
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 December 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Moutray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been drawn to my attention that during a function held in Parliament Buildings on Friday evening, individuals refused to leave the Building when the fire alarm was sounded. Is the Speaker able to make a statement to the House on this serious issue today, or will he undertake to carry out an investigation and report back to the Assembly to ensure that the situation will not be repeated?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I will look into the situation and report back to him.

At the sitting on Monday 3 December, Mr Campbell, on a point of order, asked me to establish when the Department for Social Development was aware that it was likely that his question to the Minister could not be put on the grounds that the matter in question had become sub judice on Friday 30 November. Mr Campbell was concerned that he had not been informed earlier that his question could not be put.

I can confirm that information showing that leave had been granted for a judicial review was received from the Department for Social Development last Monday morning. My officials made enquiries about the grounds on which leave had been granted. On that basis, I was satisfied that the grounds for review related to matters referred to in Mr Campbell's question.

At approximately 1.35 pm last Monday, I ruled that the question could not be put on the grounds that the matter was sub judice. I understand that the Member was informed soon after that. I cannot say at what time the Department considered the matters raised by the Member.

Mr Campbell: Thank you for investigating the case at my request, Mr Speaker. May I take it that the High Court proceedings that were commenced on the morning of Friday week ago — about which we are now having this discussion and about which you were

informed last Monday morning by the Department — were the reason why my question was ruled inadmissible? Rather than being informed when it became apparent that my question would be inadmissible, I was notified a full working day later that my question would not be included on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: In response to the Member's point of order, my office and I were informed only on the morning of Monday 3 December 2007.

On Tuesday 4 December 2007, Mr Raymond McCartney made a point of order alleging that the word "lapdog" had been called out when a colleague had risen to ask a question. Mr McCartney asked me to rule on whether that was unparliamentary language. I did not hear the remark. However, if it was made, I do not consider that it was unparliamentary, in the context of Standing Orders.

As I have said on a number of occasions, I urge Members to consider the dignity of the Chamber before they indulge in such antics. I have repeatedly asked Members to be mindful of their language, and I do so again.

Mr S Wilson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Would the term "pet poodle" be acceptable in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding the first meeting since restoration of the North/South Ministerial Council in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in the Loughs Agency headquarters at Prehen on Wednesday 21 November 2007.

The Executive were represented by Ian Paisley Jnr and me; the Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan TD, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. This statement has been agreed with Ian Paisley Jnr.

The Council noted the progress that had been made since the last meeting in April 2002 and welcomed the opportunity to come together to discuss co-operation in the aquaculture and marine sector. The Council welcomed the passing of legislation in both jurisdictions in 2007, which provided the Loughs Agency with the powers to regulate aquaculture and wild shell fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

The Council also welcomed the introduction of a hardship package to provide a measure of relief to those affected by the cessation of commercial drift-net, or draft-net, salmon fishing in the Foyle area.

The Council noted the plans in the aquaculture and marine sector for 2008-2010. Those include actions to maintain the sustainability of fisheries in the Carlingford and Foyle catchments; the introduction of a regulatory and licensing regime for aquaculture in the Foyle and Carlingford areas; the improvement of the angling licensing system; and the introduction of a marine tourism development strategy.

The Council also approved the Loughs Agency corporate plan for 2008-10 and the business plan for 2008, subject to budgetary considerations by the Executive and the Irish Government. It was noted that the St Andrews Agreement review is now under way and that the agency's future plans may require consideration in light of the outcome of that review.

The Council approved the implementation of the Loughs Agency's marine tourism development strategy

for 2008-13, subject to the availability of funding under the EU programme for cross-border territorial co-operation. That strategy will work through partnerships with state authorities and private bodies, and it will provide support for projects, develop access infrastructure, project development, skills training, marketing and communications activities.

The Council also approved the Loughs Agency's financial assistance policy to oversee how grant aid will be administered to support angling development, conservation and protection of fisheries, marine tourism and aquaculture.

The Council noted the Loughs Agency's annual report and financial statements for 2006. The Council approved the agency's proposed purchase of a monitoring vessel, subject to the availability of funding under the EU Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG).

The Council approved the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Angling) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations 2007, which should impact positively on the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in an area of the River Finn, noting that the regulations will now be progressed in accordance with legislative procedures in both jurisdictions.

The Council also noted the regulations being developed to improve the control of salmon and coarse angling, and for the licensing and development of aquaculture.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in February 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): The Minister indicated the welcome for the hardship package in respect of the cessation of commercial drift-net salmon fishing in the Foyle area. What progress has been made with the EU to ensure that those payments are made before the end of the year?

Will the Minister state whether a similar package will be paid to the oyster fishermen of Strangford, who are being forced to close their fisheries? Those fisheries have been supported in the past by the Department in order to protect the horse mussel.

Ms Gildernew: Both sponsoring Departments have submitted state-aid notifications to the European Commission in respect of the hardship payments. We have been working with the Commission to expedite its approval. Following receipt of that approval, the Loughs Agency will be in a position to start processing those payments. I intend to raise that issue with the EU Fisheries Commissioner, Joe Borg, when I visit Brussels this week. Like the Chairman, I would like to see the payments made before the end of the year.

As for the oyster fisheries in Strangford Lough, I do not have the relevant information at hand because my

statement relates to the work of the NSMC. However, I am happy to respond in writing on that matter.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the plans for the aquaculture and marine sector for 2008-10, which are interesting. The Minister's statement mentioned the North/South Ministerial Council's welcome for the introduction of a hardship package to provide relief for those affected by the cessation of certain types of salmon fishing in the Foyle area.

There were two jellyfish attacks on salmon stocks on the County Antrim coast on 21 and 23 November. Can the Minister provide an update on that situation and confirm that that matter has been discussed by the Executive? What financial package will be introduced for those who have been affected?

Ms Gildernew: I am dealing with the North/South sectoral meeting. The Glenarm situation was not discussed at that meeting because that matter is outside the Council's remit. As the Member knows, I have had a number of discussions with Executive colleagues, and the matter that he has raised was discussed at last week's Executive meeting. At this point, I do not have any further news for the House on a financial package. We are still working on that. I am not sure whether that will be forthcoming.

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I note the Minister's reference to the hardship package for those forced from the industry because of the new regulations. Who was involved in drawing up the guidelines for the hardship package? Could the Loughs Agency corporate plan for 2008-10 be tampered with as a result of the review of the St Andrews Agreement?

Ms Gildernew: As I said in my statement, we shall be examining all those matters under the review of the St Andrews Agreement. I have already addressed that issue.

The hardship package was discussed by the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, the Loughs Agency and officials from my Department. However, those discussions were very much guided by the Loughs Agency.

Mr McCarthy: My question also relates to the hardship package, which is welcome. Why can the Minister not make similar provision for the Irish Sea fishermen, such as those in Portavogie, for example, who have been crying out for such a package for quite some time? That also applies to the fishermen of Strangford Lough, who have been denied a livelihood.

Ms Gildernew: Again, that does not come within the remit of my statement. However, the package is available for the salmon fishermen because it is part of

measures to conserve stocks and to protect species from overfishing or exploitation. That does not automatically read across to other sectors, where the stocks are not the matter of most concern. However, I am very aware of the pressures that face the fishermen of Portavogie, as the Member has pointed out. I met those fishermen last week, and I am trying to explore ways in which we can help them.

12.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I thank her and her ministerial colleagues for the work that they did at the meeting.

The Council welcomed the legislation that was introduced this year to give the Loughs Agency powers in relation to aquaculture. Will the Minister and her counterpart in the South keep the implementation of that legislation under review, so that new anomalies do not emerge? In relation to the hardship package, the questions are how much and how soon. Similarly, how much is envisaged for the proposed tourism development strategy?

Ms Gildernew: The hardship package is marginally more than that agreed in the Twenty-six Counties, due to the nature of fishing in the Foyle. We received approval for that from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) when I met the Loughs Agency earlier this year. I welcome the Council's support for the Loughs Agency and for what it is doing, and I can reassure the Member that I will be keeping a close eye on all these developments to ensure that they are as helpful to the agency as can be.

The agency is in the process of applying to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for funding of approximately £13.64 million for the marine tourism project. SEUPB will only advise the agency of the proposed level of commitment after a feasibility study has been completed.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she recall her meeting, some 6 to 8 weeks ago, with the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association? We were looking for hardship money for them as well, and she said that she would look at the matter. She has said this morning that hardship money has been made available for conservation reasons. Since sections of Strangford Lough have been boxed off for conservation purposes, would it not be fair for the Minister to consider hardship money for the fishermen of Strangford Lough?

Ms Gildernew: As the Member says, we did have a meeting some weeks ago. The issue there was the environmental protection of the modiolus beds in Strangford Lough and the impact on them of fishing and pleasure boating. When I was in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel last week, I announced measures under the European fisheries fund. We will want to explore how we can spend that money with a view to helping all the

sectors of the industry — fishermen, processors and the aquaculture and inland fisheries people. We will be trying to use the money imaginatively while keeping within state-aid rules. As the Member knows, there is quite a bit of controversy over the application of those rules.

If the Member is suggesting that the remit of the NSMC be extended to include Strangford, we can certainly consider that and the future prospects of Strangford Lough.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Charities Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to introduce the Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], which is a Bill to provide for the establishment and functions of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Charity Tribunal for Northern Ireland; to make provision about the law of charities, including provision about charitable incorporated organisations; to make further provision about public charitable collections and other fund-raising carried on in connection with charities and other institutions; to make provision about the funding of such institutions; and for connected purposes.

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

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The Further Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate any last amendments to a Bill. As no amendments to the Pensions Bill have been tabled, there will be no opportunity today to discuss the Bill. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill's Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Company and Business Names (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Company and Business Names (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/462) be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval for regulations to add three further expressions to the list of those that require the prior approval of my Department before being included in the title of a company or business. The Department's prior approval is required if a company or business seeks to use certain words or expressions as, or as part of, its company or business name. That control is in place to protect the public from possible harm arising from a company or business using a name that falsely or incorrectly suggests a status to which that company or business is not entitled.

The regulations before the House today add the expressions "HPSS", "HSC" and "NHS" — the abbreviations for health and personal social services, health and social care and National Health Service respectively — to those words and expressions already prescribed. "HSC" and "HPSS" have both been included in the regulations at the request of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, while "NHS" is included at the request of the Department of Health in Great Britain. The Assembly approved a similar motion on 2 October 2007 in respect of regulations that added the word "Government" to the list of words already prescribed.

My Department made these regulations on 7 November 2007, and they came into operation the following day. As laid down in the parent legislation, and to ensure continuing effect, the regulations are subject to confirmatory procedure, and require approval by resolution of the Assembly within 10 sitting days or 30 days, whichever is the longer, of the laying date, 7 November.

The Department of Health in Great Britain had some concerns that an opportunist could seek to include "NHS" in a company or business name and moved to have the expression added to the list of prescribed words and expressions requiring the written permission of the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in Great Britain before a company or business may trade under a name that includes any of those words or expressions listed.

While "NHS" is a well known brand name across the whole of the United Kingdom — and I understand that the Department of Health has now registered "NHS" as a trademark — its cover does not extend to Northern Ireland. Health provision here is dispensed under the health and social care, formerly health and personal social services, banner. However, it is necessary to

include the term "NHS" in regulations made here as a company registration is recognised across the United Kingdom, irrespective of the jurisdiction in which it is incorporated. Similarly, "HSC" and "HPSS" have also been included in the corresponding Great Britain regulations made on 5 November 2007, which were debated in the House of Lords and the House of Commons on 20 and 21 November respectively.

Since the Great Britain legislation was made under powers in its Companies Act 1985, which does not extend to Northern Ireland, my Department was asked to consider the introduction of similar legislation here under equivalent powers in the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. That is to maintain parity in company law with Great Britain, thereby removing any opportunity to exploit the lack of parallel legislation here.

These regulations amend the principal Company and Business Names Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1984, previously amended in 2004 and 2007, to add the same expressions — "HSC", "HPSS" and "NHS" — to the list of those words and expressions requiring the written permission of the Department before being included in the name or title of a company or business. The departmental committee considered the regulations at its meeting on 15 November 2007 and recommended confirmation by the Assembly.

I hope that the motion, which is non-contentious, will be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): On behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I advise the House that the Committee has considered the amendment to the regulations. It believes that it is necessary and appropriate to add to the prescribed list of terms in the company and business names regulations the three terms that the Minister has outlined. Therefore, the Committee fully agrees that it is necessary and timely for the Department to act in the manner in which it has.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Company and Business Names (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/462) be approved.

Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/452) be approved.

Like the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I hope — and expect — that debate on the motion will be non-contentious.

The purpose of the Order is to increase the statutory legacy, which is the sum of money that a surviving spouse receives from the estate of his or her deceased spouse if that person dies intestate. The provisions also apply to a surviving civil partner in the same way as to a surviving spouse. The amount of the statutory legacy that is contained in the Administration of Estates Act (Northern Ireland) 1955 is set at two levels. First, a surviving spouse will be entitled to the first £125,000 of the estate if the deceased is also survived by his or her issue — that is, children and grandchildren. Secondly, if there is no surviving issue but other relatives of the deceased, such as parents or siblings, are still alive, the surviving spouse will be entitled to the first £200,000 of the deceased's estate.

Those figures were set in 1993 and relate to deaths that occurred on or after 1 January 1994. The Order will increase the amount of the statutory legacy that is payable from £125,000 to £150,000 for cases in which the intestate is survived only by a spouse plus issue, and from £200,000 to £450,000 where the intestate is survived by a spouse and other relatives.

The level of the statutory legacy was the subject of a public consultation exercise that ran from January 2007 to April 2007. However, only four responses were received. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has considered and approved the new amounts. Clearly, no formula exists that will determine, at any given time, the appropriate levels of the statutory legacy. However, the new amounts follow on from a review of a full range of social, economic and demographic factors. I believe, therefore, that they have been set at an appropriate level for this jurisdiction and that they will allow reasonable provision for a surviving spouse.

It will be apparent from my earlier comments that the amounts of the statutory legacy have remained unchanged for 14 years. In future, I will seek to review those amounts more regularly to ensure that they keep pace with economic developments. I urge Members to support the motion, and I propose that the Order be affirmed.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): As the Minister of Finance and Personnel has explained, the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil

Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 increases the amounts that are payable from an intestate.

On 27 June 2007, the Committee for Finance and Personnel received a detailed oral briefing on the proposed statutory rule from the Department of Finance and Personnel's principal legal officer in the Departmental Solicitor's Office. The Committee considered some aspects of the statutory rule, and it made several recommendations to the Department. Those included increasing the statutory legacy figures that are payable from an intestate; seeking views on the new figures from the respondents to the original consultation; considering any revised figures for England and Wales; and acknowledging the need for a regular review of the statutory legacy figures and the five-year review period.

There is a case for a wider review of the intestacy laws, to ensure that arrangements are in place for an equitable distribution among all claimants, including children and dependent relatives, and to take account of societal changes since the legislation was introduced in 1955.

The Committee raised those issues formally with the Department on 4 July 2007, and received a substantive written reply on 15 October 2007. The Committee gave further consideration to the statutory rule on 21 November 2007, and was content that the Department had taken on board its recommendations.

The Committee agreed unanimously to support the Department in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order. On behalf of the Committee, I therefore support the motion.

12.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for his comments, and I thank the Committee for its work regarding the Order. I assume that the reason that no one else wishes to speak on the matter is that everyone is satisfied — just as, having submitted only four responses, the community is clearly satisfied with our approach.

The issue is important because, in general, the belief is that were someone to die, his or her spouse automatically takes over the proceeds of the estate. That is not the case, and this should be a warning to everyone with considerable assets to prepare a will, and ensure that no one dies intestate.

The Minister of the Environment has arrived, so I need filibuster no longer. I encourage colleagues to support the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I must thank the Minister for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/452) be approved.

Climate Change Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleague for filibustering on the administration of estates — something that few of us would take lightly.

We debate the motion because it is now accepted that climate change is the greatest environmental challenge faced by the world today. The matter is being taken very seriously at international level and, in recent days, we have heard of talks in Bali to achieve a new post-Kyoto agreement. The outcome of that conference, and future discussion, may well demand new international action.

The UK Government, and each of the devolved Administrations, are committed to tackling the issue, because we in Northern Ireland must play our part. The Climate Change Bill [HL] is intended to assist the UK's transition to a low-carbon economy. The Bill will make the UK the first economy to set a long-term legal framework for reducing emissions. There are no specific devolved provisions in the Bill, as the attainment of targets will require action in both reserved and devolved-policy areas.

The key provisions of the Bill are: a series of statutory targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions; a new system of legally binding five-year carbon budgets; a new statutory body, to be known as the committee on climate change, to provide independent expert advice and guidance; new powers to enable the Government more easily to implement emissions-reducing policies; a new, open and transparent system of annual reporting; and a requirement for a risk assessment of the impact of climate change, including a commitment to develop a programme to prepare for those impacts.

I have had good support for my position from the Executive and from the Committee for the Environment. Moreover, I am pleased to say that the Environment Committee supports the motion for legislative consent. However, scrutiny by the Committee has raised several issues in relation to the composition of the committee on climate change. Those were, specifically, the establishment of a Northern Ireland subcommittee, and the need for a member of the climate change committee to be from Northern Ireland.

I understand the intentions of Committee for the Environment members, who are concerned that the special and specific needs of Northern Ireland may not be recognised and taken into account. I have assured the Committee that provisions that are now in place provide for devolved Administrations' specific needs.

Members of the committee on climate change will be appointed jointly by the other relevant devolved Ministers and me, and the committee will have knowledge and experience of Northern Ireland's circumstances. Moreover, criteria that instruct the committee on climate change must take into account Northern Ireland's circumstances, and there must be a direct reporting line from the committee to me. I have also assured the Committee for the Environment that I will follow good practice and review the issue of a Northern Ireland subcommittee once we have evidence of assistance received.

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

The Committee for the Environment asked that a Northern Ireland member be appointed to the committee on climate change. However, this is not to be a representative committee but one made up of experts in relevant fields. I can tell the House that no similar representations for an equivalent arrangement have been made in either Scotland or Wales. Therefore, it is not necessary that we have a Northern Ireland representative on the committee on climate change. Good arrangements have been made for the appointments process, for the criteria for operating the committee on climate change and for its reporting lines. Those arrangements reassure me that the committee will provide Northern Ireland with all relevant advice. I am committing significant resources — around £100,000 per annum — to the running of the committee. Therefore, I want to ensure that we get value for money through the advice provided.

The Committee for the Environment agrees that, at this stage, we should support UK targets rather than provide for Northern Ireland targets. I have given the Executive a commitment to return to the issue once I am more certain about the Northern Ireland emissions baseline and when I am better informed on the relationship between economic competitiveness and greenhouse-gas-emission reductions. Current research into those matters is progressing well, and I anticipate receiving the findings of that research by March or April 2008.

The Bill will amend the Energy Act 2004 by enabling the Secretary of State to set up a renewable transport fuel obligations (RTFO) scheme, which the Department for Transport plans to introduce from April 2008. I have agreed to inform the House on that matter on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The RTFO scheme will be the main mechanism for supporting the increased use of biofuels in transport across the UK. The 2004 Act, which provides the framework for the RTFO scheme, already extends UK-wide. That was agreed while the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended and has considerable merit, despite the fact that energy is a transferred matter. For example, the transport-fuel industry operates almost seamlessly UK-wide, and the proposed structure of the RTFO scheme is such that it will impact on the large GB-

based suppliers that import fuel and refine oil rather than on our local suppliers. Furthermore, it is planned that the obligation will be applied alongside the road-fuel excise duty and the associated biofuel rebate, both of which are reserved matters.

The Department for Transport's work to date to develop the detail of the RTFO scheme has identified a number of administrative areas in which change from the original concept, as outlined in the 2004 Act, would be preferable. Appropriate amending provisions have been included in the Climate Change Bill [HL] and must now be included in this legislative consent motion in order to enable Northern Ireland's continued involvement in the UK-wide RTFO scheme. Those amendments will allow the Secretary of State or Department for Transport agencies to be the RTFO scheme's administrators; will provide for the proceeds from buyout payments to be paid into the Consolidated Fund rather than be redistributed among suppliers; will establish an information gateway between the RTFO administrator and HM Revenue and Customs; and will provide an overarching duty on the RTFO administrator to encourage the supply of sustainable biofuels.

None of those proposed legislative amendments nor the existing primary provisions specifically apply to Northern Ireland — they all apply UK-wide. From an operational perspective, the Department for Transport does not consider that any local transport-fuel supplier will be obligated under the RTFO scheme. Furthermore, the Department for Transport does not believe that there will be any appreciable impact on pump prices.

I have highlighted the significance of the Climate Change Bill [HL], including those provisions that relate to the RTFO scheme. The House's endorsement of the principle that the Bill be extended to Northern Ireland would demonstrate that we are fully committed to playing our part in tackling the very serious global issue of climate change. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank the Minister for tabling the legislative consent motion to extend the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

The Committee recognises the threat from climate change and is aware of the urgency of the problem. It is against that background that the Committee considered the extension of the Bill's provisions. It was briefed in writing on the issue on 28 June 2007 and by the Minister in Committee on 5 July 2007. The Committee learned that the Bill provides a framework for moving to a low-carbon economy. Indeed, the Minister has outlined some of the Bill's key provisions in the debate: a series of key statutory targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, including an overall UK target of 60%

reduction by 2050, with a 26% to 32% reduction by 2020; a new system of legally binding five-year carbon budgets that are set at least 15 years in advance; a new statutory body, called the committee on climate change, that will provide independent expert advice and guidance to Government on achieving their targets and staying inside their carbon budgets; and new powers to enable the Government to more easily implement emission-reducing policies.

The Bill also contains accountability provisions that require progress reports. In early September 2007, the Committee provided a written response on the extension of the Bill's provisions. The Committee supported the UK carbon-reduction targets that are set out in the Bill but sought a commitment to provide Northern Ireland targets in the future. The Minister subsequently advised the Committee by letter on 15 November 2007 that she will revisit the issue of Northern Ireland targets after further examination of the emissions baseline. Research into the emissions baseline is currently ongoing.

On the matter of representation on the independent committee on climate change, to which the Minister has referred, the Committee for the Environment initially held the view that the committee should have specific representation on it from the North, and that there should be an independent subcommittee structure in Northern Ireland for the independent climate change committee. However, during recent meetings, the Committee considered the issue of representation against the size of the proposed overall committee and the need for it to have specific expertise. We also sought the views of our counterpart Committees in Wales and Scotland in order to inform our point of view. The Committee for the Environment now acknowledges that the Bill currently provides for members to be appointed to the committee on climate change jointly by the national or regional authorities and notes that the proposed committee may set up its own various subcommittees. Therefore, we no longer seek the specific representation that the Minister outlined.

The Committee for the Environment takes the view that the independent committee on climate change should provide independent advice to the Northern Ireland Executive. It is acknowledged that the Bill states that the committee must give, on request, advice, analysis or information on targets, budgets, trading schemes or other requirements that relate to greenhouse-gas emissions. The Committee supports the Bill's enabling powers, which it views as helpful, subject to Northern Ireland consent, for the introduction of other climate change initiatives. The Bill provides for Northern Ireland to set up, if required, its own trading schemes. The Committee can foresee climate-change-mitigation initiatives in the North that would use those enabling provisions. The Committee also supports the proposed reporting arrangements.

During its deliberations, the Committee for the Environment expressed an interest in examining the idea of setting up a separate local body on climate change that could harness local knowledge on the issue and through which views could be formed and expressed. The Committee will revisit that matter. Information is currently being sought on whether other similar initiatives exist. My Committee colleague Mr Ford may address that matter in more detail. However, I raise the issue because the Committee discussed it recently due to its relevance to the broader issue of dealing with climate change. I conclude that the Committee is content in principle for Westminster to legislate in the area concerned and will support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: I welcome the motion and congratulate the Minister of the Environment on moving so quickly on the issue. It was important that the Committee received the extensive briefing that it got from the Minister and her officials.

It was also important that there was a real sense of engagement on the issue so that, although the Committee was unified on the broad purpose of the Bill, concerns about the detail were dealt with appropriately. That has steered us in the right direction.

12.45 pm

As regards climate change, we are often told to think globally and act locally. The motion allows the Northern Ireland community to make a vital contribution towards meeting national targets and towards ending the international problem that is climate change. It will put us into a regulatory framework at a national level, which is appropriate, but it will also allow us a degree of flexibility to develop our own initiatives. It has been said that there has been a problem with monitoring the Northern Ireland baseline figure, and we are glad to hear that there is ongoing work to establish Northern Ireland's position. That will help us to frame further initiatives on climate change at a later stage.

It is important that the Assembly sends out a clear message to people that no contribution is too small. Whether contributions are made at Assembly level, Government Department level, or by businesses, institutions and individuals, we all have a part to play in helping to achieve the targets that are vital for the future.

Although the work of the Minister and the Department in ensuring that Northern Ireland has an input to the Bill is welcome, it would have been preferable to have had someone from here on the carbon committee that will be dealing with the matter on a UK-wide basis. However, we must be realistic when it comes to a committee that is likely to comprise eight or nine members. Whether it will happen remains open to question. However, ongoing work on co-ordinating

efforts between the devolved institutions across the UK will play a vital role.

The Department has put provisions in place to ensure that Northern Ireland's input is direct and that the committee will hear a clear voice from Northern Ireland — that is something that should be welcomed.

I also welcome the fact that we can proceed on the basis of the existing structures, and that the possibility of a review has been left open. I welcome the Minister's commitment that, in three years time, there will be a review of how the system is actually operating and whether there may be, for example, a need for a Northern Ireland subcommittee. That can only come about when we are much more secure in our knowledge of Northern Ireland's baseline data. However, that the option is being kept open is welcome.

Therefore, I welcome that the Minister and the Department, in taking action, have been able to meet the Committee of the Environment's concerns. It is a positive step forward, so early in the lifetime of the Assembly's current mandate. Reducing carbon levels is an Executive commitment, as outlined in the draft Programme for Government. I welcome the steps that have been taken and I urge everyone to support the motion.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that the Minister is taking firm measures to reduce CO₂ emissions here. The matter needs to be addressed urgently, as recent reports, such as the 'Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change' and the 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: Fourth Assessment Report' have outlined. Both reports have spelt out, in the clearest terms possible, the consequences that climate change is having already, and the potentially disastrous effects to come. It is also worth noting that the scientific community is united in its acknowledgement of those dangers.

The leading economist Nicholas Stern has endorsed the need for a 50% cut in emissions, globally. That requires the more developed world to put in place an 80% reduction in emissions, especially in places such as Ireland and across the water. Therefore, it is quite clear that there will be dire economic consequences if climate change is not taken seriously, something which Mr Stern makes clear in his report.

Although Sinn Féin believes that a target of reducing CO₂ emissions by 60% by 2050 is a step in the right direction, we support following the example of the Scottish Government that have set legally binding targets to reduce the 1990 levels of emissions by 80% by 2050.

Ireland, of course, has huge potential to generate electricity from wind and wave power, as well as from biomass technologies, and we should not be reluctant to set higher targets in the Climate Change Bill [HL].

Sinn Féin also believes that all-Ireland legislation should be introduced to ensure that there is consistency across the entire island. The levels of carbon emissions North and South are closely linked through the single electricity market and the proposed single gas market, as well as through other fields. Many areas in the world have already been affected by the increase in average global temperatures, and the latest scientific evidence suggests that the next five years will be absolutely crucial if further irreversible damage is to be avoided. Even the European Union's agreed long-term goal of limiting global warming to no more than 2°C above the temperature in pre-industrial times might not be sufficient to avoid the significant negative effects of climate change.

In conclusion, I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought this matter to the House so soon after restoration of the Assembly. The provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] are a step in the right direction, but Sinn Féin would like further changes to be made, and the party believes that a review early in the new year would provide the opportunity to make those changes. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burnside: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I support the motion.

In her opening remarks, the Minister referred to the international obligations that are again under discussion in the post-Kyoto conference at Bali. Will she agree that the challenges of climate change and reducing carbon emissions worldwide are such that whatever we in the United Kingdom and the developed industrialised world do to tackle the problems, unless the United States and the massive economies such as India and China are included in those efforts, it will amount to nothing?

Therefore, although I support the motion, I ask the Minister if she will, on behalf of the devolved Administration, bring pressure to bear on the United Kingdom Government to adopt a much wider international framework that incorporates China and India and does not exclude them for the foreseeable future.

Mr Ford: As a member of the Committee for the Environment, and on behalf of my group, I welcome the proposal that the Minister has brought to the House today. It is absolutely right — and there is unanimity in the House on this — that we should be full participants in the UK climate change process. However, I have some slight concerns that by being involved with the UK structures, there is a danger that focus may be lost — particularly as this proposal comes from the Environment Minister rather than the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We have already heard that, quite reasonably, because of the size of the committee on climate change, which will cover the whole of the UK, it is unlikely that there will be specific Northern Ireland representation. How-

ever, we know — and it has been acknowledged on all sides of the House — that climate change is probably the major challenge that we face in the world today. This matter has global implications.

Although I hear what Mr Burnside has said about the developing economies of the Far East, at this stage, carbon production per capita in China and India is far lower than it is in the North and in the West. We must be realistic; we are the people who have the lead to give. The Assembly has taken considerable interest in international development, yet it is a blunt fact that carbon is created in the north and the bulk of the problems are caused in the south. We have a moral obligation to provide the lead on this matter.

I ask the Minister to give an assurance that when we play our part in the UK-wide process, she will ensure that the Executive take global warming and carbon production extremely seriously. She has already talked about getting the baseline report next spring, and that is to be welcomed. However, we know from a UK-wide report that was published last week by an NGO, and which was broken down by local authority, that Northern Ireland has the worst environmental record in many areas. That is largely because of the fuels that we use for domestic heating and the fact that we are excessively reliant on private cars. We have a great deal to accomplish, and I trust that the Minister will ensure that the Executive continue to take note of today's debate even when other pressures are on them.

I want to follow up on a point that was made by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, who referred to advice that the Committee sought from Wales and Scotland. In particular, I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that, like us, Wales is covered by the UK Bill and has no specific representation on the committee on climate change, yet the Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing in the National Assembly for Wales has established a Climate Change Commission for Wales, which I understand will meet for the first time this morning.

That commission has been designed to involve the National Assembly for Wales, local government, and the business and voluntary sectors, and it will have a link to the Sustainable Development Commission Wales. By working on a voluntary basis alongside the UK committee, it will be able to maintain a focus on Welsh needs.

Rather than waiting three years for a review, I ask the Minister to establish an informal voluntary local structure that would enable a more specific focus to be directed to Northern Ireland and that would ensure that we continue to meet our obligations. That would be useful to Northern Ireland, and it would not cost a great deal more than the UK process — £100,000 — to which she has committed. I thank the Minister and her

officials for the work that they have already done, and I hope that she will consider my proposal as a way forward for the future.

Mr Gallagher: Today we are addressing the most important issue that faces us in the century ahead: climate change as a result of global warming. That is an important issue, not just for those who live on these islands, but for people everywhere in the world. We should all know from our own experience that even in winter, we have less snowfall and heavier rainfall than we had 20 years ago. For those who have not yet experienced those changes, scientific opinion supports the facts. For example, since the 1970s, the average temperature in these islands has increased by 1°C. Several Members have said that if that increase continues unchecked, there will be more catastrophes, such as floods and droughts, and infectious diseases that result from those will spread. It is therefore important to extend the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland, to set targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and to keep rising temperatures in check.

Findings always emerge from scientific study, not least the latest, which warns that over the next 50 years we must keep the temperature rise in check and below the critical figure of a 2% increase. Many people are of the view that a 60% reduction in carbon emissions, which is the aim of the Bill, is not enough. As another Member said earlier, that is perhaps a modest target, and we should aim to achieve an 80% reduction. In light of that, will the Minister tell the House what capacity is in the Bill for reviews to take place, lest we find out in 20 years that the 60% target was far too modest a reduction in carbon emissions? Will it be possible to aim for a greater reduction, and even to achieve a reduction of 80%?

I also seek clarification on an issue that has arisen previously when the Assembly has considered UK legislation. During the debate on the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 on 15 October 2007, I raised the matter of the single energy market. Given that local suppliers of renewable energy sources are unable to obtain credits for feeding their products into the Republic of Ireland, I discussed how oddly that Order fitted against the reality of the new single energy market, which came into being on 1 November 2007. The same disadvantage affects suppliers in the Republic of Ireland who wish to trade in this direction. If we consider that the Bill is concerned with energy production and the use of carbon, how will it fit against the background of an all-Ireland single energy market?

1.00 pm

Mr B Wilson: I also welcome the motion. It is particularly appropriate that the motion should be introduced during the UN climate change conference

in Bali. I regret that the Assembly is not represented there. The only Northern Ireland delegate is my Green Party colleague Peter Doran, who is making some input into that important decision. It also follows last Saturday's global day of action, held at St Anne's Cathedral, which highlighted the growing concern of people in Northern Ireland. We must listen to such legitimate demands for us to show leadership, and I therefore welcome the small step that has been indicated by the proposal to extend the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland. The Green Party suggests that the Assembly should develop and implement its own climate change Bill.

The UK Climate Change Bill [HL] aims to reduce the net carbon account by at least 60% by 2050. Although we welcome that reduction, it is clear from the reports of the intergovernmental panel on climate change that that figure is not adequate to prevent global temperatures from rising above dangerous levels. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Government have emphasised that that is only the minimum level of reduction to be considered. Equally worrying is that the Bill proposes that some of the CO₂ reductions may be accounted for by the purchase of foreign carbon credits. The buying of such carbon indulgences must be kept to a minimum.

The Climate Change Bill [HL] consultation document recognises:

“the role of the Devolved Administrations in relation to setting, modification and achievement of the UK targets and the intervening carbon budgets”.

More significantly, it allows the devolved Administrations flexibility:

“The Bill will be amended to take account of these decisions before introduction to the UK Parliament.”

The Scottish Executive have expressed their intention to introduce a Scottish climate change Bill, which is due to set a long-term target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 80% by 2050. That target is 20% higher than the target proposed in the UK Bill and amounts to reductions of 3% each year. The Irish Government are also committed to reducing the amount of CO₂ emissions by 3% each year. In both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the main reason for the more stringent CO₂ targets is the input from the Green Party. If the more scientifically informed reduction of 3% per annum is good enough for our neighbours in Scotland and the Republic, and since there is explicit provision for the Assembly to devise its own legislation on climate change, I ask the House to devise climate change legislation that commits Northern Ireland to making cuts of at least 3% per annum in CO₂ output.

Mr S Wilson: Carbon dioxide output is determined by a lot of factors, not least changes in the climate and weather from one year to another. For example, a particularly cold winter might lead to more coal or oil

being burned or more electricity being consumed. Can the Member explain how such year-on-year targets would work? There will be peaks and troughs, and the targets would become either meaningless or a rod to beat people with over an event that was beyond their control.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for his question. Given the weather conditions that the Member refers to, there will be changes in the levels of emissions. However, the targets would be assessed over a number of years. A target of 3% a year would equate to 15% over five years. One year the emissions might be 3%, another year 5% and another year 1%, but, over a period of time, the average would be 3% per annum.

The Assembly should make that its target and, therefore, I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I place on record that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was consulted on the legislative consent motion and received a written briefing and presentation by officials. The Committee supports the legislative consent motion and recognises that, as the Climate Change Bill [HL] is taken through Westminster, it is important that it clearly encompasses the situation in Northern Ireland.

The Committee has a direct interest in energy policy and recognises that, as the Bill goes through, players in the energy sector here will probably raise different angles and issues. Through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of the Environment, the Committee hopes to be able to factor in such considerations as the Bill proceeds. Climate change must be a major consideration that will programme and frame our energy policy, and we view the legislative consent motion as one part of that. However, we recognise, as other Members have expressed, that that will not be enough, and additional measures must be introduced. We must reflect on what people in the energy sector — both existing players and those who enter the sector with new and innovative ideas on renewable energy — have to say.

Although the Committee did not come to a formal conclusion, members had some sympathy with the view of the Committee for the Environment, and we too wanted to ensure that particular guarantees about the quality of consideration be given to Northern Ireland. I note that the Minister expressed her intent to supplement the structures to which the Bill commits Northern Ireland with further consideration.

The single electricity market is one of the issues that Committee members identified as requiring much consideration, and some Members mentioned that too. We can learn from the experience of the UK legislation on the renewables obligation: it set the framework for Northern Ireland in a way that was blind to the single

electricity market. In an area as important as climate change, we simply cannot afford legislation that informs and affects how the energy market will operate, but that is blind to the single electricity market in Northern Ireland. If Members are to be considered coherent legislators, we must ensure a proper reconciliation between the two. If the two do not properly rhyme, we cannot back one and not back the other.

Dr Farry: I am pleased to follow the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. At one stage, I feared that the debate was becoming a closed shop for members of the Environment Committee, despite the fact that the implications of the legislation cut across all Government actions and all sectors of society.

Several Members have expressed their concern that the target of a 60% reduction in carbon emissions is not sufficient. I appreciate that we are debating the UK Bill today and that 60% is the target that it sets. However, it seems that many of our devolved partners are more ambitious and have recognised the need to go beyond 60% by considering a figure of 80%. There is widespread concern among domestic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that the UK is not aiming for an 80% reduction. As someone who firmly intends to be around in 2050, I hope that —

Mr Durkan: You are fairly round now.

A Member: Now, now; it is Christmas.

Dr Farry: I understand that the Member for Foyle was busy being Santa at the weekend. I too dressed up as Santa over the weekend, and it is all part of the act.

Mr S Wilson: You are a better Santa than he is.

Dr Farry: I hope that I have better presents.

Anyway, with hindsight, there are genuine concerns that we may have made a mistake in not aiming for a more ambitious target of 80%. I hope that we — as a country, not just as an Assembly — do not live to regret not opting for that target.

I want to focus on what we are doing to address climate change in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget and on the interaction between the environment and our economy.

Mr S Wilson: If Northern Ireland were to achieve an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, what percentage of electricity would have been generated in that time by, for example, windmills or tidal power? Is there even the capacity to achieve that target through the use of renewable forms of energy, or does the Member support many people's position, which is that we will have to go nuclear?

Dr Farry: I will deal with that point in more detail presently, but it is fair to say that we must invest in a wide range of alternative ways in which to generate

electricity and energy. It is important that we keep an open mind.

Two conclusions are part and parcel of the Stern Report. First, the implications for our economy will be huge if we do not protect the environment and address climate change. Those consequences are becoming very real.

Secondly, genuine economic opportunities exist for us to invest in climate change technology and for our economy to reorient itself in order to become greener. In some respects, that may answer Sammy Wilson's question. Although many forms of renewable energy may not be cost-effective at present, as time moves on and we invest in more efficient technology, that balance will change. In this part of Western Europe, we must capitalise on the opportunities that arise from our natural environment — namely, the wind and sea — and invest in them. Solar power will not become one of Northern Ireland's main attractions.

I have concerns about whether the final Programme for Government will make a major contribution to the climate change agenda. I was disappointed that, despite the strong economic focus in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, the green economy was not referred to; Northern Ireland needs to have a green economy.

In some respects, we are a developing economy, so there is a natural desire to invest in our infrastructure in order to bring our economy up to speed with that of many of our competitors. However, in doing so, it is critical that we bear environmental concerns in mind and that we do not allow ourselves to get trapped into the notion that a contradiction exists between economic growth and protecting the environment. As a society, we must make a choice. In fact, the two issues go hand in hand.

Transport particularly concerns me. My colleague Mr Ford referred to the Energy Saving Trust's report, which highlighted that certain local authorities in Northern Ireland have some of the largest carbon footprints in the whole of the UK. Although there may be differences in the methodology of our baseline studies, that report indicates a number of problems, not least a heavy reliance on private transport compared with elsewhere on these islands.

The draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland states that, in the first three years, around 60% of the transport budget will be invested in private transport — that is, on roads — and only around 40% in public transport. That is almost the opposite of the situation in Great Britain. However, over the 10-year period of the investment strategy, we are to invest 80% of the transport budget in private transport and only 20% in public transport. That sounds like a twentieth-century solution to our transport problems rather than a twenty-first-century solution. In welcoming the motion, we must be

realistic about what this society needs to do in order to get up to speed. We must set not only a 60% target but an 80% target; it is very much needed.

1.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank Members for their positive contributions to the debate. Some good and serious points were made on the legislative consent motion.

Mr McGlone spoke as the Chairperson of the Environment Committee; I thank him and all the Members of the Committee for their constructive approach to the legislation. As I did, the Committee wanted to send out the message that it aimed to tackle the problem of climate change, which it achieved through its positive engagement with me and my officials.

Mr McGlone was correct to highlight the fact that there are enabling powers in the Bill. At the request of Northern Ireland and Wales, the Bill places a duty on me and the Welsh Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing, Jane Davidson, to report on action and adapt to climate change, which we will do.

Peter Weir, who is a Member of the Environment Committee, spoke about the broad purpose of the Bill and placed on record his thanks to officials for working with the Environment Committee. I too place my thanks on record. He acknowledged the international context and the contribution that this part of the kingdom will make in efforts to reach the national targets.

As was mentioned during the debate, the Department has a lot of work to do on Northern Ireland baselines. I hope that that information will be available in April 2008 so that we can decide how to move forward. For example, many Members have mentioned establishing a subcommittee on climate change. When the baselines are available, we will decide the best way forward. Mr Ford is correct to say that we do not have to wait for three years, but can instead objectively look at the figures when they are available next year.

The important factor will be the lines of accountability and communication between the Department and a climate change subcommittee. There will be a two-way discussion because the Department will seek expert advice on how to adapt to future climate change and deal with some of the issues to which Dr Farry referred in respect of how to meet our targets.

Mr McKay spoke of the need to deal with CO₂ emissions and referred — as did other Members — to the Stern Report and the acknowledgement that, if climate change is not dealt with now, there will be “dire economic consequences.” That should be borne in mind because although many people think that combating climate change will cost the Government a lot of money, if it is not dealt with now, there will be a greater cost in the future.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister is correct to say that there will be a lot of costs involved in combating climate

change, including increased building costs and increased fuel costs for individuals in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister appreciate that many people find those costs difficult to accept when those who preach about climate change — and the harmful effect of CO₂ emissions — have descended on Bali in the past week and created more CO₂ emissions than Chad does in a year?

Some environmental groups have sent between 40 and 50 members to that idyllic location. I doubt that the same numbers would have attended had the location been Birmingham, instead of Bali. Can the Minister understand why some people might be a little cynical about that exercise?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member is not suggesting that politicians do not generate hot air from time to time, because there is a lot of it in the Chamber. I also hope that he appreciates that I made the sacrifice of not going to Bali. We are well represented at the conference in Bali by three Government Ministers: the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and two other Ministers are representing the UK case.

Mr McKay, Mr Gallagher and Mr Brian Wilson — among others — raised the issue of targets. It is important to recognise that, since the Royal Commission's report in 2000, science has developed considerably. That is why the Bill has been amended so that, for the first review of the 2050 target, the committee on climate change will be able to take into account all developments in scientific knowledge since the Royal Commission reported in June 2000.

The committee on climate change will decide whether the target for reducing carbon dioxide emissions should be increased to the 80% level that Scotland has decided to go with, and I have spoken to the sustainable development commissioner about that. The committee will look at the scientific evidence and decide, and I think that it is the right body to make that decision.

Mr Burnside also mentioned the talks in Bali. It seems that a lot of the politicians in the Chamber today wish that they were in Bali, but we are here and dealing with the issue of climate change. He said that the US has a huge impact on carbon emissions. Mr Ford responded to that when he said that most of the impact from carbon dioxide emissions is caused by one half of the world but felt most severely by the other half. The Assembly should consider that when thinking about the Climate Change Bill [HL].

Mr Ford also spoke of his worry about Northern Ireland's focus if we were involved in the UK climate change committee but did not have our own. I listened carefully to his comments on what the Welsh are doing about climate change, and I am willing to look at that. I will look at the Welsh example, but I want to be sure of our figures. I will look at it again in April when we have those figures. I know that Mr Ford will be after me in April to see what I am planning to do.

Mr Gallagher spoke about the implications of not dealing with climate change. I agree with him: adaptation is an important issue with which the Assembly must deal. He also spoke about the all-Ireland single energy market. I will speak to him about that when I have spoken to my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about the issues he raised. I am sure that there is a problem of harmonisation in relation to HM Revenue and Customs, but I will refer the issue to the appropriate Minister.

Sammy Wilson regretted my absence from the talks in Bali. I hope that he did not mean that he would have preferred I was there rather than in the Chamber progressing the Bill. I am sure that that is not the case. He mentioned Scotland's climate change targets; I hope that I have answered that question. Mr Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, spoke about the many issues around climate change and its impact in the field of renewable energy. He also mentioned the all-Ireland single energy market, and — as I said to Mr Gallagher — I will speak to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that, but I imagine that the difficulties are related to fiscal policies.

Dr Farry mentioned the target for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and I hope that I have addressed that. He also mentioned the interaction between climate change and the draft Programme for Government, and the need to invest in a wider range of renewable energy. Dr Farry will be aware that my Department recently put PPS 18 out for consultation. He is right to state that the Stern Report recognised the economic consequences of not doing anything about climate change. However, there are now economic opportunities for Northern Ireland, particularly with our history in engineering and innovative skills. I hope that we rise to the challenge — especially with regard to tidal and wind energy, because there are not many openings for solar energy here.

The environment is at the heart of the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government. I have been saying exactly what Dr Farry said: a better environment and a better economy are not mutually exclusive — the two can sit easily together. We have had a good debate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007: Prayer of Annulment

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/442) be annulled.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This statutory rule is made under the powers conferred by articles 4(8) and 14(4) of the Higher Education Order 2005.

That Order capped fees at £3,000, subject only to inflationary increases. The effect of the statutory rule is the application of an annual inflationary increase to the basic and higher fees that are charged by our higher education institutions for qualifying courses in the academic year 2008-09. The statutory rule will increase the higher amount from £3,070 to £3,145, and the basic rate will increase from £1,225 to £1,255. Other rates for other specific prescribed courses will increase on a pro rata basis at around 2.5%.

Under article 4 of the 2005 Order, increases to basic and higher fee rates are subject to rises linked to inflation until 2010.

I know, go raibh maith agat, that this is a basic point, but I remind Members that this motion is to annul proposed fee increases. However, it does not address the principle of variable student fees. Should the statutory rule be annulled, the current higher rate fee of £3,070 will be payable by students next year, and other fees will remain at their present levels.

The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 were laid in the Assembly Business Office on 5 November. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 21 November, and officials from the Department were present to explain the position. At that meeting, I forwarded a proposal that a prayer of annulment be brought to the Floor of the Assembly. It is important to note that there was division in the Committee, with six members agreeing to the annulment motion, and three members against. During this debate, when I refer to “members”, I mean those who voted in favour of proposing the motion.

Members expressed a number of serious and specific concerns on the statutory rule during the Committee’s deliberations, and I will highlight those.

First, and more importantly, the Department stated that it proposed to conduct a review of student finance, including fees, some time during the academic year

2008-09. The review has been presented as a reason why fee increases should go ahead, in line with the primary legislation, in advance of the research and review findings being made available.

However, the opposing argument is surely stronger. How can fee increases be justified in advance of knowing precisely what impact they will have on take-up or drop-out rates on prospective, or existing, university students? There is a particularly serious concern that those most disadvantaged in our community are being put off by fees, particularly when they see increases coming forward in the absence of due consideration of their impact. Even before the research and review was decided on, there was evidence of a drop in the numbers applying to universities after fees were introduced in 2006. Members of the Committee agreed that the need for research and review was paramount, and I ask the Department to bring that work programme forward at the earliest opportunity.

However, to increase fees on an annual basis in an information vacuum is surely taking us down a path from which it will become increasingly difficult to retreat. Should the research show major impacts on particular categories of the population, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, radical action would be required. Continuing on a path of increasing fees will make reform difficult.

A number of Members and I are concerned about the impact of fee increases on a particular section of the community. The Committee was informed that a full equality impact assessment would have been completed with respect to the primary legislation, and that no adverse impact was assessed at that time. The Committee was therefore told that there was no need for a full assessment of the statutory rule.

Although I accept that that approach may be procedurally correct, I am surprised that no form of — at least interim — equality impact assessment has been conducted. Student fees are an extremely important issue in our society, with major financial implications for students.

The lack of further work on the equality impact is linked to the general lack of information that I mentioned earlier. There should not be any increase in the current level of fees until the appropriate information is available.

1.30 pm

The Committee’s briefing on the statutory rule coincided with a briefing on the draft Budget. Some Committee members, including myself, found it somewhat ironic that, during the Budget briefing, officials said that the Department did not have the money to fund changes to maintenance grant provisions that would provide parity with the position in England and benefit local students. The Committee was told that, in the absence of such funding being made available locally,

a university student in England whose parents had a combined income of less than £25,000 would receive £2,835, while a student here in similar circumstances would receive only £1,877. I mention that because this statutory rule is seeking parity with England. In this case, parity means that students will be penalised with fee increases — yet they will not reap the benefits of an increase in maintenance funds, since that form of parity cannot, we are told, be funded. That is clearly a lose-lose situation for local students.

The Department made the point that the equivalent Statutory Instrument in England — The Student Fees (Amounts) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2006 — has been passed and that students from here who choose to study in England will be penalised, as they will be paying a higher fee than if they had chosen to stay and study at our two universities. Committee members opposing this statutory rule did not necessarily accept that, and the point was made that it could be easily addressed in appropriate legislation — for example, by amending the primary legislation under which those fee increases are made.

The point was made in the Committee that the proposed review of student finance, including fees — which I referred to earlier — might result in the lifting of the cap on variable fees, thereby allowing the universities to charge whatever they wish. At present, however, there is no way of knowing the outcome of that review. Therefore, I propose that the statutory rule be annulled in advance of a full review of student finance — both fees and maintenance — so that any further detriment to the position of prospective and existing students can be avoided. I remind the House that on 21 November 2000 it backed a report from the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment — as it was then — calling for tuition fees and means-tested grants to be abolished. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Spratt: I rise to speak against the motion as a private Member, not as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

When this motion was brought before the Committee, I believed strongly that the best way forward, in the interests of both the universities and the students, was to await the impending review of the whole matter. Unfortunately, some members of the Committee chose to pre-empt the review, and so we are in this position today.

Much valid concern was voiced by local universities when the Committee decided to table the motion for debate in the House. By proposing to annul rises in line with inflation for the next three years, those parties in favour of such a proposal are engaging in headline-grabbing opportunism without thinking through the consequences of their actions.

It is necessary to review some facts and figures in order to put the issue into perspective. The regulations, as they stand, provide for an inflationary increase in tuition fees with effect from 1 September 2008. Such an increase would see the fees of undergraduates rise from £3,070 to £3,145. When a rational approach is taken, it is clear that the rise is relatively small. The amount of the increase will not be the deciding factor between someone choosing to go to university and someone choosing not to go. To believe seriously such an argument is to fail to engage in reality.

Although the increase in fees for an individual may be £75, it is imperative, in the context of this debate, to consider the financial impact that that would have on local universities. Should the Assembly choose to annul the 2008-09 increase, the combined loss to Queen's University and the University of Ulster, over those three years, will be £7 million. Furthermore, recurrent income for the universities would be reduced by that total until 2011-12.

Consider the impact of that income reduction on universities. The funding available to our two universities would fall significantly behind that available to other UK universities. On such a tight settlement, our attempts to help those universities to match other UK universities' funding, to attract the best academics, and to encourage research will be greatly inhibited, and, inevitably, students will suffer.

All parties signed up to the draft Programme for Government, which places the economy at the heart of driving Northern Ireland forward. Cutting university funding would jeopardise the competitiveness of the top-class teaching and research that the universities provide in support of the Northern Ireland economy. Any reduction in the standards of university courses here would increase, rather than solve, the brain-drain problem.

Only two weeks ago, we witnessed the First Minister's and the deputy First Minister's attendance at the opening of the new cancer research centre in Queen's University — a truly world-class facility at the cutting edge of research. If university finances are cut, such ventures may be in jeopardy. We should work with universities to ensure that such projects are possible, and that Northern Ireland can be at the forefront, as it is in cancer research and care.

Under the current student-fees regime, 30% of students from a household with an income of less than £17,501 are entitled to the maximum Government maintenance grant, as well as to a university bursary. There is a sliding scale of assistance for students from households with incomes of up to £32,501. Fees are not the basis on which the disadvantaged are deterred from entering third-level education. The increased number of university applicants clearly shows that young people realise the

huge academic, financial and cultural value of a third-level education.

The DUP is not in favour of any measures that would increase the burden on students. In line with fees increasing with inflation, we envisage proposals for maintenance grants to rise in line with inflation. Therefore, the burden on students will not rise.

The DUP is in favour of a top-class education system that encourages our young people to stay in Northern Ireland and go on to support our economic prosperity. I implore Members to reject the motion, to set aside headline-grabbing opportunism, and to await the outcome of the impending review before engaging in debate on the whole issue. I oppose the motion.

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party asks that Members reject the prayer of annulment. However, the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and Mr Spratt raised several issues on which there is some agreement, and it is worth investigating and discussing the right way forward.

First, there is clear evidence that students with higher qualifications earn more, have better job satisfaction, live longer and healthier lives, and contribute more to society.

Is it any wonder that Governments around the world try to encourage more and more people to achieve third-level qualifications. However, it is surprising that some people reject that premise. Perhaps they are worried about the distant promise of future potential as against an immediate pay packet, which is much more attractive to young people despite the fact that it may not be the best long-term solution for them.

People must be forgiven for thinking that way, because, regrettably, recent news has shown that some of our major employers, such as Seagate, are having difficulties competing in the global economy. Young people will ask themselves why they should invest in gaining skills when there is no certainty that those skills will be relevant in the future. Why should they take on debt when there is no guarantee that they will get a job that will get them out of that debt?

We are all keen to encourage people from socially deprived areas into further and higher education, but the accepted wisdom in such areas argues against taking risks. Strong communal ties encourage people to stay in the areas that they know. Yet that limits the opportunities that are open to young people and reduces their horizons, and that is not what we want.

The Assembly must examine ways to encourage people in those areas to take up further and higher education. It must discover what must be done to empower them and release their potential; it must examine what will enable them to succeed where earlier generations have failed. If we are to increase participation rates, many people will be the first in their families to have entered

higher education. The real challenge for the Assembly is to confront lack of ambition and find ways to break the cycle of deprivation and enable all the people of Northern Ireland to unlock their potential. The answers should come from the Assembly.

People have come up with various ideas; and the recent trip to the USA, which focused on the economy, was most successful. However, improving our economy will not be sufficient to solve our problems, because we have relatively low unemployment, and we must work out how to increase productivity. Unless we can find more people, those that we do have will have to earn more or work longer. Personally, I favour the option of earning more.

No doubt others would argue that equality is the fundamental challenge facing the Assembly. However, speaking with considerable experience of international commercial activity, the world is not fair, equitable or equal; it is a competition, and we must ensure that all our young people have the skills and abilities to compete in that world.

The only enduring, competitive edge is having a good education. That is why the process is fundamental to us. The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to ensuring the increased participation of all of our people in all stages of education, but particularly in further and higher education.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning alluded to evidence that some potential students from areas of social disadvantage might be put off going to college by debt. The trouble is that we do not have all the evidence yet. Top-up fees were introduced only one year ago, and their impact is by no means certain. As I understand from the current figures — and, no doubt, the Minister will clarify this — it is not possible to see a trend at this stage.

Nevertheless, there is a genuine concern. That is why my colleague on the Committee for Employment and Learning, David McClarty, voted with other members to try to find a way of not passing on fee increases. He did it with the best of intentions in the hope that the resources could be made up elsewhere. Sadly, that does not seem to be the case. If the prayer of annulment is passed, universities will lose £2.5 million this year.

In the proposed tight comprehensive spending review (CSR) settlement, that will impact significantly on our universities. It is by no means certain that it will have any particular benefit for the students whom we are trying to help. Therefore, there is definitely a loss and no particular gain. The sum of money that has been referred to represents only a modest increase, in line with inflationary pressures. As my colleague Mr Spratt has mentioned, that will be offset by other measures.

1.45 pm

The most fundamental problem with the proposal — which smacks of tokenism — is that it is untargeted and will not address the issues that ought to be addressed. Student fees represent only a fraction of what it costs to deliver courses. Many students' earning power will be increased as a result of going on to further education. The type of uplift to which I am referring is approximately 80%, or £13,000 per annum. Therefore, there is a real economic reason as to why individuals should pay the fees and go on to higher education.

Those fees help our universities to compete in a modern world — and they must compete. The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning has spoken about parity. However, there is an anomaly in that; even if the Assembly accepts this prayer of annulment, the fees paid by students from Northern Ireland who go to universities in Great Britain will increase, but our ability to give them support will not increase. Therefore, that will lead to a lack of parity between two sets of students, which surely is unhelpful.

Many of the issues that have been raised are linked, which indicates that some form of integrated fundamental review of the process is required. That is exactly what the Minister has suggested should happen.

We are blessed to live in a land of outstanding natural beauty. However, we lack natural resources. The only natural resource that we have is human capital, which is what will enable Northern Ireland and its people to compete in the world. If our people are going to compete, it will be on the basis of knowledge-based industries.

Our universities are our global brands and our champions, and they will take the lead in enabling people to compete. Now is not the time to remove their resources or those of students; now is the time to invest. If the Assembly does not reject this prayer of annulment, money that is badly needed by students and universities will be taken away.

I have made a conscious effort to try to address issues that Members have raised. All Members want to move in the right direction. However, this hotchpotch, chancing-one's-arm approach is not the right way to proceed. A fundamental review of fees, higher education and further education is required, and that is what is going to happen. Therefore, I urge all Members to reject the prayer of annulment.

Mr Attwood: As Mr Spratt and Mr McCrea have outlined in their contributions, our further and higher education colleges will have to be at the heart of the economic and wider development of this part of Ireland. All Members should agree with that.

As Mr Spratt said, the economy has to be at the heart of driving this part of the world forward. Unfortunately, the draft Budget does not reflect that. Although the

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) was the clear winner in the Budget stakes, it is clear that our further and higher education colleges are the also-rans.

I would take seriously what Mr Spratt said, had he also stated that the Department for Employment and Learning should receive more money in the final Budget than it had been allocated in the draft Budget, to ensure that Queen's University, the University of Ulster, the Open University and the FE (further education) colleges are at the heart of the economy. The draft Budget does not send out that message. It states that there will be 300 more PhDs by 2011, yet there is not 1p in the draft Budget to fund those PhDs.

The Irish Government have offered the Assembly £34 million of their money to enable Queen's University and the University of Ulster to participate in an all-Ireland science foundation, yet there is no money in the draft Budget for that.

I could demonstrate my point in other ways. Regardless of the motion, there should be agreement throughout the Chamber that if the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is to be the driver of the economy, the Department for Employment and Learning, and further education (FE) and higher education (HE) colleges, must be its partners. That is not reflected in the draft Budget.

Regardless of the loss that might be incurred by Queen's University and the University of Ulster if the prayer of annulment is agreed to, it is not as significant as the funds that FE and HE colleges need from this year's Budget to ensure that they are at the heart of the economy, producing the PhDs and the innovation that will be the engine of growth and opportunity for all our people.

I do not wish to detract from the universities' need for proper funding, but why is that not demonstrated in the draft Budget? Why is the Minister of Finance not funding the initiatives that have been taken by the Minister for Employment and Learning to put development at the heart of the North's economy?

I wish to deal with some arguments that have been advanced in respect of the motion. I thought that we could have a debate that would be free from more exaggerated terms. However, Basil McCrea used the term "tokenism" and Mr Spratt referred to "headline-grabbing opportunism". This is a more substantive debate than such terms suggest.

I accept and understand that if the annulment motion is passed, there will be a loss of funds to universities in the North. I have said to Queen's University that it should fund that loss from its reserves, so that universities in the North send out the message to the students, pupils and parents that those institutions acknowledge that student debt and loans are a major concern.

Queen's University will avail itself of any opportunity to increase student fees when the cap is removed, or even before that. The universities, and Queen's University in particular, should send out a message to students and their parents that they understand the problem and accept that, for a period of time, there will be a shortfall in their budgets. In that way, those institutions will indicate their best intentions with respect to student funding. I am concerned that one university in the North intends, over time, to try to increase its fees to a premium. I say that because Queen's University has joined an elite school of universities, known as the Russell Group. It follows that it will try to increase fees.

There is another reason why it is important that the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 be annulled. It is said that there is no evidence as to how access to universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is being affected. If that were the case, why has the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in England — the sister Department of the Department for Employment and Learning — announced major reforms to student funding, even though fees have just been introduced?

Therefore, despite fees having been introduced recently, that Department has already recognised that there is a need to respond to the perception, and to the reality that people who wish to go to university may be put in a disadvantageous position. DIUS has announced higher income thresholds in order to increase the number of students eligible for maintenance grants; a repayment holiday for up to five years after graduation for students in receipt of loans; and the introduction of HE student-support guarantees for students who are in receipt of an educational maintenance allowance.

To be fair to the Minister, he is aware of all that, is examining it and is working through the potential consequences. However, even though fees have only recently been introduced, DIUS is already taking remedial action, because evidence of a problem has already come to light. In that context, it would be fair for the House to annul regulations that introduce fees, because to do so would be to send out a message to our students and their parents —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a moment, Sammy.

The message that would be sent out would be that Members are concerned and will be seen to respond. Yes, we should be seen to respond in much more fundamental ways, and for that reason I welcome the review, which the Minister says will be initiated in the next academic year.

However, at the present time in the development of our education system, for the Assembly to pray against

the regulations would be a strong and appropriate symbol to project to our students and their parents of how Members see the future of student finance.

Mr S Wilson: I took the opportunity to look at the Member's contribution on the subject when student tuition fees were introduced in the Assembly in November 2000 by his SDLP colleague the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Dr Seán Farren. Interestingly, the Member was arguing back then that the abolition of not only the increase but of student fees entirely would not necessarily help the disadvantaged. Indeed, he said of a Sinn Féin Member in that debate:

“However, he ignored the evidence from the Republic of Ireland on the abolition of tuition fees and the fact that access is still being denied to under-represented groups”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p263, col 1*].

Therefore, if, in 2000, the abolition of student fees would not help, and was not perceived as a way in which to help disadvantaged individuals, why does the Member now claim that to do away with the increase would help disadvantaged groups?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his point and for reminding me of what I said, which is consistent with what I am saying today, for the following good reason: when it comes to guaranteeing access to third-level education, a menu of options must be put in place in order to ensure that students — those from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular — are able to avail themselves of educational opportunities. One size does not fit all: a number of options must be available in order to ensure that a person whose family has had no member go on to higher or further education receives every encouragement to do so. It is a matter of ensuring that the fees do not exist, or are set at a smaller level; that grants are set at a higher level; and that childcare facilities are available for those who require them. When it comes to guaranteeing access for disadvantaged people, there must be a menu of options, which is the same point that I made in November 2000.

In any case, the evidence from England is that intervention is necessary to mitigate the impact of student fees, so surely we should also realise that we should intervene to mitigate their impact. That will come in part through the Minister's review, but we can take other measures now, such as stopping the student-fee increase on the basis of inflation, in order to send out a strong, clear message to students and their parents.

I shall now return to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education's comments. Those students from here who study in England, where the fees have already been introduced, face a problem. It is not beyond the wit of the Assembly draftsmen to draft regulations to assist those students who would be disadvantaged otherwise, while at the same time advantaging our own students by not increasing the fees in line with inflation.

2.00 pm

My final point is this —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: No. I have given way already.

This issue nearly brought down a Government. When the Bill that introduced student fees was going through Parliament, it came down to a handful of votes. For that reason alone, it is not opportunism to state that we should annul fee increases. This issue runs so deep and has such an impact on people's decisions about going into higher education that — on its own merits, never mind the wider context that I have outlined — the Assembly should vote to annul fee increases as outlined in the motion.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports the prayer of annulment.

In the past, there has been all-party support in the Assembly for the abolition of university tuition fees. I note, in particular, the DUP's past support for that goal.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No.

Tuition fees are not a product of Northern Ireland's political system; they are a product of New Labour's bankrupt social policies, one of the hallmarks of which has been to be more Thatcherite than Thatcher herself would have ever dared to be. We should also remember that tuition fees have trebled in the past few years, and we are in danger of moving to the American model whereby universities are for the rich, and where social mobility is frozen.

Northern Ireland has been vastly more successful than England in ensuring that young people from low-income backgrounds go to university. Given that context in particular, we must develop a Northern Ireland solution that reflects our unique circumstances. We should look towards the Scottish system for a working model. That system expects those who have benefited financially from higher education to make a contribution to society and future generations of students after they graduate. That system does not encumber students with upfront debt, and would free those who have received higher education but who choose to go into poorly-paid but socially worthwhile occupations such as social work, the clergy and the voluntary sector from carrying debt for the span of their adult life.

I appreciate the argument that universities should not be penalised for the sins of the Westminster Government, or indeed for those of our own Minister of Finance and Personnel. I appreciate that the draft Budget has already set a very tough first year for universities in the next spending round. However, no injustice can be corrected by its continuance. If we agree with the principle that tuition fees are unjust —

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way, and I note what she said about all-party consensus. Would she accept that tuition fees were introduced by a party that is now going to support the prayer of annulment? Over the past number of years, the percentage of people from all classes in Northern Ireland going into higher education has increased. Where is the injustice?

Ms Lo: Many students emerge from university with debts of between £12,000 and £20,000. That is very worrying for many low-income and middle-income families. The Member's view would certainly discourage that section of society from attending university.

If we agree with the principle that tuition fees are unjust, no Northern Irish students should have to pay them. It is not logical to add to the burden of a system that we have committed to abolish.

As Basil McCrea said, Northern Ireland has no significant mineral resources. Our most significant natural resource is the skills base of our people. In a world where global competition is ever more cut-throat, we must have the best-educated workforce possible. In that context, the perpetuation of a system that puts off some of our brightest young people, simply because they come from a poor family, is a false economy.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I believe that, if the costs of segregation were tackled, the resource constraints that face the higher education sector could be addressed. If the draft financial settlement for universities is poor, the solution to the problem lies with the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Students should not be penalised for the failures of our political leaders.

Mr Ross: Student fees are a serious issue that should be examined when we are in possession of all the facts, figures and costings. It is interesting that the motion on the prayer of annulment was proposed to the Committee for Employment and Learning before all those facts and figures were available.

Members from all parties asked questions of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) about how many young people were now applying to university compared with the number before the introduction of student fees. Members asked how many people dropped out of university because of financial problems and also about the specific costs of freezing tuition fees. Many of those questions were not answered. The Department either did not have the information available or stated that it was far too early to answer some of the questions. Most of the available information stated that, in recent years, university admissions were on the rise. In the Chairperson's opening remarks, she used the phrase "should the research show". That demonstrates the fact that the motion is not based on fact or research.

Many elements of DEL's budget bid are not being funded, yet Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP and the Alliance Party — the parties that supported the motion in Committee — wish to create an additional shortfall of some £2.5 million. The DUP is not advocating an increase in student fees per se. However, this statutory rule would allow student fees to rise at the same level as inflation and in parallel with student maintenance grants, which are rising at the same rate. It concerns financial responsibility. The DUP believes that an increase in tuition fees would not create additional barriers that would prevent young people from lower-income families from going to university. As my colleague Sammy Wilson said, there is evidence that more young people from lower-income families in Northern Ireland go to university than elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

It would be interesting to know what cuts those parties that wish to freeze tuition fees will make to other areas of the DEL budget. Sinn Féin opposes this statutory rule because the rule might be perceived as support for student fees, which the party in fact wishes to abolish. Sinn Féin has not explained from where it would find the £2.5 million shortfall if fees were to be capped let alone the £90 million to £100 million shortfall if student fees were abolished.

Questions about the financial impact of decisions in this area are not new. My colleague Sammy Wilson referred to Mr Farren's actions in 2000. In November 2000, the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Seán Farren, tried to stop a motion —

Mr Newton: Is it not the case that the SDLP introduced tuition fees? Is its position today not one of political hypocrisy and budgetary irresponsibility?

Mr Ross: That is correct. The SDLP did introduce tuition fees.

In November 2000, the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Seán Farren, stopped a motion because it left a number of questions about cost unanswered. Today's motion is supported by the SDLP, but those issues of cost are still left unanswered.

Mr S Wilson: Given that the Member has done his research on Seán Farren and his statement to the House in November 2000, will he note that the point that the current Minister for Employment and Learning makes about anomalies was also made by the former Minister?

Mr Attwood said that the parliamentary draftsmen must be able to find some legal way around the problem. However, the former SDLP Minister Dr Farren found that there was no such way around the anomaly, and he concluded that if his proposals were not accepted, the result would be disadvantage to — and discrimination

against — those who wished to study outside Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, as always on such matters, he is absolutely correct.

Mrs Hanna: I succeeded Seán Farren as Minister for Employment and Learning. Our student-support package was built around raising the thresholds at which students and their families pay fees. We are keenly aware that middle-income families often suffer most: people just above the benefits threshold. Our policy was to continually raise those thresholds. Indeed, our policy was supported by National Union of Students (NUS) and USI (Union of Students in Ireland) as the best student-support package in these islands.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for her intervention. It seems as though the SDLP policy has changed ever so slightly over the years, depending on what positions it holds. However, at least the SDLP has changed its policy over a number of years; the Ulster Unionist Party, on the other hand, changed its policy in a matter of weeks. Only a fortnight ago, the Ulster Unionist representative on the Committee for Employment and Learning supported the annulment, yet today we heard Basil McCrea argue against it. There seems to have been a change of opinion by the UUP in only a matter of weeks, whereas the DUP Committee members have taken a financially responsible view, which we maintain today. That is a consistent theme of the DUP in the Administration: we are financially responsible in all areas of government.

The Committee had the Minister before it only a few weeks ago. He confirmed during that meeting that a review of the entire area of student finance was to take place that would include consideration of fees and grants. That, of course, is to be welcomed. We should all be patient and wait to see the findings of that review before we make any decisions that would result in a tighter squeeze on the departmental budget. I listened to Mr Attwood argue that there was not enough money in the DEL budget, and that we needed more for this, that, and the other. However, he then went on to say that we should create a further shortfall in that budget by supporting the motion. That seems hypocritical.

If the motion were passed, universities would lose a substantial amount of funding, which is used to ensure that the quality of courses is at the right standard, that the range of available courses is at the right level, and that there is adequate funding for research and development. My colleague Mr Spratt mentioned the cancer centre in Belfast, which is widely recognised as a centre of excellence. Such developments come, in part, from our universities, and that shows the important role that our universities play.

The draft Programme for Government places a strong emphasis on the economy; indeed, it has the economy at its heart. Considering the size of Northern Ireland, our two campus universities play a vital role in that economy. Northern Ireland cannot afford to see our universities fall behind others in Scotland, England and Wales in respect of funding. I congratulate Queen's University on joining the Russell Group. Rather than viewing that as a bad thing, I contend that that is a very good thing.

We must realise that the barriers that prevent young people from going to university are not all financial — there are social issues that prevent young people from going to university, and, of course, many simply do not achieve the necessary grades. There is a problem of underachievement in working-class areas, particularly unionist areas, and that must be addressed.

I listened to the Alliance Member Anna Lo talk about not wanting a system for the rich. That is somewhat bizarre, considering the fact that her party supports an education system that will lead to just that. Rather than academically gifted children from working-class areas being able to go to grammar schools, the Alliance Party supports a system that would see only those who can afford houses close to the good schools gaining places at grammar schools. That is a little bit of hypocrisy on the part of the Alliance party.

Ms Lo also mentioned the cost of segregation. That is another point on which the Alliance Party is hypocritical because it supports the setting up of Irish-medium schools, which cost a substantial amount of money, and cater for only one section of the community.

2.15 pm

In conclusion, I do not support the motion — I do not see how it can be funded within the current departmental budget, and I do not wish to see other DEL initiatives going unfunded in order to make up the shortfall. None of us wants to see students in financial hardship, or barriers put in place to prevent people from learning. However, we should act responsibly and work within the resources available to us. I look forward to the launch of the review next year, and hope that Members will wait until then, rather than acting irresponsibly now to create another financial shortfall in the DEL budget.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún i dtaca le táillí múinte. Nuair a bhí an t-ábhar seo os coinne an Choiste labhair mé ina choinne.

I am disappointed that some parties that gave a commitment a couple of years ago to oppose tuition fees have now done a U-turn. This debate concerns the fundamental issue of how we fund the further-education sector. Creating a well-educated workforce is all about creating a good student experience, but we do not have

that at the moment. Some parties on the Benches opposite are making excuses about why universities should be able to charge tuition fees. In the past year, we have seen students incurring far more debt than ever before. There is an agenda to bring the marketplace to universities. There is talk about some universities in Britain wanting to increase tuition fees by as much as £10,000. There is division between vice-chancellors, particularly in England, over whether tuition fees are the right option. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: Obviously, in an ideal world, we would want university education to be free at the point of use. However, we must live within budgetary constraints. With what policy would the Member fill the gap that would be left if tuition fees were not charged in Northern Ireland? What impact would that have on the many disadvantaged people who gain university places through bursaries and other forms of help with tuition fees? The universities would not be able to pay for those if the fee income were not available.

Mr Butler: Well, first of all, we do not know the impact of tuition fees. We can say that there should be a rise because of inflation, yet the Minister — and I have written to him several times — does not know what the impact on disadvantaged groups would be. He does not even know whether there is going to be an increase in variable tuition fees. Queen's University and the University of Ulster could raise those fees. If we do not know that, why are some parties advocating the defeat of this motion?

I am concerned about the proposed review. Will it be independent? Will students have an input? I hope — after listening to Basil McCrea, for example — that this matter is not going to be manipulated in such a way as to show that tuition fees can be justified. I have real concerns about how we can have a totally independent review of tuition fees. If the review is entirely independent, and if it shows that tuition fees discourage people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will the Assembly abolish them? We must examine those issues.

Tuition fees bring the marketplace to universities. Some Members on the other Benches are trying to justify that, but it is unacceptable. Third-level education should be there for people from all backgrounds, particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, to avail themselves of, without being lumbered with debt when they go out into the workforce after three or four years at university.

Queen's University has received somewhere in the region of £90 million in one year. What is the quality of the education that students are receiving? Have the courses improved? What about the facilities? Has employability improved? We do not know the answers to any of those questions.

Nevertheless, the Assembly has gathered to debate an increase to tuition fees, albeit at the rate of inflation. The Assembly must, however, send out the message, as Mr Attwood said earlier, that it is opposed to tuition fees. That has been Sinn Féin's consistent position throughout the ongoing debate on tuition fees of the past several years. Indeed, my party has proposed the motion. I appeal to Members to oppose an increase in tuition fees.

Mr Lunn: This has been an interesting debate. I do not wish to repeat other Members' arguments. However, there are so many issues that relate to tuition fees that what is really needed — as Ms Ramsey said — is a full review of the entire matter. I note with interest that every party seems to have opposed tuition fees back in 2000 and 2001 — long before I was elected to the Assembly. A bit of consistency is not a bad thing. Ideally, there should be — and I get the feeling that there is — unanimity on that issue. Theoretically, perhaps, it is impossible to take a decision, because the Assembly does not know from where the necessary finance will come.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that, before the establishment of the current Assembly, the DUP promised the electorate a £1 billion bonanza from Gordon Brown, which has not materialised?

Mr Lunn: That could be the answer. Many promises are made at certain times during a four-year cycle. Another £1 billion is represented by the cost of segregation, which was identified by my party and is continually referred to in the Chamber. Recently, that figure was amplified to £1.5 billion by Deloitte. Perhaps there is scope for the necessary money to come from that total.

In the meantime, however, my party believes that the situation is characterised by too many imponderables and questions that must be answered by a proper review. Therefore, the only sensible course of action is to support the prayer of annulment and not to add any further burden to graduates, even if that burden might be small, in hard cash terms. The Assembly must send out a signal that, if the amount involved is just £2.5 million, which is not a huge amount, surely it could be covered by the universities for one year. Alternatively, perhaps, if the Minister were to obtain a better deal from the Department of Finance and Personnel, that shortfall could be covered by the DEL budget. I certainly hope so. In the meantime, the Alliance Party will support the prayer of annulment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Standing Orders require that Question Time must take place at 2.30 pm. Therefore, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will recommence at 4.00 pm, when the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, will speak.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Single Equality Bill

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on a single equality Bill, in light of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1204/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The single equality Bill was a Programme for Government commitment of the previous Executive, and a significant amount of work has been completed as a consequence. Since that commitment was made, additional equality legislation has been introduced that provides further protections across a range of grounds. We have not yet taken decisions on policy proposals; any policy proposals for single equality legislation will be considered in consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Executive.

As I said, the single equality Bill was a Programme for Government commitment of the previous Executive. The intention was that it would provide a clear and accessible framework of equality law for Northern Ireland in one legal instrument, which, as far as was practicable, would harmonise existing provisions. Northern Ireland has a significant body of equality legislation, so this represents a significant and complex piece of work.

There have been significant consultations to date on the Bill, and two public consultations were held — in 2001 and in 2004. In line with the commitment in the St Andrews Agreement to develop policy proposals for an incoming Executive, there was further engagement with key stakeholders. Subject to a ministerial decision, it is anticipated that there will be a formal public consultation on final policy proposals. At present, officials are engaging with advisers and preparing a submission for Ministers on potential options.

Ms Lo: I thank the First Minister for his response.

Given that there is not a single mention of a single equality Bill in the three-year draft Programme for Government, is this another case of the political differences between the First Minister and the deputy First

Minister leading to a freeze on any legislation that they regard as controversial?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: I have given the full position of our stand on this issue and the work that is being done on it. Our targets are to introduce measures to work towards the total elimination of the gender pay gap and to work across Government to reform the tribunals system to enhance the enforcement of rights.

Mr K Robinson: Given that the Equality Commission is the enforcer of any equality legislation and that it is a body for which the First Minister has oversight responsibility, what significant steps will the First Minister take to ensure that the commission will address the problem that its staff is 34.5% male compared with 65.5% female, and is made up of 35.43% Protestants compared with 63.3% Roman Catholics, despite its declared mission to advance equality and promote equality of opportunity?

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member has raised this matter. I will take it up with the chief commissioner, and we will test it out with her.

Mr Kennedy: With him.

Mr Durkan: Will the First Minister clarify whether Members would be wrong to read his earlier response as an indication that all the statements on equality in the draft Programme for Government do not amount to a commitment to a single equality Bill?

Does the First Minister agree that the various statements on equality in the draft Programme for Government provide a policy cover, or policy basis, for the statement that was made by the Minister of Education last week regarding the future of post-primary education?

The First Minister: It is for the Executive Committee and the Assembly to take action on those matters. This is the place in which to settle those matters — they cannot be settled by something done in the past. This House is the final appeal court of the country.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Third International Conference on Services and Innovation

3. **Mr McFarland** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on its recent participation in the third international conference on services and innovation.

(AQO 1193/08)

The First Minister: The third international conference on services and innovation was an important event, which focused on the significant economic opportunities presented by the growth of the services sector, and on how innovation can help to build competitiveness in

that sector and drive overall economic growth. It took place at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin, on 7 and 8 November 2007 and was attended by representatives from business, policy agencies and development agencies from most EU member states.

The deputy First Minister and Mr Brian Cowen TD delivered the opening addresses of the conference. A press release outlining the deputy First Minister's attendance at the conference was issued at the time and is available from our joint Office's website.

Mr McFarland: I note that on day two of the conference, the delegates discussed how to develop a supportive and flexible enterprise environment for service providers. What is the First Minister, in his role as the Executive's economic policy co-ordinator, doing to achieve that objective in his draft Programme for Government?

The First Minister: We must address structural weaknesses in our economy and become innovative and productive. Our focus will be on growing the private sector, including attracting high-value foreign direct investment, supporting indigenous enterprises and promoting growth in well-paid, high-skilled jobs that will be sustainable in the longer term. The draft Programme for Government aims to increase the skills of our workforce, reduce economic inactivity and enable our companies to become more innovative and invest more in research and development.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his answers on this important issue, but I want to probe a little further. He has commented at length on the private sector, but I would like to draw attention to the public sector and our Civil Service. Is he aware of the current state of progress on e-Government? What plans are there to implement modern electronic methods of customer service by our Departments? I realise that this is a complicated question, but will OFMFDM make an early statement on the matter?

The First Minister: The Member admits that it is a complicated business. It must be discussed carefully and thoroughly by the Executive and debated by the Assembly. We will take any opportunity that arises to announce progress, but we must make progress before issuing statements. There is no use in making covering statements. Let us get to the heart of the matter.

Mr Hamilton: Will the First Minister tell the House which key industries are being targeted by the Executive in order to attract new investment to Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: Being greedy, we are targeting all of them. Many parts of our economy need help, and as I have said elsewhere, we must lift our economy from dependence on so many low-paid jobs and strengthen its infrastructure.

It is not a job that is done in a day. I might say that Rome was not built in a day, although that is a bad analogy in this affair.

Public Appointments

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that all public appointments should be based on the principle of merit. (AQO 1258/08)

The First Minister: Ministerial appointments to public bodies are, where appropriate, made in accordance with the code of practice published by the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments. The code of practice sets out appointment procedures, which are founded on the principles of selection based on merit, independent scrutiny in the selection process, equality of opportunity and a process that is open and transparent. The code of practice also requires Departments to comply with their statutory duty under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 when making ministerial appointments to public bodies.

Mr Burns: Can the First Minister assure the House that that will be the case in respect of the appointment of the Victims Commissioner? Will the Minister give an update on the appointment process?

The First Minister: On 8 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I announced our intention to extend the appointments process for the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. That process is almost complete, and we hope to announce the appointment before the end of the year.

Mr Lunn: If the First Minister accepts the principle of merit as pre-eminent in public appointments, does his Office's insistence in reopening the process of appointing a Victim's Commissioner not constitute political interference, given that the persons who made the shortlist under the previous selection process were all deemed — in his own words — to be:

“appointable and of high calibre and commitment”?

The First Minister: My office is dedicated to the defence of victims, and we believe that, having seen a change in the political background of our country, the people who would not have put forward their names under the last regime of direct rule, will do so now, and they have done so. Everyone should co-operate with that fact, and everyone is entitled to put his or her name forward. I believe in merit, and I regret that the beginning of the process did not stick to merit. If it had stuck to merit, the facts that have been given by an honourable Member today for investigation would not be before the House.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The First Minister has answered part of my question; nevertheless, I shall ask

it. Will he explain how appointments are made to the central appointments unit in OFMDFM, how many officials are involved in the unit, how they are recruited, to whom they are answerable, what audits have been carried out on their performance in the past five years, and whether those audits are made public?

The First Minister: I will be happy to write to the honourable Member and give him all the facts that he wants. We have nothing to hide. In fact, I have not yet met some of the officials that I am supposed to be dealing with. When there are over 500 of them, that cannot be done in a day.

2.45 pm

Trip to the USA

5. **Mr Easton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on its recent trip to the USA. (AQO 1173/08)

The First Minister: Last week, the deputy First Minister and I visited New York and Washington DC at the invitation of President Bush.

We met political and business leaders to promote the clear message that we had come to develop economic opportunities and to invite companies to invest in Northern Ireland and also to attend the investment conference here next year. The junior Minister Ian Paisley Jnr accompanied us throughout the programme, Minister Nigel Dodds joined us in New York, and Mr Danny Kennedy met up with us in Washington DC.

We attended over 20 meetings and met more than 150 chief executives from companies that are involved in the financial services, information technology and services sectors. The businesspeople confirmed their intention to visit us and were supportive of our new message that Northern Ireland is open for business and that Northern Ireland is good for business. Our mission generated substantial publicity in the targeted business media.

New York's business community invited the deputy First Minister and me to open day trading at NASDAQ. CNN, Bloomberg Television and Fox News broadcast live television coverage of the event to many millions of viewers, and our message that Northern Ireland is open for business and is good for business was seen across the world. That event was also displayed on a seven-storey-high screen that overlooks Times Square in New York. The two people who appeared on the screen may not have enhanced the message, but the proof of the propaganda was there for all to see.

We met the editorial boards of 'The Wall Street Journal' and 'The Washington Post', who questioned us at great length on our business proposition and on why US companies should consider working with us. We

were able to convince those hard-nosed business journalists that Northern Ireland offers a viable product.

We were fortunate to meet New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who is an extremely busy man and a successful businessperson in his own right. He accepted our invitation to lead a business delegation to Northern Ireland next year to build on our economic relationship with the United States. We also met the Secretary of Commerce, who committed his Department to supporting the conference next May.

Several private meetings were held with senior business leaders who are interested in visiting Northern Ireland to investigate business opportunities. My colleagues and I invited them to contact us any time if there is anything that we can do to assist them to locate here.

The political attention that we received in Washington DC was unprecedented. Over 20 Members of Congress broke off from an important debate to meet us. They congratulated the Assembly on its work and pledged their support for strengthening the links between the Assembly and Congress. Indeed, the Speaker of the House of Representatives left the Chair to spend some time with us.

Senator Kennedy hosted a briefing with eight Senators, with whom we had an open discussion on future work priorities. The Senators asked how they could be of use to the Executive, and we discussed several economic issues and funding opportunities. Everyone in the Chamber is aware of the pressures that politicians face during election campaigns, and we were delighted when Senator Clinton took time out from her campaign to meet us — usually people go to see her, but she came to see us. The Senator was delighted with the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland and said that, if she becomes President, the door of the White House will always be open to us.

Senator Chris Dodd broke off from his election campaign to meet us and offer his support. We were delighted to receive an invitation to meet the President, and we were so engaged in those discussions that the meeting lasted for over an hour, even though it was due to last for only 12 minutes. We asked the President to consider sending senior representatives of his Administration to the conference, and he agreed to use his personal influence to encourage companies to come to see us.

The political access that we had throughout the visit was a surprise to many. Even Senator Kennedy said that he was amazed at our level of access and at the people whom we met. That is a solid demonstration of the interest from the United States, and we must build on that for the good of our people. Many business people and politicians who spoke to us about our investment message said that we were now speaking

the language that they wanted to hear. We have made many new friends and potential business partners, and we look forward to their visiting us and investing in us.

I thank all my Assembly colleagues who accompanied us and who helped to make the visit so successful. I include the deputy First Minister in that remark, as he would wish to be associated with it.

A man came up to speak to me at a conference and told me that he was my third cousin, so we traced back our history. Then, I was told afterwards — I wish that I had known at the time — that he had just sold his business for over £700 million.

Mr Burns: He was definitely a relation. *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: I would not say that, but I hope that he will do what he promised, which is to help us to get businesses to invest in Northern Ireland. That man will be attending the conference.

Mr Easton: I thank the First Minister for his detailed reply. Does he feel confident that Northern Ireland will benefit from this trip? Can I suggest that North Down might be a good location for a golf course?

The First Minister: I hope that a certain billionaire will also think along those lines, and will come to help us.

There were a number of purposes to our visit: first, to raise the general awareness of Northern Ireland as a business investment location among the wider US business population — we think that we moved forward on that difficult proposition; secondly, to open the doors to specific business boardrooms to gain access to the key decision-makers and to present tailored propositions; thirdly, to talk to individual business leaders and invite them to come to the investment conference; and, finally, to provide ministerial support and endorsement to businesses that are in discussions with Invest NI.

A number of firms are in negotiations with Invest NI, and we have assured them of the Executive's support in coming to Northern Ireland. We hope to continue our contact with the chief executives of those companies and to support Invest Northern Ireland in securing that investment over the coming years.

Mr Kennedy: I congratulate the First Minister and thank him for his detailed reply. I, too, commend the important economic initiative that took place last week in the United States of America. I express my personal thanks to the First Minister, his deputy, and their ministerial colleagues for the consideration that was shown to me during the Washington leg of that visit.

How does the First Minister see external relationships being developed by the Executive, the Assembly and the Committees?

The First Minister: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee that, from time to time, looks at and investigates what we are doing. I am glad that he was able to

join us and that he saw the benefits that we can reap from what we have sown in the harvest that will come.

Of the many propositions that were discussed, one of the most interesting was the revival of the Scotch-Irish lobby in America. Even those on the other side said that we should help to develop that lobby. It will be most helpful when both parts of Ireland have people in the United States working together for their benefit. Therefore, I would like to see the Scotch-Irish lobby being developed.

When speaking at meetings, I had to keep reminding those present to remember the Scotch-Irish. One man told me that he was Scotch-Irish but that he had not known some of what we had said about the Presidents that the Scotch-Irish have sent to the White House. I replied that I had not said whether those Presidents had been good, bad or indifferent. Although we met politicians, we kept out of the political arena — just as we would not want people interfering in our land, they did not want us to interfere in theirs, particularly during an election campaign. We kept clear of that, but we did meet representatives from all sections of the community, and we found universal interest and hope that Ulster would come through and that we would succeed in our aims.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the First Minister for the detailed report that he gave in the short time available to him. Was the plight of the undocumented Irish in America raised with President Bush? If so, was there a satisfactory response?

The First Minister: Yes; that matter was raised with the Senators who came to see us. There was a discussion on the issue, and our views were strongly expressed.

Constitutional Issues

6. **Mr Burnside** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what discussions it has had on constitutional issues with the First Minister of Scotland. (AQO 1157/08)

The First Minister: The Member will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I met the First Minister of Scotland earlier this year. At that meeting, we acknowledged our shared culture, history and interests, and discussed greater co-operation between our two Administrations for mutual benefit.

By “constitutional issues”, I assume that the Member means the position of Scotland and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. Such issues were not discussed. The Union is secure. The First Minister of Scotland has well-known views on the future constitutional position of his country. However, that is for him — and his party — to take forward with the people of Scotland, and has no bearing on the future government of our country.

3.00 pm

Mr Burnside: Will the First Minister withdraw his support for the Scottish First Minister’s statement that he wished in the future that The Queen should become queen of Scotland? That could only take place after the ending of the 1707 Act of Union. Will he disassociate himself from those remarks and give a commitment that the only queen that we will have in the future in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will hold a unitary crown — one crown, and one queen for the whole of the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: Please be brief, First Minister.

The First Minister: The Queen is the queen of Scotland, and I would like her always to be the queen of Scotland. However, Scotland has a right to decide for itself, and whatever it decides is not our business. Everybody knows that I believe in the Union and stand for the Union; a union of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, that does not prevent me from speaking to the First Minister of Scotland. The First Minister of Scotland is a member of the Privy Council, and I advise the honourable Member to read the oath of the Privy Council and then decide a person’s loyalty.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Procurement of Local Produce

1. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what progress is being made in securing a strategy of procurement of local produce by other Departments. (AQO 1216/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Strict restraints on public procurement are set out in EU legislation. Nevertheless, I believe that the North produces a wholesome quality product that more than meets the public procurement criteria. Our challenge is to ensure that the agrifood industry is in a strong position to tender for contracts and that contracts are accessible for small and medium-sized businesses to deliver.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education are key players in the procurement of food contracts, and that is why I met recently with Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey to discuss the possibilities for increasing public-sector procurement for local food. My officials are working with the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and Central Services Agency (CSA) to assist in the development of a range of guidance to support and encourage the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in competition for Government business. They are also

looking at how to integrate sustainable development considerations into public-sector contracts.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. What action is her Department taking to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises can engage in public procurement contracts? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: Departmental staff are continuing to provide technical support and advice to individual farmers, processors, producer groups or co-operatives — large and small — to help them engage in public-sector contracts. I have also approved a new processing and marketing scheme under the 2007-2013 rural development programme, which will provide assistance to improve competitiveness of the agrifood sector and enable it to compete for such contracts.

Staff from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at the Loughrey campus have supported CPD by providing advice on the specifications for public food contracts. In addition, they have had an input to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's initiative that aims to improve the nutritional quality of food in hospitals. CAFRE also provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors to develop technical and business management skills. College staff can assist with product specification, product development and the adoption of new technology. In addition, the college benchmarking programmes can be used to monitor and identify opportunities for improved efficiency and competitiveness in production systems.

My Department is also contributing to the success of the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFAEL) project that aims to encourage local authentic food producers to develop new markets. The aim of the initiative is to promote the use of local food as a firm foundation for public health and ensuring that local food has been brought to the attention of consumers.

Dr W McCrea: On 22 October, I wrote to the Minister — in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development — asking about her Department and other Executive Departments taking the lead in the promotion and purchasing of Northern Ireland-sourced products.

As yet, the Committee has not received any response. Will the Minister indicate whether she will formally respond to my Committee, or is it now a matter of policy that it will not be consulted? Is this strategy the only ministerial response to the dire findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force, or is the Minister insisting that diversification is the only salvation for the farming industry?

Ms Gildernew: On the first point, I have signed that letter of response, and the Committee should receive it today or tomorrow.

Secondly, the strategy is not a response to the Red Meat Industry Task Force, but represents one of the points in the UFU's (Ulster Farmers' Union) five-point plan, which it put to all the parties before the last Assembly election.

My departmental officials are working very closely with the Central Procurement Directorate, which has a key role to play. To date, we have developed guidance to support and encourage integration of sustainable-development considerations into public-sector contracts. That work is not being done solely in response to the Red Meat Industry Task Force, but in response to several issues.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister assure the House that all meat, fish and vegetables that are served in canteens in Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) premises are procured locally?

Ms Gildernew: The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for managing the Civil Service contract-catering arrangements. There are three DARD catering contracts that incorporate the Government's aims and objectives for sustainability in farming and food sectors, and they are contributing to a better environment and to healthy and prosperous communities.

Where appropriate, or possible, the contractors should use products that are environmentally friendly and that have been recycled or organically produced. There is also a stipulation that the use of local produce should be considered, where possible, and the Department wants to see that enhanced. The answer to your question is yes.

Decommissioning Package: Prawn-Boat Sector

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what money is available to deliver a phased decommissioning package for the prawn-boat sector. (AQO 1210/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have no plans to introduce a decommissioning package for the prawn fleet. The rationale for such schemes is to combat overfishing, and achieve a better balance between fishing effort and available fishing opportunities.

Irish Sea prawns are being fished sustainably and, just last year, the European Commission raised the total allowable catch for nephrops by 17%, based on the scientific evidence gathered by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. There is, therefore, no reason to

introduce decommissioning for the prawn fleet, and the Commission has proposed that the same total allowable catch be set for 2008.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What financial help might be available from the European Fisheries Fund? Will the Minister visit the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society in Toomebridge, and perhaps encourage the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to do the same? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: The European Fisheries Fund (EFF) will make £12.76 million available for the local fishing industry, and that will help us to achieve the overall aim of a strong fishing industry that supports local communities in the long term.

The EFF can also be used for processing in aquaculture, and I hope that we will work with Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) on some inland fisheries. I will certainly be pleased to accept an invitation from the Lough Neagh co-op.

We are required to match the money that is available from the EU with national funding, and there are a number of activities that can be supported under EFF, including marketing, vessel modernisation, etc. The focus will be on providing a sustainable future for the fishing industry through innovation and technology, and that will be achieved in a number of ways, including new investment, and wider use of the latest technologies, alongside improvements in the supply chain and environmental awareness. Some of that new funding will be used to help tackle social exclusion and promote prosperity in areas that are traditionally dependent on the fishing industry, when support cannot be provided in any other way.

My Department is currently working on a draft operational programme that will guide the implementation of the EFF. That will be subject to a 12-week public consultation beginning in February 2008.

Mr Shannon: I know that the Minister is aware of the dire problems facing the prawn-boat sector of the fishing industry due to red-diesel fuel costs and that fishermen are working for 78p an hour as a result. Will she confirm what money is available through any grant or otherwise to ensure that assistance is given to enable our fishing fleet to remain?

Ms Gildernew: I have received several questions for written answer and other correspondence on the matter of high input costs in the fishing sector. I am aware that the sector is facing difficulty because of the lower price for prawns and increasing fuel bills. Under current arrangements, fishermen enjoy derogation from the EU to use rebated red diesel in their boats. Beyond that, it is not possible to offer any further direct fuel subsidy to fishing vessels. The European Commission confirmed last year that member-state subsidy of the cost

of fuel constituted uprating aid and would, therefore, be incompatible with EU law.

It is also likely that fuel costs will continue to rise. That has been the trend over the past few years. The fishing industry must devise how to adapt to the longer-term economic situation and the most preferable means of dealing with rising fuel prices by becoming more fuel efficient.

The new EFF will provide opportunities for the fishing industry to become energy efficient through measures such as grant aid for the purchase of more fuel-efficient engines. Other fuel-saving measures might include the use of biofuels in fishing vessels, gear technology that reduces fuel consumption, the audit of vessels to identify where fuel can be saved and vessel engineering solutions that reduce fuel consumption. The Department will look at how it can tackle the problem. I am aware of the hardship that high fuel costs are causing fishermen at the moment.

Mr McCallister: I thank Mr McElduff for raising the issue. I am sure that he will be disappointed, given the impact that prawn-boat fishing has on his West Tyrone constituency.

Has the Minister held any discussions with her fellow Ministers from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and with the European Commission about getting support for the fishing industry in Northern Ireland with respect to the forthcoming European decisions on fishing quotas and days at sea?

Ms Gildernew: I want to be a strong voice for the fishing industry here, and I have been working closely with ministerial colleagues Richard Lochhead MSP, Elin Jones AM and Jonathan Shaw in Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to ensure that Irish Sea issues are given due importance in the forthcoming December Fisheries Council from a negotiating position. I visited the three ports last week to hear the views of local fishermen. Last Friday I met with Mary Coughlan to discuss how we could work together on issues of common interest at the forthcoming EU Council. I also had a video conference this morning with Jonathan Shaw and Richard Lochhead in advance of our meeting with Joe Borg on Thursday. The fishing issue is taking up a lot of time in the run-up to the Fisheries Council. I am pleased to say that we have had a very good level of engagement with all Ministers involved.

Crossnacreevy

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the business case for the proposed sale of Crossnacreevy. (AQO 1185/08)

Ms Gildernew: I announced to the Assembly Committee on 12 June that I was seeking the strategic disposal of land at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) site at Crossnacreevy. That followed a review of AFBI's needs and utilisation of the estate, the conclusion of which opened up the possibility that the current site could be disposed off without any adverse impact on AFBI's activities. The Department has moved to the next phase of the study, which includes the preparation of the business case and relocation plan. At this stage, the business case has not yet been fully developed, but when completed it will be made available at an appropriate date.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for writing to me recently in English only, as I requested. It was deeply appreciated.

Crossnacreevy is in my glorious constituency of Strangford, and I find the Minister's reply somewhat disturbing. I wonder about her interpretation of "strategic", and I am sorry that she has not, as yet, reached the ability to have a business case put together. I hope that she will come back to me on that.

Has the Minister considered any alternatives to the sale of the entire Crossnacreevy site — such as selling only a portion of the site? In addition, beyond what is required for the farm-nutrient management scheme, can DARD — as I would wish — retain any excess money from the Crossnacreevy sale?

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: When considering solutions to the problems with the farm-nutrient management scheme, we obviously considered not only the Crossnacreevy land but the entire DARD estate. As the Member knows, I negotiated with the Department of Finance and Personnel and got its agreement to my continuing to approve applications and give commitments to farmers for grant aid for the farm-nutrient management scheme. Obviously, any money left over from the sale of the AFBI site — and, at this stage, I do not know how much that is likely to be — will go back to the central pot, and I, along with other Ministers, will be able to bid for part of it. I am content with the fact that Government Departments must be as pragmatic and sensible as possible when dealing with such problems —

Mr McNarry: Why sell more than you need?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Gildernew: The discussions with DFP concerned the site itself. I am satisfied that we have solved the problems with the farm-nutrient management scheme and that we have given commitments to find an alternative site for the valuable work of the AFBI staff at Crossnacreevy, which we wish to continue.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I share Mr McNarry's bafflement. Although

it has been selected as the ideal site to sell, is the Minister telling Members that, as yet, there is no firm business case for the sale of Crossnacreevy? Furthermore, is the Minister suggesting that more money than that required by the farm-nutrient management scheme will be received from the sale of Crossnacreevy, and that that money will be returned to DFP and not retained for urgent requirements within DARD? If those are the facts, how does the Minister expect Members to believe that the issue has been seriously considered?

Ms Gildernew: None of that should be new to the Members; I am sure that they were present when I previously answered questions on the subject.

In advance of the 12 June announcement, DARD and ABFI jointly committed to a review of ABFI's needs and the utilisation of the estate that it occupies. As part of the initial scoping study of that review, the usage of land and buildings at Crossnacreevy were examined. That scoping study concluded that the relocation of the activities and facilities at Crossnacreevy was feasible, which opened up the possibility that the current site could be disposed of without an adverse impact on ABFI's activities.

Members must also recognise that the Executive are working on behalf of all of our people. Although I would have loved to have been able to retain the additional money, we do not know how much money there will be, how the land will be valued, and what planning issues might arise. We hear from all the parties about the other financial pressures around the Executive table, and, therefore, we must be wise about how Government money is spent for the betterment of all people. A joined-up approach from the Executive will be of real benefit to the people of this place.

Mrs I Robinson: What benefit does the Minister envisage for the people of Crossnacreevy in particular, and Strangford in general, from the sale of this land?

Ms Gildernew: As the Member knows, the land is currently agricultural land. There are several potential benefits. Having land available for further economic development can bring benefits to the people of both Crossnacreevy and the wider Strangford constituency. I hope that whoever buys the land will consider the needs of, and how they might interact with, the community. Therefore, there will certainly be benefits.

We are looking carefully at how staff are affected by the sale as well as the people who live in the cottages at Crossnacreevy. I am taking all that into consideration and keeping a close eye on how the situation develops.

Pig Meat Sector

4. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance is being given by her Department to the pig meat sector. (AQO 1223/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. My Department continues to support the pig sector in every way in which it can. The Department's pig technologists are dealing with individual farmers to assess areas of potential improvement in production efficiency on farms. The pig grading information system (PiGIS), which I launched in June 2007, was developed jointly by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. PiGIS has been widely used by producers to assess carcass specifications. Already there is evidence that, through the use of various measures, significant savings can be made on farms.

CAFRE provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes that develop technical and business-management skills for producers and processors. It provides benchmarking support and delivers the pig challenge to address inefficiencies and maximise competitiveness at farm level. College staff also assist with product specification, product development and the adoption of new technology. Furthermore, over the past four years, the Department's supply-chain awareness programme has seen the involvement of farmers and others in investigating supply-chain issues and marketing models in Ireland, Britain and Germany.

The Department has agreed with the industry to co-fund a review of key issues that impact on the pig sector, and that review will be undertaken by the Ulster Pork and Bacon Forum.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat. To what extent will the introduction of export refunds help to stabilise pig prices?

Ms Gildernew: I met with industry representatives recently, after which I was left in no doubt about the pig sector's extreme financial situation, which has largely been caused by the increased production costs as a result of high cereal prices. The private storage aid scheme that the EU Commission introduced at the end of October failed to bring about stability. I am delighted that the EU management committee for pigmeat has agreed to reintroduce export refunds for pig meat. That illustrates that the major difficulties facing pig producers across the EU have been recognised. The commencement of that subsidy is an essential first step in trying to restore some balance and stability to the sector. It will increase the amount of pig meat that is exported from the EU and, hence, increase market prices. I hope that that marks a turning point for the sector, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely over the coming weeks and months.

Mr Irwin: Has the Minister discussed with the Ulster Farmers' Union possible ways in which to help pig farmers who are suffering unsustainable losses? Will she assure the House that she will leave no stone

turned when examining ways in which to help the pig sector at this time?

Ms Gildernew: Absolutely. EU funding and support will be available for the industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets and to encourage better co-operation and communications among all sectors of the food industry. That support will be delivered under axis 1 of our rural development programme through the agricultural marketing development grant scheme and the supply-chain development programme.

The industry has also undertaken activities to help itself. Food Promotion Northern Ireland is a group that has been formed from a range of sectors, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Livestock and Meat Commission, to take forward jointly and fund a domestic marketing campaign. One of its objectives is to develop and deliver a domestic promotion and marketing campaign that is aimed at delivering sustained growth, increased market share and maximisation of profitability for businesses here. It complements the regional food programme, which aims to promote quality regional food by assisting the industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets, and by encouraging better co-operation and communication among all sectors of the food industry.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the crisis in the pig-meat industry requires a great deal more than a nod or a grunt. Will she explain why the gap between the farmgate price and the price that the consumer pays is widening? Does she have a solution, and will she support an inquiry into the cause of that disgraceful state of affairs?

Ms Gildernew: First, as the Member knows, I do not control prices. However, I have been working hard with all levels of the supply chain in order to get the best deal for producers. I wrote to all the supermarkets to express my concerns about returns at producer level, given the rising cost of feed. I am aware that there has been a subsequent rise, albeit a small one, in some retail prices.

That is a welcome trend, as it provides an opportunity for increased returns to work their way back through the supply line to the farm-gate price.

Additionally, I met the senior management team of a leading pork processor to learn at first hand of the difficulties in that sector. I have also been working with the UFU and the industries to ascertain how to narrow the gap to which the Member has referred.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the business case for the continued processing and financing of the farm nutrient management scheme. (AQO 1186/08)

Ms Gildernew: The business case for the continued processing and financing of the farm nutrient management scheme (FNMS) provides economic justification for funding all FNMS applicants and quantifies the additional funding that is required for the scheme. The economic analysis demonstrated the value for money that can be achieved by enabling the agriculture industry to invest in slurry storage facilities in order to comply with the EU nitrates directive while maintaining livestock numbers and viability.

The funding gap was estimated to be £89 million above the existing scheme's budget, and a bid for that amount has been submitted through the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. The additional funding will prevent a reduction in livestock numbers to comply with the EU nitrates directive and the consequent loss of the value added to the economy from those livestock. Unsatisfactory implementation of the nitrates directive could result in European Commission infraction proceedings against the North, with a possibility of daily fines.

DFP approved the business case in June 2007. Since then, I have allocated additional staff resources to the scheme, and I am happy to say that good progress has been made. To date, some 3,200 pre-approval inspections have been completed, and over 2,400 FNMS applicants have been issued with approvals and offers of grant aid.

All eligible applicants should have received an initial visit from an inspector or DARD adviser before Christmas. All approvals should be issued by the end of March 2008, provided that farmers supply any new information that is needed following a pre-approval inspection. More than 1,000 claims for completed tanks have been submitted so far. Therefore, a significant increase in the construction rate is necessary. The Department's target of issuing all approvals by March 2008 gives a clear indication to the construction industry of the urgency in getting the works completed by 31 December 2008. It is vital that that deadline is observed, as there is no prospect of allowing the 60% grant to be extended beyond that date.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her long-winded answer. Given the importance of the farm nutrient management scheme, has the Minister considered what options are available for financing the scheme, especially given the problem of the sale of the Crossnacreevy site? Furthermore, is the Minister of a mind to extend the scheme beyond 2008, bearing in mind the environmental impact that would result if there were not enough tanks for farmers to store their farm nutrients in?

Mr S Wilson: That was a long-winded question.

Ms Gildernew: Yes, that was a long-winded supplementary question, and I thank the Member for it. I think the Member was asking whether further money

will be made available. That cannot happen; the Department can give only the 60% grant. To do otherwise would be extremely unfair to the people who received a 60% grant one year ago and built a tank.

There will be problems with building all the tanks for which we will be giving approval. I accept that finding the 40% to go along with the 60% that the Department is making available will be a financial consideration for some. However, it is important that farmers build those tanks as quickly as possible if they are going to avail themselves of that 60% grant aid.

Mr P J Bradley: With strong winds blowing here and from the other side of the Chamber, I am in the eye of the storm.

Will the Minister tell the House whether she has been in touch with her ministerial colleague in the Department of the Environment regarding planning applications for storage tanks? It is important that approvals are granted in time to allow the work to be completed before the December 2008 deadline.

Ms Gildernew: My Department has had discussions with the Department of the Environment. Planning permission is no longer necessary for the majority of tanks. Therefore, that should not be a consideration in holding up the work. Other factors are holding up the work, including getting contractors out and making slots available in order that it can be completed. That means that finishing the work is becoming problematic.

In answer to the previous supplementary question, which I did not catch in full, from January 2008, we will be in the period of extension. The original deadline for the work to be completed was December 2007. One year's extension has been granted. I have made enquiries, both in Europe and among my ministerial colleagues, and I have been told that the extension is to December 2008 only, and that we will not be able to go beyond that. I am trying to get that point across to farmers, some of whom still feel that there might be two or three months' grace. There will not be.

3.30 pm

Mr McCartney: The Minister has already answered my supplementary question.

Mr Speaker: The Member whose name is next on the list of those to ask questions is not in his place.

Energy Crops

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to encourage the growing of energy crops.
(AQO 1202/08)

Ms Gildernew: My Department has assessed the potential for energy production from crops in its

renewable energy action plan. In 2004, Forest Service established a three-year challenge fund to encourage landowners to establish willow coppice for an energy end-use. Under that scheme, 950 hectares of willow coppice were established, or approved for establishment, by 45 rural businesses. A short-rotation coppice scheme, as outlined in the rural development programme, will replace the challenge fund.

The Department supports the growth of crops for energy under the EU aid for energy crops scheme. Uptake for that scheme has been limited. At present, the arable sector can secure a better return from growing cereals than energy crops. Work is currently under way to establish a renewables centre of excellence at the AFBI site in Hillsborough. That demonstration and research facility will further identify the potential for energy production from crops.

Mr McCarthy: What encouragement is given to farmers to co-operate in the growing and marketing of energy crops? Will the Minister take account of what is happening in the South of Ireland to see how co-operation in this sphere can be encouraged and expanded?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to keep her response brief. Time is almost up.

Ms Gildernew: I will.

My Department, AFBI and Teagasc have worked together closely on how to develop markets. We will also have to work on the taxation of biofuels to ensure that the scheme is cheap enough for farmers to take up. We are working very closely across the island on this issue.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sports Strategy

1. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to comment on whether the sports strategy can be implemented, in the context of the funding allocations in the draft Budget. (AQO 1231/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Sport Northern Ireland will have an important role in the delivery of the sports strategy for Northern Ireland. The funding allocation to sport in the draft Budget will help to ensure that a start can be made on implementing the 10-year sports strategy. Under the draft Budget, it is proposed that core funding, including capital, for sport should rise by £23 million in 2008-09, over £29 million in 2009-10, and £42 million in 2010-11.

However, full implementation of the strategy also depends on the willingness and ability of all stakeholders to contribute to its delivery. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Sport Northern Ireland, therefore,

seek commitment from the stakeholders to implement the sports strategy as part of the current consultation exercise on the draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17.

Mrs Hanna: We are all particularly concerned about the loss of local sports and aware of the importance of sport in participation and promotion of better health. Does the Minister anticipate the closure of any local facilities? That would reduce capacity and the potential for financial remuneration for local clubs and sporting facilities.

Mr Poots: One can never rule out the closure of facilities. I am confident, however, that over the period of the strategy, new facilities will be opened and others will be enhanced. Within the budget that has been allocated, we can have an improvement in the sporting infrastructure.

Mr McNarry: The Minister's responses so far have been interesting. He has said that we need to raise the current level of sports funding by £206 million to realise the 10-year sports strategy. Has he developed strategies to acquire that very substantial funding? What performance targets will be built into the strategy to measure whether we have realised the 24 priorities that he seeks to establish and which I support?

Mr Poots: The first building block of the required additional funding comes from the central block Budget. Over three years, and in year 3 in particular, we will see a significant uplift in that central Budget. I will continue to make the case, and put the argument, that sport and physical recreation can contribute to significant savings, in particular in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. My Department will take that matter into consideration regarding funding; we will also consider the private sector and the delivery of sport and physical recreation by local government. I hope that we can get a combination that will produce the required figures to develop and deliver sport as identified in the draft sports strategy.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that, last year, there was a huge underspend in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget. Will the Minister assure the House that that money will be used for other capital schemes in sports and the arts, including the sports strategy, and will not be snatched away by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or the Treasury across the water?

Mr Poots: Were the Member aware of his facts before he put his question, he would have realised that a significant element of that money related to the Ulster Museum. The development of the Ulster Museum would have started sooner had it received earlier planning permission, but there were objections to the planning permission. The objections concerned the removal of a shuttered wall, a structure that is like a

silo wall. Ultimately, that was a key reason that that funding did not go ahead.

Another reason for some capital funding not going ahead is that the Department is waiting for the Lyric Theatre and the Old Museum Arts Centre — which have been allocated funding — to come up with other funding. The Department is using public, central Budget money to leverage other funding that should come from the private sector and from Belfast City Council, which will make a decision soon. Dr Martin Naughton has donated £1 million to the Lyric Theatre, which is very welcome, and other private donations have been received.

Let us use our money wisely and bring as much as possible into the central pot to redistribute throughout the fields of arts and sports. I would rather spend money wisely than spend it quickly.

Mr McCarthy: Will that money be handed back to the Treasury?

Mr Poots: No, it will not.

Lottery Funding: Grant Aid

2. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether sports clubs in Northern Ireland, whose parent bodies are not associated with the Olympic Games, will receive grant aid for their development programmes, due to lottery funding's being redirected to the 2012 Games.

(AQO 1149/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the distribution of grant aid to sport in Northern Ireland. It will be able to continue to invest in development programmes for non-Olympic sports clubs through a combination of lottery and Exchequer funding.

Mr P J Bradley: A range of groups in my constituency has raised a number of concerns about the redirection of funds. It is easy to understand their frustration, because they were told that their development plans had been accepted and that their applications for funding had been successful, only to learn that the funding identified for their projects is London-bound. What are the Minister's financial proposals to allow those clubs to pursue their five- and 10-year development plans?

Mr Poots: I share the disappointment of a number of clubs that money is being diverted to the Olympics. That decision was taken in London — not by me. Nonetheless, we are left with the aftermath: a number of clubs would not have been eligible in any case, but some clubs were eligible and should have received funding, but they did not.

We are looking to the capital realisation task force to see what Government capital assets may be realised over the next few years. Should we be successful in

that realisation, for which clear targets have been set, the money may be used to reinvest in sport, which is something that we wish to pursue.

Mr K Robinson: To what extent does the Minister feel that the diversion of lottery funding to the 2012 Olympics will derail or delay his sports strategy for 2007-17 and will weaken participation rates at club and local level in all sports?

Mr Poots: The diversion of lottery funding to the Olympics will certainly neither derail nor delay the strategy. The sports strategy is still a draft document, which does not have the Assembly's final approval. That has yet to be achieved.

On the basis that the Assembly approves the strategy, significant funding is available in the early years to assist the Department in its delivery. The required rises in spend must be incremental. The Department must continue to ensure that further funding and increases are achieved beyond 2011 in order to allow the sports strategy to be fully developed. The Department did not anticipate, for example, that there would be a £206 million spend over a 10-year period. It did not anticipate spending £20 million per annum during the first three years in any event: that will have to be built up. Ultimately, therefore, I do not envisage that the strategy will be either derailed or delayed.

Olympic Elite Participation Programme

3. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what progress has been made on the Olympic elite participation programme.

(AQO 1153/08)

Olympic Centres of Excellence

10. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the original amount of funding announced by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in relation to Olympic Centres of Excellence; and (ii) the amount of funding that is available under the draft Budget for these centres. (AQO 1244/08)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Mr Wilson's and Mr Burns's questions together. In March 2006, the then Sports Minister, David Hanson MP, announced that approximately £50 million had been provisionally allocated for high sports priority infrastructure projects. Since then, two separate competitions have been held, seeking expressions of interest from anyone who is interested in developing elite Olympic and Paralympic facilities in Northern Ireland.

As a result of the first competition, North Down Borough Council has been identified as the preferred developer for Northern Ireland's first 50m swimming

pool. As a result of the second competition, a further 15 projects have been identified as being suitable to proceed to the next stage of the competition. There will then be a further shortlisting exercise to determine the final list of approved projects.

The proposed Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure capital investment during the next three years under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2, which was published in November 2007, identifies £218 million of capital projects, of which £112 million relates to sports projects. I will consider priorities carefully during coming months and, in particular, any comments that are received during the current consultation. That consideration will include elite facilities.

Mr S Wilson: Some applicants who have got through the second round are concerned that, although the next step is to present their business case and assessments, submit their planning applications, etc., to the Department, they have been told not to do anything at present. Time is running out. Can the Minister tell the House when it is envisaged that the second-round applicants must have submitted all the necessary paperwork to the Department? What is the time limit before which allocated money must be spent? Is the Minister sure that, apart from large local authority projects, smaller clubs will have the time and the resources to be able to compete fairly in the second round of the competition?

Mr Poots: Deliverability by 2010 was one of the elite programme's key criteria. I understand the Member's concerns on that particular issue, especially where, in some instances, applicants could become engaged in protracted planning applications that could cause considerable delay. I speak, in particular, of some cases in which the Environment and Heritage Service is involved and in which pressing issues must be dealt with. The Assembly must be cognisant of that. I assure the Member that I will work closely with Sport NI and clubs that are making applications. I am happy to discuss the matter with him in due course to identify how progress can be made.

Mr Burns: Can the Minister confirm that it will still be possible to fund all the shortlisted projects if the draft Budget is approved? If not, what impact will that have on the draft Programme for Government's plans to host 10 international teams in Northern Ireland during their Olympic Games preparations?

3.45 pm

Mr Poots: We are arguing that capital-realisation funds should be directed towards elite facilities, in conjunction with the funding that has already been achieved. Therefore, I do not intend to opt for any diminution in the amount of funding for which we have applied. Although we do not have the full £53 million at present, I will continue to pursue that.

The significant factor in the proposals is that many of them can be delivered on time. That is somewhat different from many other capital projects that are being proposed. In future years, capital money that has not been spent must be returned to Westminster. Therefore, it is in our interests to take forward projects that can be turned around quickly, to use up capital that might otherwise be lost to Northern Ireland. I intend to use that argument as a means of leveraging further funding for that important project.

Mr Burnside: The Minister made a good point about the £53 million that was allocated for those elite facilities: if planning decisions were delayed and the right business-plan proposals did not win, we might not secure the amount of money that is available. Will he re-emphasise the point that those facilities are available and the finances are available to make a considerable contribution to the Olympic Games?

How does our funding allocation compare with that of Scotland and Wales?

Mr Poots: One of the most significant benefits of spending money from the Northern Ireland block Budget in the way that I have outlined is that that will actually lever further money from the clubs or the local authorities that are involved. Therefore, the return on the money that we invest is significant, and much greater than the original outlay. That is hugely beneficial for Northern Ireland.

Scotland is in a completely different situation because not only is it preparing for the Olympic Games in 2012, and how it can benefit from that through the development of its facilities — it has won the right to stage the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Therefore, Scotland will have a more significant financial outlay. I confirm that I am meeting my counterpart in Scotland later in December and that we will be discussing the Commonwealth Games and what opportunities they might present for Northern Ireland — whether in acclimatisation for competitors, or other elements of that event — considering that Belfast is the closest capital city to Glasgow. There should be significant opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Reception for David Healy

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he plans to host a reception for David Healy, following his record achievement of scoring the most goals in a European Championship qualifying campaign. (AQO 1190/08)

Mr Poots: I place on record my congratulations to David Healy on what is a magnificent achievement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: To become the highest goal scorer in the European Championship qualifying campaign is a

remarkable feat, by any standards. I have already written to David to offer my congratulations. I confirm that it is my intention to host a reception for David and his fellow team members as soon as that can be arranged. We are in discussions with the Irish Football Association (IFA) about the details of those arrangements.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. That is something that everyone has wanted to hear. Many believe that his reward should go even further, and that he should be awarded an MBE. I am one of a growing number of people who believes that. He has also received the BBC Northern Ireland Sports Personality of the Year award.

He comes from Killyleagh, which is part of the constituency of Strangford, which I have the pleasure and privilege of representing. Killyleagh is the only village in Northern Ireland that has ever produced three Northern Ireland international footballers who have played in matches against England: Hugh Davey, who played for Northern Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s, when they lost 2-1; Terry Cochrane, who played for Northern Ireland against England —

Mr Speaker: I detect that a question is coming.

Mr Shannon: A question is coming. Terry Cochrane played for Northern Ireland against England, in a match that ended in a 1-1 draw. Of course, David Healy scored that magnificent goal in Windsor Park, not so long ago, in that famous victory over the mighty English.

David Healy's success has been as a player in the Northern Ireland team — and this is the question, Mr Speaker, you will be glad to hear. Can the Minister comment on FIFA's eligibility proposal, which would dismantle the very process that enabled David Healy to excel? What steps is the Minister taking to address that issue?

Mr Poots: As the Member knows, FIFA's eligibility proposal will be debated in the House tomorrow. It is public knowledge that I have already written to FIFA, and I have offered my support to the IFA, and I will take its advice on this matter.

Over the years, and during the worst period of the Troubles, the Northern Ireland football team has been made up of people from both sections of the community. The Northern Ireland football team can look back on many great players from both sides of the community, including the likes of Pat Jennings, Martin O'Neill, Pat Rice and Sammy Nelson, and the more up-to-date players such as David Healy, Steve Davis and others. Football crosses the political and religious divides, and it is critical that that be noted. It would be hugely unfortunate if others interfered with a team that has been successful and that has brought our community together. It would be a sad day for the people of Northern Ireland if we went down the route proposed by FIFA,

which might, for example, result in Protestants or unionists playing for Northern Ireland, and Catholics or nationalists playing for the Republic of Ireland. That would be detrimental to all in our community.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, congratulate David Healy.

Is the Minister willing to contact his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about staging a joint event for the teams from the North and the South to wish them every success in the next World Cup campaign? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: I do not know how appropriate it would be to hold such an event, particularly given that the manager of the Republic of Ireland football team has just left because of the team's lack of success. I can hardly bring people together to celebrate success when the Irish Republic's football team is having one of the worst runs that it has ever had. In this instance, I will stick with the successful recipe — led, of course, by David Healy, popping in the goals.

Mr Kennedy: I warmly welcome the Minister's remarks on David Healy and on the wider issue.

Will the Minister consider establishing a new soccer hall of fame to honour Northern Ireland's international footballers, past and present, with a view to really celebrating Northern Ireland's rich contribution and heritage in soccer?

Mr Poots: That sounds like an excellent idea, and if we had a modern, up-to-date stadium we might be able to incorporate such a hall of fame.

Arts Council: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the ongoing programme of work and co-operation undertaken by the Arts Councils in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 1213/08)

Mr Poots: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council in the Republic of Ireland meet in plenary session once a year and operate a joint subcommittee to pursue matters of mutual interest, including co-operation on international arts promotion. The two councils currently fund 22 organisations or projects on a cross-border basis.

In addition, arrangements have been made for exhibitions in two partnership galleries: the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin and the Void in Londonderry. The first exhibition took place on 6 December. Other projects that are currently being piloted include an Turas, a scheme to promote traditional arts, and a scheme with the Verbal Arts Centre for literature tours

across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The two councils have also jointly commissioned a major research project on the living conditions of individual artists in Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply and for his co-operation. Will he give details of specific programmes and examples of best practice carried out by the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism in the South, and how he could use those to develop ideas in the North?

Mr Poots: I mentioned the two verbal arts programmes, An Turas. Twenty-two programmes were involved, and it would take too long to describe them in detail today. I will write to the Member about the projects that have been involved in the past year.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister ensure that such cross-border co-operation takes full account of our cultural diversity, including the Ulster-Scots and Orange cultural traditions? Will he also encourage the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to enhance its co-operation with the other arts councils in the United Kingdom, so that there is a similar level of co-operation between Northern Ireland and all the other parts of the British Isles?

Mr Poots: I am sure that my colleague will be able to talk to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland about cultural diversity and encourage it to promote the Ulster-Scots tradition, in which he has a particular interest. I will speak to the Arts Council about its links to similar bodies in the United Kingdom, and what is happening in the nation as a whole.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's reply, because it gave a good flavour of what is being done jointly by both arts councils, North and South. It was useful to share that information with the Assembly and I welcome it. I have two questions. First, does he believe that we can learn lessons in the North about the living conditions of artists? The Government in the South gives various forms of assistance to artists to ensure that they stay in the country and make a contribution to the economy. Are there examples of improving living conditions for artists in the South that could be followed in the North?

Secondly, given the importance of developing the creative industries, will he comment on the fact that although the draft Programme for Government suggests that there should be a 15% increase in employment in the creative industries in the North, there is, as yet, no provision in the Minister's budget to enable funding for that increase to be achieved in the next three years?

Mr Poots: The responsibility for budgets for the creative industries is shared by my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Funding is available in the DETI budget for Northern Ireland Screen and for the Northern Ireland

music industry; so opportunities to promote jobs in the creative industries do exist.

Funding to create better conditions for artists has increased significantly in the Republic of Ireland in the past 10 years, but was made possible by economic growth. The Executive have made economic growth a priority. Ultimately, if we can deliver a stronger and more vibrant economy, we can put more money into the arts, sport and many other pursuits. Nevertheless, the arts have a significant contribution to make to the development of our economy, and I will continue to make that argument and identify those areas of the arts that can make that contribution. I trust that my good friend the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be able to assist me in achieving that objective, and that other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development (DSD) or the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), will not gobble up finances to the detriment of other valuable areas of Government.

Per Capita Arts Funding

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he had to reallocate resources towards bringing per capita arts funding into line with Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 1205/08)

Mr Poots: I have secured an indicative increase in arts and creativity revenue funding in the draft Budget totalling £6.75 million for the three years between 2008 and 2011. I have secured an additional £32.5 million for capital projects, which is a significant commitment for investment in the arts and cultural infrastructures.

4.00 pm

Although it has not been possible to bridge the gap with the rest of the UK and Ireland in per capita arts funding, the draft Budget allocations ensure that arts and creativity funding will at least keep pace with inflation in years 1 and 2. The significant increase in year 3 will enable the Department to make good progress in closing the per capita funding gap with the other UK regions and the Republic of Ireland. As well as the arts securing an uplift in Government funding, I am pursuing ways in which to lever in additional resources from the private sector and from philanthropic sources.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that the arts is a dynamic economic sector that drives economic growth, especially in our tourist industry, does the Minister think it logical to leave arts funding at a lower per capita level than that of our neighbours in Scotland and the Republic, whose arts funding levels match their successful tourist industries?

Mr Poots: I have been making the case for an uplift in arts funding. Ultimately, my Department aims to reach the same funding levels as our counterparts across the United Kingdom. The arts have a significant contribution to make to tourism and economic development — those points have been clearly made. If people visit Northern Ireland only to find that the arts infrastructure does not exist in our capital city of Belfast, that means that a gap in what can be offered to tourists exists where there should be none.

The arts also contribute to economic development. If we are to attract higher-value jobs, the people who will take up those jobs will expect a certain quality of life. In attempting to grow the economy, we are seeking such jobs for Northern Ireland. We must create the right quality of life if we are to create an economy that is based on higher-value jobs.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why his Department, in returning money to the Department of Finance and Personnel, has effectively surrendered £10 million in the past year, when our arts community is crying out for funding in order to survive?

Mr Poots: I thought that I had explained that, although I am not sure whether the Member was in the House when I responded to Mr McCarthy's question. Most of that money was for capital spending; it has been rolled over, and quite a lot of it is being spent on the Ulster Museum. The Department spent around 98% of its revenue budget, which is fairly close to 100%. Therefore, there was little revenue underspend, which is how it should be. There was some slippage in spending of the capital budget, but the Department is making up the ground.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007: Prayer of Annulment

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

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/442) be annulled. — *[Ms S Ramsey.]*

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): It is my task to respond to the proposal from the Committee for Employment and Learning. I am opposed to the motion, and I will explain my reasons for that.

I listened carefully to the debate, and a number of Members' contributions surprised me. Many of the facts out there must be misleading, because almost every Member who spoke said that his or her aim was to ensure that people from disadvantaged backgrounds could access higher education. Members said that reducing student fees would help those people to gain that access.

Alex Attwood questioned why the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in London introduced new measures in the autumn. He suggested that that indicated that student fees were not working. First, Northern Ireland has an excellent record in attracting people from less-favoured backgrounds to higher education. In our universities, 41% of our students come from that general background, compared with 29% in Great Britain. Therein lies the answer to Mr Attwood's question. The reason that new measures are being introduced in GB is that it is not delivering to the same extent as we are.

Through the CSR, I have also secured an additional £500 for the grant, which, in the United Kingdom, is unique to Northern Ireland. The Department works with the universities, and its access agreements with them mean that students have access to bursaries that have been set at £300. Indeed, those agreements include a legal liability on the universities to pay those £300 bursaries. I am happy to say that both universities currently pay bursaries of £1,000, which I strongly support — but for how much longer will they pay that amount? Members must be careful about what they agree to today.

If today's motion were agreed, £2.5 million would be taken out of the universities' pockets on top of, unfortunately, the £3 million that they will not receive next year as a result of the CSR. At this stage, it appears that in year 1 of the CSR, the funding for higher

education will decrease by 5·2% in real terms, which is a substantial reduction, although it will pick up in subsequent years.

Mr Attwood said that the Assembly wanted to send out a “strong, clear message”. By agreeing the motion, we would send out a signal that the Assembly will continue to take money from the universities, and, moreover, will increase the amount that it takes. If Members were in the shoes of those who run the universities and were looking forward to the next two or three years, they might assume that that amount of money would be taken from them in future years as well. Members must be extremely careful.

The second area in which the motion would create an anomaly relates to students from Northern Ireland who study in England and Wales. They pay more towards the upkeep and success of the universities there than they would if they studied here. How large a loan will those students get to pay for that? My information is that the value of those students’ loans will be based on levels that have been set in Northern Ireland and that they may face a shortfall as a result. That must be examined more closely. We are sending out the wrong signals.

Everyone, including me, wants people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education, not only because it is in the interests of the Northern Ireland economy, but for many other reasons, such as getting people out of poverty and ensuring that they are at no disadvantage. However, I fear that the motion is part of a haphazard approach that may pre-empt the review that I have already announced. We cannot send a message to the universities that we back them one minute yet take the money out of their pockets the next.

Mr Attwood expressed a fear that universities would increase their fees. A university becomes a member of the Russell Group by invitation rather than application. The Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 set out the level of tuition fees until 2010. Thereafter, as fees will be the Assembly’s responsibility, and the universities will not be able to set fees unilaterally, Mr Attwood’s fear is unfounded.

Mr Attwood: The facts confirm the Minister’s statement that people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the North have greater access to universities than their counterparts in England. However, the Minister must address the fact that, following the introduction of tuition fees in England, in November 2007 DIUS began to reshape radically how people gain access to university in Britain. It increased to £25,000 the family-earning limit under which students receive a full grant, and it has found it necessary to increase the upper limit from £35,000 to over £60,000.

I suggest that those figures reveal that in England, where those from disadvantaged backgrounds have problems accessing university, the Government have

had to perform radical corrective surgery. On the basis of the inadequate tuition-fee strategy in Britain, it is reasonable to conclude that similar surgery will be required in the North.

Sir Reg Empey: I normally listen to Mr Attwood’s speeches with great care, but perhaps his timing belt is not quite right, or his fan belt is not in the correct position today, because the opposite is actually the case. He may not have listened to my previous answer. We are succeeding in Northern Ireland, with 41% of our university students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. By comparison, that figure is only 29% in England. Therefore, we have a success story to tell.

My departmental officials and I are examining the announcement that was made by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. We are doing that in the context of the comprehensive spending review. I made some comprehensive spending review bids in that regard, but they were unsuccessful. The DIUS gave my Department one hour’s notice before it made its announcement, but the detail of what it will deliver is unclear. We should proceed in a logical manner through the review process, with a structure through which we can consider all the issues.

Paul Butler asked whether the review would be independent. An independent commission has been set up in England, responding to Parliament. We will examine that model to decide whether it will fit here. I want the review to be meaningful, and not merely a play-acting exercise. I have made that commitment to the Assembly and to the Committee on several occasions. We are creating anomalies by putting our students who study at universities in England and Wales at a disadvantage in the short term, against students who study here. Some £2·5 million has been taken from universities; therefore, they are no longer able to attract the highest-quality researchers.

Members said that that money should be taken from reserves, and that is fine if reserves exist. Our universities have no reserves to meet revenue deficits. Members must pay attention to the fact that universities are giving £1,000 bursaries to every student from a disadvantaged background. However, under the access agreements, they are only required to pay £300. We cannot force them to pay £1,000 — they are doing that voluntarily. It would be outrageous and a great shame — and it would have the opposite effect of what Members want — if they were to reduce that bursary to make up the losses that they would suffer from paying the fees. I am sure that is not what they intended. I do not believe that they intended to create the anomalies that will exist whereby students from Northern Ireland who study in England and Wales may face a shortfall in the loans that they will be able to acquire to pay their fees in England.

The current situation is a product of measures that have not been thought through in their entirety. Therefore, it is better to start the review, for the sake of a year. That review will be comprehensive, and it will deal with all of those issues, including the anomalies that are being created. It would be better for us to follow that course than to take a precipitative decision. The figures that were released this year do not sustain the argument that there has been a fall-off in access.

We will not find out the final figures until next month, but the indications are that the number of students at universities is increasing. That is good, considering that the cohort of 18-year-olds has dropped by 5.5% in Northern Ireland. We will have to analyse those figures closely when we receive them, but there is nothing to sustain the argument that freezing fees will increase access for people who are currently unable to get it.

The key thing that we must defend is the £500 differential in the maintenance grant that we have secured. We must ensure that the highest quality of university research and education is provided to drive our economy.

We must try to avoid the discrepancies and anomalies that exist between our students and those studying in the rest of the UK. As regards the announcement by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, I am reviewing all of those questions and will bring suggestions to Members in due course. Until the comprehensive spending review is complete, and I know how big the cake is, I am not in a position to determine the Department's internal priorities.

4.15 pm

With respect to PhDs and the other issues raised, I am consulting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department because there are funding issues that are outside the CSR process. Mr Attwood referred to the money from the Irish Government, of which I am acutely aware, as are my colleagues in DETI and in other Departments. We are constantly considering that money and have been in regular contact with the Irish Government and my two counterparts in Dublin. I hope to bring proposals to the House in due course.

Now is not the time to take unilateral action — it has not been thought through. Although I understand the concern and rationale behind what many are saying, at this stage the facts do not support them. It would be a terrible mistake to risk bursaries from universities — who are paying well above what they are legally obliged to — to save £70. That would be a perverse outcome. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank Members for taking part in the debate, which has been interesting in spite of only having been allotted 20 minutes in the indicative timings. I thank Sammy Wilson, who was up and down with so

many interventions that people got confused about who was speaking. That brought some humour to the debate.

I agree with those Members, and the Minister, who said that we should wait for the review. However, I disagree with those who said that fees should be increased until then. A balance must be struck. Two Members said that the motion was about headline grabbing. Anyone who knows me will know that that is not the case. The motion is about honouring manifesto commitments, which some Members should try to do.

In opposing the prayer of annulment, Basil McCrea gave his party's view. For the record, one of the Ulster Unionist representatives on the Committee for Employment and Learning supported my proposal in Committee, because he knew that the legislation was wrong but was in line with his party's policy on student fees.

Some Members said that maintenance grants are increasing, which I said at the start of the debate. However, the Department told the Committee that it could not match the increase in England, which caused us concern.

Some Members do not seem worried about financial implications when they are attacking other Ministers such as the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Whether Members sit back and say nothing or attack when others are trying to achieve goals seems to depend on which party holds the DFP portfolio.

Mr Spratt raised an issue about the position in Scotland, and Alistair Ross spoke about facts and figures. Instead of fees, for several years students in Scotland have had to pay a graduate endowment fee — for academic entrants this year that will be just under £2,300. Compare that to the bill of £9,000 that students here will face when they graduate after a three-year degree course. Some Members mentioned the lack of statistics on that: research in Scotland has shown a decrease in young Scots entering higher education from 51% in 2001-02 to 47% in 2005-06.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that, as the Minister said, the situation in Northern Ireland is not the same as that in Scotland, England and Wales? Northern Ireland leads the way in that 41% of its university students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence to date suggests that things are improving, although we are seeing a 5% drop in the cohort. Does the Member agree that the situation should be handled properly — as she said earlier — and that the advantages should be explored to help get the best possible outcome for everybody?

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely; let us wait for the review, and not increase student fees. Let us get it right. I agree with the Minister: we should get it right from the start. A higher proportion of people live in disadvantaged areas here than in other regions, but the social profile

is very different. There is a higher proportion of our population in that category already, so let us see what facts and figures the research produces. Basil McCrea talked about parity, but such an issue is only raised on the Member's Benches when it suits him. I have some research from Scotland, and I want to read it into the record.

The proportion of young Scots in higher education has fallen from 51% in 2001-02 to 47% in 2005-06. The decision to withdraw the graduate endowment fee draws on research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2003, which showed that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deterred from entering and completing full-time education because of the economic hardship that they would suffer as a result of debt. Over the past five years, Scotland has monitored the proportion of young people from disadvantaged areas in higher education and decided that the abolition of the graduate endowment fee is a necessary step to increase the numbers coming from those backgrounds. Until the review is complete, we should hold off on increasing student fees.

Like Sammy Wilson and Alastair Ross, I looked at the report of the Assembly debate on this issue in November 2000. The DUP and the Ulster Unionists supported the call for tuition fees and means-tested grants to be scrapped. It was a former Member of the Assembly who brought the proposal on behalf of the Committee. The DUP and the Ulster Unionists called for fees to be scrapped — there is an issue of Members changing policy when it suits them.

Anna Lo mentioned the American model —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I said earlier that Sammy Wilson had made a lot of interventions during the debate. I will not give way; I have put the jack-in-the-box to bed.

I agree with Anna Lo that we might end up with a two-tier system in which some universities attract students regardless of the fee, and others struggle. Some Members mentioned student debt. It is estimated that students leave university with debts between £12,000 and £20,000. Members talk about the housing market — how are students supposed to get on to the property ladder if they come out of university with debts of around £12,000 to £20,000?

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: No, I will not give way. Sammy Wilson can jump up and down all day.

I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for attending the debate; we have a good relationship outside of this one. *[Laughter.]*

The laughter of Members gives me time to find my last page. It is a pity that in the mouth of Christmas our relationship is going downhill; I might not get a present.

The Minister is right that the outcome of the review is being pre-empted by the proposal before the House. I believe that increasing student fees — regardless of whether it is in line with inflation — is pre-empting the outcome of the review. The debate has shown that the quicker that review gets under way, the better, but I am disappointed that we did not get more details on it. Further to Paul Butler's comments, the review should be as independent, transparent and open as possible.

I thank Members for taking part in the debate, and I thank the Minister for attending. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Ms J McCann.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Were there any apologies from the Members opposite who absented themselves during the Division, or was it simply the case that the parties opposite

wanted to have their cake and eat it — to oppose the regulations, but ensure that they went through?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, and I am sure that Mr Wilson would not expect me to comment on it.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 5 December, I had occasion to submit to three Ministers a question for priority written answer concerning a statement issued by the Minister of Education on 4 December. In order for me to raise the matter during questions to the First Minister, and because there is a debate on the topic tomorrow, it was important for me to receive the responses within two days. Two of the three Ministers to whom I submitted a question for priority written answer did not respond, and the one response that I did receive arrived too late, which meant that it was useless to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker, will you make a ruling on how this regrettable state of affairs might be resolved?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That matter has been raised with the Speaker, who has asked his officials to investigate. If the Member raises that issue with the Speaker outside the Chamber, I am sure that he will respond.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Delivering Choice for the Terminally Ill

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice, whether in their own home or the home of a family member; and that many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers; welcomes the positive results emerging from the Delivering Choice Programme which Marie Curie Cancer Care has operated in Great Britain; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring that patients, and their carers, receive the necessary support throughout the palliative care period.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to thank the hospice movement and Marie Curie Cancer Care, in particular, for allowing us, after a series of meetings, to bring forward the motion on their behalf. We sought this debate with deep concern, in the knowledge that terminally ill people will continue to be unable to die in their place of choice unless action is taken soon.

In the North of Ireland, 3,959 deaths a year occur due to cancer, and it is noted that, of the 64% of terminally ill people who chose to die at home, only 25% are able to do so. We desperately need a programme, such as Delivering Choice, to address that inequality and to pioneer a new approach to the provision of palliative care for terminally ill people that will make the wish to die at home a reality.

The motion originated after the success of the Delivering Choice pilot project, which was launched in October 2004 in Lincolnshire. Now, well into its third phase, that project has gone to great lengths to improve provision so that greater choice can be extended to a wide range of terminally ill patients who wish to die at home. Following the pilot scheme's success, the Delivering Choice programme has been rolled out to four more areas in Britain. It is hoped that such a project could be introduced here, and I thank the Business Committee for providing the opportunity to debate the issue.

As Members know, cancer is a difficult disease to live or cope with. There is no doubt that the introduction of the Delivering Choice scheme would relieve the incredible pressures on individuals who suffer from that illness and their families. At this stage, I appeal to any Members who have suffered from cancer, or who have ever known a person — whether a friend or loved one — who has suffered from cancer, to take a moment

to think about the differences that the Delivering Choice programme would make. Such a programme would deliver palliative care across all communities.

As many Members may be aware, Marie Curie Cancer Care is a leading charity, which, although specialising in cancer care, provides care to people suffering from life-limiting illnesses. Following its inception in 1948, the organisation was given charitable status in 1952 and has since gone from strength to strength. The first hospice centre was established in Belfast in 1965, and, undoubtedly, it has been a fantastic help to families across the North who have had to deal with cancer. Therefore, Marie Curie Cancer Care has earned a reputation as an organisation that delivers to those in most need. Its past successes include the completion of the Living Rooms appeal, which funded a £3 million hospice redevelopment that included accommodation for 18 patients, 16 newbuild single rooms and one double room, each with en suite facilities and a spare bed to allow a relative to stay overnight.

The Delivering Choice programme goes one step further, and the introduction of such a programme here would vastly improve the Belfast hospice's ability to provide palliative care across the whole of the North, giving people here the choice of a home death.

I am pleased to announce that, over the past few months, representatives of Marie Curie Cancer Care met several MLAs in a bid to secure cross-party support for this motion. I understand that those meetings were very successful and that the comments received were constructive and hugely positive with regard to support for the motion.

I remind Members that the majority of terminally ill individuals are unaware that they have a choice about where they die.

Professionals are often reluctant to support end-of-life home care, and services are often not sufficiently well developed to ensure that patients can be cared for safely in the community. If people genuinely want to die at home, the individual and their families should have access to the services needed to make that feasible.

4.45 pm

According to research findings from the King's Fund, the Lincolnshire pilot programme allowed for a rise from 17% to 42% in the number of home deaths. I am confident that the introduction of a Delivering Choice programme here would provide the support needed to enhance the organisation of those services and would increase the provision for nursing-at-home services, which will enable more terminally patients and their families to make their wish to die at home a reality.

Members should be comforted by the fact that, after the service remodelling that would take place as part of the Delivering Choice programme, terminally ill patients

who choose to die at home will receive the same outstanding standard of care as they would have if they were in hospital.

In the Lincolnshire pilot programme, 66% of terminally ill patients expressed a desire to be cared for at home, even if they required complex palliative care. Not only is a home death the preferred option but patients who are cared for at home, or by specialist palliative care teams, have received similar or better symptom and pain control, and a better physical quality of life, than those who received conventional hospital care.

In addition to those social benefits, the Delivering Choice programme offers numerous economic benefits. Some financially pressed localities may argue that we cannot afford to invest in a specialised palliative care programme that supports an individual's right to die. However, it has been shown in places such as Italy, Spain and across the United States that spending in that area would release funds that could be used elsewhere in the NHS and would ultimately relieve financial pressures, particularly in hospitals.

Research has also shown that individuals who spend the last fortnight of their lives in hospital may be estimated to require approximately £4,200 worth of services compared with a spending of £2,500 for an intensive community support package for the same period of time.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is undertaking economic research to realise the precise extent of such savings and believes that, in the medium to long term, for every £1 invested, £2 will be released to go towards hospital services. The Delivering Choice programme also goes some way to addressing the issue of ambulance hours, hospital waiting lists and bed-blocking issues, of which I am sure that all Members are aware.

The Delivering Choice programme offers rapid response as an essential component. Poor access to palliative care services, such as 24-hour nursing and Marie Curie nursing services in certain localities, makes it likely that critical situations will arise that cannot be handled by the carer. Access to crisis care at any time of the day — particularly out of hours — is therefore crucial to avoid the escalation of symptoms that might otherwise lead to emergency admission.

In the Lincolnshire pilot programme, the rapid response team prevented more than 550 unnecessary hospital admissions in the first year of its implementation. Not only does that help to achieve the wish of the patient but it helps to ensure that ambulance hours are not wasted. Furthermore, it ensures that approximately 3,000 occupied hospital beds are freed up — a monetary saving of £90,000 in the acute sector.

In conclusion, a LeasCheann Comhairle, the £50,000 that has already been committed and allocated to the

Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) is welcome. However, further financial support is needed to sustain the project for three years. In the North, the programme will cost £150,000 annually for phase 1 and phase 2 of the pilot project, which will develop into a three-year programme. The initial work will be to identify the level of need in a local area and to map out current service provision. New services will then be designed and implemented to address any gaps.

I ask all Members to support the motion and to support the need to commit funds to support the Delivering Choice programme. In anticipation, I thank Members for that support. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion, and I congratulate Carál on securing the debate. I also place on record my sincere gratitude for the outstanding work that Marie Curie Cancer Care does in delivering front-line services for palliative care.

Increasing the availability of palliative-care services at home fits with the general thrust of directing services away from acute hospitals and into the community. At the start of the decade, 'The NHS Cancer Plan: a Plan for Investment, a Plan for Reform' acknowledged that support for patients with advanced cancer who live at home is sometimes poorly co-ordinated and may not be available 24 hours a day.

The Preferred Place of Care initiative was introduced across the water, and through that plan, a patient-held record follows the patient on his or her path of care into the variety of health- and social-care settings that are available. It records a family profile and carer's needs; the patient's thoughts about their care; their choices and preferences; services that are available and that the patient is accessing in their locality; and changes in care needs.

By placing the patient at the centre of the care plan, autonomy and control are maximised, and many patients perceive that those have been taken away from them during the terminal stages of disease. A plan of that nature avoids the situation, for instance, where an out-of-hours GP, who does not know the patient well, admits them to hospital without realising that it is their preference to remain at home. That can lead to significant adverse effects on relatives, such as regret and guilt, if the patient does not ultimately have the opportunity to die at home.

There is also an economic argument for refashioning services. Reducing hospital admissions and enabling patients to decide to die at home can reduce financial costs to the NHS and, as has already been said, improve the quality of life for patients and carers.

Some studies have indicated that every extra £1 that is invested in hospice care at home can release £2 in

hospital services. Dr Keri Thomas, in the introduction to 'The Gold Standards Framework: A Programme for Community Palliative Care' stated:

"Caring for the dying... is a measure of our success, not our failure as healthcare professionals."

She went on to say:

"palliative care represents the best of all medical care, bringing together the clinical, holistic and human dimensions of primary care".

The 2003 Department of Health paper, 'Building on the Best: Choice, Responsiveness and Equity in the NHS' accepts that if people genuinely want to die at home, they and their families should have access to the services that are needed to make that possible.

Palliative care must be more readily accessible. It continues to be financed, to a large extent, by the charitable sector. There are marked geographical variations in its provision across the UK. Marie Curie Cancer Care has suggested that it is unable to provide for 30% of those who seek its home-care services. However, there is a long history of excellent palliative care in the United Kingdom. That must be expanded and restructured to ensure that as many of those who wish to die at home have the opportunity to do so.

Occasional demands for assisted suicide tend to acquire a high profile, but they are the exception. The vast majority of people dying in the United Kingdom, even from diseases such as motor neuron disease (MND), do not want assisted dying. The 1,000 MND patients who die annually in the UK in the main do so comfortably and with good palliative care.

Approximately 95% of people using hospice or palliative care have cancer. Some 300,000 people with other terminal illnesses are prevented from benefiting from that care on account of their conditions.

It is essential that we restructure and improve end-of-life care to meet the needs of our aging population. Some foolishly imagine that the skills that are required for that crucial work cannot be learned and that they occur naturally. However, communication-skills training for healthcare staff releases them from avoidance behaviours that have been acquired through their cultural upbringing and from the innate fear of death that is present in everyone.

Only then can they be genuinely warm and supportive and able to interpret the complex physical and psychological interactions in their patients.

Those involved in palliative care deserve our highest praise. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I join other Members in welcoming the motion. The care of patients must always be at the heart of the Health Service; without that guiding principle, it becomes a matter of simple economics, which leaves the patient aside. That principle must apply to the palliative care of terminally ill patients, just as it

applies to waiting lists and hospital cleanliness. Patient care must not be simply an objective of the Health Service: it must be an intrinsic part of its culture.

Of all Departments, the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety touches areas to which no easy cost can be affixed, and the care of terminally ill patients is one such area. However, the use of robust health economics models for the home-based management of terminal illness has begun in the public domain. The Sheffield School of Health and Related Research was commissioned to develop such a model in 2003. Evidence from the USA, Spain and Italy suggests that a home-based terminal model may lead to cost savings.

For that reason, the Minister should consider the commission of his own study to establish the real situation and to create financial and health economics models to address it. Too many of the available studies relate to outside the UK, let alone Northern Ireland.

Almost £400 million is spent on palliative care in England. We must establish the overall figure for Northern Ireland to give a ballpark figure to work towards; within that provision there is a broad range of services to consider. The indications are that the uncosted value of informal carer inputs to the system is approximately £2,500 per carer.

Much has been said in admiration of the work of the Marie Curie nursing service. I, too, praise those who have gone into that service in order that people who are terminally ill may be cared for properly; I also take into account the contribution of many family members. Marie Curie Cancer Care estimated that end-of-life care at home would double its existing spend; a fact that may give us a handle on what is involved.

Whatever the facts, they will be satisfactorily collated only by a specialist ministerial working party that will give us real, practical and logical figures from which to work.

Of one thing we may be sure: we must always take into account the wishes of those who are coming to the end of the journey of life. In my experience in another life, I found that one of the things that touched me most was the despair that one sees sometimes in a hospital bed in a patient who cannot be at home among family to end the journey of life. With that in mind, I fully support the call for a pilot study so that we can put the care of the patient and the family first and ensure that a person who is coming to the end of their life is given some peace of mind and good care.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for tabling it.

Dignity, family support, and more choice between hospice and home care for terminally ill patients are issues of concern. More attention must be paid to the needs and wishes of patients who have terminal illness

and how those might influence the end-of-life treatment considerations for them and their caregivers.

I want to praise all of the good work that is being done by the Northern Ireland Hospice, Marie Curie Cancer Care and, of course, the family support that helps to bring all of that sensitive care together.

5.00 pm

In my experience of nursing patients and several of my own relatives who had terminal illness, equality of treatment is essential. The utmost support should be offered. Giving care at home can be particularly challenging, especially when mental ill health is present as we have been told by the relatives of people who have Alzheimer's disease. Although there are many variations in end-of-life experiences, the vast majority of patients and carers want to speak to a healthcare professional when they must make distressing choices as a person approaches the end of his or her life. That advice and help must be available to all who ask for it. It is particularly important that choice, and as much information as possible, are offered in a positive manner.

The patient's journey, and the experience of the family and friends who care for that person, is of the utmost importance. The rapidity of illness can result in some patients and caregivers having to adjust their lives significantly over a short period of time whereas a longer period of palliative care may be required for patients with terminal cancer. Carers looking after such patients and, indeed, those who have reached old age, may have different and more long-term needs and requirements.

Regardless of a patient's circumstances, the need for advanced planning to avoid inappropriate management and, in particular, unnecessary admissions to hospital is extremely important. The role of the primary carer must be strengthened in order to provide him or her with the knowledge and the expertise to apply appropriate end-of-life care and, in particular, a heightened awareness of the sensitivity, dignity and respect that is needed at that time.

Many patients who are nearing the end of their lives convey fears of the loss of independence and dignity, as well as expressing feelings of being a burden on family and friends. Many patients believe that pain is more frightening than the fear of death, especially when suffering from long-term illness. Healthcare professionals do not deal well with pain. That issue needs particular attention.

Members have referred to the first pilot — the Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme. I welcome the Minister's comments on the possibility that the scheme could be piloted in Northern Ireland. It makes economic sense to reduce the number of admissions to acute hospitals and, crucially, it gives patients more choice.

Good communication between patients and their general practitioners is absolutely essential. GPs need appropriate training in order to continue the service. With a more holistic approach, the highest possible quality of care can be reached. An important part of good palliative care is, as I have mentioned, the control of pain. If a good community-based approach is taken, without unnecessary and expensive hospital stays and insufficient treatment time, the dignity, family support and choice that should be available for all patients will be ensured.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for bringing this important issue to the House. I want to put on record the Alliance Party's thanks and appreciation to all of those organisations who carry out such excellent service, not only to people who are in the final stages of their lives, but also to their families and carers during a stressful time. I also want to express my appreciation that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is present in the Chamber.

On the Order Paper, the motion is headed:

"Delivering Choice for the Terminally Ill".

That wording is most appropriate, because this issue must be acknowledged for what it is. Most of us spend our lives making choices in all sorts of ways. Choice is recognised as part of a civilised and democratic society, and that is all the more reason why people should be given a choice — as far as humanly possible — when they reach the end of their lives.

It is estimated that, when the end of their lives is near, the majority of people wish to be at home with their families. However, that is sometimes impossible because of the nature of their illness. We must all ensure that patients are given every care and attention right up to the end of their lives, regardless of where those patients might be.

The Delivering Choice programme, which was introduced across the water by Marie Curie Cancer Care, has been successful. That being the case, Assembly Members wish to see the same programme being introduced across Northern Ireland. I had the pleasure of meeting officials from Marie Curie Cancer Care recently. Those officials, with their vast knowledge and experience, believe that much work remains to be done. They hope to secure the Assembly's support to further the aims of their group, on behalf of our entire community.

We are often reminded about the huge cost to the Health Service of admitting patients to hospital. Here is an opportunity for the Department to invest a small amount of money that will produce massive savings in the long run. At the same time, such investment will provide the patient and his or her family with what they require. That can be done only in conjunction with the local organisations who are experts in that field. Once again, I pay tribute to their work, dedication

and vital assistance to all concerned at a critical time for all of our people.

The Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme, which has been in operation in Lincolnshire, clearly proves that it represents value for money and recognises the wishes of the patients and their carers. Approximately 42% of patients were able to pass away in their own homes. Deaths in hospitals were reduced to 45% and the cost of caring for terminally ill patients fell by 8%. Those are the facts. I hope that the Minister acknowledges those results. The highly eminent Professor Mike Richards has said that the results:

"demonstrate that close partnership working between the NHS and the voluntary sector can give major benefits for patients at the end of their lives, and can be cost effective."

Let us move forward together and, for a little investment, the rewards can be high. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I am sure that almost everyone in the House has direct experience of the death of a close family member or loved one. Some Members may be dealing, currently, with the impact of that situation. Whether death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, or at the end of a long, terminal illness, its impact is devastating and traumatic for the family. In the case of terminal illness, the pressure on family and carers can be prolonged and difficult, particularly if it involves repeated admissions to hospital as the health of the patient declines. The additional stress that that creates for the person who is dying, and for his or her family, is easily imagined and understood.

In Northern Ireland, we are extremely fortunate to have the Marie Curie Cancer Care organisation. Its work, dedication and commitment to the terminally ill in our community has provided enormous support to families, and allowed many people to die with dignity while surrounded by the most skilled and sensitive nursing and medical care. More than 200 Marie Curie nurses, across the Province, provide daily care for terminally ill in the place of their choice. That care is funded in part by the Government — and also by major charitable support — and is free of charge to patients and their families. The Minister is well aware of the work that is done at the Marie Curie hospice in east Belfast where care for terminally ill patients includes inpatient and outpatient care, day therapy, home nursing and residential space for family members.

I am sure that the Minister is also aware of the Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme, which aims to develop and provide the best possible service for all palliative care patients, allowing them to be cared for in the place of their choice. That includes the provision of totally free, high-quality specialised nursing, so that all terminally ill patients can have the choice to die at home, supported by their families.

Central to this charitable thinking is the view that the right to a good death is fundamental, and that patients have the right to choose their place of care and their place of death. Research shows that given the appropriate conditions and level of support two out of every three people would choose to die in their own home. Sadly, that happens for only 25% of those who express such a wish. I am sure that most of us, when faced with the knowledge that we are terminally ill and given time to reflect, would want to reduce the pain and stress to our families. We would hope to be able to make a free choice about where our lives would come to an end.

The Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme was initiated in 2004, with the objective of providing services that would enable patients to make an informed choice regarding their place of treatment and eventual death. The programme already operates in several locations on the mainland and seeks to achieve its objectives through improved planning and co-ordination, and through the uptake of existing local services. It works with local organisations to apply best-practice in healthcare and social care.

In that context, palliative care in the community can become a genuine option, reducing the level of treatment and deaths in hospitals and increasing the levels of community care. It may have some additional outcomes, such as reducing the demand for hospital beds for critically ill patients and reducing the stress placed on those working at full stretch in the hospitals as they nurse and minister to patients who are close to death.

The project has three objectives: first, to develop patient-focused, round-the-clock models of palliative care that serve the local need; second, to assess and evaluate the economic impact on healthcare services of more people receiving such care at home as opposed to in hospital, and third, to disseminate its findings to other health and social care providers across the UK so that the need and hopes of the terminally ill, and their carers, can be met. Initial reports are positive and very encouraging.

I join with other Members in calling on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring patients and carers receive the necessary support through the palliative care process. We must all work towards the day when all palliative care patients in Northern Ireland can make the choice to die at home, and we must ensure that that wish will be supported and resourced by the Government. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I also support the motion. I am sure that there is no one in this Assembly whose life has not been affected by the suffering or loss of a loved one, whether it a close family friend or a relative. It is estimated that one in three people will either suffer from cancer or lose an immediate relative to the illness. It is

a horrible fact that every year 4,000 people in the Province die of cancer. It can, and does, strike any of us and it does not respect creed, colour, sex or age.

On 8 May, the Assembly was restored, yet the day was tinged with a sense of sadness, as one of our esteemed colleagues, George Dawson, lost his battle with cancer only the night before. George was a great family man and a great constituency man, and his loss is still felt within our ranks. George was one of those who were able to die at home.

It is estimated that 64% of people wish to die at home, and yet only 25% achieve their wish. None of us is under the illusion that there need be no budgetary restrictions. However, the question that I posed was; how much does it cost to give a dying person their wish? I looked into Marie Curie's Delivering Choice programme, and, while I hate to reduce this issue to one as basic as money, I was surprised to learn that to spend the last two weeks of life in a specialised palliative care centre in hospital would cost the Health Service £4,200, yet the Delivering Choice programme costs only £2,500. So the question now is; how we can refuse to put in place a programme that is cost effective and gives patients what they want? The programme scores on both points. Not only is the final wish of the patient and the family addressed, which is the prime concern, but beds are also freed up in hospitals. That means smaller waiting lists, and, hopefully, an end to people lying on trolleys in the accident and emergency unit for days at a time, as has happened on many occasions in the constituency that I represent.

One of the regions that tested the scheme discovered that, on average, 550 unnecessary hospital admissions were saved in the first year of the tests, and 3,000 bed places were saved in the same period for admissions that had usually been taken up by the sufferers of end-stage cancer.

5.15 pm

The care of those who made use of the programme in the test areas was found to be of a higher and more dedicated standard than that found in the local hospital. That is in no way a reflection or a judgement of the level of care offered by the hospitals. Hospital staff do a brilliant job in the circumstances, yet dedicated home care has been proved to be better, not only for the patients' peace of mind and the stress levels of their families, but also for the more efficient running of the health system.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is well known for aiding the families of people with cancer. The support and guidance it offers cannot be commended highly enough. Many of my constituents have praised its input and have told me that they could not have coped without the Marie Curie scheme. The Delivering Choice programme is yet another way in which Marie Curie Cancer Care provides the best and most effective care

for patients and their families. The programme aims to improve the planning, co-ordination and uptake of existing local services in partnership with local organisations in order to apply best practice in health and social care. They want to work with the healthcare system to achieve the best for everyone concerned.

There are, of course, those who have no desire to die at home. The choice of hospital care should always be available to those families who are unable to cope with the death of a loved one under their roof. However, the option offered by groups like Marie Curie Cancer Care should be provided for those who wish to die at home. For that reason I urge the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work with Marie Curie Cancer Care in order to introduce the Delivering Choice programme to Northern Ireland. Nothing can take away the pain and the frustration caused by watching a loved one die, but there are ways to ease the strain. By backing the Marie Curie Cancer Care scheme, we can show our support for those who need it most.

I ask that a pilot scheme similar to the five schemes operating on the mainland be implemented in the Province to assist those who suffer and those who watch their loved ones' lives slip away. Let us do what we can, and offer this option. I commend the motion and ask Members to support it.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the motion and thank Carál Ní Chuilín for proposing it. The tone of the debate suggests that there is widespread support for motion. Unfortunately, many Members have had some personal experience of this matter. It is an extremely thought-provoking and sensitive debate, and raises matters that are of great importance to the people we represent.

The motion states that:

“many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers”.

It is imperative that we find a way to limit the stress and heartache felt by people who have to endure and cope with a loved one who is seriously ill. It is accepted by health professionals, cancer sufferers and the families of those who are ill that home is the best place to spend the closing days of an individual's life. However, according to a 2004 Marie Curie Cancer Care survey, the biggest perceived practical obstacles to dying at home are the time constraints and physical pressure that it puts on family members and friends. The survey also noted that half the respondents felt incompetent to provide care to a dying relative. It was felt that the help of a nurse would considerably ease that pressure.

Although hospital admissions at the end of life can, on occasion, be vital, there are considerable concerns that a significant proportion of admissions are the result of poorly co-ordinated or otherwise inadequate palliative and supportive care services available at

home, which lead to problems such as poor symptom control and carer fatigue.

Beginning in March 2004 in England, Marie Curie Cancer Care launched its Supporting the Choice to Die at Home campaign. The launch came close to the publication of results from a YouGov study, which stated that 64% of people would choose to die at home if they had a terminal illness. Only 25% of cancer patients are able to do so. The campaign aimed to double the number of patients who have the choice to die at home. Marie Curie Cancer Care drew its economic conclusions from a University of London opinion paper, which demonstrated that to double the number of patients cared for at home in England alone would cost up to £75 million.

As other Members have mentioned, it is important that we, as an Assembly, acknowledge and pay tribute to the vital role played by the Northern Ireland Hospice, which provides help and support to cancer sufferers and their families in the closing days of life, one of the most difficult and agonising times for any family and close friends. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Northern Ireland Hospice and Marie Curie Cancer Care, and I am sure that the House will support that sentiment.

In response to the wishes of patients, the hospice-at-home nursing service provides nursing care to patients who would prefer to spend their last days in familiar surroundings at home. It offers practical nursing care, day and night, in the patient's own home. The most common need is to give exhausted carers a break, especially when the patient's condition deteriorates rapidly or when distressing symptoms are difficult to control.

I thank the proposer for bringing this worthwhile motion to the House and look forward to hearing the Minister's response. At such a difficult stage for families, it is one of the most important issues to get right as it can leave a great legacy for families as they try to get over a truly awful period in their lives.

I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: To care for and watch a family member clinging to life is a heart-wrenching trial for anyone. Such an experience is loaded with stress and emotion, and sometimes it can also be a character-building experience that, at the time, does not appear to be so. Only families who have made that journey with their loved one can fully understand and appreciate the value of having the professional help to allow the sufferer to die at home and with dignity, surrounded by family and friends.

At one stage or another throughout life, I am sure that we have all been touched and have witnessed the death of a family member or friend from the awful effects of a terminal illness. I can recount numerous stories from my constituents, who are at great pains to tell me of the help and care that they received from the

hospice nurses and the Marie Curie nurses. The nurses visited daily, for perhaps an hour in the early stages of the experience and for hours on end in the latter stages, and carried out shifts so that the patient and the family were accompanied and comforted throughout. Those families could never have survived, either physically or emotionally, with the pressures involved in providing freedom of choice and the comfort of home, without the help and emotional support that they received from the nurses.

In this day and age, the world of medicine is such that we are more fortunate than ever before as more and more cancers are curable. However, the choice, life and dignity of people who are unfortunate enough to receive a terminal diagnosis must be respected at all times. Their wishes must be delivered to the best of our health providers' ability. I am sure that many of our constituents will find some form of comfort in the fact that we are debating an issue that for many years was ignored as the fight to find cures and raise funding for research was paramount in the minds of social-health providers. That area of research must not be allowed to suffer, just as the help and care necessary for the delivery of a dignified death must not be sacrificed.

The two should be justly and appropriately funded and receive equal priority in the health budget: it should not be a choice between one and the other.

Now that we are supposed to be in a new political era, there is a huge amount of ground to cover to catch up with the rest of Europe's policies on providing care at home. People should be able to choose where they die. Such freedom of choice should, and must, be applied across the entire Programme for Government.

I am proud to state that my Foyle constituency is blessed with a former GP whose vision — many years ago, I should add — was to deliver exactly what is being debated here today. The motto on the Foyle Hospice website is:

“Even when days can't be added to life Foyle Hospice aims to ensure that life is added to days.”

The hospice delivers a daily programme of care to those who wish to stay at home and operates an in-house programme for those unable to do so. Those services, added to its provision of a respite facility and day care, make Foyle Hospice one of the most popular health facilities in Northern Ireland. However, it is run almost entirely through donations and fundraising. Such funding is outdated and must be supplemented by health providers, and I am sure that many similar facilities also require Government funding. I urge the Minister, in considering the motion carefully, to apply lateral thinking across all the health boards.

The ethos of caring for the dying at home is an old one. I recall, in my youth, countless grandmothers and grandfathers who were cared for in their ailing years

and dying days by their families. Today, agencies such as Marie Curie Cancer Care and the hospices care for both the patients and the emotional well-being of the families.

I ask the Minister to accept the Assembly's call for appropriate funding. What he gives in monetary terms will determine the quality of those added days for terminally ill patients. They deserve the finest care and the utmost dignity in their final weeks, days and hours. I welcome and support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Facing up to the challenge of being diagnosed with a terminal illness is a daunting and frightening prospect for individuals and their families and friends. Of the 14,000 people who die in Northern Ireland each year, 4,000 require specialist palliative care, such as hospital or hospice services. Many others suffer from life-limiting illnesses and could be cared for in the community, but currently are not. Surveys show that 56% of people would prefer a home death, but only 25% die at home. Generally, that is because the appropriate services are not available to support the patients and their relatives and carers.

Today, I announce the development of a regional model for supportive and palliative care across Northern Ireland. Its aim is to provide people with choices as to where to spend their final precious days. Society has a duty to provide the best possible care and support for those affected by such illnesses. I have spoken to carers and patients about the support they receive and how services can be improved. Their clear message has been that every effort must be made to help people spend precious time with their families at the end of their lives.

The diagnosis of a family member or friend with a life-limiting or terminal illness is an emotive subject, and one that has directly affected many in the House. To any individual who receives such a diagnosis, dignity means choosing how to manage that illness. That should be a right, not a privilege.

Help for carers must be an essential element of the service provided. To look after a dying loved one is difficult and stressful and, therefore, carers must have access to respite care. Hospital care should be easily accessible to those who require it, but the aim should be to return patients to their homes as soon as possible. Their care can continue there, which is where they want to be. By keeping access to all those services open, the burden on carers and patients is reduced.

In today's motion, concern is expressed:

“that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice”.

That is not where we want to be. I want to ensure that the wishes of the patients and their families are paramount.

5.30 pm

In recent years, there has been progress in the care of people with terminal and life-limiting illnesses. Some actions include improved training in palliative care for staff who work in the community, and enhanced care packages to support people. Macmillan facilitators are now in place to train and support GPs. Rapid-response and 24-hour nursing teams have been established, and healthcare professionals have undergone training in breaking bad news. Many trusts have provided education and training for staff in nursing homes, and some have attached district nurses to nursing homes to care for people in the final stages of their illnesses.

I want to build on the excellent work that has been developed to date. As well as providing high-quality care, I want to ensure that patients are fully informed and involved in decisions about their care. To deliver on that, the Department has been liaising with the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) and others in the health and social care field to inform our policy on palliative care. I have asked the four boards to work with NICaN and the University of Ulster to develop a regional model for palliative care to provide quality, comprehensive, consistent services across Northern Ireland. The new model must ensure that future services are responsive to the needs of patients, carers and their families.

We must determine the demand for additional care; then we will be better equipped to respond and to ensure that those who choose to spend their final weeks of life at home can do so. We must ensure that we have appropriate staff and expertise in local communities so that standards of care are maintained and more people can be supported safely at home.

We must learn from organisations such as Northern Ireland Hospice Care, Newry and Foyle Hospices, Macmillan Cancer and Marie Curie Cancer Care, which have wide-ranging experience in supportive and palliative care.

A vital element of the project will include consultation with people living with a terminal illness and learning from the experiences faced by patients, families and carers. The project will also work in partnership with the excellent Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme to share learning and experience. To date, my Department has contributed £50,000 towards the development of the model. I anticipate that it will be in place and piloted during 2008-09, and the project team will report back to me with recommendations by the end of 2009.

The project will include an assessment of need and the implications of providing a model across the whole of Northern Ireland for all terminal conditions. My Department is currently developing best-practice standards for palliative care. Those standards will ensure that patients are correctly identified, that services

are designed around their needs, and that they, their families and carers are given the physical, emotional, social, financial and spiritual support that they need. As work begins to develop this vital model, there is much that can be taken forward in the meantime.

In order to properly deliver services in the community, we must continue to develop a dynamic and integrated primary-care service. Providing healthcare that is closer to a patient's home and is more responsive to their needs and expectations is the key to the future delivery of health services. Patients must be at the core of service delivery. They must have a greater say in how that care is delivered and be empowered to make informed choices.

People with life-limiting and terminal illnesses deserve the same levels of choices as others in respect of their care, particularly about where they spend the last days of their lives, based on their needs and wishes, and considerations for their families and carers.

I have tremendous admiration for those who have been at the forefront of planning and developing supportive and palliative care services, be they in the statutory or voluntary and community sector. I want to ensure that all those with a terminal illness are afforded the best possible care and support, so that they can make the most of every minute they have left with their loved ones.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín for bringing the motion before the House. I also thank the Minister for attending and everyone who contributed to the debate — it has been very positive.

The Delivering Choice programme aims to make it possible for terminally ill patients to die in their place of choice. A number of contributors stated that although 64% of the population would choose to die at home if given the option, only 25% are able to do so. Most people will die in hospital because the decision is taken out of their hands and because there is no support system to make it possible for them to die at home. When people are dying, they have very little control over what is happening to them, therefore anything that enables them to choose where they wish to die must be welcomed and encouraged, and all of the contributors have agreed with that.

Several projects across England are aiming to make it possible for people to choose to die in their own home. The projects provide the appropriate support for those who are dying and their family and carers — it was earlier called the holistic approach. Such projects have one common theme: that the main focus is on the person who is dying, their family and their carers.

Guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend that professionals identify the needs of people who are

dying. One way to do that is through a care model such as the Lincolnshire project, which other contributors referred to. There is also a Liverpool care model that covers all aspects of care, including: keeping the patient comfortable by controlling symptoms; when to prescribe certain drugs to prevent symptoms; when to discontinue certain treatments and aspects of care; psychological and spiritual support; and support for the family. The idea behind the care plans is to care for all dying people in the same way, regardless of whether they are receiving treatment in hospital, in a hospice or at home.

I am grateful for the support outlined for all the organisations that provide support services to people and their families such as Marie Curie Cancer Care, Northern Ireland Hospice Care, Macmillan nurses — and GPs, who are often the first point of contact for families and patients. All of those groups alleviate anxiety and stress to patients and carers by offering practical help, respite and comfort. They offer an essential service and are mainly funded through — as Mrs Iris Robinson said — voluntary donations. As a society, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the work of Marie Curie Cancer Care and the other organisations that I mentioned.

A significant proportion of hospital admissions at the end of life are due to poorly co-ordinated or inadequate palliative care and support-care services at home. That is unacceptable and must be remedied urgently.

Enabling patients to decide to die at home can reduce financial cost to the Health Service, as other Members have said. As Jim Shannon said, one does not want to be crass by comparing human suffering with economic cost. However, the figures are glaring and are something that the Department must be mindful of.

As Iris Robinson and Rev Dr Coulter stated, in the medium to long term every extra pound invested in the provision of care at home will release £2 in hospital services. However, savings will not be apparent until a large number of admissions is avoided, which is why I welcome the Minister's announcement of a regional focus to ensure that, regardless of where someone lives, there will be equal access to palliative care services across the North. That is something that has not been looked at for far too long.

Most Members know someone who has died due to cancer. The question is whether that person was given the choice about where they died or whether the decision was made for them due to insufficient services. If appropriate support structures existed to enable a dying person to choose to die at home, I have no doubt that a lot more people would take up that option and choose to die in the comfort of their home surrounded by their family and loved ones.

The rights of the person who is dying must dictate the care that he or she receives, which many Members have said. There is a common thread of opinion about choice, the right to a dignified death, and the necessity of advance planning to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions.

Members talked about the economic case and the need for an holistic approach to be adopted.

I thank the Minister for his announcement on the regional model of supportive and palliative care for those with cancer or life-limiting illnesses, and I welcome his comment on choice's being a right and not a privilege. The Minister also said that the patient's wishes and those of his or her family should be paramount, and that is necessary. I am grateful that he plans to consult with families and carers in order to take the project forward. I ask Members to support the motion, go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice, whether in their own home or the home of a family member; and that many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers; welcomes the positive results emerging from the 'Delivering Choice Programme' which Marie Curie Cancer Care has operated in Great Britain; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring that patients, and their carers, receive the necessary support throughout the palliative care period.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Home-Start Funding in the Ards, Comber and peninsula area

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic will have 10 minutes in which to speak and that other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the Assembly the serious issue of funds to sustain the excellent work of Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula. I welcome the Minister to the debate and thank him for his time. Most of my comments will be for the attention of the Minister, so I trust that he is in a good listening mood and that I will be at my most persuasive in not only making the case for Home-Start but in convincing him to step up to the mark with crucial funding.

Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula not only desperately needs funding but its work demands sustainable support, and its caring staff and wonderful volunteers deserve the Minister's commitment. From its beginnings as a satellite scheme in 1997, Home-Start has expanded to what it is today — a vibrant, caring and well-managed voluntary organisation. In truth, Home-Start is really only managing what it can, in the full and open knowledge that many more families in the area require its help. However, it cannot deliver that help due to a lack of support funds.

The service that is provided through home visits by volunteers, a respite playgroup and a family group is open to families with at least one child under the age of five. It is a real service, for real families with real needs. Home-Start volunteers also get involved with families to provide necessary employment skills and to improve networking in communities. There is no shame in seeking help from Home-Start. Perhaps the shame lies in the fact that too many people do not recognise the need for the type of service that Home-Start offers. They therefore remain ignorant of the good work that it does daily.

I know the financial restraints that the Minister is under, and I am aware of the draft Budget restrictions forced on him. I commend and support his stand for more cash to be injected into his Department. However, I will put him on the spot: Home-Start in Strangford — an area that the Minister knows as well as anyone and better than most — should not be placed in the situation in which it finds itself. It is begging for funds

and competing for scraps of money. It costs £422 a year to support a child through Home-Start. That is a pittance compared with the cost of placing a child in care. Some 76% of referrals come from health and social services trusts, and 30% less is spent on families and children here than is spent in England. I am asking for the Minister's assistance, and I will also be asking his Executive colleague the Minister for Social Development to dip into her coffers. I also urge the Minister to ask his officials, and Ms Ritchie's officials, to pool their resources annually in a set-aside scheme solely for the purpose of funding Home-Start. Perhaps the Minister of Education could also be included, because that could mean a win-win situation for everyone.

A situation in which the general and mental health of families is improved, and in which families are kept together and children go to school in a positive frame of mind, is in the interests of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Education.

One cannot leave out the Minister of Finance and Personnel. He should be asked to consider bringing to the Executive a proposition to reinstate the Executive fund, or something similar, for children and young people. I trust that the restoration of that fund, and the idea that there should be greater departmental collaboration and cross-pollination of funding, will be taken on board and an outcome brought to the Assembly in the near future. However, for the immediate future I will continue to press the Minister.

5.45 pm

The referrals to Home-Start in my area of Strangford come mainly from health visitors and cover a blend of communities from all over the Peninsula: the town of Newtownards and its surrounding housing estates, as well as Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy. An extensive network of volunteers brings respite, relief and a caring approach to many families. Since it began its operation, the local branch of Home-Start has increased its volunteer force from 12 to 52. That not only shows dedication to providing the service, it shows how much the service is appreciated, and how major are the needs of those who benefit from the work of the local Home-Start volunteers. There is clearly a demand.

I have already mentioned competition for funds, and it seems that a ridiculous situation has arisen in the area. Complementary services exceed their remit, duplicate those services and become competitive.

As much as I support the volunteer work of Home-Start, I recognise the good work done by Sure Start. Sides cannot be taken when families and children lose out, because one organisation has strayed from complementing the service of another into duplicating that service and, in the process, attracting and securing

funds. That is seen locally as funds having been taken away from Home-Start by Sure Start.

I ask the Minister to examine that situation, because competition that undermines a tried-and-trusted service cannot be tolerated. Regrettably, it provokes ill-feeling between two organisations, both of which do tremendous good work in their respective fields of expertise.

According to a Home-Start circular, during the last year extra money was provided by the Government for Sure Start, enabling it to expand its services to the Scrabo ward in Newtownards. It has taken on extra paid staff to cover that, and to start a further programme for two-year-olds on the peninsula. There has been no further core funding from Sure Start to Home-Start, even though it is moving into an area already covered by Home-Start. An unknown source has disclosed that £60,000 was allowed for Sure Start's new programme for two-year-olds, which has been set up in St Mary's Integrated Primary School in Kircubbin, and is designed to accept 12 children a year for four mornings a week. It seems that there is no problem giving extra money to Sure Start; yet Home-Start, an existing and well-established family support organisation, constantly battles for core funding.

I do not know if the Minister is aware of that duplication, but without doubt, it hits Home-Start hard and causes it serious problems. That situation needs to be sorted out.

I trust that I have made a good case for Home-Start, and I know that the Minister recognises the value of its excellent work. I hope, however, that he will do more than offer deserving praise. I hope that he will come up with the cash Home-Start so desperately needs to stay on top of maintaining and sustaining the service it provides to the Ards, Comber and Peninsula area.

Home-Start needs and deserves funding. It cannot provide the service without sufficient funding. If I did not think it justified extra money, I would not have tabled this motion, and I would not be standing here pleading its case this evening. That case is justified. I invite the Minister to bring some good cheer to families in the peninsula area and the great band of volunteers who work with them, and for them.

I rest my case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The business on the Order paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3) I will allow business to continue until it is completed.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion, in the hope that the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Minister for Social Development might understand the important role played by Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula, and that they

might realise the impact that failure to attract funding will have on the local community.

The Home-Start organisation was founded over 34 years ago, and for the past 24 years it has been operating in Northern Ireland, which has 22 independent Home-Start schemes. All those schemes deliver a first-class service, none more so than Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the peninsula area.

Although some Home-Start schemes provide only home-visiting volunteers, the scheme in my constituency also provides the services of a respite family group and a family group. I have had great pleasure in working closely with the groups over the past five years in supporting their applications for funding to enable them to expand their services. Those services are vital for families that find themselves in need of support, not least parents with children under the age of five who are struggling to cope with life's pressures.

People need support for any number of reasons: post-natal illness, disability, bereavement, the illness of a parent or child or social isolation. People can feel isolated in their community; they may not have family in the area or they may simply have difficulty in establishing new friendships. They can also find it difficult to cope because of their own or a child's physical or mental illness, or they may have difficulty in coming to terms with the death of a family member or loved one.

At the heart of Home-Start's ethos is the belief that parents have the key role in creating a secure and happy environment for their children. In the Ards, Comber and peninsula area, hundreds of families have been provided with critical support and many hundreds of children have been helped as a result.

Home-Start volunteers visit families in their own homes to offer support, friendship and practical assistance; they can reassure parents that they are not alone and that support is available. They have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of parents, which is of ultimate benefit to their children. Home-Start volunteers provide a time for listening and talking, help with children, a break for parents, practical help and reassurance, and a chance to meet other parents in the same predicament.

As funding for children's services faces challenges, Home-Start schemes have increased, and it is crucial that funding be identified to ensure the future of Home-Start beyond March 2008. The value of the schemes has not just been recognised by those families who have benefited, but by statutory agencies such as social services, GPs, health visitors and other healthcare professionals. In recent years, Home-Start's continued success has depended on securing finances from the children's fund.

The frustrating aspect of the matter is that if the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were to implement efficiency measures, as has been suggested, we might not have had to debate the issue in the Chamber. I urge the Minister to work towards identifying adequate funding for this very worthwhile scheme. In the meantime, I congratulate Joyce Ross and all at Home-Start Comber, Ards and the peninsula area, and trust that the scheme will continue to flourish in the coming years.

The previous Member talked about duplication. I would also like to talk about duplication for a few seconds: if the Department were to stop duplicating services in four boards and missing opportunities for the creation of one single authority and if it were to ensure value for money in efficiency savings and productivity, it might find the money in the Budget.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr McNarry for bringing the matter to the Floor of the Assembly. Although the Adjournment debate centres on the Strangford, Ards and Comber area, I come from the neighbouring constituency of South Down. Therefore I hope that I will be excused for mentioning some offices in that area, as I am familiar with their good work.

I am extremely concerned that the Home-Start satellite schemes in places such as Ballynahinch and Newcastle — and right across the North — have been placed at considerable risk as a result of Government funding being cut or reduced to levels where they cannot function properly.

For 2008-09, the Department of Health has advised that there is a budget of £3.8 million to fund projects — a £2.1 million reduction from the current budget, with further reductions likely in 2010-11. I am concerned that that will result in the closure of Home-Start schemes and a significant reduction in the quality of services.

In my constituency of South Down, through the dedicated work of home-visiting volunteers who give freely of their time, Home-Start provides an essential service to vulnerable families. In Down, local Home-Start schemes in Ballynahinch and Newcastle have been funded by the children's fund since it was launched in 2001, and are administered through the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In recent years, the confidence shown in Home-Start by local government has been welcome, and, if funding were to be cut, two part-time, 25-hour schemes would be lost. Home-Start's work is closely linked to the Government's priorities of promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being and of tackling inequalities.

Home-Start is the leading family-support charity in the North of Ireland, and its work is invaluable. Last year, across the Six Counties, Home-Start worked with

25 schemes to support 1,573 families and 2,908 children. The work of Home-Start volunteers makes a real difference to some of the most vulnerable people in society. In the North, each week, 650 volunteers visit families at home and support parents who are experiencing isolation, bereavement, the consequences of multiple births, illness, disability or parenting stresses. Last year, more than 90% of parents who were supported by Home-Start said that its intervention had made a positive contribution to their lives. Home-Start schemes require £186,000 a year to continue that service in order that vulnerable families do not lose that important lifeline. Home-Start NI — the regional organisation — also requires adequate funding to support schemes that are necessary for the continuation of that vital work.

The statutory services recognise that the early intervention of Home-Start is cost-effective — as mentioned earlier, 76% of referrals come from health and social services. On average, it costs £422 a year to support a child through Home-Start, compared to £83,950 to place a child in care. Members must also consider that, in the Six Counties, per capita spending on social services for families and children is 30% lower than in England.

If funding were cut, there would undoubtedly be major implications for many at-risk families. More than 600 children and 350 parents would lose a vital lifeline, and their physical and mental health would undoubtedly suffer. That would result in more costly statutory intervention, the loss of a vital community facility, and, if schemes close, redundancies for a dedicated group of people.

Home-Start schemes in Newcastle and Ballynahinch — and I am sorry to go on about Down when we are here to discuss Strangford — cover a wide rural area in my constituency and provide assistance for people in Dundrum, Castlewellan, Clough, Seaforde, Saintfield, Crossgar and Killyleagh. The scheme has been operating successfully for 10 years and, in the past 12 months, has provided support for 247 children and 90 families. The organisation has 48 local, trained volunteers from across the community, who provide a unique service in an area of limited family resources. Therefore, I urge the Minister — whose presence I appreciate — to give assurances that his Department will reinstate the Executive programme fund for children and young people. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: Like Mr Clarke, I thank David McNarry for bringing the subject of Home-Start to the Floor of the House. Given that this is an adjournment debate, I accept that Mr McNarry was confined to addressing problems as they affect the area that he represents. With your permission, Mr Speaker, and with Mr McNarry's, I wish to include in the debate the Home-Start family-support charity groups in my constituency, which are faced with the same threats

mentioned by the honourable Member and others. The Kilkeel Home-Start scheme covers Hilltown, Rostrevor, Kilkeel and Annalong, and other groups in my constituency work in Newry, Banbridge, Ballynahinch and Newcastle.

To illustrate the work being carried out by Home-Start volunteers, I will highlight the group in my immediate area — Home-Start Kilkeel, which has operated successfully for more than 10 years. In the past 12 months alone, it has supported 78 children and their families. The group comprises 21 locally-trained volunteers from across the community.

6.00 pm

When we talk about Home-Start, we seldom stop to think about what we are referring to. The true worth of Home-Start cannot be measured; it is experienced by those who need the scheme's support. That valuable support includes reassuring parents that they are not alone in the world when they are dealing with their problems by explaining that many other families, even local ones, are going through the same ordeal. Some families require such support after a bereavement.

Support can be valuable to parents who find it almost impossible to deal with the demands of looking after a physically or mentally ill child. The volunteers often bring comfort and support to families that are emotionally drained because of pressures in the home, and that comfort brings real benefit, especially to the children of the house.

I had a brief look at the Home-Start website, and one phrase stood out:

“Trying to get the fun back into family life”.

Rearing a family can be very difficult, and without the fun that surfaces in the confines of the home, it would be even more strenuous. Our children's laughter is one of our greatest possessions. Home-Start volunteers are trained to gauge a situation, and, as its website states, they try to get the fun back into the family where necessary.

Mr Peter Hain attempted to address the problems that abound, but the new Executive's strange lack of commitment will result in the inevitable closure of the family-support service. That is difficult to understand, given that the statutory services recognise that Home-Start's early intervention is cost-effective, with three out of every four referrals coming from health and social services.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to call for adequate funding to be made available for a proper children and young people's service. Therefore, I call for the full reinstatement of the Executive's children's fund.

Mr McCarthy: I thank my colleague David McNarry for raising this important issue. Only last week, I raised the same issue at a meeting of Ards Borough Council, where I received unanimous support for my proposal to

bring the matter to the powers that be in the Assembly. I also welcome the presence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, during the Adjournment debate.

As Members have mentioned, the children's fund was established through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it might have been appropriate for someone from that office to be here this evening to hear the plea on behalf of all Home-Start users.

The uncertainty of funding and the threat to voluntary organisations cut across the whole of Northern Ireland, and I am glad to see representatives of other constituencies in the Chamber. I ask the Minister and the Executive to get on top of this disastrous situation immediately.

This evening, we are discussing the specific effects on the Strangford constituency, particularly on Home-Start schemes in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula. I must emphasise the excellent work that is carried out by the staff and volunteers, who provide a brilliant service for the children of my constituency. In the past year, Home-Start has worked with over 109 families from Greyabbey and Newtownards, providing home visits, respite services, playgroup and family group sessions — all to help children get a better start in life. That vital service is provided across the entire community, in all locations. It is imperative that the service continues, but it requires proper funding to do so.

I was disgusted to discover that, under the draft Budget, the children's fund will disappear, and the grossly underfunded Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be expected to manage and fund all Home-Start schemes with a much-reduced budget. Had the Executive given sufficient funding to the Health Service, that would have been a different ball game, but they are clearly not stepping up to the mark in relation to funding.

That cannot be allowed to happen. Home-Start funds will run out in March 2008. The Assembly must give a solid commitment to our Home-Start teams, so that they will have the funding to carry on their superb work on behalf of the children and families whom we represent.

Speaking in the debate on the draft Programme for Government a few weeks ago, the First Minister, Ian Paisley, said:

“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.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p359, col 1*].

Ian Paisley should honour those words, put his money where his mouth is and secure sufficient funding for all the Home-Start and other voluntary

groups that serve the needs of the children that he spoke about. His wishes will then have been fulfilled.

I hope that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the Ministers who control the purse strings will listen to the plea from the Floor of the Assembly this evening and ensure that our children will be saved from the destruction that will ensue if this scheme falls apart.

Mr Shannon: It's my pleesur tae be pert o' mony fien orginisations in my bonnie area whut er ther fer tae help an haud up the people o' tha proavince an in pertickuler Strangford an aw what seek tae bring about a' better soart o' life fer aw whut leev heer.

It is my pleasure to be associated with many of the fine organisations in my beautiful constituency that exist to help and support the people of the Province — particularly Strangford, in this case — and that seek to improve the quality of life of the people who live there. I thank David McNarry for bringing this matter to the attention of the House and for giving us the opportunity to highlight the good job that Home-Start does.

My first association with Home-Start was back in 1990 when I was Deputy Mayor of Ards, and I had the opportunity to see the work that the North Down and Ards Home-Start did.

I have often stated — some of the other representatives here will agree with me — that we hail from potentially the most beautiful part of the Province. However, there will also be some who will say that we are certainly not without our problems. In Ards there are currently a large amount of young families and single-parent families who find it difficult to cope. Young mothers are trying their best to manage without the absent father. They find it hard to juggle taking care of the home as well as looking after the children and are under tremendous stress as a result. It is for reasons such as that that Home-Start began.

Home-Start is a community group comprising volunteers and paid co-ordinators who support families with young children in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan, Killinchy and Peninsula areas. Province wide, over 650 visits are made by volunteers each week, and just under 3,000 children are supported through Home-Start Northern Ireland. They do a fantastic job.

Home visits are made by volunteers who help young mothers, mothers and fathers who are grieving, or those with multiple births or illness. The criteria is simple — anyone with a child under the age of five can get help from a volunteer who will come to do a few hours menu planning, to help with shopping, to carry out simple home tasks or to provide a caring, listening ear. It is no wonder that Members from constituencies other than Strangford are present to make their plea for Home-Start schemes in their areas.

Respite playgroups and family groups are available to families who find themselves in difficult situations. Over 90% of those who were visited by volunteers have said that their lives were positively affected by Home-Start's input into their family lives.

Home-Start is a scheme to which people can self-refer or be referred to by social services, GPs or through word of mouth. Indeed, 76% of referrals come from health and social services, which sees it as a cost-effective means of helping people and lightening the load, and reducing problems down the line for children who are placed in temporary or full-time care as a result of the nervous breakdown of a parent.

It is estimated that to place a child in care could cost just under £84,000. Many children would not have needed to go into care if the parent had been given the essential care and support at the very beginning. Many young mothers in Ards have told me that they were ready to throw the towel in until they were given help by volunteers who really cared. That help even extends to training people to enable them to get jobs, to get out of the house and get a little independence, which makes all the difference for those who are on the edge.

Home-Start has stated that to support a child for a year through its organisation could cost as little as £422. That makes some difference, not only regarding the monetary cost, but also to the emotional well-being of the child, who can feel the difference made in the home.

I cannot stress enough the importance of the scheme for individuals. Over 350 parents and 650 children in the Ards area currently rely on Home-Start for help. It is also important to the entire healthcare system, especially in view of the fact that prevention is better than cure. This organisation is a way of relieving the stress and pressure that leads to family breakdown. The scheme has served Ards for the past 20-odd years, and many families rely on it. It is funded by the children's fund, in conjunction with other sources of finance. The children's fund supplies the core funding, without which staff would be unable to provide the service on which so many depend. The organisation is currently applying for other funding, but so far it has had no positive response. Members can understand the precarious and worrying situation which the organisation is in. It is essential for it to further promote the facilities so that more people are aware that there are people out there who are willing and able to help them, to provide low-cost clothing and toys for families which struggle to make ends meet, and to generate income.

In conclusion, we cannot allow the funding to be cut. I stand alongside the other Members from my constituency to maintain that Home-Start does an exemplary job in our constituency and is an integral part of it. Strangford would be a poorer place without

the dedicated Home-Start volunteers. We must do all in our power to ensure that funding is made available.

Miss McIlveen: In my position as a member of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people, and as my party's spokesperson on the issue, I have had the great pleasure of receiving presentations from representatives of Home-Start. Undoubtedly, this is a charity that carries out a huge amount of incredibly important work with families throughout the United Kingdom.

6.15 pm

Home-Start's 2006 figures indicate that it was involved in 25 schemes that supported 1,573 families and 2,908 children. It runs a total of 350 local schemes around the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland has great need of such a charity. In Northern Ireland it has 650 volunteers who give their time to provide assistance.

In 'Aiming High for Children: Supporting Families', HM Treasury calculated that a family experiencing social exclusion costs the taxpayer between £55,000 and £115,000 a year. Home-Start calculates that it costs approximately £1,000 to provide one-to-one visiting support to a family for a year in Northern Ireland, and, in 10% of those cases, the family moves out of social exclusion. Also, it costs the taxpayer £83,950 if a child goes into care. That is not to say that Home-Start is a direct alternative to care, but it can provide the support, guidance and assistance required to aid a family in such a way that costly and extremely stressful care proceedings can be avoided. Some 35% of the children aided by Home-Start are on the child protection register.

The support that the organisation provides to parents covers a wide range of matters, such as loneliness and isolation, lone parenting, first-time parenthood, post-natal illness, children's behavioural problems, and relationship difficulties. The support comes from weekly visits by a volunteer who is also a parent.

Research by James Henmann and the Work Foundation shows that intervening in the earliest years of a child's life to support parents brings dividends in terms of getting the best outcomes for children and preventing poor educational achievement. Schools and teachers are crucially important, but research shows that our parents, and what happens before we reach school, are most significant. If we want to change outcomes for children living in the most deprived circumstances, we must support the early-years work that Home-Start delivers.

The subject of this debate is funding. Until now, Home-Start has had ring-fenced funding from central Government. That has now ended, and five local schemes are in danger. If funding is not secured, it is proposed that the Ards, Comber and peninsula area scheme, with which this debate is concerned and which covers my constituency of Strangford, will become part time.

However, four other schemes — Armagh outreach, Kilkeel, Ballynahinch and Newcastle — will close. Much as I appreciate that the debate has been tabled and the representatives of Strangford have had an opportunity to discuss this matter, the issue is not confined to our constituency. As we have already heard, the problem is much wider. To keep those five schemes operating, Home-Start requires £186,000 per year. However, Home-Start NI also requires £195,000 per year to support and develop schemes in areas that do not have them.

It is difficult to quantify the total impact of the loss of the support provided by those schemes, but, undoubtedly, there will be an increase in statutory intervention, which is much more costly and has a greater negative impact on the child, in cases where such intervention could have been avoided.

The importance of such an organisation should not be underestimated, particularly when we consider that 76% of its referrals come from health professionals, who see the value in its work.

Home-Start is asking for continued parity of funding with the rest of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was cut off mid-sentence when he was about to deliver bad news about the Ards, Comber and peninsula scheme during Question Time on November 5. Therefore, we do not know exactly how bad that news was.

As the Minister has been at pains to say, the Budget is at the draft stage, and is out for consultation. He has also been at pains to avoid making the decisions to cut bureaucracy and inefficiency in his Department. Last week, I was interested to hear his party colleague Basil McCrea inform a meeting of Queen's University graduates that such decisions had to be made, and that the current situation is not good.

On 5 November, the Minister stated:

"I know about the real and lasting differences that locally based Home-Start schemes are making to the lives of families with young children, and I want to be able to support that important work." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p25, col 1].

Perhaps we will see those words translated into actions.

Mr McCallister: I thank my honourable friend the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry for securing the debate. I have some knowledge of working with the Home-Start programmes in my constituency of South Down, and it is a worthwhile programme.

It was disappointing that Mrs Robinson could not get through her remarks without taking a cheap shot at the Minister in respect of decisions about which he has answered questions both in the House and in Committee. Miss McIlveen did very well until the last 30 seconds of her speech. I was interested to hear her mention

parity. When he replies to the debate, the Minister may tell us how much healthcare spending it would take to reach parity with England and Wales.

Turning to the more important matter at hand, the Home-Start programme provides support, which is vital for a number of reasons. Miss McIlveen said that 35% of the children who are helped by Home-Start are on the child-protection register — a group that should be targeted. The programme provides tremendous support for families from different socio-economic backgrounds, and it is important that we get it right.

The Ulster Unionist Party has been at the forefront of recommending early intervention. On many occasions, it has been proven that outcomes and value for money are much improved by investing in early-years initiatives for children up to the age of six. That long-term impact on young people brings us towards the future on a much sounder footing. For that reason, I urge the Minister to support the programme, and I look forward to hearing his contribution.

Good family foundations are vital to building up the strong communities that we all want to see across Northern Ireland.

The existence of the support mechanism provided by early intervention is vital to help families and children deal with a variety of issues, and it improves outcomes and educational attainment. The Home-Start programme is an excellent model for the interesting mix between state funding and the huge contribution made by the voluntary sector. As we all know, volunteers who give of their time, talents and energy can make a huge contribution to families.

With the end of the children's fund, we also must examine the wider funding issue, as a 30% shortfall in funding for children's services has been identified.

Miss McIlveen mentioned some particularly relevant areas. A fellow South Down Member, P J Bradley, is also present. Obviously, Members from the South Down constituency, which takes in Kilkeel, Ballynahinch and Newcastle, are particularly anxious — as too are those from Armagh. Having visited Home-Start's Kilkeel branch with councillor Isaac Hanna, who is a party colleague, and having seen the work that it does at first hand, I am supportive of that worthwhile programme, which makes a huge contribution to communities and families.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Members for the opportunity to reply to the debate. I have taken on board the useful comments that have been made by many of the contributors to the debate.

Home-Start was established in Northern Ireland more than 20 years ago. Its main aim is to provide support, through a volunteer-based home-visit service,

to families with children under five years of age, and which are experiencing stress. Children are a key priority for the Executive. My Department has special responsibility for 2,500 children who are in care, and 1,600 children who are on the child-protection register. Therefore, I am particularly aware of the duty to meet the needs of children and young people who are in care.

Indeed, one of the earliest debates in the Assembly was on one of the Department's key strategies — Care Matters. We all want to improve children's lives. As far as possible, we must ensure that they do not have to enter care in the first place. Care Matters is aimed at keeping children out of care, and supporting those who are in care, and those who leave care. A key aim is to support families who are experiencing stress in order to ensure that children are not taken into care, because the outcomes for children in care are poor when compared with the rest of the child population in Northern Ireland. Almost every relevant statistic shows that children who spend time in care are worse off than their counterparts.

Since April 2003, Home-Start in the Ards, Comber and peninsula area has been supported by the Department, through the children's fund. To date, grant-aid assistance in the region of £182,000 has been provided to support the salary costs that are associated with the posts of senior co-ordinator, respite co-ordinator, four part-time playgroup workers, and some administrative support. That assistance will continue until March 2008, when the current round of funding is set to end. The children's fund also supports locally based Home-Start schemes in Armagh and Dungannon, Newry and Mourne, and Down District. That funding will continue until March 2008. In addition to that, as part of the Department's core funding arrangements, it will provide support to Home-Start's regional office to assist with central running costs. That funding is currently in the first year of a three-year cycle.

I understand that the project continues to attract and train volunteer workers. It sees between 20 and 25 new referrals each quarter and would typically, during a similar period, provide around 20 families with respite by providing childcare. Its home-visit volunteers also support up to 50 families.

I am well aware of the concerns in the voluntary and community sector about the future of the children's fund after the current funding runs out. Before I comment on that, I believe that it is important that Members understand the background to the children's fund, and my Department's involvement. The fund was created by the previous Northern Ireland Executive back in 2001. It was established to provide project funding of up to three years' duration to voluntary and community groups for their work with disadvantaged children and young people. The 89 projects that are currently supported by the fund represent a wide range of activities that span the business areas of several Departments.

Although my Department administers those funds, it is not solely a DHSSPS initiative. The funding arrange-

ments to support the children's fund, reflect the cross-government nature of the initiative.

At the outset, the Executive made available £17.5 million from Executive programme funds to support the children's fund over the four years from April 2003 to March 2007. That funding was augmented from March 2007 by additional funds that were made available by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mr Peter Hain when he announced a children's and young people's funding package. All projects were advised that funding would not continue beyond March 2008. That contrasts with the voluntary and community sectors' commonly held view that the additional money was ring-fenced in the children's and young people's funding package to provide continuing support to groups that are working with children and young people, including children's fund projects.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is directly responsible for only 57 of the 89 projects that are currently supported. The four Home-Start schemes are included among those 57 projects. The other 32 projects are for other Ministers to consider. Members will be aware of the inadequacy of next year's proposed Budget allocation for my Department. As a result, I cannot guarantee that all existing projects will be supported in future or to the level that they have been in the past. It will simply not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until consultation on the draft Budget has been completed and final decisions have been taken.

In the meantime, I have asked my officials to liaise with the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Office to see whether they can assist with funding. I know how important it is that existing projects are given early confirmation about their future funding. I assure Members that that information will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

The Home-Start fund comes under the children's and young people's funding package, which is being wound up next March. That is why we are in this situation. Four Home-Start schemes will be affected, one of which is the Home-Start scheme in Ards, Comber and the Peninsula; also affected are Home-Start schemes in Armagh, Dungannon, Down district and Newry and Mourne.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety administered funds that were provided from the centre; however, from March 2008 there will be no money. My Department is trying to manage the future; we are looking for funds. We should be able to manage until next year; after that, however, there will be serious problems, and we will not be able to manage. I am trying to look on the Home-Start schemes as inescapables because they are ongoing and employ people. One simply cannot tell people that the draft Budget has abolished their funding; there has to be a period for a soft landing. I am trying to do that.

The Budget will abolish the children's and young people's fund, and that is why we are in this situation. Members have heard me talk about the Budget and have heard me highlight the problems that I face with it. It was not a joke; I was not playing politics; I was not trying to be clever or to wind anyone up; I was not trying to be difficult. I told the truth. The cuts in funding to Home-Start schemes are one of the consequences — only one of them — of my Department's Budget allocation, and it is small when compared to the list before me.

Mrs Robinson — who is no longer in the Chamber — talked about efficiencies in the four health and social services boards as a result of amalgamations. As far as jobs saved are concerned, we have already reached the efficiencies for years 1 and 2. I have already said that I will reach the efficiencies on 3% CSR of £343 million. That will still not do it. Although £450 million of new money is coming into the health budget over three years, £700,000 comes out of it in unavoidable and inescapables.

6.30 pm

I am left with only £97 million over three years for service developments, and those moneys are to be found in the third year, as the efficiencies emerge. There is virtually nothing in year 1 and year 2. That is the problem with which I am faced, and that is why I am complaining. Despite accusations that I agreed to the Budget, the fact is that I never agreed to it — I refused to agree to it, and the minutes of the Executive Committee meetings fully exonerate me. I will continue to argue that point.

Members who talk about the draft Budget being a good Budget for health — as some have — need to consider their position very carefully. Every Member will be asked to make a decision about, and vote on, the draft Budget. It will be at that point that push comes to shove, and Members will have to justify to their constituents the consequences of agreeing to the allocations. The end to funding for Home-Start is one such consequence, and let me assure the Assembly that, as far as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned, it is one of the small consequences. There are bigger consequences to come.

Mrs Robinson suggested at last Thursday's meeting of the Health Committee that Belfast had too many hospitals, and that hospital closures were the way to fix the Health Service. That is not the way to do it. I am not up for shutting down hospitals and cutting back on services. I am in favour of maintaining the service as it is, because that is the service that the people of Northern Ireland need, desire and require. However, as matters stand, if the Budget does not change, the Home-Start scheme will be a casualty — and that is why I am arguing for change.

Adjourned at 6.31 pm.

