
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 26 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: At the sitting on Monday 19 November 2007, Mr O'Dowd sought a ruling in relation to comments allegedly made from a seated position by Mr McNarry.

The first question that Mr O'Dowd asked was whether the language that he believed that Mr McNarry had used was appropriate. I have met Mr McNarry on at least three occasions, and he has strongly denied using the words that were quoted by Mr O'Dowd. Without any evidence to the contrary, I have accepted his denial.

The second question asked by Mr O'Dowd was why the remark was not recorded in the Official Report. As I have said, Mr McNarry denies making the remark, but it may be useful to remind Members that remarks made from a seated position are only recorded in the Official Report if they are referred to by a Member who is on his or her feet at the time or by the Speaker.

I think that this exchange simply reinforces what I said to Members last week: all Members should ensure that good temper and moderation are demonstrated in the Chamber.

BUSINESS MOTION

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that a suspension of Standing Orders requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4), inclusive, be suspended for 26 November 2007. — *[Mr McNarry.]*

Mr Speaker: Given that the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm if required.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the Northern Ireland Events Company.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am grateful for this opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC).

Members will be aware that, on 22 November, the Executive agreed to a number of immediate steps in response to the deficit identified by the NIEC. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) was first notified of the deficit on 20 September, when the acting chief executive advised officials that the company had incurred a significant financial debt. Prior to that, the company gave no indication to the Department of any impending deficit.

Earlier in 2007, the Department commissioned an internal audit to review the company's governance and control systems, and that report was completed in August 2007. In view of the number of significant weaknesses identified, the Department engaged with NIEC on the recommendations and action points set out in the internal audit report. In that context, and in the work of the external auditors finalising the 2006-07 accounts, the staff of NIEC advised the Department of the deficit. The draft accounts prepared by the company's external auditors for the period ending 31 March 2007 reflect a deficit of approximately £1.2 million, accumulated over the financial years 2005-06 and 2006-07.

On the basis of the information provided to the Department to date, it appears that the greatest deficit arose from significant overspend against budget in several events, and the company committing itself to expenditure on the basis of assumed corporate sponsorship that failed to materialise.

The purpose of this statement is to inform Members of the background to the issue, and to set out the steps agreed by the Executive to address the matter. The NIEC is established as a company limited by guarantee, and it is bound by companies legislation. The company is treated as a non-departmental public body and has, largely, been dependent on financial support from its sponsor Department, DCAL. Grant-in-aid is paid by DCAL to the company on the terms of an approved business plan. The company is run by a group of non-executive directors, appointed by the Department, with the support of a small executive team.

The liabilities, and contingent liabilities, of the company are precisely that — that is, the liabilities of the company, and not of the Department. Prior to this,

the Department has not underwritten or guaranteed the debts of the company; however, in reaching a decision on how to address the issue of this deficit, there is a wide range of factors which I, and the Executive Committee, must consider.

At this stage, there is considerable uncertainty as to the precise details of the company's financial affairs; therefore, the information currently available must be treated with caution. As previously stated, the draft accounts for the year ending 31 March 2007 reflect a deficit of approximately £1.2 million. In addition, several potential contingent liabilities require further consideration.

I want to have available a comprehensive and authoritative audit of the company's financial affairs to enable me fully to assess the position, and I will advise the House further when that becomes clear.

Following a meeting of NIEC's directors on 5 October, the chairman of the company asked the Department to assist in meeting its liabilities. The Department asked the company to quantify its liabilities and set out the background to the accumulation of its deficit. The information currently available to the Department is based on the work of the company's external auditors and on documentation provided by NIEC.

A decision on whether or not to assist the company, and in what manner, was urgent. Given the circumstances, this required me to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and, thereafter, my Executive Committee colleagues to seek agreement for my Department to assist in meeting the liabilities of NIEC. The Executive agreed on 22 November to meet the liabilities as identified by the external auditors appointed by the company. This process will be verified by an appropriate professional, appointed by my Department, who will advise on the most appropriate method of winding up the company in an orderly manner.

As Members will appreciate, this matter gave rise to a difficult policy decision for my Department and, ultimately, the Executive, since it is both significant and controversial. A range of options as to how the public interest could best be served were explored. The arguments in favour of assisting the company in meeting its liabilities included consideration of the damage to Northern Ireland's reputation for hosting events should the company, and the events function, be put in abeyance. A number of events are due to take place in the near future, and several significant events are in the pipeline. The rationale for supporting events is to attract tourists and improve the overall standing of Northern Ireland's image. The position in relation to the company's creditors and staff was also an important factor in the decision.

In seeking the agreement of the Executive for this course of action, it was my judgement that the public

interest is best served by assisting NIEC to meet its deficit in a manner that maintains confidence in the ability of Northern Ireland to attract and host major events. The potential strategic, long-term benefits of decisive action now outweigh the costs of meeting this immediate shortfall.

As I said earlier, I am in the process of commissioning an independent, comprehensive review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by NIEC. In particular, this will focus on the significant overspend against budget on a number of specific events. I will report back to the House on the findings of this review at the earliest opportunity.

I have also commissioned an external review of the monitoring arrangements between the Department and the other arm's-length bodies for which it is responsible. This will consider what lessons can be learned in the light of the experience with NIEC.

Clearly, there is a range of sensitive legal and financial issues to be addressed. The professional financial adviser and his specialist team are best placed to bring clarity to these matters. Until I am in possession of the precise details, there is a limit on the extent to which I can assist Members at this stage. I trust that Members will appreciate the sensitivities involved and, therefore, I ask Members to take account of the fact that not all the relevant facts are yet available. It would be prudent to suspend judgement until the facts are available.

The course of action agreed by the Executive will provide full scrutiny of the circumstances leading to the deficit. It will protect Northern Ireland's reputation for hosting major international events and secure, as far as possible, the existing portfolio of events, along with those in the pipeline. I know that Members share my keenness that events should proceed, if worthwhile, but I am adamant that this must be done within a properly controlled financial framework.

In the process of winding up the company in an orderly manner, early consideration will be given to how the events function should be delivered in the future. It is my intention to ensure that the transition from the current model to whatever new arrangements are put in place is managed in a manner that secures the continuity of attracting and hosting major events in Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Nelson McCausland, I remind the House, because of the nature of the Minister's statement, not to stray onto any legal issues. I also ask Members not to name, either directly or indirectly, people who are associated with the company.

Mr McCausland: Have there been any complaints against the company? If so, what was the nature of

those complaints, when were they made and how were they investigated?

Mr Poots: The Department received complaints from five individuals about the Northern Ireland Events Company. Those included complaints from former employees and from those who organised events. The complaints ranged from management attitude to their staff to financial management and propriety and to lack of transparency and equity in dealing with funders.

Complaints were also received about specific actions of the former chief executive, and a further complaint concerned an alleged irregular payment. Those complaints have been subject to ongoing investigations.

The Department has interviewed former members of staff, who wish to remain anonymous. A broad internal audit of the Northern Ireland Events Company was initiated to examine those areas of financial management and processes that former employees had highlighted. The audit also included an examination of all contemporaneous records of payment.

Funding applicants who made allegations were advised to follow the NIEC complaints procedure, and they were provided with the relevant documentation on those procedures.

Additional allegations that a fifth individual made were investigated, at the Department's request, by a retired senior civil servant, whose report concluded that there was no evidence to substantiate the allegations that had been made. After the complainant was informed of the report's findings, a further allegation about an irregular payment was made, and the Department immediately initiated an internal audit investigation, which remains ongoing, into that specific alleged payment. Some of the queries and inquiries to which I have referred date as far back as two and a half years ago.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr O'Dowd): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee has asked for an interim report into the matter to be compiled. Given the comments that both the Minister and you, Mr Speaker, have made on the legalities involved, I shall keep my comments broad.

First, will the Minister let the House know why the internal audit of August 2007 did not highlight the company's financial difficulties immediately? Does the Minister agree that there is no excuse for arm's-length bodies finding themselves in the position in which the Events Company now finds itself?

The Minister's statement said that the internal audit report was completed in August 2007 and that in view of a number of significant weaknesses identified, the Department had engaged with the NIEC. The significant weaknesses refer to good governance practices. A wealth

of information on good governance is available to arm's-length bodies. The Audit Office provides that information, as does the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Indeed, I think that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) provided training only last week or the week before on the governance of such public bodies. Does the Minister agree that significant information is available out there, and, therefore, there is no reason why a public body's governance procedures should contain weaknesses?

Mr Poots: It is a salutary lesson for those who sit as directors on such organisations that their responsibilities do not simply extend to dealing with information of which they are aware. It is also their responsibility to make themselves aware of information that they should possess. Individuals who sit on such bodies must ensure that they receive the quality of information that gives them the confidence to make decisions. I agree with the Member on that.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): I thank the Minister for detailing his proposed action and congratulate him on securing the required extra funding.

Will the Minister confirm that groups that have yet to complete their forms to draw on grants that have already been approved will receive payment? Also, what lessons can his Department and other Departments learn from their not recognising sooner what was a serious financial deficit?

Mr Poots: First, those groups that applied for funding, were awarded it and have yet to draw on it, will still be eligible to receive it, provided that they present the appropriate and proper documentation.

We will be very careful to ensure that everything paid out is adequately documented and that appropriate spending took place. This situation will be a lesson to Departments, and there will be lessons to be learnt.

We will have our enquiry; and I expect that there will be a hearing by the Public Accounts Committee on the matter also. As we go through the process, there will be lessons for Government to learn about how non-departmental bodies are organised, and there will be lessons to be learnt by the individuals who are involved in those bodies.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I acknowledge his contribution and help in recent days in bringing a level of comfort to many on this matter. Has a commitment been given to existing programmes, activities and festivals in the incoming year? There is a level of anxiety from the organisers of good events — such as the Foyle Cup and Milk Cup, community events in my constituency and the World Police and Fire Games. There are good staff who have the capacity to deliver such events, not just in relation to funding applications but in securing private-sector

sponsorship. Not all of the staff have been at fault in this matter. Therefore, can we ensure that the capacity to deliver events will remain intact?

Mr Poots: First, I want to ensure that genuine creditors will receive outstanding payments. That will include all applications that have been approved up to March 2008. As for the future of the Northern Ireland Events Company: it will be wound up as soon as possible after that date. It was due to transfer to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 April 2008, and the due diligence process is underway. As things stand, the transfer is still planned to take place on that date.

Secondly, I intend to make a statement to the Assembly next week on how we will deal with community festivals, as they do not seem to fit within the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. My statement should give Members some confidence on the matter.

We want to ensure that there is confidence both within and beyond Northern Ireland in our ability to deliver events. We have been bidding for significant events, which I trust will be successful. There is still a very important events function to be delivered, and we want to ensure that it is delivered in a professional way that inspires widespread confidence.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister stated that the draft accounts for the period ending 31 March 2007 were prepared. Will he tell us when the accounts for 2005-06 were published and whether they highlighted difficulties at that time? He also said that the company had committed itself to expenditure:

“on the basis of assumed corporate sponsorship that failed to materialise.”

Could the company claim funding from the bodies that did not cough up, or was there any written agreement that funding could be recouped from those bodies?

Mr Poots: On the first point, the 2005-06 accounts were unqualified. Therefore, the auditors had not identified any issues in the 2005-06 accounts that were presented to the board. Corporate finance and corporate sponsorship was assumed but was not actually achieved. Companies had not agreed to give funding or sponsorship. However, it was assumed that such funding and sponsorship could be received on the basis of previous experience.

Unfortunately, the events company lost key members of staff who had a specialism in attracting and going after that type of corporate sponsorship. In the absence of the members of staff who were pursuing that particular sponsorship, it did not materialise.

Lord Browne: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a large number of non-departmental public bodies. In the light of the serious financial loss incurred by the Northern Ireland Events Company, how confident

is the Minister that other, similar situations could not arise? Will he confirm that a business case had been made for each event sponsored by the Northern Ireland Events Company?

Mr Poots: All Departments can learn from what has happened. As a consequence, DCAL has commissioned an immediate review into the monitoring arrangements with all of the arms-length bodies for which it is responsible. I cannot necessarily say that I would be confident that that is the case in other companies. It may be unlikely, but the review is being carried out to ensure that we have that confidence in place, and it is something that other Departments might wish to consider in order to identify the lessons learned in the light of that experience.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

With regard to the new arrangements that have been put in place, I ask the Minister if he believes that the events company is best suited to DCAL in the future. Has he a view on where it should be situated? Will he agree that all such bodies are best placed in DCAL, so that the Minister can keep a close eye on them? He talked about learning from the mistakes that have been made, and I hope that we can all learn from that experience. What is the position with regard to arrangements for which the events company has responsibility, including the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: I indicated that the company was due to move to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 April 2008. As I understand it, that is still the case, subject to due-diligence procedures. Festival funding, clearly, does not fall within the Tourist Board's remit. We intend to make a statement next week that will deal with that issue. I am sure that the good work that has been done in that area will continue.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the diligence that he has shown in the matter. He said there was considerable uncertainty about the precise details of the company's financial affairs. What steps were taken once the company's financial deficit came to light?

Mr Poots: A number of actions were taken. First of all, the Department instructed the Northern Ireland Events Company not to enter into any further commitments until and unless it had been given explicit approval by the Department to do so. In addition, the usual quarterly monitoring meeting between the Department and NIEC has been escalated to a monthly one for the foreseeable future. The Department has requested a full assessment of the financial deficit and financial commitments of the company up until March 2008. It has also asked for a detailed report on the extent and origin of the deficit. That is being prepared by external auditors, who are also undertaking a 100% verification

of all payments against authorisation. I expect to have a report on that in the near future.

Mr B McCrea: I note from the Minister's statement that the Department was first notified on 20 September 2007. Perhaps he will tell the House when he was informed personally about the financial difficulties. Will he also indicate whether any significant contingent liabilities were entered into after that date? Given the importance of protecting Northern Ireland's reputation, will he state what quantum of costs might have to be dealt with in order to settle the contingent liabilities?

Mr Poots: I was informed at the same time as the Department on 20 September. My accounting officer brought to my attention that which had been brought to his attention. I would have expected nothing less from him than to be informed immediately of something of that nature.

12.30 pm

I first received information to the effect that all might not be well at the Northern Ireland Events Company in the early part of the summer, when I was approached by my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr. He indicated that he had picked up information to the effect that matters might not be as they should. In response to that, I met a former member of Northern Ireland Events Company staff. I also met the organiser of a particular event, who brought some matters to my attention, which I subsequently brought to the attention of my officials. That led to the chain of events that I outlined in my statement.

The Member asked how we intended to handle the matter. We have stated that we intend to ensure that legitimate creditors are paid in full, and we shall put in place a process whereby we can continue to ensure that quality events are brought to Northern Ireland. The organisers of those events must be able to have confidence that those events will be successful, and that whatever sponsorship is offered to them will be paid. I believe that we are in a position to do that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Bearing in mind that the events company was in difficulties for some time, why did the Minister's Department not become aware of those difficulties until 20 September, and why did his Department not have in place monitoring arrangements to protect the public interest in the company?

Mr Poots: As I have indicated, monitoring arrangements are in place, which have operated on a quarterly basis. The reason why the figures were not identified at an earlier point is a matter that must emerge from the inquiries that will take place. I trust that we will get that information and that we will learn how such a deficit could have been accumulated without it being noticed through the audit arrangements that were in place.

Mr Craig: Bearing in mind the information that the Minister has already provided about the transfer of the Northern Ireland Events Company's responsibilities to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, is the Minister not concerned that some board members appear to hold dual mandates? Could he also outline to the House the findings of the internal audit review?

Mr Poots: As I have clearly indicated, the transfer of responsibilities to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will be subject to prior due diligence. However, the sooner we can wind up the Northern Ireland Events Company and start the transition of its functions and responsibilities to another organisation, the sooner we will be able to gain greater certainty and clarity and ensure greater confidence in the local community, and beyond, in respect of bringing events to Northern Ireland.

As part of that process, the responsibilities of those who have been members of both bodies will have to be addressed.

The internal audit review that was completed in August 2007 concluded that risk management, control and governance arrangements in the Northern Ireland Events Company were satisfactory, in part, but contained a number of significant weaknesses that could undermine the achievement of objectives and leave the organisation vulnerable to material error and abuse.

In view of the significant weaknesses that were identified, the Department engaged with the Northern Ireland Events Company to address the recommendations and action points that were set out in the internal audit report.

Mr Durkan: I recognise that the Minister is dealing with problems that were in no way of his making. The Minister said that the full facts are not available. When will the full facts become available? Will the full facts be available to all Members and the wider public, so that the due diligence exercise in respect of the possible transfer of most of the events company's functions to DETI and the Tourist Board are fully informed by those facts? To carry out a transfer on any other basis would be asking for more problems.

Mr Poots: In addition to the work that the external auditors have been asked to do, an expert has been appointed who will be directly answerable to the Department on all of the issues at hand. I cannot be specific as to a date for the establishment of all the facts, but that will happen — comprehensively and adequately — as soon as is physically possible. We must identify how the present difficulties and problems came into being and clear them up before any consideration can be given to transferring the functions of the Northern Ireland Events Company to the Tourist Board. The work that has to be done is in good hands, and the right level of expertise has been deployed in order to identify the issues that Members need to know about. I

will inform the House as soon as I receive adequate information, just as I have done in this instance.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he mentioned the non-executive directors who run the Northern Ireland Events Company. Will the Minister remind the House of the identity of those directors and state whether any assessment has been made of their management of the company?

Mr Poots: The current board members are as follows: Mr Mervyn Elder, chairman; Mr Ian Lee; Dr Paul McWilliams; Mr Jim Rodgers; Mr Jim Clarke; Professor Eric Saunders; Mr Alan Clarke; Mr Gerry Lennon; Mr Bill White; Mrs Roberta Dunlop; and Mr Sam McGregor. Three of those appointments were made on 23 April 1997. Four appointments were made in 1999, and the remainder in 2002.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned contingent liabilities in his statement. Will he advise the House whether loans are included under that heading? Did the Northern Ireland Events Company take out any loans to enable it to operate? If that is so, when were the Minister and the Department made aware of the situation, and when was any approval sought or given?

Mr Poots: I am not aware of the Northern Ireland Events Company having taken out any loans. That is not to say that that is not the case, however. I will seek to ascertain the facts and inform the Member in writing.

Lord Morrow: The Minister said that he had received a number of complaints. Will the Minister inform the House whether he received those complaints prior to, or after 20 September 2007? Furthermore, will he tell us what the deficit was in the accounts for 2005-06? The Minister also mentioned sponsorship that failed to materialise. What action was taken when the facts of that matter were brought to his attention? Does the Minister have any details of further deficits for the period between April and October 2007?

Mr Poots: I received first reports of these matters in June 2007. As I said, I met an event organiser and a former employee of the Northern Ireland Events Company, both of whom expressed concerns about the company. I passed those concerns on to senior staff in the Department, which brought about the internal review, and, which, ultimately, has brought the matter to the attention of the House. I will seek to ascertain the exact figures pertaining to the 2005-06 deficit and provide those to the Member. I am aware that a considerable amount of the deficit developed in that period, and I will provide that information to the Member as soon as I receive it. The Department is not aware of deficits in the financial year 2006-07 to date. However, that determination will be subject to the accounting procedures that have been put in place.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to introduce the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07], which is a Bill to amend section 2A of the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pensions Bill

Accelerated Passage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to move

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

This Bill will make provision for Northern Ireland corresponding to provisions of the Pensions Act 2007, which received Royal Assent on 26 July 2007. The provisions in the Bill flow largely from the Independent Pensions Commission's Turner report, and they are aimed at improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension and simplifying private pensions.

I am sure that everyone in the House, myself included, wants to be a champion and an advocate not only for pensioners but for those who are on the threshold of receiving entitlement next year or in 10 or 15 years. Anyone who is in that category now or who will fit into it in the future will obtain the money to which they are entitled. The reforms of the state pension will benefit women and carers in particular, by providing them with better opportunities to build up pension entitlement. I will describe the proposals in greater detail later this afternoon during the Second Stage of the Bill. However, it may be helpful if I briefly go through the main provisions of the Bill.

The Bill will reduce the number of qualifying years needed for a full basic state pension and will revise and modernise contribution credits for those with caring responsibilities. It will enable a spouse or civil partner to draw a pension based on their partner's National Insurance record, even if the partner has chosen not to retire, and will abolish adult dependency increases. It will provide for the uprating of basic state pension and the minimum guarantee element of pension

credit in line with earnings. It will reform and simplify state second pension and increase state pension age gradually from 65 to 68 between 2024 and 2046. The Chairman of the Committee for Social Development raised that issue with me, and I have provided him with a written response.

The Bill also simplifies private pension arrangements and encourages saving for retirement by simplifying the structure of defined benefit contract-out schemes, abolishing contracting out in defined contribution schemes, introducing simpler internal dispute resolution procedures for occupational pension schemes and providing for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal account system to enable people to save for their retirement.

I will now turn to the reasons why this important Bill should be given accelerated passage. However, I am conscious that such a procedure may inhibit Members from conducting fuller line-by-line scrutiny. There has been a longstanding principle of parity with GB in the areas of social security and pensions. In recognition of that exceptional position, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on me and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to seek to maintain single systems of social security and pensions right across Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Members are aware of the constraints of parity, both in terms of what is operationally possible given the common information-technology systems, and, crucially, the very substantial funding that we receive from Britain to pay benefits here: currently around £2.4 billion per annum. That funding is predicated on the maintenance of parity — thus, there are 2.4 billion reasons for the maintenance of that arrangement. Very sound and pertinent economic imperatives underpin the principle of parity and I hope that all parties are aware of and understand its benefits.

12.45 pm

The majority of the provisions in the Pensions Act 2007 were brought into force when the Bill received Royal Assent, or two months afterwards, even though most of them do not have practical effect until 2010. Planning for retirement is a long-term process, and commencing the provisions of the Act in that way allows people throughout Northern Ireland and Great Britain to plan for retirement with some degree of certainty. We are already finding that the absence of corresponding legislation in Northern Ireland is causing operational difficulties, in relation to retirement pension forecasting for example. If this Bill were to be subject to the full Bill procedure, people here would, unfortunately, be disadvantaged for several months to come in that they would be unable to plan with certainty for their retirement.

Furthermore, an important provision of the Bill ensures that the standard minimum guarantee of pension credit can be operated in line with earnings. The standard minimum guarantee provides a minimum level of income for pensioners: currently £119.05 for a single person and £181.70 for a couple. Before the introduction of the Pensions Act 2007, there was no requirement to uprate the standard minimum guarantee, and uprating was carried out purely at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Pensions Act 2007 now places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to uprate the standard minimum guarantee annually in line with earnings, and that takes effect from April 2008, when the minimum guarantee is expected to rise by £5 a week for a single person and by £7.65 a week for a couple. My Department has no power to uprate benefits unilaterally in Northern Ireland. However, the Bill empowers the Department to make an Order to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in line with the rate applicable in Britain.

This Bill is essential to ensure that no one in Northern Ireland misses out on increased payments guaranteed to be available in Great Britain. Without accelerated passage, there can be no guarantee that the Bill will receive Royal Assent in time to allow the necessary Order to be made. The Department would therefore have no power to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland from April 2008, and people here would be entitled to only the 2007-08 rate.

Parity covers not only the content of the legislation, but also, as far as possible, the timing of its implementation. To ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are given the same opportunities to plan for retirement as people in Britain are, and that they are entitled to the higher rate of the standard minimum guarantee from April, the necessary powers must be made available as soon as possible.

I do not take lightly the use of the accelerated passage procedure. I do not believe that any legislation should be free from detailed scrutiny, and I have already had that discussion with the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and Committee members. I will consider each piece of so-called parity legislation according to its merits, and I have already given that undertaking to the Chairperson.

However, in this instance, I believe — and I hope that the Assembly will agree — that people in Northern Ireland who pay the same rates of National Insurance contributions and income tax as people in Great Britain have the right to expect the proposed changes to apply here at the same time as they apply in Britain. In particular, they should be entitled to the higher rate of pension credit in the same way as people in England and Wales are.

As I said earlier, I want all people in Northern Ireland, particularly those who are on the threshold of entitlement to their pension and those who are currently in receipt of it, to be sure that they receive all of their entitlement. That is why I launched the benefit uptake campaign earlier in 2007, which had already been successful during the previous two financial years.

Therefore, for all the reasons that I have outlined, I ask that the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with Standing Order 40(4). Granting the use of accelerated passage procedure means that there will not be a formal Committee Stage. I met the Committee on 8 November to explain why it was necessary to seek accelerated passage for the Pensions Bill. Of course, Members will have an opportunity to make their views on the Bill known during its Second Stage and for issues to be fully discussed during that debate, the Consideration Stage and the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Some people have experienced delays in payment of their pension credit. I have asked my officials to carry out a full investigation of the number of applications for pension credit that have been made during the past three years; how many have been approved, refused or are outstanding; and to explain why applications are outstanding and whether further information is required from the applicant in those cases. As I have said, I want to ensure that everyone who is entitled can obtain their benefits without undue stress or discomfort.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): As she has mentioned, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee for Social Development on 8 November 2007. She explained the reasons for her request that the Pensions Bill should proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. She also outlined the consequences if accelerated passage were not granted. The Committee listened carefully to her remarks.

Every part of the Bill falls under section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is a 100% parity measure that will ensure the continuation of a single system of pensions for the United Kingdom. It is part of the ongoing process of pensions reform and is intended to improve the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension, to simplify private pensions and also to establish a personal accounts delivery authority.

The Committee is aware of the importance of maintaining parity in order to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland benefit from changes at the same time that they are introduced in Great Britain. However, Members expressed serious reservations about the principle of bringing forward legislation without full Committee scrutiny. The Minister has agreed that she will consult intensively with the Department on how to deal with future parity legislation with the Committee's

involvement. Therefore, in the light of that undertaking by the Minister, the Committee has agreed to support her request that the Pensions Bill be granted accelerated passage.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As has been stated, accelerated passage is relevant to the Pensions Bill and has been agreed by the Committee.

The problem of pensioner poverty has resulted from years of underinvestment in the pension system. The state pension is one of the meanest in Europe. It looks set to continue as such, even under the reforms to the pension system. Unfortunately, the Government have chosen to use means-testing as the apparatus with which to tackle pensioner poverty. The system's inherent fatal flaw is the problem of uptake. Each year, here and in Britain, over £4 billion is unclaimed by pensioners, and that does not include disability benefits.

In conclusion and in view of the huge amount of money that is unclaimed, the basic state benefit should be set at a level that takes people out of poverty rather than one that requires them to claim help. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I have listened carefully to the views expressed in the Chamber today, particularly to the comments made by the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Campbell, and by Mr Brady; and I am grateful for the Committee's support for my request for accelerated passage. I agree with Mr Campbell's view that the handling of social security and pension legislation poses unique problems. The statutory requirement to seek to maintain single systems across Northern Ireland and Great Britain creates obvious tensions between our desire to scrutinise in-depth proposed legislation and the need to maintain the parity of timing inherent in such single systems.

The area of social security and pension legislation is highly regulated, and the Pensions Bill is the second Bill from that field that has been introduced by the Assembly: Members considered the Welfare Reform Bill back in May and June of this year. Furthermore, it is anticipated that there will be two more related Bills in this session. I acknowledge the undertaking that I made to the Committee: I will consult heavily and intensively with my departmental officials, the Committee and the Chairperson about how to progress the Pensions Bill. In addition, there was an announcement in the Queen's speech that another pensions Bill and a national insurance contributions Bill will be progressed. I propose to consult further with the Committee as to how we can best handle parity legislation in this field, particularly given the anticipated heavy programme of legislation.

I also thank Mr Brady for his comments on pensioner poverty. I cannot disagree with him, because it should be the ultimate aim of the Executive and the Assembly

to ensure that people, particularly pensioners — many of whom live in isolated rural communities and who already feel marginalised, undermined and alone — do not live in poverty. The Assembly must be there to help them, and that is why I took the opportunity to launch the benefit uptake campaign through which the advice service network will inform people of what benefits are available. The Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Social Security Agency wrote to pensioners, and other eligible people, earlier in the year to ensure that they were aware of the campaign. There is an onus of responsibility — in fact, an obligation — on Members, as public representatives, to ensure that the elderly members of society are made aware of all the benefits that are available to help remove them from poverty.

Over the next couple of days, I will have further meetings on this issue in London. I will meet a social security Minister to discuss child poverty, and I will also make further representations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on matters relating to pensions, because I am conscious of the issues involved.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Pensions Bill

Second Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):
I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] be agreed.

I feel as if I am regurgitating some of what I said a few minutes ago. Notwithstanding that, the Pensions Bill makes provisions that correspond with those of the Pensions Act 2007. During the debate on the Bill's proposed accelerated passage, I addressed the issue of parity with Britain and the arguments in favour of maintaining that long-standing policy — not least with regard to the financial realities. I trust that all Members accept that the policy of parity is beneficial and acknowledge that all pensioners and those who are on the threshold of receiving a pension next week, next year, or in 10 or 15 years' time — and many Members may fall into that category — have a right to obtain the benefits to which they are entitled.

1.00 pm

I also briefly described the content of the Bill and, with your agreement, Mr Speaker, I will provide some background to the reforms and address the Bill's proposals in greater detail.

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

In November 2005, the Independent Pensions Commission published its second report, the 'Turner Report', making recommendations on how the pensions system could be reformed to better meet future needs. Average pensioner outcomes today compare well with those of previous generations, and changes since 1997 have been targeted in particular at helping those on lower incomes. As I said earlier, I am sure that everybody in this House, including me, wants to be a champion and an advocate for pensioners and future generations of pensioners to ensure that they are able to avail of all the benefits to which they are entitled, including all the benefits that pensioners should be able to obtain.

The commission concluded that the demographic and social trends are creating future challenges for all of us. Life expectancy is increasing. This, along with lower birth rates, is resulting in older age groups becoming an increasingly large proportion of the population. Indeed, we are facing a situation where, for the first time, we will have more pensioners than children. Family structures are changing with single-person households now more common. The trend of women's growing participation in the labour market is continuing and as a result of the accumulation of 60 years of pension legislation, the current pension system is complex and difficult to understand. Problems with savings incentives could develop if, in the long term, a

pension system evolved in which a significant majority of pensioners had to rely on pension credit. Around seven million people across Northern Ireland and Britain are estimated to be under-saving for their retirement.

In May 2006, building on the analysis and recommendations made by the Independent Pensions Commission's proposals for pension reform and the rationale for change were published in the White Paper 'Security in retirement: towards a new pensions system'. The White Paper explained the challenges facing the pensions system and presented proposals for a long-term solution. The proposals aimed to promote personal responsibility for planning for retirement and to be fair, affordable and sustainable. The White Paper was the subject of widespread consultation both in Britain and here, and the proposals form the basis of the Pensions Bill that we are debating today.

The Pensions Bill contains a package of reformed state pensions, simplification measures and private pensions, and provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal accounts system to enable people to save for retirement. It is anticipated that the detail of the personal accounts scheme will be the subject of a later Bill.

Part 1 of the Bill proposes a number of changes to state pension provision. These are aimed at improving its coverage, generosity and sustainability by reducing the number of qualifying years for a full basic state pension; revising and modernising credits for caring that will apply to both the basic state pension and the state second pension; enabling a married person or civil partner to draw a pension based on the National Insurance record of a spouse or civil partner over pensionable age who has chosen not to retire; abolishing adult dependency increases; flat-rating and simplifying the state second pension; linking the up-rating of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings; and gradually raising the state pension age, including consequential changes for other social security benefits.

The state pension reforms recognise the different ways in which people contribute to society and will particularly benefit sections of society, such as women and carers, who, arguably, are disadvantaged by the current system. Under the proposals, they will have significantly better opportunities to accrue pension entitlement.

That will be achieved primarily by reducing to 30 the number of qualifying years required for a full basic state pension for men and women and by introducing contribution credits for parents and carers. Those measures will help to address the pension effects of differences in the labour market between men and women and the impact of caring responsibilities.

Only 40% of women in Northern Ireland are entitled to a full category A pension. Under the proposals, it is

anticipated that 75% of women who reach state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full pension, and that that figure will rise to over 90% by 2025. A fragmented career history, for example, due to caring responsibilities, will no longer necessarily have a negative impact on pension entitlement.

The Bill also provides for the basic state pension to be operated in line with earnings rather than prices. However, due to the significant cost implications, the precise date for that has not yet been fixed. The corresponding Act at Westminster provides for it to be implemented by no later than the end of the next Parliament. The measure will ensure that the basic state pension keeps its value relative to earnings and provides a solid underpinning to retirement income.

I have explained the provision in the Bill that ensures that the standard minimum guarantee element of pension credit is uprated annually in line with earnings, and that will take effect from the uprating in April 2008. During the debate on accelerated passage for the Bill, I told the House that I have asked my officials to investigate the number of applications for pension credit over the past three years and how many have not yet been processed to approval stage and why. I am particularly conscious that many pensioners are isolated and are living in poverty. The Assembly should do everything in its remit to ensure that that situation does not continue.

The new Bill provides for the reform and simplification of the state second pension. The earnings-related component will be phased out, and the complex accrual mechanisms will be replaced by a flat-rate sum of £1.50 a week, in 2007-08 terms, for each qualifying year spent working or caring. Over time, the earnings-related component will decrease, and by about 2030, it will have disappeared.

The Bill will enable a spouse or civil partner to draw a pension based on their partner's National Insurance record, even if the partner has chosen not to retire. Given the cost implications of the proposals, there are inevitable trade-offs, such as the increase in state pension age in each decade between 2020 and 2050 in response to the ageing demographic profile. Under the proposals, the state pension age will increase to 68 by 2046.

The changes to pension age merely reflect the anticipated changes in the average life expectancy. Indeed, the ratio of people of working age to those of pensionable age in the population will continue to decline, although not as sharply as it would if the state pension age were to remain unchanged. The increases in state pension age will be matched by a corresponding extension in the availability of working-age benefits to those who are below the new pension age.

The abolition of adult dependency increases in category A and category C retirement pensions will simplify state pension rules. The existing provisions

governing adult dependency increases are complex and are based on the increasingly outdated post-war concept of a single-breadwinner household. Transitional protection will be provided to 2020 for the small number of people in Northern Ireland who will be affected.

Part 2 of the Bill contains measures aimed at simplifying the provision of private pensions, of which there is a long history in Northern Ireland. Over time, layers of regulation have produced an extremely complicated system that makes it difficult for schemes to operate and for members of the scheme to understand. The proposals aim to provide a degree of clarity that does not currently exist and to encourage saving for retirement.

The structure of defined benefit contracted-out schemes will be simplified by permitting the conversion of guaranteed minimum pensions that relate to certain pension rights earned between 1978 and 1997 into ordinary scheme benefits of at least equal actuarial value. Contracting out in defined contributions schemes will be abolished. The amount of pension payable by a defined contribution scheme depends on a number of variables, including the age at which a person joins; the amount he or she pays in contributions; and, crucially, the performance of the scheme's investment portfolio. Given these variables, it is difficult even for experts to judge whether a person would be better off contracted out in such a scheme or remaining in the state second pension. Permitting the conversion of guaranteed minimum pensions removes the need to make that difficult decision.

Occupational pension schemes will be able to operate similar internal dispute resolution procedures, and the Department will no longer be required to approve actuarial guidance notes relating to pension schemes. Part 3 of the Bill provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal accounts system to enable people to save for retirement. Part 4 of the Bill provides for a report on the operation of the subsequent Act before the end of 2014, and that report will be laid before the Assembly.

The Bill represents a step in legislating for the long-term reform of our pension system. It will improve the coverage and generosity of the state pension system and ensure its sustainability, simply by private pension provision, and lay the foundation of the introduction of a new system of personal accounts, as recommended by the Independent Pensions Commission. The reforms will remove existing inequalities in state pensions and help to mitigate the consequences of labour market differences, which adversely affect women's pension entitlement. They will also reduce the income gap in retirement between men and women.

The Bill aims to ensure that the state pension system remains affordable in both the short and long term. As

envisaged by the Independent Pensions Commission, the proposals form an integrated package. None of the elements alone could successfully tackle the future pensions challenges.

With this Bill, we are aiming to build a simpler and enduring pensions system for generations to come. I hope that many, including those who are women and carers, will be able to benefit from the new Pensions Bill. I hope that all people and all Members in the House will be able to agree with the provisions contained therein. I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the very technical nature of the provisions contained in the legislation, but it is my duty and responsibility to explain the content of the Bill and its consequences.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): It is on occasions such as this that eyes glaze over and brains begin to numb, and that is before we get to equal actuarial values. In all seriousness, as the Minister has outlined, there are three key components to the Bill. Improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension; enacting simplification measures in private pensions; and establishing a personal accounts delivery authority.

The Minister and her officials have briefed the Committee in great depth on the principles and details of the Bill, and the Committee is grateful for that. The Bill is part of the preparations to meet the challenges of increasing longevity and changing demographics. In 2050, there will only be two people of working age for every one person in retirement — today, the ratio is 4 to 1. Therefore, it is clear that pension reform is vital to meet those challenges, and the Bill is only part of the ongoing process of pensions reform.

I have no intention of speaking about every provision in the Bill. Members will be glad to hear that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Campbell: There is no need to be so enthusiastic. However, there are a number of provisions that I want to touch on.

The Bill is of particular significance and benefit to women and carers. Many women and carers are denied a full pension because their family and caring responsibilities mean that they are not in work long enough to qualify.

However, the Bill will enable people who care for children, or people with a severe disability, to build up a state pension entitlement through weekly carer credits. The Committee believes that that will provide women and carers with a fair deal, making it easier for them to balance their responsibilities. It will also recognise their important contribution to society as a whole and help to redress the gender gap that exists in pensions generally, which is just as important.

1.15 pm

The changes would mean that around three quarters of women who retire in 2010 would be entitled to a full basic state pension — the current level is about half of that figure. By 2025, more than 90% of people who retire would be entitled to a full basic state pension. The Bill will also raise the state pension age. The first increase, from 65 to 66, will take place between 2024 and 2026. The second increase, from 66 to 67, will occur between 2034 and 2036. The third increase, from 67 to 68, will take place between 2044 and 2046. That may not be welcome news for some, but those changes are necessary to reflect increasing longevity and, hopefully, will go some way to stave off a pensions crisis in the future and secure the long-term financial stability of the pensions system.

Research has shown that poor people do not live as long as wealthy people. Therefore, any increase in the state pension age — to allow for a more generous state pension — may not benefit poorer people in our society. The Department for Social Development takes the lead on many strategies and policies that target the disadvantaged and aim to reduce the level of poverty, and the Committee will pay particular attention to those when it is scrutinising the Department's work.

The Bill also provides for re-linking the basic state pension with earnings. It is hoped that that will go some way towards ensuring that living standards for older people keep pace with those of the rest of society and that older people do not get poorer the longer they live. The proposed abolition of contracting out defined-contribution schemes is intended to remove complexity from pension-saving decisions; due to the complex nature of pensions, it is often difficult for someone to judge whether they would be better off contracted-out or contracted-in to the state second pension. The Bill also intends to simplify private pensions: streamlining the regulation of private pensions should make it easier for people to plan and save for retirement.

I highlight the Committee's desire to see the people of Northern Ireland benefit from changes at the same time as they are being introduced in the rest of the UK. However, as I mentioned during the debate on accelerated passage, Committee members expressed serious reservations about the principle of advancing legislation without full Committee scrutiny. The Minister has agreed that she will consult intensely in her Department on how future parity legislation is dealt with. The Committee looks forward to hearing from the Minister about the outcome of her consultation.

Mr A Maginness: I suppose that we are the victims of our own success; the reforms initiated by the Labour Government after the Second World War created a welfare state, which provided universal health care, support for the vulnerable in society, and helped to

increase living standards and life expectancy for ordinary people on the street. None of the pioneers of the welfare state anticipated that, as a result of their good work and the creation of better conditions for the ordinary in our society, people would be living a lot longer. Neither would they have anticipated the change in the ratio between those in work and older people in our society — I do not like using the term old age pensioner, particularly when the First Minister is in the Chamber as he might take exception to that. *[Laughter.]*

I do not want to be ageist, but I am sure that Members take the point that there is an imbalance between those people who are working and those who are older and will retire soon. Therefore, it is necessary that there be a thorough pension reform. It remains to be seen whether the Bill is such a reform, but, at first glance, it seems to be substantial and moves towards a simpler, more effective and, as the Minister has said, more generous pension for people in retirement.

Importantly, the Bill also promotes personal responsibility towards pensions. When one is younger, one does not think about pensions. One of the obstacles, particularly for people who are self-employed, is the complexity of private pension schemes. As a self-employed person, I have experience of that. The Bill attempts to simplify those schemes, which are baffling to those who attempt to operate them and those who are their potential beneficiaries. People simply do not understand the schemes because they are so complex. Any reform that simplifies those schemes and makes them more comprehensible to the ordinary person is to be welcomed. In that regard, the Bill is to be welcomed.

The reform of the state pension, which the Bill aims to do, is also to be welcomed. The Bill aims to improve the coverage and sustainability of the state pension. If there are not reforms to the state pension, the system will be under incredible strain, and that might impact adversely on many people. The reduction in the number of qualifying years for a full pension to 30 is to be welcomed. That is important for people whose careers have been disrupted for all sorts of reasons, but in particular for people who are caring, or have cared for, ill or elderly relatives and who, as a result, have been unable to obtain the necessary credits for a full pension at a reasonable age.

The linking of the uprating of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings is important. The linkage was established previously with prices. That is also a step forward. I ask the House to welcome it as a progressive step towards being fairer and more equitable to the ordinary pensioner. The uprating of the state pension in line with earnings is a significant and important step because it will maintain the value of the pension relative to earnings and will be a much more secure basis for people who are entering retirement.

The Pensions Bill is timely, and it will be of general benefit to many people in society who were disadvantaged by the previous pension system. It strengthens the state pension, increases its value for many people, and is a progressive and welcome step forward for all those, including myself, who are approaching pension age.

Ms Lo: I very much welcome the Bill and the simplification of the pension arrangements.

I hold several pensions from different employers, and contracting in and out is absolutely mind-boggling. I also welcome the fact that women and carers will benefit from the shortening of the qualifying period to 30 years — it is unfair for women caring for children and elderly parents or relatives to be penalised. It is a welcome step, and it is a recognition of women who stay at home to look after young people, which saves public services money. Women looking after children and sick, and perhaps disabled, relatives are actually providing a public service.

I was puzzled when the Minister said that 40% of women are entitled to a full pension in 2007, and that that figure will be increased to 75% in 2010, but then went on to say that it will take another 15 years — to 2025 — to increase it to 90%. I do not understand why it will take so long to achieve that increase. Overall, I welcome the Bill.

Mr Hilditch: I have a few comments to make; before the glazed stares spread along the Benches.

I thank the Minister for bringing this important reform to the House for debate today, and I would like the Pensions Bill to proceed under the accelerated passage as previously agreed.

Members should be fully aware, as part of the ongoing process of pension reform, that Part 2 of the Bill makes provision in relation to non-state pensions. It will allow the right to a definite minimum pension accrued under a defined benefit pension scheme to be changed into ordinary-scheme benefits and provide for the abolition of contracting out for defined contribution pension schemes. The Bill also makes corrections on dispute resolution arrangements and the Department's role in approving pension help and advice.

A number of elements of the Bill have been highlighted, and I welcome those. They will raise the amount of pensions; ensure that those who are entitled to a pension receive it, and they will install faith in the state pension in Northern Ireland. The Bill will improve the allowance for females and carers by decreasing the requirement years for a basic state pension. It will refresh and update credits for caring that will apply to the basic state pension and the state second pension. It will enable a married person to have a pension based on the National Insurance record of a spouse who is over pensionable age and who has decided that they wish to work on.

The Bill will abolish adult dependency increases, flat rate and simplify the state second pension, and will combine the upgrading of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings.

The regulatory impact assessment was printed earlier this month. The proposal works towards meeting the five main reasons for pension reform.

It will encourage constituents to get involved in plans for their retirement; it will be fair to those in vulnerable sectors, through the establishment of a new contributory principle; it will make the pension system easier to understand and will ensure that a constituent's decision to save can be made as easily as possible; it will be affordable, through examination of the financial needs of future pensioners, alongside the financial capabilities of the taxpayer, and ensuring that those needs are met economically; and it will be sustained, as many of our constituents gain trust and faith in the pension system in Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

The Pensions Bill will benefit our constituents. More people will receive a full basic pension; there will be a more generous state pension, with earnings uprating of the state pension; the poorest pensioners will benefit from a higher income, with earnings uprating from the pension-credit standard minimum guarantee; and there will be a simpler system of state second pension and private-pension measures, which will make it easier for people to understand the pensions that they are now accruing.

There will be an impact on employers, who will have to pay full-rate National Insurance contributions. However, a rebate will be paid through the scheme and, therefore, the extra National Insurance costs could be reflected by smaller employer contributions in the long run.

However, if we choose not to reform the pensions system, the inequalities between men and women will continue. If the minimum guarantee is uprated with increasing prices, some pensioners will fall into low income and poverty. To sustain an affordable state pension while the number of people aged 65 increases, the value of state support for pensioners will fall to incomes, and our constituents will never have a clear understanding of their retirement income.

There is no guarantee that life expectancy will not change and, therefore, it is important that we allow people time to plan for retirement. Under the reforms, the amount that is provided through the basic state pension remains constant by means of the second state pension becoming increasingly flat, with each year of work or caring earning an extra £1.40 a week, in 2006-07 terms, during retirement. The result is that individuals will move increasingly towards an underpinned weekly

state pension of around £135 for working or caring from 25 years of age to state pension age.

I welcome the reform of pensions that will result from the Pensions Bill. I see no reason why we should not all support the motion.

Ms Ritchie: I have listened carefully to all of the points that Members have made, and I trust that I will be able to address their concerns. Several matters were raised during the four contributions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Campbell, raised the issue of lower life expectancy for those on low incomes. Life expectancy is increasing across the board. However, Mr Campbell raised the important issue of the need to ensure better health for everyone in society, particularly lower-income groups. Anyone who is unable to work to the new pension age will have the safeguard of the existing range of working-age benefits, and I assure Members that that is the case. Each of us has to ensure that that happens, and that those people who find themselves outside that category due to ill health before pension age should receive their full entitlement. That is our duty and responsibility.

My colleague Mr Maginness referred to the complexity of the pensions system. I am sure that we all welcome any measures that make the system easier to understand. Many Members may wonder how the system is easier to understand — particularly after listening to the various explanations of the technical details. I know that there is irony in needing such a complex Bill to simplify the pensions system. However, I hope that all Members agree that the Bill will be successful in simplifying the system.

Anna Lo referred to two matters; first, the extremely complex issue of the anticipated rise in the number of women who would be entitled to a full state pension in 2010 and 2025. I wrote to the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development on that matter.

The proportion of women who are entitled to a full basic state pension has been rising steadily. That is largely due to women's improved work records and to the positive effect of home responsibilities protection, which was introduced in 1978. However, lower state pension entitlement is particularly acute for women who are over the age of 45 today. They did not fully benefit from home responsibilities protection and have significantly poorer contribution records than men of the same age — despite the fact that most of them have made valuable contributions to society. The Bill will allow credits to be awarded for previous years in which home responsibilities protection was awarded. That applies only for complete years, up to a maximum of 22 years.

The general issue of women was also raised. I agree with Ms Lo about the important role that women play

in society, and I am pleased that this Bill will help to protect women and carers, because in many instances — although not all — women are the carers.

Ms Lo also asked about the percentage increase in the number of women who are entitled to a full state pension, and I have dealt with that.

Mr Hilditch raised various issues, and I thank him for his considered response and for his support.

In this short debate, Members have had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of this complex legislation, which I hope will improve the coverage and generosity of the state pension system. It will also ensure the system's sustainability and remove existing inequalities, thereby reducing the retirement-income gap between men and women. Private pension provision will be simplified and the foundation of a new personal accounts system will be put in place.

I hope that I have addressed all the points that Members raised. I will carefully read Hansard to ascertain whether I have properly dealt with those points, and, if I have failed to do so adequately, I will write to the relevant Member.

This Bill will significantly improve the lives of women and carers, and I hope that I, as the Minister for Social Development, and other Members will continue in our role as champions and advocates for pensioners, whether under current legislation or this new Bill. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill (NIA 7/07) be agreed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Programme for Government and Draft Investment Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to six hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 20 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The Minister will have 45 minutes to respond, and all other Members will have 10 minutes.

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

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

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

As we embark on this potential marathon, I anticipate Members' co-operation.

I am pleased that the Assembly has been provided with an opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI).

At the outset, I wish to make it clear that I am speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and that my comments are based on the Committee's discussions on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. While I hold personal views on many issues that will be debated today, there will be other opportunities for me to make those views known to the House.

I trust that all Members recognise the significance of this debate, because we have an opportunity to influence the priorities that will direct the £25 billion that will be spent by the Executive over the next three years. In addition, the priorities and programmes under discussion today will direct approximately £18 billion of capital investment over the next 10 years. Therefore, it is incumbent on all Members, irrespective of party differences, to ensure that the Programme for Government and investment strategy are fit for purpose and will deliver tangible improvements to the quality of life of the people whom we represent.

At the request of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, my Committee is liaising with the other Statutory Committees to produce a co-ordinated response to the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. We will take our new role very seriously — it will involve publishing the views

and recommendations of all the Statutory Committees in a single report.

The report will identify the main strategic themes that emerge from the Committees' responses, and, in that context, members will listen carefully to the views expressed by MLAs today on the strengths and weaknesses of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy.

Before commenting on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy in greater detail, I will mention the process of their development. My comments are not intended as excessive criticism of the Executive — I recognise that many opportunities for engagement in consultation, which would normally be available to Committees, were lost as a result of the early delays in devolution. In addition, the late announcement of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review did not facilitate the early publication of the draft Programme for Government or draft investment strategy.

However, it is important that Members recognise the limitations of the process to date and the impact of the delayed publication of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. There have been reduced opportunities for Committees to scrutinise departmental proposals and for Members to scrutinise the overall plans of the Executive. Therefore, it is more important than ever that the Executive should pay careful attention to the views expressed during today's debate and to the conclusions and recommendations of Statutory Committees that will be detailed in my Committee's forthcoming report. It is also crucial that the Executive take proper account of the comments that will be made during the public consultation process, and I am sure that all Committees will be seeking evidence to prove that that has been the case.

The Assembly should make certain that the final Programme for Government and investment strategy are as robust as possible. However, no plan is perfect, and we must be mindful of the need for early action to ensure that new processes for engagement in consultation are put in place for next year, so that any limitations in the Programme for Government that might emerge will be addressed quickly and effectively.

For that reason, my Committee has specifically asked for views from other Statutory Committees on how to improve the accessibility, quality and relevance of the information provided in relation to the Programme for Government and the investment strategy.

My Committee has identified some areas of potential concern and has recommended remedial action. For example, my Committee will have concluded its scrutiny of the draft Programme for Government before high-level findings on equality impacts will be available to its members.

Again, more detailed information regarding the geographical spread of new capital investments will not be available until the final version of the investment strategy is produced.

1.45 pm

My Committee is also establishing the views of other Committees regarding how the overall process to develop the Programme for Government and the investment strategy can be improved in future years. It is imperative to ensure that any new process takes careful account of the need for the systems that are used to develop priorities and to allocate resources to be closely connected. Therefore, I will be writing to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to seek an early meeting at which we can discuss how we, in consultation with the Executive, can take forward proposals on a timetable for the Programme for Government, the Budget and ISNI.

As I said earlier, I hope that this debate will be constructive. It offers an opportunity to highlight to the Executive the aspects of the draft Programme for Government that Members commend — and which should therefore be retained in the final strategy — and to identify areas for improvement that need to be addressed before the Programme for Government is finalised.

I am aware that the views of Members vary about the extent to which the actual strategic priorities identified in the draft Programme for Government are the most appropriate priorities. However, in general, my Committee welcomes the Executive's effort to develop a Programme for Government that focuses on delivering cross-cutting priorities and endeavours to avoid the traditional silo mentality of many Departments.

Efforts to ensure that public service agreement (PSA) targets are aligned with the strategic priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government are also to be welcomed. My Committee has sought and received assurances from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that its Budget allocations were determined based on an assessment of the resources required to deliver its public service agreements. That, of course, is as it should be.

Over the next few weeks, my Committee will be carefully scrutinising the extent to which the Programme for Government commitments made by OFMDFM are matched by the resources that the Department is receiving. As a prudent Committee, we will also be checking that large amounts of resources are not used to support low-priority programmes.

A specific concern that has come to the attention of my Committee is the relationship between the goals and commitments in the draft Programme for Government and the targets and actions in the public service agreements and the investment strategy. Not all of the

goals and commitments for the next three years that are mentioned in the draft Programme for Government seem to have found their way into the public service agreements or the investment strategy. We have asked OFMDFM for an explanation of the status of such goals and commitments, and we encourage other Committees to explore that issue with their Departments.

Another area of interest for my Committee — as I mentioned earlier, we have had a relatively limited time to hold a discussion on the Programme for Government and ISNI — relates to the delivery of the Programme for Government. To be fair, it is unreasonable to expect the draft Programme for Government to include all the details of how the Executive intend to meet their priorities. Were that to be the case, I suspect that this debate would need to be extended even beyond its allocated time. I am not sure that my fellow MLAs would welcome that.

The public service agreements do include some of the detail that the Assembly requires in order to satisfy itself that the priorities in the draft Programme for Government are deliverable and will be delivered. However, my Committee is of the view that we need to hear more about the arrangements for monitoring and reporting progress against PSA objectives and targets. That is particularly the case regarding the cross-cutting objectives of a better future and sustainable development. Therefore, my Committee will be taking an interest in the early development of a robust performance management framework for the Programme for Government and ISNI, and we have already asked OFMDFM to explain its proposals to us in more detail at the earliest opportunity.

My Committee will also consider the action that needs to be taken in advance of the draft Programme for Government being finalised in order to ensure that the targets in that document and in the PSAs are sufficiently specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bounded (SMART). We have sought the opinions of other Committees on the robustness of those targets and we expect to include specific recommendations about that in our report.

I welcome the inclusion of longer-term goals in the draft Programme for Government. However, if we are to ensure that those are more than aspirations, it will be important to ensure that all long-term targets in the Programme for Government are supported by SMART targets that can be delivered within the three years covered by the programme.

All parties represented in the Assembly were critical of many of the policies developed under direct rule. We now have the opportunity to change those policies. I recognise that we cannot change everything overnight, and I am sure that I speak for all the members of my Committee when I say that we will be supportive of

the Executive in establishing a clear set of priorities on which all Departments and agencies may be expected to focus. As an Assembly, we must ensure that, when the overall objectives and targets are changed, existing policies are also changed and improved. A quotation attributed to Albert Einstein defines as insanity:

“doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

We must also ensure when setting new objectives and targets that we carefully consider the actions and resources that will be required to have them delivered. In that regard, I encourage the Executive to be clear with the public about the timescales required to deliver some of the most challenging problems that we face.

My Committee has a particular interest in the targets in the Programme for Government and the related PSA targets relating to child poverty. Members will know that my Committee has commenced its first inquiry into that subject. We, therefore, wholeheartedly support the Executive’s commitment to work towards eliminating child poverty by 2020 and halving it by 2010.

However, we wish to see more evidence of how that challenging target is to be delivered. The Committee on the Programme for Government assessed the existing anti-poverty strategy earlier this year; and, while welcoming its overall direction, the Committee was far from convinced that the associated actions were capable of delivering the objectives. My Committee will also be seeking evidence from OFMDFM that specific outputs and outcomes will be delivered as a result of the higher priority afforded to those issues. In tomorrow’s debate on the draft Budget, we will be highlighting concerns about the impact of the time lag before resources become available for some specific priorities.

I am conscious that my time is running out, but I must say that the main interest of my Committee is to ensure that the strategies developed will help to produce an improved environment; more and better-paid jobs; affordable housing; high-quality health and education facilities; reliable and sustainable transport infrastructure; and more efficient government. I therefore look forward to hearing today from Members and the First Minister about proposals for ensuring the timely and cost-effective delivery of key infrastructure projects, on time and within budget.

One specific step that could be taken is inclusion in the investment strategy of a timetable for Departments to complete production of their investment delivery plans. My Committee will take an interest in the extent to which investment delivery plans make clear how investment will contribute to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

I encourage Members to contribute to what should be a strategic and robust debate on the contribution

that the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy can make towards delivering a better Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; but expresses its concern at the limited vision, scope and proposals contained in the documents.”

I am aware that this debate is on a take-note motion, and I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of which I am a member, for proposing it. Owing to his Committee role, Mr Kennedy’s comments are necessarily more fettered than mine may be. I realise that he may have searched for the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon in order to pull together a speech that fully represented the Committee’s views.

Today’s debate comes during the consultation period on the Programme for Government, so Members have an opportunity to give initial feedback. The draft Programme for Government was announced in this Chamber with much fanfare and trumpet blowing. In fact, that speech was longer by about eight pages than the document that it was announcing. The Executive told Members that it was no mean achievement to produce such a programme, and agree on its contents, five months into the new Administration. Although we recognise that devolution happened on 8 May, only five months before the publication of the Programme for Government, the current Executive parties were funded by the NIO, at taxpayers’ expense, immediately following the St Andrews Agreement last November; special advisors were presented to them, and full details of the direct rule Ministers’ plans were available so that the development of a Programme for Government could proceed.

That is the context in which we should regard this document, not simply as a short-term, cobbled-together piece of work, but rather as the product of a year’s work, which should see us through the next three years, with only a light-touch return to it over the next two years.

As the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee has already said, the opportunities for scrutiny and input were extensively foreshortened. We understand the reasons for that, given the timelines that were available, but some of that discussion could have been held in Committees, had we received a draft at an earlier stage to allow us to have some input.

I shall focus my comments specifically on the Programme for Government for the next three years. Other Alliance Members will examine issues connected with the ISNI.

On the day of the publication of the Programme for Government, I half-jokingly asked whether some of the document had been left at the printers. My primary concern is not about quantity, but quality. The document

sets out general policy areas, but there is no serious attempt to prioritise them in the accompanying public service agreements. Concrete actions are few and far between; for example, the Executive will implement measures, conduct reviews and take steps, but those measures, reviews and steps are not detailed.

The targets that should tell us in three years whether the measures have been implemented, reviews conducted and steps taken, and whether the desired outcomes have already been achieved, appear to be much the same as those that were being developed under direct rule. There are only a few areas in the PSA framework, notably health and education, where there is a read-across between what the Executive want to achieve, what they want to do, and the outcomes that the Executive are going to measure.

Last week, David Ford and others highlighted the lack of imagination and direction on legislation, and a number of areas on which action was needed. Private Members' Bills have secured significant and, in some cases, unanimous support, such as the creation of an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, and the introduction of free personal care for the elderly.

The same commentary could be applied to the Programme for Government. As David correctly highlighted, the little legislation that has been generated or is anticipated in the forthcoming year is mainly parity legislation, tidying-up exercises, or legislation that was already substantially progressed under direct rule — rather than new, home-grown solutions to local problems. That could also be applied to the Programme for Government, the most apparent failures of which are in connection with one of our most pressing, most pervasive local problems — that of sectarianism. Others from the Alliance Party will focus on other areas during the course of the debate, but I will concentrate my attention on that specific area.

Let me be clear: my primary concern is not about the endorsement of a certain policy, with a certain name or actions; my concern is about the lack of any policy under any name, or any attached action, to address the fault line that runs through the heart of our community and, indeed, through this Chamber. The Alliance Party recognises that the Executive's seal of approval on any such document was important when the issue of a shared future was debated in the House on 4 June 2007. However, since then, precious little effort or progress appears to have been made in developing an alternative and equally comprehensive strategy.

2.00 pm

A written reply that I received from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, specifically on that matter, suggests that there may be something "early in the new year". I can already feel another question

coming on — asking them to specify which new year. The level of priority and urgency that is attached to the shared future agenda does not fill me with hope for January 2008.

If people cannot live with the language of 'A Shared Future' — owing to its having the seal of approval of a direct rule Administration — by all means, change the name. It would be a huge mistake to simply throw the baby out with the bathwater. That document was developed, with extensive consultation, to address issues that are specific to the needs of a society that is moving out of conflict and towards a more prosperous future. That policy is built on international experience, as well as local expertise.

Only this morning, the One Small Step campaign launched a new drive to produce 100 small steps that individuals can take, or have taken, to create a shared future and advance that aim in our society. The campaign's focus is on individual actions that can be taken in our community. However, if the work that is being done by those individuals and groups in the community is to be effective, it must be acknowledged, underpinned, supported and promoted by an overall framework that secures the progress that has been made and clears the way for further progress.

The impact of division in our society is wide-ranging; there is hardly an aspect of governance that is unaffected by it. This is not the fluffy stuff that was previously dismissed, with some disdain, by John O'Dowd in earlier debates — rather, it is a realisation that the tough problems cannot be resolved in the absence of some sense of shared purpose, and some overarching framework for enhancing sharing, rather than shoring up segregation.

Does anyone truly believe that we will solve the housing crisis without strategic tools in place for tackling division and the restrictions that that places on people's mobility? Can we tackle economic inactivity without also tackling the physical and psychological barriers that prevent people from moving freely from where they live to where employment exists?

Can we resolve the issue of declining school rolls without considering increasing the number of shared facilities? Can we deal with issues of culture and language if we fail to address the reality of a cultural and language war that is being waged? Is the basis for progress on that not the delivery of a shared future, which embraces diversity?

The cost of not tackling this issue was highlighted, quite rightly, by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in his speech on the draft Budget. Although that reference was welcome, it was disappointing that it was not followed through by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government.

The Finance Minister claimed that there were limited opportunities for major savings during the three-year financial cycle. However, in the absence of any strategy to tackle division over the next three years, it is hard to see how we will be closer to unlocking that money for better use in the future. There is not a single reference to a shared future, or good relations, in the Programme for Government or in a single public service agreement, out of the 23 that are designed to promote them.

I wrote to OFMDFM, asking that those references be highlighted for me, in case I had missed something. In the letter that I received in reply, that had not been done. In line with the Executive's stated aims of building a stronger economy and a fairer, more just and equal society, those objectives will be best followed if we can also tackle the issues of a shared future. Stability aids inward investment, supports tourism, creates a more mobile and flexible workforce, tackles social exclusion, and helps to underpin the political structures, which is to everyone's benefit. Instead, mention is made only of the rights and equality agenda, in the complete absence of any strategy for improving community relations.

It goes without saying that equality and human rights must underpin the building of a shared future. The Alliance Party has championed both of those critical tools and it will continue to do so. However, they cannot alone heal the divisions in the areas that have most readily spilled over into communal tension and violence, or where competing rights have failed to be resolved in the context of any wider sense of shared community.

Even before we had spoken, those of us who are critical were told that we were naysayers. However, the First Minister, in his speech last week, welcomed the fact that the Programme for Government would be examined and said that proposals could be improved, and that we could add new proposals. I simply ask that, following my party leader's written request, we embark on that engagement. We want this to work, and we are happy to help.

Mrs I Robinson: The Member for East Belfast made some derogatory comments on the work of the Programme for Government, describing it as being "cobbled together". Do voters not choose those whom they wish to speak on their behalf in this devolved Administration? As I look around the Chamber, I note that the electorate has spoken. The Member's party also proposes social engineering and the creation of a third-level tier of education that discriminates against the controlled sector by taking moneys that could be used to improve the lot of the children who are in that sector.

Mrs Long: It is called parental choice.

Mrs I Robinson: No; it is called force. I shall ignore those remarks that have been made from a sedentary position. *[Interruption.]*

I shall make my remarks today in my capacity as the DUP's health spokesperson, but I shall also touch on a few issues that affect the Strangford constituency. A draft Programme for Government that has been produced by locally elected politicians represents a significant step forward for Northern Ireland. It is also encouraging that this blueprint was unanimously endorsed by every Minister around the Executive table.

Members of the Alliance Party have argued that the conciseness of the document is worthy of criticism. I take the opposite view; it is a clear and concise document that is intentionally written in more accessible language.

The document is political rather than technical; it sets out the Executive's strategic plan rather than, as previously, simply throwing together everything that each Minister wanted to include. The draft Programme for Government is tightly focused, with clear objectives and targets. All goals have specific measurable targets.

Unfortunately, some of the content of our predecessors' Programme for Government was woolly and unfocused, with few action points. Previously, commitments were broad in nature and frequently offered only to review or develop strategies, policies or recommendations. There are now radical new proposals, and all Ministers must prove that they are up to the challenges in their Departments.

I welcome the fact that there is a strong focus on the economy. The previous Executive's Programme for Government had no hierarchy of priorities. Although my overriding concern will still be health issues, it is through building and sustaining an improved economy that health and all other sectors can best be served in the longer term.

I welcome the stronger emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, but I believe that much more can be done in this area. I support increased screening programmes, including, in particular, the introduction of a bowel-screening programme and follow-up treatments; it is intended that those measures should reduce death from bowel cancer by 10%. Similarly, an immunisation programme for the human papilloma virus should see cervical cancer decrease by 70%.

The Appleby Report found that our public-health behaviour in Northern Ireland is much worse than in GB. To that end, I welcome the intention to see, by 2010, binge drinking reduced by at least 5%, drunkenness fall by 10%, 5% fewer young adults taking illegal drugs, and a 30% reduction in the number of young girls under 17 years of age who give birth.

Efforts to reduce obesity, and the number of adults who smoke, are also sensible. I support enhanced co-ordination across different Departments to improve well-being. The public health of the people of Northern Ireland is not a matter only for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Therefore, I welcome additional funding to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to encourage leisure and exercise. That is an example of the Executive's providing better joined-up government. I shall illustrate that point further: the draft Programme for Government has 23 public service agreements that cut across Departments; the previous Executive's document had only 11 — one for each Department.

Everyone will welcome efforts to reduce healthcare-acquired infections. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been conducting some work on that issue.

The Committee has also been taking evidence on the issues of mental health and suicide. It is important to slash the waiting times for access to talking therapies, although that will require sustained effort and investment over a prolonged period. It is also a positive step that more people with mental-health problems can be treated in their own homes and in the community.

There is a determination to continue the good work achieved under direct rule in reducing waiting times for assessment, investigations and treatment. In particular, I applaud the proposed reduction in waits for cancer treatment.

There are commitments to improve productivity, through indicators such as bed throughput, staff absenteeism, and the ration of day cases to inpatient admissions. A strong, local, commissioning role will, however, be required in order to see improvement.

It is difficult to see how these measures can be sufficiently improved without introducing some degree of contestability into the process. Where are the real incentives and actions to sharpen performance? If a service provider is guaranteed the delivery of services to a given population, what encouragement is there to optimise performance? Similarly, for example, if a builder is guaranteed a number of houses to build — regardless of how quickly that is completed or what problems subsequently emerge — his maximum output is unlikely.

Some of the current output comparisons with other parts of the United Kingdom are poor. However, our front-line health-care staff, generally, work flat out. Clearly, the problem is in how the system operates, and that must be fixed. Efficiency savings are one thing, on a par with all other Departments, but the real challenge is in refocusing the entire Health Service to ensure much greater productivity. In that regard, the loss of David Sissling, Chief Executive Designate of the new,

strategic Health and Social Services Authority, is a real hammer-blow to the province's urgent requirement for Health Service modernisation and innovation.

Disturbingly, now, clicking on the icon for modernisation of the health and social services in Northern Ireland on the DHSSPS website leads only to a single, temporary, holding page with no information. That is not an encouraging sign, particularly given the wealth of progressive proposals that were previously accessed there.

Those fighting for funds for education, transport, and so many other worthy causes, question — quite rightly — whether huge proportions of funding for health, in the region of half of the block grant, will keep on rising at such a fast rate. Will 48% become 58%, then 68%? Where does it all end?

That is why significant reform, placing the emphasis on quality outcomes and cost-effectiveness, is so important. In an environment where there are so many worthy, competing, needs, those of us tasked with improving future health provision for Northern Ireland must prove that we are determined to squeeze every last penny's worth from the sizeable sums invested in health.

If I may, for a few minutes, I shall flag up some issues in my own constituency, which has a historic association with Northern Ireland's traditional industries of agriculture, fishing, textiles and shipbuilding, as well as with the aerospace industry. Over the years, the people of my constituency have suffered as a result of the demise of Harland & Wolff, the downturn in fortunes at Bombardier Shorts, and the closure of TKECC, the constituency's largest private employer. That has had a deeply negative effect on the wider community. There is equal concern about the provision of industrial land throughout the area.

I could speak on many other issues; unfortunately, my time is running out. However, I thank the Minister for Social Development for coming to Ballybeen last week and for looking at the Renewing Communities action plan, which was completed last year. It was based on the report of a task force, which examined claims in the Protestant unionist community that, since 1998, they had lost out to nationalists in improvement programmes. Studies show that, of the 15 Northern Ireland electoral wards with the worst educational attainment, 13 are predominantly Protestant. In Strangford, areas such as Ballybeen, West Winds and Bowtown are often overlooked, because they are surrounded by areas that are perceived to be affluent. I welcome the Minister's commitment in visiting Ballybeen last week, to see for herself the difficulties faced by local communities. She is examining strategies to help with funding.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I welcomed the opportunity to speak.

2.15 pm

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion.

I note the Programme for Government and am pleased with its contents. I congratulate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on their commitment, taking as their priority the use of prosperity to tackle disadvantage so as to build an inclusive and stable society based on equality. The challenge for all of us today is to develop new and innovative measures to address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

The old days have long gone, thanks to, among others, Nobel Prize winner and former vice president and chief economist of the World Bank Joseph Stiglitz, who has dispelled — once and for all, we hope — the nonsense that a rising tide lifts all boats. In fact, it only lifts the boats of those who have boats. As he says, it is “a riptide” that destroys the smallest boats.

What is extraordinary and far-sighted about the Executive’s Programme for Government is that it more than acknowledges in its priority objectives, alongside economic growth and competitiveness, the building of a society based on partnership, equality, inclusion, regional balance and mutual respect, and the urgent need to address environmental sustainability in the world of global warming and man-made climate change that is encroaching on us. We are facing a world that is going to undergo huge changes. This Programme for Government, along with ISNI 2 and future investment strategies, must be able to cope with these changes, which threaten economic life as we know it.

If we are serious about the pillars of economic growth in ISNI 2, we must treat each in a holistic way. The essence of our investment strategy is that the pillars are interdependent and inextricably linked. Building skills, a good quality Health Service, meeting our social and environmental objectives, and striving towards regional balance and equality — they cannot be severed from each other, nor must they be in practice. That means that we should see a strong ISNI 2 after consultation.

For instance, the people of Derry want to be assured, following the consultation, that the commitment made in ISNI 1 that future investment strategies would tackle regional imbalance is addressed the next time that we in this Chamber discuss the outworkings of the consultation. Let us all be clear: striving towards regional balance is not tackling regional imbalance.

In addition, Derry people are appalled at performance reports from Invest NI, which show that assistance for investment has mainly been skewed to where invest-

ment is already located. In fact, Invest NI appears to have an active policy of disinvestment west of the Bann. I am sure that all Members from that region will support the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee’s investigation of the activities of Invest NI and its continued failure to deliver on its statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity. Thankfully, the First Minister is aware of the need for ISNI 2 to tackle regional disparities. We hope that his political commitment, given in this Chamber, is heard by those carrying out the consultation on ISNI 2.

If we are to lift all boats, we must also lift the boats of the disadvantaged, the vulnerable in society, the marginalised and the excluded, whatever community people may come from. That is the prosperity that the Programme for Government commits us to building. ISNI 2 must not dilute that. The First Minister came to Derry a few weeks ago. He said that he was struck by the wonderful potential there, but that potential has been wasted through dark days of impoverishment and neglect. That is what regional imbalance is all about.

Last Friday, some gathered around the Christmas tree at the Guildhall with their Christmas boxes to represent the presents that they want for Christmas. The boxes reflected the litany of neglect that Derry has suffered in the absence of strategic investment. Stand Up For Derry is looking for investment strategies to address the holistic neglect of our city and, indeed, the entire north-west region, which has been denied the opportunity to use the wonderful potential that the First Minister talked about.

Tá mé ag iarraidh níos mó jabanna agus tuilleadh infheistíochta i nDoire. I call for more jobs and investment in Derry. I acknowledge the political will and skill that Minister Conor Murphy has shown in pursuing the railway development for Derry and the rest of the north-west.

Infrastructural development will enable us to redress neglect. We can then begin to achieve economic growth and development, which, in the end, is all about developing the potential of the people of Derry and the entire north-west. In that sense, a present to one is a present to all. Investment for Derry and the rest of the north-west means investment for all the people who reside across the North and further afield. It would be economically incompetent not to assess that outcome when deciding where investment should go.

The boats will rise because we plan strategically to raise them. A priority is to address disadvantage. We must ensure that the opportunities that the new political dispensation affords us do not leave behind those who suffered the most. Moreover, we must ensure that the investment conference in May 2008, which OFMDFM is to lead, builds prosperity and tackles disadvantage. The Programme for Government’s aims must find

expression in that conference's aims. Without housing, good healthcare, jobs and transport, the rip tide will continue to deny that potential in Derry and in the rest of the north-west, and the boats, as before, will remain holed, sinking.

Through targeted investment to address those disadvantaged areas, we will begin to enable people in all our communities and to tackle seriously child poverty, fuel poverty and much more. Those who argued that a rising tide lifts all boats forced, at a terrible human cost, people's resourcefulness, innovation and human potential to be wasted. It is the declared intent of the Programme for Government to free that potential by promoting tolerance and inclusion of all, and by building on, as Jim Shannon correctly stated a few weeks ago, "equality for all".

ISNI 2 acknowledges that we need to assess and monitor continuously everyone in order to ensure that we are implementing a strategy that tackles regional disparities. We must apply clear criteria on which our success can be judged. Practical, measurable outcomes are necessary. We must carry out a root-and-branch review of the Shaping our Future strategy, in order to ascertain whether it is enhancing our future. The strategy must create a better future, not merely a shared one. Statistics can appear that show an increase in economic growth, yet those same statistics can be entirely consistent with an increase in inequality and a further waste of people's lives.

We must judge this Executive's success, and our people will judge it too, on the extent to which we succeed in addressing inequality and tackling regional imbalance.

Thinking must change. Human rights and — to quote Jim Shannon again — "equality for all" must be embraced so that the Executive's Programme for Government's values are recognised and acclaimed as being at the forefront of economic practice for development in what is an unjust and unequal world. I support the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in what they are trying to achieve through this Programme for Government and future Programmes for Government, and so does my party. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will begin at 2.30 pm. Members are being allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes in the debate on the draft Programme for Government, so I suggest that they take their ease until the beginning of Question Time. This debate will recommence at 4.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Children and Young People

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether it will include a declaration of independence in a future Order in relation to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in order to improve the autonomy of this post; and to ensure that the commissioner, as a "constitutional watchdog", is made answerable to an Assembly Committee rather than to a Government Department. (AQO 906/08)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): A LeasCheann Comhairle the review of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Order 2003, was carried out at the end of 2006. Patricia Lewsley took up post in January 2007, and we thought it only fitting to ask the commissioner for her views on the review report. We have very recently received her additional recommendations. Those are complex and wide-ranging, and we are currently considering them.

Mr A Maginness: I understand that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is studying the report given to them by the commissioner, Ms Lewsley. However, I emphasise that it should be the objective of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to enhance the position of the Commissioner for Children and Young People so that she is totally independent of Government and answerable not to a Government Department but to an Assembly Committee. If the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are serious about that position, they will seek to enhance her independence.

The deputy First Minister: As I said, the commissioner has given her opinion of the review that has taken place. In fact, there have been two recent reviews relating to the Commissioner for Children and Young People. We will take into consideration everything that she has said before deciding how to move forward. The review of the 2003 Order was initially carried out by Barney McNeany, the interim commissioner, late last year with added recommendations from Patricia Lewsley received lately.

A second review was carried out by Deloitte to determine the effectiveness of the operation of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The overall conclusion of the Deloitte review of the commissioner's office was that it was, in the main, very positive. It recognised that the illness and untimely death of Nigel Williams had a significant impact on the staff and led inevitably to a period of uncertainty and change that affected staff morale. However, the review also reported that staff felt morale had improved. Our Department is satisfied that the commissioner is taking steps to bring about further improvements, including reducing the number of priorities and registering to begin work to achieve Investors in People status.

We take very seriously the views of the commissioner in all of those matters. When deciding how to take that forward, we will set considerable store by the experience that she has gained during her time as commissioner.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his fairly comprehensive reply. However, there is a suggestion that a vacuum has been created and in that vacuum the interests of children are paramount. What steps does OFMDFM expect to take in the interim before the details of the report and the review are fully digested to ensure that that vacuum does not expand?

The deputy First Minister: We are of the view that the difficulties associated with the death that occurred in the organisation created problems for Patricia Lewsley as the new commissioner. I think that she has done a good job, has dealt with the difficulties that flowed from the situation and is very much involved in suggesting measures to improve it. Certainly, from our perspective, we believe that whatever difficulties were created are now in the process of being resolved. I am very hopeful that there will be a significant improvement over time.

Ms Anderson: How do the current powers of the Commissioner for Children and Young People compare with those in other jurisdictions?

The deputy First Minister: The powers of the Commissioner for Children and Young People are, generally, wider here than those in other jurisdictions. That clearly indicates that, when the post was established, there was an absolute commitment to ensure that the Children's Commissioner had enough powers to do a thorough job. During the course of the reviews that have taken place, issues have been raised, and it is now for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to consider the outcome of those reviews and, particularly, to reflect on the comments of the Children's Commissioner herself.

Joined-up Government

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it has taken to ensure collaborative, joined-up government between Departments, both in general and on specific projects. (AQO 888/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive play a central role in promoting joined-up government by providing a forum for collective decision-making; for the agreement of a common position on cross-cutting issues; and for keeping Ministers informed of emerging issues in each Department. I am grateful for the Member's question and for the opportunity to clarify the broad range of steps that the Executive have taken to ensure joined-up government.

In the Programme for Government, we will establish an agreed framework and a set of overarching priorities within which each Department can operate. We shall monitor ongoing progress against the objectives that are set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring that a high level of co-ordination and co-operation is maintained throughout its delivery.

The publication of the Executive's legislative programme for this year represents another important step to ensure joined-up and collaborative government.

In respect of specific projects, a number of Executive subgroups have been established to consider issues such as water and sewerage, rural planning and local government reform. Those groups are also proving highly effective in ensuring that Departments work in a co-ordinated and integrated manner to address those important matters.

The junior Ministers continue to play an important role through their responsibility for the co-ordination of Executive business, including ministerial statements in the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: I have listened carefully to the deputy First Minister's reply, and I have no doubt that if all the measures that he outlined are implemented, we can look forward to better days — bearing in mind that, over 35 years of direct rule, we had anything but joined-up government.

Are OFMDFM and other Departments ready to take advantage of opportunities for the efficient building of infrastructure? For example, during the construction of new roads, provision for cabling could be made, even though it might seem premature. It has often been the case that, six months after a road is constructed, it is ripped up again to provide for cabling. Can the deputy First Minister confirm that those days are behind us?

The deputy First Minister: The issues of roads and the type of support that is required to ensure an integrated approach are matters for Departments other

than the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. However, OFMDFM has a particular responsibility to promote joined-up government within the Executive, and I believe that all Ministers recognise the importance of such an approach.

If we do not adopt a joined-up approach to important infrastructure projects, our economy and our people will suffer. We have no intention whatsoever of being part of an Executive that do not do their job on behalf of the people who sent us to this Assembly. It is a clear duty and responsibility of all Ministers, including ourselves, to work in a spirit of co-operation and in a positive and joined-up manner so that we can provide the results that our people deserve.

Mr Kennedy: Does the deputy First Minister accept that collaborative joined-up government, as operated by the two currently larger parties, has so far been little more than an exercise in crude majoritarianism, which ignores the necessities and realities of enforced coalition government?

The deputy First Minister: Anyone who read or listened to any of the interviews in which I have participated in the last few weeks could not fail to be aware that I am strongly of the view that some Members are in denial about the outcome of the elections earlier this year.

The electorate has charged the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, alongside our colleagues in the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, with the responsibility to progress the business of Government. There is no point in people being in denial, because prior to the election, the electorate were told that this venture would never work and that there would never be an agreement. We do not hear that anymore. The Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists now say that it is only a matter of time before everything collapses. We hope to confound all of you.

We have been in operation for nearly six months, and there is no doubt that during that time we have reached agreement on a range of complex and demanding issues, such as water and sewerage, rating reform, the reform of local government and the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy. The Executive have also responded collectively and highly effectively to emergencies such as the July flooding and the more recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease and bluetongue in England. However, it would be unrealistic, in any democratic Administration, to expect that we would have unanimous support for every decision that is taken. The success of the Executive should be measured against our growing list of achievements rather than the tiny number of disagreements that some parties here choose to highlight in the course of recent times.

Dr Farry: There is a big difference between the Executive staying together and actually delivering results. The cross-departmental commitments to the shared future strategy have effectively been abandoned by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget. Having regard to joined-up Government, is it the view of the Executive that the shared future strategy is now solely the responsibility of OFMDFM, leaving the other Departments with nothing to do in improving good relations in Northern Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: We are looking for a better future. The course on which we have set over the past six months offers up a real opportunity for all those who voted to send 108 MLAs to the Assembly to have a far better future than anything that we have seen in the past. It obviously grates on the Alliance Party and some other individuals in the Assembly that, after six months, things are going well. We have presented a draft Programme for Government, a draft Budget and a draft investment strategy. People have had every opportunity to criticise, praise, knock down or applaud those developments over the course of the debates that have commenced in the Assembly and which will continue through to the Christmas recess. When we come back in January, I hope that final agreements will be reached on all of those matters so that we can move on and provide the better future that our people deserve.

Naturally, there are difficulties. We are working to a tight Budget, and all Departments are under considerable pressure. Our job as political leaders, and as a Government, is to make best use of the available resources, in the hope that we can continue to make life better and make a real difference for the people that we represent. Sometimes I get a wee bit fed up coming in week after week to constant narking from the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists. It almost seems as if some people in here would rather see the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin collapse in a heap. That is not going to happen.

Child Protection

3. **Mr Butler** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to produce proposals in relation to child protection. (AQO 969/08)

The deputy First Minister: A LeasCheann Comhairle we propose to develop a "Staying Safe" policy statement as part of the 10-year strategy for children and young people, which will bind together and integrate current developments and existing measures for safeguarding children, as well as examining required additional actions and policies. We have also re-established the Bichard co-ordination group, which will oversee the development of the recommendations of the Bichard Inquiry Report, particularly the establishment of the new safeguarding vulnerable groups scheme, and barring arrangements here.

2.45 pm

Mr Butler: Does the deputy First Minister agree that child protection issues can also be advanced through the North/South Ministerial Council?

The deputy First Minister: Members debated a motion on the issue of sex offenders on 9 October. We have advised the secretariats of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council of the Assembly's wish to consider the matter at their meetings. Although the issue of child protection is in neither Council's existing work programme, we wish to raise the matter at the next North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting and at the next British-Irish Council summit meetings, subject to agreement from the other participating Administrations.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comments on child protection. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has set a commitment to reduce by 20% the numbers of children on the child protection register over the next few years. How does the deputy First Minister hope to measure that success? Will targets be set to ensure that that commitment is met?

The deputy First Minister: Child protection and the safeguarding of children are crucial to the Executive. Therefore, we were delighted to accept an invitation from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to provide us with expert advice for a time to help us to develop the Staying Safe commitment scheme.

We will have to explore ways in which to measure our success in reducing the number of children on the child protection register, and we are contemplating ways in which to do so in the context of decisions that are yet to be taken. At a later date, we hope to outline in more detail how we intend to move that policy on.

Mrs D Kelly: What projects have the junior Ministers, as the designated champions of children, introduced in the past six months to improve children's lives?

The deputy First Minister: It is early days. The junior Ministers work to a wide-ranging brief, not least on the issue of child protection and on how we deal with the issue of sexual offences against young people. It is a major issue that affects our entire society, and the Executive have charged the junior Ministers with dealing with it in a comprehensive fashion. As time progresses, we will be able to outline in great detail all the initiatives and developments in which they have been involved and in which they intend to become involved.

Budget 2008-2011

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether the final Budget document for 2008-2011 requires the support

of all members of the Executive, or a simple majority vote, in order to be adopted. (AQO 912/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive unanimously cleared the draft Budget for consultation at their meeting on 23 October 2007. I see no reason why we cannot secure the support of all members of the Executive for the final Budget.

The ministerial code places a specific responsibility on the First Minister and me, as Co-Chairpersons of the Executive Committee, to seek to reach decisions by consensus, wherever possible. It also provides for a vote to be taken on any issue should it be required.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his reply. It was clear and was worth hearing, especially from the Co-Chairman of the coalition. Does he accept that a more consensual method of operation must be found for the operation of the Executive? An inbuilt resolution procedure is necessary, given that the present coalition Government is so different from that in Westminster.

The deputy First Minister: The provisions that cover the decision-making process in the current Executive are effectively set out in the statutory ministerial code, which was agreed by all parties. From our first meeting on 10 May to our most recent meeting on 22 October, the Executive have considered between 100 and 120 items of business. A decision has been taken by means of a vote on fewer than five occasions. That reflects the effort that has been made to achieve consensus on each issue and the rarity of the occasions on which that does not prove possible.

Mr Ford: Two weeks ago, I asked the First Minister whether he could provide any evidence that the Executive operate under the principle of collective responsibility. He did not answer — no surprise there. I wonder if the deputy First Minister can explain how an Executive can possibly implement a Budget unless there is full collective responsibility and full agreement within the Executive. In his earlier answers, he made it very clear that he takes no notice of what is said by members of my party or other Back-Benchers at this end of the Chamber. Is he now saying that he has no respect for the opinions of Ministers who are outside the two largest parties?

The deputy First Minister: I fully respect the participation of all Ministers in the Executive. As co-chairperson of the Executive, I have done everything in my power — as, I believe, has the First Minister — to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak at, and contribute to, each Executive meeting. There is no doubt whatsoever that, in moving forward, further important decisions will have to be taken on the draft Budget, the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. Until I came to the Chamber today, I was not aware that any Alliance Party Members

were members of the Executive; however, I am aware that the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP —

Mr Ford: Nobody said that they were.

The deputy First Minister: It is quite clear from contributions in the Assembly, and the Alliance Party's rather futile efforts to portray itself as the Opposition, that you are trying to punch above your weight — and I think that you know that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that Members make their remarks through the Chair, please.

The deputy First Minister: I think that the Member knows that, because every time he stands up in this Assembly, he makes a very serious contribution railing against the Executive, particularly the Executive as led by the First Minister and myself. His remarks are always delivered with a very serious face. However, I note that when the Member sits down, he always smiles to himself, as if he is involved in a pantomime. *[Laughter.]* None of us in the Executive is involved in pantomimes. We are involved in providing Government for the people who we represent. I am not interested in playing wee games with the Alliance Party in the Assembly. I am interested in working with serious political parties to build a better future and to make a difference for the people who we represent — and I believe that the four parties that make up the Executive are serious political parties.

Mr O'Loan: I am sorry that the deputy First Minister feels so constantly narked. People should not be so hard on him. *[Laughter.]*

Will he acknowledge that the draft Budget fails to provide adequate resources to build a shared future?

The deputy First Minister: It is quite interesting that the leader of the Alliance Party, David Ford, thought that the response to the question was very funny. I think that he was the only person in the Building who thought that it was very funny.

The fact remains that there is a draft Budget, a draft Programme for Government and a draft investment strategy. The key word is “draft”, and the contents of all three will be debated in the Assembly over the course of the coming weeks, after which big decisions will have to be taken. Those big decisions will have to be taken in the context of a very tight budgetary situation. There is no point whatsoever in Members coming to the Chamber with grandiose notions about what can be achieved with a limited Budget. We cannot take money from a stone. We must deal with the resources that are under our control. I believe that, at the end of the debate, we will move forward, adequately and decisively, to govern in the interests of our people, to build a better future and to make a difference.

Older People's Commissioner

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it will give a timescale within which the review into an older people's commissioner will be completed. (AQO 970/08)

The deputy First Minister: The review into the case for an older people's commissioner is currently under way. Following a competitive tendering exercise, OFMDFM recently appointed an independent organisation to consult key stakeholders and examine possible roles and responsibilities for such a post.

It is expected that the review will be substantially complete by the end of 2007, although it is envisaged that, thereafter, there may well be a need to engage further with section interests.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. Will he outline the issues that are currently being considered by the review?

The deputy First Minister: The key issues that will be considered as part of the assessment include the impact and accessibility of the existing levels of advocacy and protection for older people that are provided by statutory organisations here; how existing provisions for older people here compare with those elsewhere; identification of any gaps in existing advocacy and protection; stakeholders' views, including those of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister; and how older people will directly benefit from the establishment of an independent commissioner for older people.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am not sure whether the First Minister and I should declare an interest in the subject. Does the deputy First Minister envisage that an action plan will be produced by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to proactively deal with ageism, which is prevalent throughout society, both in the economy and in social and political life?

The deputy First Minister: The review into the case for an older people's commissioner, which is currently under way, will make a mighty contribution to tackling the issues that the Member clearly identifies. My mother — God bless her — is 84 years of age. Therefore, I declare an interest in the subject. I am sure that many other Assembly Members have relatives in that age group. We are their elected representatives. We have as much duty and responsibility to them as we have to our children. The Assembly must do everything in its power to ensure that the approach that it adopts is comprehensive and meets the needs of older people who, surely, deserve as much as the Assembly can deliver.

Mrs M Bradley: Can the deputy First Minister inform the House as to when the proposed commissioner's post will be advertised in the press? I welcome the fact that the review will conclude at the end of 2007. Perhaps, that will give hope to older people.

The deputy First Minister: The Member must await the outcome of the review, which, as I said during my response to the initial question, will be completed by the end of the year. Therefore, by the end of 2007, Members will have a good idea of how matters are shaping up. As soon as final decisions are taken, the First Minister and I will report back to the Assembly.

Gender Goods and Services Directive

6. **Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it will report on responses to the recent consultation on the gender goods and services directive. (AQO 934/08)

The deputy First Minister: Consultation on the gender goods and services directive sets out the Department's plan to transpose the European directive that implements the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services. Just over 240 responses were received. The First Minister and I will take account of those responses as we make our final decisions. A consultation report is also being prepared for publication. An initial assessment of the consultation responses was provided to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in order to facilitate its response to the consultation exercise.

Mr Simpson: With regard to the EU's gender goods and services directive, will the deputy First Minister's Department use available flexibility to extend exemptions from harassment provisions in order to include commercial enterprises, care and residential centres that are run in accordance with a religious ethos, church activities that are outside a church building, and medical professionals who have a conscientious objection to referring someone for gender re-assignment surgery?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the deputy First Minister to be brief in his response as time is nearly up.

The deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way that both complies with the requirements of the directives and deals with the specific needs of the member state. Policy consideration and the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law include consideration of the degree of flexibility that is available to the member state and to the devolved Administration. Given that equality is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of this Administration to

consider how the requirements of equality directives affect the Assembly and to bring forward legislation that is specific to here in order to implement those directives. It is often the case that in transposing equality directives into domestic law, there is limited discretion with regard to the precise rights or obligations that must be imposed or, indeed, created.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Science Foundation Ireland

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the progress made in identifying funds to enable both the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast to participate in Science Foundation Ireland, further to the national development plan of the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 909/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The two universities presented a joint paper to the Economic Development Forum, which contains a proposal to link with Science Foundation Ireland programmes. My Department has established a project board to consider the proposals contained in that paper, including those relating to North/South collaboration. Funding will be determined in light of the comprehensive spending review outcome in January 2008.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat. There is a strong view that the participation of Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster in Science Foundation Ireland can bring real benefits to the North. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that it will be a lost opportunity if the universities are not offered the financial assistance required to contribute to the foundation and that everyone will be denied new opportunities to join and share in research and development that will benefit everyone on this island?

Sir Reg Empey: I share the Member's view. The precise mechanism for participation must be considered by the project board, and it will ensure that only projects that are of benefit to Northern Ireland are supported by moneys from this Administration. However — subject to the availability of funds — one must understand that it may be appropriate to seek an agreement with Science Foundation Ireland on what areas can be aligned with Northern Ireland priorities.

As the Member is aware, the Department for Employment and Learning is bidding through the

comprehensive spending review process. We know that collaboration exists, and the universities have expressed their enthusiasm about Science Foundation Ireland to me. They have brought that forward to the Economic Development Forum, and I think that the Member is pushing at an open door. The Department for Employment and Learning is concerned with trying to secure the funding, and the projects that require that money, we believe, have been established. There is an enthusiasm from the universities, and we will make progress.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The draft Programme for Government commits to providing an extra 300 places for PhD students in Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. Is the money available to follow through on that commitment? Has consideration been given to some of those students undertaking PhDs in science-related subjects?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has veered off to a slightly different issue, but I assure him that it is one about which I feel strongly. I want to maximise the number of people taking PhDs, and I assure the Member that the Department for Employment and Learning will support the targeting of PhDs in specific subject areas. There will not be a blunderbuss approach, because we must target the support at areas in which our representation must be maximised for the benefit of our economic interests.

An existing scheme that has been supported by European funding has helped us to provide PhD places, but some of that funding will fall away and will have to be made up through comprehensive spending review bids. That is ongoing business, and I hope that I can rely on Mr Butler's support at the Committee for Employment and Learning when it comes to the actual Budget allocations in the coming weeks.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister inform the House what progress has been made towards the creation of an innovative funding package along the lines of that first mooted by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, in November 2006.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member raises an important subject. As I understand it, the Department of Finance and Personnel is aggregating a number of streams of funding, which will be funding for innovation generally. There are two sums of money: money that will come through our own system and money that has been pledged by the Government of the Republic.

In our negotiations with the Department of Finance and Personnel, we are pursuing the interest that we have. We have made bids for the innovation money, and we are working closely with our counterparts in the Republic to maximise the amount of money that we can bring to bear on this issue because if we are to compete in a very difficult business environment, it is

one of the critical areas. Therefore, I can assure the honourable Member that every effort is being made. However, at this stage, the detail of the fund, such as how it should operate, are unclear, and we have had some difficulty in trying to confirm that detail. I can assure the Member that we are working closely with others to maximise the amount of money that can be brought to bear on this subject.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question number 2 has been withdrawn.

Seagate

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he is having with Seagate in Limavady in order to ensure that staff facing redundancy receive the necessary assistance from his department to enable them to seek alternative sustainable employment in the north west.

(AQO 891/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Senior officials from the Department and Invest NI met with representatives of Seagate Technology Ltd, who expressed clear commitment to work with the Department for Employment and Learning. The focus is on ensuring that workers who are facing redundancy can gain alternative employment and can access advice on training, education, careers and benefits. Provision of on-site services, along with partner organisations, will be agreed with management and employee representatives.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his reply and, indeed, for his offer of assistance for Seagate. However, does the Minister agree that if the 1,000 Seagate employees, who are facing unemployment, are to successfully reintegrate into paid employment in the summer of next year, that is more likely to happen in the small- and medium-sized enterprise sector or through self-employment? Will the training and skills that the Minister plans to offer them be geared towards that direction?

Sir Reg Empey: I accept the analysis that the honourable Member has made as to the probabilities of where the workers will find alternative employment. That is largely due to the fact that there are so few large companies left in that sort of sector. I assure the Member that, first of all, we must understand that a 90-day consultation period is ongoing, and, clearly, we are limited in what we can say and do during that period.

However, I understand that a workers' forum is being established. My Department will engage with that forum. We have already engaged with the company. In conjunction with Limavady Borough Council, we plan to consider measures, such as jobs fairs at the Seagate premises. My officials are happy to establish an office at the plant, and they will interview everybody

on an individual basis. We are working on assessing the skills that are available, and we will talk to each individual and link them to the vacancies that we have.

Training will be a critical point, and I can assure the Member that we will do everything in our power. We are working very closely with Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I have spoken with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we are determined, between us, our Departments and Invest NI, to do a good job on behalf of those workers who have suffered a significant blow at a very bad time.

However, the Member will also be aware that, sadly, the Seagate employees are not alone in that area. I assure him, however, that everything that can be done will be done.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister inform the Assembly of the role of his Department in alleviating the hardship being felt by former workers of Reid Transport Ltd in Cloughmills?

Sir Reg Empey: Unfortunately, unlike the situation at Seagate, the situation at Reid Transport Ltd has happened all of a sudden, without warning and without any time to prepare. At least in the Seagate situation, we have the benefit and the luxury of some time to at least prepare and do things in an orderly manner.

I deeply regret the timing and, indeed, the manner in which the crash closure of Reid Transport Ltd has come around. It has created an enormous difficulty, and my Department is meeting with the administrators to look at the wage records and the books to establish the number of people who are entitled to departmental help. I am meeting the administrators later this afternoon.

A short time ago, I had an opportunity to brief the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on the situation, and I have spoken, or relayed messages, to most of the North Antrim MLAs. I assure the Member that we will do everything that we can.

However, nothing will take away from the trauma that those workers have suffered due to the suddenness and unexpected nature of the closure. It is in stark contrast to the manner in which the Seagate redundancies are being handled.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, I am sure that you appreciate the Minister's answer, but I remind you that the supplementary question should relate directly to the original question.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has touched on the situation at Reid Transport Ltd. What has his Department done to ensure that the affected workers receive redundancy packages? Over the past four nights on the picket line, I have heard various claims being made about the

company, including that many employees had been working for more than 70 hours a week. I was also told that children as young as 14 years old had been working night shifts at the plant. Does the Minister consider that those workers and their families should be given immunity from prosecution and encouraged to come forward and make statements?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, will you please extend your generosity?

Sir Reg Empey: I am happy to do so, because I understand the urgency of the situation. I have heard all those allegations. Officials in my Department have been made fully aware of them, and are looking very closely at them. I understand that approximately 220 people were employed by the company, but, a short time ago, only 76 people had made themselves known to staff at jobcentres in the area. I appeal to Members to encourage them to attend a jobcentre so that their details can be processed in an attempt to alleviate their situation. Over the weekend, only a few people applied for emergency loans to tide them over.

The nature of some of the allegations is such that I felt compelled to draw them to the attention of the PSNI. Others relating to the day-to-day administration of the company, such as the payment of wages, number of hours worked, and so forth are matters for the administrator because, as an officer of the court, he is obliged to report to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on how he considers the business was run and on the conduct of the directors.

The allegations are very serious, and my Department is taking them seriously. Over the weekend, and again today, all necessary steps have been taken to make progress. I appeal to the workforce to come forward as soon as possible. Employers have come to the Department's offices to say that they have vacancies that could be filled by the former Reid Transport Ltd workforce. That would be the best solution for everyone. There will be ample opportunity to reflect on how those workers have been treated and how the company has been run, but that is for another day.

Building Trade: Apprenticeships

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to secure apprenticeships in the building trade.

(AQO 949/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's Training for Success programme offers apprenticeships for a full range of construction skills. Through the Construction Employers Federation and the Construction Industry Training Board, the Department is working closely with the construction industry to refine the training provision, provide incentives for employers to take on

apprentices, and ensure that apprentices are suitably equipped to work in the building trade.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware of the downturn in the construction industry; the situation at Seagate has already happened. Hundreds of workers are losing their jobs. The building trade is prone to ups and downs, but this seems to be a prolonged downturn. I hear reports of young people being unable to complete their apprenticeships. When my colleague Martina Anderson saw that I had tabled a question on the subject, she told me of such a case in Derry, and I know of one young lad who was in the third year of his apprenticeship when he lost his job.

His mother has brought him round several building sites and he cannot get other employment. His further and higher education college has told him that if he does not get an apprenticeship, it will put him out. Will the Minister make an intervention, whereby further and higher education colleges are encouraged to keep on apprentices, allowing them to finish their apprenticeships in college?

3.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: If Mr O'Dowd, and the Member for Foyle, have individual cases in mind, they should bring them to me, and I will ensure that they are dealt with. Mr O'Dowd is right. The building industry is cyclical. It is going through a difficult period — certainly, the house building side is at the moment. Before Training for Success was introduced in September, a Public Accounts Committee inquiry reported that many young people in the construction sector were being used on building sites for four days a week, and then spending one day at a further education college. At the end of the year, they were being dumped by their employers.

The Public Accounts Committee said that that amounted to exploitation of the workforce. That provoked the Training for Success programme, which requires young people to have contracts and be employed. In the current circumstances, we are monitoring closely the operation of the scheme since it started on 3 September. I may have more to say to the Committee in due course, but we are monitoring the scheme closely and we are prepared to be as flexible as possible.

I will draw the Member's point to the attention of the further education sector. We are as anxious as he is that these people get proper training. However, we must get a balance between that and their being exploited. We may or may not have got the training right — it is a bit early to tell. However, I am very conscious of the point that the Member makes.

Mr Spratt: There is a perception across the Province that different colleges provide different standards of training for apprenticeships and various aspects of the building trade. Will the Minister look at the possibility

of reviewing the standards set in each of the colleges to ensure that that perception amongst employees does not continue? This would provide a set standard right across the Province, removing the perception that any one college provides better quality apprenticeships than others, particularly in areas such as joinery?

Sir Reg Empey: I regret if that is the perception. I will take the honourable Member's views on board and I will write to him when I have had an opportunity to establish the facts in each area. Our aim is to have as consistent a standard as possible across the Province, because that is what people are entitled to receive. Of course, there will be variations according to the skills of the trainers. There will always be a certain amount of latitude and difference. Generally speaking, training should be of a consistent quality across the Province. I will have the matter looked into and I will write to the Member.

Mr Cree: The Minister has touched on this subject, but I would ask him if he keeping on the review the success, or otherwise, of the various aspects of the new Training for Success Programme?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes. The programme is a new departure, and I have explained the genesis of it, which was that the Public Accounts Committee felt that the previous arrangements were unsatisfactory because employers were exploiting the trainees.

We are anxious to avoid that. However, we are also conscious that there must be a sufficient degree of flexibility to allow for the fact that not every trainee is ready for a contract of employment. The programme includes a "job ready" strand to prepare the trainees to ensure that they are ready for such a contract. We are also monitoring the programme very closely; some amendments have been made. Therefore, I can give the Member the assurance for which he has asked.

Numeracy and Literacy: Baseline Figures

5. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to establish reliable baseline figures for numeracy and literacy challenges for adults in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 979/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Reliable baseline figures are available for Northern Ireland through the International Adult Literacy Survey 1996, which included both literacy and numeracy.

However, those are dated and the Department is considering various options for the most appropriate method of measuring an updated position of essential-skill needs in Northern Ireland's adult population.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: What consideration has been given to conducting surveys of literacy

performance in Northern Ireland, comparable to the types of measurement that are available in England?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has touched on a matter that is at the heart of the Department's current considerations. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was last conducted in 1996 — with its results published in 1997 — and is due to be held again in 2011 or 2012. Importantly, that is an international standard, so we shall have the opportunity to measure our performance against other countries. However, the time between the last survey and the next one is too long, which means that we are a bit blind about our current position.

Other research was conducted in England, although not on a comparable basis. For us to carry out a full IALS survey, or invent another method, would be exceptionally time consuming and expensive. Consequently, the Department is closely examining alternatives to provide some early indication as to whether we are winning or losing the battle on essential skills. Although the figures for throughput are positive and above target, the danger is that we are adding to the cohort in the community who do not have essential skills and are out of school. All Members must be concerned about that — it is a big issue for the future. The Department is urgently examining that issue for the obvious reasons that the Member identified.

Mr Ross: The Minister has mentioned how important essential skills are. Will he detail how he is working with the Department of Education on that issue? Recent reports in England have stated that the state of the comprehensive-school system there means that many young adults are leaving schools and looking for jobs without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Does the Minister agree that it would be a disaster for Northern Ireland to implement a comprehensive system that is similar to the one that is failing so spectacularly in England?

Sir Reg Empey: Although I share some of the Member's views on education, sadly the evidence that we have indicates that the differences in the levels of people who do not have essential skills — literacy and numeracy — among Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, are minimal. According to the last survey, that level was 24% in Northern Ireland, 22% in Great Britain and 23% in the Republic of Ireland. There is a cohort of the population that we are completely missing. The Department is working closely with the Department of Education; we have produced a careers-strategy consultation document, and I have spoken to the Minister of Education on a number of occasions — we are both acutely aware of the problems.

For the benefit of Members who do not know, I am talking about people who do not have the ability to

fully read; for example, grasp and understand the instructions on a medicine bottle or read a bus timetable. In those terms, the problem sounds horrific, but sadly large swathes of our population have huge difficulties. That is one of our enormous tasks: how will we build a vibrant economy if we do not have those basic elements in place? There will be a huge challenge for all Members if we do not do that. I assure the Member that I am working closely with the Department of Education to ensure that we bear down on that severe problem.

Further Education: L1 Category Enrolment

6. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the fact that enrolments in the further education sector, delivered by the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College in 2005-06 was 85% for the L1 category and below and was 54% for the same category in the statutory sector, what plans he has to ensure that the success of the non-statutory sector in creating opportunities in the L1 category and below is protected and enhanced. (AQO 958/08)

Sir Reg Empey: During 2005-06, statutory further education colleges enrolled 71,435 adults in provision at level 1 and below, which equated to 66% of their total adult enrolments.

During the same period, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Ulster People's College (UPC) enrolled 2,938 adults in provision at level one and below, which equates to 85% of its total adult enrolment. My Department is developing proposals to enable voluntary and community groups to collaborate more effectively with further education colleges to support adult learners.

There has been concern about the withdrawal of contracts from the WEA and the UPC. A number of other voluntary and community organisations have expressed an interest in delivering similar provision to that which is being purchased from the WEA and the UPC. Legal advice and Government guidelines indicate that competitive tender is the only equitable way to resolve the matter. The Department would be likely to be vulnerable to successful and costly legal challenges if it were to continue with the current single-contract arrangements.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the WEA, the UPC, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults have a proven track record for attracting people from the hardest-to-reach groups back into education? Will he agree that interim funding should be provided for the groups to enable them to continue their work beyond March and August 2008, pending an assessment of failed CSR bids, the merits, or otherwise, of tendering

for community education provision, and a full assessment of how best to deliver community education?

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's contracts with the WEA and the UPC have been extended to August 2008. That follows the notification that was given to both organisations in December 2006 that any future requirement for non-statutory provision would have to be on the basis of open, competitive tender. Other organisations have expressed an interest, and, therefore the Department felt that the only equitable way was to put the contracts out to tender.

We are examining how third-party organisations might better collaborate with further education colleges, and it is hoped that proposals will be brought forward on the matter in the next few weeks. I take this opportunity to say that the work that both organisations do is very important, and it cannot be assumed that they will not continue to do that work as they will have the opportunity to tender for the work if they wish. Judgement will be made by the procurement branch of the Department of Finance and Personnel, which has guided my Department in the tenders that we have conducted hitherto.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that, although level-one qualifications are important, they are a minimum requirement and that employers are demanding level two as a minimum for entry into employment? Will he agree that a pathway from level one to levels two, three and four is necessary in order to achieve a skills base and future economic prosperity, and that those qualifications are best delivered through statutory provision?

Sir Reg Empey: As the Member points out, level one is a basic qualification. However, as I said in my original answer, during the last year for which figures are available, further education colleges enrolled 71,435 people to study at level one or below. In addition, a further 3,000 people approximately were dealt with by the WEA and the UPC. That is a huge number of people. I agree entirely with the Member's analysis that a platform and a pathway are needed to get those people through to levels two, three and four. My Department is looking at how it engages with the community sector in delivering those, but the Member is right — unless we get clear pathways to levels two, three and four, our economy will struggle in the years ahead.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question has been answered by the Minister's response to Mr Bradley.

3.30 pm

PhD Study – Scientific and Technological Subjects

7. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people at universities in Northern Ireland were studying for a PhD in scientific and technological subjects.

(AQO 923/08)

Sir Reg Empey: In the 2005-06 academic year, there were 1,710 enrolments in PhD courses in scientific and technological subjects at Northern Ireland universities.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister indicate what progress he has made in discussions with universities in India, and other further-education colleges, in developing links with Queen's University?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I am sure that the Minister will reply in writing to Mr McCrea.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

Rate Relief

3. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he would take to increase the uptake of rate relief.

(AQO 899/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Member is right to highlight the relatively low uptake of both rate relief and rebate, which is available through housing benefit. That has long been the case with the system in Northern Ireland, whether because of a general lack of awareness, a misunderstanding of eligibility for relief, the perceived complexity of the application process, or the perceived stigma attached to receipt of a benefit.

The Member will be aware that I intend to make a statement to the House tomorrow outlining the outcome of the Executive's review of the domestic rating system that was introduced in April under direct rule. When he listens to that statement, I hope that he will recognise that the Executive have agreed a package of support measures that will improve the rating system. An important element of the Executive's report is an acknowledgment that that support will be effective only if people avail of it. The Executive will, therefore, tackle that issue as a priority so that the new measures

will make a real difference, particularly for those hard-to-reach groups in greatest need.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Minister have a view on why more people do not claim what they are entitled to, given the significance of relief to someone's annual rates bill?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure how helpful the statistics are in this matter, but, traditionally, about 40% take-up has been consistent in the owner-occupier sector; between 60% and 70% in the private-rented sector; and up to 90% in the public-rented sector. That seems to indicate that the Housing Executive and housing associations are doing a very good job of informing people.

Therefore, on the one hand, there is a need to better communicate what entitlements are available, and, on the other hand, people are being discouraged by the complexity of applying for either benefits or relief. That leads us to considering more automatic payments.

Some people are put off by the perceived stigma, which might explain the larger figure in the owner-occupier sector, and we need to get the message across that this is a matter of entitlement, rather than a hand-out.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister ensure that sensitivities about data-protection matters will not prevent various services allowing their databases to be used to communicate information on rate relief to the people? Furthermore — without asking him to give away any of tomorrow's statement — will the Minister pay particular regard to the needs of pensioners, who are being encouraged by Government to take up the minimum-income guarantee — the pension credit? Will he also ensure that rate relief means that no one's income will be brought effectively below the minimum-income guarantee as the result of a rates demand?

Mr P Robinson: With regard to the last element of the Member's question, I am sure that he will want to come to the House tomorrow. He is a patient man, and I am sure that he can wait until then. However, if he has looked at the report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, he will have seen that it paid particular regard to the role of senior citizens. Of course, I pay special attention and regard to the work of the Committee, and I shall say no more at this stage.

There is a massive need for better data sharing between Departments and agencies. There will be some concern about data sharing, given recent events at HMRC. However, I have instituted an investigation in my Department. I understand that the Minister for Social Development, who has responsibility for pension and benefit claims, is doing something similar. We want to ensure that, if there is data sharing, the same standards are being operated and that those standards

are high enough to ensure the safety of all data in the public sector.

Mr McFarland: Is the Minister aware of computer difficulties that are leading to delays in dealing with rate relief applications? Does he accept that unduly long delays do not encourage others to apply, and will he ensure that those who do apply receive their assistance in a timely manner?

Mr P Robinson: I was aware of the delay. I hope that, if it is not already sorted out, that it is very close to being so. The Rate Collection Agency has undergone major work during the past few years, with the introduction of a new system. Various Government agencies were involved in providing the necessary information for the new system, and that has caused some delay. If the Member wants to draw specific incidents to my attention, I will be happy to take them up with the appropriate people.

Industrial Derating

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether he intends to bring forward legislation in relation to industrial derating.
(AQO 903/08)

Mr P Robinson: Amending legislation will be required to change the percentages set out in the current legislation, which was passed at Westminster under direct rule. It laid out the annual percentages that were due up until the planned date for complete removal of derating in April 2011. The legislation imposed a 15% liability on manufacturing firms for 2005-06, 25% for 2006-07, and, last year, David Hanson agreed to a slowdown to 30% for the current year, in recognition of the early review that my parliamentary colleague David Simpson and others helped to secure.

Under the legislation, we are due to move to 50% liability next year, followed by two years at 75% before reaching the full 100%. Those percentages can be changed through subordinate legislation and will be subject to affirmative resolution by the Assembly.

In due course, we will have to consider amending the primary legislation, which, although it allows the phasing in to be altered annually by regulation, still enshrines the final destination figure — full rating by April 2011.

Mr Ross: Can the Minister explain why he proposed to cap industrial rates at 30% rather than the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland's recommendation of 50%?

Mr P Robinson: My Department received the preliminary report when we were deciding on the draft Budget. It was clear that the evidence provided in the preliminary report was useful and informed my

decision. It recommended 50% but stated that it would ultimately be a matter of political judgement. My view was that there was a real risk to some of our manufacturing firms if the rating liability were to be increased to 50%.

Subsequent events confirm that that was the right judgement to make, and I am glad that the Committee for Finance and Personnel agrees.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister think that tax incentives will encourage new businesses to set up in TSN areas?

Mr P Robinson: We have limited tax controls. Within the scope that we have, I am happy to consider producing further incentives in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment and Learning. At one time we had enterprise zones, which benefited those areas to some degree, and I am happy to consider any suggestions that might benefit the areas that are finding it most difficult to attract employment.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister acknowledge that the application of industrial rates could be the final tipping point at which manufacturing companies decide whether to close or to continue to invest? Given the recent spate of redundancies that have been announced, does the Minister agree that preventing increases in industrial rates has been a prudent decision?

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the honourable gentleman. I have had the opportunity to meet a number of people from that sector, and I have been pleased to hear that, on the one hand, many of them believe that it has been sufficient to keep them in business, while others are saying that it was the type of decision that they needed in order to put in place investment proposals that, for a long time, had been sitting on the shelf. I hope that it will strengthen those who are finding things difficult and provide a degree of certainty and encouragement to those who are striving for a safe and stable future.

Budget Statement: 25 October 2007

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Budget statement made to the Assembly on 25 October 2007 was in draft form, and is subject to an ongoing process of consultation between Ministers, Committees and others before it can be ratified or amended. (AQO 940/08)

Mr P Robinson: No. The statement was not in draft form, nor does it need to be ratified, and it cannot be amended.

Mr Armstrong: Both the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development have confirmed the status of the draft Budget and have explicitly stated

that its provisions are insufficient to meet the important demands facing their Departments. Will the Minister therefore give an assurance that the draft Budget will be revised?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, that is a different question, which I am happy to answer. I was asked about my statement, and now I am being asked about the draft Budget. The purpose of a draft Budget is to allow the Committees and the public to consider the proposals in the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the draft Budget, and to comment on them. Of course, we will be happy to hear proposals from the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development — not just on the extra money that they think they should have, but also on where they think it should come from.

Mrs Long: In his Budget statement, the Minister highlighted the potential savings that were identified in the Deloitte report, 'The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy' and acknowledged that, although the scope to release money for more effective investment was limited in this three-year cycle, we must now make a start on tackling the underlying issues. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that during the current Budget consultation process it would be helpful if specific measures were added to both the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government to directly address sectarianism and division? Currently, such measures are lacking, and adding them would help his Department to move the matter forward in the next three-year cycle.

Mr P Robinson: Every Member has a duty to address sectarianism and division, and I hope that they will do so. I have considered that report and, in light of the tight fiscal framework within which I must work, I am keen to search out any other possible sources of revenue.

The first difficulty with that report is that a large chunk of the funds that it relies on for its rather attractive headline figure comes from the education budget. No matter how desirable anyone thinks it would be to have one educational system for the Province, no one believes that that is likely to be resolved and the money released in a three-year period.

3.45 pm

Secondly, the report identified another great source of funding from security and policing benefits. However, the Assembly does not enjoy funds from that element of Government expenditure. The third strand of savings was exemplified by there being a swimming pool on the Shankill Road and another one a few streets away on the Falls Road. Again, those sorts of savings go to local government as opposed to the regional Assembly.

There are clear areas where we will benefit over time. I am happy to talk to the Member about any of those issues — if she or her party colleagues wish to come and see me — and to examine how we can use

the funding that results from the savings that I hope will be made as we get over the traditional divisions in our society.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister accept that the Budget does not allocate enough money to provide the level of social housing that everyone agrees is necessary?

Mr P Robinson: I spoke in some detail on this matter when I made the Budget statement. I thought that I had shown myself to be very much on the side of the Minister for Social Development when I said that the body that we had set up to look at the possibility of realising further assets from the various Departments — the capital realisation task force — would operate from now until the Budget is finalised. I saw the Minister for Social Development's bid for housing funding as an important recipient of any assets that we might realise during that period. I wanted to take that one further step to assure the Minister that I wanted to find additional resources for her.

In good faith, I provided the Minister with a further £20 million as a result of in-year monitoring, and the Member will hear about further steps to assist the Minister when I make a statement tomorrow.

There are several ways to address the matter. My colleague the Minister of the Environment has been meeting the Minister for Social Development to examine how the current planning regulations can be used to assist the provision of more social housing and what changes to the legislation might further assist it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Workplace 2010

7. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the implications for Workplace 2010 of the delay in moving to best and final offer. (AQO 898/08)

Mr P Robinson: The judge issued a ruling on the court injunction last Friday afternoon. The Department is considering the implications of the judgement in consultation with the two remaining bidders. I can tell the Member that the Department is now in a position to invite bids. However, that is only one part of the process, as there is a further court case outstanding, which is not due to start until January.

If the procurement continues to be delayed, there will be serious implications for capital projects that rely on the funding that it will generate. The severity of the impact will depend on the extent of the delay.

As I have said before, Workplace 2010 will generate a substantial capital payment that will enable the funding of other capital projects. The receipt of that payment is planned for 2008-09, so any delay into later

financial years will be a significantly limiting factor in delivering the early parts of the investment strategy, and we may have to reassess our priorities for funding.

On the operational side, the Civil Service estate continues to deteriorate. Without capital investment from the private sector, we cannot implement plans to refurbish and upgrade properties in the estate.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. The fact that some judgments have been made is good news as regards being able to proceed with the projects. The Minister indicated that there will possibly be capital-receipt ramifications because of the delays caused. Will he indicate what those ramifications might be?

Mr P Robinson: The figure in the draft investment strategy and draft Budget for Workplace 2010 — although it could not be a precise figure — was £200 million. Therefore, if that amount is not going to be available during the 2008-09 financial year, the gap will have to be plugged, timetables will have to change or other programmes will have to be reduced. Those are the kind of issues that will have to be considered should Workplace 2010 not proceed during that financial year.

I do not want to depress the honourable gentleman. It is still possible to meet that schedule, and I hope that the court decisions will continue to go in the right direction.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to the Minister's reply, and acknowledging that there may be further legal delays, will he commit to making progress on the relocation of public-sector jobs? Given the devastation there has been as a result of job losses, particularly in the north-west, the decentralisation of public-sector jobs would create a lot of confidence.

Mr P Robinson: I have taken forward Workplace 2010 and the displacement of public-sector jobs in parallel. I have not put the brake on the latter because of the legal issues involved in Workplace 2010.

The Executive, at their most recent meeting, approved a proposal that I submitted regarding the terms of reference of the inquiries that are going to take place on the matter, and that work will proceed. I am content for proposals to come to me in advance of the legal issues being resolved.

As I understand it, there is to be a commercial court hearing in early January 2008. I am not in a position to ascertain how long it may take before a judgement will result from that. The worst judgement would be one that would take us back to the best and final offer stage. Clearly, we want to make real progress.

The two bidders still being considered by the Department are being acquainted with the position. I had a brief meeting with both of them, and my officials are talking to them in more detail about how we might

proceed in light of the fact that the injunction has, to that extent, been lifted.

Mr Beggs: The Minister referred to a substantial capital sum. I believe that it was £200 million, which then changed to £175 million. Will he advise how that cash-back sum was determined? Furthermore, what interest repayment rate can be expected on it, in comparison with borrowing it through conventional means or through the reinvestment and reform initiative, which would have been linked to the Bank of England base rate?

Mr P Robinson: The figure will be determined by those who have knowledge of the bids that have already been received, as those bids will indicate the amount of cash that the various bidders are prepared to give regarding the tender.

As Minister, I determined at the very beginning of this process that I did not want to be involved in the bidding process; that was to be left to officials, and they would make their recommendations to me. I felt that that was the right thing to do. Therefore, their judgement, on the basis of their discussions and the tenders that they have received, was that a figure in that range was appropriate.

Needless to say, I hope, as I am sure that the Member does, that when we get to the best and final offer the two bidders sharpen their pencils further and we get a better deal out of it. We are talking about funds coming from the private sector to the public sector for us to use. Thus, the second part of the Member's question requires no answer.

DHSSPS and Health Service Funding

8. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of the additional resources in the Budget had been allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety over the next three years. (AQO 916/08)

10. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in bringing forward his proposal for a draft Budget, what account he took of differences in spending per head on the Health Service in Northern Ireland and England. (AQO 986/08)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 8 and 10 together.

Northern Ireland spends more per person on health and personal social services than England does, and it will continue to do so under the draft Budget. The draft Budget was developed over recent months, taking into account the CSR and work on a draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. The draft Budget has involved striking a balance between promoting economic growth, which is the Executive's

top priority, and the need to continue to improve our public services, including health and education. That is demonstrated by the fact that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been allocated 51.5% of the additional resources that are available to the Executive from 2007-08 to 2010-11.

Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, I did say that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is to receive more than the other 10 Departments added together. The public would be entitled to be disappointed if, with the largest budget for health in Northern Ireland ever, and with expert advice provided by Professor Appleby's report to inform decisions, they were not to see significant improvements.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will have heard, as I have, the suggestion that the Department of Finance and Personnel has accepted that the need for health spending is 14% greater in Northern Ireland than it is in England. What does the Minister think of that suggestion?

Mr P Robinson: Anyone who has taken the time to read the Appleby Report will know that there is a plethora of different formulations for determining whether Northern Ireland is behind or ahead of England when it comes to health spend. It is possible to look at our health spend in terms of gross value added (GVA) or per capita, and several other, more complex, formulae have been tried. My officials have registered significant reservations about the model that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety used to calculate that figure of 14% and, in particular, about the proxy indicator that is used to measure deprivation. It is important to recognise that that figure is largely meaningless unless considered in the context of the relative level of need for other public services. My view is that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should focus on how it will spend the additional £800 million a year allocated to it in the draft Budget rather than on producing ever more desperate arguments to receive more funding.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answers. The Minister, like the rest of us, is aware of the allegation that the allocation to the Health Service has been cut in the draft Budget. The Minister has outlined some of the facts and figures already. How does he view those allegations in the light of the overall Budget that will be presented tomorrow?

Mr P Robinson: Let me lay down some basic principles. The Department of Health receives more than 48% of the Northern Ireland Budget. That is a substantial sum. Its budget has almost doubled over the past seven years. I ask Members whether they believe that improvements in the Health Service have doubled in that time. Do Members believe that there has been a

substantial improvement in the Health Service, simply because more money has been pumped into it?

When I met with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I told it that I wanted a better Health Service, not a more expensive one. Therefore, it is vital that we recognise that, in the draft Budget, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety ends up with the largest amount of money that it has ever had and with a larger percentage of the Northern Ireland block than it has ever had.

Everyone agrees with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that we want Northern Ireland's Health Service to be the very best. However, I have a finite cake that will not grow simply because people throw more appeals and bids for more money towards me.

If anyone asks for more money for one Department or another, they must be able to tell me from where I will take that money, and which other Department should be deprived of those resources. Are they asking for an additional burden on the ratepayers of Northern Ireland, like Ed Curran of the 'Belfast Telegraph'? If so, I must inform them that, in order to fund the type of increases sought by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we would have to triple our rates.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister for Finance and Personnel explain the Barnett formula and why, for many years, the ratios among Northern Ireland, Scotland and England have stood at 1.5, 1.1 and 1? Will he explain why it is important that there be no convergence of that formula, which would spell financial catastrophe for Northern Ireland? Will he explain the impact that convergence will have on the health budget?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

4.00 pm

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Programme for Government and the Draft Investment Strategy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister:*]

Which amendment was:

At end insert

“; but expresses its concern at the limited vision, scope and proposals contained in the documents.” — [*Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Dr Farry, Mr Lunn.*]

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was obvious to certain Members during the first session of Question Time that there was only a few seconds remaining, and I understand that you were looking at the clock. Would it not be better procedure to follow the House of Commons and allow a Minister to answer a question that has been started? As Magnus Magnusson used to say: “I’ve started so I’ll finish.”

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the honourable Member’s good suggestion has been listened to and will emerge at the appropriate Committee.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate that sets out the Executive’s future work plan and how we will make a difference to the lives of everyone in the North of Ireland —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify the procedure for Question Time? Will I receive an answer to the supplementary question that I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister is not required to reply in writing, but I am sure that your question has been heard.

Mrs D Kelly: Often, it has been said that organisations and individuals are inextricably linked in Northern Ireland, and it is unfortunate that that is not clear when one looks at the connections among the Programme for Government, the public service agreements, the Budget and ISNI. The theory is that the Programme for Government, supported by the Budget and ISNI collectively set out the Executive’s strategic vision for Northern Ireland, and how that vision is to be resourced and delivered.

I admire Mrs Robinson's optimism in respect of the Health Service but, bearing in mind that there is not enough money for the Health Service to stand still, never mind to implement the Bamford Review, I am somewhat bewildered by how she came to her conclusion.

I share the concerns of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Danny Kennedy, about the lack of linkage between goals and commitments in the Programme for Government, and the targets and actions included in the public service agreements. I hope that, when the documents have been finalised, the comments will have been heard, and that it will be easy to see clear targets, measurements and outcomes.

However, the Programme for Government has to rely heavily on efficiency savings and, under the CSR, the belt around the public purse is set to tighten further, which does not bode well for the successful delivery of the Executive's priorities. Although I welcome the Executive's support for investment in social and affordable housing, and I congratulate the Minister for Social Development on securing additional investment, I am concerned that that commitment is over-dependent on the selling off of publicly owned land, and the largesse of other Departments.

Therefore, will the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on behalf of the Executive, inform the House of the timescales for the evaluation of progress towards targets that have been set? What remedial actions do they intend to take if targets are not met, and what is plan B?

As a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I am also concerned to note that, while respect for the rule of law is one of the Executive's aspirations, neither the draft Programme for Government nor ISNI make mention of the tripartite agreement that was established to plan for the new police college, which will also include training facilities for the Fire and Rescue Service. At a recent meeting with the Security Minister, Paul Goggins, he made it clear that £90 million remains the Treasury's sole contribution, and that the additional £30 million will have to be found in the devolved Administration's existing Budget.

The SDLP wishes to be reassured that the investment strategy has undergone a full equality impact assessment and that the historic underinvestment, west of the Bann, will be robustly addressed. We also note the Executive's intention, in the draft Programme for Government, to drive improvements in public services. Therefore, the successful delivery of the investment strategy is dependent on whether the public and the private sectors are fit for purpose. Deloitte and Touche's commissioned report assures us that the private sector is fit for purpose. However, we remain to be convinced that the public sector also is, especially when we see

that all organs of Government are unable to work — as yet — as one.

With regard to international relations, we would like to see greater evidence of new areas for North/South implementation bodies and cross-border co-operation — that is, if one accepts that North/South is international. The draft Programme for Government states clearly that the eradication of child poverty is a key target — yet, there is no discrete budget set aside to do so. Therefore, will the First Minister and deputy First Minister tell the House how that will be achieved and what processes will be used to ensure joined-up government? The SDLP wants to see greater target setting, action plans and evidence of monitoring of systems.

Mr Durkan: The Member has posed several questions to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. No Ministers from that Department are present for the current debate. Will the Deputy Speaker find out when a Minister from that Department will be present in the Chamber to listen to the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That information will be passed back.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for that intervention. I would like someone from that office to be present in the Chamber.

The draft Programme for Government states clearly that equality is an important issue for the Executive and for society. Inequality exists, and we must try to eliminate it in all of its forms. Why, then, is there a cut in funding for the Equality Commission? Why are there delays in the implementation of the EU's gender directive and the single equality Bill? As Mrs Naomi Long said, why has no specific priority been given to tackling sectarianism? I hate to burst the First Minister's and deputy First Minister's bubble by telling them that the imagery of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness will not, of itself, see us through the next few years to a future of inclusivity, or a fairer society.

A clear statement is needed, from the Executive, on how they are going to tackle sectarianism and build good community relations. Ignoring the issues and relying solely on photocalls of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will not improve the situation one iota. In fact, many of their previous followers are asking themselves what the past 30 years was all about. While the IRA has decommissioned its weapons, it is the only paramilitary organisation yet to do so. Sadly, the decommissioning of bigotry will take much longer and, some will say, has yet to be commenced.

The draft Programme for Government lacks clear accountability for Government Departments to deliver on some of the key areas in creating a fairer society, improving equality, improving community relations, and in the eradication of child poverty.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has had many discussions about the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and the positioning of the agriculture sector in the Northern Ireland economy. It is obvious to all Members that agriculture faces a number of severe difficulties: the catastrophic deterioration of the red meat sector, heralded by the report by the Red Meat Industry Task Force; the continued decline of the pig sector; and the reduction of our white-fish fleet from 40 boats to two boats.

Regrettably, agriculture does not appear to have been afforded appropriate consideration in the draft Programme for Government, being limited to a couple of mentions of investing £45 million on improving competitiveness and £10 million on a renewable energy programme. The Committee is well aware that that is not the extent of the investment in agriculture, and it is genuine in its welcome for all moneys. However, there is a feeling that the Department has gone for “headlines” rather than the required long-term strategic approach.

The draft Programme for Government outlines strategic priorities and themes, and the Committee does not disagree that the Executive should attempt to raise standards or that it should seek to:

“protect and enhance the physical and natural environment”.

Farming, and farming communities, remain the backbone of the rural economy and are the true guardians of the rural environment. The Committee believes, therefore, that agriculture should have a significantly greater profile and that it should be supported and enhanced to ensure the survival of the industry and the natural environment.

The Committee also wishes that the strategic priorities took cognisance of the issues that face the industry, and it is not content that the draft Programme for Government achieves that. The Committee would prefer, therefore, that a re-prioritisation exercise be undertaken to ensure: the countering of the findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force and the protection, support and enhancement of the red meat, pig and fishing sectors; the eradication, rather than the reduction, of tuberculosis and brucellosis from Northern Ireland, in line with the vast majority of the rest of Europe; and, finally, the promotion of produce that has its origins in Northern Ireland.

I now turn to the key goals and priorities that are identified in the draft Programme for Government, and I would again assert that a re-prioritisation of objectives associated with agriculture is required. The Committee welcomes the investment of £55 million in competitiveness and renewable energy, and it looks forward to seeing the details associated with those programmes. However, in the past, the Committee has heard arguments

that striving to increase the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland that is covered by environmental enhancement agreements could spell the end of intensive farming in the countryside; the Committee believes that, in the long term, that would be detrimental to the environment. The environment, and the economy, need agriculture.

The Committee cannot accept the targets that seek to reduce incidence levels of tuberculosis and brucellosis, which are public-health issues. The Committee believes that the Department has remained in a comfort zone about those diseases for too long, which has often resulted in complacency and an increase in incidence levels. The Committee calls on the Executive and the Department to seek the eradication of those diseases, in line with the vast majority of EU countries.

The Committee is concerned that Northern Ireland’s agricultural competitiveness is being further diminished by allowing imports of meat from South America, with proven inferior welfare and animal-health standards. The Northern Ireland farmer is only asking for a level playing field; I can assure Members that, if that is provided, farmers will be more than capable of meeting the challenges.

The Committee welcomes the investment of £100 million towards diversification under the Northern Ireland rural development programme. The Committee has provided its views on the issue of voluntary modulation on a number of occasions in the past, and it will not revisit the topic at this stage. However, the Committee is concerned at the EU plans to increase the rate of compulsory modulation, which will further reduce the ability of the Northern Ireland industry to compete with its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, in Europe, and globally.

4.15 pm

Finally, in looking at the key goals and strategic priorities, the Committee welcomes all attempts to reduce the bureaucratic burden on farm businesses. There is, however, concern in the Committee that the Department is not doing enough in that regard. On the one hand, it says that reducing bureaucracy is a priority; on the other, it refuses to listen to the voice of this House when it passes a motion to remove the bureaucratic burden known as the Agricultural Wages Board. Even in the PSA framework there is an apparent contradiction: a 25% reduction in the administrative burden by 2013 is one target; another is 90% compliance with one of the most bureaucratic matters facing a farmer, namely that of cross-compliance inspections.

The Committee has several queries regarding targets defined in the draft Programme for Government and the PSA framework; however, I shall only mention them and not go into them in detail. First is the invest-

ment of £45 million to improve competitiveness of the agricultural sector, including £10 million to support the modernisation of farms. That investment is welcome; however, there is no indication of the competitiveness baseline, the level of increase to be sought, and how that investment will increase competitiveness.

Secondly, with regard to the reduction of bureaucracy by 15% by 2011 and by 25% by 2013, from what level does the reduction start, and how is it to be achieved? We still do not know the answers.

Thirdly, concerning the reduction of the incidence of TB and brucellosis, the Committee strongly advocates that that should be rewritten to read “the eradication of TB and brucellosis by 2013.” That would bring Northern Ireland into line with most of Europe. The Committee is concerned that the Department of Agriculture has established a comfort zone with regard to those diseases, and that is not acceptable.

Fourthly, there is the targeted reduction in the number of properties at significant risk of flooding from 28,000 to 27,300 by 2011. What a historic reduction by that time. The Committee queries whether that target is challenging. I certainly do not believe that it is, particularly in light of the experiences earlier this year in Cushendall and Cushendun.

The Committee wishes to see targets relevant to the issues that face the industry, particularly to the support and protection of the red meat, pig and fishing industries.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am sorry; I would gladly give way, but time is running out.

The Committee remains to be convinced that the objectives and the targets in the PSAs are measurable and deliverable. The Department needs to re-prioritise in light of the severe difficulties facing the red meat, pig and fishing sectors. The Committee’s opinion is that the Department needs to establish long-term, strategic goals to retrieve the industry from those long-term difficulties, rather than from short-term hits.

I turn now to the investment strategy, and the Committee notes — and fully supports — the inclusion of compliance with the nitrates directive. I have no doubt that farmers will do all that is necessary to meet those targets; however, I and the Committee are not as confident with regard to a positive response from the Planning Service, and I call on my good ministerial colleague to ensure that farmers are not penalised through no fault of their own.

The Committee, undoubtedly, would have preferred an agricultural pillar to reflect the position of that great industry in the economy of Northern Ireland, and in light of the well-publicised decline of the red meat and pig sectors. The Committee is concerned that, even under the environmental pillar, agriculture — arguably,

the backbone of the environment — is reduced to a mere mention under “Water and Waste Water, Waste Management, Flood Risk Management, Environment”.

My Committee has expressed its opinion on many issues, and I trust that the Minister, rather than going for specialised hits and photographs, will take them forward in the Executive.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. The role of the Department of Employment and Learning is central to the delivery of two of the key priorities in the Programme for Government: “Grow a dynamic, innovative Economy”, and “Promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being”. The role of the Department, both in delivering an innovative approach to economic development and working towards reducing social disadvantage, is critical.

In briefings that the Committee has received to date, the importance of developing the economy has been stressed as the key priority. It is this economic development that will be the main instrument to lift people out of poverty and social disadvantage. The delivery of a challenging skills agenda is clearly central to that.

Similarly, we are being told that we are moving to a highly technical knowledge-based economy and that, in addition to increasing the skills base, innovation and research and development capacity are central to remaining ahead of the game.

The Committee is now well into the process of responding on the draft Programme for Government. However, that will not be complete until this Wednesday, when we have an opportunity to discuss final matters with the Minister. It is in that context that I wish to make the following points on behalf of the Committee. I am going to start with a number of positives before addressing a number of concerns.

The Committee welcomes the focus on small and medium-sized businesses. A number of members of my Committee bring significant private-sector experience to the Committee setting and continually stress the need for support — for example, R&D and skills support — to be geared towards the SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) sector. The Committee considers that the demand-led approach being pursued by the Department, if appropriately resourced, should allow this to happen.

The Committee will be taking a very keen interest in the welfare reform agenda and the Executive’s focus on reducing economic inactivity. The Committee is keen to see that achieved, but within a robust and highly professional environment. The Pathways to Work initiative offers the vehicle for that to happen. As with the Committee’s scrutiny of the rollout of Training for Success, however, we will wish to be

satisfied that Pathways to Work delivers the employment opportunities required while protecting the most vulnerable in society.

I will now move to the areas of concern. Some of these overlap with the discussion of the Budget tomorrow.

The Programme for Government states that there will be an increase of 300 PhDs by 2010. The Committee strongly supports that, within the context of economic development. However, the Committee has concluded that there currently do not appear to be the resources to fulfil this commitment. We hear continually about the negative impact of the so-called brain drain; here is an opportunity for the brightest to remain and conduct technological research in our two excellent universities. If the Executive are stressing the need for high-value jobs, then leading-edge research has a key role to play. The Committee wishes to see this commitment delivered in full.

The Programme for Government also makes a bold statement relating to the university sector and the commercialisation of college research, with a target for this to be complete by 2010. The Committee is unclear as to what this actually involves and is not convinced that there is anything new in this commitment. The Committee asks for clarity on what precisely this involves and what differentiates it from other statements related to increased commercial focus.

Closely linked to that is the goal of securing £120 million in private-sector investment and encouraging 300 companies to engage in R&D activity for the first time. Again, the Committee is very of this goal. However, the Committee has found it difficult to get clarity on how much money will be available for levering and supporting innovation moneys. In support of this goal, the Committee asks for an urgent, clear statement of intent from the Executive with regard to innovation funding in order that the private sector and the universities can plan to allow for the achievement of this goal.

A key goal in the Programme for Government that the Committee fully supports is the proposal to increase the number of adult learners who achieves a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT (information and communication technology) skills by 90,000 by 2015. However, the Committee has serious reservations about the Executive's ability to deliver that goal. The subject has been on the Committee's agenda every week since devolution was restored and has also been debated extensively in many plenary sittings.

The Committee acknowledges that the Department is working extremely hard to achieve that aim. However, we were somewhat shocked to see its poor CSR outcome. We have received assurances from the Department that it considers the resources available to address the number of adult learners achieving those

qualifications to be a good start and something on which to build. The Committee will keep a close eye on developments, and it urges that resources for adult learning be kept continually under review.

The Committee also supports the key goal to increase the number of students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects — science, technology, engineering and maths — and the parallel goal of increasing numbers of higher-education students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am not entirely sure, however, that those two goals should be linked. The Committee has expressed a strong desire to see the outcome of the research done on the profile of students who take up all courses at our universities for the forthcoming review of variable tuition fees. We will return to the issue of general student finance in the new year.

On behalf of the Committee, I want to make some points on priorities and goals that are linked to social inclusion in the Programme for Government. I have already mentioned that the Committee will scrutinise the implementation of the Pathways to Work initiative, on which it is too early to make any judgements. The introduction of the employment and support allowance in April 2008 is a major policy change that obviously overlaps with DSD's work. We recently received welcome and encouraging correspondence from the Minister on the front-line services that jobs and benefits offices are delivering. The Minister was greatly enthused and impressed by the new, personalised service-delivery model that is in place. The Committee will follow up on that assessment in the new year.

The Programme for Government mentions the new careers service that is to be put in place. My Committee and the Committee for Education recently held a joint presentation on that service, and we will fully engage on the consultation after Christmas. From the Committee for Employment and Learning's perspective, the provision of quality and comprehensive careers-advisory services for adults is a priority. We have been told that, as the economy's structure changes, training and careers needs for those who are currently in work will be extensive.

In addition to the broader economic-development agenda, those adults who are currently excluded from mainstream careers and education advice have specific needs that require specialist services. The Committee has expressed some concern that those who are currently involved in the delivery of both guidance and courses face an uncertain funding future, which makes it difficult for community-sector providers to plan in the medium and longer term. The Committee asks that that delivery continue to be a priority for the Department and that it be reinforced, at the earliest possible opportunity, through the development of the long-

promised learner access and support strategy. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I welcome the strategic and cross-cutting nature of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

We must abolish silo thinking. It is time for Departments to choreograph their activities in order to achieve the best outcomes and to avoid duplication of effort. Furthermore, resources must be used most effectively.

The Committee is content with the priorities that are set out in the draft Programme for Government, because they embody the Department for Social Development's role in tackling disadvantage and building communities.

I welcome the five key strategic priorities, even if I do express some surprise at comments that were made just last week on private-sector investment and job creation in the wake of job losses across Northern Ireland. The top priority focuses on growing a dynamic and innovative economy, and economic growth is the driving force behind the creation of wealth and the regeneration of our communities.

Working to reduce poverty and disadvantage among individuals, families and communities is at the heart of DSD's policies and programmes, alongside building sustainability and self-sufficiency.

I welcome the commitment in the draft Programme for Government that increased prosperity will be used to tackle ongoing poverty and disadvantage across our communities.

4.30 pm

I want to emphasise the role that other Departments have to play in tackling disadvantage and poverty and in protecting the most vulnerable in our society. The Department for Social Development may have the lead role in a number of strategies and policies to address those issues but in the majority of cases, other Departments will also be involved. Joined-up Government and working strategically and effectively with other Departments will be critical if the targets and desired outcomes set out in the draft Programme for Government are to be achieved.

I welcome the priority that is being given to tackling the housing crisis and the planned investment in social and affordable housing. If the ambitious target of up to 10,000 new social housing completions over the next five years is to be achieved, all relevant Departments must play their part; the housing crisis is not just an issue for the Department for Social Development.

On the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities, I welcome the priority that is being given to urban regeneration and

the planned investment. However, I stress the need for strategic and cross-departmental working to address the issues. For example, while the Department for Social Development has the lead in this issue, PSA 12, objective 1 lists six Departments that also have responsibilities in the area.

I welcome the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to work towards the elimination of poverty, in particular child poverty. Too many people, particularly the most vulnerable, continue live in communities that experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. Many vulnerable households face fuel poverty. Therefore, the commitment to eradicate fuel poverty is welcome — indeed the excellent work being carried out under the warm homes scheme is an indicator of that commitment.

However, the Committee has serious concerns about the targets that have been set in relation to the eradication of fuel poverty. It was reported in the media just last week that Northern Ireland households are paying three times more for home heating oil than they were five years ago. There has been a 40% hike in prices since August 2007 and, unfortunately, that does not bode well for the fuel poverty target, especially when the level of the winter fuel payment has stayed the same in spite of that increase.

In closing, I welcome the expressed desire to work in partnership, as an Executive, across the public, private and voluntary sectors, to harness the ideas, energy and commitment of all the sectors. By joining up the plans of Government Departments and other stakeholders, we will maximise outcomes.

By working together in this way, I believe that we can build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in which everyone can enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the years to come.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): Speaking personally, it would be churlish not to acknowledge the achievement in producing this document, and foolish for others not to recognise some of the emerging gaps putting distance between the Executive and the scrutiny functions of the House.

We are where we are because we could not stay where we were. The next steps involve agreeing where we want to be. Do we have an Executive coalition of parity between equal partners or a dominant coalition within a coalition? We, in these seats, are committed to ensuring that violence does not return and that the Union is not threatened ever. Liking what we see, supporting it, defying it, or denying it, are no longer choices for this House. However, totally buying into a finalised Programme for Government and accompanying Budget remain, for us, matters to be resolved.

Speaking for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Committee has noted the overall aim of the draft Programme for Government. In relation to the top priority of growing a dynamic and innovative economy, the Committee has noted that there is a huge potential for cultural tourism to contribute to the economy and believes that a more joined-up approach between the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment could maximise the potential that cultural tourism can bring to the economy.

One of the key goals in relation to growing the economy is to grow the creative industries sector by up to 15% by 2011. What is meant by “creative industries”, and will that include cultural tourism? Although growing the creative industries is an admirable objective, the Committee notes that the Department is still exploring opportunities to secure additional funds to increase activity in this area from the innovation fund.

That suggests to the Committee that adequate funding is not contained solely in the draft Budget. We are informed that the Department does not have a dedicated creative industries branch. Therefore, how does the Minister expect to be able to deliver that ambitious target?

The Committee believes that the DCAL target in relation to the priority of promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being — for Northern Ireland to host at least 10 countries at training camps for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games — is a soft and easy target, whereas DCAL could have a real impact on the promotion of tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being through arts and sports, which can deliver community integration. Those are issues that, along with addressing sectarianism in sport, the Committee feels should be included in the target.

One of the targets is to invest £110 million in sports facilities by 2011, thereby ensuring a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, there is no detail available about how that money will be allocated, or which sports will benefit and what the geographical spread of the funding will be. The Committee believes that the target of getting 125,000 young people participating in sport by 2011 is weak. There should be staging posts along the way. How many young people will be participating by 2009 or by 2010? How will the Department measure that target? What is the Department of Education’s role? Surely all young people should be participating in sport while at school.

There is also the issue of funding. Where is the money to pay for the coaches and facilities to allow young people and those with disabilities to participate in sport at a community level? There is no funding allocation for capital projects at that level.

In relation to the priority of protecting and enhancing our environment and natural resources, the Committee is very concerned that there is no reference to inland fishing. DCAL has a role in the protection and conservation of salmon in inland fisheries. Our rivers need to be protected, and the case for an independent environmental protection agency should be looked at again.

I turn now to the public service agreements. In PSA 4, all of the targets appear to relate to DARD. Why is no target required of DCAL in relation to inland fisheries?

DCAL’s role in PSA 5 is pouring capital into buildings. The Committee believes that DCAL must be more innovative in the way that it contributes to tourism — particularly, cultural tourism — and in how it works with local councils and the Tourist Board to achieve its tourist potential.

PSA 6 makes reference to re-establishing a ministerial subcommittee on children. When will that be done, and when and to whom will the subcommittee report?

PSA 8 gives DCAL a target in halting the decline in adult participation in sport. How will that be done? Is there money in the health budget to deliver that, and are there plans for a dual approach between DCAL and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to get it organised?

The proposed Northern Ireland library authority is referred to in PSA 9. The Committee believes that the new library authority should be accountable at a local level. Further detail is required on how that accountability will be achieved.

PSA 10 gives DCAL a responsibility in relation to a literacy and numeracy strategy for young people. However, the Department has informed the Committee that it does not have a responsibility in that area. Why then is DCAL listed under that PSA?

With regard to PSA 12, we know that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure appointed a new ministerial advisory group in September 2007 to advise him of the implementation of the architecture and built environment policy. Why is there no corresponding target for the advisory group? How will its success or otherwise be measured?

The Committee also examined the investment strategy. It noted the three cross-cutting themes — economic, societal and environmental.

Bearing in mind the importance of culture and the wider benefits that it offers to society, the Committee proposes that a further cross-cutting theme be included, under the heading: “cultural”.

In respect of the investment pillar termed “skills”, DCAL has been allocated £31 million. The Committee cannot say whether that amount will be adequate for the modernisation of the Library Service because it has

not, at this stage, been provided with details of how that £31 million is to be spent.

Turning to the investment pillar termed “social”, DCAL has been allocated a whopping £210 million for culture, arts and leisure. Again, the Committee cannot say whether that amount will be adequate because we do not know, at this stage, how that amount will be broken down.

Overall, insufficient information has been provided to allow for a proper assessment by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee asks that the Executive work to ensure that a much more comprehensive document is produced between now and when we have the final papers before us. The case for the DCAL Committee rests.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I can report that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been carefully considering the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and will continue to do so. We have benefited from the views of a number of stakeholders, including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Federation of Small Businesses, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), and the Carbon Trust.

I believe that the Committee is generally content with the overarching aims, strategic priorities and cross-cutting themes of the Programme for Government. Obviously, we particularly welcome the emphasis on growing the economy as a significant priority over the lifetime of the Programme for Government. I recognise that, of course, that goal is not new — it was included in previous Programmes for Government, and was also agreed as part of the work of the Committee on the Preparation for Government. However, to see that priority repeated and restated, accompanied by cross-cutting PSAs, in a Programme for Government is a very welcome and positive development.

We welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy on a number of levels, as they relate to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, we recognise that balancing policy ambitions with resource constraints is going to provide a challenge for Ministers, the Executive — and this Assembly, which holds authority for the Budget. Therefore, the choices do not rest only with Ministers and the Executive, and we as Members, must recognise that.

With a real-terms increase in public expenditure of just 1.2%, we must recognise that things are tight. My Committee is particularly concerned about the degree to which the overall Budget, which supports the Programme for Government, relies on the achievement of very significant efficiency savings, which are

already factored into the allocations. If Ministers run into difficulties in delivering those efficiency savings, resulting in a hole in the Budget, we would not wish to see the DETI budget used as the first port of call when it comes to remedial action, because that has certainly happened in the past.

We welcome the fact that the Programme for Government cites a growing, dynamic, innovative economy as the top priority. Obviously, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have an important role to play in the delivery of that goal, working with other Departments, as well as with its own agencies.

Halving the private-sector productivity gap with other parts of the UK, excluding the greater south east, is an ambitious goal that presents a challenge, particularly when — as now — the private-sector productivity gap is, in fact, widening. That represents a failure of wider UK Government regional policy, but it presents a challenge to us too. It is not clear that sufficient resources will be committed to deliver that target, or what means are planned to deliver it, beyond wishing it. We wish to see exactly what the Executive have in mind in respect of developing actions. We also recognise, of course, that the Assembly and the Executive do not have the fiscal discretion that would help us to deliver that target. We await the results of the Varney Review, but hardly with bated breath.

Furthermore, the Committee has some questions on whether sufficient resources have been made available to improve the skills supply as it is emphasised in key high-value added sectors in the economy. The Committee would like milestones to be set to monitor progress in that regard.

4.45 pm

The Committee welcomes some of the targets for productivity growth in the region, such as support for new businesses and the commitment, by way of inward investment, to secure 6,500 jobs by 2011. In its reporting on the draft Programme for Government, the BBC constantly repeats that target for job creation as a global target, despite the fact that it is specifically related to jobs created as a result of inward investment. That target must be questioned, and constantly tracked and monitored, not least given the recent experiences of the bad news from Limavady and elsewhere.

In responding to the type of situation that arose in Limavady, the Committee has noted that the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget anticipate the demise of the integrated development fund, which was the final remainder of the Executive programme funds that we had during the previous period of devolution. For circumstances requiring a coherent, strategic response to a crisis, as is the case in Limavady, the integrated development fund would be a

useful tool, and the Committee asks the Executive to further consider that option.

The Committee welcomes the target of securing £120 million of private-sector investment commitments in innovation and for 300 companies to engage in research and development and innovation for the first time by 2010-11. That will be necessary if we are to develop an innovative economy. However, the Committee is concerned that there is a lack of visibility in and around the innovation funding that was announced by the then Chancellor when he met all the parties last year and earlier this year, and a lack of visibility in the additional innovation funding that has been made available by the Irish Government. There is concern that that money is disappearing into the woodwork of existing innovation measures. The Committee wishes to see that money creating additional measures with additional outcomes. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive have more work to do in that regard.

The draft investment strategy contains key issues in relation to network development. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have an important role to play in improvements in telecommunications and broadband availability, and the Committee wants to see that role developed positively. However, we also want to ensure that there is comprehensive coverage across the region as we take up the next generation of broadband provision. The Committee also recognises that wider measures in the draft investment strategy around networks and infrastructure development, although not directly under the delivery arm of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will be central to ensuring competitive economic performance.

We welcome the broader investment in infrastructure that has been committed to in the draft investment strategy, and the 10-year investment plan that arose from decisions that were taken during the previous period of devolution, when we saw the need to frame a much longer-term capital investment strategy to take the region forward.

Although the Committee welcomes the overall commitments to enterprise support, we want to see more detail on the instruments and actions that will provide that support. The Committee noted that no particular measures have been adopted in relation to the social economy; nor has any target been associated with the action to consider projects that will bring specific benefits to areas of economic disadvantage. That is an important commitment, but so far no targets have been associated with it. The Committee recommends that an action be included that addresses that issue.

The Committee wishes to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are actively supported and promoted.

We welcome the fact that the Minister has emphasised that alongside the importance of continuing to pursue foreign direct investment. However, the Committee is concerned that the positive statements from the Minister do not seem to be matched by an active commitment on the part of INI to work with the local enterprise agencies as they support small and medium-sized enterprises.

There is a sense of psychological withdrawal from that area, as there is on the issue of the social economy, where DETI should take an active working policy lead. It could borrow from some of the work of the Office of the Third Sector across the water and take a more proactive approach to developing the social economy. Some of the Committee's other concerns touch more on Budget issues, and we may address some of those in tomorrow's debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. The Committee for Finance and Personnel recognises the importance of both documents, and, especially, their relationship with the Executive's draft Budget.

The Committee has taken evidence from DFP on the Department's contribution to the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy. Although the Committee has not yet agreed its final response, I wish to highlight its thinking on the areas of the Programme for Government and investment strategy to which DFP will contribute directly. DFP has now provided detailed follow-up information on issues requiring clarification, and the Committee will consider those matters when it meets on Wednesday to finalise its position.

In relation to the strategic priorities contained in the draft Programme for Government, DFP's main contribution relates to the delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services. Reference is made under that priority to the Civil Service reform programme, which is being co-ordinated by DFP, realising significant savings that will be redirected to delivering key services.

The Committee requested quantification of the savings to be generated by the reform programme over the three-year budgetary period. These savings are vital to the Executive's draft Budget and will play a key role in the delivery of the Programme for Government. Given that the savings are specifically mentioned in the draft Programme for Government under that priority, the revised Programme would be enhanced by their being quantified.

The key goals and priorities for DFP relate to the delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services and the delivery of efficiency savings, the generation of additional capital by the disposal of surplus assets and the consolidation of public-sector websites.

The Committee had initial concerns about the objectives and targets contained in the public service agreements that are relevant to the Department of Finance and Personnel. PSA 11, objective 4 is to:

“Support the wider Public Sector in taking account of sustainable development principles when procuring works, supplies and services.”

The Committee is concerned that the target for embedding sustainable development principles in capital investment decisions will take three years to achieve. It wishes to see implementation being brought forward in the revised Programme for Government.

Also under that objective, small and medium-sized enterprises are to be given opportunities to do business with public-sector organisations by September 2008. The Committee has queried what that process involves and why such opportunities have not been maximised already. The Committee will consider whether suitable measurement arrangements need to be put in place to determine the success of the policy and to enable progress to be reported to the Assembly.

In relation to sustainable development, DFP has a central role in promoting sustainability in the procurement, operation and maintenance of buildings and the procurement of sustainable supplies and services. It is also responsible for regulating building standards and promoting energy efficiency across the public sector.

The Department has informed the Committee that it is soon to finalise its own action plan on sustainable development, and the Committee has already requested quarterly updates. DFP has the main responsibility for objective 1, the delivery of a programme of Civil Service reform under PSA 20, “Improving Public Services”. Target dates for the various Civil Service reform programmes are included under that objective. The Committee sought clarification from DFP that those targets are for the full implementation of the various programmes as opposed to the piloting of the programmes, and it also requested a comparison of those targets with the original implementation plans.

Objective 4 of the PSA aims to promote and improve access to public services and information. Under that objective, a single telephone number point of contact for selected public services is to be in place by December 2008. The Committee has learned that four Civil Service organisations have been selected for this first phase: DARD; DFP’s Land and Property Services; the General Register Office; and the Planning Service.

It is planned that it will include the majority of citizen-facing services, and, although a time frame has yet to be agreed for the inclusion of those services, roll-out is expected to start in 2009-10. The Committee has queried whether there is any study of the benefits of including key stakeholder organisations in the community and voluntary sector as part of that ongoing study. The Committee believes that, because of the potentially high-profile nature of the project, it must work effectively from the outset.

The Committee considers that the target for this NI Direct project should be strengthened in the revised Programme for Government to include: the proportion of public services to be covered when the first phase is introduced in December 2008; further detail on subsequent roll-out within the 2008-11 time frame; and a specific target to deal effectively with a given percentage of calls at the first point of contact.

DFP also has a major role in PSA 21, “Enabling Efficient Government”. Under objective 1, which aims to support the First Minister and deputy First Minister in leading the Executive, the Committee notes that the target for the first review of the Budget for 2008-11 is to be completed by January 2009. The Committee has already raised with DFP the issue of an annual timetable for Budget setting and review, which would build in sufficient time for the effective involvement of the Assembly’s Statutory Committees, and it will work with the Department to achieve that as soon as possible.

Objective 2 of PSA 21 aims to build the capacity of the Civil Service to deliver the Government’s priorities by improving leadership, skills, professionalism, diversity and equality. The Committee has been briefed on the actions to be taken by DFP to encourage applications to the Civil Service from under-represented groups and on new research to be undertaken into perceived barriers to employment in the Civil Service. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of that research, but it is concerned about the absence of a timescale for the Civil Service to be reflective of the diversity of our society.

The Committee has also highlighted to DFP the absence of timescales for the delivery of the target to ensure that the Civil Service has the right skills and expertise to deliver effective public services. More specific and measurable targets may need to be included in the revised Programme for Government in both those areas.

Under objective 3 of PSA 21, a target has been included to ensure that public spending delivers value for money. The Committee wishes to see more detail included as to how the delivery of value for money in public spending is to be measured objectively. The Committee understands that departmental efficiency delivery plans will be published alongside the final Budget and will, therefore, be available to Statutory

Committees for scrutiny. The proposed performance efficiency delivery unit is expected to play a key role in that matter. The Committee will be briefed on the role of that unit this week, and it has yet to respond formally to the proposal. In any event, there will be a need to monitor the outputs from the unit in its drive to achieve higher levels of savings.

Under objective 5 of PSA 21, which aims to deliver value-for-money gains in Government procurement, the Committee requested further detail on the structure of the centres of procurement expertise, which are to deliver those gains. The Committee wishes to see the revised Programme for Government include dates for delivery against some of the targets under this objective, including the 3% value-for-money gains on procurement spend.

I now turn to the draft investment strategy. DFP bid for approximately £94.2 million over the three financial years from 2008 to 2011, and it was allocated £68.7 million. The Committee will continue to monitor the potential impact that the allocations proposed for DFP in the draft strategy may have on its ability to deliver and how DFP plans to manage with an allocation that is significantly below the amount sought.

5.00 pm

The Committee has concerns as to whether the capital allocations for Land and Property Services were sufficient to allow the organisation to alleviate the difficulties associated with its IT systems, which were discussed during Question Time, especially with regard to rates relief. The Committee will keep a watching brief on that matter, particularly in the light of the outcome of the current review of domestic rating, the first stage of which will be announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 27 November. Land and Property Services will have a key role in the implementation of the rating reforms to be introduced in April 2008 and beyond. The Department of Finance and Personnel must consider how any further funding requirements that arise from rating reform can be met in any revised allocations.

The Department has also bid for £15 million over the three-year period for the central energy efficiency fund, which is used to support measures to improve the energy performance of, and reduce carbon dioxide emissions from, Government buildings. The Committee believes that the £6 million that was allocated to the fund in the draft investment strategy runs contrary to the prominence that was given to sustainability by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr S Wilson: Although many Members will find pieces in the draft Programme for Government that they are not happy with or have concerns about, it probably deserves better than the comments that have

been made by certain parties during the debate. As usual, the Alliance Party has taken its lofty, patronising, talk-down approach, which came from the apprentice from East Belfast, Mrs Long: wait until the House hears the speech from the leader of the party, Mr Ford, who has perfected the ability to talk down to people without even trying.

Members have listened to all the self-seeking stuff that comes from the Alliance Party about there being more means to delivering a shared future. The party wants more money to be spent on integrated education in order, the House is told, to save resources, even though it is known that in areas where Alliance Party supporters have promoted integrated schools, it has often been to duplicate or triplicate the provision that already exists.

The theme has also been taken up by the SDLP, which seems to have latched on to quangos. Mrs Kelly lamented that less money is being given to the Equality Commission, as if relations in Northern Ireland could simply be improved by spending more money on quangos. I understand why the Alliance Party wants there to be more commissions for this and more commissions for that — the Fair Employment Commission, the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, and so on — because, of course, those bodies are job-creation projects for the Alliance Party's failed politicians. Given the number of them, more of those quangos must be created.

I cannot, however, understand the SDLP's attitude when it produced that argument. I listened to Mrs Kelly's speech, which was more like the 11-plus paper that youngsters had to do last week than a speech. There were more questions in it than in the 11-plus. I believe that I counted 18 questions. Mercifully, the First Minister was not present to hear it. What amazes me is that if the SDLP have all those questions about the draft Programme for Government, what on earth was its Minister doing when the document was being drawn up? I assume that —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way in a moment, although I am not sure to which Member.

What on earth was the Minister for Social Development doing? It certainly seems as though she has not been able to answer the questions that Mrs Kelly has raised in the Assembly.

Mr Ford: I appreciate that the Member was not present to hear the contribution by his colleague the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee who asked as many questions and made as many complaints about the programme as Mrs Kelly did.

Mr S Wilson: I was not present for Dr McCrea's speech. However, I assume that, as Chairperson of the

Committee, he was asking questions on its behalf. There is a difference.

Mrs Kelly was asking questions on behalf of her party — a party that has a Minister in the Executive and who sat down with the other Ministers to agree the draft Programme for Government. Other Members attempted to do the same. Mr McNarry also tried to wash the fingerprints of the Ulster Unionist Party from the document. He joined in the cynical approach taken by other Members who want to distance themselves from a document in which their party colleagues played a part. He said that the Ulster Unionist Party had not made up its mind as to whether to sign up to the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. The Ulster Unionists are either in the Executive or they are not; they either sign up to the documents, or they do not.

Mr Cobain: Oh.

Mr S Wilson: I hear the Member for North Belfast saying “Oh”, but at least he is honest. He wants the Ulster Unionist Party to come out of the Executive and not be part of it. However, considering the party’s manoeuvring — it was even prepared to do a deal with the PUP to gain an extra Minister in the Executive — I assume that there is not any great desire among his colleagues who are Ministers to leave the Executive. Some Members are attempting to wash their hands of any responsibility for the draft Programme for Government.

The draft Programme for Government is a joint document from all the parties in the Executive, and, as with any document, it will generate concerns. Members of the Committee for Education — of which I am Chairperson — have expressed concerns about, for instance, the targets that have been set. Members may get an opportunity to discuss those today or, if not, they can talk about them tomorrow during the debate on the draft Budget. Committee members are concerned about how the targets have been linked to the draft Budget and whether they were linked to the budgets that were given to the Departments. If they were, there is no reason why Departments should not deliver them, because the Ministers — presumably — agreed the targets on the basis of the resources allocated to them.

I have another concern about education, and I am reflecting the views of all the parties represented in the Committee for Education when I highlight my concern about the commitment to having — *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Member clarify whether he is speaking in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Education?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order.

Mr S Wilson: Had the Member been listening he would know in what capacity I am speaking. Maybe

that is one of the SDLP’s problems: it does not listen to its Minister, so it has to ask questions here. The Member cannot even listen to the introduction that was given to me when I got up to speak. I was introduced as a Member — not as Chairman of the Committee for Education. That is the answer, but, perhaps, if the Member paid more attention, he would not have such problems in the future.

Although I am not speaking as Chairman of the Committee, may I say that all parties expressed concerns about the education and skills authority, which is part of the draft Programme for Government. They are concerned about that piece of legislation, its terms and whether the efficiencies that the Department hopes to achieve through it — which seem to be the main efficiencies — can be achieved, because it seems that the costings were based on unrealistic figures from the education and library boards. We do not know what the structure will be in the future, so we do not know how much the new education and skills authority will cost. However, it is included in the draft Programme for Government as one of the Education Department’s main sources of efficiencies.

There are other questions about the education and skills authority and whether it is the right way to proceed with the administration of education. We do not know what input there will be at a local level in respect of monitoring and delivery of the services provided.

The one thing that I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that I do not believe that the date that has been set for the delivery of the education and skills authority, given the amount of discussion that still appears necessary, is deliverable. If that is not the case, efficiencies may not be delivered.

One of my other concerns, which is shared by a number of Members, is the fact that the Youth Service will continue to be delivered by the Department of Education. I am fairly sure that many Members believe that the Youth Service ties far more closely to community services and leisure services in local councils and ought to be devolved to local councils under the review of public administration. As it stands, the Programme for Government places the Youth Service in the education framework. A concern shared by many is that that is, perhaps, not the best way to deliver that programme.

The other area that there is grave concern about is the investment strategy. One hundred new schools or major investment projects in schools have been planned over the next three years. The Department of Education has not been good at delivering on major educational projects and, indeed, has handed back money — in fact, it has handed back the largest amount of money almost every year. There are good

reasons for that and good reasons why there have been delays. The Committee is concerned that the investment projects will depend upon area-based planning, which will be part of the second education Bill, probably will not come to the House for another two years. If the investment programme in education is dependant upon proper planning at a local area level, it could well be that the programme will come unstuck because we do not even have in place the infrastructure in which to deliver that investment programme.

Reaching agreement will be even more difficult given the fact that in the discussions that we have had so far on the review of public administration, the Minister and the Department have made it clear that they intend to maintain the sectoral interests in education. In Northern Ireland, those same interests have delivered a surplus of school places and those sectors have fought over whether schools should be closed or amalgamated or whether a certain sector should be protected as opposed to another sector. That situation will make it difficult to decide on the spending of the money.

Those are legitimate concerns for the Executive to consider. They do not in any way destroy the Programme for Government as it is drawn up but they do raise questions that must be considered more closely before the final Programme for Government is presented, meaning that when we do get the final Programme for Government, we have document that is resourced, deliverable and allows the Executive to say that they have delivered on their promises.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. My points are similar to those from many of the other Members who have spoken. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, particularly their overarching aims and strategic objectives and the promotion of a more equal society. However, like some other Members, I have some concerns that should be considered before the final documents are issued.

First, I welcome the priority given to the growing of a dynamic, innovative economy, because there is no question that that is needed, if we are to create the conditions to deliver the equal, fair and tolerant society to which we are all aspiring. The economy needs to change to deliver a Programme for Government that ensures that people have equal access to an enhanced quality of life and increased prosperity, resulting in the reduction of poverty and disadvantage.

5.15 pm

Two main cross-cutting themes in the draft Programme for Government are “sustainability” and “a better future”. Although there is a strong focus on building the private sector by attracting foreign direct investment and by supporting smaller local businesses, that is not

matched by a similarly strong focus on building the social economy. This is in spite of an acceptance that social enterprise can be very proactive in delivering economic and social change, particularly in areas of need and disadvantage. The realisation that social economy projects provide much needed services in the community and employ local people must be written into the draft Programme for Government, and appropriate targets and outcomes must be set.

The delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services is given high priority in the draft Programme for Government. Although any reduction to bureaucracy and red tape must be welcomed, I hope that it will not result in any cuts to front-line services. My experience, which is like that of many in the community of West Belfast that I represent, is that public-sector cuts usually result in public-sector projects that the community and voluntary sector deliver losing out.

To attract high-quality jobs, investment in skills and lifelong learning projects is essential, as has been outlined in the draft Programme for Government and in the draft investment strategy. A recent report illustrated the educational attainment gap that still exists, even at primary school age, between children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who do not.

There must be investment in a high-quality education system that will enable everyone, regardless of social background, to access the high-quality jobs that are mentioned throughout both documents. Every child has the right to realise his or her potential, and that applies in further education too. I want to see first-rate apprenticeships being made available to people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to develop the skills base necessary to ensure equality of opportunity when they access employment.

I welcome the draft investment strategy’s reference to:

“including consideration of social outcomes in procurement issues, will be issued to public bodies in the near future.”

I particularly welcome the fact that that will apply to the delivery of all plans for infrastructure investment. That will create an opportunity to ensure that local people, particularly the most disadvantaged in society, and local companies will benefit from any new employment opportunities that will arise.

However, I am concerned that capital investment over the next three years will be dependent on current, or proposed, PFI projects. The difficulties and delays, to which some previous PFI projects have been subject, and taking into account the Finance Minister’s earlier comments about Workplace 2010, illustrate the weakness of any capital investment being dependent on PFI.

I broadly welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. I hope

that they will deliver a better future for everyone and that they will tackle the social and economic inequalities that create and perpetuate poverty and disadvantage in our society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I have been able to listen to the proposals that are before the House at first hand. I am among many Members who have asked for additional issues to be included. I compared the priorities that were agreed in OFMDFM with the proposals of the draft Programme for Government and found that they will deliver and address the issues.

Do not mistake what I am saying: the document by no means addresses all the issues on the wish list. However, it addresses the issues that were identified as priorities. Unlike some Members, I do not believe that there is an inexhaustible fund from which money can be drawn to achieve all that we would love to achieve in the Province. For that reason, the Committee made issues that are imperative to the future of the Province the top priorities in the draft Programme for Government.

For a while, it would be nice to live in the dream-land that some inhabit, and I suggest that the Alliance Party is among them. That party chases the shiny pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The next time Members see a rainbow in the sky, they will see David Ford in his green wellies, followed by Naomi Long in her pink wellies, digging with a spade as they try to find that pot of gold.

The Budget is limited. Consequently we must make the most of what we have to produce more and better for the next generation who can in turn make more provision for the next generation, and so on. I agree, to some extent, with the statement that the proposals are somewhat limited in scope. They are there to provide the essentials for giving Northern Ireland a secure future and do not take into account the far regions of the imagination of some of the Members here who called for abstracts at the expense of fundamentals.

The aims of the investment strategy and the Programme for Government are not a wish list. They are methods of achieving a credible goal: a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with a respect for the rule of law.

As much as I would love to be able to go through the investment strategy and the Programme for Government, I will leave that to others. I will, however, highlight a few issues that are of particular importance to me, and which have been addressed in the investment strategy. Three objectives are clear — to accelerate economic growth in business; to ensure equality of opportunity; and to promote the care

of the environment, with a view to implementing EU Directives on the matter.

The desire is to achieve a balance of investment to ensure the long-term sustainability of public service infrastructure. That has been addressed by some £5.6 billion spending for the next three years for the new infrastructure, which will measure out in the next ten years to some £18 billion. This has been specifically addressed in this manner to rectify the legacy of underinvestment during the Troubles and direct rule. The fact of the matter is that there is no point in the wide-scale promotion of tourism, investment and business opportunity when our infrastructure is substandard.

I have put the marker forward for Strangford. Quite clearly, it has the potential to be developed. Jobs and opportunities can come from tourism. There is more pressure than ever on regional infrastructure. For the first time ever, there has been a shift from net emigration to immigration, with statistics showing that by the end of 2006, there were 19,000 immigrants from Europe and further afield living and working in the Province.

Therefore, instead of people leaving and the subsequent lessening of strain, there are more people arriving, with a consequent build-up of pressure. It is for this reason that the placement of funding is essential and timely. The basics must be addressed first, and the investment of £5.6 billion is the first step in that direction.

Six pillars have been identified for the investment strategy. These are further made up of 23 sub-pillars. Time does not permit me to go into all of those. The pillars are made up of network, skills, health, social care, environment, and production, on which the £18 billion will be spent over the next ten years. Rural and primary industries are addressed, which, in practical terms, means a boost to tourism and the modernisation and diversification of agriculture by the year 2013. We all know — those of us who represent rural areas — that diversification in agriculture is the key to the future of farming.

Some £25 million of public and private investment has been focused on the fishing industry through the European fisheries fund programme. Again, a cause that is very close to my heart, as I represent Portavogie. Between 2008 and 2011, £410 million will be spent on rural development. The Strangford constituency comprises urban and rural districts. Therefore, I am aware of the need for investment. Also, through the Programme for Government, there is a commitment to facilitate the reduction of the administration burden on farms by 25%. That addresses the red tape plea brought forward by farmers, not just in my constituency, but from across the Province.

There is also the commitment made to invest £45 million by 2013 to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, and to improve local development in the rural community with an investment of some £100 million, with a view to improve the quality of life of rural residents and address poverty in the rural area.

I will mention child poverty and the priority that OFMDFM has set — 30% of children in the Strangford constituency are subject to child poverty. Child poverty is a big issue.

For housing, £1,388 million has been proposed over the next ten years. The commitment is to build over 10,000 new homes in the next five years. In Strangford, 2,500 people are on the waiting list, and that number is rising. Social housing is a tremendously big issue. It is an issue that is plaguing most of our young people and young couples today. It is, therefore, a timely commitment to ensure that there is affordable housing for the Province, as well as £50million for neighbourhood regeneration.

Within DCAL, there is a commitment to invest £504 million over the next ten years, including a desire to promote Northern Ireland as a training ground for 12 countries for the upcoming Olympics and Paralympics. That is why a 50 m swimming pool will be built, and why I will continue to push for some local shooting sports clubs to be granted funding to facilitate Olympic teams. There is provision for up to £110 million to go towards sports facilities, which can — and should — be used to raise the profile of the Province for the Olympics and leave a lasting legacy for our people.

The investment will include £5.6 billion for infrastructure; £3.1 billion for roads over 11 years; £1.4 billion for water and waste; £3.5 billion for education; £3.5 billion for health; and £1.4 billion for housing. All the essentials are accounted for, as well as propositions for businesses, on which other Members will expand. In citing the aims and goals of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, and the ways in which funds are allocated, it must be stressed that it is still up to the Departments to administer funds in the right way — OFMDFM can do only so much. The responsibility of Ministers cannot be overlooked or sidelined.

The Programme for Government is wide ranging and covers the essentials for the rebuilding of the Province in a global context. Although all Members will have pet peeves and issues that have not been directly addressed, the needs of the Province have, on the whole, been measured and a recipe has been created that uses the ingredients in the right way. It is now the job of the individual chefs to ensure that the outcome is palatable.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Chairpersons of Committees — and there are a number who wish to

speak in the debate — that when they speak as Chairpersons, they speak on behalf of the Committee. Should they wish to make a personal or political contribution, it is vital that they alert the House of that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Regional Development, in common with other Committees, has scrutinised the draft Programme for Government over the past number of weeks. It will finalise its views on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy at its meeting this week. It is in that context that I make this contribution.

Over the past number of weeks, the Committee has heard from a variety of stakeholders, including the Quarry Products Association, the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Group, Help the Aged, Age Concern, NICVA, the Federation of Small Businesses, and the Confederation of British Industry. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all those individuals and organisations who generously placed their time and expertise at our disposal.

I do not propose to deal with all the aspects of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy, but I wish to make some points about the Executive's cross-cutting themes, the priorities and goals that are relevant to regional development, and the investment strategy. The Committee notes that, of the five strategic and interrelated priority areas identified by the Executive, growing a dynamic, innovative economy is identified as a top priority. That is followed by a discussion of the cross-cutting themes termed "a better future" and "sustainability", which the Executive state will underpin the delivery of their priorities.

In its evidence to the Committee, NICVA noted that a shared future had become "a better future", with no definition of the watchwords of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. NICVA was also critical of what it saw as the trickle-down assumption inherent in the approach of the Programme for Government.

The Committee believes that a radically different approach to sustainability is required if Northern Ireland is to play its part in achieving the 60% to 80% reduction in carbon emissions that the Prime Minister outlined in his speech on the environment on 19 November 2007. In its evidence to the Committee, NICVA also highlighted the imbalance between spending on roads, and planned spending on public transport, and what it saw as the scant consideration of carbon emissions from transport in the draft Programme for Government.

5.30 pm

However, the Committee's view is that the issue is not simply one of bus and rail versus roads. A more useful discussion — one that is yet to be held — would focus on carbon emissions from different modes of

transport, with consideration being given to green energy and the use of hybrid-based modes of public transport. As a cross-cutting theme, it is not clear to the Committee what force, if any, sustainability has in implementation. Although public service agreement 22 refers to the reduction of our carbon footprint, it does not contain an explicit carbon-emissions reductions action or target, nor does DRD have a target for that.

There are several priorities and goals in the draft Programme for Government that are relevant to the Department for Regional Development. The Department has responsibility for delivering PSAs that contribute to each of the five priority areas that the Executive have identified in the draft Programme for Government. I will consider those in turn.

Priority 1 is entitled “Growing a dynamic, innovative economy”. Infrastructure has been identified as a key driver of economic growth and productivity, a crucial factor in competitiveness and in the decisions of foreign direct investment in choosing host locations. DRD contributes to the achievement of that priority through its investment in roads and public transport, and through its management of policies that concern water and sewerage services, ports and airports.

Priority 2 is to promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being. Key goal 10 of that priority is:

“Reducing by 33% the overall number of people, and by 50% the number of children, killed or seriously injured on our roads by 2012.”

The Committee notes with some concern that the road-safety targets for percentage reductions in those killed and seriously injured are broadly similar to those in previous years. Although road conditions are responsible for a small proportion of such incidents, the Committee is firmly of the view that reductions will not be achieved without adequate funding for structural road maintenance and local traffic measures. The Committee calls for adequate funding for structural maintenance programmes.

Priority 3 is to protect and enhance our environment and natural resources. Key goal 5 of priority 3 is:

“Delivering a new sewer project for central Belfast by 2010.”

Priority 4 is to invest to build our infrastructure. Its key goal 2 is:

“Investing £3.1bn in our road network by 2018.”

Its key goal 3 is:

“Investing £1.4bn in our water and waste water infrastructure by 2018.”

The achievability of the key goals in priority 4 is dependent on the availability of funding outside the current Budget programme and period and on decisions that a future Executive will make.

Priority 5 is to deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services. Its key goals 1, 2, 3 and 5 are as follows: to achieve 5% efficiency savings on administration costs for the next 3 years; to deliver 3% per annum on resource budgets; to contribute to the generation of an extra £1 billion of capital realisation; and to streamline Department and agency websites by 2009. The Committee’s view is that achieving those efficiencies must not come at the expense of service levels or of road and public safety.

As the draft Programme for Government sets 38 key goals, it may not be helpful to add to the list at this time. However, it might be useful if, in future revisions of the draft Programme for Government, the centrality of environmentally sustainable infrastructure and connectivity were made more explicit and given a higher priority.

Greater clarity is needed in the draft investment strategy. It is not clear that its six pillars and 23 sub-pillars are sufficiently aligned to the five priorities and two cross-cutting themes that the Executive identified in the draft Programme for Government. In the case of the Department for Regional Development, the 23 sub-pillars appear to align closely with the draft Budget objectives. That is not surprising, because years 1 to 3 of the ISNI map to the Budget period. However, it is not sufficiently clear how the sub-pillars relate to the 23 public service agreements.

Perhaps understandably, given the indicative nature of funding for the ISNI beyond year 3, the draft ISNI’s key goals are aspirational. Although that is at odds with the role of the ISNI as a strategic forward consideration of infrastructure needs, it may be inevitable, because the ISNI is tied to the Budget. That is problematic, because the infrastructure industries and others will be seeking clarity and certainty in order to prepare to compete for forthcoming Government business. The nature of infrastructure projects is that there is a long lead and development time, which often falls outside the three-year planning period. That contributes to the aspirational nature of the key goals and means that most of the milestones of relevance to the Committee for Regional Development that are contained in the draft ISNI refer to projects that are already well advanced.

In some cases that means that commitments are being made on those projects, which are on the way to being delivered, and the observer might be tempted to ask where the challenge for the Department lies.

The Committee again highlights the lack of discussion of carbon emissions in the final ISNI’s networks pillar, although the measure for investment proposals submitted as part of the ISNI bidding process devoted considerable attention to that topic.

On the environment pillar, the discussion is limited to consideration of water and waste compliance with

EU directives, rather than a fuller consideration of the carbon footprint in all of our investment activities. Reference is made to investment in the water and waste infrastructure, but the Committee is of the view that until the Executive have made decisions on the outstanding strand-one and strand-two issues of the independent water review, which is to be published in December, it is not in a position to make further comment on the proposals in this pillar.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you for inviting me to address the issues on the response to the draft Programme for Government 2008-11 and the investment strategy NI 2008-18 on behalf of the Committee.

The Committee welcomes the overarching aim to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland that has respect for the rule of law, and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come. The Committee believes that that should be done in ways that protect and enhance the physical and natural environment, using sustainable resources as effectively as possible, as stated in the draft Programme for Government. The Committee also welcomes the cross-cutting themes set out in the investment strategy NI and, in particular, the theme that building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies and programmes.

The Committee particularly welcomes the priority given to protecting and enhancing the environment and natural resources. We also welcome, subject to proper resources being made available, the priorities in the Programme for Government that relate to delivering a fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011; strengthening the protection of key habitats and species by declaring 200 new ASSIs by 2016; reducing landfill significantly; and increasing the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland covered by environmental-enhancement agreements to 50% by 2011.

We also welcome the key goals of reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint by at least 25% by 2025; enabling 4,700 farmers to comply with the nitrates directive by 2009; increasing the area of forest and woodland by 1,650 hectares by 2011; and halting the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015.

However, the Committee would prefer to see a higher profile for climate change included as a key goal in the Programme for Government, including an explicit commitment to tackle climate change and highlight its implications for society. The Committee is aware that the Department sought the inclusion of a specific goal relating to raising awareness of the impact of climate change on Northern Ireland.

The Committee supports a further crackdown on illegal waste disposal through the pursuit of prosecution for offenders. It also endorses the key goals, as set out by the Department, of strengthening a partnership approach to cutting the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads by at least a third by 2012; halting the biodiversity loss, as far as possible, by taking into account the effects of climate change in Northern Ireland by 2015; and compliance with the water framework directive to achieve good water quality by 2015.

The Committee also notes that there is no reference to the establishment of an environmental protection agency. The Committee recognises the cross-cutting nature of sustainable development and the role of all Departments in its implementation, believes that there is a specific role for the Department of the Environment in sustainable development and recommends that adequate and sufficient funds be provided to ensure the delivery of the key goals. The Committee acknowledges that the PSA annex to the Programme for Government addresses the cross-cutting issues and challenges across departmental boundaries, and that many of the outcomes are interdependent.

The Committee commented on some of the PSAs. On PSA 4, "Supporting Rural Businesses", we welcome the aim to increase the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland covered by environmental-enhancement agreements to 50% by 2011.

In respect of PSA 14, on the promotion of safer roads, the Committee acknowledges that the statistics on the numbers of people killed or seriously injured on our roads are currently under review by the Department, and believes that more ambitious targets should be agreed. We took into account the recommendations of the report on Northern Ireland's road safety strategy, published on 9 November 2007.

In respect of PSA 17, which refers to rural infrastructure, the Committee noted and welcomed the target to ensure that rural issues are mainstreamed into all relevant Government policies and programmes, and would welcome sight of the proposed rural White Paper, when published.

In relation to PSA 20, which refers to improving public services, the Committee notes the objective to modernise and reform the local government sector. The Committee has already engaged with the Department and looks forward to further engagement on those matters. The Committee was briefed recently by the Department on the emerging-findings paper.

In respect of PSA 22, on the protection of our environment and reducing our carbon footprint, Committee members agreed — in response to questions from Arlene Foster, the Minister of the Environment — to sign up to the draft UK Climate

Change Bill as presented, but with a commitment to provide for Northern Ireland targets at a future point. The Committee also supported UK carbon-reduction targets as set out in the draft UK Bill, including an overall UK target of a 60% reduction by 2050, with a 26% to 32% reduction by 2020. The Committee welcomes the target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025 and to improve energy efficiency in homes, which is consistent with targets in the draft UK Climate Change Bill.

Committee members are content with the objectives to improve the quality and ecological status of the water environment and to take forward action to improve air quality and improve the condition of our monuments and listed buildings, including structures currently on the Northern Ireland buildings-at-risk register.

In relation to objective 5, the Committee has already stated that the issue of illegal dumping should be given a higher priority, and would support the inclusion of waste management as a key goal in the Programme for Government.

In relation to objective 8, the Committee notes the aim of delivering a modern, effective planning system, and the priority commitment to a fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011. However, Committee members are concerned that the proposed efficiency reductions set out in the draft Budget will impact on the delivery of a modern, effective planning system to meet the needs of the whole community and the economy, while protecting the environment. Committee members are also concerned that there may not be sufficient resources for the Planning Appeals Commission to deal with its backlogs. Concern was also expressed at how proposed efficiencies will be achieved, considering possible staffing cutbacks in the Department.

Furthermore, the Committee notes the target of ensuring that a fit-for-purpose suite of draft adopted development plans is in place by 2011, and is concerned that, in reality, that target may not be achievable. The Committee noted that judicial reviews have stalled that process in three major area plans. Nevertheless, the key concerns that have been expressed need to be taken into consideration.

In relation to PSA 23, which examines the management of the risk of flooding from rivers and the sea, although the Committee feels that there is a need to consider future planning in order to deliver sustainable flood-risk management policies, it recognises that there is a role for planning in the delivery of sustainable flood-risk management.

The Committee noted that the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland sets out a framework for the creation of a sustainable twenty-first-century infrastructure, and welcomed the cross-cutting

objectives in the strategy, particularly the environmental objective relating to investment in infrastructure to enhance and protect the environment, addressing key areas such as EU directives.

The Committee notes that £18 billion will be invested in the next 10 years to deliver essential infrastructure, with £5.5 billion invested in the next three years. It notes the framework for infrastructure investment in six pillars, and welcomes the environment pillar.

The Committee notes and welcomes the key goal of a new approach to waste management that is compliant with EU regulations and uses more sustainable technologies. It welcomes the inclusion of the need to invest in waste-management infrastructure to ensure compliance with EU regulations, both as a key goal and as a milestone in the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

With regard to local authorities' delivery of the waste management infrastructure, the Committee notes and welcomes the key milestone of supporting local authorities to deliver the waste management infrastructure by 2011.

The Committee noted and welcomed references to investment in our environment, such as nature reserves, monuments, archaeological sites, etc, to promote the enjoyment of our heritage, and acknowledges the goal of sustainable flood-risk management to meet the social, environmental and economic needs of the region. However, the Committee recognises that there is a role for planning in sustainable flood-risk management.

5.45 pm

For each issue, we recommend that there should be a clear indication of which Department will have the lead responsibility for the goals and milestones listed in the environment investment pillar. The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment should take the lead on the waste management agenda.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Speaker and Members for their time and for listening.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy, and I congratulate those Members who have driven them forward.

The draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy signify a positive agenda for Northern Ireland. They contain ambitious targets, and such ambitions should be encouraged and aided by those in the House. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the Alliance Party has again exuded negativity in the Chamber. We have seen few meaty proposals from the members of that party — only the tired old rhetoric that we have been listening to for many years.

The first line of the draft Programme for Government states:

“We are entering a more optimistic and promising era.”

Perhaps, the Alliance Party might care to participate constructively in this new era.

Northern Ireland faces many challenges and, in order to make it the country that we all know it could be, placing economic growth at the core of the Programme for Government is a sensible approach. By aiding the Northern Ireland economy, we will reap the benefits for years to come. It will be the foundation stone on which many other building blocks will be placed.

The draft Programme for Government recognises the need to bolster economic innovation. To achieve that, the skills shortage in the Northern Ireland workforce must be addressed. As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I welcome that commitment. On a personal level, I welcome key goals such as 70% of school-leavers achieving five GCSEs at grades A* to C, and steps to encourage and promote adult literacy by 2015, which are moves in the right direction that will help to produce a highly-skilled workforce in Northern Ireland, ensure that indigenous companies meet their recruitment needs and attract overseas investment.

The draft investment strategy attempts to tackle the skills issue by committing substantial levels of funding. That demonstrates that the Executive mean business and are not just indulging in rhetoric. The draft investment strategy states that:

“Over the next 10 years, we will deliver a modern and sustainable schools estate with links to the further education estate across the region, better aligned to the needs of the population and the skills required by tomorrow’s economy.”

The crux of the matter is that we must be responsive to the needs of employers by creating a workforce in Northern Ireland that has the skills to meet their demands. Those are ambitious goals; however, with the right attitude, determination and will, they are within the grasp of the Assembly and within the capabilities of the Northern Ireland population.

The draft investment strategy recognises the brain drain. Given that almost 30% of students in Northern Ireland leave to continue their education elsewhere, we must be proactive to ensure that the conditions are right to entice people to stay in order to further their education. We cannot continue to lose so many of our young people — many of whom never return.

The further commitment to our universities as demonstrated by complementing investment to support teaching and research infrastructure is positive. The Executive has also stated that a key goal is to increase the number of graduate and post-graduate students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects by 25% by 2015.

The special emphasis on bringing those from disadvantaged communities into further and higher education is particularly encouraging.

Those examples of good practice are espoused by the Programme for Government. Let us work to ensure that we reach those goals, rather than engaging in negativity and defeatism from day one. I hope that the Alliance Party and some members of the UUP and SDLP will take that challenge to heart.

By investing more than £500 million in the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities by 2012, the Executive have committed to an initiative that I hope will greatly benefit my constituency of South Belfast. Devolution must deliver in communities such as the Village, Sandy Row and Taughmonagh to improve people’s standard of living. That can be aided by the commitment to neighbourhood renewal, but hand in hand with that must come the investment in social housing that is required to meet the needs of our constituents. That problem must be addressed in my constituency of South Belfast.

The draft Programme for Government and investment strategy are good news for Northern Ireland plc and for the people of Northern Ireland. Unlike the previous Programme for Government, which was championed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, this programme will bring about real change to the lives of the people, who have put us in a position of great responsibility. Unlike the previous Programme for Government, this one will benefit from real leadership at the top and will build a better future. If we fail, we can be judged on that failure; however, I am confident that this is a positive first step on a long road. The House should unite behind the Programme for Government and investment strategy and commit its energy to their delivery.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government, which is out for consultation. Like other Members, I see issues that I wish to tease out and commitments that I would like to be added, but those are issues for the Assembly to consider in the weeks and months ahead.

I will mention some matters that are specific to my constituency of South Belfast. Mr Spratt mentioned his representation of that constituency. I accept that, although I will talk about my constituency, some of the issues affect all constituencies and cause concern to all Members.

In the coming consultation period, I wish to tease out the issues of diversity; regeneration of housing; planning and traffic management; education; and youth provision. Some of the issues will be dealt with under the changes to local government, and the Programme

for Government has already made commitments to them, such as an overhaul of planning and investment in regenerating disadvantaged communities, as has already been mentioned. I look forward to seeing progress on those matters.

I have heard much criticism of good relations or what has been called the shared future. I am satisfied that the need to build an inclusive and fair society is encompassed by the Programme for Government.

Much criticism has been levelled against the Alliance Party, but its members have argued that there are no commitments on the need to promote good relations or to build a shared future in the Programme for Government. One paragraph of the document states:

“We must also continue our efforts to address divisions within our society. Progress has been made, but sectarianism, racism and intolerance are still too evident.”

It goes on to say that:

“it is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity.”

The core difficulty for the Alliance Party is that it finds it easier to deal with the old, direct rule style of shared future, rather than with the need for equality for all citizens.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maskey: Mr Ford can speak after me.

I will be involved in more discussions, and I want some of those matters to be teased out further.

I look forward to hearing the views in the next number of weeks of people from the ethnic minority communities to find out how they believe the matter of building a tolerant, fair and all-inclusive society can best be taken forward.

Dr Farry: The title of the document refers to “a better future”. I thank the Executive for clearing that up, because we were in some doubt for a moment. Has there ever been a woollier phrase than “a better future”? It stands in stark contrast to the phrase “a shared future” and all that that entails in bringing the people of Northern Ireland together and trying to overcome divisions.

It is difficult to come to the conclusion that the document will create a better future for Northern Ireland. The defensiveness of both the DUP and Sinn Féin Members who have spoken has been striking so far this afternoon. I was under the impression that both parties believed in democracy. Part of democracy is being able to criticise what the Government are proposing. Both parties seem to have difficulty accepting that what they are producing may be flawed.

The DUP and Sinn Féin need to be conscious that they cannot continue to dine out on what happened on 8 May 2007. As time passes, the people of Northern

Ireland are moving from merely being satisfied with a semblance of political stability to demanding real delivery from the devolved institutions.

Looking past all of the pats on the back, I have to say that there are grounds for real disappointment with both the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget. The Executive need to face up to that reality. Rather than simply laughing off criticism, or failing to engage and address the very real criticisms that not just the Alliance Party, but large chunks of civil society are raising, they need to face up to what is being said. Denials will not wash with the people of Northern Ireland.

The most rational approach for preparing the draft Programme for Government would have been to analyse the main challenges facing Northern Ireland, the main opportunities to be exploited, and to work out the appropriate policies. Instead, we have a mere 17 pages. Either that reflects a total lack of ambition on the part of the Executive, or an inability to agree much beyond the lowest common denominator.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister would have us believe that, six months on from devolution, the draft Programme for Government should be treated as a good effort. However, there is no good reason why the wheels of Government should work any slower in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the world. The Government at Westminster and the new Administration in Scotland, for example, produce much more detailed programmes in a shorter time. Frankly, what we have before us could have been produced in a week, or even a day. Let us not forget that the Executive parties have had special advisers — funded by the taxpayer — for the best part of a year for the explicit purpose of devising a Programme for Government.

The draft Programme for Government is heavy on platitudes, but there is little detail regarding how the Executive intend to deliver Northern Ireland to the promised land. I make no apologies for the Alliance Party being ambitious for Northern Ireland. We are optimistic, and we believe that the people of Northern Ireland have great potential. However, the policies need to be in place to exploit that potential to the full.

The real story of the draft Programme for Government lies in what is missing. My comments will give the DUP and Sinn Féin Members some flavour of what the Alliance Party would do if we had the opportunity to be in Government. The critical strategy for creating a shared future has been binned. There is an absence of any commitment in key areas such as development of integrated education and the promotion of mixed housing. For most people, the human, social, economic and financial costs of the divisions in Northern Ireland are unsustainable.

The direct rule Administration, for all their faults, belatedly woke up to the fundamental challenges when they produced their shared future strategy. However, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister argue that their friendship is all the shared future that Northern Ireland requires. The failure to engage with the shared future agenda ranges from ignoring it in the draft Programme for Government — there are no commitments, just flowery language — to failing to embed it in the public service agreements.

6.00 pm

Among 31 cross-cutting themes, “good relations” is nowhere to be found; therefore, it will remain in the silo of OFMDFM and no pressure or challenge will be levied against any Department or agency about their responsibility to promote sharing over separation. The Deloitte Touche report ‘The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy’, which was commissioned by OFMDFM, has been put on the shelf and will not be looked at.

The draft Programme for Government is being sold as a recipe for economic development. However, it is clear that the deep divisions in Northern Ireland have a major impact on our economy and we cannot have economic change without addressing those divisions. It is time that we woke up to that fundamental reality.

The creation of a single equality act seems to have disappeared. I understood that that was a major aim of Sinn Féin, but clearly that party has given up and bowed the knee to the DUP.

Before the Assembly election, all parties made commitments in their manifestos to deliver free personal care for the elderly. I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made a bid for it, which was tenth on his list of bids, but it is nowhere to be found in the draft Programme for Government. Similarly, all parties promised to make dealing with mental health a much greater priority. Again, the draft Programme for Government says little on that subject.

Nothing is being said about the huge challenges, that the public is aware of, relating to sustainable schools and an agreed alternative to the 11-plus. Are those simply to be washed away and forgotten about?

Protecting the environment is the greatest political challenge on the planet; yet the document is almost silent on environmental issues. Where are the commitments to marine conservation and to an environmental protection agency? Critically, an indication must be given on how Northern Ireland will play its part in combating climate change — the major challenge facing us all. Members have referred to the target of a 60% reduction in carbon emissions: they should note that some of our devolved partners in the

UK are talking of an 80% reduction. Let us get serious about the issue.

The multi-sports stadium has been reduced to a mere mention in the small print of the PSAs. That, again, is something that is very much in the public eye: yet there is no reference to such a high-profile project in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft investment strategy. I wonder what conclusions we are to draw from that.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of projects in the draft investment strategy are being re-announced by the Administration. Some originate as far back as 2001. There is little that is new in the draft investment strategy: all we are doing is announcing the same stuff, over and over again — another trick the Executive seems to have learnt from Gordon Brown.

Let us look at transport funding. In the rest of the UK, well over 60% of investment goes into public transport. Here, it is the opposite: in the short term — the first three years — 60% of the money will be spent on roads, while over the 10-year lifespan of the investment strategy, 80% of investment will be in roads with a mere 20% for public transport. How Belfast is to become a modern, twenty-first century city on that type of investment, I am not entirely sure. What about the implications for the planet of such a heavy investment in roads? Where is the vision in that respect?

The major plank of this draft Programme for Government is the economy, but I do not think that the figures add up. There is much flowery, aspirational language about how many jobs will be created and how a step-change in the Northern Ireland economy will be made. However, when you look at the fine print, all you will see is aspiration. There is no joined-up thinking: the dots cannot be joined up in order to get from A to B, or to show how policies will change. The Executive seem quite satisfied to accept the situation in which Northern Ireland remains a dependent part of the UK. We are not prepared to challenge the orthodoxy that the UK economy is based around London and the south-east of England. Northern Ireland needs to become a lot more sustainable: financially, environmentally, economically and socially. I see no effective challenge to the status quo coming from the Executive.

In the absence of the Varney report, Northern Ireland is dependent upon the same four economic drivers that were identified in the failed draft regional economic strategy in January 2007. All we are doing is more of the same. There is an absence of creative thinking on how we will change Northern Ireland society.

There are major flaws in the Programme for Government. The Alliance Party does not oppose merely for the sake of opposing, but when there are documents that are genuinely flawed, we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to point out the criticisms

that we have identified, and that a vast range of organisations have also identified.

The document needs serious reform, and to be beefed up significantly. The last devolved Executive, for all its faults, produced a Programme for Government of 144 pages.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: The last contribution is all the more reason why we are glad that the Alliance Party is not on the Executive, and does not have the electoral mandate to speak on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the strategic direction of the Programme for Government. It is vital for the future of Northern Ireland that we concentrate on developing our economy. A strong economy will help all aspects of our society, including our Health Service and our education system, by creating and generating greater wealth. Although I recognise that the current political arrangements are not perfect, and would not be my first choice for delivering such a Programme for Government, surely it is better for those who once encouraged and engaged in the destruction of Northern Ireland's economy to be forced and harnessed into developing and delivering an economy for which they are accountable, and which is vibrant and for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom.

I listened to a contribution earlier from Mrs Kelly, who said that the process was not accountable. The reason that the DUP negotiated for the last number of years was to make this House and the institutions accountable. The problem that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists have is that they are outside the tent and cannot grasp the fact that there is accountability. The previous arrangements failed, and were incapable of delivery. Is it not strange that we now hear a chorus from the Ulster Unionist Party urging a move away from a mandatory coalition, when it was they who failed to deliver on such arrangements? The DUP is picking up the pieces of their failures. Of course, that is nothing new in the politics of Northern Ireland.

As well as aiming to halve the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average, excluding the greater south east, by 2015, the draft Programme for Government has 10 other key goals that are aimed at developing our local economy, which include, among others: increasing the employment rate; supporting exporters; securing inward investment; and improving people skills. Surely the recent events in my constituency of North Antrim, with the devastating news about Reid Transport and the confirmation at the weekend of the closure of Tyco Healthcare Manufacturing in Ballymoney, underline the gravity of the task that faces us.

In respect of economic development, the key goal is to halve the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average, excluding the greater south east, by 2015. Currently, excluding the greater south east area, Northern Ireland is ranked last of the nine remaining UK regions. Private-sector productivity in Northern Ireland is 94% of the UK average. Without reaching the goal of halving the private-sector productivity gap, Northern Ireland will continue to have the lowest private-sector productivity of the nine regions, with private sector productivity decreasing to only 92.5% of the UK average.

However, by achieving that goal by 2015, productivity in the private sector will increase to 97% of the UK average, excluding the greater south east, and Northern Ireland will no longer be ranked last of the remaining nine regions. That is an ambitious goal, but one that reflects a realistic position, which also gives due regard to the limited policy levers available to the Northern Ireland Executive. The Northern Ireland economy is measured relative to the UK, excluding the greater south east of England, encompassing London and the surrounding regions, which is responsible for over 40% of the total UK output, from regional comparisons.

Inclusion of those regions would skew the relative data. DETI, DEL, the Department of Education and DARD are the key Departments with a strategic role to play in promoting economic growth in Northern Ireland. Those Departments have all been allocated increases in the recurrent expenditure budget that is in excess of the average increase of 3.6% in total planned spend over the period. Those are facts and not some woolly aspirational writing on a piece of paper. I am surprised that the Alliance Party is worried that we are now not producing more paper. I thought that that party was environmentally friendly.

Here are the facts. The average increases over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 are: 4.8% for DETI; 3.9% for DEL; 4.3% for the Department of Education; and 6.5% for DARD. I have grave concerns about the way in which the education budget will be handled during the current Assembly's mandate, despite its 4.3% increase in funding. The recent announcement by the Minister of Education about the amalgamation of two schools in Ahoghill, in my constituency, demonstrates her inability to be trusted with making the right decisions for our children. She is to be trusted as much as 'Blue Peter' is when naming a cat.

That decision — and it is a serious point that we make — will cost the North Eastern Education and Library Board, not the Department of Education, £500,000. We now understand that that decision is under review. Why did the Minister make that decision in the first place? Clearly, it was made on the basis of political expediency, without any recourse to the financial advice that she had been given by the North

Eastern Education and Library Board. There is now a situation in which six children in one school — which we were told was going to be amalgamated with another school — are being taught by two teachers. That is a deplorable situation, which the Minister of Education must address urgently. However, if it is addressed as urgently as the classroom assistants' dispute and the introduction of proposals for academic selection, we will have to wait for more and more time to be given.

The Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionist Party have a problem in that, when one brings the facts and criticises, they are our partners and are in Government. The Ulster Unionist Party is in Government and so would the Alliance Party be if enough people had voted for it. The Ulster Unionist Party likes to play Pontius Pilate politics, washing its hands of responsibility and claiming that it is always someone else's fault. We will not allow that party to delude itself.

Despite those genuine concerns about specific issues on the way in which we are governed, Northern Ireland has benefited. When the situation is compared with direct rule, there is benefit to be derived from the devolved arrangements. For instance, there was the additional money for the victims of flooding and the settlement of the nurses' pay award — a decision that the Minister was able to take. There is the decision over an Irish language Act — which we are glad not to have — which was made by an Executive Minister. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party remains silent on that issue. Those have all been positive results of devolution.

There are also several outstanding important matters, but I do not have the time to mention all of them. We must have a settlement on the issue of parading; it must be resolved. The so-called army council must disappear. We must bring the RPA to a conclusion in which the unionists who live west of the Bann do not feel utterly deserted. Victims and survivors of the Troubles must be kept to the fore, and republicans must show wholehearted commitment to the issue of policing, over a period of time, and not make the partial excuses that were witnessed in places such as the Markets area of Belfast, where a Member of the House made disgraceful comments about a DPP (District Policing Partnership) meeting that did not take place. We must reconfigure the entire equality agenda. One outstanding issue, which for many years was seriously addressed only by my party, is the inherent weakness of the form of Government that is currently in place in the Assembly.

Remember, it was the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP who harnessed us to d'Hondt and the current mandatory coalition arrangements. Now they want to move out of a mandatory coalition —

6.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No. Now they do not want d'Hondt, for the simple reason that they cannot stick the heat that they are under, and they cannot deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP will deliver, and will do so for the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I have had the opportunity to address many important issues as a member of the Committee for the Environment, but I speak today as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

The fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011 should be implemented sooner rather than later in order to alleviate the concerns of rural communities. I want to address the issues raised by draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 14, and I know that the Minister of the Environment has agreed to produce a new draft PPS 14 within six months. I hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to that new draft policy, and Members will make their contribution. The draft area plans are also due a serious review, but I welcome the proposed overhaul of the planning system.

The Committee has agreed to sign up to the UK carbon footprint-reduction target of 60%, but even Gordon Brown said recently that that is not enough, and that the target could be increased to 80%. I welcome that, but the problem must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis. Those of us who live in rural border areas are faced with the serious issue of illegal waste dumping. That situation must be addressed, because people in rural areas are paying the price of that illegal dumping.

Mr Storey: Close the border.

Mr Boylan: The Member got to write his book earlier. Give me the opportunity to speak — good man yourself.

The target to reduce landfills by 2011 is welcome, but we must get it right. The proper treatment of waste, both mechanical and biological, in a way that benefits the environment and inhibits climate change, must be a priority for all.

I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to a review of the Department's road safety strategy, but continued education is required to ensure that targets for reducing road fatalities are met, particularly at school level, and in the 17- to 24-year-old age bracket, which, sadly, seems to claim the most victims. We must take the opportunity to look at this problem on an all-island basis, given the number of road deaths in the border areas.

Unfortunately, there is no mention of an independent environmental protection agency in the draft Programme

for Government. That should be a fundamental priority in any future plans to protect and enhance the environment.

I welcome the key goals that have been stated in relation to tourism, and on a purely parochial note, I wish to note that the Armagh area has a lot of potential. However, something must be done about the roads infrastructure in the area, particularly the Armagh link road and I will speak to the Minister about that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and welcome the opportunity to address these issues in more detail in the coming months. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms Purvis: The theme of my contribution to the debate on the draft Programme for Government is economic justice. The reasons for that are simple. First, Bill Clinton was right to remind everyone that the answer to every question, according to the famous 1992 campaign poster on his war room wall was “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Secondly, a strong economy creates wealth not only for entrepreneurs and business owners, but for also workers. Through taxation, the state can distribute resources to those who would not otherwise benefit.

Thirdly, the Progressive Unionist Party supports the role of the state. We recognise that the market can help the state in a creative, three-legged stool, with the state, the market and the community working in partnership for mutual benefit.

My party supports the principle of a strong economy; let no one suggest that we are soft on the economy or soft on the causes of the economy. We believe in progressive economic development for the many, not the few, in the interests of those whose labour has been sold, who work for a living and who deserve better from the state and from the Executive, in particular.

Economic justice is my theme today, but the Programme for Government is neither truly economic, nor is it just. It is unfair, unprincipled and will prove wholly ineffective. The programme is not truly economic, because the Administration has not negotiated the real levers of power to allow it to claim to run an economy. It is pretending. Emperor Paisley has no clothes and Chancellor Robinson enjoys no taxation powers, no fiscal powers, no real economic powers to lead and direct the economy. There is a need for those powers, for real devolution, for real control, but the negotiation skills of the DUP and Sinn Féin were found wanting.

There has been plenty of hot air about a huge peace dividend and much bluster about the size of Gordon Brown’s cheque. However, as I predicted a long time ago, nothing was delivered; however, we will not cry over spilt milk.

Is the Programme for Government just? I fear not. It is little wonder that businesses are queuing up to commend the DUP for swallowing their agenda hook, line and sinker. The shallow shift for the economy in this programme is headline-grabbing but completely unjust. Where is the vision to which economic growth will be directed? I will tell you: it will go to that great cash machine for businesses and bosses in Bedford Street — Invest NI. Nowhere in the Programme for Government can I see a vision that mentions how we share Northern Ireland, how we tackle division and neglect, how we unite our communities and how we build a new society together. Mr Storey mentioned many of the outstanding issues. However, all I see is subsidy to businesses and snubs to those who work for a living in our forgotten communities.

Is the Programme for Government unfair? Yes, it certainly is. I will give the House some examples of that unfairness. Chancellor Robinson has made the ludicrous decision to maintain the blanket subsidy to manufacturing companies by continuing rates relief. How will that be targeted and means-tested? There seems to be an insistence on means-testing people for welfare benefits, but not when fat cats get benefits. Corporate welfare seems to be alive and well in “Robinsonland”.

Is the Programme for Government unprincipled? Yes, the Progressive Unionist Party believes so. Does it come from collective Cabinet discussion and agreement? Clearly, it does not. Does it come from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister as joint heads of our Administration? Again, clearly it does not. Martin McGuinness must have been taking an afternoon nap when the draft Programme for Government was being agreed. There is not an ounce of Sinn Féin policy in it — not a bullet point. Where is the vaunted equality agenda? It is not mentioned. The redistribution of wealth has been reversed. Where is targeting social need? It is absent without leave. Five Ministers missing in action — what a let-down.

Will this Programme for Government turn out to be ineffective? Undoubtedly. The appallingly weak understanding of how the economy works runs through this programme like a virus.

First, if the housing budget is slashed, more people will be in housing need. More people will join the waiting lists, more will remain in the extortionate rented sector, and more will be homeless. All those moral and political priorities have been shirked. Even more amazingly, they do not seem to get it; if the Minister for Social Development is forced to slash the housing budget, the backbone of the economy — the small business sector — is immediately condemned to join the dole queues. If there is no capital spending, no builders will be needed. If there is no housing refurbishment programme, no plumbers will be needed. If there

is no heating replacement programme, there will be no central-heating engineers, fewer gas connections, and so on down the food chain. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a few seconds. *[Interruption.]*

Ms Purvis, please continue.

Some Members: Time.

Ms Purvis: I was just thinking that some Members will go to any lengths to get me off my feet.

This is not a wealthy food chain. It comprises people who are hungry for every job, the lean and efficient small businesses of my constituency — and Minister Robinson's. Let me remind him of those 800 people on the waiting list for the warm homes scheme in East Belfast; the pensioners and single parents, the people with disabilities and the low-paid — my voters and Mr Robinson's. Are they consigned to wait forever while big business gets cash withdrawals from Mr Robinson's party colleague, Minister Dodds from "DETI-land"? Or should that be Disneyland, with unreal claims, cartoon characters, lots of bright orange colours, but little substance, no delivery and no answers to hard questions. So much for tackling fuel poverty.

Who will benefit from this Programme for Government? It will not be the voters, the hard-working or immigrants, who do so many important jobs and bring so much to our developing new society. It will not even be the DUP and Sinn Féin. The voters are too clever to be taken in by this delusion. I wish that I could be a fly on the wall at the next Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis, as party members ask how Sinn Féin can have repeated the colossal error that it committed in the Southern elections earlier in the year. They will take the party apart for letting the DUP walk all over it on public-private partnerships, less Government and equality issues.

As for the SDLP, its members may regret going into Government. *[Interruption.]*

What have they achieved in Government? Please tell us. They have been rolled over. I am sure that I will welcome them to these Opposition Benches soon enough, just like Reg and Michael.

I will tell Members who will benefit from this Programme for Government — big business. The already rich, those who have yachts — rather than the have-nots — those who build roads, pollute the environment, drive big cars and farm big fields. There is precious little economic justice in this draft Programme for Government, and I shall be opposing it.

Mr Moutray: Since devolution, we have reached many milestones in this Assembly. Without doubt, the two documents under debate today are momentous

documents of which the Executive and the House can be proud.

The Assembly can bask in a sense of satisfaction at the benefits and prosperity that the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy can bring to the Province. Those documents will undoubtedly instil in locally elected representatives a duty to carry out their mandate to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. The contents of both documents will enable the Government of Northern Ireland to be placed in the hands of local politicians who are undoubtedly more aware of local needs. I want to place on record my party's support for those complex but practical and well-balanced documents. They secure Northern Ireland's economic and social future. I commend the Executive for delivering those documents within a limited time frame, and particularly their inclusion of a wide range of local issues. That demonstrates the Executive's long-term interest in the Province and, indeed, in our constituents.

Unlike that of the previous Administration, 'Building a Better Future — Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011' includes clear and measurable targets. In their consideration of the programme, Members will note that the recurrent theme is sustainable business and economic growth, which will provide opportunities and the means to reduce poverty, increase wealth, health, well-being and will enhance the overall quality of life in the Province.

6.30 pm

The clear economic focus of the draft Programme for Government is welcome. The previous Administration were hallmarked by an almost total absence of focus toward building a strong and prosperous economy. As I will make clear in my speech, I do not suggest that social issues should be sidelined; however, if the Assembly wants to build a more peaceful society, economic prosperity is an important factor in the achievement of that aim. Sadly, for the people of Northern Ireland, the previous Programme for Government overlooked the economy. Due to the absence of such economic focus, the challenges that the Assembly faces have been multiplied. In the previous Administration, the Ulster Unionist Party allowed the SDLP to push its socialist agenda at the expense of the economy. Now, the Assembly must deal with the consequences.

The draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy also demonstrate the sea change that has taken place in Northern Ireland. Once, republicans were committed to bombing businesses and stopping economic growth in the Province; now, it is hoped that they are committed to building economic growth. Only the fullness of time will tell if that is the case.

The emphasis on growing the private sector is a welcome plan that will increase employment and

financial well-being in society. The Executive's commitment to create the conditions in which enterprise can flourish will create an innovative and vibrant Province. Everyone in Northern Ireland will benefit from such investments. For example, the Executive's intention is to deliver more than 6,500 new jobs by 2011 and to ensure that at least 75% of those jobs will provide salaries that are above the local private-sector average. The repercussions of that will be investment in infrastructure that will drive forward economic enhancement, social transformation and environmental improvement, which will create a high quality of life.

The focus on social inclusion will ensure that the most vulnerable in society are protected and cared for. That should be the fundamental aim of any Government. In addition, there is a focus on various groups in society; for example, children. Often, we wonder what children stand to gain. The programme will support young people to reach their full potential and to become more independent, which will result in their becoming well-adjusted adults. The draft Programme for Government rightly aims to eradicate child poverty; improve educational outcomes; ensure that children are cared for, that they can live safely and be protected from abuse. Does society not need all of that to happen? The elderly are also provided for in the programme, which ensures that they are not isolated. Can the Assembly not endorse those plans and ensure that it is united to provide a better future for all constituents?

When Members scrutinise the draft Programme for Government, they can see that its entire content is underpinned by equality and good relations. That is reflected in its priority to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. In line with that, Members must be committed to take action in order to deal with key differentials that exist in society and ensure that everyone receives the opportunity to contribute and benefit from a better future.

The draft investment strategy must be noted for its contents and ability to underpin one of the main priorities in the draft Programme for Government. The priority to invest to build our infrastructure is extremely important. For instance, the improvement of social and affordable housing, health and care facilities, and the need for better roads, modern information, communication links and educational facilities are essential for the health and well-being of our constituents. The House must address those issues and many others that have been brought about by many years of the Troubles and direct rule. Members will see upon scrutiny that the draft investment strategy will enable such tasks to be tackled and allow the establishment of a modern infrastructure. Such improvements will assist business growth, tackle social and economic inequalities and improve the quality of life for everyone.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No, I will not. I hear enough of the Member in another place; I will certainly not give way tonight.

The investment of £5.6 billion in new infrastructure over the next three years offers an unprecedented opportunity. No investment of that scale has ever taken place in Northern Ireland. The draft investment strategy also offers the potential to invest more than £18 billion in the next ten years. That will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland, and it will be particularly focused on such areas as roads, public transport, schools, youth services, regeneration, housing, water and sewerage reforms and enterprise and innovation.

Such draft programmes are a far cry from what was delivered by direct rule. I am sure that I do not need to remind Members of the repercussions of direct rule. The draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy have been appropriately named by the Executive — 'Building a Better Future'. Upon analysis of them, we can say without doubt that they do exactly what it says on the tin. This is our chance to govern on local issues and to bring about more beneficial and positive changes and to rubberstamp them with the stamp of approval — "Made in Northern Ireland".

Mr B McCrea: At this time of the evening, it is sometimes hard to speak without covering ground that has been covered by others. For that reason, I commend Dawn Purvis for her thoughtful speech, which was no less powerful for having been delivered with soft words. I share her concern about the lack of focus on those in society who need it most. There is a clear lack of resources, and there was a failure to get the financial package that we were promised. Some Members present repeatedly said that there was no point in having an Executive unless we had the financial package to do it justice. We now reap the rewards of that failure.

Some Members on the opposite Benches talked about equality. However, I am not persuaded by equality as a strategy, because it seems to be a dumbing-down measure. The crucial word for the Assembly should be "empowerment". We should empower our people to do better. I am surprised when Members talk about equality — and I do not want to go on about it too much — but an opportunity has been missed. Members talk here about wasted lives and wasted talents, but we have come a long way from those days, and we do not want to go back. It is hypocritical of some Members to lead with those examples.

The main challenge facing our Administration relates to social mobility. I am sure that Members present have read the recent report by the Department for Work and Pensions in another place. On reading that, they will have concluded that, following years of investment in social programmes and comprehensive education, among other things, social mobility has

ground to a halt in Great Britain. One might ask why that has happened, but it is linked into such things as the problems with housing, lack of attainment in skills, lack of confidence and lack of opportunity. Those are the issues that we must tackle, and they should be on the top of the Assembly's priority list.

One of the main ways to tackle such issues is through education.

Literacy and numeracy are major education issues — and I must commend many of the Members who are here today on the immeasurable improvement in their reading skills since I first heard them speak. They are all doing well, but resources should be going to the 25% of the population who are unable to attain even basic levels of reading, writing and numeracy.

Where in the draft Programme for Government is there a proposal to tackle problems in early-years education or the failure of parenting? It is difficult for children to go through school without support from home, and a way must be found to invest in that area. Has any attempt been made to tackle the pupil/teacher ratio, which is fundamental to raising educational standards and central to allowing people to escape from poverty?

Members have talked about academic selection. If there is to be a greater focus on those in most need, how can that be achieved without some form of selection, and how can resources be delivered to them? One size does not fit all: there must be some form of selection, and there must be some form of targeting those most in need.

It was strange to hear Members argue that it was a terrible shame that there would not be a single all-embodying health authority. Other Members, who are not here at the moment, said that they were unsure about the establishment of an education and skills authority, because it would be the largest educational establishment in Western Europe. Where are the economies of scale that can make a real impact? Why do some Members pursue such a contradictory argument?

Without an economy that enables people to use their skills, education is simply a recipe for migration: it is a conveyor belt carrying people out of Northern Ireland, and we cannot afford to lose those people. Wages here are only 80% of those in the rest of the UK, because the majority of women take low-paid part-time work in environments that allow no prospect of advancement. People talk about level-one and level-two jobs, but how can people move into level-two cleaning or level-two shelf-stacking?

There is a target to increase the number of economically active people in Northern Ireland from 70% to 75%, but other parts of the UK are aiming for 80%. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report states that

120,000 new jobs are required for the yearly cohort and to increase the number of economically active people. If the creation of 6,500 jobs is considered in that context, is the issue really being tackled?

People talk to me about productivity, and Mervyn Storey gave me a good lecture on the subject. Let him explain to me how to increase productivity when Northern Ireland is losing well-paid manufacturing jobs, with a GVA of £49,000, and is replacing them with part-time jobs in tourism and retail, with a GVA of £12,000. Productivity has been going in the wrong direction for years, and I see nothing in the draft Programme for Government to tackle that.

People have not got their heads around the fact that Northern Ireland's one competitive advantage is its educational attainment, for which it is famous throughout the world. Why are we not investing more in higher education? Why do we not capitalise on Queen's University or the University of Ulster by increasing the number of students who achieve PhDs?

Some 40% of those who are employed in the manufacturing sector are guest workers, and they may not be here for much longer.

Mr P Robinson: The Member started off by lauding the Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis, who argued that there should not have been a freeze on industrial rating at 30%. Given that Mr McCrea is an Ulster Unionist, it is interesting that he felt it worth applauding her remarks. I wonder whether he is in denial and does not recognise that his party is in a four-party coalition. Despite all the points that he raised during the debate, his party did not suggest an amendment to a single issue.

6.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I did the Member the courtesy of taking his intervention, which is a courtesy that is not often given to me. I will deal with those issues. I said that Dawn Purvis raised some important questions — I did not agree with everything that she said. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will recognise that I commended his attitude to, and decision on, industrial derating.

The Programme for Government lacks ambition and resources — there are not sufficient resources to do what is required. The Minister of Finance and Personnel promised that there would be £1 billion, and that it would not be worth going into an Executive without it. We did not get that £1 billion, which means that older people will now have difficulty getting respite as they will not get into nursing homes. We will have difficulty providing for children and mothers: there will be no budget for the early years; no budget for parenting; no budget for reducing the pupil-teacher ratio; and no budget for dealing with the oversupply of teachers. The list goes on.

If we are going to genuinely advance a Government in Northern Ireland, Members must get serious and start listening to people. Government is not about telling people what to do when they are needed, and when they are not, forget it. Members must find a way of prioritising the issues that we have to deal with — if we do that, we will be successful.

I will deal with the Barnett formula tomorrow, because it is fundamental to the inequities in health.

Mr O'Loan: Earlier in the debate, Mr Sammy Wilson questioned the right of any Member from a party with a Minister in the Executive to speak in this debate at all, or to seek any change in the Programme for Government and its Budget. That was strange. I wondered why he took the trouble of coming to the Chamber to listen to himself speak. However, he did not stay long, so maybe he was wise enough.

There is considerable substance in the Programme for Government; whether it can all be realised remains to be seen. Together, the draft Programme for Government, the draft investment strategy and the public service agreement framework present a substantial programme. I will confine my comments to the content of the programme, as there will be a further opportunity to discuss budgetary elements. However, the two are intimately linked. In particular, concerns about the deliverability of elements of the programme relate to the availability of the necessary budget.

Like any reasonable person, I endorse the principles and key priorities of the Programme for Government, with one important proviso. Reading the documents, one would hardly know that this society is emerging from nearly 40 years of intense conflict. Many died or are seriously scarred by that bitter period. The activities of some of those centrally involved in the events of those years have built up deep wells of resentment. The forces that gave rise to that period of violence are still present in our society, although there is no doubt that political agreement — which appears to have been achieved at last — has made a huge difference to public perceptions across the board.

It is that change in the public view that has mandated political leaders to make decisive changes. Thus, with only a few exceptions, unionists have accepted that they must treat their nationalist neighbours as equals and that — in their own interests as much as anything else — they must engage with the whole island in a way that they had previously rejected. Similarly, republicanism has had to recognise the futility of physical force. What a pity that such harm was done before those two major, and inevitable, shifts took place. They have now happened, but Members should not forget that we still have a fragile society in which to develop broad social and economic progress. That

requires a particular response in the Programme for Government, but it is not adequately expressed there.

Yes, the SLDP believes — as John Hume called on all to do — that by working the common ground of responding to economic and social needs we can come together. However, I have no doubt that we must do specific work to bind together a fractured society. I find that context and response largely missing from the programme. I wonder whether that obvious omission is a reflection of the fundamentally different stance of the two parties in OFMDFM regarding the history of the last 40 years. It may suit those parties not to confront those realities, but it is not good enough for the rest of us.

I return to some positive aspects of the programme. We all want, as is stated:

“a prosperous, fair and inclusive society, supported by a vibrant and dynamic economy and a rich and sustainable environmental heritage.”

I support putting the growth of the economy at the heart of Executive activity. It is not that our public sector is fundamentally too big, but it is quite clear that our private sector is too small and too weak. We have far too many economically inactive people. There are serious gaps in the provision of the four economic drivers — skills, innovation, entrepreneurship and infrastructure. All of those demand to be tackled in a concerted way, and there are themes in the draft Programme for Government which do that.

Building the economy cannot and must not happen in isolation from wider social development. I referred earlier to the legacy of the Troubles. Part of that legacy is a weak economy, and part is a society where division is still a key attribute. For our economy to take off, we must pull together, and those historic divisions must be broken down.

There are other divisions too. Our society is far from equal in its distribution of wealth and the capacity to earn wealth. Too many children are born, not with a silver spoon in the mouth, but with a list of disadvantages caused by poverty, and a lack of family and community support that dog them from the outset and, in many cases, predetermine their personal educational and economic future. For those reasons, the test of a Programme for Government, here and now, is whether it has a coherent plan to reconstruct our economy while healing our society and tackling disadvantage. Those three requirements are inextricably linked. Failure to achieve any one of them will severely damage the others.

The five priority areas in the draft Programme for Government, subject to the comments that have already been made, are well defined and have many valid key goals attached to them. Priority 1, the economy, has key goals which, if achieved, will radically improve the situation. Those include targets on productivity;

employment rates; new businesses, including foreign direct investment; tourism; and qualifications, including STEM subjects. However, there is not much visible indication of how those will be achieved. The PSAs provide some detail, but without clear action points it is hard to assess them. Nobody needs a wish list; the responsibility is on OFMDFM and the Executive to deliver.

Priority 2 of the draft Programme for Government deals with tolerance, inclusion and health. It is striking that the short paragraph on addressing divisions is high on rhetoric but low on specifics, with no key goals at all for that area. That must be changed, and we must hear from OFMDFM that it can be explicit and concerted in its vision of a shared future.

There is good and challenging content on reducing disadvantage, particularly on child poverty. There are valuable promises on health, although more can be said on that during the Budget debate. At last, progress is being made on road deaths. This year is two thirds through and deaths are running at three quarters of the figure for the two previous years. The target that is set out in the draft Programme for Government should be reduced further if that is sustained.

There are some serious environmental targets in priority 3, but there would be more credibility in those if an independent environmental protection agency were to be announced. Effective strategic management of waste by DOE is long overdue, as is substantial reduction of carbon emissions. We must see substance behind the phrase “improve energy efficiency” with regard to homes, including much higher building standards and full support for the warm homes scheme. That will also be the subject of critical debate when the draft Budget is considered.

At long last, we seem to be getting to grips with our appalling infrastructure deficit, which is dealt with by priority 4. A sum of £5.6 billion over the next three years, and a total of £18 billion by 2018, will make a tangible difference. I welcome the £572 million that is to be spent on our roads over the Budget period as part of £3 billion on roads by 2018. Of course, I also welcome the promised investment of £1.4 billion by 2018 in social and affordable housing. However, even if all of that were spent on social housing, I could not square that figure, either in money or timing, with the need to build 10,000 social homes within five years.

The budget for housing is just not adequate, and I will say more about that in the debate on the draft Budget.

The theme of enhancing equality and efficiency throughout the public service, as expressed in priority 5, is vital and will provide a hard task for all Ministers. The 3% and 5% targets for efficiency savings, and the development of that issue more generally, is crucial.

The PFG refers to North/South and east-west linkages. I call on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to upgrade its treatment of North/South development. That is about more than co-operation, as it is termed in the document. We are one corner of an island, and the rest of the island has outstripped us in economic terms. Its rate of growth and increase in public spending are forecast to be still well ahead of ours for years to come.

I welcome the practical work on North/South matters from unionist parties now, but for the real progress that we vitally require, it needs to rise to a new level. We cannot afford not to plan so many matters on an all-island basis. Energy is an area that exemplifies that point. Let us apply that to planning for the island as a whole, including all infrastructure, as well as health provision, research, agriculture, inward investment and public transport. No one loses in that, and it is no obstacle to using east-west links, including those with Scotland, to our maximum advantage.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le fáilte a chur roimh an Chlár Rialtais agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi. I wish to make a number of observations about the Programme for Government and, in turn, the draft investment strategy, both of which I broadly welcome. I shall concentrate on two areas: the impact that the Programme for Government must make on balanced regional development and on the north west; and in particular, on the constituency of Foyle. The points I shall make about Foyle could no doubt be made for any other constituency.

I am very conscious that the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee has spoken and has brought the Committee’s view on those documents to the debate, and there is no need to do a rerun of that, because he covered the broad points well.

The core of the Programme for Government is that all parts of the region must share in sustainable and economic growth, and we must strive to eliminate all forms of inequality. If that happens, we will build a better future based on fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. All of that is very welcome, but that must now translate into action and deliver for those who, in the past, have been at the wrong end of a system that did not have fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity at the core of its policy programmes. As we move forward to ensure regional balance, there must be an acceptance that regional disparity did not take place in a vacuum, but was a direct result and consequence of deliberate policy.

I welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy to invest in, and build on, our infrastructure, and the recognition that there is a need to effectively tackle the major

deficiencies in areas such as roads, public transport, water and sewerage infrastructure. Many of those deficiencies are to be found west of the River Bann.

The infrastructural needs of the north west are well known, and they are vital to the necessary growth for job creation, investment and expansion of the education sector. I stress that the Executive should distil their targets down to the expected impact on the constituencies. For example, the target of 6,500 new jobs should have an appropriate target for each constituency. Derry, Strabane, Enniskillen and Larne all need jobs and are all of one mind: how does the Programme for Government and ISNI specifically intend to deliver?

The same can be said for transport, and the road and rail networks — jobs cannot go to Derry, or elsewhere, if the roads and rail networks remain as they are. Social exclusion and lack of mobility will remain a problem unless proper resources are allocated to rural transport, which is another objective of the Programme for Government.

The Minister for Regional Development has outlined his desire to tackle regional disparity, and the Budget should be resourced to make that possible. The Programme for Government and ISNI are the first positive steps in the process of a future built upon the principles of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. That is not flowery language, as it was described by Stephen Farry, nor is it something that we will have to explain to our next Ard-Fheis.

7.00 pm

Dawn Purvis said that she wanted to be a fly on the wall at our next Ard-Fheis. She is welcome to come. Basil McCrea, who seems to have a habit of attending those things, can also come. I would also welcome the SDLP, but it will be having Ard-Fheiseanna of its own in the future, perhaps with Bertie Ahern as its new party leader.

I will refrain from inviting anyone on the opposite Benches to our next Ard-Fheis, lest they do not get invited to their own party conference. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I listened with interest to the comments of several Members. I heard much negativity from the Benches opposite and from those on my right-hand side. Where is their vision for the future of Northern Ireland?

Mr Storey: Where are their Members? Where is their party?

Mr Simpson: To be honest, I predicted that at about 7.00 pm they would all go like snow off a ditch.

Mr Storey: ‘Emmerdale’. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Simpson: Yes, ‘Emmerdale’ is about to start; I forgot about that. At 7.30 pm it will be ‘Coronation Street’.

Basil McCrea has returned to the Chamber.

There is great negativity, but, as my colleague Mr Storey pointed out, there have been increases across the Departments. The draft Programme for Government has a positive outlook.

The DUP was the first political party — and for several years the only political party — in Northern Ireland to identify key changes that were needed to our economy, and hence, by definition, to the political strategy that the Province needs to follow if we are to shape a prosperous future.

I am glad that where once there was opposition to the DUP’s arguments, there is now general acceptance of what were so long uniquely DUP principles. I am glad that when we engaged with representatives of the business community — the Federation of Small Businesses, the Confederation of British Industry, the Chamber of Commerce, and right across the spectrum — they all broadly welcomed this initiative.

Dawn Purvis referred to the jobs of ordinary working-class people. Many of the so-called working-class people that I have spoken to welcome the draft Programme for Government; they see prospects for the creation of new jobs in all sectors in the Province.

The draft Programme for Government states that:

“Our over-arching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

It continues:

“To achieve this we need to pursue an innovative and productive economy and a fair society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal health and well-being.”

I wholeheartedly support those ideals.

However, where this draft Programme for Government departs from previous visions for Northern Ireland is that the economy is now the top priority, but in a manner that is not undisciplined or unconnected with the other needs of society. That is a DUP position. Looking at the Assemblies of the Trimble-Mallon and the Trimble-Durkan years, this is not only the DUP’s position; it is territory marked out by the DUP long ago. I am pleased that others have begun to catch up.

My party’s efforts have forced that shift in attitude and direction.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: No, I will not. You have talked enough. *[Laughter.]* With the greatest of respect, Mr Speaker, I do not think we could handle much more. The Members should save it for his Committees.

Mr Storey: Save it for the Sinn Féin conference.

Mr Simpson: That is right. The draft Programme for Government represents a huge success for those people who want Northern Ireland to prosper and nurture a strong economy. The liberal agenda has been cast aside, and that is to be welcomed. The fact that Sinn Féin has signed up to the draft Programme for Government may cause some eyebrows to be raised. However, that is a matter for Sinn Féin.

I welcome the plans to grow the private sector in order to foster a SME-friendly environment. As the draft Programme for Government states:

“A successful economy is characterised by high productivity, a highly skilled and flexible workforce and employment growth.”

As well as increasing productivity and encouraging growth, we must have well-paid, high-skill jobs. In the light of recent job losses at places such as Seagate Technology, Tyco Healthcare and Reid Transport, that is all the more urgent.

The wealth and revenue that the Programme for Government creates will drive society forward and finance the rest of the Executive’s and the Assembly’s priorities. Alternatively, the failure to create that additional wealth and revenue will hold back those priorities and wound our people. I care about that. From recent comments, I wonder whether others in the House care as much as they say they do — or as much as they should.

The aim is to increase the employment rate from 70% to 75% by 2020. We look forward to securing inward-investment commitments that will create more than 6,500 new jobs, and to ensuring that at least three quarters of those jobs will come with salaries that are above the private-sector average. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCrea cannot help himself from chirping in from the background, but we have listened to —

Mr Storey: His party signed up to it.

Mr Simpson: That is 100% right. Despite what his colleague behind him said a few moments ago, his party signed up to the draft Programme for Government. All of a sudden, the Member has gone quiet. That can only be good.

Further prosperity will depend on the ability to respond quickly to business prospects. There is now a challenge for businesses and entrepreneurs. The Assembly must promote a pro-business environment that supports entrepreneurs — people who are not afraid to take risks in order to succeed. That is what I did in my business life — I had to. I know the pressures and stresses of trying to grow a business from scratch. However, I also know the rewards that can be gained from taking such an approach.

Northern Ireland must have, and be known to have, a knowledge-based economy with a highly-skilled workforce. There must be investment in research and development, coupled with deliverable innovation.

The welcome that business leaders have given to the draft Programme for Government is encouraging. However, that welcome highlights the failures of others who appear to have put their fortunes above the future of the Province. In calling for the shift in approach that the draft Programme for Government signals, the DUP stood almost alone among other political voices. We are keen to get on with the job of making Northern Ireland a business, investment and tourism success story, and the draft Programme for Government will allow us to proceed along that road. I welcome it.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

However, I want to deal with the issue of housing — or perhaps I should say the lack of housing — which has been debated many times in the House and has received the support of all Members. I will try to be as brief as possible. The housing issue has brought statements of condemnation from all parties, and, if it is not tackled, will condemn people to spending years on waiting lists while they lie in hostels or, in many cases, on the streets.

The Housing Executive estimates that we need to build at least 2,000 houses a year. That is an under-estimation, especially if one considers that there are 36,000 people on the housing waiting list. In the first two quarters of this year alone, 10,000 people have declared themselves homeless. However, according to the draft Programme for Government, only £1.4 billion will be made available for housing between 2008 and 2018, and only 10,000 houses will be built in the next five years. If my calculations are correct, the budget works out at about £127 million a year over that period. That amount will build fewer than 800 houses a year, which will not allow us even to keep pace with the number of people who declare themselves homeless let alone deal with the housing crisis.

Will the First Minister tell the House whether the £1.4 billion outlined in the draft Programme for Government will definitely be committed to a newbuild programme, or is the document simply a wish list of things to do if the money is available? Will the First Minister take on board the serious underfunding of the sector? Does he agree that much more must be done?

The housing issue requires a programme that is properly costed and resourced. In Dublin, billions of euro have been made available to deal with housing, and, in England, billions of pounds have been made available to deal with the serious problems of social

housing supply and affordability. We must follow those examples.

Housing is a cross-cutting issue; it impacts on health, education and employment. I ask the First Minister to re-examine that section of the draft Programme for Government and deal realistically with the allocation of resources for housing. The sector needs at least £400 million for newbuild in the coming year and annual increases thereafter to keep pace with rising costs. Anything less will condemn those who are most in need to years of no prospect of owning their own home or being allocated social housing. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: It is a delight to be involved in the debate, and it is always good to listen and learn at the feet of the master, Mr McCrea. Lest I offend my colleagues from Mid Ulster or South Antrim, I should point out that I mean Basil McCrea. We have heard the usual exposition from the unofficial leader of the Opposition, which will set us on the right road.

We have this opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government. Unfortunately, we have heard the usual negative remarks from Alliance Party Members, who seem able only to carp from the sidelines. Their solution is a magical figure that they conjure up by calculating the cost of division. They seem to be able to use that as a bottomless pit of funding to cure all the ills in society, financial or otherwise.

I am reminded of its sister party, the Liberal Democrats, which, in the 1990s, consistently promised to put 1p on income tax. It was keen to spend that amount over and over again on every conceivable matter. Again, we have heard about the magic-bullet solution for Northern Ireland, and we have heard that, if only those changes could be made overnight, everything in our economy would be right.

To be fair to the Alliance Party, at least its position is consistent — it is consistently wrong. However, its position is slightly more coherent than that of the Ulster Unionist Party. It seems to be engaged in some type of hokey-cokey politics. Members from that party seem to think that they can close their eyes and let the world drift away, and they will no longer be part of the Executive.

Indeed, the Member for North Belfast Mr Cobain vehemently rejected the suggestion of them being involved in any way, shape or form, and seemed to be apoplectic at the suggestion that they were part of the coalition.

7.15 pm

Mr Basil McCrea, Mr Cobain and others may not want it this way, but, when the UUP opens its eyes it will find; that it is part of the Government; that it has agreed to the draft Programme for Government; and, indeed, that it cannot simply denounce parts of the

programme while being part of the Government. UUP Members cannot have their cake and eat it. Unfortunately, that lesson seems to have been lost on them.

Mr B McCrea: I could be wrong, but was there not a previous Administration in which DUP Ministers were half in and half out? Was that not a case of them having their cake and eating it?

Mr Weir: We were against the system at that stage, and we indicated that. *[Interruption.]*

The UUP went into the election on the basis that it would be in Government from day one, no matter what happened. However, its members now want to be in Government and in opposition; they do not know what they are involved in.

As regards inconsistency, Basil McCrea seems to be facing in two directions. He castigated the draft Programme for Government for not being business-friendly enough and for not creating enough jobs. However, on the other hand he seemed to say that he could support a lot of what the Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis said, and, indeed, the far left agenda of the PUP, a party that still has as part of its constitution the old Labour constitution containing clause 4, and which would nationalise just about everything. I appreciate that the PUP, at least, has some intellectual and honest consistency.

However, I cannot work out whether Basil McCrea wants a more business-friendly Programme for Government, or whether he wants to hoist the red flag — as he does the red tie that he consistently wears — overthrow the Government and the middle classes and implement the kulak system that that entails.

We have a draft Programme for Government that is based on support for business and puts at its heart the growth of “a dynamic, innovative economy”. It was the failure by successive predecessors of the current Administration to grasp that nettle that is fundamentally at the heart of current economic problems.

The draft Programme for Government is clearly focused. There are some who criticised it when it was published for not being some sort of version of ‘War and Peace’ that goes on for thousands of pages. We have a document that is clearly focused and can deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

I serve on the Committee for the Environment, and I want to touch on a number of the issues that relate to that area. As was mentioned by one of the Members opposite, all Members should welcome the commitment that has been made to reduce road deaths. Many issues discussed in the Assembly are regarded as matters of life and death. However, few are so directly and literally matters of life and death as road deaths. I welcome the commitment to reduce overall road deaths, and, in

particular, the commitment to try and reduce child deaths on the roads.

I also welcome the commitment to proceed with the reform of local government in Northern Ireland. The review of public administration is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many Members feel that there is still work to be done. Indeed, it has been acknowledged by the Minister of the Environment that the emerging findings are simply the initial stage in that regard. It is a challenge to Ministers across the board to ensure that there is proper delivery for local government. A system that can better deliver to the people at local level is vital.

As someone who has been involved in local government, I also strongly welcome the pledge to fundamentally overhaul the planning system by 2011. All Members, whether they represent an urban constituency, a rural constituency or somewhere that is a mixture between the two, will be aware of the fundamental problems that exist with the Planning Service. The review that will clearly lead to changes to PPS 14 is to be welcomed. Fundamentally, the Planning Service is in massive need of overhaul and reform.

In particular, there is a very strong economic dimension: one of the major barriers and disincentives to bringing new business into Northern Ireland is the creaking planning system. Businesses see the speed with which they can locate in other parts of the world and compare it to the long, drawn-out process here. That is something that we must tackle with alacrity.

A range of other matters connected with the Department of the Environment are worthy of note. The commitment to reduce landfill significantly, by creating a network of new waste treatment facilities at council level, will be of practical benefit to the environment and will have financial implications. That issue was heavily neglected under direct rule. If Northern Ireland does not tackle it, we will run into difficulties with the European Union, and the taxpayers of Northern Ireland will pick up the tab for that. Waste management was neglected time after time by previous Administrations, particularly under direct rule. I welcome the commitment to that.

I also welcome other commitments, such as the reduction of carbon emissions and the strengthening of key habitats and species by the declaration of 200 new ASSIs by 2016.

We have a coherent, environmentally friendly Programme for Government that looks after all our citizens and puts the economy first. It will be seen in years to come as a key turning point for Northern Ireland. It protects the interests of our citizens and faces up to challenges which, for too long, were ducked by direct rule Ministers.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the fact that a draft Programme for Government and a draft investment strategy have

been laid before the House. It has been a long wait — almost six months — for Executive action. I suspect that we might have had to wait longer had it not been for the Ulster Unionist Party, which brought forward a successful motion demanding that a legislative programme be laid before the House.

I have heard much criticism today. Members of the DUP, too numerous to mention, have criticised the Alliance Party, the SDLP and my party. It is good to see, however, that they have some friends in the House, just across the Floor from them — their partners, Sinn Féin.

Mrs D Kelly: Is it not somewhat ironic that we must listen to lectures on negativity from the party of which Seamus Mallon once said that, if the word “No” were taken out of its vocabulary, it would have nothing to say?

Mr Elliott: If that is the Member’s thought, I have no comment.

I was pleased to hear Members such as Alex Maskey talk about good relations. However, I wonder how far that stretched last week, when a local district policing partnership meeting in his constituency had to be abandoned because of republican protests. I should like to hear Mr Maskey, when he returns to the Chamber, speak on that: perhaps he will condemn that action.

I also welcome the consultation period for the document, which lasts until 4 January 2008. Normally, I would question the brevity of that period, but, because we have waited so long for the programme, I am content not to make too much of that.

It is important to observe that the Programme for Government and the investment strategy are at a consultative stage. That is something that the Health and Social Development Minister seems to appreciate, but which other Ministers seem not to understand; it appears to have eluded them.

In broad terms, no one can argue with the principles outlined in the Programme for Government: providing good leadership; working energetically in the interests of everyone; working in partnership across public, private and voluntary sectors; raising standards across Government; and delivering fair outcomes and social improvements. All are laudable in themselves.

We are told that the Executive will grow a dynamic, innovative economy; promote tolerance —perhaps not excluding South Belfast and the district policing partnerships; promote health and well-being; protect and enhance our environment and natural resources; invest to build our infrastructure; and deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services. They would say that, would they not? We should be no more surprised at that exposition of worthy aims than we are when we hear a Miss World contestant say that she wants world peace.

As legislators, we must ask the hard question. What precisely does the Programme for Government explicitly promise that will provide a qualitative improvement in Government and administration in Northern Ireland, and which will realise the lofty aspirations to which the Executive has signed up?

The 23 public service agreements that aim to deliver that strategy appear sound enough in their own way. The correlation of objectives, actions and targets on a matrix framework that cuts across all Departments is a clear and measurable way to proceed. The inclusion of specific targets sets ambitions and, in some cases, difficult tasks for the Government to achieve. We have been seeking that level of detail, and it will provide a real task for the Committees of the House in assessing the performance of the Executive and the individual Minister. I applaud and support the thoroughness of that approach.

I will deal with two issues, the first of which is child poverty. In the Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister that is part of an ongoing investigation. It is close to my heart, as in my constituency the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area has the highest child poverty percentages in the province.

A recent Government report found that in Northern Ireland up to 120,000 children live in varying degrees of poverty. If we add to that the number of children who are deemed to live in deprivation the figure increases to 160,000. Those figures are highly disturbing, given that in 1999 the Prime Minister pledged to end child poverty in a generation.

It is important for us as a regional Government to choose a focal point from which to tackle child poverty. 120,000 children live in poverty, that figure might drop by more than 50% if the target groups were to include only those children who live in severe poverty, and not those who live in general poverty. When the focus is shifted, the number of children in Northern Ireland whose situations require what we would call immediate action decreases to 44,000.

Furthermore, we must ask what the difference is between immediate and long-term action in child poverty. Differentiating between levels of poverty does not take away from the overall problem. Nevertheless, were we to make such a differentiation, the Assembly and the Executive could execute a more strategic plan to help those who are in most immediate distress. To attempt to tackle an issue of that scale in a single move could lead to miscalculations of judgement, and could prove erroneous in the long run.

The second issue is agriculture and rural development. I listened to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr William McCrea, and I agree with much of what he said. It is

difficult for me to comprehend a situation in which many who are directly involved in agriculture and farming through the rural development programme should be almost encouraged to cease farming activities in favour of diversification. I have no difficulty with diversification; it does have a specific remit. However, it is not the answer to all problems. I am concerned that many in the agriculture industry are encouraged to leave it in favour of diversification, and that alone will not solve the problem. I am sure that many of those people would not welcome such a move, particularly those who have started their own beef-import businesses, importing large amounts of beef from South America.

Where will all the money come from? I assume that that will be the first major problem the Executive, and the Programme for Government, will come up against. For that reason, it is impossible to separate meaningfully the Programme for Government from the Budget, which realises it.

I suppose that one difficulty has been the failure to get the expected money and secure the financial deal that was supposed to come from the then Chancellor, and now Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. That is something that, I assume, we will live to regret.

It is easy to talk in vague generalities, or even in specifics, about principles. Discipline comes when one has to explain, convincingly, how one is going to pay. I am concerned that some of the financial assumptions in the draft Programme for Government may be unsound. Much depends on the sell-off prices of assets and on the as yet unspecified additional income from as yet unspecified sources. However, that is a debate for another day.

7.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Through its role in providing opportunity for all children and young people, and in preparing them for life and work — and in reforming its administration — education is meant to contribute to the Programme for Government priorities of growing a dynamic and innovative economy; promoting tolerance and inclusion; health and well-being; and delivering modern, high quality and efficient public services. Those priorities and goals are underpinned by a range of education-related public service agreements — in particular PSA 2, which deals with skills for prosperity; PSA 10, which deals with helping our children and young people to achieve through education; PSA 16, which deals with investing in the education estate; PSA 19, which deals with raising standards of schools; and PSA 20, which deals with improving public services. The key education goals for the first two priorities are ensuring that 70% of school-leavers achieve five or more GCSEs by 2011, and achieving a position by 2011 whereby 30% of school-leavers who are entitled

to free school meals obtain GCSE passes A* to C in English and Mathematics.

The use of the GCSE qualification as an indicator for the future is questionable, given that a revised curriculum is being introduced. Even assuming that CCEA will adapt its syllabuses to suit the revised curriculum, many schools in Northern Ireland enter pupils for GCSE examinations with other examination boards whose syllabuses will not be linked to the curricular changes that are taking place in Northern Ireland. If that is the case, we must ask how accurate an indicator GCSE will be in the future and consider what other relevant indicators can, and should, be used.

Although the key goal under priority 3 is that of establishing an education and skills authority by 2009, there is still quite an amount of work to be done on fashioning the shape of that authority. One of the main concerns that has been expressed about the new authority is its size. The ESA will be the biggest authority of its type in Western Europe. It remains to be seen how it will deliver its services on a subregional basis, and how accountable it will be at local level and at board level. Since ESA is seen as the main means of improving schools in the future, it is essential that there is satisfaction with the accountability and delivery mechanisms at all levels.

The teaching profession, of which I am a member, is the most valuable resource that education has in Northern Ireland. Over the past number of years, teachers have lost parity with their counterparts in England and Wales. This is particularly true in relation to the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time that has not yet been implemented in Northern Ireland. Likewise, teaching principals in small primary schools need two days administration time to ensure that their workload is manageable. The Department of Education will claim that one day is already factored in — under the common funding formula — but since that resource is not ring-fenced, it is more often than not subsumed in the attempts to balance the school's books.

Public service agreements 10 and 19 would benefit from proper investment in the teaching workforce. There is concern that available resources from the draft Budget will not enable many of the public service agreement actions and targets for education to be realised.

Objective 1 of public service agreements 6 and 10, which relate to the early-years strategy, is very much in doubt due to reduced resources. Given the savings that investment in early-years education can bring — a point underlined strongly by Nobel laureate Professor James Heckman in his recent Belfast lecture — a future reduction in spending in that area of education could prove costly not only in financial terms, but in

human terms, in the social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of children.

Professor Heckman pointed out that investments in social policies that intervene in the early years have very high later rates of return, while social policies that intervene later in the life cycle have low economic returns. A large body of scientific evidence shows a persistent pattern of strong effects derived from early interventions. Significantly, those substantial long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains, but are most clearly seen in measures of social performance and lifetime achievement. In other words, people who participate in enriched early-childhood programmes are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents or participate in criminal activities. Rather, they become productive adults.

The quality of pre-school provision appears to be a crucial determinant of educational attainment. High-quality provision involves small group size, high adult-child ratios, a balanced curriculum and trained staff. The House has previously debated how the benefits of enhancing the skills of the early-years workforce through a transformation fund would greatly enhance that effect.

A reduction in resources would also cast doubt on objective 2 of public service agreement 10 regarding the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy and the school improvement scheme. Each child has a basic right to leave primary school competent in literacy and numeracy. The Public Accounts Committee report of December 2006 underlined the need for a revised literacy and numeracy strategy. Twenty-six million pounds was spent on the previous strategy and we have 660 co-ordinators in reading recovery in our schools, yet only 160 of those co-ordinators are active, because schools do not have the resources to release teachers from the classroom.

Any literacy and numeracy strategy must be strong on practice as well as policy. The three-wave approach at each of the key stages 1, 2 and 3 should be implemented: wave 1, quality first teaching; wave 2, group withdrawal of underachieving pupils; and wave 3, one-to-one teaching. A framework for language should be developed to guide teachers as to the language competencies that children should have in relation to their development. As is good practice in other areas of education, early identification of difficulties and appropriate early interventions are required that will lead to savings in future both in human and financial terms.

Initial teacher training must be reviewed in order to ensure that newly qualified teachers are aware of the literacy and numeracy strategy and have the most effective methodologies for teaching literacy and numeracy as

part of their professional skills. As with the recently established inclusion and diversity service, a regional approach should be taken to implementing the literacy and numeracy strategy under a regional organiser, with local delivery teams supported by trained learning support assistants.

Although time prevents me from going into detail, I believe that the available resources from the draft Budget may not allow other specific education-related public service agreement actions and targets to be met.

Depending on the final Budget allocations and the use made of resources available for education, the following PSA actions and targets may have to be revised or scaled back: PSA 2, objective 4, regarding the increase in skills and career choices in science, technology, engineering and maths; PSA 2, objective 3, regarding the Department of Education's contribution to the implementation of the strategy and framework for careers education, information, advice and guidance; and PSA 10, objective 2, regarding improved access to the Youth Service for young people most at risk of exclusion, and its associated targets.

Programme for Government priorities and their underpinning PSAs, objectives, actions and targets should be more than mere aspirations. They should be achievable goals, backed by the necessary resources to realise them, for the benefit of our citizens in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCausland: I broadly welcome the strategic direction of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. Before turning to culture, arts and leisure, I want to pick up on some issues that have been raised by previous Members.

Dr Stephen Farry spoke at length about the size of the documents. He expressed the concern that they were comparatively brief. I reflected on that and thought that the moral law of God is expressed in 10 short commandments, which possibly suggests that it is the quality of a document, rather than the quantity, that matters. Basil McCrea should take that point on board and apply it to his speeches.

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

Basil McCrea surpassed the Alliance Party in negativity. His whingeing and gurning knew no end. He must have been attempting to bolster his bid for the leadership of his party. A common theme ran through the Ulster Unionist Party speeches: it was a theme of denial and the delusion that it is not part of a four-party coalition Executive. This is the draft programme of a Government in which the Ulster Unionist Party has two Ministers and of which it is a part. Fred Cobain nearly had apoplexy when that was said, and he had to leave. I am glad that he recovered and has returned. However, that is the situation.

Declan O'Loan spoke in very measured tones, but he seemed to have a great desire to speak at length and repetitively about "the island". He continually referred to "the island". He should be less insular and more inclusive in his thinking. I hope that, in due course, he will become more expansive and inclusive and realise that we are part of the British Isles and that there are two islands that are very close together.

I am delighted that the draft Programme for Government contains a commitment to promoting access to culture, arts and leisure. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, David McNarry, referred to funding. He spoke at length about the need for more funding. I would like to see more investment in that area, but we are starting from a lower base than most other Departments. Why are we starting from such a low base? Who was responsible for that? Under the previous devolved Government, the Ulster Unionist Minister Michael McGimpsey was responsible for ensuring that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had such a low budget. His failure — in fact, the Ulster Unionist Party's failure — was carried on by direct rule Ministers who operated a care and maintenance model.

For the sake of our society, I hope that Mr McGimpsey makes a better job of health than he did of culture.

7.45 pm

I now turn to the priorities identified in annex 1 of the draft Programme for Government. I want to highlight the fact that culture, arts and leisure are not only seen as important in their own right; they are also important because they impact on tourism, health and education.

In particular, the tourism sector in Northern Ireland must be developed. There is a commitment to manage and develop the Northern Ireland cultural infrastructure — £229 million of capital investment by 2011 in arts, sports, museums, libraries and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. That shows the scale of the need, and re-emphasises the scale of past failure. It is good to see that resources have been allocated for the provision of a number of major arts, cultural and sporting centres; to renovate the Ulster Museum and for other developments in the museums; to restructure our libraries so that there is a better library infrastructure right across Northern Ireland; and to ensure that we have a properly resourced Public Record Office that is suitable and appropriate for a place such as Northern Ireland.

PSA 6, on children and families, also relates to sport. It is important to address the issue of childhood obesity, and an increase in sporting provision will provide young people with greater access to sport and thus will undoubtedly help to tackle that issue.

Sport also has a key role to play in PSA 8, on promoting health and addressing health inequalities. As time and effort are invested in promoting sport, good health will, at the same time, be encouraged. Thus, the provision of better cultural, artistic and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland will help to address a number of the Government's key priorities.

One area in which greater commitment is needed is education. There has been a failure to address the cultural rights of children in education, particularly those in the controlled sector. There has been a tremendous amount of investment in the Irish-medium sector, which provides an Irish cultural tradition for children from that background. Likewise, there has been a great deal of investment in the Catholic-maintained sector. I hope that we will see more commitment to recognising the cultural rights of children who are educated in the controlled sector, and to meeting the requirements at an international level in respect of those rights.

Both the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy refer to the creative industries. We must realise that many of the heavy industries that were so important in the past are now no longer here, and that the areas of potential growth — and very substantial growth — are tourism and the creative industries. It is clear from the number of hotels that are being built in Belfast and across Northern Ireland, and from the number of international cruise ships that are bringing tourists from around the world into our ports, that there is a tremendous potential and opportunity to develop our tourism industry, which can create many new jobs for the people of Northern Ireland.

I shall pick up on a couple of points in the draft investment strategy. I hope that, in carrying forward the commitment to the modernisation of our libraries, reference will be made to the good model that already exists in north Belfast — the Grove Well-being Centre, which not only offers library provision, but a major leisure centre and recreational and health provision. Therefore, libraries, leisure and health are all tied in; the three services are brought together in one context. I hope that that integrated approach to the provision of library services will be at the heart of future provision.

I am glad to see a commitment to creating a new Belfast central library by 2015. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a national library, and therefore it is important that a significant regional library is provided, and that it is suitable and adequate for maintaining the cultural wealth that is part of our heritage in Northern Ireland. The provision of a new Belfast central library will contribute to that.

Finally, under the investment pillar termed "social" in the draft investment strategy, it is stated:

"Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood ... offer the potential for a transformational development ... that will provide social and economic regeneration within North Belfast."

That is the type of major opportunity that lies before us. I hope that instead of the negativity that we have heard from certain Members, there will be a change of heart — perhaps something of a political conversion from a few of them — a commitment to being positive towards such initiatives that will, in the future, bring many new jobs not only to north Belfast through that particular project but to the entire Province through the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the take-note motion. Since the publication of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, Members have debated the strengths and weaknesses in their respective Committees and parties. That process is ongoing. Therefore, anything that I say in the debate is not definitive: I fully reserve the right to scrutinise, and comment on, the documents further.

What initially struck me as positive in the draft investment strategy is the departure from a silo mentality in Government. It has long been the case that, in Government, one hand did not know what the other hand was doing. However, the positive thinking behind the draft investment's strategy's six pillars will help to join up departmental plans and other stakeholders, avoid any duplication and allow them to recognise opportunities to maximise outcomes by working together. The Assembly must ensure that that filters down to all levels, especially to local development level.

With regard to building a sustainable future through social, economic and environmental policies and programmes, the draft Programme for Government refers to the need to:

"ensure that the principles of sustainability — development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs — underpin our approach to all our activities."

I welcome that commitment from the Executive. However, as the Assembly is forced to move further down the line of Departments' use of private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships for procurement rather than conventional methods, it may leave a legacy for future generations that is steeped in Government debt.

I welcome the commitment to modernise the mental-health service's estate and support for a move away from long-stay settings to care in the community. That must be welcomed, particularly after a year in which instances have been highlighted of children and older people with learning difficulties being held in long-term settings when a sufficient care package would enable them to be at home. I am concerned that there is no

commitment from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deal with the lack of respite provision and that neither document refers to that issue. It should be a priority for the Executive, because it affects the most vulnerable people and their carers.

My constituency of Mid Ulster is a rural area that is situated west of the Bann. I am glad that the draft Programme for Government includes a commitment to deal with regional imbalance. However, it is not strong enough. I want a commitment in black and white from the Executive that they will deal with years of underinvestment in that area by successive British Governments.

I am concerned about the draft Programme for Government's claims that widespread broadband access will be delivered. People who live in rural areas do not have full access to broadband, and those who do pay over the odds for the privilege. The Assembly must not allow such claims to be made by companies such as BT, because, by doing so, it ignores the situation that many people face in rural areas of the North.

In order to deal fully with the effects of underinvestment west of the Bann and to make progress, there must be a clear Executive-led strategy to tackle the problems in that area with a view to establishing more favourable outcomes for all people and to eradicate inequalities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: My party colleagues have already outlined the reasons for my party's critical amendment, as, indeed, has Basil McCrea. I will try not to repeat their arguments. However, I wish to highlight further what my party considers to be the draft Programme for Government's deficiencies: its lack of vision, detail and firm commitment. My party considers that there is virtually nothing in the draft Programme for Government that would not have been included in a direct rule document. It is hard to see the effect of local input after long months of deliberation by local Ministers. Instead, the flimsy document indicates the difficulties of reaching agreement among the four Executive parties and the resultant acceptance of a lowest-common-denominator approach.

Much of the draft Programme for Government is a continuation of work in progress. Where are the new initiatives — the release of new thinking that is based on the particular needs of the Northern Ireland public? Neither the draft Programme for Government nor the public service agreements contain any significant details of policy proposals or of priorities to be given to policy areas, particularly to changes of policy direction after devolution.

This is not a momentous achievement, as claimed by the First Minister, or in any way strategic as claimed by the deputy First Minister. It is, unfortunately, a bland, disappointing effort that has been constrained

by the lack of agreement in the Executive. The draft Programme for Government argues that the framework of PSA's confirm the key actions to be taken in support of the five key priorities, but an absence of detail runs through both documents.

PSA 1, which covers productivity growth, aims to allow Invest NI to continue what it is doing — unsuccessfully, some might say — and for the energy market to be opened up for competition, as has been planned already.

PSA 2, which covers skills for prosperity, promises a series of reviews and as yet unwritten action plans, and PSA 4, which covers supporting rural businesses, contains vague measures. PSA 5, which covers tourism, states that we will have to manage and develop our inland navigations and cultural infrastructure. Are they not being managed already?

The draft Programme for Government does not contain any promise of action on the shared future agenda or good relations, unless one counts societal relationships. There is no promise or commitment on integrated education, unlike the Irish-medium sector, which is to be maximised under the terms of the agreement: nor is there any promise of action in the arts, except that the 'Arts Council for Northern Ireland Corporate Plan 2007-10' is to be promoted — not implemented or funded, but promoted.

I could go into detail on education because I am a member of that Committee for Education, but I do not need to, because Dominic Bradley has done so, rather eloquently, a few moments ago. It does not sound as though education is to be prioritised? How is vocational education to be promoted? How is entrepreneurship to make its way into schools? What industries are to be targeted so that careers services deliver appropriate advice?

The inadequacy of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy are plain to see, and, in summary, their aims are not prioritised; the actions are not detailed, and existing targets are not changed. Education has been left out of the priorities; tackling sectarianism is not referred to, and the arts are all but ignored.

The Alliance Party has been accused of negativity — I have never heard that word used so many times in one day — and mention has been made of our churlish attitude to what is being portrayed as some sort of visionary document, which, in its present draft form, it patently is not. I hope that the Executive will seriously consider the draft Programme for Government's deficiencies and look positively at the suggestions that have been made and which will be put forward during the consultation period.

All of the suggestions have not come from the "negative" Alliance Party; they have come from all

parties in the House. I have listened with interest today. I heard Alex Maskey refer to matters that he would like to be teased out, which is a diplomatic way of saying that there are matters about which he has major concerns. He mentioned the shared future and the draft Programme for Government's lack of commitment to it. Mervyn Storey expressed grave concerns about education, and he had genuine concerns on other matters. I cannot help but think that his concerns about education are not so much to do with the education programme as the potential antics of the Minister of Education.

Mr Boylan expressed concern about planning regulations, global warming, the need for an all-Ireland approach on road safety, and the lack of an environmental protection agency. Those concerns have come from Members of parties in the Executive. Basil McCrea also contributed to the debate: what can I say to my Lagan Valley colleague? I agree with some of his comments about early years, pupil/teacher ratios, selection, and the education and skills authority — and he was not the only Member to mention that.

Fra McCann, a Member who is also from a party in the Executive — the coalition — talked about housing, and he was quite right.

Mr F McCann: Members are putting their points across today in order to try to influence the Minister to change aspects of the draft documents. That is why one of the documents is called a draft Budget. Members may not have much impact when the draft Budget becomes the Budget.

8.00 pm

Mr Lunn: I could not agree more. It is supposed to be a discussion about draft documents.

However, there is a perception that all the comments from this end of the House have been negative and those from everywhere else have been cosy and friendly. I was encouraged to hear people from the far reaches of the Chamber being critical. Some people might see that as constructive comment, but I call it criticism of the draft Programme for Government.

I commend the Alliance Party's amendment to the House. We have not been quite as negative as has been suggested, but when it is four parties against one, we are an easy target.

Mr Hamilton: Even at this late hour, I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate. I know that some Members are tempted to nod off when they have to work at such an hour. I will give it 10 minutes, but it seems that some Members have fallen asleep already — Fred Cobain must be dreaming if he believes that his party is not in Government.

I am increasingly surprised and shocked at the Alliance Party's attitude in the House. After years of

demanding that all the parties get together and work for the betterment of Northern Ireland, I suppose that I should not be surprised that the party now opposes what it wanted for so long. The only conclusion to be drawn from such extreme hypocrisy is that the Alliance Party opposes the draft Programme for Government simply because the electorate did not give it the mandate to be in Government, and that is churlish.

I am not surprised by the attitude displayed again today by the Ulster Unionist Party. Members of that party want to be in Government and enjoy the fruits of being in office. However, at the same time, they want to appear to the outside world as some type of Opposition. It depends on who is being spoken to, or who speaks to the Government, whether the Ulster Unionist Party wants to be in or out of Government.

With the majority of people in Northern Ireland, I am positive about the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. I could talk at some considerable length this evening about the specific benefits that those policies will bring to my Strangford constituency, such as the new rapid transit system that will start in Dundonald and go throughout Belfast, or the new accommodation for the South Eastern Regional College, including investment —

Mr McNarry: Where is the money for that coming from?

Mr Hamilton: As David McNarry knows, all that information is contained in the draft Budget, should he wish to read it. I am surprised that he has not read it, and I hope that he does so in time for tomorrow's debate so that he can make a knowledgeable contribution — but perhaps that is too unrealistic a dream.

Despite what the Health Minister may have suggested, there are also new hospital facilities for Downpatrick that will serve my constituents. The programme also includes the completion of the first phase of redevelopment at the Ulster Hospital, not to mention more general issues, such as free public transport for everyone over the age of 60.

I am sure that Members all around the Chamber could talk about how the draft Programme for Government specifically benefits their own constituencies —
[*Interruption.*]

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

Mr P J Bradley: Mr Hamilton referred to reading the draft Programme for Government and to the various other publications. As a representative of a rural area, is he surprised that there is no reference to agriculture in this booklet? The word does not even appear.

Mr Hamilton: The word "farming" appears in the document, but perhaps the Member does not like that choice of word and prefers "agriculture".

Mr Paisley Jnr: Perhaps it would be helpful if the Member for South Down were to read about the intended £45 million investment in the draft Programme for Government:

“to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector.”

Mr Ross: That is agricultural, as opposed to agriculture; it is a question of grammar —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the junior Minister for his contribution. It is unfortunate that P J Bradley is contributing to the awful literacy figures in Northern Ireland. I suggest that he sits down and does not embarrass himself further. It is in his interest to do so. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hamilton does not wish to give way.

Mr P J Bradley: I was referring to a particular version of the document. As Naomi Long mentioned earlier, there are several publications and a number of printed versions —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must resume his seat.

Mr Hamilton: I hope that I will be allowed a wee bit more time after that crude intervention.

I am pleased with the centrality given to the economy in the draft Programme for Government. Economic growth is not included as an afterthought; it is the Executive’s priority, front and centre. There are many targets and proposed outcomes, such as inward investment and the creation of 6,500 high-quality and better-paid jobs and increasing the employment rate to 75%. *[Interruption.]* I hear murmurings from sedentary positions and can only assume that those Members are unhappy about 6,500 new high-quality jobs, and do not want them in Northern Ireland. The programme plans new exporting companies, £120 million private-sector investment in innovation and growing creative industries.

Coming from Strangford, I am pleased to see the huge commitment to tourism. I praise the Executive’s concentration on the economy and their decision to make economic expansion their priority, which has met — and will meet — with criticism. However, those dogma-driven dinosaurs from a different age must be challenged.

The many structural weaknesses of Northern Ireland’s economy have been well noted — in the Assembly and elsewhere — and need no re-rehearsal. Failing to focus on the economy first and foremost and make it our priority in the Programme for Government and draft investment strategy will, at best, perpetuate the problems and, at worse, see them deteriorate. A Programme for Government and an investment strategy that continue

with the same direct rule mindset will do nothing to achieve the step change required in our economy.

I praise the Executive for their prioritisation of economic expansion and encourage them to resist any temptation to change focus. Continuing with the old formula of prioritising public services would produce the same results. Although previous programmes could not be blamed for the historically poor performance of our economy, they did little or nothing to address it. The absence of focus in the economy today has made the Executive’s task much harder.

It is muddle-headed to think that continuing to expand the size of, and spending on, the public sector at the same rate as recent years — which would exacerbate the prime problem of over-reliance on the public sector for growth and employment — will correct our economy. That is not to say that the aims of economic growth and more efficient and effective public services are mutually exclusive. In fact, a transformed economy, through substantial wealth creation, can be the key to unlocking better public services.

I encourage the Executive to keep the economy as their primary priority and to resist the easy option of reverting to type. The hundreds upon hundreds of people who have lost their jobs in recent days in Limavady, Cloughmills and Newtownards — which is in my constituency — would not thank us for letting the economy and the creation of new jobs slip down the agenda. In concentrating on the economy, it is essential that the right infrastructure — both physical infrastructure and people — be in place. That is why I welcome the inclusion —

Mr McLaughlin: Simon is right-wing now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: The Member will accuse me of being a Thatcherite next, which is not a label that I am prepared to wear.

That is why I welcome the inclusion of networks and of productive and skills pillars in the draft investment strategy. When we compare our physical infrastructure to that of our competitors in the rest of the United Kingdom — and in the Republic of Ireland — it is easy to see how substandard roads, energy and telecommunications can be a distinct disadvantage in Northern Ireland’s competitiveness. A common complaint about our economy is the lack of certain key skills; there is little point in attempting to attract new investment if there are not the right people with the right skills to take up the jobs that will be generated.

I welcome the commitment to tackle bureaucracy and to produce additional efficiencies. That includes a review of the number of Departments to tackle the bloated political bureaucracy created by the Belfast Agreement; a 25% reduction in the administration faced by farmers, which I am sure that Mr P J Bradley

will be pleased to hear; a single telephone number as a point of reference for public services; and a capital-realisation programme, which will obtain an extra £1 billion for infrastructure.

Strangely, the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy have been criticised in some quarters for being aspirational— as if aspiring to something was wrong. I welcome the aspiration and ambition in the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. If Northern Ireland is to be economically vibrant and have world-class public services, some aspiration is essential. To expect the multi-faceted problems of Northern Ireland to be overcome immediately is to aspire a little too much. It took more than three decades to create Northern Ireland's problems through a combination of terrorism and the ineptitude of direct rule, and it will take longer than the three years of the Programme for Government to undo them.

However, the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland offer a vision of a better and brighter future for Northern Ireland. We must start somewhere, so let us begin.

Mrs M Bradley: As far back as 19 December 2006, Ian Paisley Jnr, now a junior Minister, told the House how vital it was for effective campaigning for older people to be put in place and:

“We must ensure that we have delivery and not more process.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p184, col 2*].

That is all well and good, but now that we know that Deloitte and Touche has been appointed to carry out a review, is that not merely more process? One of the targets of PSA 7, objective 2, is that the Programme for Government will:

“Deliver a strong independent voice for older people”.

Another target is to:

“Ensure more effective statutory protection for older people as an identifiable group”.

What exactly does that mean for older people? We want to see real action and delivery of the goods, not report after report, more deliberation, and so on. Is the Budget to be spent on consultations and reports rather than on delivery?

Our older people and young people alike are abused, victimised and made to feel worthless daily. Both those sections of our society are considered to be the most vulnerable. Children deserved to get their commissioner, and so do our older people. Although there are PSAs that will assist children in the long term, there is little in the draft Programme for Government for older people, apart from the fact that the minimum age for the free-travel scheme has been reduced to include anyone aged 60 or over. Let us remember, however, that

people in rural areas cannot avail themselves of that scheme, because there is no bus travel there.

The free-travel scheme, which is to be introduced in 2008, is to be welcomed, but I hope that it is not the only party favour on offer for older members of our society. If so, what kind of message would that send out to the section of the electorate who are in their later years? Is it that they are not valuable enough to merit the appointment of a commissioner, who could, on their behalf, fight for policies that would have a huge impact on their current state of health and wealth? It worked for the children when their commissioner was appointed, so why is it different for people who are in their older years?

It is certain that we will all age — some of us more and quicker than others — but we all want to have a dignified life and death. That is not too much to ask for, now that we are in a new political era, with a Budget that can be applied by local Ministers, who should be — if they are not already — au fait with the needs of the people. If old age means going to the back of the queue in hospital because one is too old, if it means that a procedure is seen as simply a postponement of the inevitable, if it means that one can be abused by intruders, carers or even by family members, or if it means that one can be excluded from travelling because the cost of insurance is four times the price of that for anyone else, it is merely an existence and is not worth having. An older life is just as valuable as a youthful one.

Where is free personal care for the elderly? Where is the blueprint for getting to that stage? I acknowledge that it will be expensive, but it is something that our electorate is crying out for, yet they are getting nowhere.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that, on more than one occasion, the House voted to introduce free personal care for the elderly, and that, in every recent election, all the parties in the Assembly have promised to deliver free personal care?

Mrs M Bradley: I agree with the Member, but we need to hear that from the Minister who is responsible for delivering free personal care.

Winter fuel payments must be sorted out urgently, due to the massive hike in fuel costs, electricity and gas. The prediction of a much colder winter than last year, and the proposed cuts in home-fuel-saving schemes, mean that a cold, miserable and dangerous winter is on the agenda for the most vulnerable members of our communities. We must produce a consistent and unified call for winter fuel payments to be increased.

I am pleased to see that the Executive acknowledge children and the need to protect them. However, more stringent legislation must be a main player in that objective. Child protection and the tightening of the legislation that surrounds it must be a priority for the

Government. The recent media reports and debates in the Chamber should stand as testament to that.

The issue of cross-border co-operation and the establishment of an all-Ireland sex offenders register must be agreed, supported and acted on if we are to protect our children and all victims, whether past, current or potential. Children's rights and how they are delivered must be a priority for the Assembly, just as it has been in Wales.

They have got it right. They have agreed and established the Children and Young People Committee so that the Welsh Assembly speaks with a unified voice and deals with any decision-making pertaining to children's issues from one Department. That single-strand approach is working towards the appropriate delivery of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its successful implementation is a priority for the Welsh Assembly.

8.15 pm

Our children have great potential, and how the Government provide a just and equal society will determine how well, or how badly, children will develop into well-balanced human beings with a sense of respect and decency for themselves and others.

Parents, too, must play a pivotal role in achieving that, and the parental role should not be minimised, because it will have more bearing than anything else when it comes to creating and maintaining a lawful and just society. Therefore, the PSAs that refer to children and family must be applied diligently, and the budgetary requirements need to be in place and increased yearly. There are concerns as to whether there is an adequate budget in place for the implementation of the 10-year strategy for children and young people.

Homelessness is also a well-known ailment in my constituency of Foyle; it is at a shocking level. There is quite simply nowhere to build social housing because house prices keep rising, and landowners are attaining previously undocumented sums for their land from developers waiting to cash in on the house-price boom. In historic style, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Ten thousand social-build homes across Northern Ireland are only a drop in the ocean, but it is a start in staving off a long-term problem that is worsening by the day.

We also have to consider the families who own their own homes and live in, what are described as, affluent areas, but who cannot afford to heat their homes properly, nor pay the ever-increasing gas and electricity bills, and who, because both partners work, may be just over the benefit threshold and no more. They have nowhere to go for help. Tax credits, increasingly, cause hardship when huge overpayments are clawed back in ridiculous sums, even when it is proven that the overpayment is the

fault of the Department. Increasing debt and household expenses are an all too common complaint, and we are depending on the decisions that this Executive make and sign off on to improve the lives of people.

I sincerely hope that poverty, and fuel poverty, strategies are capable of delivering what it is claimed that they can and that we will have the budgetary requirements to implement them properly. The effects of fuel poverty are well documented, and given that, I am sceptical of the target of 2016 for total eradication. I am even more sceptical of eradication in vulnerable homes by 2010.

Winter deaths among vulnerable people are a constant worry year upon year. In September of this year, the House was informed that the Social Development Minister's request for an increase in winter fuel payments was denied by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Minister has assured the House that fuel poverty and its eradication will remain at the heart of her Department's aims. I have every confidence in her determination, because, as she has shown in recent months, she can be a formidable force. I hope that the Executive will ensure that the financial means will be in place behind her determination.

People and their environment are, however, at the heart of more than half of the PSAs, so I can only hope that an early-intervention approach, and a mindful conscience, will be the basis that underpins the decision-making strategy in the life of this Assembly. Ultimately, that will determine the future for all our communities.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): My young friend Simon Hamilton was worried about the late hour to which we have been sitting; however, I remember when some of us had to be ejected from this House during the days of the old Stormont Commons. My colleague, friend and deputy spoke for eight hours, and that was only the icing on the cake, because all the others had spoken for hours before that. Eventually, we were hauled out and thrown down the steps, but, behold, we have come back again to haunt this particular Chamber.

I have served in the House of Commons, where there used to be very late sittings. I was able to go to the Tube station at 5.00 am after the House rose, catch a train to Heathrow and return to Northern Ireland. I suggest that my young friend should try that. It is good for one's health. He, too, could live until he is over 80 years of age.

Members will recall that when I launched the draft Programme for Government in the House on 25 October, I said that the Executive were determined to seize the opportunity to make a real difference and to build a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. I also said that we were determined, through the Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern

Ireland, to produce results that far supersede all that has happened in recent years in Northern Ireland.

Let me nail one issue from the outset. Our vision is not limited, our proposals are not limited and our ambition is not limited. I hope that we will show by our actions in the House not only that we are leading the people of Northern Ireland, but that the people of Northern Ireland are leading us in the right way.

The Executive have taken a new approach to the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. We want the plans to be understood by those outside the House — the people whom we are here to serve. We should all care about the people of Northern Ireland. We want our plans to set out clear goals and commitments, and to set out the issues that we, as an Executive, are committed to delivering for all the people of Northern Ireland. We want them to be ambitious and stretching, and to mark a clear difference from what has gone before. I can do no better than commend the comments of my party colleague Mr Spratt in that respect. I believe that we have noble objectives, and I believe that we will achieve them.

I am delighted to be able to tell the House that our approach has been widely, if not universally, welcomed. I have more to say on that — but I will keep Members in suspense just a little longer.

I am confident that the draft Programme for Government offers a clear framework, at a strategic level, for the Executive to develop their policies and programmes, and make a real difference for all the people of the Province. Our overarching aim in the draft Programme for Government is:

“to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

The main issue that is sealed in the document has been decided in the House today. Everyone should be obliged to join with us in the “peaceful, fair and prosperous society” that Northern Ireland deserves, and that our families’ families deserve:

“with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

That is a laudable aim for us to set for our Executive, Assembly, Government and people. I am glad that the whole Executive have been able to reach agreement on a shared, safe aim. I trust that we will have many conversions along the way, and that we will be able to say “unity at last”. That appeals to me as a unionist.

Everything that I have heard in this debate and elsewhere suggests that that aim commands widespread support across the whole community. That is as it should be.

Devolution has presented the Executive with a unique opportunity, but, in the coming days, if we are

to deliver that overarching aim, we must face many challenges with all the strength and wisdom that the good Lord can give us. The way will not be easy. The hills are not small hills but great mountains, and there will be much rough riding for us all. However, if we are determined to leave for those that come after us the foundation stones for an Ulster, such as I mentioned, that will be work well done.

Five strategic priorities are set out in the draft Programme for Government. They are not about narrow party politics or sectional interests. Contrary to what some Members said, the Executive thought long and hard before deciding on those priorities. We considered a wide range of evidence, and the views of many stakeholders and interests, before deciding on them. They are the Executive’s agreed priorities, and we believe that we have got them right. They are about tackling our challenges head on and grasping the opportunity to build a better future for all our people.

Among the people in Northern Ireland, especially those on either side of the great divide between unionists and republicans or nationalists, no one can doubt that there has been a change in thinking. Even people who would not listen to me in the past are now prepared to shake hands with me. The other night, as I was getting off a plane, a lady at the end of the runway asked to shake my hand. I told her that she certainly could, and she told me that, 11 months ago, she would have slapped me in the face. I asked her not to do that, and she said that I would be surprised to know who she was — she was the Mother Superior of a local convent. I said, “Thank you, Madam.” We left, and I did not get a slap in the face.

There have been changes; changes are coming, and we should encourage people to go in the direction that we have debated about together. We have put forward our points of view; we have sought what is right, and we will win through in the end. I certainly hope that I will live to see that victory in this country and Province that I love.

Our plans are good news for everyone in Northern Ireland, and we urge all Members of the Assembly to join us on the journey ahead. Even Alliance Party members are welcome, although that party’s leader does not ring me or send me a letter; rather, he uses the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ to communicate with me. Nevertheless, for the good of my country, I am prepared to wear even that.

Mr Ford: Does the First Minister accept that before releasing information to the media, I wrote to him about consultation on the legislative programme, and that that letter was delivered to his office in this Building?

The First Minister: I am afraid that that letter never came to my hand.

Mr Ford: There is clearly a difference between the First Minister and me about the operation of the internal mail system. The First Minister should report that to the Speaker and to the Commission.

8.30 pm

The First Minister: The honourable Member has communicated with me before; he knows my phone number at Parliament Buildings, and he can reach me when he wants to. However, I shall not answer letters that are sent to me publicly through any newspaper. I should not be expected to do that, despite all my gentleness and goodness of heart.

Our priorities for investment in infrastructure reflect our intention to put the economy first. Accelerating economic growth and improving the competitiveness of business are clear objectives of our investment strategy, which is designed to tackle years of underinvestment in our transport networks, water and waste infrastructure, schools, health and a range of other pressing concerns.

We are going to invest £5.6 billion over the next three years and at least £18 billion over the next 10 years. Those are record levels of investment, which will help to set the right conditions for economic growth and the creation of jobs. That investment will boost our construction industry, presenting it with an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen its capabilities.

I hope to go to the United States of America next week with colleagues from the House. We will try as best we can to persuade people to come and invest in Northern Ireland. The more investors create quality, well-paid jobs, the more our aims will be strengthened.

The investment strategy will create high-quality infrastructure to be enjoyed by all our people and will leave a positive legacy for generations to come. The Programme for Government will drive forward economic growth and sustainability. It will build a fairer society, in which everyone is valued and has the opportunity to realise their potential. I hope that all Members agree that those are worthwhile objectives for any Government.

The Executive welcome the very positive response that they have received on their choice of priorities and especially on making the economy their top priority. Many Members have supported those priorities during the debate, and I welcome that.

Once again, I am convinced that we have got the priorities right. My conviction about that has been reinforced by the positive response that we have received. For example, on behalf of the business community, the CBI has warmly welcomed the Programme for Government. The Institute of Directors and the North West Chamber of Commerce have also welcomed the fact that we have placed economic growth at the heart of the Programme for Government.

The National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland have welcomed our renewed commitment to increasing the number of adult learners and the strong focus on school- and university-leavers with regard to future economic growth and stability. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which represents the voluntary sector, has also recognised that a thriving economy should benefit everyone.

However, the economy is not the whole story. As I said, the Executive recognise that economic growth, social progress and environmental protection must go hand in hand. In delivering our priorities, a key objective will be to ensure that all our people contribute to, and benefit from, increased prosperity. We must use economic growth to tackle disadvantage and poverty.

I agree with other Members who said that we must ensure that there is balanced economic development across Northern Ireland and in every part of the Province. The Programme for Government and the investment strategy create the conditions for that.

This debate has played an important part in the consultation process on the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. I welcome the contributions that have been made. I wish the Committees well as they do their business and put forward their individual views. I trust that we will have help from all those who want to build this Province into a place that will be well worth living in.

A number of Members have commented on the need for clear baselines and milestones for the delivery of the commitments. The key goals and targets of our Programme for Government must be attained, and we must deliver our best for the people of the Province.

A number of Members expressed concern about the absence of information regarding how the Executive's performance in delivering the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will be monitored and reported. Work is being taken forward to develop a clear performance management and delivery framework for agreement by the Executive. Details of those arrangements will be included in the final published versions of the documents.

With regard to public consultation, I can assure the House — and in particular Mr Kennedy, who is the Chairman of the Committee that looks after me and my colleagues — that we are determined that this will be a proper and genuine consultation process, in which everyone can get their oar in, and I trust that they will then pull for the shore as real good sailors on the ship.

The Executive must see to it that many people, particularly the most vulnerable in our community, get their rights and the sort of care that they need.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The First Minister: Excuse me, I must finish.

I am glad that emphasis has been put on those who are old. I am getting old, and I am looking forward to a day when I can sit up in the Gallery and laugh down and say that I am glad that I have become old. However, no one should think that I am old at the moment; both my feet are working and ready for the task.

I also am glad of the emphasis placed on children. The children of Northern Ireland deserve our dedication, and I trust that we will live to see the day when they will be saved from poverty and have all the things that they have been deprived of in the past. The best thing that the children of this Province could have is a Province at peace with itself.

Mr Ford: In the course of his summary, the First Minister said that the Executive wanted to “make a real difference” to what has gone before. The tragedy of the situation that we are in has been highlighted by this debate today — the paucity of proposals in the Programme for Government, the lack of smartness in the public service agreements, and the vagueness of the investment strategy.

It is noteworthy that the comments that I have highlighted have not just come from these Benches — although the process was started by my pink-wellied colleague, the deputy leader of the Opposition. Even more surprisingly, those comments did not just come from our part-time allies on the Ulster Unionist and SDLP Benches. As my colleague Trevor Lunn pointed out, the great majority of contributions from the DUP and Sinn Féin Benches also highlighted the problems in the draft Programme for Government.

I welcome the fact that Members, in recognising what is wrong with the Programme for Government, are being somewhat more open than the First Minister alleged.

Why is it that, after a year of preparation, so much still needs to be done?

The principal theme of most of the DUP Back-Bench speeches was nothing to do with the Programme for Government, but took the opportunity to attack the Alliance Party — [*Interruption.*]

Sometimes the Members managed to weigh into the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, but they seemed to be unsure as to whether they were trying to woo them to support the programme, or attack them.

The programme is full of aspiration; and that may be desirable, but it is no substitute for action.

I thank Danny Kennedy for the way that he outlined, in a useful summary, the contents of the programme. His was almost the only contribution that dealt with simple facts. Naomi Long highlighted that the real issue was not the lack of quantity in the Programme for Government, but the poor quality of it, including in particular its total failure to tackle sectarianism.

It is impossible to address the serious issues of housing, jobs or education if we do not address the need to build a shared future. That is part of what we need to deal with those issues.

The next contribution came from Mrs Robinson, who started in the usual way by criticising the Alliance Party. She claimed that the programme was tightly focused. I must say, however, when I read the PSA framework, I see no tight focus there. Ms Anderson treated us to a discourse on equality and human rights. She mentioned the process of boats coming in, so much that I believe Naomi Long is hopeful of re-opening the shipyard.

I am not sure whether the sight of two equal MLAs sparring and spitting hatred across the Chamber is doing anything to build the society that we want. The issue is not about equality: it is about a shared future alongside equality and human rights.

In her positive contribution, Dolores Kelly stressed that sectarianism must be dealt with alongside equality.

The next two contributions were particularly interesting. For some reason, Dr McCrea forgot to attack the Alliance Party, and I thought that that was obligatory this afternoon. However, he went over the reservations of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee about all the failures of the Programme for Government. It was one of the best, and most constructive, speeches, and it pointed out everything that was not in the programme. Dr McCrea is no Back-Bencher: he is a fairly senior member of the DUP, and yet he highlighted the concerns of the Agriculture Committee, which represents the four parties of the Executive, about the programme. That was backed up by Tom Elliott in his contribution.

Immediately afterwards, Ms Ramsey made similar contributions in her capacity as Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee. She highlighted concerns ranging from PhDs to adult literacy and the issue of student finance — I was going to declare an interest in that, but it will take them so long to do anything that my youngest will be long past being a student. Those are the issues we face.

Gregory Campbell then spoke as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee. He emphasised the need for cross-departmental working, but I was unclear whether that was an aspiration or something that he felt needed to happen.

Mr McNarry made no such mistake. He pointed out that if there is no branch dealing with creative industries, it is difficult to ensure 15% growth in that area of the economy. He pointed out, as many others did in other respects, the need for intermediate targets across different areas. Dominic Bradley did so particularly strongly in relation to educational targets.

Mark Durkan, as Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, referred to his Committee's concerns as to whether efficiency savings can be met, and to the need to identify milestones on the way to meeting the targets. He referred to the fact that there are no measures for the social economy and in that he was backed up by Ms Jennifer McCann. Mr McLaughlin similarly talked about the failure to detail the savings from efficiency. Speaking as Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, Fred Cobain referred to the fact that sustainable development implementation is far too slow, and to the lack of targets in that area.

Sammy Wilson then got into the mood again with the usual barnstorming bluster to replace any argument. At least, unlike Mr McGuinness earlier today, he did not completely lose the run of himself. When he eventually got down to the business, he stressed the concerns of the Education Committee about the problems in the programme for the education sector. He highlighted problems in areas such as the Youth Service and in structural reforms. He is, therefore, yet another loyal member of one of the two parties of Government — there are definitely two parties in Government: I am not sure about the other two — who highlighted major concerns about what needs to be addressed.

8.45 pm

Mr Shannon is clearly well in line for the most loyal Back-Bencher award. He made a good, strong attack on the Alliance Party to keep people happy. However, he nearly spoiled it by expressing his support for what is being done by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development despite the fact that Dr McCrea had criticised it. The DUP Whips should sort out the party line on agriculture.

Fred Cobain, during his contribution on regional development, talked about the lack of clarity and linkages between the PSAs and the draft investment strategy, and the aspirational nature of much of the strategy. Patsy McGlone, speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, gave the full Committee view on the lack of consideration of matters such as climate change and the fact that departmental priorities have been excluded from the draft Programme for Government. In other words, the DUP Minister took proposals to the Executive table that have been rejected.

Mr Spratt made another quite good attack on the Alliance Party, and is doing well for a Back-Bencher, although he did not seem to have discussed some issues with his Committee Chairperson, Ms Ramsey, about which she seems less happy than he, and I am not sure how we deal with that.

Mr Alex Maskey criticised the prospect of a shared future, and quoted the waffle section of the draft Programme for Government, yet he did not acknowledge the fact that there are no goals, no targets, and no PSAs.

Similarly, the point was made even more eloquently by my colleague Stephen Farry, when he pointed out that there can be no better future unless there is a shared future, and the use of the title 'A Better Future' if we are talking about a divided future, is not better for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Storey made a particularly good attack. He attacked the Alliance Party, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists, and even Sinn Féin, which was a bonus and was really inclusive. One does not have to agree with Ms Purvis' economic analysis to say that her question "Where is the vision?" is a reasonable one, because there is no vision.

Mr Moutray forgot to attack to the Alliance Party, though he managed to attack the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. Indeed, Basil McCrea made some interesting comments about the lack of concern for those who are less well-off. Declan O'Loan is suffering from the fact that he is being damned with faint praise by the DUP, but he made the point that the real fundamentals are not agreed between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Mr Simpson also sadly forgot to mention the Alliance Party, though he may learn in time for the next debate. Mr McCann made another useful contribution, as highlighted by Trevor Lunn, with his genuine concerns about the failure to deal with the housing budget, and yet so much more needs to be done.

I apologise that I cannot adequately deal with a five-hour debate in ten minutes, but I will jump forward to some points that were made by Dr Paisley. He said that devolution has provided a real opportunity; the fact is that the Executive have not grasped the opportunity with which they were provided. They produced waffle about talk of tolerance — what a weak phrase. The Alliance Party Members are the people on the Benches who are positive; we are the people who have a vision and who want to see a Government that consist of more than the "Chuckle Brothers" chuckling. We want to see a Government that actually deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Perhaps the cynics on the DUP benches, who believe that that vision only means that the "Chuckle Brothers" chuckle, would like to tell the children in an integrated school watching a peace wall being built through their school grounds whether they will be able to live in a shared future, because those Members seem to think that chuckling is all that matters. I want to see real delivery for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: May I restore calm to the House, in my usual measured way? I thank all the contributors to today's debate and pay particular tribute to those Members who have stayed the course. I single out the First Minister, Dr Paisley, who has been present for most, if not all of the debate, and I compliment the leader of

the Alliance Party, Mr Ford, who was present throughout — but, I suppose, the poor are with us always.

The debate has been wide-ranging of necessity, and therefore, I do not expect to be able to comment on all the issues.

Mr Ford took the opportunity, somewhat unusually, in his winding-up speech to refer to other Members' statements. I will attempt to apprise the Assembly as to what took place earlier in the debate. Obviously, it was a long debate, but it has been worthwhile. The Speaker and the two Deputy Speakers have been used to good effect. Most of the big beasts of the political jungle have taken part. There is some kind of TV programme that is set in the jungle. In it, contestants who do not perform to reasonable expectations are evicted. I am not sure who will be evicted after the debate. Perhaps we will leave that for others to judge.

Some Members raised valid criticisms and suggestions, while others made stinging criticisms. Nevertheless, I hope that all the contributions will be taken seriously. Today, a message has been sent to the Executive, the Assembly and the wider public that everyone should take heed of the debate. The full range of Chairpersons or Deputy Chairpersons of each of the Statutory Committees all strutted their stuff, which reminded me slightly of 'The X Factor'. However, I do not feel qualified to act like Simon Cowell.

I acknowledge the considerable assistance provided to all Members of the House — particularly those Members who spoke on behalf of Committees — by Committee officials and staff, in preparation for the debate. At times, I was tempted to get involved in some of the argy-bargy but, given my role today, that would have been unwise.

There was a general welcome for the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government, as outlined by a significant number of Members. Jim Shannon invoked the image of the Wizard of Oz, although it is very apparent that he is not a friend of Dorothy. *[Laughter.]* He said that we need to recognise that there must be a shortlist of priorities, as set out in the draft Programme for Government, as resources are not unlimited.

Patsy McGlone, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, welcomed the cross-cutting commitment to building a sustainable future. He emphasised the need for resources to deliver that objective. However, Dolores Kelly highlighted the lack of connection between the draft Programme for Government, the draft Budget and ISNI.

Questions continued to emerge throughout the debate, even from Members whose parties clearly support the draft Programme for Government, ISNI and the draft Budget. How will this be done? What do individual targets mean, on various issues? How will those targets

be properly delivered, and who will retain responsibility for delivering particular targets? Specific comments were made about the proposed targets. Iris Robinson and Stephen Moutray welcomed the new, innovative and ambitious targets. Mark Durkan welcomed the proposals on investment and jobs, but underscored his comment by requesting careful monitoring.

Gregory Campbell expressed concerns about fuel poverty. Sue Ramsey expressed concerns about issues concerning literacy, numeracy and IT. Fred Cobain expressed concern about the need to achieve sustainable development.

Sue Ramsey spoke about the commercialisation of research. David McNarry felt that many of the targets set out in the Programme for Government were weak, and that the involvement of young people in sport could have been given greater priority. He felt that targets were missing from the Programme for Government, particularly in relation to the role of sport in tackling sectarianism.

Mitchel McLaughlin contended that some targets in relation to sustainable development had been changed, and that three-year targets should be moved forward and achieved earlier. Mark Durkan made the point that efficiencies would have to be made in the context of the Programme for Government and public expenditure, and reminded the House that the Executive do not have the ability or the overall financial clout to do anything about that.

The theme of the economy surfaced throughout the debate. Mark Durkan, Jimmy Spratt and Mervyn Storey mentioned the strong focus of the Programme for Government on the economy, and Mervyn Storey welcomed the draft Budget increases in areas that would be critical to the delivery of an improved economy. David Simpson was pleased that the economy was the top priority. Dr McCrea highlighted the need to reduce bureaucracy if agriculture was to contribute effectively to the economy. Mark Durkan sought clarity on the innovation funds and what they would deliver, and insisted that those funds should be supplementary and provide additional outcomes.

Dawn Purvis — almost a siren voice — said that the Programme for Government was neither truly economic nor just. She was concerned that no peace dividend was forthcoming, that no tax-raising powers were available, and that it was unfair that large companies would be subsidised.

In reference to the shared future strategy, Naomi Long and Declan O'Loan made stinging criticisms of the lack of objectives and actions to address divisions in the community and to bind our divided society together. Fred Cobain noted the change in emphasis from a shared future to "a better future". Stephen Farry was unclear as to the meaning of "a better future"; he

said that the concept of good relations was nowhere to be found in the Programme for Government.

Addressing inequality, Martina Anderson said that it was crucial that those who were most in need should not be left behind, and that a rising tide did not necessarily lift all boats. Dolores Kelly urged the Executive to tackle child poverty, as did Gregory Campbell and Jim Shannon. Basil McCrea expressed a general concern about a lack of focus on those who need support, and asked for answers on improving social mobility and education. Tom Elliott reminded the House of the need for a strategic plan to help those children who are most in need. *[Interruption.]*

I realise that Members have heard their colleagues' contributions; it may be unhelpful to restate that I expected a little better attention from the House.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Iris Robinson welcomed the Programme for Government's focus on health promotion and screening targets.

Stephen Farry was concerned about the lack of focus on mental-health issues. Dr McCrea felt that greater priority should be given to agriculture and recognised the decline in the red meat and fish industries and the need to help them to increase competitiveness by reducing bureaucracy. He felt that targets were not challenging enough in some areas. However, Jim Shannon welcomed the investment in agriculture and rural development.

9.00 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, said that climate change should be given a higher profile in the draft Programme for Government. He was concerned about the impact of efficiencies on planning and the need for the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission to be well resourced. Cathal Boylan said that there should be a commitment to the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency.

Peter Weir welcomed the commitment to reduce the number of road deaths. Many Members welcomed the priority given to tackling the housing crisis and to increasing social housing, but emphasised the need for action across Government to provide that. Others were more critical and said that there was a need for additional resources for social housing and for the draft Programme for Government to be strengthened in that area.

Concerns were expressed about the legislation relating to the education and skills authority and the likelihood that efficiency savings will be delivered. Jennifer McCann felt that investing in skills was essential and that there was a need to address the attainment gap. Jimmy Spratt welcomed the targets to improve skill levels, but Basil McCrea questioned why we are not

investing more in that area. Stephen Moutray welcomed the range of actions and targets to improve the lives of children and young people. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mitchel McLaughlin, gave a commitment to ensure efficient and effective public services.

On the investment strategy, Martina Anderson and Raymond McCartney said that there was a need to tackle regional disparities and investment, and not simply to promote regional balance. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, David McNarry, was concerned about the lack of detail in the investment strategy, which hinders Committee scrutiny.

Mark Durkan welcomed the commitment to invest in technology infrastructure. Sammy Wilson had concerns about the ability of the Department of Education to deliver large infrastructure projects. Jennifer McCann was concerned about delays that may be created as a result of PFI. The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Fred Cobain, raised the need for clarity in relation to how the pillars in the investment strategy relate to the draft Programme for Government priorities. Jimmy Spratt thought that the investment strategy demonstrated that the Executive meant business by investing in education.

We moved through the lengthy but useful debate. Other Members, such as Dominic Bradley, spoke about educational issues. Nelson McCausland mentioned that it was good for resources to be invested in cultural tourism. Michelle O'Neill challenged the statement about 100% broadband and its high cost in rural areas. Trevor Lunn said that there was a lack of new actions and targets, and added that many targets were restatements of existing commitments.

Simon Hamilton highlighted the benefits of the draft investment strategy and gave the example of the proposed rapid-transport system. Mary Bradley made an impassioned plea for free personal care on behalf of older people, and she also highlighted the plight of the homeless.

I thank the First Minister for his response to the motion. I particularly welcome his comments on the contribution that Committees make; the importance placed on those contributions, and his assurance that Committees have had, and will continue to have, an important input into the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. I also welcome the First Minister's commitment to a genuine consultation process and the public aspects of that process. I hope that account will be taken of the many useful comments and views expressed during today's debate before both the documents are finalised.

I hope that I have been able to reflect some of the main points that were raised in the debate. The points that I have missed will, of course, be contained in the Hansard report. No doubt, that report will make for essential bedtime reading tomorrow night. The purpose of the debate was to afford Members an opportunity to make the Executive aware of their views on the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and, in that regard, I believe that it has been a success.

I am mindful of my position as Chairman of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, so it would be unwise for me to comment in detail on the amendment in the names of Mr Ford and other Alliance Party Members. It will be for Members to decide whether they will support that amendment, and I have no doubt that individual Members, and parties, will determine that for themselves. I trust that the Executive will take careful account of the views expressed today and the views of the Committees as expressed in our forthcoming report.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate, and I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 50.

AYES

*Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley,
Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree,
Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Hanna,
Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn,
Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea,
Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis,
Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

*Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly,
Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke,
Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson,
Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann,
Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland,
Mr I McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan,
Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilin,
Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr,
Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey,
Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt,
Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr Moutray.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The structure of the Assembly is built around a mandatory coalition that was negotiated principally by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. The Programme for Government is the basis on which any coalition Government are able to progress. Lest there be any doubt at a later stage, without an agreed Programme for Government, there cannot be government.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Adjourned at 9.22 pm.

