journey, particularly where destinations may be hard to find."

However, Roads Service deems that road signs for businesses are not to be used as marketing tools. Instead, it insists that directional signs should be used only where they are of benefit to the road user as an aid to navigation or for road safety or traffic management reasons. That presents a major obstacle to local rural businesses. At the moment, the choice between having a road sign and not having a road sign can be a choice between success and failure for many local business owners.

I am in no way suggesting that the regulations be relaxed to such an extent that the countryside becomes littered with signs advertising businesses, but I am suggesting that they be made flexible enough to assist local businesses in the current economic climate. I do not feel that the Planning Service and the Department of the Environment are being helpful in this matter or are taking that economic climate into consideration.

Given that my constituency lies within reach of some of the most picturesque places here in Ulster, tourism is central to its local economy. Therefore, signage is important, as recognised in a document published jointly by Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in April 2004, 'Tourist Signing in Northern Ireland', which also contains criteria for signs marking attractions. White-on-brown tourist signs constitute one part of the overall family of directional signs.

The main purpose of tourist signs, as for any directional sign, is to guide visitors to their desired destination. White-on-brown signs are deemed to supplement rather than duplicate information already available. It is recognised that, although there are additional benefits for the beneficiary of the white-on-brown signs, they are there to provide clear benefits to the road user. The benefits of white-on-brown signs are clear, for not only the beneficiary but the tourist.

Mr Humphrey: I agree entirely with the Member. I remember lobbying Roads Service a couple of years ago, through my previous employment, on a brown sign relating to a piece of Ulster-Scots art in the tourist town of Bushmills. We could not get Roads Service to move on that. I think that I wrote to the Member's constituency colleague Mr Campbell, who was the Minister at the time. We could not get Roads Service to move. It was clearly something that was going to be of benefit to tourists coming to Northern Ireland, particularly tourists from Scotland, Canada and the United States with an Ulster-Scots background, but Roads Service simply refused. I could not understand it.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I totally agree with him: it is very hard to get Roads Service to understand the importance of the signs. I trust that the Minister will pass on what is being said today to her Executive colleagues.

I, therefore, ask whether a similar policy can be drafted to benefit local businesses that may not

be directly considered to be a tourist attraction but that will provide a service for local tourists visiting the area. Mr Speaker, I will give you an example. The A29 runs from the Minister's constituency into my constituency and on to the north coast. There is a tea room there called the Duck Pond tea room. I recommend that anybody who is passing go in for a cup of tea and a cupcake. Members know that I would not be interested in a cupcake, but I would have a cup of tea. One day, when the owner had a sign out, Mr Roads Service landed and told the owner that he could not put it out and that he had to bring it in. The consequence of that was that the owner saw his takings reduced to one fifth of what they were on a normal day when he had the sign out. It is important that Roads Service takes action and allows some sort of signage.

I commend the motion to the House and look forward to the debate.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with the Member. For generations, rural businesses have been the backbone of the communities, and they are becoming more and more squeezed out by the global market, and so on. One of the biggest factors in squeezing out rural businesses at the present time is the financial constraints that they face.

The rural development programme was introduced recently. I found that to be a lifeline to small businesses. It allowed existing businesses to expand and new businesses to start up. However, there are two downsides to that. One is the banks. They have still not bought into the whole concept of what is going on — the rejuvenation of the countryside and its communities, which we all see and hear and talk about. The other downside is the Planning Service. I agree with the Member that the Planning Service needs to show a little bit of give and take on signage. That is true. As clearly defined, we have an urban/rural problem here. The problem with signage in urban areas is not as bad as it is in rural areas. Businesses in rural areas are paying the same rates and overheads. Yesterday, we talked here about energy prices. Large amounts of my area have no gas provision. We do not have the choice of gas, regardless of its cost; we have only electricity.

The rural development programme needs to be promoted more. There are two to three years remaining of the programme. The money is there

to be put into it, and I do not think that it is being used properly. Part of the Assembly's brief is to help rural businesses. I ask the Assembly to talk to the banks and allow them to be more flexible. There is a period of six weeks from when an applicant is accepted for the programme until he buys the material, for instance. In that period, the applicant has to arrange a bridging loan and take big money out of the bank. If the banks are not willing to move, we should be looking at other financial institutions that could help those people. The rural development programme assists the farming industry, because it has helped farmers to go into businesses outside farming to supplement their income. However, they also meet planning constraints.

The second element I want to talk about is the Housing Executive. It employs a lot of people, and it has a big say in rural areas. One of its areas of work is its grant schemes; for example, its disability grant scheme. Under that scheme, it can take between one and two years from an application being made to a person being told to start the work, and that is happening year-on-year. If that scheme could be fast-tracked in some way, it would allow more builders in rural areas to get the work and enable them to put more money back into the economy. However, that is not happening at the moment.

The councils, through the economic strategies they roll out in their council areas and their tourism strategies, also have a big role to play. The Tourist Board talks to the councils before tourism strategies come out; they liaise with each other. The councils also have a role to play in regard to signage, which the Member talked about earlier. They can do that, and we should encourage them to do more in that area. The Tourist Board spent almost £750,000 on brown signage along the previous Antrim Coast Road — it is now the Causeway coastal route — which is good for tourism. However, the drivers for tourism are the small businesses such as souvenir shops, cafes, public houses and hotels. We will end up with those businesses being able to operate only during the summer and having to close in the winter, and those communities will die. We are all about rejuvenating communities, but we cannot do that with what we have at the moment.

The catalyst for driving the rural economy is the draft Rural White Paper, which was introduced by the previous Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development, Michelle Gildernew, and which the present Minister, Michelle O'Neill, will hopefully sign off before the end of the year.

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

Mr McMullan: Members, everything that you need is in that document, such as the drivers and the names of the people and organisations. I encourage the Assembly to use the Rural White Paper as the driver for rejuvenating rural areas.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the motion, and, with your permission, I will dwell primarily on its first clause, which is:

"That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy;".

On the issue of signage, I was interested to hear Mr Campbell on 'Good Morning Ulster' on BBC Radio Ulster this morning discussing how he felt that signage would be useful to people with maps and satnavs. My satnav directs me to the premises rather than to the sign for the premises, but, given where Mr Campbell is sitting, perhaps he supports inferior brands to me. *[Laughter.]*

I want to highlight another programme on BBC radio. BBC Radio 4's 'The Food Programme' made, by its own admission, a rare visit to Northern Ireland a few months ago to examine the role of our local food entrepreneurs in boosting the private sector. Indeed, the programme identified Northern Ireland as the leading region of the United Kingdom in that regard. I am happy to say that two of the interviewees were constituents of mine: Martin Hamilton of Mash Direct outside Comber, who is exporting his vegetables to the United States; and Will Taylor of Glastry Farm Ice Cream at Kircubbin, who has exclusive rights to some of London's top international five-star hotels.

Of course, the rural economy has more to do with the economy than just agriculture, and it is important that, as we try to regrow the private sector, we choose our sectors and do so mindful of the demographics and what they have to offer. Previously in the House, I spoke of the benefit of creating a green economic corridor from Belfast Harbour all the way down the Ards peninsula, based on the fact that Belfast Harbour is investing some £50 million in a new logistics facility for offshore wind. From that,

flows the possibility of agglomeration economics with spin-out and spin-off companies being established in rural sites from Belfast Harbour to Portaferry.

In his report to the House earlier on his visit to the United States, the First Minister referred to HBO and its filming of 'Game of Thrones' which takes place not only in the Paint Hall Studio in the Titanic Quarter but at four satellite filming venues across Northern Ireland. Clearly, that happens with or without appropriate signage.

12.15 pm

I accept that signage is important to the tourism industry. Tourism tends to make its money in the rural economy, with the exceptions of the Titanic Quarter and perhaps the City of Culture, Derry/Londonderry in 2013. I think of the Giant's Causeway and golf, particularly at Portrush, Newcastle and now Holywood, thanks to Rory McIlroy. There is also St Patrick's trail and our Ulster-Scots heritage, which need to be well signposted, whether physically or on satnav and associated software programs.

Signage plays a role, but a limited one, in promoting the rural economy. We need to address the generic weaknesses that stem from a lack of critical mass in people and infrastructure. On this morning's 'Good Morning Ulster', we heard a report on the lack of affordable child-minding for people in both urban and rural settings. An enhanced role for the social economy will release the potential of the rural economy to help our economy and people move forward. We often talk of the social economy as the not-for-profit sector. I see it somewhat differently: as something that generates profit, not in pounds and pence, but in individual and community development.

I am very happy to support the motion, although I see the irony of Mr Campbell and Mr McQuillan bringing it forward on a day when one of their colleagues, a Mr Alan Graham, had the most fantastic physical advertisement on his farmland outside Bangor, in the pop icon Rihanna, and yet did not seem to welcome her presence. Perhaps we might rethink and reconsider, moving forward.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Both represent the same constituency, and we have some understanding of the particular problems that small businesses have there. I am sure that the struggle that small businesses have in East Derry is replicated across the North.

I suggest, however, that, although directional signs are useful, the Assembly needs to do a lot more to sustain small businesses, which are frequently described as the lifeblood of the community.

How can we do that? I think we must all have been listening to the radio this morning. I heard the commentary on how schools should change, and particularly on how greater entrepreneurship should be built into the school curriculum. As we go down the path of reforming the education system, that element needs to be addressed. That said, I recognise the work of Young Enterprise and other groups such as The Prince's Trust, which have been around for a long time. However, those projects are not built into the main curriculum, and they should be.

Mr Speaker, you know that one of the biggest obstacles to setting up your own business is red tape. There is scope for Limavady and Coleraine councils to collaborate to address red tape. I suggest that businesses should be exempt from registration for VAT for their first 12 months. There is much that local councils are doing to support businesses, but it could be done much more strategically and I urge that they take such an approach. In Coleraine and Limavady, small shops are the lifeblood of the local community, and it is ironic that, tomorrow night, there is a public meeting to discuss the problem of rates. Rates bills fall very unfairly on many small businesses that simply cannot afford to meet the demands. In Coleraine, we look forward to the Finance Minister, Mr Sammy Wilson, spelling out how there could be greater help for small businesses that have closed or are at a critical stage where they need help.

Directional signs, yes, but in what direction are we pointing our small businesses? That is key to the future. That is in no way to deride the motion. The motion is very important, and I am grateful that it has been proposed. However, we need to be clear, focused and supportive about where we are going. It is no longer enough simply to be champions who ask for nothing more than a level playing field. Any small business will tell you that everything is stacked in favour of big business. I do not think the future of the small business is a hopeless case, and I hope and pray that we do not get into a situation, as has happened in many towns, villages and rural communities in England, where the small businesses have simply disappeared. Essentially, we are a rural

community, and even our larger towns are rural in nature, and we have to put everything we can into those places.

When the debate is carefully analysed by those who have influence, they will take seriously what has been said this morning. I encourage our Ministers to work in partnership a lot more. I remember when the Seagate factory closed in Limavady, our Ministers all arrived independently in their own cars, but that is not how to solve the problem. Our Ministers should sit around the table together in true partnership and encourage special task forces to identify the issues and address them. That should be done in collaboration with the university, the chambers of commerce and our councils, which, I believe, are doing a good job but should be encouraged to do more.

Mr Lunn: I am afraid that I have been asked to contribute to this debate at very short notice, so forgive me if I ramble a bit.

Mr Nesbitt: As usual.

Mr Lunn: Yes, as usual.

The motion seems to be aimed at more than one Department. I have listed the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for tourism, DARD because the Minister is here, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) because of the eternal problem over signs being hung on lamp posts, and DOE because of planning issues. I am not sure which Minister this motion should be aimed at, but we have no problem supporting it. Rural businesses suffer the same problems as non-rural businesses, but more is heaped upon them because of their isolation, their broadband difficulties, which we are going to hear about later, transport costs, which Mr Dallat referred to, rates, lack of support and lack of cohesion.

A particular problem in rural areas is that people cannot even find the business that they are looking for, and that leads to the issue of directional signs. We support the motion as it is phrased, subject to some fairly stiff caveats about the nature, size and type of signage, which leads me to advertising.

We have all seen the proliferation of advertising signs on the wheeled things that people put in fields. Apparently, they are not illegal at the moment, but they are just as unsightly as something that might be placed beside

the road. In the past few years, a company in Lisburn — I will not name it but it specialises in wooden floors — has managed to erect signage on just about every conceivable place known to man. Every time you stop your car, you see a sign for the company. The signs are on fences, barriers, roadsides and advertising hoardings. I am sure that some of the signs are illegal and some are not, but that company seems to get away with it. However, my colleague was telling me about a case, presumably in Strangford, of a small fish and chip shop, which decided to advertise when it opened up, and it put up a total of seven signs on lamp posts somewhere in the Strangford constituency —

Mr McCarthy: The village of Cloughey.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Kieran.

The DRD demanded that the signs be taken down because they were on lampposts. Also, the Department did not give the shop any warning and fined it £350; £50 for each sign. So, that is a good example of support being given to a small rural business that was trying to establish itself.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes; thankfully.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am sure that the number of fish and chip shops in a small village such as Cloughey is limited.

There is an example in my constituency where a sign for a guest house in Downpatrick was permitted to be displayed in one direction but not the other. I hope that this is the type of problem that the Members who tabled the motion are trying to deal with; in other words, how we co-ordinate the appropriate use of signage.

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

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I note that, in some places around the world, that sort of signage is allowed in a limited way and there are rules that allow two signs within a quarter mile of a business and two more within a mile radius. You hear about that kind of thing happening.

When I go round the country, I see perfectly legitimate signage, mostly for more substantial businesses and churches. I have seen directional road signs, below which there are other signs

that read, "Leading to" such and such a premises or church. I have also seen signs that look like low street signs, established for just one business. So, there is scope. However, our concern is that, without any control over the size, colour and position of signs, there will be proliferation of them, which really would not do the image of the countryside any good at all.

The only other thing that I have to say on the matter is that it is ironic that the DRD was so quick to demand that signage advertising a business be taken down — and actually threw in a fine to make its point — when just above the sign there were illegal flags that nobody can take down, evidently, and that nobody will ever be fined over. There is a contrast there.

We are looking for consistency and a set of rules that everyone can understand. We want small rural businesses to have every opportunity to be able to advertise their wares in a legitimate and reasonable way so that people can find their way to the premises. When I have driven along the A5 over the past few years, I have noticed that there are about 200 signs stuck into the grass, some of which advocate a new road and others which advocate against it, and I do not think that they do the area's image much good. We need consistency and a good set of rules that people can understand.

Mr Wells: Every rural MLA supports the motion. We all understand that rural businesses, like the general economy, are suffering. However, there are things that the Assembly as a whole can do. I think that we are talking about the Executive rather than one particular Minister, because the motion is cross-cutting and takes in, for instance, DARD, the DOE, DETI and, of course, the DRD, and requires a joined-up approach to meet the needs of rural businesses.

One thing that can be done immediately to assist rural businesses is to ensure that every small business in Northern Ireland has an adequate broadband connection. There is no doubt that that is the way forward for many of our businesses. It is amazing how the internet has transformed every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. However, I get constant complaints from small businesses in south Down about the fact that they cannot grow and attract orders. As far as they are concerned, the worldwide web has become the worldwide wait, because they have to sit for ages for orders to come through. So, I think that that is a very practical thing that can be done.

I have also noticed that there is a lack of business park spaces for small businesses in rural areas in my constituency. Companies that wish to establish themselves in large conurbations are very well provided for and get multiple offers to use large warehouses and ready built off-the-peg premises. However, when you go to small villages — we want to encourage people to establish businesses that employ maybe only two or three people — you see that there is a shortage of suitably serviced workspaces for them. That is another very practical thing that could be done.

The issue of signage is difficult. One of Northern Ireland's greatest assets is, of course, its very attractive countryside. However, if truth be told, we have trashed the countryside in many parts of Northern Ireland. I drove through west Tyrone recently, and I was absolutely appalled.

An area that I knew well 20 or 30 years ago was completely destroyed by inappropriate development and mass proliferation of ugly bungalows and houses on almost every hilltop, which detracts enormously from the quality of that countryside. That is why it is so important to bring in new policies to prevent that from happening. On top of that, there are ghastly signs for rural businesses. The problem is that for 90% of those signs, no form of consent has been given. It is simply the case that businesses feel that it is necessary to put up the largest possible sign. I have seen signs that are probably bigger than the businesses that they advertise.

12.30 pm

We understand the problems that local rural businesses have. They want to advertise the availability of their goods and services. We need to consider some form of standardisation of signs in the same way that we tackled the issue for guest houses and bed and breakfast accommodation. There was a demand from those small businesses to advertise their presence for passing trade. However, rather than to allow every business to come up with the most garish and biggest possible sign that it could imagine, we said that that is not the way that we will do it; we will design a standard sign that can be used by all small businesses to advertise their presence. That is what we need to do in order to facilitate the multitude of local small businesses, such as joineries and those that create products using concrete, wood and timber. There needs to be a standard sign that

enables those businesses to be found but that does not detract from the countryside.

“Let us kick the planners” seems to be a theme in the Assembly. However, if Planning Service actually got down to it and enforced the removal of every unauthorised sign in Northern Ireland, there would be thousands and thousands of cases. Quite often, I watch the planning schedule going through Down District Council. Once in a blue moon, one sees an application for consent to advertise in a rural area. That is not what happens: businesses simply go ahead and do it. Would it not be better to regulate that and have signs that people can see and appreciate?

To return to those who would kick the planners; most rural businesses in Northern Ireland do not have planning permission. What has happened is that some local entrepreneur has decided that he has a skill in woodturning or with precast concrete, for example, and he has decided to develop that business in a garage or a back shed. The business has grown, and he has been successful. It has continued to expand. Eventually, it is discovered that it has been there for four years and that, therefore, no action can be taken against it. That is not the way to plan rural businesses.

I am glad that the policy that controls businesses in rural communities has been changed recently to be more flexible and permissive. Therefore, there are ways in which people can actually regulate their situation and obtain planning permission. Things are moving forward. The Planning Service is taking strong action on that issue, but, yes, an awful lot still needs to be done. During the current recession, the Assembly must retain support for and nurture small businesses because they are the backbone of the rural community. The Assembly must do all that it can to sustain them.

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item of business will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Basil McCrea is not in his place for question 1.

Woodland

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will support higher woodland creation targets in the Executive's Programme for Government. (AQO 398/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to see higher targets for woodland creation. Forest Service's business plan for 2011-12 identifies a target of 200 hectares of new woodland creation, which is realistic and achievable. That reflects the recent uptake of woodland creation grants by landowners and is affordable, given capital budgetary constraints.

If we are to achieve higher targets, we need and I am committed to developing new mechanisms to support woodland creation in recognition that higher levels of planting will be required in future to achieve our long-term aim of increasing woodland cover from 6% to 12% of the entire land area over the next 50 years. This year, I intend to review the operation of the existing scheme and the effectiveness of the strategy and the associated business plan targets.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is disappointing. I understand that her officials are proposing lower targets for next year, compared with the targets for the previous three years. Can the Minister confirm that?

Mrs O'Neill: I would like to confirm to the Member that I am also disappointed at not being able to reach certain targets. I intend to review the whole process — the grants scheme and everything that is involved — so that we can make sure that we attract as many people as possible into this.

The other key factor that is discouraging some people from getting involved is the whole issue of CAP reform and uncertainty about the type of land that will be eligible under the new system. People are being reserved; they are sitting back and waiting to see the proposals from Europe before they decide to get involved in some of our schemes.

Those are all factors, but, as I said, I want to keep the process under constant review to make sure that the targets that we have are realistic and achievable. We are fully committed to increasing woodland cover from 6% to 12% over that 50-year period. So, it is about making sure that our targets are realistic and achievable.

Mrs Dobson: Over the past three years, Forest Service has failed to deliver 54% of its target for new woodland creation. Can the Minister detail how she intends to combat that shortfall and improve on our extremely low 6% woodland coverage, which compares poorly with the EU average of 33%?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I addressed that in my previous answer. I am also disappointed at the targets; we have to keep them under continual review. I have said to Forest Service that, by the end of the year, I want a full review to look at what we have done and where we expect to be so that we can put measures in place.

We have two grants schemes in the Department, and we are looking at a woodland inventory to establish exactly what we have. I do not disagree with you: I am disappointed about the targets, but I will make sure that we move forward in a positive manner and do whatever we can through grant support and grant aid, even for farmers who wish to diversify and plant more trees.

Mr W Clarke: Will the Minister provide details of any plans that she might have to strengthen North/South links in forestry?

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to confirm that Forest Service in the North and Coillte in the South co-operate on many aspects of forestry. In order to formalise and develop those relations still further, a memorandum of understanding between the two organisations was launched on 22 March 2011. That will help to maximise the potential for development of the forestry sector on an all-island basis, including socio-economic benefits, while protecting the environment. Forest

Service staff in the North are also in regular contact with their forest service colleagues in the South about forestry plant health matters.

DARD: Headquarters

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made on the decentralisation of her Department's headquarters. (AQO 399/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to confirm that the DARD HQ relocation programme began in earnest in March 2011. A project team established by the DARD permanent secretary as a committee of the departmental board has met on four occasions and agreed a scoping paper which outlines the considerations necessary to progress the programme. That paper covers issues such as policy context, project management, equality screening and human resource issues.

Since taking up post, I have been keen to ensure continued progress in this important programme. I have already agreed a necessary governance structure for the programme, and the formal programme board is now in place to progress and plan the work necessary to ensure that we have successful delivery. The recently appointed programme manager is already working on the development of the strategic outline case, which is a necessary component for a programme of that scale. The programme will be subject to the Executive's usual requirements in respect of business cases and procurement. In moving forward with the programme, DARD will continue to work closely with all key stakeholders. It is my intention to submit a paper on the DARD HQ relocation programme to Executive colleagues before Christmas.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline the economic benefits of moving the DARD headquarters out of Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: I am delighted to have the opportunity to highlight the economic benefits. The proposed relocation of the headquarters out of the greater Belfast area has its origins, as the Member will know, in the Bain report on the relocation of public sector jobs. As intimated in the Bain report, a move to a rural location will have significant economic and social benefits. Those will be fully articulated in the business case that will be developed and presented to the Executive as part of the relocation project.

It is very clear that the proposed relocation will naturally stimulate the rural economy through increased local spend and the provision of high-quality and well-paid public sector jobs. There are, potentially, also the jobs associated with any construction project that would come about as a result of the relocation. It will also help to share wealth across the economy and contribute to better-balanced economic growth by commencing to address disparities in the distribution of public sector jobs across the North of Ireland. Furthermore, the proposed DARD headquarters relocation represents an important first step to relocate a significant share of public sector jobs and could pave the way for a much larger programme of relocation in the public sector. It would naturally greatly enhance the economic and social development of rural communities and bring a greater realisation of the outcomes envisaged by Bain.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will not be surprised when I refer to Loughry in my constituency — indeed, the constituency that we share — which is a good example of an area that would suit and be more than able to facilitate the new headquarters. Will the Minister assure the House and the people of the Cookstown and mid-Ulster area that she will consider that as a potential site?

Mrs O'Neill: It would be opportunistic of me to stand up and plump for Mid Ulster, but obviously, as constituency representatives, everybody has an interest. No location has been decided for the DARD HQ. What I will do in line with the Bain report is say that I am clearly committed to making sure the location comes out of the greater Belfast area. The details of the configuration are yet to be determined. Those and many other matters will have to form part of the business case, which I intend to bring to the Executive later this year.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said so far about office accommodation needs. Will she assure the House that no undue or particular barriers will be put in place by accommodation office officials that might jeopardise provincial towns and office projects beyond the 20-mile radius of Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not sure that I understood the question, but I am not interested in disadvantaging anybody. The project is about moving high-quality public sector jobs into a rural community. That is something I am very committed to. The

fact that people will be able to access public sector jobs outside the Belfast area can only be an advantage to those who live in rural communities and who, for too long, have had to travel to Belfast to get a job in the first place and even to try to achieve promotion in the Civil Service. We should all welcome this. It will be a positive development, and, hopefully, other Departments will follow suit.

Mr Nesbitt: I shall just pursue Mr Boylan's question, Minister. I am, first of all, very pleased that Strangford and the Ards peninsula are still in the hunt to be the location, should your Department move. However, will you clarify how a move would help you to achieve any PSAs or key targets that you might set yourself under the new Programme for Government?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is only new to the Assembly, so he may not be aware of the Bain report and other reports that clearly suggest that the Government need to look at the decentralisation of public sector jobs. This very much meets those targets and works towards those aims. *[Interruption.]*

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

Mrs O'Neill: There is an Executive commitment to decentralise public sector jobs. I hope to take this project forward and to complete it by the end of 2015. We have set aside £13 million in this Budget period, and £13 million will hopefully be achieved in the next Budget period. I will not be deterred from the job at hand. It is a fantastic opportunity to bring public sector jobs into a rural area. There are not too many Members who would not support that measure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I should have announced that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer and that question 12 has been transferred to DRD for a written answer. Paul Girvan is not in his place to ask question 4.

Veterinary Medicine

5. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the decision to freeze tuition fees, what action can be taken to assist students who want to study veterinary medicine as there are currently no courses available locally. (AQO 401/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department and the agrifood sector have a clear and ongoing need for trained veterinary professionals. Recently, I met representatives of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association and listened to their concerns about the consequences of high tuition fees for students who wish to study veterinary medicine. It is an issue, of course, that affects more than veterinary students. I have considerable personal sympathy with the challenges that future students will face.

I acknowledge that there are no veterinary medicine courses available locally, but they are available in Dublin and at seven universities in Britain. Institutions in Britain that charge higher fees will offer bursaries to students from low-income backgrounds as part of their access arrangements. Students from the North will also be able to avail themselves of the means-tested support arrangements offered by DEL if they are from lower-income households. I understand that no tuition fees are chargeable to those who wish to study in Dublin, although there is a registration fee, which is reimbursed by DEL.

I have already relayed the concerns expressed to me by the professional veterinary bodies to the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I intend to meet him to seek an assurance that he will keep the issue under review. In the meantime, I have reviewed the supply of veterinary professionals locally and am satisfied that there is no current or emerging risk.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Obviously, this issue is a bit of an anomaly resulting from the very welcome decision that the Executive took on tuition fees. I am pleased to learn that there are courses available on the island and that there is no additional charge for people travelling down to Dublin from the North.

Involvement in the veterinary industry is a matter of supply and demand. Will the Minister give an assessment of the supply of veterinary professionals locally?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. DARD's primary interest is in the availability of veterinary professionals to meet the requirements of the local agrifood industry and DARD. You will appreciate that there is an important distinction between that requirement and the much wider issue of enabling students

from the North to attend veterinary courses or any other courses in Britain.

The availability of veterinary surgeons and other trends in the veterinary profession is regularly surveyed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, which publishes the reports on its website. The most recent survey does not indicate any impending shortfall in the number of veterinary surgeons, nor has the Department identified any such difficulties in the North. Furthermore, research on forecasting future skills needs in the North that was undertaken by DEL in 2009 shows that the supply of veterinary science graduates is projected to meet the indicative graduate requirement until 2020. Supply will meet the projected demand.

There is no evidence of an immediate or foreseeable risk to the supply of veterinary professionals in the North of Ireland. The royal college's regular monitoring of the position will provide an early warning if any such risk emerges. There is no departmental requirement for DARD to pursue specific actions at this stage. Indeed, that could be counterproductive. However, I will continue to keep the position under review. I will continue to work closely with the royal college and to ensure that we are fit for purpose and can meet our targets.

Mr Frew: Has the Minister looked at her budget in respect of the freeze in tuition fees? Where will the shortfall in her budget be made up from? Will she remind the House exactly how much DARD has lost?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As the scrutiny Committee is involved in scrutinising the DARD budget, I am sure that the Member is aware that it is very difficult for all Departments. We have to meet particular challenges, but we are trying to meet our efficiency savings through back room costs and other things that do not impact our farmers directly. I can provide a more detailed breakdown if the Member needs it.

2.15 pm

We in DARD have to look at the issue of tuition fees. Our tuition fees are different because our colleges are different. We were delighted that we did not have to increase charges in this Budget period except by the current inflation rate. That is the position for the 2011-12 period, and, given the budgetary discussions, we will keep that under review over the next year.

Another issue that has been raised is that of students coming from Britain and elsewhere and whether they would displace some of our students. We will have to review that situation because the displacement of any of our local students would not be in anyone's interest.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the Minister's engagement with local veterinary associations to discuss this matter. Can she give the House an estimate of the potential learner uptake if veterinary medicine courses were offered locally? Does she have figures detailing the number of people from Northern Ireland who have travelled to other parts of the UK to study veterinary science over, say, the past five years?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures in my briefing today, but I am happy to provide them. The veterinary associations with which I have been speaking have told me that quite a number of students travel every year. We are meeting our supply and demand needs for veterinary surgeons. I am meeting those associations again over the next months and will raise that issue with them. There do not seem to be any problems at this stage, but I am happy to provide the Member with details of the number of students who travel to Britain or elsewhere to achieve their veterinary qualifications.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

DARD Direct

7. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will carry out a review of the DARD Direct project before any decisions on new departmental headquarters are taken. (AQO 403/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The relocation of the DARD headquarters is a separate issue and is not dependent on a review of the DARD Direct project. The relocation programme will follow the required approval and appraisal processes, as I outlined in answer to an earlier question, and any potential impact on the DARD Direct project or any DARD Direct office will be considered as part of the overarching business case.

The DARD Direct programme is concerned with delivering our services more efficiently to farm businesses. A business case for this programme was completed in 2008 and was followed by an EQIA public consultation in 2009. To

date, DARD Direct has been rolled out to seven locations: Enniskillen, Coleraine, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Mallusk and Newry. That leaves five locations to be taken forward over the next 18 months. We will complete a post-project evaluation (PPE) once that has been achieved.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply, but would it not have been better to carry out a review of DARD Direct, if that is the model that she would like to pursue, to examine whether the delivery of DARD services through that model could be improved, rather than spending so many millions on relocating?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member is aware that none of the DARD Direct offices would be big enough to house all the departmental staff. For a project of the size of the DARD relocation, we have to follow the Executive's procedures for business cases, approvals and appraisals, so the decision on what arrangements would best meet the needs of any future DARD headquarters need to be considered in the round.

The DARD Direct offices do a fantastic job in the locations that I mentioned. I have had the opportunity to visit some of those offices. They are a one-stop shop for farmers, who have told me about the advantages, and I do not want to take anything away from that. You mentioned a review of DARD Direct even though it was established only in 2008. I hope to have the list of areas that I have outlined completed in the next 18 months. I am happy to keep everything under review; we can always improve and do things better. You can learn only from experience and time. I hope that answers the Member's question.

Mr Campbell: Deputy Speaker, I am glad that you saw me at the third time of asking.

The Minister outlined the issue of five outstanding offices under DARD Direct and said it would be around 18 months before the deal was complete. Does she foresee the fifth of the five offices outstanding not being completed until 18 months hence, or will it be completed before then?

Mrs O'Neill: My intention is that the five areas that I have outlined will be completed in the next 18 months. Some of the problems to date have been around getting premises and negotiations with landlords. Officials are working at that constantly, and we are trying to bring those forward as quickly as possible because

we can see the benefits that are being afforded to farmers in all the different areas. A number of issues have to be ironed out. If it is done in six months, that will be fantastic, but I am setting a target that they should all be completed within 18 months.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to ask a question, I will explain to Mr Campbell that I called two members of his party. It is tradition that we do not call two members of the same party on a particular question, but we did call two members of the same party for that question. No one was ignored.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answer, but I also observe that the question is like comparing spuds with apples. The DARD Direct project is a great project and has been very successful where we have had it, but it is hugely important that we get moving on the departmental headquarters. Minister, do you know when the move out of Belfast is likely to be?

Mrs O'Neill: We have a proposed completion date of 2015-16, so we hope, now that we have the project team established, that everything is moving forward. I have to continuously push that matter forward, because it is my intention to officially open the office somewhere in a rural community by 2015-16.

Rivers

8. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria that the Drainage Council and Rivers Agency use to designate rivers for maintenance.(AQO 404/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Designation is required to enable the Department to undertake maintenance and schemes for drainage and flood defence purposes at public expense. Criteria for the designation of watercourses are used objectively by the Drainage Council to ensure uniform treatment across the North. There are two key overriding conditions: first, that the proposed works offer value for money, with benefits outweighing the costs; and, secondly, that the works have sufficient priority to be included in the Rivers Agency's programme.

There are five additional criteria beneath the two overriding conditions, with an application for designation needing to satisfy one or more of the following: first, that there is sufficient

area of disadvantaged agricultural land that is subject to poor drainage or flooding; secondly, that works to reduce existing or potential flooding are outside the capability of the riparians to organise and carry out at their own expense; thirdly, where works are required but it is not possible to identify the occupier; fourthly, where the watercourse requires works, but it does not perform any function connected with the drainage of riparian land; and, lastly, that works are required to provide an outfall for increased run-off from new housing and commercial development.

In summary, designation will be made only for drainage and flood defence purposes where value for money can be demonstrated and works have sufficient priority to be included in the Rivers Agency programme, given the competing priorities that we have for any available funding.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is useful to get some of that information, especially on the criteria. There is a river in my constituency, and local residents are being subjected to smells, trees are overgrown, and there are vermin coming out of the river. Nobody wants to take ownership of it. Should ownership not be part of the criteria? Is any liaison being undertaken by other Departments and the Rivers Agency so that we can talk to someone without being pushed from pillar to post and from one agency to another?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for that question. I have every sympathy for the residents, and I have dealt with similar cases in my constituency, where people have experienced problems such as those that you have outlined. It is important to stress that the work of the Rivers Agency and the determinations of the Drainage Council are concerned solely with drainage and flood defence issues. The Rivers Agency has no power over any issues other than flooding or drainage. Where a watercourse is designated and maintenance works are subsequently undertaken at public expense, it will only be because of drainage and flood defence risks.

The work that the Rivers Agency does with other Departments is normally limited to the environmental impact of the potential designation that we are looking at. That is the focus of any cross-departmental work that we do in that field.

Mr Kinahan: I am particularly interested in the liaison between agencies, which was mentioned in the previous supplementary question. However,

when it comes to the maintenance of rivers, is the Department taking proper notice of the river rights of fishermen who, in many cases, have spent large sums of money on a river and are not consulted before maintenance? Is the Department taking proper cognisance and talking to those fishermen before undertaking maintenance work?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is responsible for fisheries, and it works closely with DCAL, which has ultimate responsibility for inland fisheries. We are always mindful of the rights of fishermen. If there are particular problems of which you are aware, I will be happy to take those on board and deal with them through my Department or through DCAL.

Mr Buchanan: Given that we are facing projected 100-year flood level figures, does the Minister feel that the criteria need to be reviewed? When were the criteria last reviewed, and does she feel that there is merit in initiating a review?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, I am always happy to keep everything under review. I do not have the information to hand about the date of the most recent review, but I am happy to provide it to the Member in writing after Question Time.

Mrs McKeivitt: Does the Minister have any plans to review the legislation governing the Drainage Council and the Rivers Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: The Drainage Council is always under review, given that it is an unelected body. At the moment, I do not intend to review that legislation, but, if that situation changes, I will be happy to let the Member know.

Rural Poverty

9. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what her Department can do to address rural poverty.
(AQO 405/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to answer the question, because addressing rural poverty is a key departmental priority. Some £16 million has been allocated to addressing poverty and social exclusion in rural areas in the current Budget period. My officials are developing measures to tackle rural poverty and are engaging with stakeholders and other Departments to bring

forward initiatives that will help those suffering rural poverty and social isolation.

Some of those measures will build on the successful rural poverty work undertaken by my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, on access to benefits and services, rural transport and support services to vulnerable groups in rural communities such as elderly people and isolated young people. Those initiatives are having a positive impact on our rural communities, and I hope to build on that in the new term. Through the maximising access to services and benefits and grants for rural dwellers projects, 4,135 vulnerable rural households were visited, and 10,900 referrals to various Departments and agencies for further support were identified. Those actions will directly help those in poverty to secure a better standard of living.

By collaborating with the Department for Social Development (DSD) and NIE, my Department has been able to target fuel poverty. Around 1,000 homes in rural areas have received home energy efficiency measures such as insulation and new central heating systems. I am also keen to address social isolation, which goes hand in hand with poverty. The assisted rural travel scheme has supported almost 150,000 trips made by elderly or disabled people through the rural community transport partnerships. That has had a real impact on targeting social isolation among the most vulnerable in our society. Without that, some people would never get out of the house unless they have someone to call on them, which, obviously, is not the case for everyone.

Nonetheless, addressing poverty goes beyond that £16 million package. Although my Department cannot single-handedly solve all the challenges facing our rural communities, we must ensure that we target our limited resources to produce the maximum benefit. The EU rural development programme and the annual single farm payments also make a significant contribution to the rural economy and help to address the many challenges facing people in rural communities.

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

Mr Lynch: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. *[Laughter.]* What is the timetable for delivering rural poverty action?

Mrs O'Neill: I will be brief this time. We are reviewing all the anti-poverty measures that my predecessor introduced in the previous term. We are having a number of pre-consultation events, because we want to look at and build on our successes and achievements to date and the new initiatives that we can bring forward.

2.30 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Confucius Institute

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she intends to support the newly established Northern Ireland Confucius Institute in its aim to develop Chinese language, particularly within primary and post-primary schools.
(AQO 411/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's primary responsibility for languages relates to the North's indigenous minority languages, which are Irish and Ulster Scots. I recognise the work of the Confucius Institute and its aim to develop the Chinese language, but my Department has no remit in respect of the protection and promotion of that language.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her response. Considering the importance of the Chinese language as an essential global and business skill, will the Minister encourage the teaching of the Chinese language as a priority language in our schools and colleges? Of course, that includes the idea that you cannot understand the language without understanding the culture.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his response. I cannot impose anything on the Department of Education or the Department for Employment and Learning. There is a misconception that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is responsible for every language. I recognise the work of the institute in Coleraine. Other Departments have implemented diversity measures, but all that I can do is take on board what the Member has said. I cannot give a commitment to prioritise the Chinese language.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Nesbitt: There he is.

Mr Campbell: I will come to that afterwards.

I am sure that the Minister is aware of the recent visit to the House by people forwarding the Confucius Institute. They were very well received by a number of us, including the deputy First Minister, junior Ministers and others. Will she co-ordinate with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that, when the institute gets up and running properly, particularly at the Coleraine campus, the maximum usage possible from Northern Ireland goes across to China to benefit students here as well as overseas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet Mr Farry to talk about that, but I will not give a guarantee at this stage about co-ordinating that initiative. I am happy to play my part in development, but, other than that, I cannot give any commitments.

Ms Lo: I congratulate the University of Ulster on establishing the Confucius Institute, which is really a worldwide network across something like 55 countries. Will the Minister consider using the opportunities from the institute to have artistic and cultural exchanges with China? Teaching Chinese is not the only purpose of the institute.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that. That is where DCAL can benefit from the experience of the institute. I received presentations yesterday from NICEM and ArtsEkta, and they spoke about celebrating our diversity and all cultures. This is an opportunity for DCAL to learn lessons from people who have done that so well.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister, given the Executive's desire to put the economy at the centre of the Programme for Government and the consequent need for cross-cutting measures, will you adopt the Confucius Institute as a departmental flagship and afford it the same support as you are providing to the Líofo project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is actually pronounced "Leefa", but I cannot — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I genuinely appreciate your attempt. I cannot give the institute priority at this stage, but I understand the Executive's commitment to supporting and growing the economy. The institute has a valuable role to play in that regard, and, in turn, we have a valuable experience to learn from the institute.

Where we can join up work, we should do so. At this stage, I am not sure and I cannot give a commitment about exactly what role my Department will have. I will certainly ask about that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 6 and 9 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

World Police and Fire Games

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline preparations for the 2013 World Police and Fire Games. (AQO 412/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The World Police and Fire Games will be the biggest sporting event ever hosted in Belfast. It will attract in the region of 10,000 competitors supported by at least 15,000 family members and friends from approximately 60 countries. It is estimated that the economic benefit to the North will be in the region of £15.5 million, but that is a fairly conservative estimate that does not take into account that visitors will return to the North. Additionally, the games will bring the benefit of having a positive impact on sport; create a good and strong image of here internationally; boost tourism; enhance social cohesion, and create a legacy effect. Above all else, the games will promote the reputation of the Police Service, the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service at home and abroad.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for her answer. At the games in New York this year, there were more than 90 events, ranging from track and field to beach volleyball.

Mr Wells: Which one are you interested in?

Mr Dickson: They do not do it in fields, apparently.

Minister, bearing in mind that, year on year, each country that has hosted the games has attempted to improve on the facilities of the country that held the games previously, are you confident that Northern Ireland has the appropriate high standard of sporting facilities to deliver more than 90 sports? Given the superb facilities at New York this year, can she guarantee that Northern Ireland will have state-of-the-art facilities for the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Hopefully, a final decision on which facilities and venues will be used will be made in the autumn, and we will then look at what we can do and how we can broaden that out. Not every country had a team competing

in every discipline. Although I do not think that many beach volleyball teams will be competing — but they may — I am happy to say that our beaches have received better approval in the media than has been the case previously. I am also confident that, although the games are being held in Belfast, the World Police and Fire Games board is using every opportunity to examine facilities across the North. In conjunction with the services, the board will be looking to see where else we can maximise opportunities.

Miss McIlveen: Is the Minister aware of any concerns among the relevant stakeholders as regards the 2013 World Police and Fire Games delivery body, which was set up by her Department? Given that that body and its chief executive are crucial to the success of the games, does she have confidence in them to deliver the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right to say that that is crucial, and I am not aware of any concerns about the World Police and Fire Games board. I am happy to speak to the Member if she wishes to share any concerns with me. Thus far, I have confidence in the chief executive, but I would welcome any Member bringing any concerns regarding that to my attention. If there are issues that need to be resolved, I would like to do so as soon as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will other parts of the North benefit from the World Police and Fire Games, which are to be hosted in Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Belfast made a bid for the World Police and Fire Games and will be hosting them, but it is anticipated that there is potential for other sporting venues across the North to be used. I said that at least 15,000 friends and family members will come here for the games. When I was in New York, some of the athletes' families said that they were prepared to travel from New York to Philadelphia to look at historic sites. That might not seem a big distance, but it is a four-hour journey. A travel time of four hours from Belfast would allow visitors to see many of the attractions that we can offer in the North, and there should be economic benefits for the towns and villages where the events might take place.

Mrs McKeivitt: On the back of her visit to New York along with departmental officials, what lessons has the Minister learnt that would be beneficial to here, particularly lessons about the weather?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The hurricane coming to New York and its impact on the games was regrettable. When I met the athletes at the Javits Center and during the registration process, there was quite a buzz about the place.

The Member asks what lessons I have learnt. I have some observations that I intend to share with the 2013 World Police and Fire Games board. The opening ceremony in New York took hours and hours, because of the thousands of athletes who were competing. We have a history of parading here in the North, and I am sure that we could do things a lot better and a lot quicker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I understand that there are some amplification problems. Members should indicate if they are unable to hear, and the technical people may be able to deal with the problem.

2012 Olympics: Training

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there are any discussions to bring more Olympic teams to train in Northern Ireland ahead of the 2012 London Olympics.
(AQO 413/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in Sport NI, in partnership with the governing bodies of sport, a number of other partners and my Department are holding a number of discussions with countries and sports to attract Olympic and Paralympic teams to train in the North. Those discussions are ongoing. I have made several announcements over the past four months about pre-games training camps and events that will take place in advance of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. For the Member's information, those include the Yonex Irish International Badminton Championships, the Australian boxing team and the Paralympics Ireland team.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that Northern Ireland has already contributed many millions of pounds to the 2012 games. Does the Minister think that the sacrifice that many local sporting organisations have made is justified, in view of what looks like a fairly low return on the investment to attract overseas visitors for the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand the Member's frustration. The issue of lottery moneys, which people feel should have been invested in local sports and local athletes, comes up constantly. All that I can say is that, at this stage, it is still

early days. Pre-games training and qualifying events — mainly pre-games training — are not due to happen until spring 2012. Through Sport NI, we are in a competitive process with other countries to try to secure pre-games training here in the North but mostly to try to secure qualifying events. That process is ongoing. However, I share the Member's frustration and accept that people have a perception that lottery money that should have been invested here went to London and that people here are not getting the benefit that they feel they are entitled to.

Mr Weir: What progress has been made on efforts to ensure that the Olympic torch route goes through every council area in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Other Members have raised that important point. I visited the Beam project in County Tyrone not so long ago. The torch may go through part of the town but not the main part of it, where it could attract and inspire a lot of people. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) designs the route, and I believe that it has met with local representatives. Mervyn Storey has constantly raised with me — I am sure that he did the same with my predecessor — the case of Dervock and of Kennedy Kane McArthur. It is important that we use the Olympic torch not only to celebrate the achievements of former Olympians but to inspire potential Olympians. However, the route is down to LOCOG. If the Member feels that his constituency could be used better or that an opportunity to promote it positively has been missed to date, he can forward information to me, and I will be happy to forward it to LOCOG on his behalf.

2.45 pm

Mr Copeland: Has the Minister assessed Northern Ireland's deficiency in key areas of sports infrastructure, such as a velodrome, on our ability to host pre-Olympics training camps?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With respect, those are two separate questions. I met a council delegation from Downpatrick this morning to discuss the velodrome and the whole issue of the development of elite facilities. I am sure that other councils are in the same position when it comes to competing for elite facilities in preparation for London 2012. However, when I took on this portfolio the budget deficit in the block grant that we received and the gaps in capital funding meant that we could not provide elite facilities because the money was not there.

Even had the money been available, not every area that applied had a robust strategic outline business case that met the criteria for capital infrastructure.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, what funding is available from the London 2012 organisers for visiting teams for pre-games training and qualifying events?

Ms Ní Chuilín: LOCOG, the London organising committee, offers £25,000 per country. Sport NI, through my Department, has received £100,000 a year for 2010-11 to 2011-12. In addition, Sport NI has set aside £50,000 for sporting bodies.

Regeneration: North-west

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what contribution her Department can make to the regeneration plan for the north-west region. (AQO 414/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has made a significant investment in culture, arts and leisure in the north-west in the past number of years. Major capital projects include the Playhouse Theatre; the new Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin Irish language arts and cultural centre; the Mute Meadow public art project; John Mitchel's GAC in Claudy; the Institute Football Club; and Newtownstewart library.

DCAL will continue to fund various activities and services across its remit, for example, sporting or arts events, libraries, creative industries and community festivals, to name but a few. Departmental strategies, such as our current 10-year sport strategy, Sport Matters, will play the lead role in promoting sports. I could go on, but I anticipate more questions.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. In the context of the north-west, has DCAL given any funding to Derry City of Culture 2013? If the Department has, will she give us a breakdown of it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The City of Culture competition was initiated by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in Britain and it was made clear at the outset that no additional funding would be provided to cities bidding for the award, either for the bidding process or for programming in the case of the successful city. However, I was in Derry again last week and I met some

of the key stakeholders involved in the city's regeneration plan. That delegation included representatives of the Culture Company, and, as I said in my first meeting with representatives of the Culture Company, DCAL anticipates receiving a business plan for funding for Derry City of Culture 2013. I look forward to receiving the business case for that bid.

Mr Swann: Taking into consideration how the Minister's Department is working on the regeneration plan for the north-west, what contribution can her Department make to the master plans for other towns and villages, including that for Ballymena in my constituency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Here is an example of all politics being local. Well done. The honest answer is that I have absolutely no idea. I know that that is primarily a Department for Social Development (DSD) responsibility. Look at the Gaeltacht Quarter in west Belfast, in which DSD is taking the lead role, although DCAL made a significant contribution to Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich. I anticipate that my Department will receive a business plan from the Member in the not too distant future.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister outline what other capital investment projects in DCAL's remit are being considered for the north-west region? Will some consideration be given to Gray's printing works in Strabane, which is synonymous with the printing of the American constitution over 200 years ago?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, that is another example of where all politics is local. If Strabane was not in the capital development programme for this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, it is unlikely that it would be funded. However, there are ongoing discussions with ILEX, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department for Social Development with regard to development in the north-west area, but nothing has been finalised yet.

2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how she intends to maximise the benefits from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (AQO 415/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department continues to work with local partners and London 2012 to maximise sporting, economic and social benefits with regard to sports, business, volunteering,

cultural activities and tourism. The games will encourage increased participation by young people in sport. The Sport Matters strategy sets out how we are developing our capacity to increase participation in sport and improve sporting facilities and performance. There will be an opportunity for everyone to see the Olympic torch and to showcase the North to the rest of the world.

As I said previously, work continues to attract Olympic-related business. More than 40 companies have won contracts estimated to be in excess of £40 million, which will help to create and sustain jobs. Invest NI continues to work with local businesses to encourage them to register and bid for further contracts that are available through the London 2012 network. We are working hard with Volunteer Now to increase the capacity and capability of volunteers, and that will help to develop major events planned for 2013 and beyond.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is particularly good to hear that 40 companies are involved already. What meetings has she had with the Minister of Education to ensure that all schools benefit from being part of the UK-wide Olympic experience and, in an effort to make it local, those in South Antrim?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are good, I have to say. I do not know whether you heard Lord Coe's interview yesterday on Radio Ulster about the participation of schools in the programmes thus far. There is room and development opportunities for other schools. By 2012, however, it is estimated that 30,000 schoolchildren will have taken part, which includes the Activ8 and the 5 Star Disability Sports Challenge. I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Education on the matter so far, other than to provide progress reports to the Department on the uptake of those programmes.

Mr Humphrey: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that she is looking forward to improved facilities for Northern Ireland. Are her Department and Sport Northern Ireland committed to ensuring the upgrade of the Dame Mary Peters track at Upper Malone?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have the budget for it. However, that does not mean that I cannot accept a business case or try to prepare for the next CSR period? I am happy to do that. I will find out the exact position with Sport NI. I know that there have been discussions with the athletics

association. I will get an up-to-date position on the capital and revenue aspects of the Mary Peters track and forward it to the Member.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answers. We have a tremendous culture of volunteerism here, and people have acted as volunteers in different capacities. Will the Minister take steps to encourage volunteers for the Olympics and Paralympics, and will she tell us what those steps might be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that, where possible, every Department promotes volunteerism and uses the skills and expertise that we have in the North.

Since taking up office, I have worked with Volunteer Now on preparing for London 2012, the World Police and Fire Games and, indeed, the Commonwealth Games. Not only has it made sure that everybody is registered, but it is providing training, interviewing and volunteers for those events and more. I have been nothing but impressed with what I have seen so far.

Líofa 2015

7. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline progress on the uptake of her Department's Líofa 2015 campaign. (AQO 417/11-15)

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many people have signed up for Líofa 2015 since it was launched. (AQO 418/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I shall answer questions 7 and 8 together.

So far, progress on the Líofa 2015 campaign has been very good. In answer to question 8, in just three weeks, almost 600 people have signed up. There has been a lot of positive media coverage, and people see it for what it is: a genuine initiative to broaden the appeal of the Irish language. In such a short time, progress with and uptake of the Líofa 2015 initiative has been very good.

Ms J McCann: I congratulate the Minister on the Líofa 2015 initiative and on its success to date. When does the Minister intend to bring forward proposals for an Irish language Act?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have said repeatedly, I intend to bring forward proposals for legislation to

protect the Irish language, in the same vein that the Scots Gàidhlig and Welsh languages have been protected in legislation. The Department is carrying out a significant scoping study, but I do not anticipate anything from that exercise coming to me until early in the new year.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response to my question. To date, 600 people have signed up to Líofo 2015. Will the Minister outline in greater detail the numbers representing both communities in Northern Ireland who have signed up? I understand that the difficulty with registering online is that people cannot signify which community they come from.

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be honest, it is a problem under data protection legislation, but it does not really matter. However, many people who attended the Líofo 2015 launch and indicated their desire to sign up to it identified themselves to me as members of the Protestant/unionist community. I do not know whether they have since signed up for the initiative or, indeed, whether anybody from other communities has. I cannot identify such things. One of the benefits of Líofo 2015 is that people can sign up and find out where their nearest class is, regardless of their background. Nevertheless, I appreciate the sentiment behind the Member's question.

Mr Irwin: The Minister received a business case for the campaign. How much will the project cost over the next four years? Does she have similar plans for Ulster Scots?

Ms Ní Chuilín: So far, the cost has been just over £2,000. It is about using existing facilities and resources; it is not about additional resources and spending money simply because it is a departmental initiative. It is about directing people to use existing classes.

I will meet the Ulster-Scots Agency within the next fortnight, and I look forward to hearing its proposals not for a similar initiative, but for something different. I have been told consistently by members of the Ulster-Scots community that their interest is not primarily in the language but in promoting their culture and heritage. I am happy to meet the agency to see how we can take forward initiatives to promote its work.

3.00 pm

Private Members' Business

Rural Businesses

Debate resumed on motion:

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.—
[Mr McQuillan]*

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún, agus beidh mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta dó. I support the motion, which allows Members to highlight the particular needs of rural businesses. What immediately comes to my mind is the issue of broadband. Later today, broadband, specifically the broadband needs of a particular rural community in west Tyrone, will be the subject of the Adjournment debate, and I will address the issue in more detail then. For the current debate, suffice it to say that the absence of proper broadband provision constitutes a major obstacle to rural businesses, as it reduces their competitiveness. People want to conduct their business online as much as possible. They want to carry out marketing and research activities and to receive orders via the internet. They are duty-bound, for example, to make PAYE returns online, and the same obligation will come into effect for VAT in April 2012. In rural areas, businesspeople, including farmers who want to apply for grants online, find the poor connectivity disabling. Any provision of high-speed broadband in many rural communities, if there even is a service, is usually intermittent at best and more costly than using a landline.

I also think specifically of the decline in the construction industry, which is hugely important in rural areas and communities. I am grateful to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for being present for the debate. Perhaps it would be possible for her to include in her response something of the Department of Agriculture and Regional Development's (DARD) commitment to rural broadband.

Ms Gildernew: The House must understand how the lack of access to broadband handicaps and causes detriment to rural businesses. I cannot get broadband at home, and many businesses

and A-level students complain bitterly about not having access. Members will probably hear that the North is 100% enabled for broadband. Although every exchange has broadband, the further away you are from an exchange, the less your chance of getting it.

DARD has contributed significantly to a number of boxes to try to enhance rural access. Ultimately, however, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has responsibility for broadband and is, therefore, the key Department. Despite DARD's trying to help, significant areas of the North still have no access to broadband, and that is a shame.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for her contribution and support everything that she said. I trust that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will attend the Adjournment debate on broadband and that, coming from a rural background, she will understand the issue.

The construction industry accounts for 17% of employment in rural areas. Rural communities and businesses are, therefore, hit particularly badly when that industry suffers a decline, as is happening at this time. Perhaps the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would also outline whether her Department has any capital programmes or schemes that it intends to roll out over the next 18 months. I am a member of the Assembly all-party group on the construction industry, and we have made it our business to ask all Ministers what their capital priorities are and whether any scheme might get under way within the next 18 months.

My third and final point is on signage. I have considerable sympathy for those businesses in rural areas whose failure to attract business or their loss of business is at least partly as a consequence of there being no directional signage. I have made representations to Roads Service's western division about a plant hire company at Aghadulla Road, which is just off the A32 from Omagh to Dromore, and on behalf of bed and breakfast providers in mid-Tyrone. It makes sense to have a relaxation of the policy there. I am not talking about the brown tourism-type signage for a plant hire company; I am talking about the black-on-white direction signs.

Community, recreation and sporting facilities should also be given some consideration,

because, very often, where there have been sporting fixtures and football matches in rural communities, ambulances have passed the road where a young player has laid injured on a football pitch, for example. I know that that has happened in Dregish and Drumragh in west Tyrone. I highlight those two places where I believe Roads Service should relax the signage requirements.

If you are not allowed to put up any structure that is likely to act as a visual distraction for drivers, what the hell are the balls on the Falls about?

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

Mr McElduff: The ball within a ball at the end of the motorway is surely a distraction to motorists.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the issue today, and I thank my party colleagues for tabling the motion. There is no doubting how important rural businesses are to the local economy in Northern Ireland. In my constituency, there are many very successful rural businesses making a good name for themselves across the Province and in markets further afield. I can think of Gilfresh Produce, Rapid International and Tayto, to name but a few. Those rural businesses are important employers that support our local economy immensely.

I want to focus on a largely operational issue for rural businesses, which is the ability to continue trading in harsh weather. I will focus particularly on last winter. I received many calls from rural businesses that had massive difficulties in transporting their produce to the shops and supermarkets across the Province. That was due to the fact that the rural roads were practically impassable, especially for larger vehicles. That had a huge impact, particularly on the agrifood sector, where the transport issues meant that the delivery of fresh produce to the supermarket shelves was severely delayed. In some cases, food was lost, and there was a cost to the companies involved.

In my opinion, the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) response to last year's winter crisis was inadequate. Of course, I do not criticise the men on the ground. However, I criticise the preparation and the obvious lack of grit and machinery resources. Some rural businesses, including two in particular that I know very well, approached me to see if they could buy grit from the Department of the Environment

(DOE) so that they could grit the roads themselves, but they were told no. That was a great stress for those concerned, especially in the week approaching Christmas, when large amounts of vegetables such as Brussels sprouts were going to the local supermarkets. Those businesses faced a great difficulty, and many of them almost ground to a halt at that stage. I have already raised the issue with the Regional Development Minister, and, as yet, I have not received a response. However, I urge the Minister to ensure that those key urban and rural routes are kept clear whatever the weather and to ensure that, come this winter, our rural businesses are not left stranded and our economy is not further damaged.

I have dealt with a high number of planning cases relating to directional signage and roadside advertisements. Planning Service has made a concerted effort to enforce the rules and to eradicate many road signs. I know that the enforcement section in the Armagh area has done that. Owners of rural businesses for which road signs have been up for 25 years have been asked to take them down. When the enforcers were told that those businesses had signs there for 25 years, they wanted proof. Believe it or not, some of that proof was quite difficult to produce. It can be a big issue.

I understand that there can be problems at busy road junctions or dangerous corners, for instance, where signage may not be practical. However, it must be recognised that rural businesses are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to advertising compared with businesses in larger towns or cities. In many cases, roadside signs are the only real and tangible way of alerting passing trade to the presence of rural businesses. Indeed, directional signage, particularly in more remote rural locations, is essential to avoiding missed trade and allowing ease of access for deliveries. The Minister of the Environment must recognise the difficulties that are faced by rural businesses and seek to support them through a sympathetic signage policy, which, while not spoiling the countryside through the use of oversized signage, allows for a sensible solution in which businesses are not placed at a disadvantage.

In Newry and Armagh, rural businesses are our lifeline and they help to sustain rural life, economically and socially. They must be protected and encouraged, and I would like to see the two

areas that I have highlighted addressed in an appropriate fashion. I support the motion.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I am confident that rural businesses across all our constituencies will welcome the fact that the Assembly is giving time to debate such an important issue.

Rural businesses across Northern Ireland struggle daily with the many barriers that are associated with running and growing their business in a countryside setting, and those barriers are made especially tough by the present economic climate. Those barriers often take the form of planning issues, increased transportation and delivery costs, and access to broadband, which, although key to a modern small business, is often unavailable in certain rural areas. Members will be aware that I have spoken previously on the issue of rural broadband in the House and at the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I welcome the fact that DARD and DETI are working together to provide solutions to an issue that is so critical to our rural economy.

As an example of a successful agribusiness, I want to commend Green Energy Technology Ltd, a Northern Ireland company that exhibited at the DARD stand at last week's National Ploughing Championships in County Kildare. This is the second year that the Department has recognised that successful growing business in that way. The company specialises in wood pellet boilers, solar panels and other emerging renewable technologies, and it is an excellent example of diversification from a dairy farm to an emerging technology company. It is also located in a rural setting, which just happens to be in my constituency of Upper Bann.

That business and countless other examples across Northern Ireland prove that, in the right market and with the right business plan, a rural company can succeed. However, support from the Executive is required for those companies now more than ever, and we need to look no further than the motion to see the problems in getting that support. The motion brings in three different Executive ministries, DETI, DARD and DRD, and that highlights the difficulties that rural businesses face when looking to the Executive for support.

Rural dwellers who may well have come up with the next successful enterprise concept are faced with an often confusing web of bureaucracy

when it comes to getting the assistance that they need. We must ensure that we do all that we can to promote economic growth by encouraging entrepreneurs to come forward and to set up businesses across Northern Ireland. If the Executive wish to support rural businesses, they must make it easier for rural dwellers to receive support and guidance. I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to work alongside her ministerial colleagues in DETI and DRD to foster a joined-up approach to providing that much-needed support and assistance to rural businesses. Given the barriers that they often face, some of which I mentioned earlier, and the present economic climate, we very much welcome and support the motion and its desired intention of increasing support for our rural businesses.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: The Member referred to some of the difficulties that rural businesses face. One of the greatest difficulties in getting a business going and keeping it going is the public knowing that it is there, which puts focus directly on the issue of signage. Does the Member agree that there was a missed opportunity in the drafting of PPS 21 to deal with that issue, and, if not, an addendum or revision of PPS 17 is an imperative that cannot wait much longer?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. As was stated by the Speaker earlier, the Member is not to be heard, and other Members should remember that when they are giving way.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. The ruling of the Speaker was that I was not to be called.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat.

Mr Allister: The ruling of the Speaker was that I was not to be called.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. Mrs Dobson has the Floor.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I have finished.

3.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the debate and thank those who tabled the motion. I would have liked the motion to be more detailed and the debate

to be longer because of the importance of the issue.

All our local businesses find themselves forced to operate under extremely difficult circumstances, but small rural businesses face particular challenges, which are generated by isolation and location, to which the motion refers. Rising to those challenges and overcoming them will require a bit more than road signage.

I want to draw attention to some of the challenges. Evidence suggests that the impact of the recession on the construction industry is affecting the rural economy more severely than the urban economy; planned cuts on public spending will have a further crushing impact on the number of public sector contracts and employment levels in rural areas; and the communication and transportation costs faced by rural businesses have a much more negative impact on their competitiveness — in other words, communication and transportation costs are much higher for rural businesses. In rural areas, it is difficult to maintain a competitive edge against rival urban companies because of the absence of an available pool of trained or skilled labour and training facilities to help development.

In the face of all those challenges, rural businesses that are trying to keep afloat in the current economic climate find themselves drowning in a sea of red tape and bureaucracy. Rural businesses tend, by and large, to be small, with a few exceptions. Common economic sense should prevail, and small businesses with fewer than five employees should be exempt from many unnecessary strangling regulations.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for giving way.

When the Member cites statistics, it may be helpful for him to know that the previous Minister for Social Development took a unilateral decision that the Department would no longer contribute to towns and villages with populations of fewer than 4,500 people. I am not sure whether the Member is aware of that. That effectively rules out towns such as Lisnaskea and Irvinestown in my constituency. In the last mandate, I felt strongly about the Department turning its back on the rural constituency.

If the Member felt that the motion was too short, he could have tabled an amendment to incorporate some of his thinking.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Member for telling me what I already knew; that is much appreciated. However, I am dealing with the motion as it is not as it may be amended. Debates on issues such as rural businesses need much more time. I appeal to the Business Committee not to treat every issue in exactly the same way; some debates, such as this one, should have priority.

I was about to compliment the Member, but she was in to attack and undermine me before I could do that. Some of those challenges were outlined in a rural White Paper published in March this year. My colleague will admit, perhaps, that it was a year or two too late, but, nevertheless, it was published. It is a good document, and its recommendations need to form a key part of a major debate on the subject and to trigger meaningful departmental action. I do not want to get into a debate between one Department and another, but we need joined-up government and Departments working together.

There are significant challenges, some of which I have had the chance to touch on. There are also tremendous opportunities out there, and I will touch on them quickly. There are opportunities in respect of renewable energy where we can do all sorts of things in rural areas. There are opportunities for rural areas in agriculture and food and in tourism. However, we have to clear away the bureaucracy to ensure that people in rural areas have a real opportunity to work and to do what they want to do.

It is very difficult to get a business going in a rural area. Believe it or not, I do travel and talk to people in rural areas, and I am very heartened when I see small businesses growing on the back of farm businesses that are struggling. Engineering and renewable energy are important, but there are tremendous opportunities in respect of food production and tourism, and we need to get our act together on those issues and make sure that people in rural areas have adequate opportunity to work close to their homes, rather than having to travel 30 or 40 miles to work.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus tá fáilte romhaibh. I am grateful to Mr Campbell and Mr McQuillan for tabling the motion and to all the other Members who have taken part in the

debate. The motion raises the important issue of Executive support for rural businesses. I emphasise the fact that it calls for Executive support, because, although my Department provides significant support to our rural businesses and communities, I am very clear that all parts of our Administration must have responsibilities towards our rural areas and rural communities.

DARD cannot and should not be the sole provider of support to our rural communities. My predecessor and I have worked very hard, through initiatives such as the rural White Paper and rural proofing, to get other Departments to accept rural issues as the main part of their business. Aside from the Department providing direct support for rural businesses, there are many other parts of government whose policies directly or indirectly affect rural communities. Many examples of those were given throughout the debate: reference was made to issues around DOE and the planning regime; DRD on roads and water and transport infrastructure; DETI and Invest NI on business support, telecommunications and broadband issues; and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) on skills and support for businesses. Therefore, it is an area where we need to work collectively in the Executive to make sure that we are supporting our rural communities and rural businesses.

Many Members referred to the rural White Paper. That initiative is trying to get an overarching tie-in from all Departments that have an interest and responsibility to support our rural communities and rural businesses. I wholeheartedly support the motion's calls for support for our rural businesses, and I want to take this opportunity to ask others to support those businesses.

Members raised many points throughout the debate, some of which are relevant to other Departments. I know that there are officials here from other Departments, particularly DRD, and they will respond in due course to particular issues, such as signage. It has been very clear from the nature of the debate that signage is an issue. I have dealt with it in my constituency in the past, so I am aware of the challenges that it presents to rural businesses.

In moving the motion, Adrian McQuillan talked about the importance of the agrifood sector, and that is not to be underestimated. Since taking

up this office, I have consistently emphasised the importance of the agrifood sector not only to the wider economy but to the whole rural fabric. The facts speak for themselves. Gross turnover from the food and drinks processing industry was estimated to be £2.7 billion in 2010, which was an increase of 8.3% on the previous year. In 2009, some 70% of sales were to markets outside the North of Ireland. That in itself illustrates an important source of export earnings for our economy. Therefore, the agrifood sector has demonstrated time and time again its ability to grow. Even given the current economic downturn, it continues to be a major employer for the rural economy right across the whole sector.

There are obvious further opportunities for growth within new global markets that are developing and expanding, and I have no doubt that the agriculture sector is capable of meeting the additional demand that that would create. We already have good foundations to build upon, and we already work closely with other Executive Departments and industry representatives.

From those foundations, the Focus on Food strategy was produced last year, but I feel that it needs to be taken a step further. What we need to do is to move it to the next level and to agree strategic targets for the agrifood sector up to 2020 that should achieve export-led growth.

DARD directly supports rural businesses through axis 1 of the rural development programme. We already provide support to rural businesses through the competitiveness element of axis 1. The programme provides support for agrifood and forestry businesses. One funding measure in axis 1 that I wish to highlight is the processing and marketing grant scheme, which is probably better known to most people as the PMG scheme. It is part of the wider rural development programme and has a profile budget of £21.5 million to spend by the end of 2015.

Since the scheme opened back in 2007, my Department has committed grant aid of £8.4 million to 27 companies. That £8.4 million of assistance brings an investment in the rural economy of at least £21 million to agrifood companies. I can report that we have paid out grants of more than £5 million against our commitments and are on target to spend our balance by the end of this financial year.

There is sometimes a perception among small-scale agrifood processors that PMG is for larger

companies. Therefore, I take this opportunity to reaffirm that the PMG scheme is also open to them. The aim was to test the market with small-scale processors and offer a less cumbersome application form and process for those planning to invest up to £125,000 in their business. I am pleased to report that we have had some success with that, with 22 companies, which plan to invest £2 million, close to final assessment. Furthermore, let us not forget the PMG applications from agrifood companies where the planned investment is more than £125,000, for we have 16 companies applying for up to £16 million. That represents continual investment in the rural economy and is to be very much welcomed.

Under the quality of life measures in axis 3 of the rural development programme, measure 3.1 helps diversification into non-agricultural activity and measure 3.2 assists business creation and development. A total of £40 million is available to assist the creation of new rural businesses and the development of existing ones. A further £12 million is available under measure 3.3 for the encouragement of tourism activities, and I know that some Members picked up on the potential of tourism in our rural communities. The measures provide support for larger infrastructure projects, but support is also available for smaller, individual businesses that provide tourist accommodation, tourism activity-based enterprises and craft facilities, to give just a few examples.

Existing businesses and private individuals wishing to start up a business may also be offered financial support at a rate of up to 50% of the eligible costs, up to a maximum grant of £50,000, to assist with building costs and the purchase of equipment necessary for the development of their enterprise. Coincidentally, signage is actually an eligible expenditure under that programme but is subject to planning permission. As a result, that is where it falls down and where the weakness lies. Further assistance is also available for bespoke training in publicity and marketing, again at a rate of 50% of eligible costs, up to a maximum grant of £5,000. I know that I have quoted a lot of figures, but I wanted to give Members a flavour of the type of support that is there for not just farmers but the rural community in general.

In addition to the funding provided through the rural development programme, my Department supports rural businesses through supply chain development branch, which works to improve

the capability of agrifood stakeholders and to help them develop their supply chains. It does so by providing advice on agrifood supply chains; facilitating better communication and collaboration throughout the whole supply chain; co-ordinating relevant training and development; providing focus and support for group initiatives; and maintaining a network of contacts in each agrifood sector. It also works to increase the uptake of rural development support provided by DARD.

Of course, we also provide assistance to rural businesses through our colleges, through significant investment in research and development and through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Some Members picked up on the particular difficulties with the rural development programme and businesses' ability to access bank lending for their match funding. I am aware of the availability issue. It has been raised with me on many occasions. My predecessor met local banks to discuss the impact of the credit crunch on rural businesses and farming and to stress the importance of how important the agrifood sector is to our economy. She also asked the institutions to look sympathetically at proposals from businesses that had a commitment from the Administration for match funding.

3.30 pm

The rural White Paper was mentioned on a few occasions. I have led the development of the action plan. The consultation process closed earlier in 2011. By and large, the response was positive. Some issues were raised with regard to tightening up targets and ensuring that they were realistic and achievable in the time ahead. I am in the middle of a series of bilateral meetings with other Ministers because that tie-in is needed. We want there to be concrete departmental targets right across the board so that when I bring the final paper to the Executive before Christmas we can move forward on a positive footing. That is an example of the Executive's commitment. The rural White Paper is an Executive project that is led by DARD. It gives a commitment from the Executive to support and protect the rural way of life.

Broadband was an obvious issue to which many Members referred in the debate. It is vital that rural businesses have access to broadband; if they do not, it can be to their detriment. If their access is not fast enough, they might as

well not have any at all. Incidentally, on Monday 26 September 2011, I met Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to explore what more we can do. During the previous term, DARD was able to put some funding towards rural broadband through the anti-poverty and social isolation fund. We are looking towards that fund again. There are clear gaps that we could all identify. I am sure that we could all name places that do not have broadband or have very slow access to it; therefore, we must take that issue forward seriously. Arlene Foster and I discussed it in a meeting yesterday. We are committed to working together to ensure that the rural community is not disadvantaged in comparison with urban settings.

In my response, I picked up mainly on DARD's work and what it does to support businesses. As I said, I will ensure that points on planning issues, DOE, DEL and so on are relayed to relevant Ministers. We all know that the economic downturn has created challenging conditions for all businesses but particularly for rural businesses. I welcome any further assistance that can be provided to them either in the form of additional funding or allowing them to advertise or to put up directional signage for their business. Such a move would help to level the playing field for rural businesses, increase their visibility, help them to attract new trade and help them to survive. I want to put it on record that I will continue to do all that I can to support rural businesses directly and to encourage others to take their rural responsibilities seriously. That is exactly what the draft rural White Paper aims to do.

I will pick up on Barry McElduff's points on capital programmes and what DARD is doing to get funding into rural communities. He will note that the farm nutrient management scheme kept the construction industry going in rural communities by getting funding to them. That was a positive thing during the past couple of difficult years. Other grant schemes that I mentioned earlier include the rural development programme and the farm modernisation programme. They benefit not only farmers but their suppliers, which is also good for rural businesses. Positive work is being done.

In finishing my remarks, I want to commend the motion to the House. I support it wholeheartedly.

Mr Campbell: The debate was wide-ranging, as has been mentioned. My colleague Adrian McQuillan moved the motion. He referred to the agrifood sector, as did many Members and the Minister in her response. He also referred to the importance of tourism to the local economy. He raised the issue of brown signage, to which Members referred repeatedly, and numerous Members talked about the size and location of signs. We all know and appreciate that there are difficulties in getting the criteria exactly right for the supply of such signage.

Mr McMullan talked about the problems faced by farmers. He also brought in the context of the Housing Executive and local councils and what they can do to assist. Of course, that is very relevant, particularly in isolated rural areas, where most local councillors are, in fact, rural residents themselves.

Then we heard from the inimitable Mr Nesbitt, who, I see, is not in his place at the moment. Among other things, he talked about his experience with satnavs. He may have an upmarket satnav, because he was a very well paid television presenter and a very well paid victims' commissioner. However, now that he is a more lowly paid MLA, he may get the variety of satnav that most people use, which makes mistakes. All of us will have read stories in the press about satnavs that have led drivers to local fields, quarries or pools. Thankfully, Mr Nesbitt has avoided all of that, because he has an upmarket satnav; good on him. Hopefully, he will long live to reap the benefit of it. When he moved away from that issue, he mentioned matters that were relevant to rural areas, particularly in his constituency of Strangford.

Next to speak was Mr Dallat, who is also from the East Londonderry constituency. He referred to the importance of matters such as help for rural businesses featuring on the school curriculum. That is a very appropriate reference. He also alluded to the red tape and bureaucracy involved in the setting-up of businesses, which is something that I will come back to in a moment or two.

Mr Lunn from the Alliance Party said that he had had very short notice to prepare his speech. I was wondering what the excuse would be if he had had long notice, but he managed reasonably well with short notice. He talked about the caveats and the problems that are faced due to the multiplicity of signs, not just in Lisburn but in other locations. That is accepted

by all, but it is not an excuse nor should it be used as a reason for Departments, particularly DRD, not to furnish the appropriate signage in the correct location.

Jim Wells also alluded to the issue of signs. He made the remarkable statement that he has come across some signs that are bigger than the businesses they advertise. I would like to see either the small size of the business that he alludes to or the large size of the sign that he alludes to. I think I got the point that he was trying to make. I will not comment on whether he may have exaggerated a bit.

Jim Wells also referred to the regulation that is required in rural areas. That is a point, and hopefully the Minister will bear it in mind. He also talked about flexibility being required, which is an issue that I will come back to shortly.

Barry McElduff referred to broadband access. I just checked the topic of the Adjournment debate, and it is about broadband access, so I am sure that he will have an opportunity to elaborate on that. He also talked about the importance of the construction industry, not just in west Tyrone but in other rural areas, which was a relevant point.

Mr Irwin talked about the issues that have affected Newry and Armagh. He mentioned local delicacies, including Tayto. I am sure that everybody who has ever sampled other, secondary crisps like Walkers, which are promoted by a certain sports presenter, will admit that they pale into insignificance in comparison with Tayto. That is a promotion for his constituency, not for a particular company.

Mrs Dobson from Upper Bann referred to the issue of green energy in her constituency, which was a very pertinent point. She also talked about co-ordination between Departments, which is something that I want to return to. Alasdair McDonnell also talked about the problem of cuts in public expenditure, which we are all very much concerned about and having to grapple with.

In closing, I want to talk about some of the generic points that were raised. Before I do so, some of the matters around flexibility have to be dealt with.

I have an example, but I will not name names, to spare the Minister's blushes. A small business in a rural location faced a fundamental problem, not to do with signage, that threatened its

profitability and existence. I asked for and got a meeting with a Minister, for which the business and I were grateful. The meeting was in June, and minutes were taken. Six weeks later, because no response was forthcoming, I made a discreet call to the Minister's office to see what had happened as a result of the meeting. The next day, the Minister's office rang the constituents to ask them the reason for their meeting with the Minister. To say that they and I were furious would be an understatement. I let that Minister know in no uncertain terms that that was unacceptable, and that Minister apologised. However, there needed to be greater flexibility not just in getting back to the constituents but in doing something about the problem. Not only did they take a long time coming back but the response was negative. There has to be, as many Members have said, greater flexibility in how we deal with problems in rural areas.

Another issue, which Mr McQuillan, the Member who proposed the motion, mentioned concerned a rural business in Garvagh that is trying to get appropriate and correct signage. It is having difficulty with Roads Service in trying to get that correct signage. While it is trying to do that, a local broadcasting company is with the business, filming for a series that will be shown on television over the next few months, and it is aware of the problems that the business is facing. You would imagine that the Department responsible would say, "We should have tried to resolve this anyway, but, given that there will probably be some embarrassing commentary on a television programme about us, we will get our act together and sort this out". Unfortunately not.

Those are some of the flexibilities that have to be taken into account in trying to resolve the issue. The problem of broadband access will be dealt with shortly in a debate later this afternoon. However, it is a major problem in rural areas because so many businesses are dependent on broadband access for their growth. If they do not have that, they do not have growth, and they have to move.

Depopulation of rural areas is an ongoing problem that has been around for many years, some would say decades. A multiplicity of Departments is responsible, but it appears to me that DARD, DETI and DRD are the principal Departments that can help. I am glad that the Minister made a response along the lines that there will be co-ordination. We need to see that

having a practical effect on the ground to deliver for rural communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.

Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society; believes that where the sector provides public services, it is appropriate that it should be adequately funded for this provision and any related overhead costs; and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.

I declare an interest as a member of Raloo Presbyterian Church, where I also serve as a Boys' Brigade officer. I am a member of the Carrickfergus Neighbourhood Development Group, a voluntary community group that helps in Love Lane, a disadvantaged area. I am also a member of the Carrickfergus children's locality group and a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which operates in Larne and Carrickfergus. I am also a committee member of the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group, which provides counselling and support to people who have suffered from addiction. I have worked with young people, in particular, to raise awareness of the harm caused by the misuse of solvents, drugs and alcohol. I am also involved in the Carrickfergus road safety committee.

3.45 pm

The motion refers to:

"the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society".

I suspect that our health service could not survive without the major contribution of the community and voluntary sector and the many specialist health groups that assist those who suffer from particular illnesses. We must recognise the essential work of Macmillan Cancer Support nurses or the Children's Hospice. We recognise that the health service is essential;

equally essential is some of the health work of the community and voluntary sector.

The community and voluntary sector frequently provides essential services and reaches places that statutory agencies cannot go. About a year ago, when the drugs craze was hitting our young people, the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group and Preventing Addiction Larne organised public meetings in the local town halls to advise teachers and parents. Indeed, I understand that many police officers took it upon themselves to come in civilian clothing to learn more about mephedrone etc.

The community and voluntary sector is frequently at the edge and provides knowledge that the statutory agencies are not aware of. I also think of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, which receive relatively little core funding for their headquarters. However, all the local groups throughout isolated rural communities are led by local volunteers. Therefore, a little bit of seed funding has resulted in a tremendous amount of volunteering. We need to reflect on the scale of the contribution of the community and voluntary sector.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action estimates that there are 4,700 voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland employing more than 27,000 people. On top of that, we must add the tens of thousands of volunteers. My own Boys' Brigade at 1st Raloo receives a few hundred pounds for equipment each year, yet 70 boys there are given training and experiences that benefit them. Volunteers do that for free and on a regular basis. It works very well, particularly for the older boys in the company section, in conjunction with the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. Young people take part in community service and volunteer, usually working with the young, elderly and vulnerable. That provides them with good life skills that they can take with them.

I was a bit shocked when I saw that the sector had an annual income of some £570 million, most of which comes from outside government. About 45% is public funding, about two thirds of which comes from government's direct purchase of goods and services from community and voluntary organisations.

Most people working in the sector have a vocation to work in it. It is not just a job, and they do not watch the clock. They frequently go beyond the requirements of normal employment.

I think of Carrickfergus Home-Start. There is a very dedicated central administrator, and the service is delivered entirely by volunteers who befriend families that may be struggling and give them additional support. Most organisations in the sector have relatively low administration and staff costs of 14%. Fortunately, we now have a Charity Commission to deal with any inappropriate administration levels incurred by those who claim to be charities. Most do not have significant reserves on which to draw should difficulties arise.

There is a huge variety of groups including small local groups such as the village playgroup, church crèches and mums-and-tots, as well as larger groups such as Bryson House. That has won openly tendered contracts advertised by government to administer parts of the warm homes scheme, deliver door-to-door recycling services for local government and deliver specialist equipment for sorting known as material recovery facilities (MRFs). There are also national charities, such as Barnardo's and Action for Children, which work with parents and families through Sure Start to reduce risks to society and help the vulnerable.

The question is this: why should government invest in and value the community and voluntary sector? As a former member of a local strategic partnership almost 10 years ago, I saw that statutory bodies frequently could not deliver the access and service that others could. At one stage, we had to withdraw a £100,000 contract from a local FE college because it could not get people into basic education classes. It did not have the outreach into the community.

I have heard that the YMCA is delivering successfully by working closely with the local community and by partnering a range of bodies and education providers. I have been advised that, last year, 21 individuals gained qualifications giving them a second chance in their education. Five gained European computer driving licence (ECDL) qualifications, five obtained GCSE maths at grade C or above, and 11 gained emergency first aid qualifications. That brings hope and encouragement to many people in an area of my constituency that includes the Northlands ward, which is ranked 37 out of the 582 wards in Northern Ireland under the multiple deprivation measure.

That funding is at risk. Changes in funding rules could alter some of the legs of the stool,

which could cause it to fall. I understand that small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) funding programmes are being offered but not for employment support costs. This is in an area of disadvantage and weak community infrastructure, and the difficulties around services being delivered entirely by volunteers will put them at risk and further endanger the area.

The Larne community care council has lost 100% of its children's fund support. It is located in the Antville ward, an area recognised as being "at risk" under the neighbourhood renewal scheme. Essentially, the care council provides a child-minding facility and after-school club. Its manager and administrative worker were put on protective notice some time ago, and it is drawing on reserves while it tries to find another source of funding. However, without a manager and an administrative worker, it will falter at some point.

Volunteers frequently cannot carry these larger bodies without help. It is important that this is recognised and that the good work already being done is not threatened. We need to get better value from what we are doing and better funding, but the Department needs to ensure that it is coherent and that it minimises the bureaucracy involved in the administration of funding. For example, Mencap has numerous contracts with different service providers. The community and voluntary sector needs to be able to get on with doing what it does best: delivering an essential service to the community in need.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I declare an interest as a non-executive committee member of the confederation of community groups of Newry and district.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, I will advise the House of information that the Committee has received from the Department on community development budget reductions to date. That information is directly relevant to the motion. In its regular budget update on Thursday 22 September, the Department for Social Development informed the Committee of a planned 25% reduction in funding to infrastructure support organisations that provide services to the voluntary and community sector at a regional level. The Committee was also informed that the new arrangements will take effect from April 2012, with significant

changes to current support arrangements and a clear emphasis on rationalisation, with the ending of current contracts and their replacement with more targeted support arrangements.

The Committee was also informed that that decision, while securing the required budget savings, enables funding to be largely maintained across key community development programmes and essential front line services up to March 2015. The Committee for Social Development expressed concern about the 25% reduction in funding because officials were not able to elaborate on the new arrangements from April next year or on what support organisations are affected. The Committee has formally requested clarification on those points and on the impact of the changes to advice, volunteering and other services to the public.

The DSD briefing referred to the Minister for Social Development's recent speech to the NI Council for Voluntary Action on this subject. I note that the speech, made on 8 September 2011, referred to achieving a 25% budget reduction through plans to advertise for one strategic partner or consortium to deliver regional infrastructure services. The Minister also said that:

"Broadly similar approaches will be used to support what we describe as thematic work — volunteering, regional advice services, support for women in disadvantaged areas and the faith sector".

DSD papers referred to a consultation exercise to review its regional infrastructure programme. I note that the 2010 consultation paper listed 10 funded organisations under that programme such as Advice NI, Citizens Advice, the Law Centre NI and women's centres and regional partnerships. Usefully, the consultation paper refers to the impact of the recession on the third sector — the voluntary and community sector — including an increased demand for key services such as welfare rights, housing and debt advice and the likely decline in income from investments, charitable giving and public sector income.

As I said, the Committee expressed concern about the Minister's planned reduction of 25% in funding to infrastructure support organisations. The Minister for Social Development knows that the organisations I have mentioned and others in the voluntary and community sector provide public services assisting the most vulnerable people in society, as the motion states.

At this time, as the impact of the recession hits the third sector, there is a clear challenge for the Minister and his officials to get the strategic partner/consortium arrangement right. I note that, in his speech on 8 September, the Minister said that he had asked his officials:

"to ensure that funding is distributed on the basis of clearly evidenced need, for clearly demonstrable outcomes".

I can assure the House that the Committee for Social Development will scrutinise the Department's plans and the arrangements put in place next April very closely and report back to the House as necessary.

I will now speak briefly as a Member, rather than as Deputy Chair. As someone who worked in the voluntary sector for 27 years before coming to the House, I have to say that the value of the voluntary sector to the community is immeasurable. I was a welfare rights worker in Newry, and the number of disadvantaged and vulnerable people who do not have access to statutory organisations and use the voluntary sector increases every year. We now face so-called welfare reform — cuts dressed up as reform. Indeed, in an article in the 'Daily Telegraph' yesterday it was very clear, as Treasury officials have told the Chancellor, that it is unlikely that the Budget will accommodate welfare reform and that the IT system will not be fit for purpose.

The point I am making is that there will be a much more focused need for advice services. Umbrella organisations such as NICVA perform an essential role, as do the Law Centre, Advice NI, CAB and other organisations. Those organisations depend solely on funding. They need sustained and proper funding.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Brady: They need guarantees that funding will continue and that they will be able to perform the services that they have performed very well, indeed, sometimes better than the statutory sector.

4.00 pm

Mr Easton: I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. The community and voluntary sectors play a vital role in our society, especially in areas deemed to be at economic disadvantage.

I have worked with many community and voluntary groups throughout the years, and I want to pay tribute to them today. They are Rathgill Community Association; Kilcooley Community Forum; Breezemount Community Association; Beechfields Residents' Association; Clandeboye Community Club; Redburn Loughview Community Forum; Whitehill Community Association — I hope that the Minister is taking note of all these — Conlig Village Association; Millisle Community Association; and Bloomfield Community Association. There are many others across North Down.

It should be noted that some of those groups secure funding from either central or local government and some none at all. Never have I seen such a more dedicated group of people eager to advance the fortunes of their areas and communities, particularly in tackling social disadvantage and education and health problems. I know that all work very well with government. Each Minister for Social Development has met them, from Margaret Ritchie to the new Minister in this mandate, Nelson McCausland. Those voluntary and community groups form part of the fabric of our society. Many fill a gap that successive Governments have failed to occupy. They act as representatives and lobby groups in order to tell government what they need and what resources they require for their communities. They know best, from working in the sector of their relevant area. They also provide a valuable resource for their local communities.

In a speech to representatives of the voluntary and community sector only a matter of weeks ago, the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, stated that he fully recognised:

“the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to civic society in Northern Ireland.”

He stated clearly:

“I am committed to ensuring that my department will continue to work closely with the sector to deliver social, economic, cultural and environmental improvement for the people of Northern Ireland.”

That statement has to be welcomed.

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, David Cameron talked about building a big society. Mr Cameron had no further to look than Northern Ireland to see how a big society works, given the relationship between the voluntary and

community sector and government, especially now that devolution is up and running.

I welcome the outcome of the consultation on the concordat for relationships with the voluntary and community sector, in which all consultees welcomed the renewed commitment to a partnership between government and the voluntary sector. I look forward to the publication of a detailed action plan. The community and voluntary sector not only acts as a lobby group for those that it represents but assists and supports various programmes. I know that there are schemes running in my constituency that help young people to obtain some basic skills, such as reading and literacy skills and computer skills, that will help young people when they are looking for a job. Many of those young people have not been helped by the education system, and such local initiatives to help and support them, coupled with assistance from the Department for Employment and Learning, offer one example of the sector's benefits and value in society.

I am keen to see a good relationship continue with the community and voluntary sector. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I commend those who tabled the motion, particularly Mr Beggs. It is an important motion, because it invites the House and government to look seriously at the role of the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. It calls in particular for an effective working relationship between that sector and government. Of course, this institution is based on partnership between Catholic and Protestant, between nationalist and unionist and among the political parties that have been elected to it. It is right and fitting, therefore, that we should be talking in terms of building a partnership between the voluntary sector and government. That should be the keystone of the approach by government to the voluntary and community sector.

The motion acknowledges the invaluable contribution that the community and voluntary sector makes. Together with other parties in the Chamber, the SDLP certainly agrees with that assessment, and long may that continue. However, it is insufficient for us, as Members, to simply acknowledge that. We have to put flesh on the bones. Through government, we have to assist the voluntary and community sector to carry out its work. It is not sufficient, therefore, for us to say, “Get on with it, and we will support

you.” There has to be a much closer relationship between government and the voluntary sector if we are to build a serious partnership that embraces the good work of that sector and the work that government requires to be done in the community.

There are certain things that government cannot do in the community that the community and voluntary sector can do, and do much better than government. That is the importance of the voluntary sector. I think of groups like the Simon Community and its work with the homeless. It is very difficult for government to deal effectively with homelessness at a street level. That organisation does so, and it needs the support of government. The Society of St Vincent de Paul is one church organisation that deals with poverty in the community. That is another good example, as are other church groups, from no matter which confession they emanate.

The credit unions have carried out marvellous work to empower individuals, families and communities to build financial resources and share them right throughout the community. It is very important, therefore, that the partnership is developed. We should listen very carefully to the voluntary and community sector. The green new deal emanated from that sector. Unfortunately, however, government has not responded to that in an effective fashion. The idea was to use moneys to prise further money from the European development bank. Government has not responded to that effectively. If government wants to encourage the community and voluntary sector, it should revisit the green new deal so that proper funding may go to that enterprise. It is money well spent, because it means that we will improve the quality of our homes —

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

Mr A Maginness: — develop energy efficiency and reduce the level of fuel poverty in our community.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I also thank my East Antrim colleague Mr Beggs for proposing the motion. I declare a number of interests before I commence: as a leader in 1st Greenisland Boys' Brigade Company, a trustee of Greenisland War Memorial Sports Club and an elder in Greenisland Presbyterian Church, all of which deliver in the voluntary and community sector.

I am pleased to be able to debate the issue today and to highlight the role of the voluntary and community sector. I will also raise concerns about its sustainability in the current economic climate. Voluntary and community organisations are working on some of the most pressing social issues facing Northern Ireland today. Organisations provide Northern Ireland with an invaluable expertise and specialised services that work to combat crucial issues such as preventing reoffending, preventing family breakdown, helping older people to remain independent, raising levels of educational attainment, helping lone-parent families to find employment that works for them, and regenerating and developing communities. Those are but a few of the voluntary activities that go on across Northern Ireland every day. The organisations have a wide remit, including giving advice, advocacy, campaigning and influencing policies and the delivery of goods and services. By investing in the community and voluntary sector, we gain value for money in front line services, which leads to financial savings in government.

Others have given examples, and I shall also give some examples. Jobtrack is a partnership between the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), the Probation Board and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. It is estimated that Jobtrack's programme, by working with ex-offenders, produces an average saving of £1.4 million a year to the economy.

Other Members referred to Home-Start. I was the founder chair of Home-Start Carrickfergus. Home-Start, with its 900 volunteers across Northern Ireland, contributes more than £2 million worth of work to the economy each year. It costs just over £1,000 to provide Home-Start support to a family for a year, and, compared with the cost of taking one child into care, it can support 40 children living at home.

LITE 60+, which is run by the Belfast Central Mission, costs approximately £50 a service user a week, compared with £430 for residential care and £570 for nursing care. Such projects enable vulnerable older people to continue to live in their own homes by providing them with services such as home security, benefit advice, shopping, food preparation and assistance with personal appearance and hygiene. The figures show that postponing entry into residential care by just one year saves £28 a person, and, more

importantly, it allows the older person to retain their independence and, quite often, their dignity.

The voluntary and community sector can also contribute to and strengthen social enterprise. For example, reference was made to the Bryson Charitable Group. It works with local councils, including my own in Carrickfergus, as a contractor for recyclable waste, and profits that are generated from its services are put back into maximising the environmental and social benefits that it provides.

I will take this opportunity to highlight a final example of the work of the third sector in my constituency. Seacourt is a mixed housing estate in Larne that has had a troubled profile in the past, both with interface and intra-community tensions. There was a waiting list of people who wished to leave the area. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland invested some £200,000 in the area to develop new community structures to build community cohesion and invest in community leadership. As a result of the establishment of the Seacourt Community Council, the estate has won the best-kept large housing estate competition three times, through local people undertaking environmental projects and working with agencies to refurbish and re-let empty properties. Housing prices have improved, and there is now a waiting list for people wishing to move into the estate.

As I and many others have highlighted today, the voluntary and community sector plays a vital role in providing services to our community. Unfortunately, it is also too easy for Departments to target it as budget cuts kick in. Yet, in many ways, the recession calls for more services in the voluntary sector, rather than less. As unemployment rates continue to rise, and with welfare reform changes on their way, there is likely to be an increase in those needing quality advice and practical help, and the sector must be able to continue to provide those services. Tackling poverty —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Dickson: Therefore, we must ensure that the sector is adequately funded to provide its services. I am happy to support the motion.

Ms Lewis: I declare an interest as I sit on the management committee of Antrim citizens advice bureau. I welcome the opportunity to

speaking about the community and voluntary sector. I am well aware of the importance of the work that organisations in the sector carry out. They play a huge role, and it is one that is underestimated and not often appreciated. I am sure that other Members will mention the work of such organisations in their constituencies, and, no doubt, they will stress the importance of the sector to them.

As a Member for South Antrim, I want to mention two organisations in particular. In the past few years, I have worked closely with Women's Aid, and the services and support that it provides to women and children are invaluable. I have spent time hearing stories of countless women who have received support from Women's Aid. Their stories are often tragic, but the work that Women's Aid does has a massive positive impact on their lives. It has been there for them when they did not know who else to turn to. I understand how important its work is, and it provides support to the most vulnerable in society.

Home-Start, which other Members have mentioned, is another organisation in my constituency that provides help and support to families who need help in managing day-to-day life. Sometimes, families struggle to cope with managing everything, juggling jobs and home life. That is where Home-Start comes in, bringing relief to parents and help for children.

That is important work as it not only provides immediate help to those who need it but has long-lasting positive consequences that help to reduce problems for children later in life, the cost of which the public sector would have had to pick up. That organisation plays a valuable role and should also be recognised. I am happy to support today's motion because organisations such as those in my South Antrim constituency do a fantastic job, and it is important that the Assembly sends a message to the sector that its work is valued and appreciated.

4.15 pm

I note that the motion calls for organisations in the sector that provide public services to be fully funded. I support that, as long as it can be demonstrated that the sector can provide those services with value-added benefit. That has become an even more critical requirement given the financial and funding challenges that we now face. It is only natural that every organisation that provides a service believes that it is best placed to deliver that service

at the most reasonable cost to the public purse. Although that is true in many cases, it is perhaps fair to say that, in a crowded field, we must now take more time to evaluate the work of all organisations and the results that they achieve with the funding available.

As Northern Ireland seeks to build on the new political stability but against a backdrop of global financial uncertainty, we no longer have the luxury of providing funding to a whole host of groups that carry out similar roles in different communities simply because that is how it has always been. We must look at new ways of bringing communities and organisations together to deliver real change for all our most vulnerable and needy. I know that organisations such as Women's Aid and Home-Start will welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their continued value to our communities.

The motion also mentions the need to ensure effective working relationships between all Departments and the community and voluntary sector. I endorse that. However, the nature of the relationship and the key to a good working relationship has been set out in the concordat for relationships between government and the voluntary sector, which has been endorsed by the Executive. I support the concordat and the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. I rise in support of the motion. However, I was surprised when I heard that the Ulster Unionist Party had brought the motion, given its support for the Tory coalition and its anti-community, anti-people policies, especially in the shape of welfare reform legislation, which is the single biggest attack on communities and the poor in decades and is supported by the Ulster Unionists. However, I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor for discussion.

The broad message and theme of the motion highlights the excellent work carried out by the voluntary and community sectors and calls for the Minister to ensure that an effective working relationship exists between government and the broad community sector. We are in a period where much uncertainty exists in the voluntary and community sectors about their future. Funding streams are drying up, and many groups do not know whether they will still be providing a service this time next year. The sector has never really been taken seriously by Departments even

though it provides a service for the most socially deprived and for those most at risk in society.

When you look at the briefing paper provided by our researchers and by NICVA, the biggest of all voluntary organisations, it is quite obvious that the community and voluntary sectors are big employers in the North. It is estimated that they employ 27,000 people, spend £544 million and that about 4,700 organisations provide a wide range of services to the wider community. That, in itself, is impressive but it does not take into consideration the spend that this money brings to communities and businesses across the North —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I am trying to get all this in. It does not take into consideration the spend that the money brings to communities and businesses across the North through services procured in the local economy and wages spent. We need to ask ourselves what our communities would be like if those services were not provided by the community and voluntary sectors and what it would cost for government to replicate the services provided by those groups. Would it be double or maybe triple the existing cost? No one can quantify the worth of the service provided by these sectors, yet, in many ways, they are not trusted by Departments and statutory agencies and are seen by some as an irritant that has to be dealt with. They have been vilified, audited to death and are often ignored and not seen as worthy of being brought into central planning when policy and strategy is being brought together.

Yet those people have many decades of experience in their field. "Partnership" has been a much-abused word that promised so much and offered a new way forward that was, by and large, ignored by Departments and statutory agencies which did not trust local organisations to make decisions about future programmes.

What about today? Well, today, things are every bit as bad. I recently attended a meeting with representatives of community sector groups and Departments, and the experience was painful. In one Department's case, no flexibility existed, but that was my experience of the same Department many years ago. That Department was the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Many other Departments and statutory bodies do not fare any better. Some of the comments that I have heard recently across the sector have been about civil servants being

more interested in obtaining control and authority than building relationships on an equal footing, which was promised by neighbourhood renewal at its inception. Many feel that the adversarial policies and politics of the past between civil servants and the community sector are back on the agenda.

There are exceptions to that. I have worked with civil servants who are good at their job, professional in their approach and care for the many projects that they work in. A look at recent NISRA figures on deprivation shows that areas of severe deprivation are getting worse. Statutory intervention over decades simply has not worked. We may ask ourselves why. Had there been genuine partnership, firm relationships and a lot of trust between Departments, statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector, I believe that we could have begun the hard work of dealing with generational deprivation.

To finish, some commentary from officials, individuals and some Ministers is that this is not about people protecting their jobs in the sector but the core programme: such people should get real. Without the jobs, the programme would not be delivered. That is an insult to those who work at the coalface of communities and deal with the most difficult issues. Many of them were there before the jobs existed. It is about the whole package — jobs and service.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Like many in the Chamber, I got involved in politics mainly as a result of voluntary and community development work over the years. That experience convinced me of the potential for positive change in society when people are mobilised and come together to influence decisions that affect their lives.

The motion is about recognising the hugely important role of the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, and Members have pointed to excellent examples in their constituencies. Of the many that I could highlight in my East Belfast constituency I will speak briefly about the self-help initiative, Helping Hands, an autism support group that is located in the Tullycarnet estate less than two miles from here. The project was set up by local parents, most of them women, two years ago and provides much-needed practical help and support on a purely voluntary basis to around

50 families. The people on that committee carry out amazing work.

Helping Hands epitomises that aspect of the motion which asks that the Assembly “notes the invaluable contribution” of such groups. The motion highlights the need for adequate funding to support the sector, and today we welcome the announcement of the social investment fund, which has the potential to make a real impact in disadvantaged and depressed communities across Northern Ireland. In addition, Members should support the First Minister and deputy First Minister and our MEPs, such as Diane Dodds, in their tireless efforts to secure additional funding through a new Peace IV fund for Northern Ireland and the border counties.

The debate should not focus on grant funding alone. Many individuals in the community and voluntary sector have long recognised the need for sustainability, mainly through the social economy route. This is about safeguarding their future when funding inevitably runs out. I argue that my constituency has some of the best examples of social economy in Northern Ireland, most of them developed through the inspirational leadership of Maurice Kinkead, chief executive of East Belfast Partnership.

Initiatives such as Avalon House on the Newtownards Road, Bloomfield House at Holywood Arches, the Enler centre at Ballybeen and the Hanwood centre at Tullycarnet, to name but a few, have transformed local neighbourhoods and restored a sense of community pride and, importantly, those projects are generating income to employ staff and to fund other local community projects. Success in motion: for me, seeing is believing.

It is estimated that those projects and other social economy businesses in the pipeline — there are a number of developments taking place in east Belfast — represent an asset base of over £80 million for the community and voluntary sector there. Those assets have been used. It is not just about encouraging local development; it is about attracting private sector investment and bank loans to work on other initiatives. For me, that is self-help and community development in action.

While the Minister is here, I want to say that we have done all those things in east Belfast through a close working relationship with the Department for Social Development. It would not have happened without its intervention.

The motion calls on:

“the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.”

We can all buy into that. However, I believe that the all-party group on the community and voluntary sector is the best model to take that forward. As a member of that group, I look forward to debating those issues at our next meeting. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: The debate has been useful. We have heard about the work that Members are involved in with different local groups and committees in so many different parts of Northern Ireland to help regenerate those areas. Members help and contribute with their knowledge and work in a collective way with local communities to give them a boost, particularly at a difficult stage in the economic cycle.

I declare that I still have an interest in the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, I am a trustee of Rathfriland Young Farmers' Club and a member of Rathfriland Regeneration Committee — like everyone else. I will not bore everyone to death with the list of activities. However, it is good for Members and councillors to be involved in those activities and put something important back into the community.

Picking up on some of the issues raised, the debate was all going terribly well until Mr McCann attacked our Conservative friends. When I am in Manchester next week, I will pass on his comments.

I hope that the Minister will address some of the issues raised. Mr Douglas touched on the social investment fund. We are so far through the financial year now, and we are concerned about whether that money is going to be used up. How is the Minister going to get that money to community and voluntary sectors — the front line — where it is needed and can be most effective?

All Members have described the work of the community and voluntary sectors in their different areas and constituencies and what they can add to society. Community and voluntary groups make an enormous contribution right across the spectrum of public services, and it is true that we sometimes take that for granted. We often underestimate the contribution that our community and voluntary sectors make in education and health and in people giving up

their time and talents to volunteer. We also underestimate the benefits that that brings, not only to those they help but to those who volunteer from right across the spectrum. It helps to make a difference to those who retrain and to those who just enjoy putting something back into the community.

Mr Easton has returned to the House, and I will pick up on his point about the big society.

The rest of the UK should look at the Northern Ireland model to see how we live with the big society, what it means and how they could deliver it.

4.30 pm

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

In his opening remarks my colleague Mr Beggs talked about the contribution that the community and voluntary sector makes to health. Health simply could not deliver all that it does without the community and voluntary sector — it could not afford to. Many of those groups can delve into and help communities with issues that the statutory sector cannot reach. The community and voluntary sector has a great impact on education and health. Furthermore, in justice, the Jobtrack partnership between the Probation Service and NIACRO has managed almost to halve reoffending rates from nearly 43% to 24%. That is making a real difference. It is not just about getting people involved and active; it is about seeing real benefits and improving outcomes in people's lives. That is where the community and voluntary sector can make such a difference, and improving outcomes for people who most need help from the government and who work to achieve it is the measure that we should always look for.

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

Mr McCallister: That is where they can make the biggest impact. I am interested to hear the Minister's remarks on the social investment fund.

Mr Hamilton: Having listened to Members from virtually every part of Northern Ireland talk about their personal experiences with community and voluntary groups in their constituencies, one cannot deny the size, scale and impact of the sector. It is clear that, across Northern Ireland, many community and voluntary sector organisations work day in and day out with some of the most vulnerable people in society.

During my tenure as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, as well as in my constituency capacity, I have had many interactions with community and voluntary sector groups, and one thing that comes forward is that there is a feeling that they are sometimes underappreciated and receive little praise and acknowledgement for their work. Therefore, if nothing else, today's debate gives us an opportunity to put on record our thanks and praise for their work and to acknowledge their great contribution to Northern Ireland society.

Despite that perception, their contribution is recognised by the Government at Stormont, and the concordat puts that appreciation into words. I hope that the Minister robustly enforces that across government in Northern Ireland. Such appreciation is also manifest in the confidence exhibited by the public sector in asking community and voluntary sector organisations to deliver services on its behalf for the people of Northern Ireland. That is not done in any way as a favour to the community and voluntary sector. It is not a matter of giving services to the sector to keep it occupied; it is done, as Mr Maginness outlined, because the type of people with whom the community and voluntary sector invariably works are hard to reach geographically or, on policy issues, by the public sector. I am talking about delivering on health, education and skills issues to any number of hard-to-reach communities in Northern Ireland, both geographically and demographically, including people with mental illness, the elderly and those dealing with suicide issues. Everyone in this place, no matter how wonderful we think we are, must recognise that there is a panoply of issues with which the community and voluntary sector often deals but with which the government cannot deal as effectively.

These days, most debates focus on funding. However, at a time of very difficult budgetary circumstances, the Executive should be looking for opportunities to expand service delivery on behalf of the public sector by the voluntary and community sector, because, what often happens is that not just are they reaching vulnerable sections in society, they are doing so to a very high standard and at great value for money.

In these austere times, we should all be mindful of value for money as a watchword. We should be looking at opportunities to expand the sort of service delivery that the community and voluntary sector provides on behalf of the public

sector. As well as touching on good examples of community and voluntary organisations, we could all also give examples of where we have seen the fear manifest itself that the centre will seek to protect itself by passing on the ill effects of the downturn to everyone, including the community and voluntary sector.

In spite of the fact that we should seek to expand, if possible, the work that represents value for money, which is that done by the community and voluntary sector on our behalf, no one, not least that sector, should be immune from what is going on. That lack of immunity is being shown in some of the cutbacks that it is experiencing.

Mr A Maginness: Your last point is important. I do not think that the sector would object to cuts per se. The important point is that those cuts must be proportionate to its capacity.

Mr Hamilton: I agree with the Member. In fact, when I was Chair of the Committee for Social Development, a session on the Budget, which we held at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), involved about 80 groups from the sector. The point that I wanted to get across to them, which was reiterated by the Finance Minister during the Budget process, was that the sector should not be singled out or targeted in any way for disproportionate cuts.

The sector must look at itself critically, and I know that, in many regards, it already does so. It must ask whether the existence of so many community and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland is appropriate and whether some that were established many years ago, with the best of intentions, are still fit for purpose and delivering. There must be that sense of introspection across the sector, so that it can survive the downturn and consequent cutbacks in public expenditure and emerge more strongly than it would without such critical self-examination. Indeed, the Assembly and the Executive must also do that on behalf of government. Some work on that front is ongoing in the sector, but it is not simply a matter of giving it more money. As Mr Douglas said, the sector must look at how it can make itself more sustainable, perhaps through a social enterprise model, to ensure that it will be there into the future delivering —

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

Mr Hamilton: — the high standards to which we have become accustomed.

Mr Agnew: I thank the proposers for tabling the motion. Before I worked in the Assembly, originally for Brian Wilson and now as an elected Member in my own right, my background was in the community and voluntary sector, mainly working with the homeless. When a motion such as this is debated, it gives me the opportunity to reflect on the importance of the community and voluntary sector's work and the dedication of the people who work in it. I worked with the homeless for five years, at the end of which, largely because of the stress and pressure of that type of work, I chose to leave the sector. However, I am aware of many others who dedicate their lives to working on behalf of other people and to protecting and supporting the most vulnerable. Despite the personal toll it may take on their lives, they put the needs of others before their own. It is important that we recognise that today. It was interesting to hear Sammy Douglas talk about some of the work going on at Ballybeen. As a young person growing up there, I availed myself of some of those services. It is good to hear that work being recognised. Largely, that work goes on day and daily without the appropriate value being attributed to it.

The sector as a whole plays an important role in innovation. A lot of services that exist today, particularly social services, would find their genesis in the community and voluntary sector. Alban Maginness mentioned the work of the Green New Deal Coalition. I hope that that will become another example of a funded statutory programme with its genesis in the community and voluntary sector.

The sector has the flexibility to meet the needs of people who are falling through the net, which, sometimes, the public sector lacks, due to its size. I think back to my time when I worked in the homeless sector. I worked with young people who were coming out of care or juvenile justice centres. Our education services were, perhaps, not able to fit around the transitional nature of those people's lives. However, there were always voluntary sector services providing community education that fitted around the young people, rather than expecting them to fit into an inflexible mass model.

Yesterday, we had a debate on youth justice. That is another example of where the ingenuity

often comes from the community and voluntary sector. Look at the early intervention strategies in youth justice and the championing work of the likes of NIACRO. They are very important in moving statutory services forward by providing the evidence base. Perhaps those involved in a small pilot scheme can say, "We have done it; it works here. Now, can you expand it throughout the statutory sector?"

It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the charities operating in my constituency. Unfortunately, I did not hear Mr Easton's contribution. I have no doubt that he mentioned Kilcooley Women's Centre. *[Interruption.]* Did he not? Well, I will mention it, because it does excellent work. I know a number of people who avail themselves of its services. I have to give special mention to Positive Futures, a now region-wide charity that was set up and founded in Bangor. It does excellent work with people with learning difficulties. It was the drive and ambition of Agnes Lunny that set up that charity. I know that it provides excellent support to complement the statutory services. It is important that Departments see these services as complementary and that work is done together. Given the cuts, the sector has had to make more strenuous efforts to work together and to ensure that there is not duplication of services. It is important that government works with groups to support them in that. Perhaps the final piece of the jigsaw is the next step of Departments working together more efficiently.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Agnew: I will leave it there.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the motion, as it gives me the opportunity to reaffirm the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to civic society in Northern Ireland. If I may, I will address the important issues raised in the motion in reverse order, so that I can show how policy development leads through to action.

It is appropriate that the motion has been tabled to the Assembly. As a Minister in the previous Executive, I, like my colleagues at the time, approved the new concordat for relations between government and the sector in Northern Ireland. The concordat is the shared vision of government and the voluntary and community sector working together in partnership. It is shaped so that they can work together to build

a more participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive society in Northern Ireland, and it has been operational since April of this year. The concordat provides the foundations for partnership working, based on respect and mutual trust, and it offers opportunities for active participation by the sector in developing public policy. It creates the framework that supports greater co-operation, collaborative working, modernisation, smarter and different funding mechanisms, and it reduces the administrative burden. The concordat provides the platform for other policy issues and support arrangements, such as volunteering and advice services in DSD and across government. I intend to ensure that it is implemented robustly.

Although I am responsible for policy matters as lead Minister for the voluntary and community sector, that does not mean that I can or want to deal with all matters relating to the sector. My ministerial colleagues have developed relationships that relate to the business of their own Departments. For instance, many in the sector work closely with Edwin Poots and his officials in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Arlene Foster has the social economy remit, which is an agenda that I very much want to support; and, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Sammy Wilson has a particular interest in dormant accounts, which, as Members may know, he has been considering in recent days. The First Minister and deputy First Minister's interaction with the sector is also considerable, and others have similar engagement, whether it is in the arena of the environment, education, employment, skills development, culture, sports or leisure.

4.45 pm

We in government very much realise the importance of the voluntary and community sector to our society. The sector employs some 29,000 people across 4,500 organisations, with many more thousands involved in a voluntary capacity. Some £260 million of the sector's income of £570 million comes from government to enable them to deliver public services on behalf of, or in partnership with, government.

As the lead Minister for the sector, I see my role as being to advocate on the sector's behalf across government when the need arises. My role is to support the sector and to make sure that the needs and contributions of the sector are recognised at the Executive. That is why

I attach such importance to the concordat as the policy instrument that will help us to achieve that. I will continue to ensure that my Department adds value by convening others to share ideas and good practice, and that includes social economy organisations. My Department has particular responsibility for helping to support the infrastructure or the skills and capacities that are needed in the sector, and it spends up to £15 million each year in such assistance.

In the last few weeks, I have held detailed discussions in the Department on future arrangements for the regional infrastructure support programme and for the support of other thematic policy areas, including volunteering, advice services, women in disadvantaged areas and faith sector engagement. I have instructed my officials to ensure that funding is distributed on the basis of clearly evidenced need for clearly demonstrable outcomes that are closely aligned to my Department's policy objectives and that it is carefully evaluated. A number of Members referred to those points in their contributions.

My party has made no secret of its interest in looking at social impact bonds and alternative finance sources, including philanthropic sources, and in helping voluntary and community organisations to ease their dependency on government grants. The issue of sustainability was raised by a number of Members, and we must support organisations as they try to become more self-sustainable.

I appreciate that many thousands of organisations operate on an entirely voluntary basis without any recourse to public funds. That is particularly true in a number of areas and especially in the faith sector. In those circumstances, it would be inappropriate of me to force mergers or to insist on collaboration; that is entirely a matter for those organisations. However, it is a very different story when public money is involved. That is why the Department for Social Development did so much to light the touchpaper of modernisation, bidding for and administering the modernisation fund and using that fund to help support collaboration and the sharing of services. Since I came into office, I have seen examples of that, such as Omagh Community House, where many voluntary organisations share space and overhead costs while delivering many services to their community. It was clear when we met the

different organisations there that there was a synergy and a sense of mutual support as those organisations worked in the same building. DSD has also provided assistance to the Building Change Trust to drive forward work on mergers and collaborations, and it has welcomed the work that is being done by NICVA to help organisations to collaborate. It is important that that work continues.

Neighbourhood renewal provides a vehicle for engagement across government to take forward measures to tackle disadvantage. In the most deprived communities, it provides a flexible, local mechanism for statutory agencies to work together with local residents and voluntary community groups. Efforts to regenerate the most deprived neighbourhoods must be based on real partnerships, both within and between communities and with government. To that end, each neighbourhood partnership was to be representative of key political, statutory, voluntary, community and private sector stakeholders.

As Minister, I lead a cross-departmental ministerial group which takes forward the work on neighbourhood renewal. Its most important role is to ensure that all parts of government remain committed to the purpose and delivery of neighbourhood renewal by continually reviewing work in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

For those groups receiving revenue funding, including via the neighbourhood renewal investment fund, a new funding approach was introduced in April 2011 that seeks to maximise the impact of available resources by reducing overheads and duplication. Where projects were working well, producing results and providing value for money, they were offered funding for up to four years from April 2011. As Social Development Minister, I have agreed to invest more than £20 million each year in the neighbourhood renewal programme.

The principle that voluntary and community organisations must be able to include full overhead costs related to delivering a contracted service is one that I endorse and it is also supported by Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). As part of a concordat implementation process, we are committed to work with others to develop proposals for imbedding full-cost recovery within contractual arrangements between public sector and voluntary and community sector organisations.

I realise, from the contributions made to this debate, that we all recognise and believe in the value of the voluntary and community sector, and we have heard examples and experiences from constituencies across the Province. My Department is fully focused on supporting vulnerable people, the most needy in society, and we work in partnership with the sector in delivering social, economic, cultural and environmental improvement in Northern Ireland. To support that, over £60 million is spent each year on the Supporting People programme. Additional capital and revenue funding has been secured for the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, totalling £128 million, to take forward schemes for people with mental health problems.

As lead Department for relations with the voluntary and community sector, I assure you that I am fully committed to support the most vulnerable, improving quality of lives and ensuring access to services. We all cannot fail to recognise that the current economic climate has had an impact on communities. As unemployment continues to rise, so does the number of those seeking benefits and requiring advice. We have many people dependent on benefits; proportionately more here compared to the rest of the UK. Tackling the poverty problem, and the proposed changes to welfare reform being taken forward at Westminster, will be significant challenges to us all. I commit my officials to engage constructively with representative organisations on issues such as universal credit, social fund reform and personal independence payment.

The role of lead Minister requires clear leadership in helping to raise some of the tough and sensitive issues that confront us all when funding becomes limited. It is all very well to say that we prioritise the front line. The question is this: what does that mean in practice? What is the minimum infrastructure that we need to support to help the sector flourish? How, in practice, do we help voluntary organisations reduce dependency on government? Those are the questions that I want to focus on over the next while.

I will pick up on a number of points that Members have made. Some points I have already addressed; I will not return to them and I hope that the Members who made them will accept that. Mickey Brady referred on several occasions to the address that I gave at a NICVA conference on 8 September. That was an opportunity to set

out directly to the sector, and to engage with folk in the question and answer session, our vision for the voluntary and community sector over the next number of years. I found that very helpful, and those who were at the conference also found it helpful in setting out clearly where we stand.

Unsurprisingly, Alban Maginness was somewhat critical when he said that the Government have not responded to the green new deal effectively. However, I assure the Member that we are still waiting for the business case for the green new deal. I am sure that the Member has been here long enough to know that unless there is a business case for something it cannot proceed. As soon as we get the business case, we will look at it very carefully. It has been promised on several occasions; it has still not arrived, but I look forward to receiving it with interest.

Stewart Dickson spoke about value for money. He is absolutely right. We need to look at organisations to see those that are really delivering value for money — there are many of them — and to see areas where there is a weakness and where value is not being delivered.

Fra McCann referred to the cuts that were imposed on us by the coalition Government — those whom John McCallister described as our Conservative friends. He also spoke about the sometimes difficult relationship between Departments and the sector. That is where the concordat comes into play. We need to see the concordat robustly implemented.

John McCallister told us that he is a member of the Young Farmers' Clubs, and I discovered that the word "young" is obviously very flexible. He also referred to the social investment fund. I wish to inform the Member — I am sure that he will take this to heart — that the matter is being taken forward by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) not DSD. We have a role to play, as will other Departments, but the lead Department is OFMDFM. With the launch of the consultation paper today, I am sure that the Member will take the opportunity to respond to OFMDFM on that.

Mr Hamilton: Not to DSD.

Mr McCausland: Not to DSD. That is absolutely right. Steven Agnew spoke about the need to avoid duplication. That is something that we are very keen on. We want to get the maximum impact. At a time of financial constraint, which

has been imposed on us by Mr McCallister's friends in the Conservative Party, it is important that we ensure that we have value for money. Therefore, we will work with the sector to ensure that that happens.

I will close by saying that I am proud to be the Minister for voluntary and community organisations that are effective in achieving their missions, collaborative in working with Government and one another to tackle need, able to demonstrate the impact of their work not to me but to the communities of which they are part, and trusted and deliberate in working with my Department and with others for the public good.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was remiss of me not to declare an interest when I spoke that I am a member of a number of community organisations in west Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is very good of you. I call Mr Michael Copeland to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Mr Copeland: I, too, must declare an interest in — to borrow a phrase from Mr McCann — a number of community and voluntary organisations in east Belfast. This is not the first occasion on which I have been asked to wind up; however, it is the first occasion on which I have been asked to wind up a debate, and I will perform the duty to the best of my ability. However, I ask for Members' forbearance.

This is an important issue, and we have to look at the information that we use in order to decide what we are going to do. My belief is that, at some stage, we need the publication of the full register of charities, for example, so that we will know how many organisations actually exist in the sector. The absence of compulsory registration makes it difficult to determine accurately the number of groups involved. However, I have no doubt at all that the statistics that Members quoted today are accurate. I would like to use this opportunity when we have the Minister present to urge respectfully that he attempt to find a quick resolution to the public benefit dispute in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. It is an issue that has been dragging on for a long time, and there are organisations in the community and voluntary sector that are unsure of what their new or current legal obligations may be.

I would appreciate it if the Minister would bear those remarks in mind.

5.00 pm

I am sure that I am not the only Member in the Chamber who has concerned groups coming to them to say that they are genuinely afraid that they will see their resources cut, not because of the effect that that cut in resources will have on them but because of the effect that it will have on the communities that they seek to serve and the issues that they seek to address. Some of them have a feeling, which may or may not be real, that they are seen as a soft touch or an easy target by Departments seeking to rejig spending. I hope that the magnanimous and unanimous views expressed by all parties around the Chamber today will go some way towards allowing them to understand that we seriously understand their requirements and anxiously and earnestly seek to address them.

As the Health Minister said in his statement earlier, the community and voluntary sector makes an important contribution not only to the things that we know about but to other things such as providing services and assisting the health and social care sector to find solutions to difficult issues. Be it the former alcoholic helping others to fight their battle against drink or the students supporting a local youth club, volunteering builds a sense of trust and understanding. The fact that people freely and without expectation of reward — certainly not in this life — give of their time, effort and skills solely for the benefit of others is not unique to these islands, but it almost is.

Another point that needs to be and has been made and stressed is that local groups sometimes know how to do things better than large government organisations. Their driving force and will to do things make them do those things all the better and, generally, less expensively. It, therefore, follows that, if those groups continue to feel undervalued, whether or not they actually are, and to fear that their resources will be cut, even greater pressure will be put on them. The motion calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there are effective working relationships in the community and voluntary sector. There is hardly a Department or public body in Northern Ireland that does not deal or interface with or have knowledge of some of those groups. However, there is need

for improved co-operation and co-ordination across all Departments and public bodies.

As I listened carefully to what Members said in the debate, I tried to distil the essence, rather than the totality, of what they said by taking one key word from each contribution, in the hope that an analysis of those key words would subsequently give an overall view of what has taken place here. In a very good opening speech, Roy Beggs stressed the word “need”. No one in the Chamber believes for one second that we live in a society where need is not relevant or important. Mickey Brady, who has a long history in the field, used the word “value”, which is about how we look at and hold an object and where we place that object in relation to other things. Alex Easton used the word “dedicated”. It is a notion that someone will not be detracted or put off from doing something that they believe to be right.

Alban Maginness used the word “partnership”. What is possible in this life without partnership? Whether we in the Chamber hold hands and dance around daisy chains does not matter. There is an effective partnership here, in which we are all involved, be it the partnership at home, which is the foundation of the family; the partnership of convivial company; or the partnership of people who will not lie down and accept something that they know is less than what they can otherwise have.

Mr Dickson used the word “cohesion”, which is about sticking together, the inability to be separated, and the refusal to be broken off or hived off. Pam Lewis spoke well. She used the word “aid”, which means help and assistance — what people seek when things go against them. Fra McCann introduced a note of surprise, which was surprising. He said that the situation was getting worse. He went on to examine the past links between my party and damage to people, which was, perhaps, even more surprising.

Sammy Douglas, from East Belfast, used the word “positive”, which describes the refusal to lie down in the face of adversity. He mentioned Helping Hands — a group that I know well — Hanwood Trust and the East Belfast Partnership. Their work goes on day and daily behind the scenes to occasion change. Generally, they do not appear in newspaper headlines, nor are they mentioned in dispatches. Without their work, however, society would be a much poorer place.

John McCallister used the word “contribution”, among others. That is what each of us, corporately and individually, can bring to the table for the benefit of other people. Simon Hamilton mentioned “delivering”. We hear much about that in government. It is a mysterious thing; we really do not know what it means. However, we know when it does not work. In the case of the community and voluntary sector, it does work. Steven Agnew mentioned “innovation”, which means thinking outside the box and refusing to be bound by past principles or experience. It is the notion that the situation can be changed because somebody dares to say that it can be different.

All of those words sum up and distil the essence of the debate. I hope that people in the community and voluntary sector take heart from what has been said. The most important words were those of the Minister. He used such words as “shared vision”, “inclusive”, “mutual trust”, “modernisation” and “value”. Most important, he said that he was fully committed. In that statement, he must deserve the support and congratulations of the entire House. I hope that he will take what Members have said to his Executive colleagues, because many people in the sector need just that little lift.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society; believes that where the sector provides public services, it is appropriate that it should be adequately funded for this provision and any related overhead costs; and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Broadband: Greencastle and Other Parts of West Tyrone

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, I tabled an Adjournment debate on broadband access in rural parts of west Tyrone. Today, I do so again. At that time, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was Nigel Dodds. On this occasion, the Minister with that responsibility is, of course, Arlene Foster. It is not her responsibility alone, although she holds that portfolio. I welcome the fact that she is in attendance for the Adjournment debate.

The Minister will know that, in my capacity as an MLA for West Tyrone, I organised a public meeting in Greencastle. The Adjournment topic specifies a rural area called Greencastle, which is in the Omagh district. It refers to other rural parts of west Tyrone. That will resonate with other Members and their constituencies. I am sure that the Minister knows that I organised that public meeting in Greencastle on Wednesday 22 June 2011. It was a very well attended meeting, to which there was a huge local public response. From the officials’ side, the meeting was attended by representatives from Minister Foster’s Department, Alberta Pauley and Bill Stevenson from the telecommunications policy unit. BT attended in the form of Michael Speers, senior wholesale broadband manager. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was represented, as was North West Electronics by Scott McClelland. When I organised that meeting, I was essentially fulfilling an election promise to people in the area. During the Assembly election campaign, this was definitely the biggest single issue that came up on the doorsteps in that rural part of West Tyrone.

In the February 2008 Adjournment debate, I said:

“Information and communication technologies have become part of our everyday lives. These days, broadband is crucial for high-speed Internet connection to emails; for research; for booking flights or concert tickets; for downloading photographs, music or videos; for interactive entertainment; for the delivery of Government services; for assisting with young people’s homework; and for anyone else involved in lifelong learning. Broadband is crucial for everyone, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in efforts to increase the competitiveness of local businesses and to boost business productivity.” — [Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p348, col 1].

Obviously, that is still the case. Before coming to this debate, I spoke to people in the Greencastle community, who have very strong views on the issue after experiencing the deficit of broadband access. One of them said to me that the Government have made it compulsory for businesses to complete PAYE returns online. That will also apply to VAT returns from April 2012. The same person said that DETI had approved Avanti Communications, North West Electronics and other companies for wireless broadband but that that can be an intermittent supply and be unreliable and more expensive. Some people I spoke to said that they go to the public library for access to the internet. However, data protection is an issue there when one is making returns of the sort that I mentioned.

In July and August in the Greencastle community alone — a small, rural community in County Tyrone — the local community carried out a survey. There are 80 to 100 registered small businesses, two thirds of which said that they had no broadband coverage. It is a very entrepreneurial area. That small community also has 100 farmers, who are obliged to register the births and deaths of animals online and are encouraged to do a lot of their other business online, such as applications for grants and single farm payments.

More recently, we have learnt that the regional college in Omagh is holding a virtual learning week, where everything is done online and at a distance. Obviously, the students from the areas that I am talking about are totally disadvantaged and, indeed, excluded from that process. That is one of the reasons that the local community is seeking a meeting with Minister Stephen Farry, who has responsibility for employment and learning. It is everyone’s business and every

Department’s business, not just DETI’s. We have also raised the issue in the Employment and Learning Committee.

The Rural Community Network also says that, in response to any of its consultations about the draft rural White Paper, poor broadband and poor mobile phone coverage are consistent complaints from rural dwellers. Therefore, to add to the evidence base, the Rural Community Network is saying that it is consistently and constantly hearing those complaints when it goes out and about to consult rural communities.

5.15 pm

A key question is how the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment believes broadband will be delivered to rural communities, some of them remote, when the decision is very often left firmly in the hands of a commercial entity. I want to thank senior BT people such as Frank McManus and George Fitzpatrick, who have worked well with the local community, in particular since the meeting in June. They met subcommittees of the campaign group to discuss quite complex technical issues, and it is my understanding that there will be another meeting with local campaign subgroups in October. I believe that Frank McManus holds the portfolio of broadband manager and George Fitzpatrick is, I think, the senior network planner.

This matter is of huge interest to people in rural communities because, very often, people cannot access courses at their local regional college or carry out their day-to-day business activities or farming business transactions. The issue speaks for itself. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), an amalgam of, I think, 12 councils north and south of the border, has a telecommunications working group. They, too, have identified this as a major issue. In addition, five district councils west of the Bann came together, chaired by Cookstown councillor Sean Clarke, to produce a document. That was a five-council approach to spelling out the telecommunications issues west of the Bann in four councils in County Tyrone and one in County Fermanagh.

There is a huge evidence base, which will not be unfamiliar to the current Minister. I am simply lobbying on behalf of rural communities who still feel that they are being left behind. Investment has been welcome but, to date, has been inadequate.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. First, I welcome the good work that has been done by the Minister's Department on seeking to increase the speed of broadband and to get it into as many rural areas as possible through next generation broadband and other mechanisms. I know that the Department has put a good bit of finance into upgrading broadband and seeking to increase the speeds.

There is no doubt that broadband technology is used by many people in rural areas. As time goes on and technology develops, it seems that ever more people are beginning to depend on broadband. Some of that dependency was outlined by the Member who spoke previously with regard to small businesses, farmers and the unemployed, who are seeking to find a job through the internet. A lot of work done by young people in the education system is done via the internet.

There is a wide range of people in rural areas who are depending more on broadband. That increases the challenge of getting broadband into all rural areas. We have to be realistic in that there are still pockets of rural areas that cannot receive broadband. I am sure that we all get people from rural areas coming to our offices and making the complaint or raising the concern that they still cannot access broadband or the internet or that it is too slow. Perhaps some of them cannot get it at all.

We have been able to direct some people to other providers through North West Electronics. Once again, it works for some people but not for all. Although there are other options, it simply does not work for everyone. There are pockets in West Tyrone and, I am sure, in many other rural constituencies where broadband cannot be accessed.

When next generation broadband came about, the cabinet boxes were upgraded and people were told about this faster broadband, many people in rural communities felt that it was a godsend. However, it did not turn out how they expected, and some people were disappointed. That was down to the way in which BT advertised the new system. BT's advertisement stated that if people joined up to the new broadband system, they would get unlimited broadband of up to eight megabytes per second. BT did not go on to say that it might not benefit people living a mile or two away from the exchange in the same way.

It has benefited a number of people, who are appreciative of it. However, that is not the case for people who are further away. One constituent is continually on my back about the issue. That person lives in a rural area and was receiving 2.5 megabytes per second. The constituent saw the BT advertisement, signed up to it and can now get only one megabyte per second. I can assure you that I am really getting it on the back about this issue. There are still areas on which we need to concentrate. I am not quite sure how we get broadband into those areas. It is a challenge, and we have to look at it.

The Agriculture Committee is looking at the issue. I note that, in one of the consultations, it was suggested that we should look at the use of satellite broadband. That has proved successful in many countries with a more extensive rural area than Northern Ireland, one example being India. Perhaps that could be considered to see whether there is some way to get broadband into pockets in rural areas that are still unable to access it.

People are still raising concerns that they are being forgotten about and that, although other people can access broadband, they cannot. It is a challenge. I commend the Minister on what she has done and for increasing the speed of broadband in rural areas. However, I have to lay down a marker and say that there are still areas in rural communities that do not have it. We have to see what we can do to provide broadband in those areas.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate Barry McElduff on bringing forward this issue once again. He referred to the fact that the issue has been debated in the House on a number of occasions. I do not want to repeat the overall context and the technical issues relating to broadband. All I can say is that broadband is still a very vexed issue in many rural parts of west Tyrone and other parts of the North, including south Down. Many small businesses and private households are left frustrated and badly disadvantaged by not having access to the web network or the internet.

A number of debates on the issue have taken place here previously. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has been aware of the broadband problems experienced by many rural people. BT has enjoyed many contracts to supply broadband networks. I have to say that I am concerned that BT has a number of lucrative contracts but has not delivered. I

appeal to the Minister and her Department to revisit the assurances or otherwise and the contractual obligations or otherwise of BT in relation to providing broadband services.

BT has been a double-edged sword as regards the provision, or lack, of broadband services for many people. As Thomas Buchanan said, many BT advertisements boast about its broadband service across the North. That is not the experience of many BT customers, despite its “Infinity” advert.

I will share the experience of the Kelly family of Whitebridge Road in Carrickmore. I received a phone call six weeks ago from the parents of two university students doing dissertations. They were deeply frustrated, as they were dependent on broadband. When the system went down, they got a phone call from a BT official saying that they were sorry, but the service was being cut off as quality of delivery could no longer be guaranteed, even though those people had a contract for the service with BT. That manner of ending the service was a bit like a summary execution.

As Tom Buchanan said, we have been told since that BT relaid some cabling and installed a service box in the area, but it seems that the new cabling is not of as good a quality or as effective as previous cabling. Nevertheless, those people had a service, they no longer have that service and now they have to look for an alternative.

North West Electronics and a company called Meganet based locally in Omagh have been very good at trying to meet the needs of local people who want a broadband service. However, unfortunately, when the broadband service that comes through the BT wires goes down, there is nobody from BT available to deal with the frustrated caller who wants the service reconnected. Often it is North West Electronics, Meganet or other small broadband service companies who are asked to intervene and deal with the problem.

I want to pay tribute to North West Electronics, which has a contract to supply a wireless broadband service known as the WIMAX system. It is proving effective for many of the scattered rural neighbourhoods that feed off some of the BT boxes. That is proving beneficial in many parts. The Castlederg and Aghayarn areas have enjoyed better broadband coverage, and, as Barry said earlier, the Dregish area is now

enjoying a better service. Hopefully that will also extend to the Greencastle area.

However, given that we still have broadband black spots, I appeal to the Minister and her officials to get this fixed. This is a small place; there are only six counties and 1.7 million people. We are at the forefront of technology here. Why can we not have a quality high-speed broadband service throughout the North?

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. I have been a councillor for a number of years and now, as an MLA, I know that this is one issue that we hear of through our constituency offices on an almost daily basis.

I, too, thank the Minister for her commitment to improving broadband services in rural areas through the NI broadband fund. She has done that in a number of areas in the West Tyrone constituency, and I pay tribute to her for that. Councillor Kieran McGuire has asked me to particularly mention his area of Aghayarn and Killeter, where people have experienced difficulties in accessing broadband for a number of years. There have been many problems, which other Members have alluded to, so I will not go over them again.

My predecessor, Claire McGill, worked very hard for her constituents on broadband issues, as the Minister will be aware. She had numerous face-to-face meetings with BT to no avail. Another example of where there are problems is her area of Glenelly. A councillor from that area, Dan Kelly, asked me to point out that there are still issues in the Plumbridge, Dunnamanagh and Aghabrack areas. There are still people without access to broadband, including farmers with small rural enterprises, and domestic homes.

5.30 pm

One issue involves a small post office in a rural area that had no broadband access for a long time — six months. People in the area were not able to avail of the post office card accounts because of the broadband issue, so they were not able to pay for their TV licence or electricity and had to travel a number of miles to do so. In a rural area, not everyone has transport, particularly the elderly, so that, in itself, presented problems. Although we talk about farmers, domestic homes and all of that, there is an issue in some areas about paying bills. As my colleague Joe Byrne said, BT has done some

good work, but there is still a lot of work to be done in that area.

I also congratulate North West Electronics and Meganet in my own area, which had to come along and clean up after BT in many instances. In the Clady area of Strabane, there was a box put in, but it was six months before it was up and running and actually started to work. It had teething problems, and some constituents contacted my office to say that they were having to pay for the service but were getting nothing from it. Thankfully, that has now been rectified, but it took six months. I appeal to the Minister to look at BT's commitment to providing broadband to the people of west Tyrone. As I said earlier, I congratulate North West Electronics and Meganet for their work and their endeavours to upgrade what they have provided to customers.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I am pleased to be here to respond to the debate, although when I looked at Sinn Féin's website earlier today I wondered if there was much point in me coming here this afternoon, because Mr McElduff's speech was already on the website at 12.00 noon. I think it is a gross disrespect to the House to have his speech on the website before we have even had the debate. That is something that I will take up —

Mr McElduff: Here is my speech. I must show you it. It consists of hand-written notes. I spoke ad-lib. There may have been a press release issued about the broadband deficit in west Tyrone, but I think the Minister misses the point.

Mrs Foster: The Minister does not miss the point: the Minister has the evidence before her.

I will move on to the issue of broadband. As Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I want to see all of Northern Ireland enjoying the benefits of the high-quality telecommunications system that we have in Northern Ireland. In that context, this debate is an important opportunity to talk about the rural areas.

As Mr McElduff has pointed out, we have had debates on the issue before. As he mentioned, in February 2008 he secured a debate on the issue. As Ms Boyle pointed out, I met with the former MLA Claire McGill in January 2011, when we had a very useful meeting to discuss some specific issues. Then, just three weeks ago, we met a delegation from Cookstown District Council to discuss provision in that area. Mr Clarke, who was referred to by Mr McElduff, was

present at that meeting as well. My officials also attended a public meeting in Greencastle on the evening of 22 June this year, which, I understand, was very well attended, as Mr McElduff pointed out, and very lively, to use the euphemistic phrase.

I am surprised that concerns continue to be expressed about broadband provision in the area. It seems to me that there is a great deal of confusion about broadband access in those areas, and, indeed, about broadband generally. I want to deal with those issues.

In particular, I want to say to Mr Byrne that he should write to BT with the precise details of any specific issues that he wishes to raise with that organisation. I am not here to defend any of the broadband companies that have received contracts from the Department, and there have been many. I will go through them now, but BT has not only met all its targets, it has well exceeded them. I am quite happy to give the Department's evidence to the Member, which shows how BT has performed against the terms of its contracts. It is important to say that, because if Members are going to attack an organisation that has provided broadband access across Northern Ireland, exceeding the targets that were set by the company, we need to know where the misinformation is coming from, and I need to be able to tell BT where Members are saying that it is falling down. I look forward to receiving the Member's evidence so that I can bring it to BT and challenge them about it.

As we all know, and it has been said many times in this House, telecommunications is a reserved matter. The UK telecommunications market is fully privatised and regulated nationally and independently of government by Ofcom. Mr McElduff made a point about mobile phone coverage. He knows that I have been trying to get Ofcom to deal with the issues of 3G and 4G coverage. We have national targets for 3G coverage, but we need regional targets, because we have very poor mobile phone coverage at the moment. The companies are able to meet their targets nationally without coming to Northern Ireland and providing the right infrastructure for mobile telecommunications.

As well as my Department, there are a number of players in the market. The fact that the market is fully privatised also means that any investments made by my Department, of which there have been many, have to be state-aid

compliant to ensure that the competitiveness of the market is not compromised. Notwithstanding that, the Department has made significant investments in the telecommunications market, one of those being the broadband fund, which is now on its sixth call. Ms Boyle made a point about Aghyaran and Killeter, both of which were priority areas under the first call of the broadband fund, and, as such, are covered by the North West Electronics network. If anyone in those areas has an issue with coverage, they should look to that company to ensure that they can have coverage.

The quality of broadband services in parts of the rural west has been raised in the debate. As I said, I launched the broadband fund in August 2008, which was established exclusively to support infrastructure investment in rural areas. For the purposes of the first call for projects, I indicated that I would welcome projects that offered investment in those areas, and that is exactly what happened. Two projects emerged from the fund's first call, and in September 2008 work began to develop an extensive fixed wireless network across the west, which has been operational for some 18 months. It has delivered access to an extensive range of business and residential broadband packages in 18 of the 25 prioritised areas under the first call, including Greencastle and other parts of west Tyrone. Despite those efforts, however, there still appears to be a great reluctance to take up the fixed wireless broadband option.

At the public meeting in Greencastle in June, a fixed wireless connection was set up for the benefit of the people who attended the meeting. A service of 14.6 megabytes was achieved, and that specification, in such a rural area, is truly representative of next-generation performance. I would be very pleased to have it in my home. I understand that the project promoter, North West Electronics, has received some interest in the product and that there are nearly 100 consumers in that general area. That technology depends on a clear line of sight, and I understand that about 20 people have made enquiries about the service but cannot yet access a service. Members will be aware that, at the public meeting in June, the company undertook to make further investment if potential customer numbers reached 50. That is a good outcome, which shows how targeting government investment can drive further private sector investment as well. The money that we have given to North West Electronics to deliver

on a programme has been augmented by its own money, which is a good outcome.

We have been trying to talk to councils to let them know about the range of services. However, there is a misunderstanding, and we have heard a lot of that here today. A lot of people think that if they do not have the fibre to the cabinet service from BT, it is not really broadband. That is simply not the case. There are many technologies that can be used to access broadband. In his statement, Mr McElduff said that I claim that there is 100% coverage in Northern Ireland. There is 100% access to broadband, but it is not just through fixed line; it is access through a whole range of technologies, be it fixed line, next generation, satellite or fixed wireless. We cannot expect every house in Northern Ireland to have fixed line broadband because the fixed line would cost more than the house. I do not think that anybody expects DETI or any private company to spend in the region of £500 million, which is the figure that has been quoted to us, to connect people who remain without fixed line broadband.

We need to look at other technologies to infill where fixed lines are not available. That is what we have been doing, and, through the £1.9 million broadband fund, we have been quite successful in a lot of areas. I hope that the next call, which will be announced soon, will help to augment and fill in those gaps where we cannot have the fixed line. We have talked about line of sight being a problem. Technology evolves all the time, but, at the moment, the last option is to look for a satellite connection. I think that up to 1,000 people have to avail themselves of that satellite connection because they do not have line of sight.

The coverage level has been achieved. As I said, it has been exceeded in respect of the BT contract. It is the case that there is no existing obligation under the contract for BT to make services available to residential customers. The contract was to deliver to 85% of businesses across Northern Ireland. That has been exceeded; I think that it is more like 95% of businesses in Northern Ireland that are now covered. That has been a good result for the Department and businesses right across Northern Ireland. However, I accept that there is more to do. I had a meeting this week with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development at which we discussed the rural White Paper and how we can do more in relation to telecoms.

I hope that we will have the same working relationship between Departments that I had with her predecessor, when she was able to augment what we were doing in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by putting some money in to look specifically at rural areas. I hope that we will be able to develop that again.

I listened to all of the Members' concerns. They need to look wider than just the fixed line; they need to look at all of the technologies available to us. They also need to recognise that BT, although it may have been the incumbent for many years, does not provide all of the answers. There may be other providers out there that can provide the service. It is a great testament to BT that everybody thinks of it when they think of telephone and broadband connections. However, other technologies will come online and will solve the problem of rural broadband, and nobody will be happier about that than me.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.



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