

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 25 October 2011
Volume 68, No 2

Contents

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways	63
North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body	66

Private Members' Business

Maze Prison Site	71
------------------------	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Education	87
Finance and Personnel	93

Private Members' Business

Maze Prison Site (<i>continued</i>)	98
Community Pharmacies	102

Adjournment

Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School.....	118
--	-----

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

They should be sent to:

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

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

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Clarke, Willie (South Down)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Copeland, Michael (East Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark H (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hay, William (Speaker)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Kinahan, Danny (South Antrim)
Lewis, Ms Pam (South Antrim)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McCallister, John (South Down)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
McDevitt, Conall (South Belfast)
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair (South Belfast)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKevitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Maskey, Paul (West Belfast)
Molloy, Francie (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitríona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 25 October 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure wishes to make a statement.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting, which was held in Armagh on 12 October 2011.

The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, including the following significant achievements: the provision of 609 metres of additional moorings and ongoing maintenance of the waterways; the sponsorship of over 70 events to promote awareness of the waterways across all navigations; and the hosting of a successful meeting of the Waterways Forward INTERREG IVc project in Dublin and Enniskillen, which was attended by representatives from 17 organisations from 11 EU countries, as well as Norway and Serbia. The Council approved the Waterways Ireland corporate plan 2011-13 and business plan 2011 and recommended the

budget provision. The Council discussed the main priorities for Waterways Ireland in 2012 and reviewed progress in finalising the business plan and budget for 2012.

The Council received a progress report on restoration work on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal. Ministers noted that the strategic environmental assessment report and plan documents are now complete and have been published and that the environmental impact assessment is complete. The site investigation work is ongoing. Waterways Ireland has held meetings with all relevant statutory authorities to advise them on the project. Public meetings have also been held.

Detailed drawings of the route and associated facilities have been completed. Planning notices were forwarded to land owners in the North in the week commencing 26 September; notices were placed on lands in the South in the week commencing 3 October. The formal planning applications will be submitted to the relevant authorities in both jurisdictions this month.

The Council consented to a number of property disposals. It also received a presentation from Waterways Ireland on the future potential of waterways. The presentation focused on the economic benefits of waterways to the local community, recreation, tourism and the local and national economy. The Council agreed to hold its next inland waterways meeting in February 2012.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

I note that the Council received a progress report on the restoration work on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal and that work is under way on the environmental assessment reports and progress towards property disposals. I welcome that, as per the Committee's request, the Ulster canal project is

a standing item on the NSMC inland waterways meeting agenda.

The Committee raised questions about the financial sustainability of the Ulster canal project and wrote to the Minister about that. In response to the Committee's concerns, the Minister stated in a letter dated 21 October:

"The Irish Government is engaged at present in a Comprehensive Review of Expenditure under which all expenditure is being rigorously examined ... Minister Deenihan has requested that all possible options that may assist with the advancement of the Ulster Canal project be examined and he has asked his Department officials, to keep in regular contact with Waterways Ireland with a view to advancing the project to the extent possible within the current constraints."

That seems a far cry from a much needed financial commitment to the project. Will the Minister confirm that this is also her understanding of the current position of the Irish Government's commitment to fund the project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for her question and, indeed, the Committee for its ongoing interest in the development of the Ulster canal. That is my exact understanding. The Ulster canal, and progress on it, was raised at the last sectoral meeting. There is nothing to say on the progress report from Mr Deenihan beyond the letter that the Chair read out. We were told that every opportunity to find out where the finances for the project are, particularly in the Irish Government, would be taken. It is an ongoing process, and the submission of planning notices and applications will proceed.

We have not been told that the money is not there and the project is not progressing. We have been told that there are budgetary constraints but that what can be done to progress the Ulster canal project is being done. I cannot give a figure for what funding is there at the minute, but we will certainly raise the issue and keep the Committee informed in due course.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin.

Will the Minister confirm whether the 2012 Waterways Ireland business plan will be approved at the next NSMC sectoral meeting?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The 2012 plan is still under review. It has gone through different periods of review. It is our intention to bring it forward as soon as possible, but I cannot give the Member a commitment that it will be cleared by February 2012. It is certainly my ambition and that of Mr Deenihan that that be realised, but, at this stage, I am not in a position to confirm that it will be ratified by February 2012.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Waterways Ireland presentation highlighted the economic benefits to the local and national economy. What does the Minister see those economic benefits as being?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That issue has been raised before, and I thank Members for their ongoing interest. I fully appreciate that, particularly around waterways, we are talking about rural communities. I think that it was John Dallat who raised that before. It is really important, given the financial climate, that rural communities are not invisible when we talk about economic regeneration. To give a couple of examples, private boating contributes some €44 million and the hire sector some €20 million per annum. Indirect spend amounts to €100 million, providing 3,000 full-time jobs.

It includes visiting towns and villages beside the waterways, looking at tourism and where people go to spend money in restaurants and, maybe even, to use local hotels and B & Bs. It is really important that when looking at waterways we are not just looking at the activities that happen on them: the surrounding communities have to be integral to the development of any economic benefits for people who live and work in the vicinity.

Mrs McKevitt: I notice from the statement that the Council consented to a number of property disposals. Have any moneys been accrued from the disposal of properties and, if so, how will the moneys be deployed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have any detail on the amount of money that has been accrued or how it will be spent, but I will write to the Member and give her the detail.

Ms Lo: I am very pleased to hear about the progress of the Ulster canal. As the Minister said, it is wonderful for tourism. What is the estimated cost, and is there any likelihood of financial help from EU funds?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The estimated cost for the complete restoration of the canal is €171.5 million. The question has been raised before about additional support from Europe and about what my Department and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht are doing to maximise the benefits of European funding. The conference and dinner that we hosted, which I mentioned in the statement, is one way of sharing knowledge throughout European countries that have waterways-based economies and leisure tourism. In addition, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has asked that work be done on a cross-departmental basis regarding the Barroso task force.

We need to find out what additional opportunities there are to secure European funding, not just for waterways but for DCAL projects across the range of the Department. It is really important that there is additional funding rather than funding instead of. We need a full complement before us to realise the success of some of those projects. I am very aware of the need to maximise, particularly for big structural projects like this. To go back to the cost, it is 171 million pounds, not euro. I want to make that correction.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an outline of what her Department is doing to enhance greater opportunities from the European funding programmes?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you for the question. In addition to what I have just outlined to the Member for South Belfast, it is important that the Barroso task force look at the entire economy of the island. In my Department I have asked officials to look specifically at opportunities in languages, waterways, arts, culture and sport. Some projects in the community have already done that and are looking for Department funds to complement what they have already secured, on the basis that it may be matched funding. Moreover, we need to interrogate better and further opportunities to make sure that we bring more opportunities for groups that are trying to develop projects that will deliver very good services and facilities.

10.45 am

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

I thank the Minister for her statement. Do she and her counterpart in the South, Jimmy Deenihan, have any plans to appoint a board for Waterways Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: At this stage, the appointment of a board is down to the outworkings of the ongoing review of the Good Friday Agreement. If, when that review is complete, the recommendation is that a board should be appointed, then that is what will happen.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Tá ceist agam don Aire faoin chanáil in Iúr Cinn Trá. What actions need to be taken to have Newry canal included in the remit of Waterways Ireland? Does the Minister support such a move?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member and his colleague raised that issue when last I answered questions about North/South sectoral meetings. He already knows that the Newry/Portadown canal is not within our remit; it is not one of the seven waterways for which we are responsible. I support any community that tries to seize opportunities, particularly for developing tourism and the economy, or even just for the aesthetic value that they can bring to facilities that have been run down or closed. The Member may also be aware that we need legislative change to allow for further development of the canals. I am supportive of communities and groups that come together to identify potential assets in their areas and who are doing their best to restore them.

Mr Allister: Waterways Ireland is not a commercial organisation; it is essentially a management body. Can I, therefore, take you back to the issue of asset disposal? Are the properties that are being disposed of the same ones that you referred to in your statement in September? Where are they, and who gets the proceeds?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not know whether the Member was in the Chamber when this question was raised by Ms McKeivitt.

Mr Allister: It is a different question.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Regardless of that, the same answer will be given to Mr Allister. We will find out where those disposals are and we will list what happened to the money, where it was accrued and where it is going.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her statement. Has any consideration been given

to the potential effect of hydraulic fracturing on inland waterways in the counties of Leitrim and Fermanagh and the water-based activities that take place in those areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have to admit that I have no idea what hydraulic fracturing is. Had this been a debate on a motion I would have happily given way and allowed the Member to explain it. The activities on the waterways in Lough Erne and on the other canals all the way across are really important, and if the Member is talking about the impact of water-based tourism on the environment, a balance needs to be struck. However, even within environmental impact assessments, Waterways Ireland's primary focus is on ensuring that there is maintenance, and that there are proper opportunities for water-based tourism and regeneration of local economies, both of which are complementary; they are not in opposition to each other.

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure wishes to make a further statement to the Assembly.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the thirteenth North/South Ministerial Council Language Body meeting, the ninth since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly and the first held in 2011. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, who was the accompanying Minister.

I attended the meeting in Armagh on 12 October, representing the Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Jonathan Bell MLA, junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs, and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies, the Boord o Ulster-Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge. I will now present a summary of the issues that were discussed by the Council on 12 October 2011.

The Council received progress reports from Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on the collaborative work and other activities of the two agencies. Those include further development of the lecture series 'Aspects of our Shared Heritage' to include a new lecture on the history of the languages dealing with the Flight of the Earls, the plantation of Ulster and their linguistic effects; co-operation with the Lyric Theatre and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to produce an award-winning play about the work in the mills; and provision of joint information stands recently at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, the Castlewellan agricultural show, the Stormont family fun day and the bocce world cup. Preparations are also in hand for a joint cultural showcase in Belfast that will support the twinning of Listowel in County Kerry with Downpatrick in County Down.

In addition, the Council received progress reports on sharing expertise and resources on a range of corporate and HR issues; the implementation by Foras na Gaeilge of the accreditation scheme for editors, including provision of specialised training and ongoing development by Foras na Gaeilge of the national database of terms, which can be found at www.focal.ie; and delivery by the Ulster-Scots Agency of music and dance tuition to over 8,000 participants through the peripatetic tutor programme and 31 Ulster-Scots community summer schemes.

The Council discussed progress on the development of the North/South Language Body's corporate plan 2011-13 and the business plan and budget 2011. Ministers noted that the draft 2012 business plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have been prepared, with the plans focusing on each agency's key priorities. The draft plans are awaiting approval from the respective boards before submission to the sponsor and Finance Departments for approval. The finalised plans will be brought forward for approval by the NSMC at a future meeting.

The NSMC noted that the 2008 annual report and draft accounts have been submitted to the comptroller and auditor general (C&AG) in each jurisdiction, and, following certification and consolidation, they will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas as soon as possible. Ministers further noted that audit fieldwork has been completed in respect of the 2009 annual report and accounts, and consolidation will follow as soon as possible. Draft accounts have been filed in respect of 2010, and dates are awaited from the comptrollers and auditors general in regard to audit fieldwork. Ministers also noted that a new simplified consolidation process will be introduced, subject to the approval of Finance Departments. A further progress report on those matters will be made at the next NSMC language body meeting.

The NSMC noted that the board of Foras na Gaeilge has extended the contract of the chief executive officer of Foras na Gaeilge, Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, for a further period of five years.

Ministers noted the progress that has been made to date by Foras na Gaeilge with regard to the preparation of a portfolio of draft schemes for the new competitive funding model, which has the objective of achieving significant benefits

around value for money and the effective delivery of Foras na Gaeilge's statutory obligations. Having considered that progress, the NSMC requested Foras na Gaeilge to take forward a further 12-week consultation about the portfolio of draft schemes, particularly with the core funded bodies; ensure that relevant statutory bodies are given the opportunity to consider the impact of the draft schemes on their areas of operation; amend the portfolio of draft schemes as necessary and appropriate, having regard to the extended consultation process; prepare a detailed business case, with independent assistance if necessary, in support of the portfolio of draft schemes; and to prepare a revised project plan in conjunction with the sponsor Departments that will have due regard to the completion of the review process as a matter of urgency.

The NSMC agreed that an order be made at the appropriate time under section 28(2)(b) of the British-Irish Agreement Act 1999 to delete the reference to the organisations that are listed in the table to the section. Ministers requested a further progress report at the next NSMC language body meeting.

The NSMC noted the completion of the review of Áis, which is the book distribution service of Foras na Gaeilge, and requested that Foras na Gaeilge agree a detailed implementation plan with the sponsor Departments in regard to the recommendations in the review of Áis and report on progress at the next NSMC language body meeting. The Council agreed to hold its next language body meeting in February 2012.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

During the previous NSMC statement to the House, considerable concern was raised about the delays to the publication of the annual reports and accounts for the North/South Language Body. Can the Minister be more specific about the timetable for the introduction of the new simplified consolidation process and provide assurances that there will be no further delays in the publication of future annual reports and accounts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question on what has been an ongoing theme, particularly with regard to the accounting and reporting mechanisms. The problem goes back to well before my time, but I appreciate that there are concerns about the reporting

processes, which the Committee has articulated. I am not in a position to say that, by February 2012, all of that will be agreed and sorted out. However, I am in a position to say that everything that can be done on auditing and accounting procedures is being done by both Departments and both Finance Ministers to ensure that there is an easier process for the Council's reporting and, indeed, for consolidation. In due course, the accounts will be laid in the Assembly and the Oireachtas, and, notwithstanding that, they will need to be passed at the next NSMC meeting. It is our ambition to do everything that we can to achieve that target, but I am not in a position to say that that will be the case.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

Can the Minister confirm that the Ulster-Scots Agency has not yet reached its full staff complement? If so, what effect has that had on the delivery of its needs and services?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Ulster-Scots Agency is proactively trying to fill its full staff complement as we speak. That has had no effect on its delivery, either to groups or communities, or on its progress on monitoring procedures and reporting to both Departments. I am content that the Ulster-Scots Agency is doing everything in its power to achieve its full complement of staff.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you referred to the implementation by Foras na Gaeilge of the accreditation scheme for editors, including the provision of specialised training and the ongoing development by Foras na Gaeilge of a national database of terms. Is the Minister aware of anything similar by Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, and, if not, will she pursue that matter with it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that there are similar projects, but they are at completely different levels. I have met the Ulster-Scots Agency and the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots, and we discussed that and several other matters. I am not pushing, nudging or suggesting that groups go down that road if they are not ready. If they are working towards that and need support and help from us to achieve targets, that is completely different. I would not suggest that the Ulster-Scots Agency should be at the same level of accreditation as Foras na Gaeilge; it is just not there yet.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas arís leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo ar an Fhoras Teanga. I thank the Minister for her statement on the language body.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an síneadh a cuireadh leis an tréimhse chomhairliúcháin do na grúpaí bun-mhaoinithe. I welcome the 12-week extension to the consultation on the proposals for the core-funded groups. Can the Minister assure us that those who respond to that consultation will be listened to and that, in due course, the proposals will be changed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, his ongoing interest in the issue of core funding for the groups that are involved with the Irish language. We listened to what people said, including the Committee and many others. In previous consultations, there was a perception that people felt that they could not participate fully or as much as they would have liked. Having listened to everything that everyone had said, we decided, with the approval of the NSMC, to have an additional 12-week consultation. It is extremely cynical to suggest that we will put something out for consultation and not listen to what people have to say.

11.00 am

Mr D Bradley: I asked you a question.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want it on the record that the schemes are there in draft form. I implore people to use as fully as possible this opportunity to participate in the consultation. I refer not just to the core-funded groups but to the constituencies that rely on the services of those groups and the statutory bodies that have operational links with them. If the draft schemes need amended or changed to meet the needs of the core-funded groups and those constituencies, this is the opportunity to do that.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister talked about the core-funded groups in the North. Before I came to the Chamber this morning, I was at a meeting with the Irish language sector. Those core-funded organisations are very concerned about funding status, because they have funding until only Christmas. Can the Minister shed some light on that, please?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is welcome that the Member attended that event. I do not know where Christmas as a date came from, so I will clarify for the Member and for other Members that the funding is until June 2012.

I share the concerns of any group that is trying to secure additional and future funding. I worked in the community and voluntary sector for over 12 years, and I know exactly what it is like to live on protective notice from one three-month period to another. It is not a good place to be, and I do not think that it helps the sector. The sector feels as though it is almost an afterthought rather than being, as it should be, at the heart of government.

That having been said, the draft schemes are there for consultation, and I cannot envisage a better time for people to give their views, opinions and ideas on better service delivery not only to make sure that the people who need the services get them in a much more efficient and effective way but to ensure the long-term future of the core-funded groups and their work.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. Having raised this matter previously, I note that discussions have taken place regarding corporate and HR issues. Considering the general economic difficulties facing government, can the Minister give us further details on those matters?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Maybe the suggestion behind the question is about how the funding for all-Ireland bodies such as those for waterways and languages does not help to deliver economic benefits in some way. I do not know whether that is where the Member is coming from, but I can clearly say, as I have said in previous statements on those bodies, that they help the economy through employment, the development of skills and future sustainability. If the Member would like to write to me about something specific, I would be happy to answer that.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she outline joint projects delivered by Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Some projects were listed in the statement, such as the provision of joint stands at the Boccia World Cup, the Stormont family fun day and the Castlewellan agricultural show. However, one dimension that deals with aspects of our shared heritage is a series of joint lectures run by Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-

Scots Agency. That series covers subjects and topics on shared musical heritage, place names and the influence of indigenous languages. Each agency also has a list of lecturers. The use of past experience to develop that dimension in conjunction with both agencies so that new programmes can be brought forward is happening as we speak. However, the work that the agencies have engaged in so far together has been very good, particularly in helping to promote shared and better relations.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas arís leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Will the Minister tell us what has caused the delay in publishing the North/South accounts and reports?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I spoke briefly to the Committee Chair about some of the delays. In 2000 and 2001, the Northern Ireland Audit Office qualified the accounts. There was a delay in signing off on the bodies' consolidated accounts. That did eventually happen in 2004, and, as a result of the delay, the 2000 reports and accounts were not published until 2005. Subsequent annual reports and accounts were also delayed as the Northern Ireland Audit Office audits the accounts on a chronological basis. So, as I mentioned to the Chair in a previous answer, I appreciate that that issue has been ongoing, but I am content that Minister Deenihan and I, both sets of auditors and, indeed, both Finance Ministers are working towards better reporting of accounts and an easier and more effective way of consolidating both sets of accounts.

Mrs McKevitt: I also thank the Minister for her statement. Has she had any discussions about the Irish language legislation with her counterparts from the South, and, if so, what has she learned that would be useful for us up here?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any detailed discussions with my counterparts in the South on the legislation, but I understand that their strategy is for 20 years. Between the North/South sectoral meetings, I will have further meetings on legislation, Acht na Gaeilge and strategies for the Irish language and Ulster Scots.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Arís eile, gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis atá os ár gcomhair inniu. Maidir leis an phlean chorporáideach agus gnó, tchím anseo go ndearna an tAire tagairt don dul chun cinn ar fhorbairt an phlean chorporáidigh sin. An féidir liom ceist a chur ar an Aire an

féidir léi tuilleadh eolais a thabhairt dúinn ar an dul chun cinn ar an méid a rinneadh? I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she referred to progress being made on the development of the North/South Language Body corporate plan. Will she provide us with some detail on the progress that was made?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The detail on the Foras na Gaeilge languages corporate plan was that, first, the staff complement that was needed for Áis, the book project, has been achieved. So, the potential for making money has been realised. That was not realised until the last sectoral meeting, when we agreed the complement of staff. We have further secured the additional five years for the chief executive, and that will give some security. Indeed, progress has been made on an agreement for the corporate plan, which looked at whether the consultation on core-funded organisations should continue for a further 12 weeks. Given the nature of core funding, both Ministers agree that it is really important that everybody uses the opportunity to feed into the consultation, and, when the consultation progresses and reports are made, that will be fed into further and the revision will be made into a corporate plan for Foras na Gaeilge.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her statement and immediately apologise for raising the issue of the late return of accounts. I do it because I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is a really handy way of knocking North/South bodies. Can she assure the House that this is the last time that this issue will dominate questions on the North/South Language Body?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I do not think for one minute that he is raising it just to make a point; he has raised it consistently. Unfortunately, the delay in the accounts has been raised consistently. It is worth repeating that everything that can be done will be done, and it is also worth noting that the delay was caused in 2000 and 2001 — Danny is smirking — on the watch of Michael McGimpsey, when the chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency, Lord Laird, refused to sign the accounts. Ever since then, there has been a bottleneck in the system. Notwithstanding that, there are — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are concerns because both jurisdictions have different accounting procedures and different processes. They need to be harmonised and consolidated to make

sure that I am not standing here after each sectoral meeting making the same apology.

Mr Allister: I shall stay with the issue of accounts. What does the fact that this issue is still being attended to a decade on say about accountability and transparency? Ministers have been promising for years that they have been working towards, to use this Minister's words, the resolution of this matter, yet the accounts and annual reports for 2008, 2009 or 2010 have still not seen the light of day. What sort of ministerial oversight allows that scandal to continue? Does the Minister just not care?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I totally care about the process of accountability. The Member has raised this before, and, each time, his concerns bounce from one section of the issue to another. The fact of the matter is that both bodies — Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency — through my Department and the Departments in the South, are in keeping with and above what we expect of them in their accounts and accounts management, as well as in their spending performance. The difficulty has been caused by a legacy of bottlenecks in the accounts procedures. As I said — the Member was here when I said it — this started in 2000 and 2001. As for accountability, the fact that I am standing here talking about these delays and giving explanations, albeit that the Member and others are not happy and do not like it, is the process to which the Assembly is signed up.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. That ends questions on the ministerial statement.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I hope that is not me. Mr Speaker, I apologise for that. Clearly, senior executives in Roads Service did not know where I was.

For some strange reason, the Minister, in one of her later responses, chose to mention me by name. I was having a perfectly innocent time in the Chamber and smiled weakly at her to encourage her in what seemed to be a very difficult situation. What protocols are there that would enable the Minister to somehow chastise me and seek to apportion blame for a situation that I have no responsibility for but that chiefly seems to be her fault? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened very carefully to what Mr Kennedy has said in his point of order. Perhaps this is an issue that both Executive Ministers could resolve outside the Chamber. They could try to have a conversation to resolve it.

Private Members' Business

Maze Prison Site

Mr Speaker: As two amendments have been selected, the Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 45 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the potential social and economic benefits which the utilisation of former security sites, such as the site of the Maze prison, can bring to Northern Ireland; notes with concern the proposals to build a "peace-building and conflict resolution centre" at the site; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to develop this site in a way which is practical and inoffensive to victims.

The issue of the Maze site is clearly of significant relevance and strategic importance to Northern Ireland, as are the former military sites. I have looked at some of those sites and their ongoing development. Ilex in Londonderry is developing the Ebrington site as well as Fort George. Having recently visited the area with colleagues, I have seen that the ongoing development there is significant and will hopefully be a major boost to the north-west in a very short time. Obviously, that can only be good for Northern Ireland. I also note the proposals for the Lisanelly site in Omagh, where the proposed educational campus is planned, although there appears to be some delay with that. I am pleased that the First Minister and the Acting deputy First Minister are here. I am not sure whether the latter, in his role as Education Minister, can enlighten us any further at this stage as to progress at Lisanelly. However, that may be a debate for another day.

11.15 am

I want to see development at the Maze that will enhance Northern Ireland strategically and be of huge importance to the entire community. The consultative group and consultation panel met some time ago, and I think that all the main political parties in Northern Ireland were

represented. They brought forward proposals to the Ministers at that time, and the direct rule Ministers then brought forward the Maze master plan, as I call it, which included the national stadium, the conflict transformation centre and the equestrian centre of excellence as well as potential economic development and housing. It seemed to be work in progress at that time. However, at some stage in OFMDFM the whole master plan was pulled, and the Department started to look at new developments.

I am pleased that the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society is looking at the site. Hopefully, those discussions are ongoing and will come to a positive conclusion in the near future. Obviously, there is quite an incentive for it to move. It would be a huge opportunity for the organisation to have a site outside Belfast and somewhere that would be more accessible for big events.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the concept of a peace-building centre and wants to see that happening. At this stage and given it in isolation, we do not believe that the Maze site is the most appropriate site because of its historical nature. If it were developed along with the rest of the proposals in the Maze master plan, it would be a much bigger and wider development, and Northern Ireland could have a series of developments on site that could bring huge capability to the whole of Northern Ireland.

I praise the Ulster Aviation Society, which does a huge amount of good work at the Maze. I have visited its site and seen what is on display. The exhibitions are great, and I hope that there will be support for that proposal to be developed. The society is a voluntary organisation, and many individuals put a lot of work into it.

The Ulster Unionist Party has concerns about the current proposal for the conflict centre, the resolution centre or the conflict transformation centre — whatever name is put on it. Some time ago, I asked to see the application form for the funding for the centre. I did not get it, and I am not sure what the proposals are with regard to the development process. If there were less secrecy about the proposal, maybe we could look at it in a more strategic and definitive manner. Hopefully, that can go out for consultation at some stage. I would like to hear from the First Minister or the Acting deputy First Minister about how much consultation there has been on the current proposal for the conflict transformation centre and the responses

that have been received. I have received representation from victims' groups who have significant concerns about the proposal for a stand-alone centre.

There is a huge gap now. We have missed out on the overall Maze development that was in the master plan. I assume that the First Minister or Acting deputy First Minister will bring forward ideas today on where we are going with the entire project. I know that they are in the process of setting up the body corporation. Maybe they can give us some insight into where that is going.

At this stage, we have significant concerns about the conflict transformation centre, especially in light of the fact that we do not have the information on the funding application and it was not made available to us, and we have concerns about the proposal itself.

Finally, I understand that a funding application of £20 million has been put forward to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Mr A Maginness: The Member has indicated that he has concerns about the conflict transformation centre. Will the Member expand on the concerns that were expressed to him by victims or victims' groups or, alternatively or in addition, the concerns that he and his party have about the centre?

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that. The concerns are from victims' groups, in particular. They believe that it could be some sort of terrorist shrine. Since there is so much secrecy and we do not have the information on it, we, or I in particular, cannot answer their questions. That is the main concern. I would like to address those concerns. I would like to give those people some type of positive answer. If we can do that, so much the better.

My final point relates to the £20 million application to the SEUPB. Is that additional money coming into Northern Ireland through Peace funding, or is it part of the Peace III money that will be taken away from other community groups on the ground, which, in these times of austerity, are in very bad need of that money? If it is additional money, it is, obviously, beneficial; if it is coming out of the block that we already get, we need to know that, and we need to know what groups will suffer because of it.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Northern Ireland;" and insert

"acknowledges that the transformation of the Maze/Long Kesh site into a peace-building and conflict resolution centre must have due regard to the needs of victims and survivors; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to prioritise this need whilst urgently progressing a development and job creation strategy for the site."

The former Maze/Long Kesh site offers an opportunity that, to date, has been missed, and I hope that it is not too late. Our amendment calls for that opportunity to be fully utilised. There is obvious potential economic benefit to be had from it. It would have a positive impact on the construction sector, and it has the potential to provide a boost in tourism numbers. However, that potential will be fulfilled only if the Executive implement a jobs creation and investment strategy for the site. The site also provides a tremendous opportunity for the Balmoral show. If it were transferred to the site, it could create a major agriculture show for the whole island, second only to the national ploughing championships.

The Maze/Long Kesh site reminds us of the utter failure of the Assembly to address the issues around our troubled past. The conflict transformation centre proposed for the site can and should play an important role in addressing that issue. If such a centre is to be truly worthwhile, it should be centred on real and hard issues. It should not be a centre for self-congratulation. The residues of the conflict are still real and raw. That is evident in the victims' and survivors' continuing frustration that the Executive have not agreed a comprehensive mechanism for dealing with the past. There is also the residue of paramilitarism, with attacks on our people and our peace, not least in my own city of Derry.

There is an opportunity for the centre to be tasked with dealing with the coming decade of centenaries. The transformative decade that shaped the island for the last century through conflict, identify and the tragedy of partition is set to be celebrated or commemorated throughout Ireland. Our complex past is, therefore, very much on the horizon of our immediate future. The commemorations of the signing of the Ulster covenant and those of the Somme, the Easter rising, the civil war and, ultimately, partition are events that need the combined leadership of all strands of political

opinion and leadership on this island. The conflict transformation centre should be tasked with giving the necessary expertise to ensure that the forthcoming debate and reflection on our history is approached in a mature and responsible fashion.

Given the recession, I hope that it is not too late. It is true that the Maze/Long Kesh site has the potential not only to have a major impact on the area's economic future but to allow a mature discussion to be had about our past. Hopefully, that will help in some way to bring reconciliation closer.

Mr Givan: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out "with concern".

I want to address some of the other points that have not yet been covered. It is unfortunate that the first two contributions majored immediately on the conflict transformation centre. Let us remind ourselves of what the Maze/Long Kesh site is capable of delivering. It is a 350-acre strategic development opportunity that is twice the size of the Titanic Quarter. It is located directly beside the Blaris site, which is 400 acres and which has been given approval, in principle, in the Department of the Environment's master plan for the area. I feel that the Maze site and the Blaris site could create a massive opportunity for job creation in Northern Ireland. It is important that we set the context correctly for all this.

It has been estimated that 60% of the population can reach the Maze site within 30 minutes and that 80% of our population can reach it within one hour. It has the best access routes from the west, south and north of the Province, and, strategically, its location in relation to the Republic of Ireland will allow it to capitalise on flights coming in to Dublin airport. The site has the potential to create massive investment opportunities, and the master plan for the site indicated that up to 6,000 jobs could be created. At this time of economic difficulty, it is important that we drive forward the opportunity that the site presents.

The history of the site has quite a range of interests. Originally, in the vocabulary of the local people, it was known as Long Kesh. It was a site for the Royal Air Force, when it was known officially as RAF Long Kesh. Indeed, the British military association with the site, prior to its becoming a prison, is one that we can have immense pride in. When I spoke on this issue in

the House before the previous election, I pointed out some of that history. The site was visited by President Eisenhower during the Second World War and by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Indeed, the first flight taken by our own queen, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, was to RAF Long Kesh. Members need to be aware of that history and not just of the more commonly known recent history that relates to the prison. That is why I have a particular difficulty when republicans consistently refer to the site as "Long Kesh". Clearly, there is a drive to romanticise what happened during the period when the site was a prison, particularly on the part of republicans. However, there was no romanticism during that period. That was a period of our past that was wrong and that should never have happened. We should never allow what happened to be forgotten, particularly by those who were incarcerated during that period. We should also not allow the term "Long Kesh" to be hijacked by republicans. The site was commonly and locally known as Long Kesh in the past, and I have no difficulty in referring to it as Long Kesh or, officially, as the Maze/Long Kesh.

In the more recent past, the site became known as HMP Maze, and we can never forget what happened during that period. I will particularly never forget the fact that 29 prison officers lost their life during our conflict. I declare an interest, because family members of mine served in the Prison Service.

Many more were injured physically during the time that they served in our prisons and particularly at the Maze. Many who had to work in that institution still bear the mental hallmarks of the period. We can never forget the sacrifice that was paid by those individuals during that time.

11.30 am

The motion particularly notes the conflict resolution centre. Given that it was tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party, I find it very difficult to understand why that party has highlighted this particular issue. Of all parties, it has its hallmarks all over the fact that the conflict resolution centre ever got on to the paper that was produced by the direct rule Ministers. It was the Maze consultation panel's final report of 2005 that recommended that there should be an international centre for conflict resolution. I and my party supported that recommendation at the time, and we still support it. However, the hypocrisy coming from the Benches of the Ulster

Unionist Party is completely and utterly rank. Over the weekend, at that party's conference, its chairman, David Campbell, said that he felt that the contribution made by the party over the past decade has not been recognised or valued in how it moved the process on.

I want to pay tribute to David Campbell, the chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, for the work that he has done in moving Northern Ireland forward, particularly for his work as chairman of the Maze consultation panel that produced the 2005 report. I will cite a couple of the recommendations that came out of that report under his chairmanship. The report says:

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

Now, the leader of that party says that it does not believe that the Maze is an ideal location for a conflict transformation centre. That is not what the current chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party said when he was chairman of the Maze panel.

The report went on to say:

"The development of an International Centre for Conflict Transformation would add considerably to the synergy of the other proposed developments, and help to establish the international profile and identity of the Maze/Long Kesh."

So, the panel recommended that the proposal would work with all the other aspects that were proposed for the industrial and commercial development of the site and would sit well with and support the promotion of the entire site.

Obviously, there was concern, and the Member referred to it, that the site could become a shrine. That exercised our minds and those of the party on the Benches beside me at the time. I supported the recommendation of the panel chaired by David Campbell of the Ulster Unionist Party, which was:

"The facility would be a neutral, inclusive and constructive 'place apart', to be used by organisations and communities to further the cause of conflict transformation."

It was to be a "neutral" site. Just to be absolutely clear, the report made another recommendation:

"To be successful, it will be essential for the facility to be genuinely neutral and inclusive, and not

perceived as being owned by any one section of society."

So, let us be clear: there will be no shrine at the Maze. There never will be. The site was never envisaged as a shrine. As long as my party holds the position of First Minister, we will ensure that there will never be a shrine at the Maze.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: No, I will not give way; I want to continue my speech.

When the Ulster Unionist Party raises this issue, it does a disservice to those whom it purports to represent, namely, the victims. It uses the victims in a very callous manner in order to try to make a political issue of a site that has the potential to drive economic regeneration in Northern Ireland.

Given the work done by David Campbell, along with that done by this party, to ensure that the centre would never be a shrine, the Ulster Unionist Party should reflect on what it does in using victims to politicise this issue.

If the Members beside me were genuinely interested in victims, why did they support the Belfast Agreement and thereby agree to prisoners being released from the Maze? It was not my party but the party beside me that released those prisoners. It signed up to an agreement under which prisoners were released, causing hurt and harm to victims who had suffered during that period. I will not take that hypocrisy from the Members opposite. We have ensured that the Maze site will never become a shrine, as has our First Minister. I pay tribute to David Campbell who joined with our party to ensure that the site never becomes a shrine. I, therefore, commend my party's amendment to the House. I will also be supporting the SDLP's amendment.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo, nó is tionscadal an-tábhachtach é ar fad. Beimid ag tabhairt tacaíochta don dá leasú.

History or, indeed, her story is very subjective, especially in a society that is coming out of conflict. We all have our starting points and analyses, and we are all very affected by our experiences and those of the communities that we represent. There is validity to all our histories, or her stories, whether you are a republican, a loyalist, a member of the British

Army, a member of the RUC, someone who has worked at Long Kesh, or someone who has been a guest there. We obviously do not all agree with one another. We all have differing and varying analyses of the root causes of the conflict and different views on the role of the British state in the conflict. However, I hope that we have moved to a situation where each of us recognises that people from every community have suffered, that in our society many people are disadvantaged and marginalised and that each of us is trying to build a better future for all our people.

Last week, I was in University College Dublin (UCD) debating with Basil McCrea, Jim Wells and Peter Weir. We obviously aired our differences there, but what struck me and, indeed, the audience during and after the debate was that we all supported the peace process and felt that we are in a better place than we were in the past and that change is badly needed in our society. No one should be afraid of supporting diversity and equality, of making our society more inclusive and of studying the root causes of our conflict so that it never happens again. Those who ignore our history are destined to repeat it.

The 360-acre site provides us with a unique opportunity to export our experience of peace-building and conflict resolution, difficult as it has been, through support for delegations to and from different parts of the world that are emerging from conflict. It provides us with the possibility of maximising the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site. It also provides us with an opportunity to support research and practical learning. It has the potential to provide us with an opportunity for all stories to be told, including those about the prison, World War II, the peace process and international experiences. It would provide much-needed jobs for the construction and tourism industries and help to further develop the Belfast-Dublin corridor.

I, along with the OFMDFM Committee, visited the Long Kesh site, the prison and the Ulster Aviation Society hangar. I listened to Tom Elliott, who was part of that delegation, speaking on 'Hearts and Minds' the other night about his party's support for equality. So, my question to the UUP and Tom is this: what are you afraid of? Why the selective approach? What is needed here is leadership, not hollow words about equality — ceannaireacht — Ar aghaidh linn le

chéile. Tá toadhchaí níos éagsúla de dhíth orainn go léir.

Let us continue to work together to build a diverse, dynamic future and a society that is at ease with itself and provides opportunities for all our citizens. Let us not play politics with victims.

Mr Lunn: It is good to get an opportunity to revisit the issue of the Maze site. I am grateful to Mr Elliott and his colleagues for bringing the matter back to the House, even though I do not particularly agree with their motion.

The motion has three parts to it. Mr Elliott clarified the situation with the conflict transformation centre. It is quite obvious — correct me if I am wrong — that he does not want such a centre in any format at the Maze, so we will not be supporting the motion. However, we are happy to support the SDLP amendment and, if necessary, the DUP amendment.

The Member who spoke previously referred to the consultation panel. I sat on the final consultation panel for the Maze under the chairmanship of Mr Poots, who is here today. Certainly, it was my impression that all parties agreed that there would be a conflict transformation centre as part of the overall master plan for the Maze site. That was during direct rule. We definitely saw such a centre as part of the development. Again, I stand ready to be corrected, but I think that the Ulster Unionists were represented on that panel and were fully —

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that that was in the overall context of the Maze master plan and not of a stand-alone conflict transformation centre, as I have explained?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I accept that at that time, it was in the context of overall development. However, we are still talking about the overall development of the site.

Mr Elliott: — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lunn: I will come to that. We should not talk in piecemeal terms about the site but about its overall development. As far as I am concerned, the only possible site for the type of conflict transformation centre that was envisaged by all

parties at that time is on part of the Maze site. It does not make any sense to put it anywhere else. I heard the suggestion that a centre could go somewhere else in Northern Ireland, but I really do not think so.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No, thank you.

We have heard so much about the Maze development. I wonder why no serious progress has been made. In 2001, I joined Lisburn City Council. That was 10 years ago. The Maze development was a live issue then. I suppose that it is still a live issue. I do not mean to be flippant in any way, Mr Speaker. However, so far, some old buildings have been demolished and a nice new entrance has been put up. That is about it. I am aware that there has been remedial work, decontamination, and so on, but, basically, nothing has happened.

We have also abandoned what a lot of us thought was an excellent stadium proposal for reasons that are, perhaps, not unconnected with the other topic that we are talking about, namely the conflict transformation centre, or, to put it in another way, unionists' inability to countenance, at that time, a conflict transformation centre or a stadium somewhere other than Belfast. I note that the DUP amendment removes the issue of concern about the principle of such a centre. That indicates that the party is now on board. Mr Givan confirmed that quite adequately. The DUP will now agree to the centre as long as it is practical and inoffensive.

Obviously, there is ongoing concern about a terrorist shrine. I wonder what it is about that proposal that continues to frighten unionists. Our history and the path to peace in Northern Ireland are matters of world interest. The history of the Maze is integral to that. I take Mr Givan's point in particular about the wider history of the Maze. However, there is no doubt that the main focus of world attention has been on the past 40 years. The Maze prison is absolutely central to that.

The Maze panel had information on similar projects around the world. Some were based in disused prisons, others were not. The fear that the one at the Maze could become some kind of a shrine or place of pilgrimage really has no foundation whatsoever. The history to be told covers all sections of society. There is no way that a properly planned centre would be allowed

to evolve in any other way. The project would have to be controlled by OFMDFM either directly or through the medium of the Maze development corporation. That is another body that it seems to be taking an eternity to establish. Perhaps the First Minister can update the House on progress towards its establishment. I think that it has now been over a year since the promised implementation date was passed.

The SDLP amendment makes sense. My party will support it even though I could be pedantic and point out that it seems to refer to the whole site when only a few acres of it are needed for a transformation centre. It also expresses the need to progress urgently a development and job creation strategy for the site. That wish is reflected in the original motion. I hope that the First Minister will comment on that as well.

At the moment, there is an empty site of over 300 acres. There is a discontinued stadium plan and master plan that cost several million pounds. The only semi-concrete proposal is the one for the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS). I wonder whether it is having second thoughts. Is there any other genuine expression of interest in using the site? Again, perhaps the First Minister can enlighten us.

Progress is so painfully slow. We really do need some activity, action and regeneration — not regeneration of the site but regeneration of the process.

11.45 am

Mr Poots: This is a very interesting subject, and it is very interesting that the Ulster Unionists have brought the matter forward now. One can see only rank hypocrisy from the Ulster Unionist Benches.

For many years, the Maze site was a matter of discussion. I have been integrally involved from the outset — along with the Ulster Unionist Party, I have to say. David Campbell was chairman of the Maze consultation panel for many years. I sat under his chairmanship, just as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party now sits under his chairmanship. Through working intensively on the issues, we arrived at a position that was acceptable to the Ulster Unionist Party then and to the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party then. Indeed, it was acceptable to the Democratic Unionist Party then. The difference is that it is still acceptable

to the Democratic Unionist Party, because we dealt with the issues at the time.

It was made very clear by the then direct rule Ministers that it was not up to the panel members to make a decision on behalf of their parties. Rather, they had to be able to demonstrate that they had their parties' support. Mr Campbell received the support of the Ulster Unionist Party for the proposal to develop the conflict transformation centre at the site. In 2005, I received the support of the Democratic Unionist Party for that development. As I recall, the proposal went to the party officers of the Democratic Unionist Party, and everyone in the Chamber will know that the party officers at that time included Mr Allister, who sheds crocodile tears over the issue now yet did not raise it as an issue then.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: I will give way if it is a genuine intervention.

Mr Allister: It is indeed. Before he gets obsessed with my position, he might like to reflect on the position of his deputy leader, Mr Nigel Dodds, who is on record as saying:

"However it is dressed up, whatever spin is deployed, the preservation of a section of the H-Blocks — including the hospital wing — would become a shrine to the terrorists who committed suicide in the Maze in the 1980s ... That would be obnoxious to the vast majority of people and is something unionist people cannot accept."

Therefore, before the Member turns his attention to me, who never assented to any shrine, would he like to deal with how it is that his deputy leader seemed to have and still has — for he has never repudiated his statement — the same concerns? That raises the question: if you need a conflict resolution centre, why do you need to retain the buildings? Why do you need it at the Maze?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have reminded the House on so many occasions that interventions should not be long statements.

Mr Poots: I see that Mr Allister has reverted to his usual tactic of washing his hands of the issues — the Pontius Pilate.

Mr Allister: What about Nigel Dodds?

Mr Poots: Mr Allister was there in 2005 when the proposal came forward, and he did not object to it then.

Mr Allister: What about Nigel Dodds?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: Nor did Mr Allister, or any of the Ulster Unionists, object to the buildings' being listed in the first instance. The record will show who made the objections to the then Environment and Heritage Service. It was Jeffrey Donaldson and Edwin Poots, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, who made the objections, who went to see the Environment and Heritage Service, who made the case for it —

Mr Elliott: Why did you not make the case when you were the Minister?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. Every other Member who wanted the opportunity to speak in the debate got that opportunity. Members should not shout from a sedentary position.

Mr Poots: I do not really mind the flak, Mr Speaker, because, when you throw a dog into a pack of hounds, the ones that yelp the loudest are the ones that are hurt the most. The fact of life is that, of the parties to my right, neither the TUV — I do not know whether I should describe it as a party, because it is a single person — nor the Ulster Unionist Party voiced one smidgeon of opposition to the listing of those buildings at that time. They want to close the door after the horse has bolted. You are being shown up as the hypocrites that you are. The work that was done —

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to use language that ascribes to Members the term "hypocrites"?

Mr Speaker: I ask all Members to moderate their language, please, especially in the Chamber.

Mr Poots: I was referring to the parties, but I see that some people are very touchy. They do not like being faced with robust debate; they just like to be robust in their comments when they do not have the opportunity for a response.

It was made very clear during negotiations and in the report that the site would be a neutral, inclusive and constructive place. None of that relates to a shrine. Northern Ireland went

through a dreadful period for many years. The Maze is one of the greatest reflections of why we should never go back to that. Thousands of years of people's lives were lost in that prison. Thousands of lives were lost as a consequence of the actions of people who ended up in that prison. There is something there to tell the rest of the world, and an opportunity to encourage people from across the world that, here in Northern Ireland, we have moved on and moved forward. We can point to what has happened and to the Maze as a symbol of everything that was wrong in Northern Ireland. We can step forward from that, leave it behind, and encourage and incentivise others who may be considering going down the route that Northern Ireland did to desist and resist for their own well-being.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The usual roles in the Chamber have been taken during the debate, but I see this as an opportunity to move the process along. It is perhaps strange that the Ulster Unionists proposed the motion. It did not come through the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which visited the site on a couple of occasions. Hopefully, the debate will encourage the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site, and we will see movement on the setting up of the corporate body to move things along.

As for the idea of a shrine or there being a romantic attraction to the site, having visited it several times, with families on many occasions, I see no romantic attraction to the Maze/Long Kesh. It is certainly nothing for anyone to look back on with pride, from either those who worked in it or those who were prisoners there. It was a harsh time and it is a harsh site, and there is no romanticism to it. It was a time that, hopefully, we will never return to. If the buildings do anything, they remind people of the harsh reality of what the conflict was about and how it affected so many people's lives over the years.

Another reminder is the World War II site, because the aircraft hangars are there. The Committee visited the Ulster Aviation Society museum at the site. That is another part of the site that can be developed. It reminds people of the traumas of the world wars. Again, there is no romanticism about that.

There is an opportunity to recognise conflict in various forms, to bring it into perspective,

to recognise it, and to recognise some of the achievements of that time. The conflict resolution centre is an opportunity for victims from all sides to tell their stories: from the point of view of prison officers, prisoners, relatives who visited the site, and those who went through traumas in various ways, such as children who visited parents and people who had to trek up and down the road to it.

That is the past, and now is an opportunity in the development of the Long Kesh site to look to and build for the future. There is an opportunity to develop the site and to create a new future and a new beginning for people. It is a massive site — 350 acres — and if it were being handed to anyone at a time of severe economic decline with an opportunity to build on it, they should grasp it with both hands.

We have an opportunity to create a corporate body, which will develop the site and bring economic prosperity to regenerate it and to create opportunities. As far as I understand it, the RUAS is ready and willing to move to the site and expand its remit on it. That will attract other businesses, shows and developments to the site.

The site is ideally situated, in close proximity to the motorway, railway and airport. Therefore, it is an ideal location for development. We should not miss this opportunity and we should not allow it to drag on any further. We need to get the corporate body set up, start putting plans in place and start delivering on people's vision for the site. Let us not dwell continuously on the past. I am not saying that we should ignore the past or forget it, but we should move on to try to create a better future for the victims of the past. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr T Clarke: It is probably timely that I follow on from the previous Member to speak because I think that he was the first Member to have included the other people who can tell their stories. I am happy to put on record that when the idea was first mooted, I was concerned because the whole emphasis was that the site would be a shrine and that others would never be included in the proposals. However, as the proposals expanded, provision for others to tell their stories was included.

At the start, when the idea grew legs, there was concern from some people in the unionist population that the site would be a shrine, but I thank the First Minister and deputy First

Minister and their good offices for including the stories that we are now going to tell for the RUC, the army, prison staff, civilians and the Fire Service. There was a fear that those would not be told, but I am glad that that issue has been addressed. It has allayed my fears.

Another very important issue, which has been touched on today, is that victims are going to get the opportunity to tell their stories. We should never forget the victims. There were prisoners only because there were victims in the first place. The prisoners created the victims, and, equally, the victims should have an opportunity to tell their stories.

As the previous Member who spoke said, we look at the economic climate today and at the size and scale of the site. We have a 350-acre site, and we have an opportunity. Many of us are being lobbied about construction jobs and roads. Indeed, there seems to be an emphasis on it, and many of us received letters today in relation to the A5 to try to encourage more investment in Northern Ireland. We have an excellent opportunity here for a multimillion pound investment. We need to redevelop the site and, therefore, I welcome it from that point of view.

There is also the tourism potential of the site. We should never take away from the opportunity to create a vast array of things there in the future. The other thing that gives me the greatest confidence is that we are not handing the site over to someone to do what they wish with it. OFMDFM will always have full control over the conflict transformation centre. While we have a devolved institution in Northern Ireland, that gives me confidence, and I hope that it will give the wider public confidence that the site will not be left to someone to do as they wish with it; it will be up to the democratic process in the Assembly.

To touch again on the conflict transformation centre, I said that I was sceptical about it at the start, given the troubled past that, unfortunately, we have had in Northern Ireland. However, when I got married 21 years ago, I went to Jersey for my honeymoon, and I remember paying to visit a German underground hospital. Therefore, people in other areas have had the foresight to use what is there to tell a story. There are also other opportunities.

Hopefully, I am spared for many days, and that my family goes on to have a family. I look forward

to the day when I can take my grandchildren to the prison and show them what, hopefully, at that stage will still be behind us. I will be able to show them the conditions in which prisoners lived and where some people chose to starve themselves to death for a greater cause.

I can show them where some prisoners decided to go on dirty protests and blanket protests and to live in their own excrement but then moved on and stayed to work under British rule. That says a lot about how we have moved on.

That is our troubled past, and those people brought violence to the streets at the time. However, I must put it on record that it is good to see that people have decided to choose the democratic process as the way forward for Northern Ireland. If that is all part of our history, we must tell that history. I support both our amendment and the SDLP amendment.

12.00 noon

Mr Nesbitt: I am sure that some of the language and invective that we have heard to date will be of great comfort to the victims and survivors of our Troubles.

I will speak first of an experience that I had as a victims' commissioner, when I was invited by the Strategic Investment Board to a meeting of interested bodies or stakeholders, if you prefer that word. The meeting was called in the headquarters of the Community Relations Council in Belfast. It was well attended, and SIB said that it wanted us to focus on three questions that afternoon. The first question was: "In principle, is it a good idea to have a conflict transformation centre?". The second was: "If the answer to the above is yes, what should it look like and what should be in it?". The third was: "Where should it be located?". For the next three hours, we had a lively and, at times, heated debate not on the first or second question but solely on the third question.

Much like in football, where there is an ABU — Anyone But United — when it comes to a conflict transformation centre, there is an ABM: Anywhere But the Maze prison. For some, it is the scene of resistance; for others, it is the scene of the crime. Unless we resolve that, we will be making a mistake. Even though we may have agreed it in the past, it is not too late to change our minds.

On the principle of whether we should have a conflict transformation centre, the Ulster Unionists are clear: we are in favour of it. We have a victims' charter, and, on question one, although we resist having a conflict transformation centre at the Maze, we are very open to having one. On the second question, about the centre's content, our view is that it should reflect the lack of agreement about everything to do with our conflict.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member enlighten us about his opinion at that meeting as a victims' commissioner representing all victims?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. Perhaps I should have made it clear that I went there to observe the debate and report back to my three colleagues. When the Victims' Commission was established, although everyone who applied to be commissioner had applied to be the single commissioner, the resolution was to appoint four co-equals as commissioners. Therefore, in business terms, you effectively have an organisation with four co-equal chairs. No one has a casting vote, and no one's opinion is more important than anyone else's. Therefore, it would be impossible to go to a public meeting, such as that stakeholder meeting run by the SIB, and offer an opinion without first reporting back and consulting your three colleagues. So, I offered no opinion.

As for the content of a conflict resolution centre, we need one central repository where, as Ms Ruane said, every view can be reflected. We do not agree on anything about our conflict. We do not agree on what happened. We do not agree on why it happened. We do not agree on the language that we use to describe it. We do not even agree on when it began: 40 years ago, 400 years ago, 900 years ago — take your pick.

It is critical that, if we have a conflict resolution centre, we have one central repository. If my colleagues to my left are so tuned into victims, they will know that, if you put it at the Maze, there will not be one central repository. Some groups will split off and do their own thing, and we will lose the value of having a central repository as a conflict resolution centre.

As well as content, we need to think about resource. If we are serious about building peace, we have to look at the fact that we have an uneven

playing field. On one side of the fence there are some very good advocates, such as the Pat Finucane Centre, which is reported as doing very good work in helping victims and survivors, for example, in engagement with the Historical Enquiries Team. There is no equivalent on the other side of the fence. If we are to put resource into conflict resolution and peace-building, we must consider giving resource to the likes of Justice for Innocent Victims of the Troubles, bodies that are trying to build up that expertise in advocacy for people from the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community.

I cannot support the SDLP's amendment. It states that the centre:

"must have due regard to the needs of victims and survivors".

The biggest mistake you can make in looking at victims and survivors is to view them as a homogenous group who all think the same way and have the same needs. They do not. For many years now, I have been helping somebody — I believe he is a member of the Democratic Unionist Party — who worked in the Maze prison. He policed a riot for three days and took a stroke. He has not had a stroke since but has never been classified as a victim. The medical evidence at the time said that stress did not invoke a stroke. Medical opinion today is divided. Why is he not a victim?

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

Mr Nesbitt: I will close by saying that I support the development of the Maze site, the development of the former army bases and the development of a peace-building centre, but I do not support its establishment at the Maze.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an dá leasú agus in éadan an rúin. I will speak in favour of both amendments and against the motion.

It has already been pointed out — to date, I have not heard the Ulster Unionist Party explain why it has changed its opinion on the siting of a transformation centre at the Long Kesh site — that the first panel set up to examine how the site should be used was chaired by David Campbell. Edwin Poots has already said that part of signing off on that particular document was that the four parties represented all had to give their blessing at that time. David Campbell

was the chair, and he signed off on it. It was a very clear proposal that there would be a conflict transformation centre at the Long Kesh site. Whatever changed your minds — Mike Nesbitt gave some articulation of that in his presentation — I have not heard anything consistent from the Ulster Unionists as to why they changed their minds.

The only thing that has changed in the intervening years is that the balance of power has shifted within unionism. In my opinion, this is a debate that the Ulster Unionist Party has developed as a result of that shift in balance. I say that because the panel that replaced the consultation panel was the development group. One of the criticisms made of the first panel was that the Alliance Party was not represented, but it was given a place on that development group, which was chaired by Edwin Poots. The Ulster Unionist Party refused, within months of the panel producing its first report, to put a person on that development group and did so right throughout its history. Let us have a bit of honesty and integrity when you are talking about why you changed your mind.

It is also interesting — I say this to everybody who has spoken in the debate — to hear other people telling republicans what they want on that site. They always define it in simple, straightforward terms. I declare an interest as a former political prisoner who served time in Long Kesh and as the chair of Coiste, which is the representation body for political ex-prisoners. We made a presentation to David Campbell's committee. It is there on the record for people to read. If people go away and read it, then come back with some of the comments that have been made here this morning about what republicans want to see on that site and that corresponds to what they have said here today, I will stand here and make an apology on behalf of republicans. However, I will not be making any apology, because we stated very clearly that what we wanted on the site was recognition of its political and historical significance.

Caitríona Ruane said that history is about everyone telling their story: the people who were in the prison; the people who staffed it; the British soldiers on the watchtowers; and the people who visited the prison, such as the Quakers. All those representative groups should be invited to tell their story. Indeed, victims of the conflict in the North should also be allowed to tell their story. That is what

republicans want — nothing more, nothing less. That is what Members should address today instead of pretending that republicans want something else when it is not there to be seen or examined. That is very important.

What else do we want for the site? From the beginning, we have always said that the site should be developed to its maximum potential. I was a member of the development group and read some of the papers from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Almost every developer or observer who has gone to that site said that it would be foolish to develop it without some recognition of its political and historical significance. There is no controversy about the Crumlin Road prison, Portlaoise prison, Kilmainham jail, Armagh prison or Downpatrick prison. There is a focus, sometimes falsely created, particularly by unionists, on the Long Kesh site. The Long Kesh site existed; it has a history and a political significance.

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

Mr McCartney: In my opinion, the only way to develop the site properly is to recognise that political and historical significance.

Mr Weir: We have had a wide-ranging debate, and, indeed, some strange things have been said. I was particularly taken by Mike Nesbitt's attack on the victims' sector in the unionist community. He said that that none was of any worth compared with the Pat Finucane Centre. When the Member reflects on what he said, having read Hansard, he may well have cause to regret it. Furthermore, the Member does not see the inherent contradiction in saying initially that what unites victims and survivors is the belief that the Maze is the wrong place, but later, when dealing with the SDLP amendment, saying that there is no particular view among victims and survivors and they should not be lumped together. For someone who is, supposedly, the great defender of victims to reject an amendment that talks about having due regard for the needs of victims and survivors seems to be rank hypocrisy, but we have seen that all too frequently from the Ulster Unionist Party in this debate. I will come to that in a moment.

Everyone agrees that work needs to be done on the site. We are in the deepest recession for many years, and the overall scheme for the development of the Maze needs to move ahead.

It can provide employment and finance for all our people, which is something to be welcomed and embraced. Previous false starts were mentioned, the obvious one being the national stadium. However, I want to make it clear that I have always had concerns about that, although less about its location and more about whether we could marry all three sports in one stadium. Ultimately, it fell because the economic case did not stack up, and the decision was made on economic grounds. Nevertheless, we put that behind us, and, on the sporting side, we support stadiums and look to move the Maze situation forward.

I will now come to the hub of the motion and the Ulster Unionist Party's concerns. At that party's conference, David Campbell, who is not merely a minor member of that party but its chairman, said that we should remember the role of the Ulster Unionist Party, particularly during the peace process. He said that the party had not been given credit for all that it had done. I agree with David Campbell: let us remember its role. Let us specifically remember the role of Mr Campbell, who chaired the Maze consultation panel before Mr Poots, and, indeed, was intimately involved in the matter. It beggars belief that the Ulster Unionists would raise concerns at this stage, when their fingerprints are all over the proposal. If the remarks of Mr Campbell, who is a former Member for Lagan Valley, had been made by someone who would be regarded as a bit more of a loose cannon, such as that party's current Member for Lagan Valley, one could understand the Ulster Unionist Party trying to distance itself from those remarks. However, the reality is that those remarks were made by its current chairman.

12.15 pm

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. Mr Nesbitt is a Johnny-come-lately to the Ulster Unionist Party. He had no position a number of years ago, and, before that, he recognised that the Ulster Unionist Party supported the proposal. However, he now says that that was wrong. Does the Member see the obvious conflict between the position of the party chairman and that of one of its new boys in the Assembly?

Indeed, there has been abuse of victims where this issue is concerned. The proposal is not about setting up something for prisoners to celebrate; it is about setting up something to fight the fight for peace in the future and to

demonstrate what was wrong with Northern Ireland society. It is not about demonstrating that violence was good.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I remind Members about long interventions.

Mr Weir: I could not agree more with the Member. Indeed, if there is to be conflict resolution, perhaps it should start between Mr Nesbitt and Mr Campbell. That may be the most appropriate use of it.

We agree with the SDLP amendment, which effectively subsumes ours. Victims and survivors should be put at the heart of the proposal. In many ways, the Maze is the ideal place for a proposal such as this. We will ensure that there is nothing that glorifies terrorism. Additionally, we need something that reminds us of the bad days and of the evil that people should be warned not to go back to. It is therefore important that there is something that meets that need.

The synthetic concern that the Ulster Unionist Party has produced at this stage does not put victims and survivors at the heart of the proposal. If it is to show proper commitment to victims and survivors, let it join us in the Lobbies supporting the SDLP amendment. Let us speak with one voice in protecting victims and survivors, rather than, like the Ulster Unionist Party, showing false concern about proposals of which it is the genesis. Let us remember the greatest contribution that the Ulster Unionist Party made to the Maze: that was in 1998, when it threw open the prison gates and —

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

Mr Weir: — let out terrorist prisoners. We will not take lectures from the party to my right on anything that has happened at the Maze.

Mr Allister: A few weeks ago in the 'News Letter' there was a front-page report of a speech that the First Minister made in, I think, Liverpool. The headline was something like: "We can't push Sinn Féin too far".

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I note that that matter is with my legal team because of the inaccuracy of the headline, so it should not be repeated.

Mr Speaker: I remind the whole House, especially the Member who has the Floor, to be very mindful of what is being said.

Mr Allister: Obviously, that is news to me. I take cognisance of it.

The issue that I start with is that the huge transformation that we have seen in the DUP position is, of course, driven by a philosophy that says, "We must keep Sinn Féin happy if we are to keep our jobs". A few years ago, the stadium proposition was utterly rejected because it was tainted by the ugly buildings that made up the prison at the Maze and by the fear that they would become a shrine that would brand and taint the entire proposition. The stadium was rejected by many on that basis. Today, however, we have reached the point where not only can the DUP accept the buildings remaining —

Mr Givan: You accepted them.

Mr Allister: I never did.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: It accepts that the buildings can not only remain but be an integral part of the proposition.

If branding and blighting was an issue for the stadium, how much more is it, inevitably, an issue for the conflict resolution centre? If we need a conflict resolution centre, why do we need to put it somewhere where it will be blighted and branded? The answer, of course, is that Sinn Féin will not support it anywhere else. That is why, in the rolling over to the Sinn Féin demand, we have the scenario that it will be agreed that it will be at the Maze. Therefore, it will incorporate the very buildings that will be the shrine and which caused the deputy leader of the DUP to rightly say, "However it is dressed up," — my oh my, it has been well dressed up today — "whatever spin is deployed," — the spin that has been deployed today has been dizzying —

"the preservation of a section of the H-Blocks — including the hospital wing — would become a shrine to the terrorists who committed suicide in the Maze in the 1980s. That would be obnoxious to the vast majority of people and is something unionist people cannot accept."

Nigel Dodds was right then, and he is right now. The Members whose deputy leader he is

must, inevitably, be saying that he is wrong. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: I agreed with him entirely when he said that. Was Nigel Dodds wrong? Is he wrong, or was he right? Members on the DUP Benches know in their heart that he was right. Yet, as in so much, for the sake of accepting what Sinn Féin demands, they are prepared to roll over on the issue and to blight and brand a worthwhile project of development at the Maze with this, because they are anticipating the utterly unnecessary retention of the buildings. Three DUP Environment Ministers could have delisted those buildings, had them demolished and neutralised the site. Instead, they kept it contaminated, and keeping it contaminated brands the proposition for a conflict resolution centre and destroys the worth that is in that proposition. If there is a need for one, why does it have to be at the Maze?

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member agree that, given that we have come out of a period of deep violence and conflict, there is a need for some sort of mechanism in our society and some sort of site that can bring about a lasting peace and build confidence and reconciliation in our community? I know that the Member objects to the site at Maze/Long Kesh, but does he accept the concept?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Allister: Thank you. I am open to persuasion on the concept of a conflict resolution centre, if that is what it genuinely is and not some mechanism for the rewriting of history. That is why I ask this question: why brand it, why blight it and why damn it by associating it with something that will never deliver the neutrality and the objectivity —

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

Mr Allister: — that, otherwise, should and would be required? I support the motion and reject the amendments.

Mr P Robinson: Given that I speak following the remarks of the Member for North Antrim, I will comment on some of his remarks before I come to the substance of the motion.

As I look across the Chamber, the picture that comes into my mind is that of a certain Japanese man. That is not a racist comment, nor is it any reference to the appearance of the Member for North Antrim. I think his name was Hiroo Onoda. He was sent to a Philippine island during the last war to carry out certain acts to disrupt the allies. He stayed in the jungle even after the war was over. Even though they went round the island with loudspeakers to tell him that the war was over, he would not believe it. Even though they dropped leaflets on him, he would not believe it. Twenty-nine years after the war was over, he came out. It seems to me that the Member for North Antrim still has not come to terms with the fact that we have left behind the era in which he seems to be content to mire himself. We are in a new era, trying to move forward.

The Member tries to style himself as the official opposition in the Assembly. He is not an opposition at all in this Assembly; he is the opposition to this Assembly. That is a distinct difference. He is opposed to these structures. He wants to bring them down. He takes on the role of wrecker in this Assembly, and we would be very foolish if we were to pay too much heed to his words or tactics.

The motion is constructed in three parts, as the Member for Lagan Valley suggested. I readily join its proposer in acknowledging the potential social and economic benefits that the development of former military sites across Northern Ireland can bring. More than that, the Executive are actively involved in extracting the full potential from each of those sites. Nowhere is that potential greater than at the Maze site. It is roughly twice the size of the Titanic Quarter, and its strategic location on a number of arterial routes makes the M/LK site a potential catalyst for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. We are determined to ensure that we maximise the potential of that significant site. It not only provides opportunities to bring local social and economic regeneration but can create something of regional and, I believe, national significance. Out of the prison site that in the past was a manifestation of individual, organisational and even societal failure, we want to achieve something new that demonstrates our desire to build a brighter, better and shared future for all.

Nor do I have any resistance to the part of the motion that seeks to see the site developed in a manner that is sensitive to the feelings of

victims. The centre will build on the evolving cohesion, sharing and integration policy agenda and contribute to dealing with the legacy of the past, not least in supporting the victims and survivors who suffered during the years of conflict. Its international dimension will help to embed our region more deeply in worldwide peace-building networks. What better outward symbol could there be of our society's transition to stability and peace? We fully recognise the long-term impact of violence. Victims and survivors are individuals, and, as the Member for Strangford indicated, no single approach will suit them all. I can, however, categorically assure Members that every effort will be made to ensure that the functions and remit of the centre will not be offensive to those who have suffered.

It is the third element of the Ulster Unionist Party motion, which speaks of their concern about the proposal to build this centre at the Maze site, that I find not only interesting but, perhaps, bemusing. I am at a loss to understand the rationale and intention of the Ulster Unionist Party at expressing such concerns, unless, of course, they are repenting. My difficulty in understanding their so-called concern and, indeed, the reference on Saturday at the Ulster Unionist Party conference by the leader to a terrorist shrine at the Maze comes from the fact that the proposal that concerns them is their own proposal. It was not a DUP First Minister and Sinn Féin deputy First Minister who advanced the proposal for a peace-building and conflict resolution centre: we inherited it. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and then First Minister and an SDLP deputy First Minister nominated the chairman and vice-chairman of the panel that brought forward the proposal. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and then First Minister agreed to the outcome of the panel's report and endorsed it.

12.30 pm

It might be worthwhile to look at some elements of the Ulster Unionist Party-led report. It says:

"The ICCT will include the World War 2 structures; one H block; the prison hospital; the administration building and emergency control room; a prison chapel; a section of the prison perimeter wall around Maze cellular; a watchtower; and a cage from Maze compound."

It was the Ulster Unionist Party-led panel that recommended that the Maze be the site. It was the Ulster Unionist Party-led panel

that recommended that there should be an international conflict transformation centre at the Maze. It was the Ulster Unionist Party-led panel that suggested that the listed buildings should be part of that overall centre.

The report goes further:

“the work of the International Centre could be facilitated positively by being located beside the preserved buildings. Since part of the purpose of the Centre would be to acknowledge and learn from the past whilst looking forward to and building for the future, it would be fitting to do so in a setting which played a major role in the conflict.”

It continues:

“The Panel recommend that the government should protect the structures associated with the International Centre and provide funding to ensure the buildings do not fall into decay ... We believe these structures should be given statutory protection and recommend that the Government concludes the formal process of listing as soon as possible.”

The very listing of the structures at the Maze comes from the Ulster Unionist Party-led panel. This is not the proposal of the Democratic Unionist Party or, indeed, of Sinn Féin; it is the baby of the Ulster Unionist Party that it is now trying to drown it and distance itself from it.

My colleagues from Lagan Valley made exceptional speeches and indicated their support. Indeed, I note that the brief history outlined by one Member — he only had time to do it briefly — is such that I gauge that most people in our society would be happy to go along to such a facility to see the history of the army and the prison officers who worked in the Maze. There will be many levels of interest in that site, and I am absolutely determined that there will be no terrorist shrine in the Maze. If it was ever the proposal of the Ulster Unionist Party to have a terrorist shrine — it was that party's proposal — it will be stopped when it comes to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is not just my point of view: when questioned during First Minister and deputy First Minister's Question Time and when pressed time and time again by Members from the Ulster Unionist Party, the deputy First Minister has repeated over and over again that he has no intention of allowing the site to become a shrine for terrorism.

The leader of Ulster Unionist Party said at his party conference on Saturday:

“We didn't bring forward proposals for a terrorist shrine at the former Maze prison site.”

If he considers it to be a terrorist shrine, he has to accept that his party brought forward those proposals. It ill becomes him now to arrive in the Chamber and attempt to milk whatever latent form of opposition there might be to a conflict resolution centre at the Maze to see if he can get on that bandwagon. There are few bandwagons left for him to get on.

The Ulster Unionist Party does not come to this debate today with clean hands. The proposals have been approved by the leadership of that party and brought forward by the present chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party, who, incidentally, was sitting on the platform while the Ulster Unionist Party leader attacked him for having brought forward proposals in the meantime. I happen to agree with the Member for North Down: we should allow the Ulster Unionist Party to go down there for a free week when the facility is open so that they can try to resolve the conflict that there clearly is within their party.

The Member indicated that it was not the most appropriate site, but the report clearly believes that it is. That report was brought forward by his colleague, his friend, his chairman, Mr David Campbell. He then spoke about the secrecy of the proposal: there is nothing secret about the proposal. The very fact that we are debating it today should indicate that it is far from secret. He mentioned the application. Of course, OFMDFM does not want to jeopardise its application, but we will be happy to sit down and go over the application with him and his deputy chairman, if he wants to bring him along to such a meeting. As far as EU funding is concerned, this is not the pot of money that community groups seek funding from; it is the institutional and structural part of funding. I think that it is measure 2.2 that we are seeking funding from.

The initial overall development focuses on two anchor projects: the proposed peace-building and conflict resolution centre and the anticipated proposal for the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society to create a centre of rural excellence at the site. We hope that those two projects will be a catalyst for attracting further investment and thousands of jobs throughout Northern Ireland. Socio-economic conditions, including the potential employment opportunities that will arise, have been at the

heart of all of the options, analysis and testing undertaken thus far.

I welcome this opportunity to reinforce our intention that the centre that we are building will be a world-class centre of excellence dedicated to promoting and strengthening peace-building processes and non-violent conflict resolution and prevention, both here in Northern Ireland and around the globe. We want to create a world-leading facility that will provide opportunities for academic research, conferences, educational activity and events examining conflict prevention, resolution and social cohesion issues.

The centre will build on Northern Ireland's experience, helping to contribute positively to creating a more stable and peaceful world. There is potential for the venue to accommodate temporary and permanent exhibitions from around the world. The benefits of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre are substantial, and, placed in tandem with our proposals for the potential relocation of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society at Maze/Long Kesh, we believe that we are providing the impetus required to attract further investment to the site. Invest Northern Ireland has already recognised that the work of the centre will enhance our regional and international reputation and that this will encourage external investment. The potential for this is significant and could result in the creation of thousands of jobs.

The deputy First Minister and I will retain accountability for the role and functions of the centre, and we are accountable to the House, thereby ensuring that it is used solely for the purposes intended. We believe that, through partnership, the centre will draw together and build on the work of existing local and regional organisations. The outcome of this collective approach will be far more challenging and delivery-focused as a result. I am in no doubt that this will lead to the positive resolution of difficult issues experienced by many victims and survivors of conflict. Let Members stop trying to stir up anxiety and disquiet about this important, beneficial scheme, and put our collective weight behind what can be a truly significant regional development.

Mr Speaker: Order. 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. The first item of business for Members when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.39 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

DE Capital Projects: South Antrim

1. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Education what capital projects his Department has planned for South Antrim over the next three years.

(AQO 632/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At this point, I am not in a position to detail what new capital projects are planned in South Antrim or any other area. I have made it clear that we need to move to a more strategic approach to planning, and I have commissioned the education and library boards (ELB), working in close conjunction with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectors, to undertake that work. I have also indicated that no school capital building project will be looked at in isolation. Projects will be looked at within the context of the wider area plan. Until that work is complete, I cannot comment on individual schools or on specific areas.

The focus of area planning will be to determine the future needs of an area across all sectors and then to compare what is needed with what already exists in order to identify gaps and over-provision. Once the need is determined, the school managing authorities will consider how best to meet that need. The emphasis must be on a network of sustainable schools and maximising the use of the existing estate. Future capital investment will be targeted at supporting area plans.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, I have major concerns about a number of areas, one being Parkhall Integrated College in Antrim, which has already had some rationalisation in the secondary-school sector. From a health and safety point of view, the building is probably substandard, with major

leaks. This time last year, there was the necessity for movement on that, and the college indicated that it was ready to go to build in October 2010. Unfortunately, that is all in the bye. Another concern is Ballyclare Primary School, which is in need of major health and safety upgrades to make it last. I know that it is on a scheme for replacement in the longer term, but some minor improvement is required to make it abide by current health and safety requirements.

Mr O'Dowd: I understand fine well MLAs raising issues about schools in their constituencies. However, as Minister, I have a responsibility to ensure that we achieve a sustainable schools estate and that we use the very limited public resources available to us in the most effective and efficient way. I believe that setting out the area planning proposal is the best way forward. We can be assured that when the area plans come back, the proposals in them will meet the needs of education in any constituency for at least a generation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to keep their questions brief.

Mr McLaughlin: I congratulate Paul. I thought that that was an excellent performance.

The Minister made two references to the area planning process, and I assume that that type of best practice should be rolled out across every constituency. Will he tell us when he expects this area planning process to be completed?

Mr O'Dowd: I would like to see the area plans back with me by March 2012. If, for any reason, the boards and CCMS, working in conjunction with the other sectors, have their area plans completed beforehand, I am more than willing to take receipt of them. However, the target date for completion is March 2012.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I would like to think that the clear health and safety issues that the Member opposite referred to will be looked at by the people responsible for those schools.

Is the Minister exploring other potential sources of funding for capital projects in the education sector?

Mr O'Dowd: It was remiss of me not to answer Mr Girvan's question, but he asked so many questions.

The onus is on the managing authority of a school to investigate any health and safety concerns and, where possible, to take remedial action. In the October monitoring round, we were successful in securing a further £10 million towards maintenance costs for schools, and that is very welcome. However, there are significant maintenance costs across our schools estate. Am I looking for alternative sources of funding? Yes, and I am open to suggestions for funding for capital builds moving forward. I think that we have to think outside the box in the current financial climate, and if there are alternative funding sources or funding sources that would complement existing departmental funds, I am willing to take a look at them.

Home-to-school Transport

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Education if he has identified any immediate financial savings which could be effected within the next year by putting home-to-school transport services out to competitive tender. (AQO 633/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have committed the education and library boards to delivering £5 million of savings in the current financial year. The performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) has been commissioned to review efficiency in home-to-school transport services, and it will report with recommendations very soon. That report will identify how to generate further savings going forward.

The context for that report, however, is that the ELBs already put many of their home-to-school transport bus and taxi contracts out to competitive tender to secure cost-effective services that meet the safety standards for school transport. More children are transported by services that are provided under contract to ELBs than are transported by the boards. Approximately 50,000 of the 90,000 children who receive transport assistance do so in the form of a bus pass for appropriate Translink services.

Better competitive tendering, not competitive tendering per se, is the issue. The PEDU report has looked into such occurrences in accordance with its terms of reference. In addition, the boards could improve the efficiency of the services that they provide. The £5 million savings target challenges them on that. The PEDU report will also do so, and, again, that is in accordance with its terms of reference.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, surely your Department could save money on school transport by involving the private sector and by bundling contracts for school transport across the Province.

Mr O'Dowd: We are open to any area where we can provide savings, as long as those savings deliver an effective and efficient service to the people whom we are here to serve. By and large, the boards go out to competitive tendering. There are a number of cases where boards provide their own buses. That occurs in circumstances, particularly in rural communities, where Translink does not have regular services. In such circumstances, the boards provide a bus. In circumstances where children have a stated need, with travel by taxi considered to be the best form of transport, a taxi will be provided. Taxis are also used where there is a small cohort of children and bus provision would not be viable. However, by and large, Translink is the main provider, and a number of private providers complement that.

I await the final publication of the PEDU report. I am expecting the draft, which I will publish, to be in my Department within the next number of weeks. No doubt, it will make wide-ranging recommendations, and the Department will be willing to work its way through those as long as they meet the needs of the schools and our school transport service.

During a recent debate in the Chamber, which, I think, the Member's party sponsored, I agreed to carry out a fundamental review of school transport services.

Mr Campbell: The Minister said that Translink is the main provider of such transport but that the private sector offers services in addition to that. If, through the PEDU route, the Department ends up considering further private sector transportation arrangements, how thorough will the checks be to ensure that the bona fide, legitimate operators are able to compete on a contractual basis with those against whom there have been past alleged misdemeanours that, despite investigations by the Department, do not appear to have been uncovered?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not wish to pre-empt the PEDU report and its recommendations. Your second comment related to an open and transparent system for tendering. That will certainly be the case. I expect that to be the case, and I have

no doubt that our boards carry out the tendering process in that manner at this time.

There are a number of measures that boards can, and do, take against transport providers that do not fully follow contracts or the criteria that are stipulated for them. In the cases of minor incidents, providers can be warned that further action will be taken if it happens again. In the most extreme cases, such as a provider not ensuring the health and safety of the young people whom it is transporting, the contract can be taken from the provider and they can be removed from the tendering list. Therefore, sanctions are available, and they have been used in a number of incidences.

If the Member has any specific examples that he wishes to forward to me, I will be happy to ask my officials to investigate them further.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I was going to ask when he expected PEDU to publish its findings, but I think he covered that in his response to Mr Cree's question.

Ethnic Minorities: Barriers to Education

3. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to introduce a strategic framework to remove the barriers to education for people from ethnic minorities.
(AQO 634/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials participate in the racial equality panel and racial equality forum, which are working towards a new racial equality strategy through a partnership process with other Departments, minority ethnic groups and the wider community. They will provide a framework to tackle racial inequalities and open up opportunity to all.

My Department will also continue to reflect the needs of ethnic minorities in a range of policies and programmes including 'Every School a Good School – Supporting Newcomer Pupils'. The Department is also considering the recommendations of the NICEM (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities) report on promoting racial equality in post-primary schools.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the Minister's assessment of the pastoral care afforded to children from ethnic minorities? Quite often, children are the

only interpreters between teachers and staff, and I wonder what the Minister's assessment is of that level of pastoral care and support in our education system.

Mr O'Dowd: We are lucky to have a very high level of pastoral care across our schools. That comes down to the work of individual schools, the management teams in those schools and the enthusiasm of those involved in the pastoral care schemes.

I was at the launch of the NICEM report, and, having listened to the views expressed there, I am of the view that there are lessons to be learned about issues of racial equality. I am considering the NICEM report on the experiences of ethnic minorities in our schools, and I will report back on that in due course. However, in general, I feel that our schools have a very good pastoral care system, which is driven by the schools, the teachers and the staff.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the passage of the Armed Forces Bill through Parliament last week, which guarantees the removal of any barriers to education for service families throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr O'Dowd: I fail to see the relevance to the original question.

Mr McNarry: You are the Minister; you should see it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms Lo: I am sure that my supplementary question will be relevant.

Minister, I welcome the fact that you are looking at NICEM's report and the racial equality strategy. However, will you consider a more holistic approach, particularly towards Roma families? Those families have a very restricted immigration status and no right to seek employment or any welfare entitlement, yet there is a statutory entitlement on them to send their children to school. When they do not have —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Ms Lo: I have already asked a question — [*Laughter.*] Those families do not receive assistance for school uniforms, transport or school meals.

Mr O'Dowd: Following the rather disturbing incidents in Belfast last year, or perhaps the year before, in which the Roma community

came under attack, my predecessor, Caitríona Ruane, introduced support for that community. Indeed, from a very limited budget, she made substantial amounts of money available to the Belfast Education and Library Board, which covers the area where the vast majority of our Roma population appear to live. A total of £2,000 per child is available to support Roma children through our education system.

You are quite correct that the Roma immigration status causes barriers and difficulties. However, I believe that my predecessor acted appropriately at that time. That support network still exists, and I hope to be able to continue it into the future.

DE Circular 1979/10: 'Greater Involvement of Young People in the Youth Service'

4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to explain the rationale behind the decision to rescind circular 1979/10 'The Greater Involvement of Young People in Northern Ireland'. (AQO 635/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Circular 1979/10, which is actually entitled 'Greater Involvement of Young People in the Youth Service', was issued in February 1979 to create a system for participation in the Youth Service.

In advance of the new policy on youth, officials reviewed the relevance of the circular and determined that it did not reflect the policy and legislative changes in youth work in the intervening 32 years; that it did not reflect the emergence and further development of a youth work curriculum in the past 32 years; and that it did not reflect the methods through which young people might choose to participate now. Officials also found that the circular was not consistent with the funding schemes developed for youth work or with the need for fairness, openness and transparency in the awarding of grants; that it pre-dated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and was not rights-based; and that it has become obsolete, and, therefore, does not direct the participation of young people in the Youth Service today.

2.15 pm

I want to ensure that the service delivery supports for young people are efficient, effective and fit for the 21st century. It is not defensible to continue with outdated structural and funding

arrangements that result in an organisation receiving over £1,000 per annum without competition. A review of the circular was overdue. Other organisations in the youth network must apply for scarce resources and demonstrate efficiency, effectiveness and value for money. It would be inequitable to allow one organisation to remain outside published funding schemes.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Education Minister for his response. The circular provided for a regional youth-led body, currently the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, to facilitate youth participation in policy development at community and regional levels, with direct engagement with the Minister and the Department. Will any new policy maintain that level of youth participation in policy development?

Mr O'Dowd: The Youth Forum continues to have direct involvement in youth policy. Indeed, it continues to represent young people in various Department of Education fora, such as the Youth Service Liaison Forum and the Priorities for Youth stakeholder group. I am reviewing youth provision. I want to ensure that the limited funds that we have are properly used. I want to ensure that youth work is connected very closely to — indeed, is one with — education provision and that it meets the needs of our curriculum and delivers a modern education service. As part of that, I will continue to look at the role of the Youth Forum. However, I believe that the circular was outdated, as I said. I have given several reasons for that. We can continue to debate the outdated circular and miss the opportunity to move forward, but I would much prefer to debate the future with the Youth Forum and other youth providers than debate an outdated circular.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister share my concern that officials withdrew the circular without consulting adequately with the stakeholder community? Does he not accept that, in the light of his review of youth services, it would have been better to await the outcome of that review before withdrawing any circular without consultation?

Mr O'Dowd: The removal of the circular was an administrative matter that did not require public consultation. As an elected representative and as Minister, I signed off on the agreement to remove the circular. I believed that that was the right decision then, and I still believe that it is the right decision. When something is so

glaringly out of date, you do not require a review to make a decision.

Let me repeat some of the difficulties with the circular. It did not reflect the methods by which young people may choose to participate now, and it was not consistent with the funding scheme developed for youth work or the need for fairness, openness and transparency in the awarding of grants. I am sure that the Member will agree with me — this is a matter of major concern — that it predated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and was not rights-based.

We can argue about what the circular did or did not provide, but I would much prefer to start the engagement on moving forward and on ensuring that the Youth Service is modern, efficient and effective.

Mr Agnew: I appreciate that the Minister has said that he is holding a review. Can he outline what will be put in as an alternative? The circular seems to have been withdrawn without an alternative in place. In that respect, I see its withdrawal as premature.

Mr O'Dowd: Our youth engage with decision-makers in many ways. We have youth councils. We have a number of examples of school councils. We have direct engagement through Assembly Members and councillors. We have numerous engagements. Access to me and my Department continues. The Youth Forum sits on a number of decision-making bodies. My concern — I believe that it is correct — is that the circular was outdated, given changes in legislation and in the policy direction of the Department over almost three decades. The core of the circular and concerns about it seems to be that the Youth Forum had access to automatic funding. In a time of restricted budgets, we pose difficult questions and have to make difficult decisions about the future provision of education and youth services. That means that no group, and I mean no group, should have automatic entitlement to funding. Groups should be able to present an effective business case and business plan on each occasion to ensure that their programme of work meets the needs of the young people whom they are there to serve.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure us that the withdrawal of the circular will not diminish the Youth Forum's ability to continue its valuable work?

Mr O'Dowd: No, it will not. As I stated, the Youth Forum is still engaged in stakeholder groups. It is still engaged in forums, such as the Youth Service Liaison Forum and the Priorities for Youth stakeholder group. Therefore, it remains an active organisation. How active it will be in the future is a matter for the Youth Forum and will depend on the business plans or programmes of work that it brings to funders. I hope that the Youth Forum continues to be an effective and efficient voice for young people, but that is a matter solely for itself.

Redburn Primary School, Holywood

5. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the proposed closure of Redburn Primary School, Holywood.

(AQO 636/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The South Eastern Education and Library Board is assessing the future status of the school as part of its routine process of reviewing the controlled estate. Any significant change to the school estate, such as closure or amalgamation, requires the publication of a statutory development proposal to support that intent. In conjunction with the board of governors of individual schools, the school managing authority brings development proposals for school closures to the Department. In the case of Redburn Primary School, the authority is the South Eastern Education and Library Board. There is, however, no development proposal with my Department for the closure of Redburn Primary School. Ultimately, I decide on development proposals, having considered the factors involved and comments received. On that basis, it would not be appropriate for me to speculate on any possible future decision on Redburn Primary School.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister outline what the possible impacts will be on the school provision for Holywood if the proposed closure goes ahead? In particular, what will be the impact on the army children who attend the school? In light of his announcement of the review of the school estate, does he not feel that it is rather premature and foolish of the commissioners to go ahead with the consultation on the closure?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in my original answer, I will not speculate on individual schools, particularly because the development proposal is a legal framework. As the adjudicator in that legal framework, it would be wrong of me to speculate

on a decision before considering all the information that is to be placed in front of me. I have not called a pause or stop to any of the education boards moving forward and dealing with development proposals; in fact, I have encouraged boards to speed up that process.

When boards identify schools that are suffering stress or facing major challenges, it is quite right and proper that they continue with the processes outlined in legislation to move those cases forward. I will assess any development proposal that reaches my desk on the basis of the information contained therein. During the two months in which a development proposal is with my Department, I am open to receiving delegations and discussing the matter with elected representatives or representatives of the school. That is when I meet and discuss development proposals in detail and make a decision based on all the information before me.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister continue to make decisions on new applications that are with him for new nursery schools, including for Waringstown in our constituency, or have they been frozen?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I leave it up to the Minister whether he wishes to answer.

Mr O'Dowd: Again, I will not comment on the individual development proposal, because it has not reached my desk. However, the Department of Education faces significant financial pressures, particularly on its front line schools' budget. Every time that I approve a development proposal for a statutory nursery school, it creates extra pressure on the front line schools' budget programme. I am examining the preschool review, which was commissioned before the summer, and is, in my opinion, a good piece of work. It has brought forward a number of proposals on the future of development proposals for turning voluntary and community schools into statutory schools. I will examine those proposals and report back to the Assembly in due course. As I understand it, I am legally bound to make a decision on any development proposal that is currently in the system. I will base my decisions on the merits of each case.

I have to say to the Assembly that the difficulties facing the education budget are severe. Every time that I turn a community and voluntary nursery into a statutory nursery, I am only adding pressure to front line school budgets. Any decision

on development proposals has to be taken in the round.

Mr McKay: Does the Minister agree that the ongoing speculation about the future of a number of schools, which we have heard about in the Chamber and the media, that is taking place in advance of development proposals being submitted not only is unhelpful but can damage schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. Speculating on the future of individual schools, be it in the media or in this Chamber, is unhelpful and only heightens concern in communities. I would much prefer to see an informed debate about each school. I think that Members have a duty to inform themselves of the detail of each school. That information is available to them from a wide range of sources and, indeed, through this body. Members can submit questions for written or oral answer. I much prefer them in written form, because I do not think that debating the future of individual schools on the Floor of the Chamber does the schools concerned any good.

I have to say this: at the core of all schools are the pupils. As I have said in the Chamber before, we should not be fixated on buildings but on the young people who are supposed to be being educated in them. That is my core responsibility and that of this debating Chamber.

Schools: Area Planning

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education how he proposes to deal with area planning for schools which are on the borders of education and library board areas and which draw pupils from across board boundaries. (AQO 637/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The focus of area planning will be to determine the future needs of an area across all sectors and then to compare what is needed with what already exists to identify gaps and over-provision. Where boundaries are drawn for planning purposes there will be schools close to boundaries, and they will attract pupils from adjoining areas. Area plans must recognise that reality and plan for the number of pupils who attend schools in the area, whether or not they live in that area. Account must be taken of schools that are situated close to area boundaries, so that the overall number of places planned for matches the projected need and that pupils are not counted twice or omitted from consideration altogether.

In taking forward area planning, education and library boards, working in close conjunction with CCMS and the other sectors, will be required to demonstrate clearly that they have taken account of cross-boundary movement of pupils when they are developing area plans.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Education Minister for his answer. I know that area planning is quite high on his agenda. I was just wondering whether he is planning to do that on all-Northern Ireland basis, as opposed to carrying it out in each education and library board area and having the CCMS as a separate unit. However, maybe he is afraid to take on the CCMS on this proposal.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not think it is a case of my having to take on any of our managing authorities. Our managing authorities are, in some ways, ahead of the game. During the discussion around the previous question, we heard about how education boards are moving forward with difficult but, in my view, necessary decisions. It is not a case of my having to take on CCMS or the boards. However, if I have to take them on, I will, because I believe that the programme of work that I have set out is the right way forward.

Boards plan their provision almost according to council areas. I believe and am, indeed, confident that boards can plan across boundaries in the North. There is an argument for all-Ireland or cross-border planning for some of our schools estate. However, that will take a wee bit longer, because we need further information on how we would do it. I am confident that the education and library boards and CCMS can work not only together but across boundaries.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister of Education. We must move on.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 7 have been withdrawn, and written responses are required. Questions 3 and 11 have been transferred.

2.30 pm

Rates: Business Premises

2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact the revaluation of

business premises will have on the proposal to increase rates on premises with a rateable value of over £500,000. (AQO 648/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Member will recall that I postponed the business rates revaluation that was due to take place in 2011-12. The first reason for doing so was because volatility in the property market at that time caused problems in getting stability for the rate base. Therefore, the revaluation has been put off until 2015, when we hope that balance and equity will be restored to the rates system.

The proposals that I am considering for higher-value shops to fund the enlargement of the small business rates relief scheme are a temporary rebalancing measure because there has not been a revaluation since 2002. In the meantime, there has been a change in rental patterns, etc, which would have advantaged one sector over the other. When the revaluation job is done, that balance will, of course, have been restored. The additional levy that we propose under the small business rates relief will then be dropped.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. He will have noticed, in the media, comments by Tesco about its future investment plans. Does he believe that Tesco's assessment is accurate?

Mr Wilson: First of all, Tesco's response to this has been — I choose my words quite deliberately — absolutely pathetic. Here is a major company that is used to bullying its way around. However, it is not going to use bully-boy tactics on something that the Assembly has looked at, that has been proposed in the Budget and is a sensible way forward. Anyone who tells me that a £100 million investment project for which Tesco will look for a return over the next 20 to 25 years will be derailed by a temporary tax that relates to four stores and amounts to £840,000, at the most, spread over the 20- or 25-year term of that £100 million investment project, and that that kind of investment will be endangered, either has not done their sums very well or must think that we are all a bunch of idiots. That is equivalent to a 0.042% return over the 20-year period.

Now, if Tesco's investment in Northern Ireland is that perilous and precarious, I do not think that it is a wise investment decision and it should, probably, never have been made in the first

place. For that reason, I believe that it is bluffing and bullying. It will not get away with that.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. In particular, I note that rates are one vital way to help businesses in the future. Can the Minister tell the House how many people responded to the business rates relief scheme consultation and what some of the main issues were?

Mr Wilson: I do not have the exact numbers, but I think that there were around 80 responses to the consultation. I suppose that they were along fairly predictable lines. The people who are involved in small businesses in town centres welcomed the proposal and indicated that it would be one way to reduce their overheads. Those who are going to pay the 20% additional levy obviously said that it was going to cause them difficulties.

One other issue that came up, which I have taken note of and, indeed, want to put on record and give assurances on, is that many businesses, both large and small, indicated that, in the long term, the way forward is to have business improvement districts where local people and traders can decide how much they want to raise and how much they want to spend on that. Obviously, the 20% levy would have affected participation in the business improvement districts. For that reason, I put it on record again that I see it as a temporary measure. By the end of the current Budget period, the legislation should be in place for the bids and, at that stage, I would not see us having the 20% levy, plus business improvement districts. Those are some of the issues that emerged, and the detail of those responses will be shared with the Finance Committee in due course.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his robust answers. There has not been a revaluation of commercial properties since 2003. The next is planned for 2015: a gap of 12 years at a time of very volatile economic conditions. Will the Minister explain that gap?

Mr Wilson: We have seen difficulties as a result of that. I assume that that is what the Member is getting at. For example, I suspect that some of the larger stores that are being targeted in the small business rates relief scheme would have seen an uplift in their net annual value (NAV) anyway had we carried out the revaluation in 2010-11. There will be certain towns and parts of towns where there would have been a

change in the NAV and the relative rates that would have been paid. Therefore, it has skewed the market somewhat.

The difficulty in trying to do a revaluation in 2010-11 was simply that the market was in such turmoil that, had we done it, first, we were concerned that it would not have met the international standards that are laid down for a proper valuation and, secondly, it would have been challenged very quickly because the data would have soon gone out of date. So we were between the devil and the deep blue sea, and we probably made the only choice that we could have, albeit I am not denying that it has caused some problems.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

Notwithstanding the view that every little helps, does the Minister consider that the average benefit to small businesses of £700 per annum is enough, and are there any other measures that he can take that will give added support to small businesses?

Mr Wilson: Rates were one of the biggest overheads, after rent, that small businesses faced. Therefore, the reduction, on average, of about £740 a year still had a sizeable impact on the overheads that the shops and the businesses were going to face. We have, of course, introduced other measures, which have been designed to help not just small businesses. I have made the point to some of the large retailers who have come to see me that we are the only part of the United Kingdom where, for the past four years, in real terms, there has been a freeze in the regional rate, and, for the next four years, in real terms, there will be a freeze in the regional rate. In no other part of the United Kingdom have large or small businesses had that kind of benefit in local taxation. That was a conscious decision to help businesses in Northern Ireland, which was made against some opposition in the Assembly during the previous Budget debate. The small business rates relief scheme, as we are proposing it for next year, is an extension of what we have had in place for the past year.

EU Structural Funds: East Antrim

4. Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the projects delivered

through EU structural fund programmes in the East Antrim constituency between 2005-06 and 2009-2010. (AQO 650/11-15)

Mr Wilson: From 2005-06 to 2009-2010, the EU structural funds programme awarded about £6.5 million to projects in the East Antrim constituency. There are about 100 different projects, but, for the sake of time — I imagine that you would probably rule me out of order, Mr Deputy Speaker — I am not going to read them out. I will send a copy to the Member and leave one in the Library.

Mr McMullan: I thank Mr Wilson for that answer. What is the estimated multiplier benefit to the East Antrim constituency?

Mr Wilson: A lot of the projects help to support small voluntary organisations, and, in some cases, that will pay the wages of workers. The money will be spent locally for services in the East Antrim economy. Some of the projects are bigger capital projects, and it is difficult to know whether the work is given to firms in East Antrim or beyond. However, given the nature of the spend and the fact that it tends to be local spend, the multiplier effect would be quite high, though we do not have an actual estimate of what it would be.

Mr Beggs: The Minister talked about smaller projects. Will he confirm that larger projects, such as the A8 at £115 million, could also be entitled to structural funds, so that moneys would be available for other improvements throughout Northern Ireland? That additional money would benefit the local economy.

Mr Wilson: There are very strict criteria for the way in which the money is spent. Some large projects in East Antrim have already benefited from it. Nearly £2 million has gone to the Gobbins path project, and because of the money that the council and other bodies are putting in, it will be of immense benefit to the area, not just in the construction of the Gobbins path, but, much more importantly, in the number of visitors that it will attract to East Antrim. Indeed, it is reckoned that that project could probably compete in visitor numbers with the Giant's Causeway once it is completed and with all the other spin-off effects that there are likely to be.

As far as roads projects are concerned, there is some danger that all the INTERREG money might not be spent in, I think, 2014-15, and there is some risk attached there. Therefore, we

are looking to see whether we can put the funds towards any large projects that come under the criteria, so that we do not lose the funding.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister is noted for his Eurosceptical position. *[Laughter.]* I do not know whether the Minister was in the House of Commons for the vote last night, but I am sure that he will not resile from his Eurosceptical position. However, does he agree that European structural funds are a net benefit to Northern Ireland and that we should maximise opportunities therein?

Mr Wilson: I am very proud of my party's record. In fact, we were the only party that attended and had a 100% vote in favour of a referendum in the House of Commons last night. Indeed, we did not even have to be whipped in order to get there. Members may laugh, but do not forget the impact of Europe and European regulation on businesses in Northern Ireland and right across the United Kingdom, the amount of red tape, the loss of sovereignty and the fact that nearly 60% of the regulations that apply in Northern Ireland do not even get debated in this Chamber because they are imposed by some bureaucrats in Brussels. Therefore, there are very good reasons why people who have not had a say about our place in Europe for 52 years should have a say.

Now, what was the question? *[Laughter.]*

Maybe the Member should bear in mind that the United Kingdom makes a net contribution of £10.8 billion to Europe every year, and that money is not then available for spending on mainstream programmes. Indeed, if you look at the benefit that we in Northern Ireland receive from Europe and then take even the Barnett consequential of £10.8 billion and make it available to the UK Government to spend in our own country instead of it going to Europe, you will see that the net effect of us having control of that money would probably be that we would be quids in.

2.45 pm

Rates: Empty Properties

5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the expected increase in domestic rates income annually, due to the introduction of rates on empty domestic properties. (AQO 651/11-15)

Mr Wilson: When the Executive agreed to introduce the rating of empty homes, my Department

estimated that up to £10 million would be available to us in the first full year of operation. The measure was introduced in October, and Land and Property Services has already sent out bills totalling £10 million for the half year. As it is a new taxation measure, we are not sure of the full amount.

We have a test, given the exemptions. Do not forget that some owners will be exempt because their houses are not capable of habitation. Some people will be exempt because, although they are the main dweller in the house, they are in a nursing home and, therefore, will not have to pay rates. Others will be subject to probate and, therefore, will not have to pay rates. Finally, a number of properties will already be occupied. We may have not yet identified that those houses are occupied, and they, of course, will become liable for rates. However, that is not a net gain as such because the properties were occupied anyhow.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Minister. You referred to exemptions. In my constituency of North Antrim, empty properties that are in the ownership of the banks have been allowed to become structurally insecure. Will those properties be rated even if there is no one living in them due to the banks' failure to secure them?

Mr Wilson: If houses are in the ownership of the banks and the banks have the right to use them, they will become liable for the rates. What determines whether a property is uninhabitable will be for the owner of the property and the district valuer to decide. When we talked about the issue, some landlords made the threat that they would simply go in and trash the houses. I really do not see any benefit in that because of the amount of trashing that would have to be done to make a house uninhabitable. It is not a case of just cutting off the electricity or water. For a house to be deemed uninhabitable, it will be required to be in quite a state of disrepair. I really do not see the financial benefit of people doing thousands of pounds worth of damage to houses that are in their ownership just to escape a year or two years' rates. Although there has been the scare that people will simply let houses fall into disrepair, if they do that, they will be allowing an asset to depreciate in value far more than the cost of the rates that would be imposed.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for coming to Coleraine at my invitation a couple of weeks

ago to meet business owners and discuss this issue. When the Department seeks to identify domestic properties that have become empty only recently, how rigorous will the test be to establish the precise number of properties that are liable?

Mr Wilson: If a property has become vacant recently, we will know who the owner is. Therefore, there should not be an issue, and there will be continuity. If it was occupied and then becomes unoccupied, the bill will still go to that individual, so there really should not be a loss. The difficulty might come if the owner of a property that is empty has not been traced. There will be a gap as we seek to trace that owner. In doing that, we will use all the normal means. Sometimes we have used payment of utility bills, but I suppose the difficulty will be that if the property has been vacant for some time, there may not be payment of utility bills, and we will have to use other means of search.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister considered any initiatives around the domestic rate that might help to stimulate economic activity, particularly in the construction industry?

Mr Wilson: Not so much in relation to the domestic rate. Let me make something clear. As I said in answer to a previous question, as a result of decisions made by my predecessors and decisions made in the Budget over the past year, domestic rates in Northern Ireland will have been frozen for eight years by the end of the current Budget period. That is unprecedented anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It is unlikely to have an impact on stimulating the construction industry, but the announcement in the debate on the October monitoring round yesterday will have an impact. We have put an additional £10 million into the co-ownership scheme and, on top of that, have negotiated with the banks that they will make finance available for the mortgage end of that transaction.

As the Minister for Social Development said yesterday, that potentially means that, over the next four years, with the money that is already in the budget from last year and the additional money that we are committing, 2,400 new opportunities to purchase a home will be available. Many of those will be in the newbuild sector and will, therefore, feed into the construction industry.

EU Financial Transaction Tax

6. Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact of the European Union's proposed financial transaction tax. (AQO 652/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have no direct responsibility for considering the impact of proposed taxation measures, but I believe that any proposed financial transaction tax should be applied globally. Otherwise, the transactions covered may simply relocate a business activity from one country to another. The big difficulty with the European Union proposal on financial transaction tax is that if it is not applied outside the European Union, many financial institutions, especially those that deal with the kind of transactions that are geographically mobile, may simply move out of the European Union to elsewhere. Of course, the country that would suffer disproportionately from that, because the financial services industry is so important to it, would be the UK. Given the efforts that have been made to attract many of the top financial services companies here to Northern Ireland, we would suffer disproportionately as well.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he detail whether there are any estimates of the possible economic impact that that proposal would have in relation to Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: I do not have figures for Northern Ireland, but the EU has done its own estimate of what the tax would mean. It is a very loose estimate, as you will see. The EU believes that, depending on what movement there was, it could reduce GDP across the European Union by between €21 billion with little or no movement and €216 billion with substantial movement. That would mean 71,000 jobs or up to 478,000 jobs right across the European Union. Since that would disproportionately fall upon the United Kingdom, I think that you can see the impact.

Do not forget — I see that he has gone —

Mr McDevitt: No, he is still here, Minister.

Mr Wilson: Oh, he has not gone. Sorry.

This is yet another attempt by the European Union to feed its insatiable appetite for taxpayers' money. The estimate is that it would generate about £57 billion of tax across the European Union. Of course, it is one of the ways — as well as raising VAT, which will hit the consumer —

that the EU intends to feed its appetite for more money and more spend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a European ruling, but all remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister not agree — I think that he will — that Europe should be focusing on developing its economies and encouraging recovery rather than creating a tax that will disproportionately affect the United Kingdom?

Mr Wilson: I agree absolutely. The Member's party does not have any Members in the House of Commons at the moment, but had he been there with us last night, I am sure that he would have voted with us to have a referendum. One of the reasons why I believe we need to look at renegotiating our position with the European Union is simply that a lot of what comes from Europe — the one-size-fits-all type of legislation — has been destructive of jobs in many parts of the United Kingdom. Of course, a financial transactions tax would have a severe impact on the United Kingdom. As I said, we should look at how successful we have been in attracting financial services companies to Northern Ireland. Therefore, such a tax would not be good news for us. We were able to attract those firms because, by their very nature, they are geographically mobile. However, they could be just as easily become mobile out of Northern Ireland again if such an imposition were placed on them.

Mr McDevitt: It would be helpful were the Minister to clarify that he is not excusing the casino banking that brought so much of the United Kingdom's economy to its knees over the past three years, that he is not excusing the sort of brass-plate banking that came to epitomise the worst side of the City of London, and that he is, in fact, not hiding behind a slightly myopic view of Europe —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr McDevitt: — when, in fact, this tax deals with the underlying problem at the heart of our financial system.

Mr Wilson: Anyone who has listened to the criticisms of the banks that I have made in the Assembly knows that I have also made them in face-to-face meetings with the banking institutions. The Member knows very well that I do not hide behind anything when it comes to

criticising the banks for the policies that they have adopted or for the ways in which, despite the amount of government money that has gone into them, there has not been the necessary degree of regulation and control or the proper impositions on them to meet lending targets that they should have had. That has been a constant theme. I will meet Sir Mervyn King next month to talk about the impact of some banking practices in Northern Ireland. I meet Treasury Ministers in London and the Finance Minister in Dublin on a regular basis to ensure that banks that are subsidised by either the Irish or British Governments behave and make finance available for businesses in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Taxation: Retailers

8. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the proposed new tax levy on large retailers. (AQO 654/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The consultation on the proposals to introduce the large retail levy and to fund the small business rates relief scheme closed last Tuesday. Those proposals were aimed at rebalancing the domestic rating system during the period of the economic downturn through to recovery. Many town centre traders have expressed their concerns to us. One has only to look at town centres in Northern Ireland to see the numbers of vacant properties that there are. The measure is timely; the Committee for Finance and Personnel will discuss the 70-odd consultation responses, and it is also beginning an investigation. I hope that, by December, I will be bringing a paper to the Executive on the way forward.

Private Members' Business

Maze Prison Site

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the potential social and economic benefits which the utilisation of former security sites, such as the site of the Maze prison, can bring to Northern Ireland; notes with concern the proposals to build a "peace-building and conflict resolution centre" at the site; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to develop this site in a way which is practical and inoffensive to victims. — [Mr Elliott.]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Leave out all after "Northern Ireland;" and insert:

"acknowledges that the transformation of the Maze/Long Kesh site into a peace-building and conflict resolution centre must have due regard to the needs of victims and survivors; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to prioritise this need whilst urgently progressing a development and job creation strategy for the site." — [Mr Eastwood.]

No 2: Leave out "with concern". — [Mr Givan.]

Mr Newton: Those of us who sat through this morning's debate will come back to it with a degree of scepticism and, indeed, sadness about why the motion was tabled at this time.

The motion was prompted not by economic reasons but by underlying political ones. It is an attempt by the Ulster Unionist Party to, as it sees it, withdraw its earlier support for the initiative on the Maze/Long Kesh site and the conflict resolution centre.

3.00 pm

Member after Member indicated that the site offers an opportunity for Northern Ireland. It has huge economic potential. As has been said, it is twice the size of the Titanic Quarter project, which has started. It has the potential to assist Invest Northern Ireland in taking us to a new dimension in what we can attract to the site and the creation of, initially, construction jobs, which will help the hard-pressed construction industry, and the longer-term jobs that Invest NI would, no doubt, be helped in attracting to Northern Ireland through the provision of the site.

I do not think that I have heard a more negative approach to any motion or subject that the

Assembly has debated over the years that I have been here than that taken by the proposer of the motion, Mr Elliott. I say that with much sadness. The precursor to it was the UUP conference on Saturday. Claims were made there that the UUP led on issues like the devolution of corporation tax powers and air passenger duty. The mind boggles at those claims. As has been said, the motion is nearly in three parts. It has taken the UUP a long time to return to the issue to which it is taking exception. There has been huge press coverage of the matter. The development corporation has been established. When that happened around the Executive table, there was not a squeak from the UUP Ministers. The development corporation will take the issue forward. My mind boggles at why we are coming to that concern at such a late stage of the development.

When Mr Elliott rose, I got the feeling, because of his body language, that he was not quite comfortable. That became clear when Member after Member raised the role of the UUP, particularly its current chairman, in the development of the conflict resolution centre. He said that he had concerns about that centre. I listened carefully to what the leader of the Ulster Unionists said. I wanted to note his concerns, but I did not hear one concern being expressed. He did not articulate one concern about the peace and reconciliation centre. He set the tone for the other member of his party who spoke.

Mr Eastwood indicated that he was very —

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

Mr Newton: I will tell it at another time.

Mr A Maginness: The reason why we are in this House, in the view of the SDLP, anyway, is to try to bring about an end to conflict and to try to resolve the conflict and bring about reconciliation. The conflict resolution centre stems very much from the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, which, courageously, was brought about by the Ulster Unionists. They did the heavy work in bringing about the agreement, and that is to their credit. However, in politics, you have to show consistency in your general political purpose, and I am not certain that, in this instance, the Ulster Unionists have shown that consistency. It is entirely consistent with their courageous position to sign and advocate the Good Friday Agreement for them to take the position that there should be a conflict resolution centre, albeit not necessarily at the

Maze/Long Kesh. When we look at the history of this, we can see that the Ulster Unionists did, in fact, sign up to a conflict resolution centre at the Maze. Again, that was a courageous step. It does not bring any credit to the Ulster Unionists for them to resile from that position now. It does not help us to establish peace and reconciliation in our society. I have no doubt that the Ulster Unionist Party is committed to reconciliation and peace, but, in this instance, its position does not help to achieve that. I am disappointed that it has adopted that view.

Our view has been expressed already by Mr Eastwood. We support the development of the Maze site very much. The site has tremendous economic, industrial and business potential for Northern Ireland. It meets all the key criteria. The potential is there for us to use the site beneficially for all our people. Let us get on with that, and let us do that in a concerted fashion. It is common cause in the House that there should be intensive development on the site.

I support Mr Poots and Mr Girvan in their staunch advocacy of this. Indeed, I pay tribute to Mr Poots, who has been very consistent on the issue for many years, perhaps to his own political regret at some stage. He pushed for a national stadium, and he remained firm on that when others around him were not so firm. Not establishing a national stadium there for all three of our major sports was a missed opportunity. That, in itself, would have been a major act of reconciliation and conflict resolution.

I agree with those who have advocated the use of the site to promote peace, and I compliment those Members, in particular, Mr McCartney, who addressed the House passionately and said that republicans from the outset did not want an exclusive centre on the site. He said that they wanted it to be shared and that they wanted everyone to tell their story. If that is true — I accept Mr McCartney's genuineness and sincerity on this issue — there is nothing for any of us, particularly Members on the unionist Benches, to fear from this, not even Mr —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member agree that, if and when the motion is, hopefully, passed, there should be no further delay in developing that enormous site for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland?

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with that and with Mr Lunn, who was most impatient to get on with the business of developing the site. He

said that it was painful that there has been so little development.

Even Mr Allister is persuadable, if not in relation to this site, then to a centre for conflict resolution. If we can contribute anything not just to our own society but to politics and conflict resolution throughout the world, we should invest and invest well in that site, so that we can act as a model for the rest of the world.

Mr Copeland: I intend to approach the matter honestly, directly and seriously, trying to avoid malice or giving offence. Many Members expressed views that are individual and that represent their party in the Chamber on what is an important issue. I thank them for their contributions, each of which I value, even though I may not necessarily agree totally with all that was said.

It is true to say that Mr David Campbell was chairman of the Maze consultative panel, which met representatives from all four parties in 2003 and made a final report in February 2005 that included a proposal for an international centre for conflict transformation. That was then; this is now.

At one time, I served as a soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment. My wife served as a constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. She and I are very proud of the service that we believe we gave the entire Northern Ireland population throughout that time. I say without malice that individuals and groups are represented in the Chamber and perhaps, on occasion, are even present in the Chamber who, at one time, regrettably, would have considered me, my family and those like us suitable candidates for murder. I must say, without malice and in truth, that, had some great misfortune befallen them, no tears would have been shed by me at their wake. But that was then; and this is now. Things change, and policies and positions change.

I listened to the First Minister, whom I have known for many years, who agrees with the first and concluding parts of the motion tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. He has issues, as he is entitled to, with the section in the middle. The first part of the motion states:

"That this Assembly recognises the potential social and economic benefits which the utilisation of former security sites, such as the site of the Maze Prison, can bring to Northern Ireland".

That is a no-brainer for anyone in the Chamber; it is self-evident. The motion goes on to state that this Assembly:

"notes with concern the proposals to build a 'peace-building and conflict resolution centre' at the site".

That wording is slightly different from what Mr Campbell, apparently, originally agreed to, but it means much the same, fair enough — *[Interruption]*. The first words were an "International Centre for Conflict Transformation", and the second were "a peace-building and conflict resolution centre". We then get to the bit that:

"calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to develop this site in a way which is practical and inoffensive to victims".

I had and have concerns. They are not manufactured or contrived. They are mine, and they are genuine. In some ways, they are based on a visit many years ago to a jail in Dublin. I cannot remember whether it was Kilmainham or Mountjoy. I went in among the Americans and got the potted history of 1916. At each cell, I was told by a very nice tour guide that this was where the British kept Mr, Mrs or whoever, before they shot them — cell after cell after cell. I had the temerity, knowing something of the history of this island, to ask where Mr de Valera kept those whom he shot — they were kept in the same jail, and there were more of them — and I was asked to leave.

3.15 pm

Recently, an article appeared in the press about — forgive me, my Irish is weak — the Tí Chulainn cultural centre near Mullaghbawn, which is funded by European Peace money. On that occasion, the contribution to peace appeared to consist of children dressed in camouflage playing, if that is the right word, with RPG-7s and AK-47s and doing, presumably, God knows what in their mind. That sends a shiver down the spine of those who tried to serve, remain within the law and remain fair.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: Mr Poots, I do not send my words to march on your time, sir, and I will not permit yours to march on mine.

The creation of a centre in the hope that it prevents any recurrence would be desirable.

Personally, whether it is located at the Maze or not at the Maze is of little issue to me, provided that the words of the First Minister, which I have no reason to doubt, are correct. He said that he would not permit the centre to be a shrine for terrorists and that he did not think that the deputy First Minister wished it to be so.

Shrines are funny things. Two Saturdays ago, I was called to a house on the Donegall Road. Both the 86-year-old woman and 84-year-old man living there have Alzheimer's. They did not know their national insurance numbers, but they did know that they had been burgled five times in almost as many months. Their life savings of £5,000 have gone. When their central heating boiler broke down a fortnight ago, they could not afford to fix it. Behind the door in the hall were two frames: one contained a certificate from the Chief Constable thanking the lady for intervening during an armed robbery — she skulled an armed robber with her handbag rendering him unconscious and subject to arrest — and the second contained a photograph of their son, who was murdered while serving as a prison officer. That was her shrine. The house has been burgled five times. They did not know what benefits they were entitled to and had a central heating system that could not be fixed. Their grief is private; their pain is private. If this centre must be built, it must be built sensitively, and, if it is built as described, I will have little argument with that.

Others have changed their position. On 26 June 2007, Mr William McCrea spoke to the 'News Letter' about his complete objection to the idea, albeit of a sports facility. He said:

"Under no circumstances whatsoever do I accept that there should be any shrine or anything at all connected with the tragedy, heartache and heartbreak the IRA inflicted on the people of Northern Ireland. This must not ... happen."

But that was then, and this is now. The 'News Letter' report continued:

"North Belfast DUP MLA Nelson McCausland - joining Mr McCrea, Nigel Dodds, Sammy Wilson and others in the party - said: 'Moreover, the proposal to develop a centre at the Maze was compared by Edwin Poots to German camps from the Second World War, some of which draw thousands of visitors every year. However, that comparison is also invalid. Camps such as Auschwitz serve as a reminder of the evil of Fascism and are a warning of the depths to which men can sink. The German people have repented of the Nazi era

and Auschwitz does not contain a Nazi version of the story. That is the difference. The IRA have not repented of their terrorism and Sinn Fein will demand that their story be told in any centre at the Maze."

But that was then, and this is now.

I consider, Mr Speaker and Members, that you might forgive me my concern and accept the motion that we tabled because, in many cases, that concern is real. There will be people not living in the past but, as I have said before, with the past living in them. An obligation falls on us to do what must be done to ensure that it does not happen again. If the First Minister's words are right and if the deputy First Minister's thoughts are as witnessed by the First Minister, we need fear nothing, but, for me, the concern is still there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if this amendment is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2, as the wording to which it relates will have been deleted. I hope that is clear.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 63; Noes 15.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr S Anderson, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Frew, Ms Gildernew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGlone, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Eastwood.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McNarry, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Copeland and Mr Nesbitt.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the potential social and economic benefits which the utilisation of former security sites, such as the site of the Maze prison, can bring to Northern Ireland; acknowledges that the transformation of the Maze/Long Kesh site into a peace-building and conflict resolution centre must have due regard to the needs of victims and survivors; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to prioritise this need whilst urgently progressing a development and job creation strategy for the site.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members either to take their seats or to leave the Chamber. We wish to continue with the business of the House.

Community Pharmacies

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

I wish to advise Members that there is an application for judicial review before the courts on areas associated with the debate. I, therefore, caution Members to be particularly careful that they say nothing in their contributions that may prejudice those proceedings.

Mr McKay: I beg to move:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to put a contingency plan in place to protect pharmacy services in rural and socially disadvantaged areas following the introduction of new funding arrangements.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I am very cognisant of your opening comments, as all Members should be.

Community pharmacists have reached crisis point, and, as it says in the motion, a contingency plan needs to be put in place as a matter of the utmost urgency, regardless of any other considerations that are before us. The issue has been under the radar for a considerable time, and it is welcome that it is before the House. I am sure that there will be a healthy debate on the issue, and, hopefully, we can come to agreement on the way forward.

It is important that the House recognise that many pharmacists face going to the wall over the coming days, weeks and months. Job losses are increasing: at the last count, 125 posts had been lost. The service that pharmacies provide to the public, which is the purpose of community pharmacies, has also decreased. Given the present economic circumstances, the rise in poverty and the health impact of those on our communities, this is totally the wrong time for community pharmacies to be taking that sort of hit.

I have spoken with many pharmacists in recent weeks in my constituency and across the North. Sometimes community pharmacists are put into a box and seen as merely providing medicines and certain other products. However, the pharmacists whom I know and work with are much more than that. I recently spoke to a

pharmacist who goes above and beyond the call of duty on many occasions in the community. He is very proactive; he holds events in community centres and works with community associations. That is vital work, particularly in rural communities. I am afraid that such pharmacists may not be with us in the new year, and we must ask what impact that will have on our communities.

Pharmacists face many challenges and questions about whether they will lay off staff or close their businesses, which may leave communities without pharmacies, particularly in rural areas. They and their families are also under immense stress because of financial pressures and the fact that people rely on them to service their communities.

The pharmacy sector faces a loss of £38 million this year, which is a 30% cut. Regardless of sector, a cut of 30% — nearly one third — will have a devastating impact; we cannot get away from that. A Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) survey shows that 75% of contractors have been forced to reduce pharmacy staff. It also shows that the levels of stress and concern have increased, and 30% of pharmacists will now have to close on Saturdays.

Let us not forget about the workers who are caught up in this matter as well. There are many part-time workers in pharmacies and full-time pharmacists. A number of companies are facing questions about whether they can stay on. We need to be mindful of where this may end up. After the judicial review is completed and a number of other factors are played out, we need to ensure that the rights of employees are protected, jobs are secured and, in certain instances, pay is protected as well. I have had a number of phone calls from employees; parts of the sector are concerned about the way forward and some of the proposals that they have seen. We need to be cognisant of that.

Many rural pharmacies have expanded their businesses in recent times and brought in new staff, primarily to meet the needs of the community. They are holding out as long as they can to ensure that those jobs are protected so that they can continue to provide a service to the community. It is a matter of extreme concern that 70% of those community pharmacies struggle to meet the demands of wholesalers for payment. Indeed, 20% have defaulted on their payments. That is one in five. Many wholesalers

will not release further medicines in light of those defaults, so already businesses are under extreme pressure.

We, therefore, call on the Minister to work with pharmacies to develop a co-ordinated approach based on fair levels of funding. We do not believe that that is too much to ask. All pharmacists ask for is fairness in that regard. In health provision, when we talk about front line services, we talk about ambulances and hospitals, but community pharmacies are a front line service. Because they deliver a multiplicity of services and flag up certain ailments for the people who come through their doors, they need to be viewed as a front line service as well.

I have already outlined that pharmacies are willing to work with the Minister and the Department to ensure that they can realise savings. We are talking about cuts of over £30 million. We have seen proposals that clearly outline that those savings could be made by way of other methods, namely generic switches, therapeutic switches and dose optimisation. Trial studies have already been carried out in parts of the North, and those savings have been realised. We need to look at how we can mainstream that and ensure that savings can be made across the board.

It was the case until recently that pharmacists could advise on flu, hay fever and other minor ailments, thus taking the pressure off GPs and A&E departments. That was until the minor ailments scheme was also removed from pharmacies. There is no doubt that healthcare needs to evolve to meet the needs of local communities and to take account of the changing financial circumstances that we face. Pharmacies will have to take their share of the financial burden, and pharmacists recognise that fact. It is important to put that on the record. Pharmacists have suggested many cost-savings mechanisms that would save millions of pounds. However, they are not being listened to; instead the Minister seems to be ploughing on with a policy that will result in pharmacies becoming a rare sight in rural villages and at the heart of rural communities. That would be a great shame.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Member for giving way. The Minister is not ploughing on with anything. The Minister has been left a legacy by a previous Minister and, as

a result of a judicial review, has been unable to intervene. I would very much like to engage with pharmacists; I have a strong desire to do so. It is incorrect to say that I wish to plough on with anything. I want to engage but currently cannot.

3.45 pm

Mr McKay: Regardless of that factor, these pharmacies are going to the wall, jobs will be lost and services will be lost over the coming weeks and months. So, regardless of what is happening in the courts, the Health Department can put in place a contingency plan to ensure that those services are not lost to the community, and the Minister needs to recognise that.

My party recognises that the way forward for healthcare is not only to look after the sick but to prevent people from getting sick in the first place. In her time as Health Minister, my party colleague and current Member of the European Parliament, Bairbre de Brún, introduced the Investing for Health strategy. For that to work, it must have the co-operation and support of all agencies involved in healthcare provision in our communities. We should be investing further in our local pharmacies, not slashing them. We have to invest to save, and that is not a complicated thing. It is short-sighted not to, when the reality is that, in the not-too-distant future, we will rely more on local community-based projects to deliver our healthcare, and pharmacies will be to the fore of that.

To conclude, I simply ask that the Minister restore the minor ailments scheme and establish the community pharmacies, which are visited daily by close to 10% of the adult population and are a key component of our health promotion network. I ask that he resolve the community pharmacy contract negotiations and swiftly implement that contract. He should also provide fair and reasonable funding for community pharmacies, particularly dispensing fees and special advance payments. That is not something that has come from pharmacies or from us: it is from this year's DUP manifesto.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to get involved in the debate. There is no doubt that community pharmacies play a vital role in the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. They are at the front line of health provision and provide a crucial service for any local community. They offer important medical advice that is invaluable in helping to limit non-emergency visits to GPs and can reduce the workload in our A&E units,

which, in turn, helps to reduce the demand for hospital beds. The public build up relationships with, and trust in, their local chemist. They value the professional service given by our pharmacists and their staff. It is a popular, reliable sector, and one that is well used and respected by many.

The work of our local chemists in providing and delivering medication every week is vital, particularly for the elderly and vulnerable in society, who often live in isolation in their homes and may be unable to travel to their local pharmacy. I recently went out with a local community pharmacist in his car. It may be difficult to accept, but that was in Helen's Bay. I saw for myself the vital service that he provides. The professionalism and dedication to his work was clear. The evidence was there, on the faces of those who received their mediboxes. I am sure that you have all been lobbied about how time-consuming mediboxes are to maintain and to service, but I think that we recognise the invaluable work done on that issue by pharmacists.

This was an example of a relatively small urban community. Nonetheless, the importance of the service was evident during my time spent out and about with the chemist. I am sure that many Members have, like me, met other pharmacists, and I share their aim to see a high level of service provided across this important sector. We need to ensure that pharmacy services are effective and efficient. It is important that we have a network of pharmacy outlets spread across our cities, towns and villages. We must ensure that pharmacy services in rural and socially disadvantaged areas are protected. With any changes in funding, we need to keep focused on providing effectiveness and efficiency. The increased use of generic drugs is a practical and positive example of how effective savings can be made without reducing service quality. That is an example of what could be done in the wider context of community pharmacies.

Pharmacies provide a vital service, including with their outreach, health checks and screening programmes. I know that lives have ultimately been saved through their initiatives. Such measures are worthwhile and should be supported. Pharmacies provide an effective go-between for many who may not feel comfortable going to their local GP and for those who find it a strain to go to A&E hospitals. That support from chemists is vital, and we as an Assembly should do everything to support it.

It is important that we do all that we can to protect and maintain pharmacy services in rural areas and in areas of social deprivation. It is also important that the needs of smaller independent pharmacies are listened to and that they are given adequate support. Those pharmacies are crucial, as they are often located in isolation to other outlets and are the backbone of small communities and areas of social deprivation. It is important that any future negotiations and changes involve small independent pharmacies just as much as the larger chains. We need to ensure that the central issue is provision not profit.

I believe that the Minister's door is open on the issue. I feel that a location-based funding arrangement may be the best way forward on the matter. There is certainly a big difference in footfall. Compare, for example, the footfall at a chemist in Bloomfield shopping centre in Bangor with that at a chemist in Helen's Bay or the Loughview estate in Holywood, which are operating in isolation and are serving small communities.

We all recognise the severe financial pressures that the health service is under, and I feel that an inclusive, mature and constructive approach by pharmacies is the best way forward as we try to ensure the best delivery of a first-rate health service to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Gardiner: I believe that we need to seek ways to increase the Health Minister's budget, so that he can provide a separate ring-fenced budget for the additional community services that are provided by rural pharmacies. The Health Minister's budget should be able to call on additional financial support from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department for Social Development (DSD) to help to pay for the community support work that is carried out by those pharmacies.

I begin by reminding the Assembly that about one third of all people in Northern Ireland live in rural communities. So, the issue is not a marginal one. It is very much a core issue for the Assembly. This is not special pleading but a concrete proposal based on the delivery of concrete services that deserve to be paid from the public purse.

Poor transport links between local areas dramatically reduce patients' access to local community-based services. Some pharmacies

provide a free prescription delivery service to elderly and infirm patients in outlying country areas. Many of those patients are on a one-care package and have no close family to support them. They are isolated and alone. This is typical of the kind of underfunded local services provided by rural pharmacies that have been put in jeopardy because of broad-brush funding cuts.

I am asking the Health Minister to reconsider those specific services and to make proper budgetary provision for them. They are essential services, not operational extras. Further to that, he should ring-fence a specific funding stream and put in place measures to assess the nature of the additional local services provided by rural pharmacies. I would be surprised if much-talked-about rural proofing does not pick up on those services. However, if it does not do so, we would need to look at it again to make sure that it is fit for purpose.

Community pharmacies are visited daily by 123,000 people across Northern Ireland, which is 8% of the population. So, anything that puts the viability of those pharmacies in jeopardy will have a big effect on the whole population. It will also have a damaging effect on local employment in pharmacies at a time when every job counts in sustaining the viability of the local economy. As the first port of call, community pharmacies also relieve the pressure on primary care provision, helping the Department to make savings in the primary care area.

In proposing that the Health Minister's budget should get an injection of extra money from OFMDFM and DSD, which both have community-support roles, I am suggesting that the Minister increase his community pharmacy budget to pay for the real community support work that those pharmacies carry out.

Mr Durkan: As Members who spoke previously stated, community pharmacy is a vital component in the provision of healthcare in the North. Not only do community pharmacies support the work of GPs and hospitals by delivering a high-quality dispensing service, but they deliver numerous important support initiatives and services.

I am aware of many pharmacists and staff in my constituency who dedicate their time not only to administering to patients, but to promoting healthy living. At present, they face difficult decisions. How much longer can they afford to provide weight management advice, run smoking cessation clinics and work with young people

in communities on sexual health and alcohol abuse? Community pharmacies provide a community service.

I am sure that all MLAs have been lobbied strenuously on the issue. I have received correspondence and calls not just from pharmacists, but from service users. For many people, their local pharmacy is the first port of call when they have a small health complaint. Indeed, the minor ailments scheme that ran a couple of years ago was heralded as a success by all. Pharmacies compare favourably with GPs and hospitals in patient satisfaction surveys. They deliver professional care and advice in a personal manner. Vitally, they assist individuals swiftly and without the delay of appointments and waiting times. They also alleviate demand on other primary care providers.

We hear much talk of primary care partnerships. Pharmacies are an integral component in the patient-centric model of healthcare delivery that is essential as demand grows and resources dwindle. In its manifesto, the SDLP recognises the importance of community pharmacies and of safeguarding their funding. We remain committed to that.

Community pharmacy in the North is fast approaching crisis point with 125 job losses in the sector so far, not to mention reduced opening hours and, therefore, reduction in service. Current funding arrangements certainly do not seem to be working. Attempts have been made and proposals submitted that identify what could and should work. They have been rejected. Now, we are in a situation in which some pharmacies are facing into an abyss. Seventy per cent struggle to meet wholesaler payment demands. Alarming, 65% report delays in medicine supplies to patients. With a smaller number of GPs dispensing in the North compared with other parts of the UK, medicines will not reach people who desperately need them. Furthermore, closures are inevitable should we fail to act.

I welcome the motion because it definitely marks a desire to protect community pharmacies, notably in areas where there may be presumed greater need, particularly in rural areas, where pharmacies are often the only accessible means of health assistance. However, it is important that we do not create a two-tier system. Often, need is determined by other demographic issues, such as age, rather than

by socio-economic conditions. Therefore, although I recognise and support the motion and its sentiment to protect the perceived most vulnerable areas, it does not go far enough. It is, though, certainly a step towards protecting those irreplaceable services.

The fact that community pharmacies are able to make real savings for the Department, and have already done so, has to be recognised. That has been exemplified by prescription intervention schemes that involve switching to generic drugs as well as dose optimisation. Furthermore, by promoting healthy living through community development programmes, community pharmacies quite clearly demonstrate the role that they can play in health promotion and preventative action, which are key elements of the Minister's own stated vision for the way forward.

The service is not just vital; it represents value for money. I implore the Minister to act immediately.

4.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: First, I thank Daithí McKay and Michaela Boyle for bringing this important issue to the Assembly. It is an issue that affects every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland, and we beg the Minister to listen to what is necessary to support local pharmacies, even on a temporary basis, and thereby support our local communities.

As other Members have said, local pharmacies and chemists have played a pivotal and vital role in the delivery of first-class front line health provision for many years. I pay tribute to their work, dedication and outstanding desire to help every customer who crosses their threshold. As public representatives, we must play our part to ensure that that work continues for all in our community.

I was extremely disappointed to read that Minister Poots is supposed to have said that Northern Ireland has up to 100 pharmacies too many, compared with areas across the water. The motion seeks protection for services in rural areas and in areas of deprivation and disadvantage. I fully support that. We cannot stand idly by and allow pharmacies in isolated regions to bear the brunt of savage cuts of, as other Members have said, up to 30%. That is catastrophic for local pharmacies. The Minister has not acknowledged his obligation in law to provide a fair and reasonable system of

remuneration to community pharmacists. He must start to do that now, before it is too late.

Not that long ago, the Department curtailed the valuable work carried out by pharmacists by throwing aside the minor ailments service, which has been referred to by other Members. That work had proved invaluable to the whole community. People with minor health conditions could simply walk into any pharmacy and seek advice and medicine for coughs, colds, headaches or other such ills. The minor ailments service undoubtedly kept many patients out of GPs' surgeries or A&E units at the various hospitals.

In answer to a recent question, the Minister admitted that, after extensive negotiations with Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland, agreement could not be reached, and thus the downhill spiral started for the service. Like other Members, I have had discussions with Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland and many pharmacists throughout my constituency. It is obvious that despair has set in, with pharmacists, in some cases, unable to settle accounts with suppliers. The end result is that appropriate medicines are not always in stock. That is a disservice to our patients. Staff have had to be laid off. I understand that over 100 qualified people have already had to be released. Unless the Department and the Minister step up to the plate, that figure could rise, I understand, to as high as 600.

The pharmacies are willing and anxious to get round the table to arrive at an amicable agreement to stem the flow of rundowns. They have had many good and sensible ideas to save on wastage — for instance, medication review, repeat dispensing, public information campaigns and generic switches. The Health Committee was recently visited by a GP from the Western Health and Social Care Trust, where savings of over £60 per intervention was achieved. If that can be done in one place, it can be repeated all over Northern Ireland, with massive savings that could be ploughed back into the community service.

Many health problems can be prevented, and the pharmacy is best placed to provide services such as smoking cessation, healthy eating, exercise and addiction services, all of which require government backing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party fully supports the motion, and everyone in the Chamber is singing from the same hymn sheet. Our Assembly has spoken. Let us see a positive response from our Minister.

Ms Lewis: I support the motion and am grateful for the opportunity to take part in today's debate. I have no doubt that the entire Assembly is united in understanding the importance of community pharmacies and the extremely valuable work that they do. We know that they are a vital component of healthcare delivery and that they are often the first port of call for people who have ailments or health problems. Crucially, it is sometimes overlooked that they have the ability to build relationships and trust in communities where, sometimes, dispensing factual advice and reassurance can be just as important as dispensing medicines.

We recognise that, in rural and isolated communities that might be further away from doctors' surgeries and hospitals, pharmacies are an integral part of the fabric of local society. As with post offices and corner shops, it is only when they are threatened with closure that we really appreciate their worth. Many people in my constituency have told me how important their local pharmacy is to them. It is right that pharmacies stay local, but it is also right that pharmacies' main purpose should be to provide effective health provision that is not driven by profit alone.

We have an excellent pharmacy service in Northern Ireland. We have higher provision than anywhere else in the UK. We have 30 pharmacies in Northern Ireland per 100,000 people. That compares favourably with England, which has 21, Scotland, which has 23, and Wales, which has 24. We want to retain that level of care but not at any price.

Like many services in this economic climate, the pharmacy service faces new pressures and tough decisions. Northern Ireland is not exempt from harsh realities, and it is not enough merely to point to the historical numbers of pharmacies in each community and say that that is how it has always been. However, for all the pressures of the economic downturn, it is encouraging to note that there are four new applications to open pharmacies, with a further 27 applications awaiting decision on appeal, which suggests to me that, whatever the future may be,

pharmacies will continue to be an integral part of community and business.

As regards the challenges facing rural pharmacies, it is right that we support smaller enterprises and that they are given practical help so that they can continue to provide value-for-money services. I welcome the fact that the terms of the essential small pharmacies scheme have not changed. In addition, all pharmacies can qualify for an additional professional services payment of £1,500 per month, if they meet certain criteria. That is also a welcome arrangement. The motion deals with the concern about the future of pharmacies in rural and socially disadvantaged areas, and the retention of those means that there is a guaranteed funding scheme for smaller pharmacies. That is good news, and it is to be welcomed by pharmacies in those areas.

We know that a judicial review of the new funding arrangements is under way, but, once a judgement is reached — whatever it may be — we hope that all parties can work together to reach an agreed solution that will result in better outcomes for the customer and value for money for the Government. We all want to see strong, sustainable pharmacies across Northern Ireland, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, and I welcome the arrangements that are in place to make that happen.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the broad consensus in the House on this important issue. I also welcome the Minister. The motion was tabled a number of weeks ago, but we are only debating it now because there were issues around the Minister's availability. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Minister is present to hear the broad support from every party in the House on the issue.

The message is loud and clear today that pharmacies here are in crisis. The 30% funding cut means that owners struggle to meet basic business costs. They cannot pay their wholesalers, and staff are being laid off. Around 125 members of staff — a ballpark figure — have been laid off, and requests are coming in for pharmacists to reduce opening hours, further reducing that service. We have to recognise that the pharmacy service is one of those areas where there is a very high satisfaction level — somewhere in the region of a 94% to 96% satisfaction rating. No other area of any of our services commands as

high a satisfaction rating and such broad public support as our pharmacies.

Pharmacies have stepped up to the mark. For example, many pharmacists have invested significantly to install consultancy rooms so that they can see people who call at their pharmacy with privacy and dignity. There has been quite a bit of investment. Many rural villages have decided to invest in pharmacy services to an extremely high standard. Pharmacists have been very innovative. For instance, people flocked to the first pharmacist in my constituency to do blood pressure checks. He also did cholesterol checks, and he is thinking about diabetes management and other areas in which he can provide a better service to support local GPs and the local community. That has to be commended.

It has not been mentioned here today that pharmacists are really the front line of the front line. Any of us can drop in and pick something up or see a pharmacist without an appointment or without having to go through hoops to get there. Pharmacists can also recognise when someone is continually coming in and picking up paracetamol, for example, and buying it more often than expected. They can flag up problems such as dependency on over-the-counter or prescription drugs. They can often spot problems before the GP knows that they are happening. It is a service that we must not underestimate.

We had this issue a number of years back, when supermarkets tried to take on pharmacy services. The impact of local people providing a local service to other local people means that we have a much safer regime. That cannot be put at risk. We have to ensure that pharmacies continue to do the very good work that they do.

As the mother of three small children, I pop into the pharmacy frequently. I might not have time or feel that something is serious enough to get a doctor's appointment. However, I can go into a pharmacist with a child with a rash, a cough or whatever and get a medical opinion straight away. They might say that I probably need to take the child to the GP or they can give me something to help the child. That service is invaluable.

I think that it was Pam who said that it is only when a service is threatened that you start to appreciate it. That is certainly the case, given not just the comments in the House today but the volume of letters that we receive

from district councils, playgroups, schools and concerned individuals. People recognise the importance of their local pharmacy.

Mr McCarthy: You forgot to mention that the Presbyterian church in Greyabbey wrote to the Health Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Gildernew: Thanks for that, Kieran. Yes, I was getting to the Presbyterian church in Greyabbey.

We need to recognise the very strong support for pharmacies across the board. Given our current regime and system, closures are inevitable, and we will experience more difficulties as we move forward. We could also experience disastrous consequences. I think that it was Sam who mentioned mediboxes. People have got used to taking whatever medication is in the box. They implicitly trust the person who filled out the prescription and put the medication in the box. If that is not done properly, it can have fatal consequences. Someone may take the wrong medication or take two days' medication in one day. We do not know the consequences of not providing pharmacists with the ability to provide the public with the excellent service that we are used to.

The Minister has said that he wants to do what he can. I encourage him to look at the current arrangement and how it is not viable in any way. It is interesting that one Member talked about a location-based funding arrangement. It is important that we recognise that location is key in this issue. As you have heard already, for rural areas —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Gildernew: — and areas of socio-economic deprivation, the chemist is the most front line of all front line services. I ask the general public to support their local pharmacy, and I ask the Minister to come forward with a contingency plan as soon as possible.

4.15 pm

Ms P Bradley: I was about to start by outlining what has been said, but, by this point in the speaking order, most things have been said. I doubt that any Member of the Assembly — not least the members of the Health Committee — has not been lobbied on behalf of or by

local community pharmacies. I have received numerous letters and visited pharmacists in both large multinational and small independent pharmacies to discuss their concerns.

The pharmacies in the area that I represent are truly at the heart of those communities and carry out an invaluable service that spans health and social care. Over the years, pharmacies have expanded their role in our towns and villages. Now, by virtue of the variety of services that they offer, including the current minor ailments scheme, they are seen as front line health providers. That scheme has alleviated the pressures on GPs and busy A&E departments. As was also said, among other services, they fill and deliver mediboxes, pill mills, blister packs or whatever you want to call them. That underrated service saves social care and acute services a great deal of money. From first-hand experience, I know that, if a patient is being discharged from hospital and requires assistance with medication due to poor understanding, it is essential that his or her medication is clearly marked in blister packs to protect not only the client but the care worker. Pharmacists endeavour to have those blister packs available for families to collect. They might even deliver the packs to the patient's home to ensure a timely discharge from hospital, thus preventing a delay and cost impact on our health service. For some using that service, the delivery of medication is their only social interaction. Equally importantly, it allows people to remain independent in their home while managing a range of long-term chronic diseases. If that service were to cease due to budgetary constraints, it would lead to an increased need for social care, an increase in hospital admissions and a possible delay in hospital discharges.

Recently, I attended the Belfast local commissioning group's public meeting. I was encouraged by the work being done in partnership with GPs and pharmacies to decrease costs through a reduction in prescribing and an increase in generic drugs. I look forward to that project being rolled out in Belfast.

It is sad that we have come to this stage. I back the Minister in his work thus far, given that he inherited the dilemma from the previous Minister. I look forward to a resolution that is beneficial to everyone, especially individuals in our community.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and I am pleased to speak to it. We could all go through the same points, so I will try not to go over too many in the same manner. All of us have been contacted by our local pharmacists, because there are genuine fears about the 30% cut and the downturn in the number of people coming through their doors. If you take that decrease in footfall further into the rural community, it could look much worse.

The cuts have the potential to be a disaster, but they need not be. The Department is keen to emphasise a fair and reasonable remuneration and wants the pharmacies to survive. However, we have to ask the Minister to be more obliging in how he takes the matter forward with the pharmacies. As other Members said, we are told that there are 500 community pharmacies, and we know and have already heard of the range of services that they provide. If some close, it will only move those services on to the next healthcare point, which might not suit most people. From what the Department said, there might be as many as 100 pharmacies too many. However, let us not just look at the numbers. Let us look at the geographical factors, listen to what the doctors and pharmacists advise and make sure that we manage the problem as cleverly as we can.

I am the representative for South Antrim, and it is not as huge a problem for us because we are near many urban locations. Nevertheless, many pharmacists from Randalstown, Crumlin and other areas have raised the issue with me. We have to look at the dispersal of the population and the lower catchment areas to determine how we can best keep pharmacies throughout the whole of Northern Ireland — not just looking at the numbers, but seeing how we can make everything work that much better.

I know that the Budget is not infinite, and we know that the pressure is on and that cuts have to be made, but we need to find greater efficiencies. We know that pharmacies can advise on very many matters that are vital to many of us, such as smoking or obesity, but particularly on managing pills. Even the colour of pills was raised with me the other day: the colours keep changing and many people lose their way with the pills that they are taking for that reason. Let us also remember that we do not want to clog up hospital beds. We want to see a very efficient health service, and that is where we were going. The Ulster Unionist Party

made great strides in generic drug management between 2007 and 2011, and let us make more of that. We know from the pharmacies that, if we speak to them and use their skills, ideas and information, there are probably many more savings that we could make. I urge the Minister to manage that as best he can and to talk to those people about their good ideas.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Paula Bradley said, having reached this stage, I am sure that everything that I was going to say has already been said. However, I will say it anyway, because I think that it is important. I will try not to be too boring.

Contingency plans are a matter of urgency because of the threat to many pharmacies. Approximately 125 posts have been lost. The importance of the pharmacy in the community, particularly in rural areas, cannot be overemphasised. It creates social networking, particularly for older people, who use it as a centre for meeting other people when they are collecting their prescriptions, and it is regarded as an essential element of the community. Thirty eight million pounds will be lost in the pharmacy sector, and, as has been mentioned, 75% of pharmacies have had to reduce staff, while 30% have had to close on Saturdays. There are issues around employees' rights and people losing their job, which are important. Furthermore, there are young pharmacists coming through, whose job prospects will be reduced. That will have an impact on the number of young people who have to leave this part of the world.

Pharmacies are geared to meet the particular needs of the communities that they serve. A co-ordinated approach is required, and I am sure that the Minister will consider that. It has been said that pharmacies are a front line service, and that is absolutely true. The pharmacy is often, as has been mentioned, the first port of call for many people who may need to see their doctor at a later stage but can be helped by the pharmacist. With proper advice and medication, people may not have to take up their doctor's time. The withdrawal of the service for minor ailments has been mentioned, and I am sure that the Minister will consider that a holistic approach is required in relation to healthcare, of which pharmacists are an integral part. If those services are lost, it will become more and more

difficult to replace them. The restoration of the minor ailments scheme and the resolution of contract negotiations are very much required.

Many people come to rely on their pharmacists and have an implicit trust in them. Having met many pharmacists and spoken to their customers over the past months, I can say that it is very clear that to reduce or remove rural pharmacies, in particular, could create huge problems, especially for older people who, in many cases, live in isolation and rely on family and neighbours to collect their medication from their local pharmacy. If those rural pharmacies are forced to close, it is possible that people will not be able to access vital medications because of their reliance on having them collected by other people or because they have to travel greater distances. Undoubtedly, that would cause more health problems, and more people will end up in hospital, increasing the burden on an already overburdened health service. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. Go deimhin, ceapaim gur chóir go mbeadh scóip an rúin i bhfad níos leithne ná mar atá sí. Níor chóir é a theorannú ar bhealach ar bith. I support the motion. It should be as wide as possible. Like my colleague Mr Durkan, I believe that it should not be confined in any way.

When I was growing up in Bessbrook in County Armagh a short few years ago, we had two pharmacists: Mr Shields and Mr Doran. The villagers described them as being as good as any doctor. Today, we have Mr Foy in Bessbrook and Mr Strain in Camlough, and they are held in the same regard. That anecdote is an illustration of the value that communities place on the work of local pharmacists. Like many Members, I have visited pharmacies over the past number of months in Bessbrook, Crossmaglen, Newry, Camlough, Meigh and Cullyhanna. I have seen at first hand the dedication and professionalism of pharmacists and their staff. They are a valuable part of the community health infrastructure in all areas of Northern Ireland, and they play an important role in supporting public health on the front line. Other Members have outlined in detail some of the schemes that they operate to that end.

As I said, pharmacies provide a valuable service to the community right across the generations, from the earliest age right through to the older

population, especially those with chronic and recurring illnesses. It is a service that no community wants or can afford to lose. As we know, pharmacists work in close conjunction with local GPs to support primary healthcare, which, in many cases, helps to ensure that vulnerable people can continue to live safely in their community without resorting to more expensive systems of care. Like other Members here, I have seen at first hand the care, work and patience that goes in to essential services such as multiple dispensing. That clearly helps people to live independently and avoid the more expensive option of hospitalisation. Are we now, under the present funding regime, going to ask pharmacists to run that service at a loss?

The work of pharmacists already saves the health service millions of pounds each year. Further savings can be made, and Members have outlined ways in which that can be done. Mr McKay mentioned the community pharmacy intervention programme in the Western Board area, which saves over £60 per intervention through generic switches. We have medication review, which makes sure that patients are taking medicines properly, and repeat dispensing, which avoids costly and unnecessary GP visits for repeat prescriptions. We also have dispensing interventions to avoid the unnecessary dispensing of medicines. Those are some ways in which pharmacists help to save the health service untold money each year. Drug wastage is another area in which significant savings are made, and further savings of up to £44 million each year can be made. Every year, £2.5 million is wasted on unused medication, 20% of which is unopened and has to be disposed of by pharmacies.

Pharmacists have told us all that they understand the straitened economic conditions in which we operate. They expect efficiencies and are willing to make them. The House was subject to a reduction of 30%, and we objected to that. The House would have been inoperable after such a swingeing cut. Do we expect pharmacies —

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

Mr D Bradley: — to operate under such a regime?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Members for bringing this important issue to the House. I was glad to hear that the Member for North Antrim has read our manifesto. I am sure that

he learned many good things from it. Perhaps he will concur that it was an interesting read.

4.30 pm

In all seriousness, that issue needs to be addressed. I am conscious that there are legal constraints, and I am glad that those have not hindered a profitable debate. The beauty of devolution is — it is a cliché used, perhaps, too much in the Assembly — finding a Northern Ireland solution to a Northern Ireland problem. That rolls off the tongue very easily, but it is the direction needed to deal with community pharmacies. Although looking at what our counterparts do in the rest of the United Kingdom is welcome, it is important to realise that because of some very unfortunate events in our past, we find ourselves, in some ways, in a unique environment over here. The PWC report estimates that long-term unemployment is 40% higher, overall deprivation is worse, mental health issues are 20% to 25% more common over here, and population density is 67% lower. Those estimates are unique to us, and we need to look at them. I am heartened by conversations that have already taken place with the Minister. We are pushing at an open door on that issue.

That said, we have to be mindful of where the problem originated. The issue was inherited from the previous Minister, who, unfortunately, significantly mishandled the situation. When he was involved in negotiations, the importance of the community pharmacy network and the specific socio-economic landscape do not seem to have been considered properly. That left a gap, and we have to look at where the problems came from. Possibly, that conversation needs to happen on another day. Right now, it is an understatement to say that contractors are, undoubtedly, feeling the pinch because of what has been happening recently. That needs to be addressed in the future. As things stand, it will go only one way, so we need a solution, and we need to find it as quickly as we possibly can.

We need to listen to what the pharmacists are saying, and, if we do, we must dispute some of the comments made by Ulster Unionist Party Members. The pharmacists are not asking for more money; all that they ask is for some of the money that they make already to be left in the system. How that can be achieved needs to be looked at, and, unfortunately, the Members to my right do not seem to have learned from

the errors of the previous Minister, whose solution to everything was more money, more money, more money. In the current economic environment, that is simply not possible, so we need to be more creative in finding solutions. Everyone agrees that we need the service to continue to support the people who need it. As things stand, I fear that there is a question mark over that.

Mr Storey: We are all concerned about our local pharmacies; mine are in my home village of Armoy and in Rasharkin, Dunloy, and so on. Does the Member agree that pharmaceutical companies could do far more to help the Minister and the Department to reach a point at which the funding arrangements would be fairer and more equitable so that small, local pharmacies in rural areas could continue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I could not agree more with his point about pharmaceutical companies. In particular, they could help by providing substitutes for branded medicines. That road will not be without a few bumps because we are dealing with quite powerful individuals. However, it has to be considered, and the pharmacy contractors are more than willing to do so. Let us remember that the creative and innovative thinking of pharmacists brought us the generic medicines that we have now. With safety in numbers, they clubbed together and were able to produce much more cost-effective medicines after the branded versions came out of licence. We owe much to pharmacists for doing that and we should continually pay tribute to their work.

The debate is important because it sends out a good message that we care about our pharmacy contractors and want to make sure that they continue to be supported. It is a question of holding fire; we have to get beyond the judicial review. Once it is out of the way, I believe that the pharmacists are willing to negotiate. I will not speak on behalf of the Minister; I am sure that he can tell us what he is planning to do.

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

Mr D McIlveen: I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I rise with enthusiasm to support the motion. The proposer, Daithí McKay, has been

most ingenious in the past with his plastic bags tax, and so on. Let us hope on this occasion that the contingency plans that he spoke about are real and do work. Perhaps it would be better if the legal difficulties that gag Members were lifted. I have high hopes that they will be within the next hour or two.

Until recently, pharmacists, if you are polite — chemists, if you are ordinary like me — were probably not the most vulnerable people; they were making a good living. It is important to remember that those whom they serve are the vulnerable people, whether in rural areas or those in urban or suburban areas who cannot afford public transport to go into town centres and are very often not well enough to do that. We must not forget those people.

We have been privileged in every town and village not to have followed what happened in England, and God knows beyond that, where the pharmacy disappeared, followed by the baker and the candlestick maker. They all went. In England, at least 60% of small towns and villages have nothing left. You often see film clips of people waiting on the weekly bus to get into town. That is what we are doing, and I just do not understand the logic. I was not consulted in any detail about these draconian measures that we are set upon.

Let us hope that, out of this debate, the Minister will realise — I believe that he will — that there are very strong feelings on this issue. This is not an issue that we can fundamentally turn upside down. Some time ago, I travelled to America. I thought that it was bad in England, but it is a lot worse in America, where they systematically denuded, if that is the word, their communities of any semblance of habitation.

We are at crisis point, and the adage “Eat horse and you will get grass” is long past. We have to find out what is happening; we want to know how this matter will be resolved. For years, I have felt strongly, and have spoken many times in the Assembly, about the need to protect our local services. We often talked about post offices. Post offices are critical — by God they are — but how much more important are local chemists? They are a lifeline.

This Assembly came into being as a regional institution principally to protect the most vulnerable. When the Good Friday Agreement — or the Belfast Agreement, if you are not comfortable with that — was signed, it promised

equality. Well, this ain't equality for the most vulnerable in our society. We need to focus clearly. If there were ambitious plans to cull pharmacies, and I heard worrying remarks a few weeks ago, let us hope that we have put them to bed. Let us hope that they will not happen because the last thing that we want is ghost towns, with no services, provision or healthcare.

We in the Assembly are expected to defend and protect. I am sure that we all came to the Assembly with an ambition to make life better for everyone, and how much more honourable it is to make life better for the people who are most vulnerable. The chemists have, often at no charge at all, carried out services extremely well for those people.

I will finish, and I hope that I am not veering into the difficulties that this whole thing has presented. Chemists today are being refunded less money than they are paying the wholesalers for the products that they dispense. That is immoral, wrong and needs to be addressed.

Mr Poots: I have listened today with considerable interest, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond and, indeed, to share with the House my observations of the community pharmacy sector.

I should say that we are having the debate in the context of a judicial review taking place, and I hope that that judgement will be heard sooner rather than later. I do not wish to infringe on that judgement in any way, shape or form. So, any comments about fees will not stray into whether I believe that those fees are valid or invalid because that will be a decision for a court.

I regret that CPNI felt it necessary to seek a judicial review in the first instance. Having only come into the ministerial post in May, I have not had the opportunity to engage with CPNI or representatives of the pharmacists on the issue, and I think that meaningful discussions could have led to a situation where the matter was resolved by now as opposed to being dragged out in courts. Whilst it may, to some extent, suit the larger pharmacists for the smaller pharmacists to go to the wall while the process is dragged out, it would have been much better had we been able to get round the table, have reasonable discussions and see whether we could come to a solution that particularly took into account the needs of rural pharmacies and pharmacies in areas of deprivation. I recognise that the public need them, but I am constrained

in what I can do at the moment because of the judicial review.

I will come back to some of the points raised by Members shortly, but, first, I want to put on record my support for and desire to have a viable, accessible and responsive community pharmacy network that is focused on the health and social care of the population. I am aware that community pharmacies score highly in the departmental surveys of public satisfaction. Indeed, the research instigated by my Department some years ago showed that some 9% of the population visits a community pharmacy on a daily basis. That identifies community pharmacies as the environment with the greatest interface with the public, healthy and ill, and thereby they have the opportunity to be highly influential in the nation's health.

I should say that we do not have a shortage of pharmacies in Northern Ireland, and 20 prescriptions are given out per head of population here, whereas the number in Wales is 23. Wales has 24 pharmacies for every 100,000 people, whereas Northern Ireland has 30 pharmacies for every 100,000 people. So, in spite of the fact that more prescriptions are being given out per head of population in Wales, which is quite a rural area as well, Northern Ireland has 20% more pharmacies. That sets in context the numbers of pharmacies that we have. In comparison to the rest of the UK, we have around 100 pharmacies more than would be the case if that was broken down across the United Kingdom.

Mr Durkan: Thank you for giving way, Mr Poots. I am heartened by your reception of today's debate. Does the Minister accept that we may have more pharmacies per head of population because of the conflict that we are moving out of and because of the community relations or lack thereof here?

4.45 pm

Mr Poots: That may be the case, but one reason why I identified Wales as a comparator instead of England, which has large cities such as London and Manchester, is because Wales has quite a rural community and more prescriptions are given out per capita. However, the Member's point has some validity: in areas around Belfast in particular, there may be pharmacies quite close to each other that are used by one community or the other exclusively. It is unfortunate, but it is reality.

Many Members have spoken today about the importance of pharmacies in rural areas where access to professional healthcare is often more limited than it would be in a major conurbation. I have no doubt of the worth and potential to make them even more beneficial to those communities. The Building the Community-Pharmacy Partnership programme has been prominent in many areas. It was initially established through my Department and managed through the Community Development Health Network and seeks to support and empower local communities allied to taking responsibility for their own health and social care. It is an important success story for community pharmacies and the community and voluntary sectors working together.

The new funding arrangements have also featured prominently in the debate today. Although I cannot comment on individual cases or details discussed at the judicial review, I think that it is important that the Assembly knows something of the existing funding arrangements with community pharmacies.

The arrangements are primarily around fees for dispensing services and other fees for professional services, albeit that the structure of the contract means that there is a global sum, or ceiling, to the remuneration obtained. The value of the global sum has remained unchanged between 2010-11 and 2011-12. In addition, pharmacists have often benefited historically from the difference between what the Department paid them for the drugs that they purchase, through the Business Services Organisation — what we refer to as reimbursement — and the actual amount that they paid to wholesalers or suppliers.

Over the years, various discounts or clawbacks were applied to seek to control the profit element in the interest of protecting the public purse, yet transparency of profit remained elusive. England made the first move to quantify an amount of profit that could be allowed, which was controlled through a revised tariff. Scotland has a broadly similar approach. More recently, the previous Administration introduced a new tariff in Northern Ireland, which was based on the English model. This sought to provide a guaranteed purchase profit of at least £16.5 million, which is commensurate with levels in England and Scotland. CPNI claims that that is not enough and is tantamount to reducing its

income by one third from the procurement of drugs alone.

At the heart of this issue is the lack of transparency about contractors' profits. Indeed, we have increased our levels of generic prescribing from 43% in 2005 to 62% in 2011. That has also meant that community pharmacies have benefited simply because of the differentials in acquisition and reimbursement costs that are higher for generic drugs. It is right, and it is in the public interest, that this is controlled at a fair and reasonable level.

In my opinion, what we spend on drugs in Northern Ireland is out of hand. We have a cost, as regards community pharmacies and the drugs dispensed through them, of £459 million, and another £109 million is spent in hospitals: a total of £568 million is spent on drugs in Northern Ireland each year. I think that that sum is unacceptable. It is the second highest cost in my Department, and it is close to the kind of spends that entire Departments, such as the Department for Regional Development or the Department for Social Development, spend. It is five times the amount that the Department of the Environment or the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure spends. If there are savings to be made, we need to identify them and address the problem. I believe that pharmacists can be part of the solution in identifying those savings, and that is why I would have liked to have got round the table with them as opposed to having people engaged on our behalf in a court of law.

I have also moved to open up negotiations with community pharmacists whereby, if they can secure better prices for medicines, I am prepared to share some of the benefits between the public purse and the community pharmacy contractors. I have also indicated that, once judgement has been made, I am prepared to discuss further with community pharmacies the future of pharmaceutical provision and its associated funding. I am keen to engage. Indeed, my officials have endeavoured to maintain dialogue with members of CPNI.

Future engagement is not primarily about money — important though it is — it is about services, access to services and how best to configure the pharmacy network. It is also about independent pharmacies as much as the multiples. However, I am concerned that the interests of the large can often easily jeopardise the interests of the small. Generally, small

pharmacies are located in deprived or rural areas where the pickings do not seem to be as rich to the multinationals.

Increasing numbers of pharmacies are being amalgamated into large groups or chains. Although many pharmacies continue to be operated by their pharmacist owners, a significant number of pharmacists working in the community are employees rather than owners of the pharmacies in which they work. Furthermore, retailing has seen the arrival of the global competitor who can replicate success in cities and towns throughout the country. Indeed, we are seeing demands from such organisations to relax our current controls on pharmacy contracts and to open up the market much more widely.

In community pharmacies, competitive pressures will continue to require efficiency, economic purchasing, the value-added deployment of staff and sound business decision-making. The provision of quality services that are responsive and directed appropriately to meet local needs and demands will be key to the success of a future community pharmacy business. It has to be about more than prescription numbers, as that is not necessarily the most accurate barometer of pharmaceutical care in rural communities. Indeed, on a general front, remuneration on the basis of prescription volume is quite perverse and encourages waste. Arguably, it is the perversity of that system that has, on the one hand, contributed to the current difficulties and, on the other, is impeding the full expression of pharmaceutical skills to benefit society.

Pharmacists have invested and are investing much time and energy on procurement to achieve profits on the purchase of drugs. Although I want them to use their undoubted clinical skills, for which they have substantial training, to enhance the health of our people and to reward them for applying those skills, I also want and require full transparency in the acquisition of medicines being supplied as part of the health and social care (HSC) service in the same way as I require compliance with my policy on generic prescribing. I have said that future discussions are not primarily about money but about services and access to those services. However, I recognise that money is important and that viability of provision is necessary.

Much has been said about pharmacies closing, and such threats have been at the heart of the pharmacy campaign. Indeed, many patients

and communities have been alarmed by the prospect. We heard a figure of 125 today, but I have seen nothing to sustain that figure. It was said in the House recently that the pharmacy in Rasharkin had closed and that the pharmacy in Dunloy would close also. I can confirm that the Rasharkin pharmacy is open for business. Any pharmacy wishing to close or to remove itself from the pharmaceutical list is legally obliged to give three months' written notification to the HSC board of its intention to do so. However, I have checked with the Business Services Organisation and there have been no applications for closures across Northern Ireland. Indeed, there are four applications to open new pharmacies, with a further 27 applications awaiting decision on appeal. One major retail operator involved in a case against us is looking to open another facility. With that number of appeals, I am concerned that the current arrangements are not working as effectively as they should, and there may be merit in reviewing that as we move forward. We also have large multiples that wish to move into the market.

There has been much talk about pharmacies reducing their opening hours. Pharmacies have to apply to the HSC board if they wish to change their contracted opening hours. Since June 2011, the HSC board has received eight applications from pharmacists to change their contracted hours; five of the applications are to reduce opening hours, and the other three are requests to extend contracted hours. The requests to reduce hours all relate to opening hours at the weekend.

I am conscious that the public is concerned about the potential closure of local pharmacies, given the media coverage of the issue. We have made contingency plans, and the essential small pharmacy scheme is designed to ensure the viability of small pharmacies in key locations, including rural and deprived areas. The terms of that scheme have not been changed. Pharmacies that dispense fewer than 1,300 prescriptions a month, for example, and which are more than one kilometre from the nearest pharmacy, can apply for inclusion in the essential small pharmacy scheme. In addition, the HSC board, as part of its routine business continuity role, continues to monitor the provision of all commissioned health and social care services, including commissioned community pharmacy services.

I have some other matters to address, but my time has almost gone. I would like to clarify that the minor ailments scheme is still available. Anybody who has diarrhoea, head lice, threadworms, vaginal thrush, athlete's foot and fungal infection of the groin can receive the appropriate care and treatment. Members need not worry too much: that service is still available. People with a sore throat or a cold should take some paracetamol or Lemsip — not that I should be advertising — and lie down for a day.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses. I think pharmacists might well be looking for funding to expand and to build a consultation room in which to treat some of the minor ailments that he mentioned in his concluding remarks. *[Laughter.]*

I thank Mr McKay for moving the motion and the Members who contributed to the debate. *[Interruption.]* Some Members are still laughing. There was broad support for the motion across the House; there was clear consensus and support for it. It is obvious from listening to local representatives here and to the representatives who had the opportunity to go out to visit local pharmacies that they are very effective.

Mr McKay opened the debate by talking about the impact of the cuts and the crisis point at which pharmacies, particularly in rural areas, find themselves. He said that pharmacists are going over and above the call of duty to help the most vulnerable in rural areas. We heard about the 30% cuts and the devastating impact that they have had across the sector, the job losses and the potential of further job losses. Mr McKay also talked about employees' rights and pay and how they should be protected at this time.

Mr Dunne spoke about the workload within local pharmacies and the jobs and services that they provide. Those services free up a lot of much-needed hospital beds. Some Members talked about the mediboxes that pharmacists provide. Michelle Gildernew and Paula Bradley talked about the valuable service that mediboxes provide, and they mentioned the comfort that the provision of those boxes by pharmacists gives to those who need them most, particularly the elderly. If you talk to carers who look after the elderly, I know that they will tell you that the provision of the mediboxes is a valuable service.

We heard a lot about the pharmacy services and about how effective and efficient they are in trying to do their best, despite the crisis that they are in at the moment because of the cuts. The needs of the smaller pharmacist were also mentioned. Mr Dunne also talked about location-based funding, which is vital at this time.

Mr Gardiner spoke of the possibility of an injection of funding from OFMDFM. That was a core issue for the House, and there was consensus in that regard.

There was talk about transport links and door-to-door delivery and the much-needed services that that provides. That also has an impact on the services that pharmacists have been providing.

The ring-fencing of funding streams is another issue that was discussed across the House. The need to rural proof services such as community pharmacies was also discussed.

Mr Durkan talked about the services that pharmacists provide to our young people, in particular. Usually, young people do not want to go to a doctor to talk about their issues. Local pharmacists are normally the first point of contact for young people, particularly on sexual health and addiction matters, as Mr Durkan said. That is vital, particularly in socially disadvantaged communities. There was a strong emphasis on the need for the services that community pharmacies provide in those areas.

5.00 pm

There was wide acknowledgement across the House of the different methods by which savings can be made. An example was in Castlederg, in my constituency, where Dr Brendan O'Hare made savings of £300,000 in a five-week period by switching patients' medication from branded to generic forms. Support for such measures was evident across the House today.

Mr McCarthy said that we, as public representatives, can play our part in ensuring that vital front line services are protected. The minor ailments scheme was also raised during the debate, and the Minister said that certain elements of that scheme are still available.

Ms Pam Lewis talked about building relationships. She also discussed the integral part that pharmacists play in communities and the many value-for-money services that they provide. There was also wide recognition of the job losses and

the broad public support for those whose jobs could be lost.

Michelle Gildernew said that pharmacists were innovative in making changes and providing services to support GPs, including cholesterol and blood pressure checks and advice on healthy lifestyles. Members also talked about local people providing local services. Support for community pharmacies was echoed across the House. All Members who spoke talked about churches, schools and the general public coming out in support of their local pharmacies.

Paula Bradley talked about social interaction by community pharmacists and how vulnerable individuals can remain in their home while services are provided to them. She also spoke about the impact that the withdrawal of the door-to-door service and other services will have on such individuals.

Members also talked about the need to protect pharmacy staff. Members spoke of having been contacted by a large number of staff, particularly those who work in MediCare pharmacies, who are concerned about the cutbacks and the proposals to cut up to 20% from their wages. Those people are qualified pharmacists and employees, and they are seriously concerned about the severity of such cuts and the impact that they will have on their families and households.

Mr Bradley paid tribute to his neighbourhood pharmacist. I must pay tribute to the pharmacists in my home town of Strabane and, in particular, those in the Ballycolman area where I was raised. I will not say what age I am, but I have known my community pharmacist all my life. Indeed, he retired only recently due to ill health. I am sure that it is the same across the House and that all Members will know who their community pharmacists are. There is not a great turnover in the individuals who own community pharmacies.

Members also talked about the introduction of cost-effective measures and switching from branded to generic medication. There are big savings to be made in that area. In general, Members and pharmacists recognise that cuts must be made, and we cannot ignore the impact of those cuts. It is with much regret that pharmacists have had to reduce their services, with 75% of pharmacies having to pay off staff. However, let us not forget about the health and well-being of our pharmacists and the impact

that the cuts have on them. They have made personal sacrifices as a result of defaulting on payments to wholesalers. We recognise that this is an inherited issue, Minister, and we believe that you now have an opportunity to right a wrong and find a solution to it.

What needs to be done? There are 500 community pharmacies across the broad spectrum. Immediate action is needed to make sure that the necessary safeguards are put in place to protect pharmacies that are on the verge of closure, particularly those in rural and deprived areas. There needs to be a co-ordinated approach, based on fair funding, to develop short- and longer-term solutions to ensure that the local community pharmacy network is best placed to meet the changing needs of the population. We need a fair level of funding.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Boyle: Yes, OK. Irrespective of what he has said about the funding model, the Minister is not right: if a contingency plan is not put in place, pharmacies will not survive to provide the services that the Minister refers to. Pharmacists manage the drugs budget —

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to put a contingency plan in place to protect pharmacy services in rural and socially disadvantaged areas following the introduction of new funding arrangements.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond and, on this occasion, all other Members who are called to speak will have six minutes.

Mr Craig: I thank the Business Committee for giving us time to debate this matter of serious local concern. Several weeks ago, the children of Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School and their parents felt that they had been dealt an injustice, when the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) notified parents and teachers that it was its intention to close the schools at the end of this academic year. Both proposed closures have devastated the local communities and have left parents and children with very few options. Here we have two schools that are central to the local communities in which they are situated and have served those communities well over their lifetime. Both schools offer a hub for the community through the opening up of their buildings for use by the community outside school hours. The decision to close them therefore comes as a blow not only to the parents, teachers and children but to the community as a whole.

In the weeks prior to this news, parents and children, as well as teachers, listened intently to the Minister of Education's statement on sustainable schools, which was made at the end of September. It is on that policy that the South Eastern Education and Library Board based its decision, and that was detailed in a letter sent out to all parents. Everyone expected that the review of the sustainability of all schools in Northern Ireland would result in closures. Of that, there was no doubt. However, many people were shocked when the SEELB made it known that it would close both Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School prior to the completion of the departmental review. I have

served as a public representative for some 10 years, and I must say that this is the first time that I have seen any arm of any Department act so quickly. The SEELB acted within one week of the Minister's statement to the House. In the eyes of many, the decision is ill informed and misjudged, as well as wholly speculative, since a review of schools is being carried out.

Dunmurry High was recently subjected to a regular inspection that found that standards were not as high as they should be. Under the school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, the procedure for ensuring any improvement in a school is clearly laid out. It states that, if efforts to improve the quality of education are unsuccessful, the policy provides options, including:

“restructuring of the governance, leadership and management within the school; merging the school with a neighbouring school; closing the school and re-opening after a period with a new management team”,

and, ultimately:

“closure of the school, with pupils transferring to other ... schools.”

It should be pointed out that actions such as those are taken on the basis of a school's failure to turn things around after, as the policy states, significant intervention. Dunmurry High has not even been offered the opportunity to implement such action. As with any school that fails an inspection, the school management is required to submit a draft action plan, which is checked by the board and the Department. After that is accepted, the action plan is proposed and checked with the full implementation of the board at the school. The school is then responsible for implementing the plan and is permitted up to 18 months to do so, with checks conducted by the board every three months. It should be pointed out that the board never checked how things were going at Dunmurry, and, given that the action plan was submitted and accepted in May and June this year, the school was not granted anywhere near 18 months to see its implementation. Therefore, it was never given the chance to prove itself.

I want to highlight other, unique information about the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Unlike any other education and library board in the Province, the SEELB is run by a group of highly paid commissioners, some of

whom fly over every month to take meetings. The board has been run by commissioners, without any political input, for a considerable time. The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 paved the way for the establishment of education and library boards. ELBs were established following a review of local government and were intended to provide local democracy and fair representation of the community in all aspects of local government. Under the 1986 Order, a newly constituted ELB should have been appointed in 2009, regardless of the previous position. I am reliably informed that the Department has, therefore, failed to discharge its legal obligation to appoint an ELB under paragraph 1 of schedule 2 to the 1986 Order. That is one issue on which I would most certainly like the Minister's opinion.

I now want to discuss some of the benefits and details of the schools in question. Dunmurry High caters for more children from the Village and Sandy Row areas of south Belfast than from Seymour Hill, where it is based and which is one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Of the 220 children enrolled at the school prior to the announcement, 60% were from south Belfast. Many of those children had moved school once or twice in their educational career so far, all down to closures in the south Belfast area. They were left with few school options, and Dunmurry High happened to serve their needs. One has to wonder what the impact of yet another closure will be on the lives of those children. Furthermore, 71 of those children are catered for through the nurture and special needs classes that are run at the school by dedicated teaching staff. Many of the children have special needs and would not elsewhere get the care and support that they require. The Minister knows that routine is central for children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and that change is not good for them. Consequently, by closing this school, the board risks upsetting the education of those children and turning their entire life upside down.

The board pointed out in communication to the parents that 959 places were available to their children at neighbouring schools. Of course, it should be pointed out that the word “neighbouring” is not one that anyone would use to describe many of those schools. Most are situated in east Belfast, up to 10 miles away from Dunmurry High School. That is the irony. Many children will be required to get not

just one bus but several in order to get to one of those other schools.

5.15 pm

I now turn to the other school in question, Knockmore Primary School. It is home to 143 pupils, 62 of whom have special educational needs. There are four speech and language units, which accommodate 44 children, and three social communication units, which accommodate 18 children diagnosed with ASD. The school is well known for the support that it offers to children with special needs and their parents. I believe that the only reason why the board is closing the school is to split the special needs unit from the mainstream school. However, that seems to be going against departmental policy. Will the Minister advise the House whether that is legal and, more important, whether the board is breaking departmental policy?

The closure of Knockmore Primary School will leave a void in the area. Few choices remain as to where those children with special educational needs will go. Where will they receive the pastoral care that they received at the school? There is a belief that the closure has been planned for some time, because at present there is an acting principal, an acting vice-principal, three mainstream teaching staff on temporary contracts, one unit teacher on a temporary contract, one unit teacher on a substitute basis to cover the acting head, a building supervisor on a temporary contract and one temporary outreach support teacher. Although some may deny that fact, it has all the hallmarks of closure, and the Minister's statement in September provided the excuse for such a closure.

Many people view these closures as an attack on the controlled education sector. The huge area that Dunmurry High School serves will be left without a controlled or state-provided school. They are also viewed as an attack on schools that facilitate special needs children, which applies to Knockmore Primary School and Dunmurry High School. There are genuine fears about where the children will go. As chairman of the board of governors at Laurelhill Community College — I declare an interest in that regard — I can say with confidence that it provides for children with special educational needs, but it does so for those in year 8 only, and the same is true for other schools in the locality.

So, where are the rest of those special needs children supposed to go? That is a key question for the Minister to answer, in addition to the others that I have outlined, and I, for one, look forward to hearing his response.

The most disappointing thing is that Knockmore Primary School is a good and viable school. It has excelled despite the pressure that the board has placed on it by putting everyone at the school on a temporary contract. Exactly one year ago, the school came out with excellent results following an inspection. Given the criteria outlined by the Minister, one has to ask why this school been targeted. Why is the special needs unit being separated from the mainstream school when, in truth, according to what the teachers and parents have to say, both are integral? Children who get proper teaching in the special needs unit move formally into the mainstream school. I thought that the Department approved of that situation. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The topic of the debate affects a wide number of constituents and Members. Several Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Therefore, I have decided to make an adjustment. Remaining Members will have five minutes in which to speak in order to accommodate everyone who has shown an interest. Members have five minutes from now on.

Mr B McCrea: Due to the comprehensive nature of the remarks by the proposer of the Adjournment debate, five minutes will be sufficient for me to add emphasis to some of the points that he raised. He has outlined the details with remarkable clarity.

At the outset, I want to say that I understand the Minister of Education's argument about the number of empty places in schools and the need to identify a way to address those issues. Therefore, I am a little reluctant to come forward with a knee-jerk reaction and say that we must see what we can do to stop the closure of these two schools. We need to look at the issues in the round. Having made that caveat, however, and having been to the schools recently, I am astonished about the way in which matters are being handled. I cannot believe that the schools fall into any regime that would merit closure.

At the start of the debate, Mr Craig mentioned that the education and library board seemed to be moving with undue haste. That may or may not be because of its management structure.

It certainly appears to offer a certain amount of contempt for political representatives and people who are trying to respond to the situation properly. I do not use the word "contempt" lightly. Frankly, I am astonished at the speed at which it is moving.

I will deal with the schools in the opposite order. Knockmore Primary School is a school that is actually working. It has the support of parents. It brings in people from a wide range of areas. It is viable. It has excellent inspection reports. There does not seem to be any just cause for its closure. Perhaps, it is because it does not fit in with a mainstream policy or one that says that people should be moved to schools in different areas. I cannot work out why anybody would target that school.

I am also disturbed about the parallel way in which the board is looking at things; that is to say, trying to separate the special education element of the school from what might be called the mainstream school. One really good feature of the school is how all of its pupils are integrated in a nurturing environment. That is a better policy than trying to shoehorn pupils into different places.

I am really surprised by what is happening. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say. Although I have to go and do something else, I will be listening to his response. I cannot believe that that school, with all of its success, is being highlighted in this way. I have advised it that it should look at legal issues on the matter.

I have also had the benefit of going to see Dunmurry High School, although not just as recently, perhaps, as I visited Knockmore Primary School. I had a series of Assembly outreach engagements with pupils of that school. They have visited Parliament Buildings. I found the school and the people who are involved with it to be excellent. It is a school that seems to be central to its area. I believe that Mr Craig outlined that, if that school closes, there will not be a huge number of places in the vicinity due to the geographical spread of schools in the area. I understand when inspections are carried out. Other schools, such as Lisnagarvey High School, were also inspected and required some investigation. However, schools that deal with such areas deserve the Assembly's support. Frankly, I am surprised that this school has been singled out as well.

I see that time is moving on, and I want to finish with a direct question to the Minister on two points that have arisen but particularly to do with Knockmore. It seems to me that children at that school get a particularly good form of education and support, and I wonder about the legality of removing them, if that school were to close, to nominally similar types of education system that are not as integrated or as good a system as possible. I think that there is a legal issue in that.

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

Mr B McCrea: The Minister might clarify whether he can remove provision from children without making sure that there is the same standard elsewhere.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that Jonathan Craig secured the debate. There is certainly widespread dismay among the parents, pupils and staff of both schools. I am also glad that he took some time to lay out the process for improvement, which the Department does not seem to have followed very rigidly.

Following the Minister's statement of 26 September and his announcement of a viability audit of all schools, which I welcomed and continue to welcome, I was surprised to see that the South Eastern Education and Library Board was going to proceed with its proposals for a development plan. That seems to fly in the face of logic. What is the point? If those schools are to close, it will not happen before next September, and the viability audit will be complete by then. The criteria for the South Eastern Board's deliberations and those for the viability audit are not the same. For a start, on area-based planning, the Minister has made a big thing of the fact that CCMS is to be involved in the viability audits on an area basis. No account has been taken of that. I am not sure what effect that would have on either school, but it is a fact that that has not been taken into account. It is completely premature to take the proposed actions in advance of an announced and very welcome viability audit.

I turn to Knockmore Primary School first. I looked at the six criteria listed in the sustainable schools policy and compared them to what goes on at Knockmore. The first is, obviously, a quality educational experience. As Jonathan said, Knockmore had an excellent inspection report just last year.

Attendance at the school is above the Northern Ireland average. In particular, as the first two contributors mentioned, it has a really terrific and highly acclaimed unit for special educational needs. I wonder whether anywhere in the country has a better record than that unit. It is universally regarded as an exemplar for how to integrate children into the mainstream. I declare an interest in that my brother's granddaughter recently completed her attendance there, and it was marvellously beneficial to her.

Knockmore's stable enrolment trend is another big factor. Its enrolment is above the threshold and has been for the past three years. I noticed in the development proposal that the South Eastern Board lays out the figures for the past 10 years. The viability audit will refer only to the past three years, when the figures have gone up, gently, to about 159. I know that Jonathan Craig mentioned a different figure, but I am going by the figures that the South Eastern Board has provided. I understand that that figure may have dropped slightly in the past few days because these situations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is annoying to see a good school brought down by rumour, and I hope that that will not happen. Knockmore is a terrific school, and it has a relatively sound financial position, which is another criterion of the sustainable schools policy. It has good accessibility and strong links with the community.

It is in the centre of a housing estate and draws most of its pupils from that area. As other Members asked: why is Knockmore in the firing line for closure? It does not make sense.

5.30 pm

I fear that it might be a bit more difficult to make a case for Dunmurry High School. It is well below the numbers threshold, its enrolment trend is not going in the right direction, and if you take the figures that the South Eastern Board has produced, how on earth a school can go from a surplus to a projected deficit of £700,000 in three years' time is a bit of a mystery to me.

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

Mr Lunn: Nevertheless, it is premature to look at a school such as Dunmurry High School. Where are the pupils supposed to go, Mr Deputy Speaker? I know that you are in a hurry. One of

the other schools that was listed was Orangefield, which has 510 vacancies —

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

Mr Lunn: — but it makes no sense to send children from Dunmurry to Orangefield.

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

Mr Givan: I thank my colleague Mr Craig for securing the debate and for giving us an opportunity to highlight these issues. During Question Time, the Minister expressed his view on the issues and, no doubt, he will repeat it when he gets the opportunity. However, I assure the Minister that the issue is being led by the grassroots from both schools, and we are responding to that. It is not being led by the political representatives of the area. Indeed, if the parents of the schools did not want a campaign to raise this issue publicly, this debate would not have happened. Therefore, we are responding to the campaign that the parents have been running, which has brought the issue to public attention.

I want to touch on Knockmore Primary School in the first instance. The development proposal was put out, and immediately after a very unsatisfactory meeting, the response from the education board was very poor. There were no responses to parents' concerns. I sit on the boards of governors of two primary schools in Lisburn whose principals were getting phone calls from parents who wanted to get their children into those schools. How that process was handled by the education board, the manner in which the meeting was conducted and the fact that the development proposal was rubber-stamped by the commissioners within four days of the initial meeting have exacerbated the problem.

Knockmore Primary School received a good report when it was inspected exactly 12 months ago. It is not a failing school academically; it is delivering. There is frustration from Members who represent the constituency that a school that has been inspected and which is deemed to be delivering high-quality education has not even been given the opportunity to be included in the Minister's audit review, and has been put out in the manner in which it has been put out for this development proposal by the education board.

As other Members said, the particular advantage of the school is the specialist units attached to it. There are 62 children in the specialist units, 44 of whom are from the speech and language

unit. Some of those children have already been moved from the ICAN facility, which was closed because the then Education Minister did not provide the funding that the Health Department had been providing and had offered to continue providing, only the then Education Minister pulled the plug. Some of those children were moved to Knockmore Primary School, and now they are faced with the scenario that they may have to be moved again.

It is not just children behind the statistics; it is children with special educational needs. They are the most vulnerable children in the education system. I know that the Minister will have to look at the proposals when they arrive on his desk, but I implore him to interrogate seriously all the evidence that is put before him and to ask himself whether the way in which this issue has been taken forward is right and whether it is right for those children to be subjected to such treatment and moved again. The evidence has shown that 80% of children who are placed in the special language unit from entry in P1 go into mainstream education. It is successful, it works and it is delivering. People need to be very careful about breaking up a system that is delivering.

I am concerned about why Knockmore Primary School has been singled out. There are a number of urban schools in the general locality in Lisburn. I can immediately think of three others that are within a one-mile radius of Knockmore. Why is there not a comprehensive review of all primary schools in that small section of Lisburn? The education standards and teaching in those schools could be looked at and a decision taken on the best way forward. Knockmore Primary School has been singled out wrongly by the education board.

I will conclude on this point, because I know that my time is running out. Why are the commissioners still in place in the South Eastern Education and Library Board? Why are we being discriminated against in a way that no other education and library board area is being treated, with unelected and unaccountable commissioners taking these types of decisions?

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

Mr Givan: I implore the Education Minister to address the discrimination against those communities in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.

Mr Poots: I commend Mr Craig for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. There are two issues before us today, the first of which is Dunmurry High School. I recognise that it is a failing school. Why? Why has it been allowed to fail? If there has been a leadership problem — and I believe that there has been a leadership problem — why was it allowed to continue?

The education and library board and the Department have questions to answer because, as a consequence, many children living in deprived communities in South Belfast and Lagan Valley will be deprived of a local education service. That is deeply unfortunate and grossly unfair. The education and library board had a serious role to play if it knew that that school was failing, and it did know that. It did not step in to ensure that the appropriate leadership was put in place to allow that school to progress.

Knockmore Primary School is a different case. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has acted wholly inappropriately and done great violence to a good school. The school was meeting standards and did not fall below the thresholds set out by the Minister a few weeks ago. I actually agree with those thresholds, but Knockmore Primary School did not fall below the thresholds in respect of either numbers or the return given to pupils. Indeed, 80% of the children who attended the speech and language unit went on to attend mainstream school.

It is very important to give children, particularly when they are young, the opportunity to overcome their disabilities and engage in a normal school life without sitting for years and being held back by a disability. Early intervention can ensure that they have a full education. It is incumbent on the Minister to intervene in this case to ensure that the children at Knockmore Primary School get a chance.

The equality requirements of section 75 have not been adhered to. We are looking at youngsters with a disability, but the education and library board seems to have just written off that fact. It feels that it can disperse those children even though a quality education has been offered to them. The matter needs to be looked at and addressed again.

I do not know what discussions took place with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. I sincerely hope that full negotiations took place beforehand. It is a matter of concern that two-and-a-half members of staff in that school are

employees of the trust and provide a key health-related service to children with a disability. If the commissioners and the education and library board are allowed to proceed with this action without having proper discussions and negotiations, that is a major failing.

I agree with the Members who discussed the issue of the commissioners. There is no democratic accountability, and that will be taken into account if this matter comes to a judicial review. The commissioners, as established, do not have legal authority.

Secondly, when we were in the direct rule period, the fact that public ownership was not a major factor at that point was the key to judicial reviews being granted quite easily and being overturned quite easily. If we have commissioners — who are appointed at £500 a day, I remind the House — as opposed to people who have a legitimate right to be there under the Order to advocate and to deal with issues relating to our children and young people, including people who hold publicly elected positions, it would be a different matter.

The Minister should give serious consideration to how the decision has been arrived at. The way that Knockmore Primary School has been dealt with, in particular, has been wholly inappropriate, and as a consequence of their behaviour on this matter, great violence has been done to it and to children with disabilities.

Mr McDevitt: I rise to briefly add my voice to those of colleagues expressing concern at the situation that both these schools find themselves in. I have a direct constituency interest in Dunmurry High, as — as Mr McCrea, Mr Poots and Mr Givan have already noted — a significant proportion of the pupil intake of that school comes from inner South Belfast, a community that is increasingly being dispersed in relation to its second-level education provision and which really no longer has a school or a couple of schools that it can look to as its own. That is neither in the interests of the community nor of the schools that those young people attend.

It is a simple fact that the vast majority of young men and women growing up in the Village and Sandy Row areas of my constituency are travelling extraordinary distances to attend second-level education. That is not fair on them or their families, and it is certainly not strengthening their community or assisting it with the transition that so many of its leaders

are trying to make from where that community would have been in past decades to where it needs to be.

The situation in Knockmore is quite depressing, frankly. It seems illogical to me that we, as an Executive, would not take the opportunity to include a school such as Knockmore in the viability audit process. I appeal to the Minister, even at this stage, to make such arrangements as could be necessary in order to do so.

I do not really want to say much else, except to apologise to the House, because I have to leave to speak elsewhere in a few seconds, and to say to the Minister that, in the process of developing his area-planning strategies, it is communities such as those in the Village and Sandy Row in South Belfast — and, indeed, in the south and south-east inner city areas — that he could well bear in mind. The reality of the past decade has been that, for those communities, educational provision has been pushed further and further away from them, and the choices available to those children have become fewer and fewer.

Mr McGimpsey: I rise as a representative of South Belfast to echo and reiterate the concerns that exist among families in inner South Belfast in particular, in areas such as Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the Village and the Donegall Road. Those are some of the most disadvantaged communities anywhere in Northern Ireland — communities for which education for their children is of paramount importance to allow those children to progress through life with any sort of opportunity to gain job opportunities and to ensure their quality of life as they grow old.

We have been here before. We had a new school called Balmoral High built on Blacks Road by the Belfast Education and Library Board, supported by the Department. That lasted merely a few years, and then it was closed, and all the pupils who were there had to move on. They moved on to, among other schools, Dunmurry High, and here we go again. Once again, it does not seem to matter where it is, pupils coming from those disadvantaged communities are being let down. It marches very much with the situation of the new consolidated primary school planned and proposed for inner South Belfast. Again, we have three primary schools — Fane Street Primary School, Blythefield Primary School on Sandy Row and Donegall Road Primary School

— all of which are around 100 years old and fit for demolition. There is agreement in those communities that those schools will come together in a consolidated primary school. Once again on that issue we have met a stone wall, despite the fact that the Belfast Trust has offered up a site at the Belfast City Hospital to allow that consolidation to proceed.

5.45 pm

If we are going to let our pupils down in that way, where are the pupils from those areas supposed to go to school? We are being told that, because they are in Belfast, they should go to the Boys' Model School in north Belfast. That is a very difficult journey to make. It is the closest controlled school, as I understand it, but it is full, and there is no room, so the pupils are told to go to east Belfast. It seems to me that there is a lack of will in the South Eastern Board and, indeed, in the Department, to give provision for those pupils in schools that are, at least, in their locality. That is a serious mistake.

When we get a school, of course, the word goes out that it is under threat. Parents start to take their children away, the numbers go down and critical mass is lost. Educational attainment standards go down as well as we run into composite classes, and so on, and we end up with a failing school. That is what happened at Balmoral High School, which was a multi-million-pound new development. How bad was the planning for that? It was a multi-million-pound new development, but the Department allowed it to close because it did not provide the support to the Belfast Education and Library Board that it should have provided to allow that school to go forward. *[Interruption.]*

It may be a matter of some —

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): That is a good story you are telling.

Mr McGimpsey: It may be a matter of some amusement to you, Mr O'Dowd, because, of course, your party was in charge of the Department at that time. I can tell you that parents are asking me where they should go and what they should do. The cost of travel is a difficulty. Many children from poor families have to pay £2.50 each a day to get to Dunmurry because they do not get a subsidy. If they were attending Malone College, the local integrated secondary school, they would travel for free. It may be that they want to go there, and many do, but many do

not. There is an inequality there; if you go to the integrated school, you get your bus pass, but if you do not, you will not get one. That needs to be addressed.

I am disappointed that we are in a situation in inner South Belfast where, once again, a secondary school that is providing education for a number of our pupils is being shut. We are being told to go to the Boys' Model School in north Belfast or to east Belfast, or to Newtownbreda High School, which is also heavily oversubscribed. That is not the type of provision or support that children from families who need it so desperately are entitled to and which they merit and should be getting.

Mr Storey: I commend my colleague Jonathan Craig for securing the Adjournment debate on this issue. I support him, because what is being played out in relation to Dunmurry and Knockmore is probably not dissimilar to what we are going to see over the next number of years. As Mr Lunn said earlier, we need to be very careful. Whenever there are rumours or assertions that things are going to take place, as other Members for Lagan Valley have mentioned, what is already happening is like the proverbial snow from a ditch. It feeds a crisis of confidence among parents in the locality.

There are a number of generic things that I want to raise in relation to the way in which we have come to the decision that has been made on these two schools. I commend the Member who proposed the Adjournment topic for the detail that he gave. He set out very clearly the issues in relation to Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School. The significant intervention powers that exist in education Orders have not been fully implemented or used to the full extent in regard to Dunmurry High School. That is worrying. It is something that we need to further progress and discuss with the board and the Department.

That leads me to the issue of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. It has been raised at the Committee for Education, and the Department has responded. I know that the Minister will say that he is confident that the commissioners have the legal power to do what they are doing. However, it is an absolute disgrace that, in 2011, an area of Northern Ireland has been governed by commissioners since 2006. I ask the Minister to seriously consider that issue. There has been an over-

reliance on the powers of article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Those powers were invoked in 2006 for a specific reason; it was not to give general powers and duties to commissioners to take decisions like those that they have taken. I urge the Minister to take seriously the concerns that are right across the piece in that regard.

We then come to the Minister's announcement about a viability audit. Many people are concerned about what the outcome of that audit will be. When the Minister stood in the House on 26 September 2011, I think that we were all under the impression that that audit was particularly for the post-primary sector. The terms of reference of the audit show that it will involve primary and post-primary schools. That has a significant bearing on Knockmore Primary School and Dunmurry High School because they fall within the remit of that review. The Minister is looking for the review to be back by March of next year, so I wonder whether there is sufficient time to collate all the relevant information.

The other issue that I want to raise with the Minister is about the controlled sector. Dunmurry High School and Knockmore Primary School are in the controlled sector. For too long, that sector has been the Cinderella of education in many regards. It is seen by many as always having to take second place. There are issues in working-class Protestant areas. We have seen those in Dawn Purvis's report and in work that was carried out for other reports at other times. Dunmurry, in particular, is a working-class Protestant area, and we have heard the comments that were made by Members for South Belfast. That issue needs to be addressed —

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

Mr Storey: — in a way that deals with reality, not by simply saying that it is unfortunate that another controlled school is closing but we just have to move on. I ask the Minister to take those points into consideration when he responds this evening.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. I regret that I have only 10 minutes in which to speak, because the issues that have been raised here today deserve longer than 10 minutes.

I am familiar with Dunmurry High School. I was appointed as Minister of Education by the deputy First Minister, and I was in post for 15 minutes when a Member brought Dunmurry High School to my attention. What was the advice from that Member? Unfortunately, I cannot reveal that advice because I am in a legal position in which I will be signing off on any decision about Dunmurry High School. However, if I had taken that Member's advice, we would not be having this debate; the decision would have been made a long time ago. However, there is a legal process in place. No decision has been made. If the development proposals come forward to me, they will be in a legal process. I will take on board all the information that is in front of me, and I will make my decision based on those figures.

I said earlier during Question Time that I regret that these sorts of debates come to the Chamber, because you almost have to let out the family secrets. You have to lay them bare for everyone to hear, and let me lay out for Members a few bare facts about Dunmurry High School. I will lay out the facts because they are facts and because they are part, but only part, of the information that I will have to assess when coming to a decision. Dunmurry High School is a controlled school whose enrolments have continued to decline from 326 in 2006-07 to 266 in 2010-11. The school has an approved enrolment of 400, so there are 134 unfilled places.

If only that were the full story. In March, Dunmurry High School entered the formal intervention programme, because the quality of its educational provision, educational attainment, leadership and management was inadequate. That is the school that Members are defending. In 2009-2010, only 15% achieved five-plus GCSEs or equivalent at grades A to C — the overall average was 59%. The number who achieved five-plus GCSEs, including English and maths, was zero. I will repeat that for Members: the number who achieved five-plus GCSEs, including English and maths, was zero.

Mr Craig tells me that the Department and the education boards are attacking the controlled sector. Respectfully, I put it to the Member that the pupils in Dunmurry High have been under attack for a very long time. Indeed, they have been under the full bombardment of poor educational attainment and provision, and, during that period, not one Member thought it worth his or her while to come to the Chamber

to seek a debate on what we should do about educational provision in schools that are failing young people. The problems did not start only last year. Much mention has been made of the SEELB's undemocratic decisions. The SEELB was stood down in 2006, and in 2006-07, fewer than five pupils out of a cohort of 76 achieved five-plus GCSEs at grades A to C. In 2007-08, the figure was 8% out of 60, which equates to about five pupils. In 2008-09, the figure was 10% out of 60.

With respect to Members, the issue of provision in Dunmurry has long passed. The question is what we will do about provision in Dunmurry. Defending it blindly will not do; defending it because it is a building in South Belfast, or wherever it may be, will not do. Members have a responsibility to lead in their communities. I can understand parents and community leaders coming forward to demand that Dunmurry High School be retained, but I respectfully say to Members: go to those meetings well informed. The latest Education and Training Inspectorate report is a public document and is available. I suggest that you sit down and read it, and then come back to the House to defend the failings at Dunmurry High School.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not.

I respect the fact that Mr Poots spoke from the Back Benches and is not here as the Health Minister, but let me put a scenario to him. If Mr Poots received information about unsafe health provision, as I have about unsafe educational provision, he would demand action. As Education Minister, I demand action when I have information about unsafe educational provision. The failings in the education service will end up at Mr Poots's door as failings in the health service. Those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have ill health, no jobs and no prospects. When I come to make a decision on Dunmurry High School, I will make it on the basis of all the information in front of me, not simply the exam results, which are deplorable. I will make it based on all the information that the development proposals bring. If the proposals contain new information or innovative ideas, I will examine those closely.

The SEELB has legal authority. Mr Craig told me that he was reliably informed that it does not, but only a judge can reliably inform me, as a Minister, of that. As far as I am concerned, and

based on the legal advice that I have, the SEELB has legal authority. I also wish to see the end of commissioners in the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I want a democratic structure for education, and I believe that we can and will achieve that. Let us keep our focus on that and move towards that objective. The democratic accountability in all these matters rests with me as Minister. I am the person who will sign off on development proposals for Dunmurry or any other school. There is democratic accountability at the heart of government to the Executive, Assembly and Executive Committee.

6.00 pm

Quite frankly, it was a mistake to bring Knockmore Primary School and Dunmurry High School in on the same debate. However, I respect the right of Members to do that. There are two different issues. Each was examined by the board around bringing forward development proposals but they are two unique and different issues.

Again, no decision has been made on Knockmore. I will look at all the information provided to me on Knockmore. I listened to the comments of Members this evening, and I have no doubt that I will receive more comments as the process goes on. However, I think it was a mistake to bring both schools forward together. In my own mind, however, I have separated them, and I will, as with all development proposals, be able to make a decision on the basis of the development proposal.

Mr Storey is quite correct about the viability audit being brought forward. It was originally planned for post-primary provision. However, after listening to the debate in the Chamber, and comments from Members and educationalists, I thought it was quite right and proper to include primary schools in the audit. For once, you could maybe say that a Minister has listened. I believe that all those matters can be delivered in the time ahead. I want the viability audit back with me by December. If development proposals come forward for Knockmore and Dunmurry, they will be in that time frame.

However, I cannot turn round to our managing authorities or the CCMS and say, "Stop. Hold any information you have in front of you that would raise concern about a school, and stop right away." I would much prefer that they come forward with those proposals and they can be dealt with in the round.

Let us be clear: there are schools out there that are failing our young people. You can say that we should have intervened six years ago or five years ago. At one stage in the debate, the board and Department were criticised for acting too quickly, and at another stage, we were criticised for acting too late. I think that we acted too late. One reason why I brought forward my September statement was to say to the managing authorities that we cannot delay these decisions any longer. We cannot allow children to be failed in our schools.

The information is there. The boards and CCMS are aware of it. If they believe that bringing forward a development proposal ahead of the audit is the right thing to do, I will allow that process to continue.

I know that it is difficult for MLAs. I know that it is difficult for elected representatives dealing with these matters. However, I appeal to you to go informed to meetings with parents and representatives. My Department will make available to anyone any relevant information that can be put into the public domain about any school coming forward because I want an informed debate out there. I want Members to be able to go into their communities to offer leadership on these issues. However, I appeal to Members not to defend the indefensible, regardless of how it arrived or happened. Do not defend the indefensible. There are schools in our system that need to be taken out of it for the benefit of the young people contained within them.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During Mr Craig's speech, a Member violated something that the Speaker said should not happen, namely, he walked across the area between you and the person who was addressing you. I ask you to pass that on to the Speaker to have a look at.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ensure that that happens.

Adjourned at 6.04 pm.



information & publishing solutions

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

and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522

Fax orders: 0870 600 5533

E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk

Textphone 0870 240 3701

TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents

ISSN 1463-7162

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

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

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited

© Copyright Northern Ireland Assembly Commission 2011

ISBN 978-0-339-50506-3

