
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Murder in Dungannon

Tuesday 16 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before we begin proceedings, I once again remind Members that they should not attempt to enter or exit the Chamber through the doors behind the Speaker's Chair, which some Members did yesterday. New arrangements have been put in place for Members to enter and exit the Chamber through the doors on the right and left of the Officials' Boxes. I hope that Members agree that those measures are safer and more convenient.

Mr Speaker: Ms Michelle Gildernew has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Gildernew to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call other Members from the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak. There will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or for a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded.

I remind Members of the requirements under Standing Order 73 about matters that are sub judice. Members should be conscious that criminal charges have been brought on this matter, and I am particularly anxious that they say nothing that may prejudice any possible future court proceedings. If that is clear to all sides of the House, we will proceed.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My statement this morning is in relation to the brutal murder of Eamonn Hughes on Friday night in Dungannon. I convey my sympathies, thoughts and prayers to the Hughes family — to Eamonn's wife, Eileen, and to his children — on his brutal murder. The murder is especially poignant given that it came on the night that the family were celebrating Eamonn's daughter Siobhan's eighteenth birthday. I know that the family is grieving and is deeply traumatised by the awful murder, as is the entire community in Dungannon and the wider community.

The murder must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. I reiterate the appeal that I made on Saturday for anyone who has information to bring that to the PSNI. I know that charges have been made, but I want to ensure that Eamonn's family get justice. That is especially relevant considering that Eamonn's father was murdered 18 years ago and Eamonn spent the last 18 years fighting for justice for his father, Francie. I hope that Eamonn's family do not have as long to wait for justice for him.

The entire community is behind the Hughes family, which is grieving along with the rest of us. Eamonn was an absolute stalwart of the community. One can read the death notices from different community groups, including the Lourdes Diocesan Pilgrimage Committee of which Eamonn was a member and which has done a huge amount of work to bring sick people to Lourdes.

Eamonn will be deeply missed in Dungannon and by the Tyrone community. We sympathise with his

family and we want to ensure that Eamonn's murderers are brought to justice. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Lord Morrow: I also pay my condolences to the Hughes family. The murder of Eamonn Hughes has cast a very dark shadow across Dungannon and South Tyrone, and, indeed, across the whole of Northern Ireland.

It must be said that the brutal murder of that man, and the way in which he was done to death, is nothing short of disgraceful and deplorable. It conveys a message to the community as a whole that we must throw our lot behind the PSNI in its attempts to bring to justice those who are involved and engaged in those sorts of activities. I am aware that the matter is now sub judice in that people have been charged. Therefore, Members may not be at liberty to say everything that they want to say; but a state of lawlessness seems to be beginning to raise its head and reach right across the Province.

Just yesterday in the Assembly, Members talked about the situation in which dissidents and others are active. We want to send out a clear message — as representatives in the Assembly — that we are wholeheartedly behind the PSNI in its attempts to bring everyone engaged in those sorts of activities to justice.

In the past, there have been other serious incidents in Dungannon — the attempt on a policeman's life, for which no one has been brought before the courts. That tells me that the police are having difficulty receiving the information that they require. A clear message must go out that we, as public representatives, are not going to withhold any information from the PSNI that will assist it in doing its duty and bringing those who carry out those deeds to justice. It is easy to condemn the murder, which we will all do sincerely. However, we have to go a stage further and show our abhorrence. The best way to do that is by fully supporting the agencies of law and order, which is the PSNI in this particular case.

Mr Elliott: Like others, I put my and the Ulster Unionist Party's sympathy for the Hughes family and for the murder of Mr Hughes on record. Quite clearly, the community in this Province and in the Dungannon and South Tyrone area has suffered a great blow because of the murder.

Unfortunately, in today's society, knife crime and similar criminality is becoming much too common. I trust that the community, not only in Dungannon and South Tyrone but throughout the entire Province, will rally to support the Hughes family, both to act as a comfort to them and in the hope that justice will be served.

Mr Gallagher: On behalf of the SDLP, I add my sympathy to Eamonn Hughes's wife, Eileen, his daughters and son, and the entire family circle.

As has already been said, this is the second tragedy for the Hughes family, after the murder of Eamonn Hughes's father Frank, who was a taxi driver. Like other constituency Members, I got to know Eamonn Hughes through his pursuit of the truth into his father's killing.

Having just come out of shock after the death in March of Sean Fitzpatrick, who lived a few doors away from Eamonn Hughes in Lisnahull, the neighbourhood is again in shock. I hope that the future will bring both families the comfort of justice.

As elected representatives, Members must redouble their efforts to strengthen policing arrangements, particularly at community level, not only in Dungannon but throughout Northern Ireland. We must continue to work towards putting in place arrangements that ensure that the truth is revealed about all past events, particularly those that concern the deaths of innocent victims of the Troubles.

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 about the North/South Ministerial Council meeting 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, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The meeting was held in Belfast on Thursday 26 June 2008. The Executive were represented by Jeffrey Donaldson and me, and the Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, and the Minister of State Seán Power. This statement has been agreed with Minister Donaldson.

The chairperson and the chief executive of the Loughs Agency, Mr Tarlach O Crosain and Mr Derick Anderson respectively, presented a report to the Council on developments since the previous meeting in May 2008.

Ministers noted that the first commencement Order relating to the 2007 Foyle and Carlingford fisheries legislation came into operation on 1 June 2008 and that two further commencement Orders are being considered and will be reported on later in the year. The commencement Orders are required to bring into effect provisions that extend the functions of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission on licensing and development of aquaculture and on conservation and protection of fisheries in Foyle and Carlingford.

Ministers noted that the agency had purchased a 17 m catamaran at a cost of approximately £300,000, the delivery of which is anticipated before the end of 2008. The new boat will be used to collect the management data required for the sustainable development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough.

Ministers also noted that the agency's successful biodiversity week, which was held in May, involved 37 events and attracted the participation of more than 1,500 people.

The Council received a presentation on the Loughs Agency's financial-assistance strategy for sustainable angling and marine tourism. To date, 25 applications have been recommended for funding support, including angling events, the provision of drying

rooms at tourism-based accommodation and habitat enhancements to encourage the natural development of fish stock.

The Council approved five sets of regulations. The first prohibits the sale in the Foyle and Carlingford areas of salmon and sea trout caught by rod and line.

The agency believes that the introduction of that legislation will reduce the opportunities for the disposal of illegally caught salmon and sea trout for gain, and will encourage the conservation of stocks by legitimate anglers.

10.45 am

The other regulations approved by Ministers are designed to help with the conservation and protection of the native oyster in Lough Foyle.

The Council also considered a Waterways Ireland paper, included on the agenda at the request of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell, and approved its proposal to grant a 99-year lease to Galway County Council in respect of an area of land in the River Suck valley in County Galway.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will be held in November 2008. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: I am disappointed at how little content there was in that short statement.

The Minister referred to "financial assistance", much of which appears to be based around tourism here. Is any financial assistance for the fishing industry being discussed?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To qualify my statement, there had been a meeting of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission in May in order to clear up a small amount of business before the summer recess. That is why there were a limited number of items on the agenda.

The Member's question relates to tourism and protection of stocks. I said that 25 projects had been approved. I presume that he is talking about the hardship payments to the commercial salmon fishermen on the Foyle, which were discussed at the Council meeting. The Loughs Agency made the first payment, totalling €2.5 million, to affected fishermen in December 2007. The second stage of payments, totalling €600,000, was paid in April 2008. The final stage of payment is expected in spring 2009.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she provide more detail on biodiversity week and outline the potential for the aquaculture sector in Carlingford and Foyle? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: International biodiversity day was celebrated on Tuesday 22 May 2008 and the celebrations were extended to become the first ever national biodiversity week, which ran from 17 to 25 May.

The aim of biodiversity day was to celebrate Ireland's biodiversity and to promote awareness of the need to protect our natural environment. As part of the Irish celebrations, six biodiversity hubs were selected, including the Foyle catchment area. A total of 37 events were scheduled in the Foyle area over the week, which attracted more than 1,500 visitors. The schools programme was fully booked — 32 schools sessions took place — and the week was a resounding success.

On the question of aquaculture development, during the NSMC meeting in May the Loughs Agency presented its plans for aquaculture in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. I believe that there is significant potential to develop the sector, which is already valuable in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. The transfer of aquaculture licensing powers to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission will allow aquaculture operations in Lough Foyle to be licensed through the Loughs Agency for the first time, which is an important step in ensuring a transparently good standard of practice in relation to husbandry, hygiene, fish welfare, disease control and environmental impact.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her short statement. I note that 25 applications have been recommended for tourism, angling and marine tourism. Has there been any discussion with, or approval from, the Planning Service on those applications that require such permission? Has that been dealt with? A difficult situation is developing around tourism and planning developments.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his question. I queried the same thing, because I accept and understand the potential difficulties. Very few physical construction projects are involved, so planning permission was not a serious issue for the agency and did not delay any of the applications.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement.

I have two questions regarding the new catamaran that the Minister said the Loughs Agency had purchased.

From where did the funds for the purchase of the new boat come? Furthermore, and more importantly, will the Minister provide a breakdown of the arrangements that are in place for the sourcing of funding to maintain and staff the vessel?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The funding for the boat came from the budget of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights

Commission, and it cost in the region of £300,000. The vessel was purchased second-hand in New Zealand in an effort to keep costs down. The boats that were carrying out the agency's work are no longer fit for purpose; they are unable to go into the shallow waters of the Foyle. The new boat was necessary in order to carry out the agency's work effectively.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to sustainable angling and conservation of stocks. There is evidence of a significant reduction in salmon runs, particularly on the Foyle and into upper reaches such as the Strule and Owenkillew rivers. At the Council meeting, were discussions held on that problem and on what action the Minister can take to ensure that stocks are enhanced for the future?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: That was not discussed at the meeting. However, if the Member wishes, he can write to me, and I will be happy to provide him with the information.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the conservation and protection of fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. One of the first regulations bans the sale of salmon and sea trout that are caught by rod and line. Is that necessary, since it concerns such a small amount of fish?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The agency decided that it was necessary to ban such sales. We are trying to conserve and protect salmon and sea trout stocks in the area. The knock-on benefit with regard to legally caught fish — including salmon — has a positive impact on the area. There were enough cases of illegal fishing to concern the agency and prompt it to do something to rectify the situation. Since the regulation was introduced, we have seen a great improvement in conservation, and it has had a positive impact on the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries areas.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to maps — or a map — of the Foyle basin. My information is that there were three maps: one lodged with the Irish Government; one lodged with the Northern Administration; and one lodged with the Foyle Fisheries Commission or its successor. Has the Minister any information about the detail of those maps or their whereabouts?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am aware that the maps, apparently, exist. They were drawn in 1952. The Loughs Agency — which, prior to 1999, was known as the Foyle Fisheries Commission — managed the rights on behalf of the two Governments. I understand that three maps were lodged with the Governments. Despite recent searches of the DARD library, the Northern Ireland Assembly Library and our archived records for the

time, departmental officials have been unsuccessful in locating the Northern copy, but we are still working on it. I do not have any up-to-date information but will be happy to inform the Member when I do.

Mr Poots: I note that the meeting took place, and — given the costs, expense and staff involved in holding such meetings — I question whether it is necessary to hold meetings merely for the sake of doing so.

The Council received a presentation on the 25 applications that were recommended for funding support. How many of those applications applied to Northern Ireland? What capital projects are taking place in Northern Ireland as a consequence?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We were required to hold the meeting because regulations had to be put in place for this year's fishing season, and the NSMC must approve those regulations; the meeting was necessary. I can return to the Member with details on the 25 applications for funding. We did not go into the specifics of each case, so I do not have the information today. However, I can furnish him with that information. I do know that few capital projects were involved in the 25 applications.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Have any realistic estimates been made of the levels of salmon and trout that are being caught illegally? Having worked with some anglers in the South Down constituency and visited their hatcheries, I believe that the statement will be welcomed. Will the Minister reassure anglers and others involved in that sport that the initiative will have a speedy impact on the conservation of that sport and leisure activity?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The initiative is already having a positive impact on the sustainability of stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. I do not have the specific figures requested by the Member, but I believe that there was a lot of illegal fishing previously. The measures that have been taken are necessary in order to enhance and conserve fish stocks and to ensure that there is a fair and equitable system in place for everyone's enjoyment of angling in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement and I thank her and her ministerial colleagues for the work that was done during that meeting, some of which, helpfully, advanced work in another sectoral format.

The Minister referred to the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries legislation — specifically to one commencement Order that is already in operation, as well as another two that are to follow, which she said will be reported on later in the year. Does that mean that those Orders will come into operation later in the year? Will the Minister tell us what issues must be resolved before commencement dates can be set? Does the Minister

have any feedback on how the legislation that has come into operation has worked during its first quarter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: At this stage, it is proposed that the primary legislation will be commenced in three stages. The first commencement Order, which relates to miscellaneous amendments to the 1952 Foyle Fisheries Act, came into operation on 1 June 2008, and it enables the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission to make regulations relating to aquaculture.

The aquaculture licensing provisions will commence as soon as the mechanisms that are necessary to deliver an effective aquaculture regulatory system have been established by the Loughs Agency. Provision will also be made for the operation of the aquaculture offences provisions in respect of Lough Foyle to be delayed until aquaculture licences have been issued, to ensure that the existing, unregulated operators there are not penalised pending the roll-out of licences. The agency has striven to ensure that no one will be disadvantaged as a result of the regulations being introduced and that operators are still able to carry out their work. That is also important for conservation and fish protection.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned that there will be restrictions on salmon and sea trout fishing. I am concerned about that on behalf of those who enjoy fishing as a sport as well as those who create tourism potential from it. Just last week, my colleague Maurice Morrow managed to catch a 16 lb salmon — not in Carlingford Lough, but elsewhere. That salmon is almost the size of him, and that should give an idea of how big it is. *[Laughter.]* He has not invited me to share his salmon yet, but I hope that he will do so shortly.

What discussions has the Minister had with angling clubs to get their support for exploring the tourism potential of salmon and sea trout fishing? I ask that question because she referred to 25 applications that have been made to the Loughs Agency's financial assistance strategy, some of which will have been made by angling clubs. To me, it seems to be contradictory to restrict fishing for salmon and sea trout but, at the same time, encourage angling clubs — I am trying to understand how she will marry those two strategies. Furthermore, what contact has been made with some of the major fishing organisations to seek their co-operation on those matters?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is a lot in there, so I hope that I can cover it all — never mind the one that got away. *[Laughter.]*

In effect, the regulations are trying to do away with the illegal rod-fishing of salmon and sea trout.

That will ensure that fish stocks are maintained for all the purposes that the Member mentioned: for angling

clubs, tourism, and all the other opportunities that are available. It is not just a matter of conserving stocks for tourists; it is a matter of ensuring that local people can experience the enjoyment of fishing and that there are fish to be caught. Therefore, the regulations are very carefully drafted to maximise people's enjoyment of angling and fishing.

11.00 am

Before such regulations are introduced, there is a great deal of consultation between the Department and angling clubs, and others. Advertisements are placed in the local press to ensure a good, transparent mechanism for introducing regulations.

It is important to regulate how stocks are managed and to ensure that there are benefits for everyone. For example, anglers can purchase carcass tags and, if those tags are unused, the money paid for them can be refunded. That ensures that people from all walks of life — particularly young people — can be assured that there is a point to going out and sitting on a river bank for hours, and that they catch something in the end.

It is important that stocks of fish be conserved for everyone, and that the few individuals who are involved in the illegal catching and taking of fish are prosecuted. The Loughs Agency has worked very hard to ensure that there is a fair and equitable system across the board.

Lord Morrow: I agree that conserving salmon stock is vital. Before I rose to speak, I was reading the provisions of my fishing licence.

Does the Minister believe that what she has outlined today will be significant and sufficient enough to ensure that salmon stocks are preserved? The Minister has said that the first of the measures prohibits the sale — in the Foyle and Carlingford areas — of salmon and sea trout caught by rod and line. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what new resources she intends to introduce so that that prohibition can be enforced, because there is a stipulation on a fishing licence that an individual angler can take only two salmon a day?

Moreover, will the Minister tell us why it is believed that salmon are running later in the season or, in some cases, out of season? Will she inform the House of measures that she has taken to deal with that matter?

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

Policing of the measures will be vital if they are to be properly implemented. Therefore, can she tell us what new resources will be introduced to ensure that they are policed?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Member has asked four or five questions. I presume that he does not need to travel to the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas, and that

there are plenty of opportunities to practice his angling skills in his own constituency.

The Loughs Agency is carrying out important work to ensure the regulation of stocks. There are resources in its budget for the employment of river-watchers and bailiffs to ensure that there are no illegal catches of salmon and to ensure the conservation of stocks. I am content that that work is being done and that the budgets are in place to enable the agency to carry out its very important work.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr 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 to make 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 calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that the Department retains lead responsibility for Neighbourhood Renewal, now and in the future, to ensure that social deprivation is tackled in our communities and that there is joined-up delivery.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of my party, I thank the Business Committee for supporting the inclusion of the motion on the Order Paper and for facilitating this debate.

We all understand that neighbourhood renewal must be a genuinely cross-departmental programme if it is to be truly successful. On 5 June 2008, the Committee for Social Development heard evidence on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal programme.

From our own direct experience of working with groups in the community and voluntary sector, and through our request for additional information from officials, Members have ascertained quickly that there are huge gaps in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal across the board.

In March this year, the Minister announced that she was committing £60 million over a three-year period to 36 communities, some of which are the most disadvantaged in the North. Neighbourhood renewal funding aims to tackle multiple deprivation through a focused approach on local needs that have been identified by the communities.

On 10 March, the Minister said:

“Neighbourhood Renewal requires that all Departments support renewed efforts to improve the delivery of better services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including health, education and training. My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments”.

Members can all agree with that statement. A cross-departmental strategy that is regularly reviewed, closely monitored and, above all else, funded and actioned, is imperative in addressing multiple deprivation in our communities.

Sinn Féin believes that community development leads, and is essential to, community empowerment. There are many outstanding examples of that in all our communities throughout the North.

The promise made many years ago by the Department for Social Development (DSD), which retains the lead responsibility for the community and voluntary sector through its voluntary and community unit, has failed, and there is much uncertainty about future funding. In addition, the Minister for Social Development suggested that other Ministers should come in and pick up the tab for the programme from next March. That is totally unachievable, particularly given the lack of initiative from DSD to realise it.

Direct rule Ministers held quarterly meetings of the cross-departmental group tasked with delivering neighbourhood renewal. Since taking up office in May 2007, Margaret Ritchie has called two cross-departmental meetings — one in August 2007 and one in July 2008. It is a sad indictment that a locally elected Minister has placed tackling social deprivation in disadvantaged communities so low on her list of priorities. Furthermore, the Minister has never raised the issue at an Executive meeting, although I am sure that we will hear today that she intends to bring a paper to the Executive — a familiar mantra.

In the process of trying to garner information, the Committee for Social Development devised a questionnaire on neighbourhood renewal. The evidence gained from some of the respondents made it clear that, despite their evidence and efforts, there is a lack of true partnership, particularly as regards the role of, and investment from, other statutory bodies. There has been a lack of leadership on the programme, and communities involved in neighbourhood renewal partnerships feel that other Departments, and some of the statutory bodies, are simply playing lip service to the implementation of neighbourhood renewal programmes.

The delivery of the much-needed services that were identified by the communities in their action plans is absolutely crucial. Furthermore, respondents to the questionnaire recognised the potential in the concept of neighbourhood renewal to sustain and develop communities, and they are now waiting to see how that will roll out. Undoubtedly, expectations have been raised, and we are in danger of dashing those expectations unless we can ensure that true and genuine partnership and delivery is driven and resourced properly.

Some additional comments from respondents pointed to the disappointment that the whole process was more top-down than bottom-up. Communities have demonstrated a clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal. However, that has not been matched by agencies and Departments. Indeed, the Minister has yet to issue any guidance to other Departments and agencies on their roles and responsibilities for neighbourhood renewal. We must hear what the Minister intends to do about the transfer of urban regeneration, and that includes the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local government, which must be explained further.

Will the Minister ensure that equality mechanisms are in place before the transfer begins? That will ensure delivery from councils based on objective need, rather than any attempt at political carve ups. Will the Minister give the Assembly details of how all posts will be secured and what commitments have been made from other Departments? There is no real evidence of how it will work out practically.

The community and voluntary sector deserves better support, and it has detailed what it has done. The House needs to hear the details of how neighbourhood renewal is going to be implemented and supported by other Departments. We need to hear what the Minister has done to secure the resources and commitment of other Departments in the entire process. Unless that happens, neighbourhood renewal will be under serious threat.

Unfortunately, we were not in a position to review the September monitoring round in the Committee because the officials failed to bring that information to us. There is a lot of uncertainty about what money is available and what can be done. The community and voluntary sector has expressed its views, and we must support that sector. We must also support the Minister in ensuring that there is a joined-up approach. Unless that can be done properly, the programme will be under serious threat and the communities will, once again, be totally disillusioned with what we are delivering. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Simpson: I wish to say at the outset that I am speaking in this debate as a Member of the Assembly and not as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

In the past, the Minister has described neighbourhood renewal as the Executive's flagship strategy for addressing deprivation in local communities. That is a commendable attitude, born of an acknowledgement that many areas across Northern Ireland are in great need of help. All Members of the Assembly could point to parts of their respective constituencies where action is required.

However, I believe that the proposal of the motion is premature, because departmental officials will appear before the Committee on Thursday to answer questions about neighbourhood renewal. We hope that a number of questions will be put forward and given clarification at that meeting. At this stage, we cannot support the motion.

There is also something amiss in that all the signatures attached to the motion are those of Sinn Féin MLAs. I say that not as a unionist or a democratic unionist but as someone with a personal interest in seeing Northern Ireland and her people enjoy a better, more peaceful and prosperous future. It is ironic that — from early summer at least — Sinn Féin has been threatening to walk away and pull down these institutions unless its political wish is fulfilled.

Why is Sinn Féin making that threat? Is it to secure better healthcare for the old, the sick and the infirm? Is it to secure a better future for children growing up in poverty? Is it to place more emphasis on jobs and investment? Is it to give senior citizens a better life? Is it about giving greater dignity to people with disabilities? No, it is not. That threat is an attempt to cover up the fact that Sinn Féin negotiated so badly in the St Andrews meetings. Only the most indoctrinated member of Sinn Féin could fail to see the bitter irony of Sinn Féin MLAs now proposing a motion such as this to the Assembly.

Neighbourhood renewal is a vital ingredient in how we will shape the future of the Province. One of my council areas in Craigavon has benefited greatly from money that has come through projects in Lurgan, Portadown, and elsewhere.

11.15 am

Having said all that, I have already raised several issues with the Minister, and I trust that she will be able to address some of them today. There are concerns that there is not enough departmental buy-in to the renewal programme. If responsibility for the programme is passed down to councils, how will that operate? If the mechanisms are not working at this level of government, what guarantees are there that they will work at council level?

My party and I agree with the proposal to devolve responsibility to councils, but there are concerns that such a move will mean that momentum is not kept up. Furthermore, some areas in the Province have found that money has been slow in coming to them; indeed, some have still not received any money. I should like the Minister to clarify those issues in her response today. At this stage, my party is not in a position to support the motion.

Mr Cobain: I support the motion. The neighbourhood renewal programme has generated much debate in the past five years, and in the past three years in particular.

It is important to remind ourselves of the strategic aims of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, which were set out five years ago. They are to develop confident communities that are able and committed to improving the quality of life in their areas; to develop economic activity in the most deprived neighbourhoods and connect them to the wider economy; to improve social conditions for people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods through better co-ordinated public services and the creation of safer environments; and, most importantly, to help to create attractive, safe, sustainable environments in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships were supposedly established to focus Departments and to allow communities to examine and distribute particular budgets in a way that they thought would be best for

them. The partnerships aspired to take on the big issues, such as housing, health and education, which have an effect on deprivation levels. On paper, they looked the business; they gave communities real hope and, crucially, intimated that they would create joined-up government with cross-departmental responsibilities, thus offering the opportunity, for the first time, to get the approach right. We were also promised new thinking and the flexibility to involve communities in a real, meaningful way. Communities were led to believe that the neighbourhood renewal programme would involve proper engagement with all the relevant Departments and agencies.

Mr F McCann: The Member and I have attended several meetings, outside the Assembly, on neighbourhood renewal with communities and DSD representatives. Sadly, Mr Simpson made a political speech and tried to turn a debate on neighbourhood renewal into a broader debate. Does Mr Cobain agree that both he and Sinn Féin Members have continually raised this matter at meetings of the Social Development Committee? Does he agree that all the concerns that both he and Carál have voiced today have already been raised and that this is not a new-fangled matter that has only been raised in the Assembly?

Mr Cobain: Thank you very much for that point, Mr McCann. Everyone who is committed to tackling social deprivation — and I will expand on this point later — has grave concerns about devolving responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils. It saddens me that despite numerous initiatives and strategies, nothing has really changed; nothing has really been done to improve the lives of the most deprived communities throughout Northern Ireland. The new approach that the neighbourhood renewal programme offered has never been implemented, and Departments other than DSD have not lived up to their responsibilities.

The main issue is that none of the Departments has bought into neighbourhood renewal. Likewise, the health boards, the housing associations and the education and library boards have not bought into it. None of the big drivers that could have made a difference to social deprivation have bought into it. Departments talk about tackling deprivation, but their representatives do not even attend the necessary meetings, and no sanction is imposed on them.

As a direct result of its failings, DSD now seeks to wash its hands of the issue by passing responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils as part of the review of public administration. Had neighbourhood renewal been a success, we certainly would not be toying with the nonsensical idea of transferring the programme to local councils. I am disappointed that people think that transferring responsibility to councils will make a difference.

Many issues, including education and health, have an impact on deprivation.

Mr Newton: I may have misunderstood the Member, but will he clarify that he said that the Health Minister — his party's own Minister — has not bought into neighbourhood renewal and does not support the strategy?

Mr Cobain: All Departments, including those for which the four DUP Ministers hold responsibility, have not bought into it. This is not a matter of point scoring. We are talking about the poorest and most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. On numerous occasions, I have witnessed crocodile tears being shed from the party to my left, but when it comes to helping to sustain those communities, we get no help from it.

I am concerned that councils do not have the wherewithal to deal with the neighbourhood renewal initiative. The notion of placing an additional resource burden on councils to provide funding is absolutely ludicrous. More importantly, we will get nowhere without having a long-term strategic plan to tackle deprivation. Furthermore, it takes between 10 and 20 years to plan for long-term action on education and housing matters.

How will a council tell the Department for Social Development to spend additional money on housing in a particular area? More importantly, how will a council influence Caitríona Ruane to spend additional money on education in particular areas? What mechanism will be used for that? What could a Belfast City Council member — or any other councillor — do that Margaret Ritchie, who is a member of the Stormont Executive, could not? I do not know how a councillor will be able to get departmental representatives to turn up to meetings and engage with people when a Minister, with all her powers, cannot manage it.

Mr A Maginness: I am mystified by the motion, and I question the motivation of the Members who proposed it. In essence, the motion states that the Minister for Social Development should retain the leading role in relation to neighbourhood renewal policy. The Minister indicated months ago that her Department will retain that role, so I am slightly puzzled by the purpose of the motion.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development said, the motion is premature. The motion is meaningless, and it is politically motivated in the most partisan fashion. Sinn Féin should erect a big "wailing wall", and it should name it the "DSD wall". All Sinn Féin Members could go to that wall and graffiti it with anti-Ritchie slogans, stating that Margaret Ritchie did not produce the houses, and that they are determined to prevent her from producing them, because then she would become popular, and they do not want that, so they do not want any houses to be built.

Sinn Féin could say that it does not want £6.6 million to go to North Belfast, or £12.8 million to go to West Belfast. I am sure that Fra McCann would be glad if that money was removed from West Belfast, because he was happy with the original budget for DSD — which had to be amended — which stated that there were sufficient funds for the social housing programme. Mr McCann stood up in the House and said that that budget allocation was adequate, yet the Minister of Finance came back and said that it was not, and that he was giving more money to the Minister for Social Development.

Mr F McCann: Alban Maginness is misquoting me. I have always argued, whether in meetings of the Committee for Finance and Personnel or elsewhere, that there should be a proper budget for housing. The reality is that Mr Maginness's party —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat. Please continue, Mr Maginness.

Mr A Maginness: Members should read Hansard to see what Fra McCann said.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member recall that Mr McCann used the words: stop whingeing and take the money?

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to my friend for that quotation. It had slipped my mind. *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I must have the Floor.

What the Minister for Social Development proposed is, in fact, what was collectively agreed by Sinn Féin, DUP and Ulster Unionist Ministers in the Executive.

Mr Cobain: Does the Member believe that deprived communities throughout Northern Ireland would be better off if neighbourhood renewal was devolved to local councils?

Mr A Maginness: Yes. The operation of neighbourhood renewal should be at local council level. People at that level know where the problems are and how to tackle them effectively and efficiently. Mr Cobain is absolutely right. We should be very vigilant, and we should be determined that the Executive pull their weight — the Northern Ireland Executive, not the Housing Executive — in order to ensure that everyone at local and council level is involved fully in the implementation of local plans.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot; I am running out of time.

Councils are best placed to deal with neighbourhood renewal. We are talking about neighbourhoods, rather than vast areas, in which councillors and communities can work together with the statutory bodies in order to make a difference. That is what we must do. Over the next three years, £60 million pounds, which should be effectively and efficiently directed towards deprived

communities, will be available. That is what we all want, despite the political banter in the House. We all want to improve communities. Local involvement is the best way to achieve that aim, but there is an onus on all the Departments represented in the Executive to combine their collective efforts. They have all signed up to neighbourhood renewal, and they must implement it.

This motion is simply another knocking exercise, and should be treated as such. It is not a proper motion for the House to discuss.

Ms Lo: When the neighbourhood renewal strategy was first mooted, I was a member of the South Belfast Partnership Board. The Chinese Welfare Association, for which I worked at the time, was one of the beneficiaries of neighbourhood renewal funding. The association built a community centre under the scheme's capital programme.

I recall the huge enthusiasm of community groups in south Belfast at the time. They conducted surveys, formed focus groups, and worked with the consultant to produce an action plan. People were very excited, and saw the strategy for the first time as a long-term and holistic plan to tackle the complex and multi-faceted nature of deprivation in an integrated way in their neighbourhoods, which were in the worst 10% of disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland.

11.30 am

The fact that the strategy set out to deal with not only the physical renewal of neighbourhoods, but regeneration in community, economic and social spheres made people hopeful that it was going to make a real difference. People were also hoping that it would maximise the effectiveness and responsiveness of public services and resources, and create genuine partnerships between the statutory bodies and the communities, so that they could work together.

However, from listening to communities and to the evidence presented to the Committee for Social Development, it is quite clear that there have been difficulties with implementing the strategy over the past few years. People talked about the lack of commitment from other Departments, poor attendance by representatives of statutory agencies, and the lack of clout of the departmental representatives who do not seem to be able to have any influence in their Departments when decisions are being made.

There is an absence of ring-fenced, matched funding. The Departments all seem to be paying lip service to that but are not coming up with the cash that will make a difference. Lack of clarity was mentioned by a number of people in relation to setting budgets in some areas, as was the fact that budgets were mostly set by the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO), rather than by the neighbourhood renewal partnerships, through communities working together. The application process

for funding is far too lengthy and bureaucratic — I remember the difficulties faced by my organisation and others when applying for funding for projects.

Although the Alliance Party supports the transfer of community planning to local government, our concern is that if the strategy is given to local communities, without any departmental lead on the action plans, and as it was so difficult for DSD to make other Departments come up with the goods, it will be difficult for local councils to make the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) meet their commitments in the strategic plan and meet priorities in their Departments. The issue is not about the transfer to local councils but the failure of other Departments —

Mr Durkan: Does the Member appreciate, particularly given the protocols that attach to such things, and the operation of the ministerial code, that a Minister for Social Development cannot indict another Minister, or indict a health trust, or any other local management entity that is under the authority of another Minister? However, local government can hold health trusts and other bodies in their local area to account and can indict them for not turning up to meetings and for not contributing meaningfully to targets that have been set in the Programme for Government.

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for his intervention. The issue is not about transfer to local councils but about the failure of Departments to buy into the idea and meet the obligations as set out in the action plans. The Department for Social Development has been working very hard to lead on the issue. I have worked with BRO's south and east team for a long time, and it is essential that the interdepartmental group redoubles its efforts to provide strategic direction to councils and their Departments to ensure that the strategy achieves its aim of renewing deprived communities, and does not, yet again, raise expectations, only to let those communities down.

The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Hilditch: As already stated, today's motion may be somewhat premature, and, therefore, difficult to support. However, social deprivation affects one in six people. I agree with the Minister when she says that it is simply unacceptable that the life chances of some in our society are determined by where he or she lives.

Although I am committed to making neighbourhood renewal work, there are aspects of the scheme that cause me great concern, such as co-ordination funding and governance.

We are lifting neighbourhood renewal from years of failure, and many Departments appear to have washed their hands of the strategy. The targets that have been set suggest that we should proceed with caution. Targets

by 2010 include a 25% reduction in the rate of births to teenage mothers aged under 17 and the creation of 6,500 jobs, of which 55% will be in deprived areas. Achieving such targets will be possible only if resources are made available and with crucial local input.

The Minister said that responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal projects will rest with local councils and that the policy will rest with DSD. I have no doubt that local authorities will be able to deliver those projects and are best placed to do so; however, questions must be answered on issues such as resources and why there has been no consultation to prove that passing responsibility to councils is a good idea. Despite those questions, it cannot result in failures worse than those to date.

In June, it was said that it would be inconceivable for education initiatives to be delivered at local level. It is unfortunate that some people hold that opinion, because local councillors have strong working relationships with their local schools, hospitals, employers and residents and are therefore aware of the problems on the ground in their boroughs and districts. However, they do not have the power to achieve the targets set for education, health and employment.

The transfer of the delivery of neighbourhood renewal projects to local authorities would mean that local government officers and councillors would make deprivation a priority for Departments and partnerships to tackle. Furthermore, that means that areas of deprivation would be identified throughout urban and rural districts and boroughs — not just in urban areas.

The only commitment to neighbourhood renewal has come from the community: all Departments have shown minimal interest. There has been a lack of meetings to discuss the way forward; minutes have not been shared; partnership boards have lacked commitment from other Departments; and consultants have not achieved what was expected of them.

It has been recognised that DSD put much effort in at the start — all of us appreciate its attempts and realise that it does not work alone on neighbourhood renewal. However, no forward work programme has been developed, and it is time for the Departments to work together to build new confidence and faith in the policy.

To be successful, neighbourhood renewal requires leadership and control. A cross-departmental group should be encouraged with more attention, guidance and motivation from the Executive to push neighbourhood renewal to the forefront. More flexibility across all Departments is required so that they can commit time and move resources, if necessary, to make it work. We must learn from successful projects, such as the Enniskillen Neighbourhood Partnership, as well as from those that have failed. We must start to monitor the impact of completed projects — no surveys have

been done to find out whether finished schemes have brought any benefit to disadvantaged communities.

Neighbourhood renewal and its projects can work, and the whole strategy is worthwhile. It has the potential to help to improve the 36 deprived communities for the 280,000 people who live in them. We must thank the Minister for the amount of groundwork that has been done recently, and we hope that the inter-agency approach to advance neighbourhood renewal in our communities will start to work. It is time for Departments to build on that and to drive the strategy to the centre of Government. I am hopeful that the Executive will urge for the joined-up delivery of neighbourhood renewal and that the long-term spiral of social deprivation can be challenged and eradicated.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The debate is timely as it comes when there is much confusion over the future of neighbourhood renewal. That the Minister for Social Development is trying to abandon the Government's strategy for tackling social deprivation and pass it to local councils is an indication of the lack of ideas in her Department on how to deal with the strategy. The situation on the ground is getting worse and many groups fear that their funding will be terminated.

Mr P Maskey: The "wailing wall" of which Alban Maginness spoke could be extended to the same size as a peace wall, due to the number of people in Belfast who are on protective notice because they have not received letters of offer to deliver neighbourhood renewal in their local areas. Well over 100 people are on protective notice, so perhaps, in the mouth of Christmas, that "wailing wall" could be extended?

Mr F McCann: Looking at the reality —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No; I have heard enough from that end of the House.

Things are getting worse for many people, and many groups fear that their funding will be terminated. If that were to happen, it would have disastrous effects for people in the community who desperately need the services that those groups provide. I have had numerous meetings with DSD officials, and I found them to be genuinely committed to neighbourhood renewal and to the development of a broad community sector. Leadership and commitment to safeguard the delivery of neighbourhood renewal is lacking from those at senior level.

In fairness, other Departments must share some of the blame, because they have refused to buy into neighbourhood renewal. The position is a far cry from that of 2003 when senior departmental officials were out selling the idea to community groups and local politicians.

To be honest, it was difficult to buy into yet another new programme when so many had come before it. However, after many hours of discussion had taken place and commitments were given, it seemed that we were being offered a new beginning in community and economic development. For the first time, it seemed that the Government had got it right. Neighbourhood renewal offered legitimate partnership between the community and Government, with the community having a say in the allocation of departmental resources in their areas.

I remember the first time that I heard the phrase, "bend to spend".

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No. DSD officials used that phrase to explain how resources could be bent to suit the needs of local communities. I also remember the same officials denying that "bend to spend" was ever used in that context. Fred Cobain and I were at the meeting at which that was said. We were also told that a cross-departmental committee would be established, which the Minister for Social Development would chair, to ensure that other Departments bought into the concept. That buy-in was crucial to the development of neighbourhood renewal. That was to be the guarantee that all relevant Departments would come to the table with the resources necessary to ensure the success of the new strategy.

When devolution was established, many people believed that it was the new beginning needed to strengthen communities and that neighbourhood renewal would be the delivery mechanism to deal with the severe deprivation that exists in many communities throughout the North. Neighbourhood renewal partnerships that were set up were empowered to deal with the serious problems of community safety; delivery of community services; local health issues; low educational attainment in schools; economic development; local sports; and many other issues that impact heavily on areas of severe social deprivation.

What have we got for our efforts? What has been delivered by way of a broad strategy for neighbourhood renewal? It is a good strategy, which, if it were delivered properly, could tackle social deprivation? The answer is quite clear — nothing has been delivered. Commitments have been broken and promises reneged on. The community was not found wanting in its commitment to the strategy; nor were several other sectors that made up the neighbourhood renewal partnerships.

What happened to the ministerial group meetings that were supposed to ensure the delivery of neighbourhood renewal? Under direct rule, meetings took place every four to six months. The first meeting under the current Minister took place on 9 August 2007. However, the group did not meet again until 28 July 2008.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member want direct rule back?

Mr F McCann: Perhaps direct rule Ministers had more interest in developing the strategy to tackle deprivation than the current Minister.

Some Members: Oh!

Mr F McCann: July 2008 marked almost one year since the first meeting of the ministerial group. Is that the way in which to run the Department's key strategy on social deprivation?

How many times has neighbourhood renewal featured on the agenda of Executive meetings? Recently, an official stated that neighbourhood renewal has not appeared on the agenda as an item for discussion. However, the Minister has indicated her intention to present a paper on neighbourhood renewal at the earliest possible convenience. That statement highlights the Minister's lack of commitment to neighbourhood renewal. Eighteen months into her appointment, she has not put the issue on the agenda for discussion, despite the fact that many groups face closure due to lack of funding.

What happened to the guidance that was supposed to be given to other Departments? The Department stated that guidance on neighbourhood renewal has not been issued to other Departments, yet it is for other Departments to determine the most effective route down which to deliver neighbourhood renewal. One of DSD's key commitments was that other Departments would be directed at ministerial level in order to ensure buy-in to neighbourhood renewal. That is another failure by the Minister to promote her Department's strategy —

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

Mr F McCann: I gave way, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I should have said that I wanted to speak for seven minutes.

The broad point that I make, on which Fred Cobain touched, is that councils should not run neighbourhood renewal projects. If Departments will not listen to the Minister, they will hardly listen to councils.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you, Mr McCann, for resuming your seat.

11.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: Looking at the list of urban wards that fall into the 10% most economically deprived wards in Northern Ireland, as measured by the Noble index, I understand why the Members opposite have tabled the motion. I note their concerns and agree that this subject deserves more attention. Like my colleagues — and Mr Maginness — I am not entirely convinced that that is not premature at this point; however, the matter is deserving of discussion.

The Committee for Social Development is still considering urban renewal, as Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Brady and Mr McCann are aware. We await responses from the Department, and, at present, we do not know the precise detail of the format by which the local councils will administer the scheme. It is for those reasons that I feel Sinn Féin is jumping the gun, so to speak. I am also a little confused by the argument that it puts forward. It is highly critical of DSD, yet wants that Department to retain what appears to be full control. Is that not contradictory?

The scheme faces considerable problems, which have been outlined by Members. It could be argued that the fact that groups are encountering those problems gives credence to the proposal to hand management of the schemes to local councils, once they have been restructured.

There is a perception among community groups that DSD is too detached from the issues faced in deprived wards. From the papers provided to the Committee, and from listening to groups, it is evident that urban renewal partnerships are losing their enthusiasm for neighbourhood renewal schemes. DSD has failed to deliver in many instances. TSN areas are being used, and that means that pockets of deprivation are being missed because of a lack of local knowledge in the Department.

Such local knowledge can be provided by councils. For example, Belfast City Council has introduced the strategic neighbourhood action programme (SNAP), an initiative that is the forerunner of community planning. Tying a programme, such as neighbourhood renewal, into community planning and other schemes run at council level, gives it a greater chance of delivering tangible results. It is at council level that great strides have been made, through local initiatives, in areas such as combating graffiti and antisocial behaviour. I have witnessed positive examples of that in my own Ards Borough Council area.

As with everything, money is the key. Unfortunately, delivery of infrastructure has not taken place in many areas. I ask the Minister to look carefully at the issue of neighbourhood renewal. She should not take its transfer to councils off the agenda; rather she should address the glaring problems. She needs to look at what the scheme does not deliver and ensure that a more refined policy goes to local councils. There must be clarity in delivery and advice available to the partnerships. The method of transition needs to be considered carefully to ensure that when responsibility is handed over to councils, it is smooth and does not adversely affect delivery of the scheme. The Minister needs to ensure that budget follows function.

Surely the whole purpose of the review of public administration is to give greater responsibility to councils

because of their greater ability to deliver at a local level. Yet we are debating a suggestion to retain an initiative that could be better delivered at local council, rather than at regional, level. Local councils can take the lead and consult directly with the community. Consequently, local identity can be enshrined in the projects.

However, much work remains to be done. I look forward to debating the issue again, once the Committee has had an adequate opportunity to consider the Department's full proposals for the transfer of the scheme.

Mr B McCrea: Does any greater challenge face the Assembly than tackling the multiple levels of deprivation that exist in many of our communities? Is it right to give responsibility for that to those who do not have the resources to deal with it? To put it bluntly, where will the councils get the money to deal with the issues that they must tackle? The whole idea of having a devolved Administration is to have a local person in charge — someone who can bring together multiple agencies to tackle multiple deprivation.

Mr O'Loan: At last, a Member gives way to allow me to make an absolutely essential point.

Community planning is a central pillar of the new scheme for local government as proposed by the review of public administration. None of those Members who have spoken against the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local government — and they belong to the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and Sinn Féin — appear to be aware of the concept of community planning or the capacity and scope that it offers to local areas.

The Minister has rightly and wisely devolved that significant power to local government, because she knows that decisions, such as retaining policy issues and supplying resources where required, are best made on the ground. The parties that I named have councillors who are members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), which has demanded and argued for strong local government. Those parties are self-contradictory; they must make up their minds about where they stand on local government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrea will have one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. One extra minute may just about make up for that intervention. When I have the courtesy to give way to a Member, I expect him or her not to abuse the opportunity. I am quite happy to engage in a debate.

What difficulties do we face in addressing the problems of neighbourhood renewal? Do we not understand what is happening? In that case, would local focus help? Or rather, is it that many cross-

cutting issues must be tackled, which can be dealt with only at Executive level?

I am on record as saying that I have the highest regard for the Minister. This is not an opportunity, despite what other Members have done, to score party political points. This is an opportunity for the Executive and Assembly to start to do the job for which they were elected, which is to tackle the endemic, systemic problems facing the most vulnerable people in our society. It is not a job that we should not delegate to other people. We should take the lead, and I expect the Minister, who is responsible for social development, to do that. I am quite sure that she can.

I want to try to depersonalise the problems that we face by using the example of a recent by-election in Glasgow East. Many constituents there face problems associated with inner-city, post-industrialised areas, such as multiple levels of deprivation, and look to find a way out.

Mr Cobain raised the issue of education. The Scottish system is comprehensive and fully engaged, and yet 20% of people are still unable to break free from the situation in which they find themselves. We need to find a clever alternative that works together with people.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, Mark, but I have already given away once before.

One of the most disappointing aspects about the Executive and the Assembly is that there is no unifying vision or determination to tackle the real problems that affect real people. I see nothing to suggest that we are going to work together to resolve those issues. We need multiple Departments working together, and that requires leadership.

Finally, we face a challenge: are we going to stay in our silos and try to do a good job for our own particular bit, or are we going to spread our wings and work together to find ways to sort out the plight of the most unfortunate members of our society? I expect Ministers to rise to that challenge that faces the Executive and the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: It is interesting that the whingers in Sinn Féin have not congratulated the Minister for Social Development for her success in getting more money for social housing, which she had to fight for. It is also interesting to hear Fra McCann call for direct rule Ministers to return and to manage neighbourhood renewal. In his contribution, Fra McCann let the cat out of the bag. He said that many people are on protective notice, because from Sinn Féin's point of view, the money is for development staff — jobs for the boys and the girls.

I am not taking away from the many good people who work in the community and voluntary sector.

However, allow me to give an example from my constituency. Under direct rule, the neighbourhood renewal panels comprised, quite substantially, either Sinn Féin councillors or former Sinn Féin councillors, because they stacked the residents' association meetings the year before.

I wrote to David Hanson two years ago, when the neighbourhood renewal plan was going forward, to advise him against funding a particular project. That project entailed the spending of £47,000 on an office in the Court ward, one of the most deprived wards of Craigavon, which was to be managed by — guess who? — a Sinn Féin councillor and his wife, acting as development workers; unpaid, of course. Do you know what has happened? It has closed down already. It had not even been in existence for six months. David Hanson gave money to that group against the knowledge of local people and protests from me, and it has failed miserably.

Many Members in the Chamber can be heard criticising the community and voluntary sector — for example the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland — for throwing money at, and parachuting into, local authority areas and spending money without consulting local councils. Now those Members want to do the same. They want to have a Department that does not have the same local knowledge as local councillors continuing to parachute into local authority areas. What nonsense.

We now know the truth of the matter. Sinn Féin voted for a Budget that was not going to tackle deprivation. The policies on tackling deprivation and building a shared future have been stuck with Sinn Féin advisers since March or May of this year — and I suspect that those are some of the papers that were referred to by Peter Robinson yesterday.

Sinn Féin has a lot to answer for on the doorsteps of deprived communities. How many people's lives have improved in West Belfast where Gerry Adams has been MP for 20 years? Not many at all. Let us ask the people on their doorsteps how their lives have improved. It is alright for Gerry and the boys — they can go to Donegal on their holidays to their holiday homes. They can go fishing during the summer and send nice letters — or make paper planes out of them and fire them across the Chamber — to Peter Robinson to tell him what we already know. Will Gerry send them a message, or will he agree to a meeting this Thursday? Let us see whether he has the guts to meet Peter Robinson and our Minister, Margaret Ritchie, across the table to tell them what Sinn Féin is going to do to tackle the real problems in our community.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Craig: I do not know how to follow a speech such as that. When I read the motion, I read it with

bewilderment, and I took advice from a few others who, I think, were equally bewildered.

The motion states that responsibility for neighbourhood renewal should remain with the Department for Social Development, or that that Department should retain a lead role in neighbourhood renewal. What is abundantly clear is that the one thing that will not change, no matter where neighbourhood renewal is devolved to, is that the Department for Social Development will have the lead role in it. That Department funds neighbourhood renewal; therefore, it is that Department that will pull the strings. If the debate is not about that issue, what is it about? Is it really about who should deliver neighbourhood renewal?

I find it extremely ironic to have Sinn Féin stating that neighbourhood renewal should be kept within the Department for Social Development. I say that because I recall attending a Social Development Committee meeting in which a member of Sinn Féin lambasted the Minister and the Department for their handling of neighbourhood renewal.

Mr F McCann: I still do.

Mr Craig: If you are unhappy with that, why do you want neighbourhood renewal to stay with that Department? That makes no sense whatsoever.

Mr F McCann: It is part of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Mr Craig: Let us be honest about this. The Committee is now dealing with neighbourhood renewal, and it is premature; we have not finished that investigation —

Mr F McCann: Someone is not reading the strategy.

Mr Craig: Let me tell you something, when we look at the survey of those who are involved with neighbourhood renewal, what was one of the main criticisms? The whole process has been more top-down than bottom-up.

That is a fair criticism, although it is not necessarily a criticism of our present Minister; the criticism concerns how that process was handled under direct rule, where we saw the top-down approach time and time again.

12.00 noon

Who can turn that around? Who can deliver a bottom-up approach? There is nobody better fitted to do that than local councils. Local councils have used the bottom-up approach for years; they have details of, and contacts in, local communities. Is the party opposite me saying that their local councillors are not the best people to do that? Is it saying that they are not fit to deliver on neighbourhood renewal? *[Interruption.]* Is that the message that that party is trying to send out to its members?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must insist that remarks be made through the Chair, not over the Chair, under the Chair or past the Chair. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Craig: I never like to avoid the Chair.

As I said, I firmly believe in our party's local councillors, and I have every confidence in them to deliver on the issue of neighbourhood renewal. I am confident that whatever new councils may come into existence, they too can deal with that issue. It is an issue that needs to be dealt with properly; it is not an issue that should lead to jobs for the boys but one that must deliver for those communities that are suffering deprivation.

Mr McCausland: There is a great deal of truth in what Dolores Kelly and Jonathan Craig have said, and I identify myself with their comments. The criticism of the current system is largely as a result of people on the ground being disappointed by the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. I want to highlight a number of points that constituents have raised with me.

The Department for Social Development has indeed been funding a range of posts under neighbourhood renewal, and some of those posts fall into the category to which Dolores referred, while others are genuine community workers. That funding was scheduled to run out on 31 August 2008. A ministerial decision was requested in October 2007, in order to ensure that the process would be completed in good time before that 31 August deadline. Despite that request, a ministerial decision was not taken until March 2008.

That announcement stated that all posts would be put into three categories: in the first category, funding would be possible from DSD until March 2011; in the second category, funding would be possible until March 2009, with other Departments expected to take up the funding thereafter; and some posts would fall into a third category, in which funding would end. Bearing in mind that funding was to cease on 31 August, those categorisations were introduced in June 2008. However, the application form for future funding was not available until early July, four months after the announcement was made, with a deadline of 31 July set for its return. That gave people approximately three weeks in which to complete the form and only seven weeks before funding ceased.

However, DSD has been unable to process those applications in time for the funding's ending on 31 August, and it may yet be a number of months before decisions are received. That has left groups with three choices: first, they can let their staff go and cease their work; secondly, they can continue to pay wages out of their own reserves, even though DSD's position until recently was that community organisations should not have reserves; or, thirdly, they can pay wages completely at risk.

Never mind the months of being unable to answer staff queries about the future of their jobs, people who were benefiting from the services — the users — were coming in with queries about the work's future sustainability and the services of which they availed themselves.

There was, therefore, a difficulty with regard to staff who had, and still have, a great deal of uncertainty about the future, and with the uncertainty of the users of the services. There is also a difficulty with regard to those who have been put into category 2, because apart from some positive signs from the Department of Health, no other firm commitments have been made to continuation funding in other Departments. That is despite the fact that six months have passed since the ministerial announcement, and three months since the categorisation.

Therefore, even if the Department for Social Development comes back to a group with an answer in October, it is only a short-term relief, with the future as unclear as ever. If work of lasting value is to be done by community organisations, it has to be recognised that that is a long-term process. Sustainability is difficult enough at the best of times, but the continuation of support should be based on the merit of the work that is being carried out, rather than groups being faced with the possibility of having to survive the administrative difficulties that have been put in their way.

I have highlighted the difficulties with the current situation. It is better that this work in future be delegated to local authorities. That is where there is real experience of working with community organisations in local areas, and where, as was said earlier, there is real local knowledge of those projects that are delivering in those areas. If we go down that road, hopefully we will see a better delivery, a better outcome and a better result for communities across the Province.

Mr Shannon: I am very much against this motion. It is vital that the neighbourhood renewal scheme is given encouragement and attention, not exclusively by the Department for Social Development, but also by councils. Much could be better handled by individual councils in conjunction with DSD.

The reason why I make that statement is quite simply this: in the past two to three years, we have been involved personally with many community groups on the Ards Peninsula whose sole purpose was to enrich their own communities and to improve people's quality of life. Community groups and residents' associations have a role to play, but we as councillors also have a role to play in the councils with which most of us are involved.

While I know where, in Ards, one can go to learn many things in order to improve one's quality of life, the difference is that when one is working in the

community, as well as, perhaps, sitting on a council, it gives one a feel for what the people are after. Councils are part of the partnership of equals. They go a long way to improving the quality of life in areas, and there should be adequate funding to enable that type of work to be undertaken in each community group, no matter what their size.

It is with some surprise that we note that one in six people in the Province is living in deprivation. In 2006, David Hanson, the then Minister for Social Development, included parts of Ards on a list of 15 wards where just shy of 2,000 people did not have an adequate standard of living. In fact, Newtownards comprised a fifth of the list. It was found that the Glen, West Winds and Bowtown estates were areas of social deprivation. When we made the Minister aware of the matter — and credit where credit is due — he kindly came down to Newtownards to look at the Scrabo estate and the issue of deprivation. Part of the workshop group with the Scrabo residents' association is trying to regenerate and rebuild, and that is happening because we are all working together and councillors on the ground have the ear of the people.

The Minister is to be congratulated for her response and for ensuring that sufficient funding has been made available so that the Scrabo estate, along with all the other estates in Newtownards, can benefit.

With regard to the Enler project, my colleague Iris Robinson, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, has worked very hard, along with DSD and other Departments, to make things happen for the Enler estate and Dundonald in particular.

That is an example of what can be done when, on the ground, people and councils work hard. The councils are best placed to pinpoint needs and allocate funding, as well as to work continually alongside local people to help and encourage them.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all Members who participated in today's debate, although I must say that I was more impressed by some contributions than others. I note that the gang of four that tabled today's motion has tabled several further motions on a range of topics for which I have ministerial responsibility. I question that, but I look forward to those debates in due course.

My intention is that the Department for Social Development should retain the lead policy responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. Therefore, in that respect, I have no difficulty with the motion as tabled. However, under proposals in the review of public administration (RPA), as approved by the Executive in September 2007, I fully intend to transfer responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal to local councils — and I recall that few Members resiled from that stance during those debates. In fact, at that stage,

members of both Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party called for meaningful powers to be devolved to local government in order to strengthen it. However, the current situation is one of mists, frustration and confusion.

I want to ensure that neighbourhood renewal goes to the heart of communities and uplifts them, as it is supposed to do. The work should be carried out by local representatives in partnership with the communities.

Although I intend to transfer to the councils the responsibility for the delivery of the strategy, I wish to make it clear that it was always, and remains, my intention that the Department should retain responsibility for policy development and for monitoring the strategy.

It may be worthwhile to go back to first principles and ask what neighbourhood renewal is about. It is a structured attempt to address deprivation in 36 local areas across Northern Ireland through the provision of additional resources and services in line with the priorities identified by communities and local partnerships in those areas.

My Department has worked hard to establish local partnerships, and they, in turn, have worked hard to produce action plans for their areas. The partnerships vary in several ways, such as their development, action plans, and how specifically they presented their priorities. However, despite the uniqueness of each area of neighbourhood renewal, and the different speeds at which it moves, central Government officials are left to take most of the decisions on what needs to be delivered and by whom.

I contend that the process would be fine-tuned, and ultimately more successful, in the hands of local government, because it must be remembered that Ministers and civil servants at the centre of Government do not always know best. Local issues can be clearly identified by local councils, councillors and representatives and by the communities that they serve. It must not be forgotten that funding and staff will follow the function and the detail will be worked out. Those who work in local government have better knowledge and understanding of the 36 relatively small and tightly defined areas than central Government will ever have. Therefore, delivery at that level makes sense.

I contend that, if it makes sense to transfer the delivery of neighbourhood renewal to local government in 2011, it almost certainly makes sense before then. Therefore, assuming that the appetite exists in local government to take on the new responsibility, I propose to transfer those elements of delivery that can be transferred now.

I do not propose to do anything to cut across, or conflict with, the overall RPA process, and I appreciate that legislative and staffing issues must be resolved. However, I see no need to wait for some sort of big

bang movement in 2011. Through pilot programmes or partnership, real decision-making and the resources that go with it, can be transferred to local government before then.

12.15 pm

I will not attempt to force the policy on any local council that does not want it, but I cannot understand why a council would not want to take on more responsibility for delivering on what is, essentially, a local problem, as long as that responsibility is accompanied by the requisite budgetary and staff resources.

As for staffing, voluntary secondments, ahead of the full RPA transfer process, can be used, and I know that many staff in the Civil Service would welcome the opportunity to gain some experience in local government.

Members may well have concerns about the ability of councils to work with Government Departments, but DSD development officers are already working closely with other Government Departments in addressing the priorities that have been identified by neighbourhood partnerships. Moreover, local government will receive new powers in community planning, which will give councils a leadership role in co-ordinating the work of Departments and statutory agencies in their areas. The new legislation that is planned under the review of public administration will oblige statutory organisations to work with councils in the new community planning process. I reassure David Simpson, Fred Cobain and Basil McCrea, who raised those various issues, that that is my intention.

I have no doubt that the system will work better than the current centralised efforts to achieve joined-up government on the ground. Whatever the impression that might have been created at meetings of the Committee for Social Development, there is little evidence of reluctance on the part of councils to take responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. It is interesting to note that 22 councils responded to the Department, and none of them resiled or objected to taking responsibility for neighbourhood renewal because councils, NILGA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives want strong local government. Those viewpoints have been articulated in the Chamber on several occasions.

Contradiction is emanating from Sinn Féin, and I question why that is the case. That party is engaged in a political attack on me and my party.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Social Development: In October 2007, the Executive published the emerging findings of the RPA subcommittee, and that was followed by a number of stakeholder events.

A further argument that has been made is that some councils are not ready to take over responsibility for

neighbourhood renewal. I do not believe that that is the case in many instances. However, I will certainly consider concerns, where they exist. The new post-RPA councils will work within a framework of safeguards and protections to ensure that good decision-making prevails.

I wish to address some of the issues that have been raised during the debate. Carál Ni Chuilín was in the Chamber for part of the debate, but not the entire debate. Therefore, I question how interested she really is in neighbourhood renewal and in tackling disadvantage and deprivation. I am sure that she will appreciate that £6.6 million was spent on neighbourhood renewal in North Belfast over the past three years. I do not accept her criticisms at all.

Neighbourhood renewal was not making progress until devolution was restored. It is not interdepartmental bodies that will deliver success, but all of the people who work in partnership on the ground. I hope that that will happen at a local level. If expectations have been raised unduly, it was not I who raised them. I have said all along that the only measure that will deliver success is hard work, and definitely not slogans.

Fra McCann will appreciate that some £12.8 million was spent on neighbourhood renewal in West Belfast over the past three years. I always enjoy Fra's interventions, but the problem is that he usually contradicts himself shortly afterwards. He did so when he told me to stop complaining about my budget for housing and then, when I secured £205 million, he said that it was not enough.

Today, we have had more blubber and bombast from Fra, but he had no ideas. I do not think that he has ever had an idea in his political career, or any other career. He whinged about bringing a paper to the Executive. That is not the issue; my policy is concerned with delivery on the ground for those who need it, rather than for those who shout the loudest. My policy is concerned with minimising deprivation and disadvantage. I am sure that, because of the contradictions in Fra's contributions, we can expect him to become a big fan of the transferring of neighbourhood renewal to local government soon.

Michelle McIlveen made a reasonable contribution, and I take on board her comments that budget must follow function — which I did not say would not happen — and the need for properly refined policies. Local councillors, in conjunction with councils and the local population, can help identify key issues to help that process.

Basil McCrea mentioned the budget; I have addressed that matter. Neighbourhood renewal is delivered in 36 of our most deprived areas. Although each area is unique, they all seek to improve health services, education for our children and job opportunities, and create safer and cleaner environments.

The Sinn Féin Members in attendance could, perhaps, pass on a message to the Minister of Education. I wrote to three Ministers to seek their support for an interdepartmental buy-in to neighbourhood renewal. I received a substantive response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Employment and Learning. However, on 14 August 2008, I received a mere acknowledgement from the Minister of Education, who undertook to review the affected services and respond thereafter. I have not, to date, received a substantive response.

Nelson McCausland raised issues specific to North Belfast; I will respond to those matters at a later date.

My colleague Dolores Kelly made a robust contribution, during which she raised several issues. I agree with her entirely. She highlighted Sinn Féin's hypocrisy; it pretends to care, but it does not give a fiddler's about tackling deprivation. Furthermore, her comments about West Belfast are correct. In the past three years, the Department has allocated nearly £13 million in neighbourhood renewal to that area. What has Sinn Féin done? What has its MP for West Belfast done? I leave that question with the Assembly and Sinn Féin's MLAs — it is a question that they must answer.

In conclusion, I reaffirm my belief that the foundation of neighbourhood renewal is local participation and decision-making. For too long, regeneration has been done to communities — rather than done by communities. Neighbourhood renewal seeks to give the Government and communities the capacity to change the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

Sinn Féin argues to retain local community decision-making with Stormont civil servants — that is the wrong way to tackle the matter. Moreover, that party dislikes my approach to ensuring that funding is directed at those who need it most, rather than those who shout the loudest. I do not understand Sinn Féin's recent attitude to Government and its institutions. They even want a unionist justice Minister. This afternoon, as Sinn Féin listens respectfully to Gordon Brown, Her Majesty's Prime Minister in the Government of the United Kingdom, I imagine it will wonder where it all went wrong.

The motion calls on me to ensure that my Department retains lead responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. No alternative was ever proposed. Although we will retain policy responsibility, delivery will occur on the ground — where it can be best implemented. Neighbourhood renewal is a cross-departmental strategy. The alleviation of poverty and disadvantage is a shared responsibility, especially at this difficult time. However, some Members prefer to make barbed comments and fire political Exocets, rather than do the work that they were elected to do.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Under Standing Order 69(4), as the Minister is a councillor, should she not declare an interest?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister want to respond?

The Minister for Social Development: I have made that declaration in the Chamber previously; it is not a matter from which I resign. I have been a councillor in Down District Council since 1985. There is no problem with that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Further to that point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will you make a ruling on that issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the third time, I invite Mr Brady to speak.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Perhaps it was as well that there was a point of order — it will have given the Minister time to settle herself. She has been getting very exercised. I am sure that she will be pleased to hear that I was here for the entire debate and listened to it with much interest.

The majority of neighbourhood renewal partnerships are against those powers going to councils. They feel that they would be overwhelmed by another layer of bureaucracy. They consider that the whole area of neighbourhood renewal would become a subcommittee of a council committee for economic regeneration.

Fortunately, I am not a councillor, but it was interesting to sit here today and listen to all the councillors — on the other side of the House and in the SDLP — blowing their own trumpets. When neighbourhood renewal devolves to local councils, I wonder whether they will be in such a position to do so. Strong leadership is required, as is strategic lobbying in Departments.

All Departments must take responsibility for social deprivation and its alleviation. Such alleviation would surely lessen the burden on other budgets like health, social security, etc. Apart from the provision of funding, there are many other issues that impact on the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. Problems being encountered with the implementation and delivery of neighbourhood renewal are not all to do with the lack of guidance from the neighbourhood renewal unit, but also the lack of experienced staff at regional development office level. Skills and capabilities must be identified to ensure that the right staff are in place.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships should have a much greater responsibility for the allocation of their budgets. Long-term funding is needed to sustain projects and see them through. There is a need for one lead body and a single funding application process. The difficulties and logistics of completing a form and getting the money when and where it is most needed were mentioned earlier.

There is no doubt that communities have demonstrated a very clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal. However, that has not been reciprocated by other agencies and Departments. There is certainly a feeling that the whole process has been top-down rather than bottom-up, as Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned. DSD has not successfully lobbied for departmental matching funding — for example, neighbourhood renewal —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No. The Member has said enough today. *[Laughter.]*

As has been said, neighbourhood renewal has not yet been tabled as an item for discussion by the Executive. Guidance in respect of neighbourhood renewal has not been — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, Mr Brady. I am calling for order from the other Members while you are speaking.

Mr Brady: Thank you very much, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

DSD has not successfully lobbied for departmental matching funding. Neighbourhood renewal has not yet been tabled as an item for discussion by the Executive. Guidance in respect of neighbourhood renewal has not been issued to other Departments. Neighbourhood renewal needs representation at the ministerial table. The Minister appears to be opposed to capacity building and seems to be more interested in economic sustainability.

If I were to take a really cynical view, I might be inclined to think that initially, when neighbourhood renewal failed to remove deprivation, it was thrown out to the communities to make the best of a scheme that was not properly supported or financed — possibly in the hope that it might eventually self-destruct. If neighbourhood renewal is such a good strategy, why is the Minister preparing to ship it off to the councils?

During the debate, many points were made by different people. Alban Maginness is mystified; Jonathan Craig is bewildered. However, in their mystification and bewilderment, they went on to make very strong anti-Sinn Féin points that I totally and absolutely reject. The alleviation of deprivation is the key issue of neighbourhood renewal. It might suit those Members better if they spent more time thinking about the relief of deprivation.

David Simpson talked as a Member of the Assembly. It would have been interesting if he had talked as the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, because he might have given a different speech.

Fred Cobain supported the motion, and I know that he is much exercised by neighbourhood renewal problems, which must be urgently addressed.

Several Members used the word “premature”, which seems to be the DUP word of the day, although I am not sure in what context. Presumably, when those DUP Members are satisfied, having obtained details from the Department, they will explain that context, and we might get a straight answer.

Alban Maginness accepted an intervention from Dominic Bradley, who spoke about whingeing. Mr Bradley is no stranger to whingeing, although, in recent days, his whingeing has been somewhat muted about other issues.

Anna Lo, who has worked in the community sector —
12.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Tell me more.

Mr Brady: I will tell Dominic more any time that he wants. Anna Lo comes from a community —

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask Mr Brady to clarify his remarks, because many Members are somewhat mystified by his accusations?

Mr Brady: We do not have enough time to cover that subject. Obviously, mystification and bewilderment have descended on the Assembly today: Dominic is the third Member to be mystified and bewildered.

In his own inimitable style, Nelson McCausland agreed with all anti-Sinn Féin rhetoric, although it would be a surprise if he did not, so I will not dwell on that point.

The Minister took the opportunity to talk about all sorts of things — apart from neighbourhood renewal. We heard about the devolution of policing and justice, the mental and physical attacks on Fra McCann —

The Minister for Social Development: I did not say that.

Mr Brady: If the Minister reads Hansard tomorrow, she may find out. That is, of course, if she does read Hansard.

The Minister assured us that the lead responsibility for neighbourhood renewal policy decisions will remain with the Department. Current conjecture about how local government will deal with neighbourhood renewal is speculative, and it remains to be seen how that will work out. If neighbourhood renewal is such a success — and the Minister defended, and spoke glowingly about, it — why is she shipping it off?

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has finished.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 32.

AYES

Mr Adams, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Molloy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr P Maskey.

NOES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr McCausland.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that the Department retains lead responsibility for Neighbourhood Renewal, now and in the future, to ensure that social deprivation is tackled in our communities and that there is joined-up delivery.

12.45 pm

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.46 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Executive Matters

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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern that the Executive has not met since June and notes the backlog of papers requiring due consideration by the Executive on important issues such as post-primary education, the Maze and PPS14; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meets to address important papers being brought forward by Ministers, to consider the regional impact of the economic downturn and measures which might mitigate its impact on households, businesses, employment and the regional economy including expediting the start dates for major public works agreed in the Investment Strategy, rejecting water charges and prioritising interventions against rising fuel poverty; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive; and reaffirms the recommendations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Report on the Inquiry into the devolution of policing and justice matters which highlighted issues which needed to be considered, examined or discussed by the Assembly and/or discussed by the political parties before the devolution of policing and justice.

The first part of the motion notes with concern that the Executive have not met since June. It also highlights that a number of known papers and issues have now been caught in a backlog. I understand from all parties and from everything that they have said this week — in the media and elsewhere — that they all want to see the Executive meet. Everyone seems to be blaming someone else for the Executive's not meeting, but we should all share the concern that it has not met. Therefore, I see no reason why any party would have a problem with the first part of the motion.

The second part of the motion calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meet to deal with important ministerial papers. Many Ministers have stated that issues that they want to see the Executive process and pass are being held up. Ministers must now tell their officials and the policy communities that are interested in the business of their Departments that they must await Executive approval.

Furthermore, everyone has expressed concern about the impact of the economic downturn and wants to see

the Executive implement measures that could mitigate that impact. Therefore, I would be very surprised if any party had a serious objection to the content of the second part of the motion. However, I will return to that later.

The third part of the motion calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive. The devolution of those powers is not an issue for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — or, indeed, the DUP and Sinn Féin — to privatise. The devolution of policing and justice powers has implications for us as a region and for the Executive, not least on the matters of adequate budget transfer to accompany devolution and the composition and remit of the proposed Department.

Other Ministers may see some of their functions transfer to a devolved justice Department. For example, the criminal justice review recommended that the Office of Law Reform, which is currently in the Department of Finance and Personnel, should transfer to the proposed justice Department. Other powers, such as licensing laws, currently under DSD's remit, could also transfer to the new Department. That is the case in the South, and such powers rest with the Home Office in Whitehall. Therefore, the transfer of policing and justice powers is a matter for the Executive, and I would be surprised if parties could object to that.

The fourth part of the motion reaffirms recommendations that have already been accepted in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's report. That report pointed out that several issues needed to be addressed, either by the Assembly or through discussion by the parties, before those powers could be devolved. Given that such sentiments have been accepted previously, I find it hard to see how any party could object to the fourth part of the motion.

This has been a summer of serious crisis, challenge and worry for many people. Uncertainty is gripping people at all levels: children in primary 6 and their parents about the procedures to be faced when trying to find secondary schools, and people working in public services, as there are stop/go indications about what will happen as part of the review of public administration. Reviews of reviews create uncertainty for people in public services as they cope with the effects of the efficiency savings demanded by the Budget and passed by this House. Those translate into service cuts. There is uncertainty for people in the community and the voluntary sector, who see their funding diminished with the downturn in EU funds, who see the reach of neighbourhood renewal leaving many people outside the target areas, and who see the loss of funding lines on which they have relied for many years. As a result of the review of public administration, the range of bodies to which the community and the

voluntary sector have, in the past, been able to go for slippage funding has disappeared, and the funding is no longer available. Furthermore, there is uncertainty for the private sector, as firms try to cope with the implications of the downturn in world markets and the loss of customer spending power in the home market.

On top of all that, political uncertainty has been foisted on the region. There was the uncertainty of the Executive being unable to meet, and the uncertainty of a senior leader of one of the parties in the Executive talking about withdrawing Ministers and threatening the collapse of the institutions. Another party prominent in the Administration threatened serious consequences, were that to happen. During that time, the Executive did not meet to deal with the issues that worry people.

Mr D Bradley: The Member referred to the uncertainty surrounding education issues. Does the Member agree that the stasis currently at the heart of Government has led not only to uncertainty in education, but to consternation in the whole education community, particularly among parents and teachers? Parents are asking questions about the future arrangements for transfer which teachers cannot answer, as they have been given no clear direction by the Minister or her Department. Does the Member agree that it is now far beyond the time for clarity for the sake of our children, their parents and teachers? Furthermore, does the Member agree that the Executive must meet forthwith to provide clarity about the future of our education system, and that that meeting must take place without further delay?

Mr Durkan: I agree with my colleague Dominic Bradley, who has ably amplified my point. However, education is not the only issue that finds itself locked in the current stand-off that is paralysing good governance in this region. We want the Executive to meet this week; they should have met before now. I believe that it will happen — not least because of the pressure that Sinn Féin must be feeling, because people are bemused by the tactics into which it has locked itself. However, Sinn Féin realises that if the Executive do not meet this week, it will lead to a further locking of business as regards the North/South Ministerial Council. Sinn Féin's tactics will — bizarrely — leave it in Trimble country, whereby its tactics against another party in the Executive, in effect, end up by grounding the business of the North/South Ministerial Council. That would be some achievement and victory for its tactics.

The SDLP wants to see the Executive tackle the issue of fuel poverty. The House passed a motion at the end of June, tabled by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, calling on the Executive to prioritise measures for fuel efficiency, to diversify our dependency on fossil fuels, to intervene with the Treasury and the British Government on the issue of

the VAT windfall from energy receipts, and to prioritise measures to combat fuel poverty.

The Executive that we called upon to do those things has failed to meet since then. Now we get a letter from the deputy First Minister — a fig leaf to cover the disgraceful dereliction of democratic duty that has prevented the Executive from meeting. We are told that the Executive could not meet because the First Minister went on holiday and that the deputy First Minister cancelled his holiday, awaiting the First Minister's return. Perhaps if an Executive meeting had been agreed, the First Minister would have come back from Florida — he would not then have had an excuse to stay on holiday.

Why were the relevant issues not being addressed through the Executive? That is the difference that devolution was supposed to make. We expected the Executive to meet during the summer recess; indeed, my party tried to have the Assembly reconvened to encourage the Executive to meet and deal with some very serious issues.

Part of our motion asks the Executive to reject water charges, and the SDLP is explicit in wanting the Executive to reject them. My party has always believed that there should be no separate or freestanding water charges. Water should be a visible component of rates: that is where water revenue should come from. The independent panel set up by the Executive also made that recommendation. However, Ministers have been working on a different plan.

Deferral of water charges was mentioned last week; that was the first time that Ministers admitted that the intention had been to impose separate freestanding water charges next year. They would not admit that during the Budget debate earlier this year. Indeed, part of the amendment that we tabled to the Budget highlighted its lack of clarity on the implications for water charges. The other parties that backed the Budget tried to ignore that issue and pretend that it did not exist. It is all becoming clear now. We understand that the Minister for Social Development —

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

Mr Durkan: There was an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You get extra time because of an intervention only if your speech is less than 10 minutes.

Mr Moutray: In debating the motion, I welcome its aim of highlighting the need for an immediate meeting of the Executive to discuss the many outstanding issues facing our society. The Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP want an Executive meeting to take place this Thursday. For the sake of the people of Northern Ireland, I — along with many Members in the Chamber — hope that progress will be made at that meeting. I want the Executive to address

the cost of living, which is of great concern to thousands of people across the Province. I want a Government and Executive that work — one that is committed to discussion, debate and dialogue and, ultimately, to making decisions on issues that affect the electorate.

My party has been committed to the process since its formation at St Andrews. Throughout the process — and particularly in recent days — we have demonstrated our commitment to partnership government and our dedication to delivering for the electorate on education, planning, health and housing.

No one party has a majority, which dictates that there will be partnership government. The Executive is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland; it plays a pivotal role in decision making in our society. Given the economic problems that we face — such as the hike in electricity and gas prices — it is unfortunate that Sinn Féin is dragging its heels. Sinn Féin should stand up to the challenge, allow the Executive to meet on Thursday and get down to real business. That would enable our Executive to deal fully with the economic downturn and assist those who have been worst affected by the credit crunch.

I put the challenge again: get down to business. The issues facing the electorate are far too serious to be subject to political point-scoring. The Government and Executive can deliver as they have done in the past. They have delivered free travel for the over 60s; they have implemented a rates freeze across the country for the next three years; in a time of flash-flooding, they issued one-off payments of £1000 per household; they have undertaken major infrastructural upgrade; and they have successfully attracted investment.

Additionally, they have developed a workable and manageable Programme for Government and an investment strategy. We heard from the First Minister no later than yesterday that they are working and that aims are being achieved. I believe that that is progress, and that individuals and society in general have benefited from that progress and will continue to benefit from it in future. For too long under direct rule, this country was a forgotten land.

2.15 pm

The motion calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive, yet we hear Sinn Féin's threats to bring the Government into crisis over that issue. The DUP supports the devolution of policing and justice. Our Assembly manifesto states that:

“While in principle we support the devolution of policing and justice functions we believe this can only happen when there is the necessary support within the community.”

That is a sensitive issue that requires support from within the community, and such support is not evident

at present. Sinn Féin's behaviour has undermined confidence in the possibility of any move being made in the near future.

The DUP has been active in trying to resolve that issue and has engaged in intensive talks in which progress had been made. It has been agreed that there should be a single justice Department, with one Minister whose election will require cross-community support. That matter was then referred to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee for further progress. Let that Committee get down to business and move on the issue. Let it put the wheels in motion as regards the structures that need to be in place for a single Department.

After all, the policing and justice issue is not a matter for the Executive — it is a matter for each of the parties in the Chamber. The Executive have responsibility for each of the current Departments in the Administration and they should concentrate on that. I ask the parties to progress the matter of policing and justice through the appropriate channels. There is a clear division between the matters of governance and matters for individual parties. There are serious issues requiring immediate dialogue, and this country should not be hindered by those Members who are delaying progress. The DUP is committed to making progress and has been engaged in intensive high-level talks aimed at resolving those matters.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I am in favour of the motion, which, under the prevailing circumstances, accurately reflects the view of the parties in the Assembly — even if the rhetoric of the proposer does not. We all want to see the Executive meet and conduct their business free from partisan vetoes and for them to be in a position to address all the issues that are specified in the motion.

The following is an extract from a resolution that was passed by the DUP party executive in Belfast on 24 March 2007:

"The Party Officers having consulted widely, weighed up all the relevant matters and reviewed progress on outstanding matters recommend to the Party's Central Executive Committee that the DUP would support and participate fully in a Northern Ireland Executive if powers were devolved to it on an agreed date in May".

It further states:

"This firm commitment is offered within an environment where no one, including the government, goes back on any of the advances and commitments made."

It is obvious that the DUP has abided by neither the content nor the spirit of its own resolution. Advances and commitments were made by parties and Governments, and Sinn Féin intends to ensure that they are delivered on.

Some political parties and media commentators would have us believe that the ongoing crisis that the Assembly faces revolves solely around the issue of policing and justice. Although that is a vital issue, the

DUP's inability to cope with sharing responsibility for policing and justice is just the public manifestation of the real problem.

Yesterday, the House debated an Ulster Unionist Party motion on dissident violence from within the wider republican community. On the face of it, that was a valid concern, and one that Sinn Féin shares. However, unionists of all shades refused to accept a perfectly reasonable amendment that would have improved the motion by inserting a reference to ongoing violence, and threats of violence, from armed groups in the wider unionist community. No convincing rationale was offered for that particular example of a unionist consensus.

What then should we conclude? Does loyalist violence not matter to unionist politicians? Are unionists, by such crass indifference, telling the wider community that nationalist concerns do not count in the Assembly? The overriding cause of the difficulties experienced in the current political context is the refusal by some unionists, and the inability of other unionists, to accept the basic principles of partnership and equality in Government.

A cursory examination of the debates in the Assembly since restoration in May 2007 will demonstrate that rather than take issues on their merits, too often the unionists' approach has been that if an issue is important to nationalists, they will not support it. Yesterday's debate was an example of that, and the disgraceful attitude of the DUP to the Irish language Act is a further example. Such prejudice cannot be permitted to continue.

Today's motion is, in effect, a plea for the Executive to be reconvened. I have already indicated that my party supports the motion, notwithstanding the wording of some passages, or the selective amnesia of the proposers in relation to the origins of water charges. We are seeking to resolve the issues that are preventing the Executive from meeting, and we will continue our endeavours with the Irish and British Governments and the DUP to resolve those matters.

The DUP entered the institutions on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — that is undeniable. Both documents are predicated on the principles of equality and parity of esteem. That is also undeniable. Irrespective of the rhetoric of DUP spokespersons seeking to placate rejectionists within and without their party, the fact that the DUP is in Government demonstrates its acceptance of the tenets of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement.

Some members of the DUP leadership are attempting to use the economic pressure that many people are now experiencing as a smokescreen to hide their inability to deliver on their requirements, but while it is understandable —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I will not. I am almost out of time.

Although it is understandable that people will direct their demands for solutions at local politicians, it must be recognised that the Assembly, even if it were fully functional, has little power to address a global economic recession.

Finally, the refusal by the DUP to agree the transfer of policing and justice is not about a lack of confidence in our community; it is about a refusal to accept that nationalism has a right to have authority and policy oversight into how it is policed and how justice is administered.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I am sorry. Please allow me to finish, as I have only 10 seconds left.

It is fundamentally a human rights and equality issue, and unionists in the Chamber will have to accept that our community will no longer —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Mr McLaughlin: May I just finish? I was interrupted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. Time is up.

Mr Kennedy: The Ulster Unionist Party broadly supports the motion. It addresses the single most important issue for devolution and local democracy in Northern Ireland, because if we have no functioning Executive, the entire experiment of devolution has no real point. We are wasting the time, money and patience of the people of Northern Ireland.

The current impasse in the Executive has called all major democratic decision-making to stop. Ordinary people, families and businesses are facing a difficult economic outlook, and what are the DUP and Sinn Féin doing? Like Nero, they are fiddling while Rome burns. While families and the elderly are facing a winter of difficult choices, Sinn Féin is bringing the Executive and devolution to the brink.

In the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy, the Executive made the development of our economy their number one priority. However, local businesses and industry are facing serious difficulties owing to the turmoil in global markets and the economic downturn. However, rather than coming together and creatively addressing the problem, the majority of the Executive is being held to ransom by Sinn Féin. The logjam in the planning system and the inability to start major public works agreed in the investment strategy are — make no mistake about it — having a negative impact on Northern Ireland's economy.

The Executive also created ambitious targets to reduce poverty levels, yet the Minister for Social Development has stated that she cannot deliver an effective housing agenda because of the current deadlock in the Administration. The rising cost of fuel and energy will leave many hard-working families and the elderly facing a winter of fuel poverty and very difficult choices. The Executive must get to grips with the situation and follow the advice of Sir Reg Empey, which is to set up an Executive cost-of-living subcommittee to deal with the problem.

However, the Executive must meet in order for that to happen.

Sinn Féin has resorted once again to shadow negotiations but has failed to realise that the time for negotiations is over. The current Executive and devolution within the United Kingdom are what Sinn Féin and the rest of us have signed up to, and it is within that framework that problems must be solved. In order for the devolution of policing and justice to occur, Sinn Féin must show the people of Northern Ireland that it, and this Executive, can be trusted. It must show that it unequivocally denounces violence, without a nod and a wink to dissidents. Sinn Féin must prove that it fully supports the Police Service, the courts and the rule of law, without a subversive acceptance of non-participation and agitation. The party must show that it and the Executive can be competent and effective policy-makers and administrators.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Member agree that the people elected the Assembly to do three things: first, to rebuild the economy; secondly, to upgrade drastically the quality of our public services; and, thirdly, to create a united community. Does the Member also agree that the widespread perception of the people, as expressed in the newspapers and on the radio, is that the Assembly, in its first year, has failed to deliver on those three objectives and that the fundamental responsibility for that failure lies with the parties in OFMDFM jointly — the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his contribution. I agree largely with many of the points that he made, but the situation is worse than that. The public generally believe us all to be a shambles.

The debacle over the summer has shown that the Executive have been unable to get to grips with the bread and butter issues. Ironically, Sinn Féin's recent intransigence has pushed the devolution of policing and justice further over the horizon. Having said that, I accept the call in the motion for the

“First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive”.

I assume that such a paper would clearly and reasonably state that, although we should work towards agreement

on the principles of the issue, the time is obviously not yet right for the devolution of policing and justice. That is the type of mature activity and progression that can build confidence, which may eventually, when the time is right, lead to the devolution of policing and justice. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee can carry out preparatory work, but it remains the Ulster Unionist Party's view that it is premature at this stage to consider the devolution —

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

Mr Kennedy: I have an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The intervention was for 45 seconds, Mr Kennedy. I call Mrs Naomi Long.

Mrs Long: It has been three months since the Executive last met. Although my colleagues and I have not been behind the door in our criticism of the Executive when they were meeting regularly, this latest development is deeply damaging to public confidence in the institutions generally. I agree with Danny Kennedy on that.

I hope that the noises that have been made in recent days indicating that the Executive will meet on Thursday 18 September will come to pass, because the public's patience is running out. The intervening period has been characterised by increasing brinkmanship, with threats of collapse being issued repeatedly. Such sabre-rattling cannot be seen as anything other than reckless and irresponsible, not least of all in the current economic climate.

More than that, the impasse has been incredibly counterproductive. Bearing in mind that it began as a dispute over the timing of the devolution of policing and justice, it is hard to see how creating instability and highlighting the weaknesses of the current arrangements does anything other than frustrate and delay devolution further. The situation may have started as a dispute over policing and justice, but the list of sticking points and blockages has expanded to include the Maze stadium project, the Irish language Act and PPS 14, to name only a few. It has served to expose to the public how deep and far-reaching the rift in the Executive currently is.

I regret to say that it has also been characterised by a certain childishness and petulance, which has done nothing for the reputation of these institutions. At Question Time yesterday, I was chided by John O'Dowd for referring to it as petty squabbling — frankly, it is difficult to think of a phrase that better sums it up. Take the spat over the regional development strategy; a crucial document that will shape this society and drive policy and investment for the foreseeable future. Had it been issues of gravity that led to public disagreement, the matter would have been serious. However, it was not; it was a childish spat about how to refer to this region in the document.

2.30 pm

No one thought that bringing together disparate political interests around a table and expecting agreement would be easy. Things can clearly only work if there is an overriding commitment to make them work. I do not believe that that commitment lies only with Sinn Féin; it lies with every party around the table, and indeed those of us who are not at the table.

It is the apparent absence of commitment, however, that causes people who are facing real and pressing problems to be concerned for the future. To be blunt, few of my constituents wake up at 4.00 am in a lather of sweat, concerned about how they are going to refer to Northern Ireland as they go about their business that day, or who the current Minister for justice might be. There are plenty, however, who are losing sleep because of concerns about how to put a loaf on the table, pay their heating and electricity bills, their mortgage, and about how their child in P6 will transfer from primary school to secondary school. For those people, the Minister's assurances that children are at the heart of it all, and that it is all very clear, are starting to ring rather hollow.

People are worried about planning delays, and about their houses being flooded every time it rains. Farmers are in despair over crops being destroyed, and people are worried about growing tension and violence in communities, and that the people whom they have sent here to resolve those issues are failing to do so. They want politicians who not only care but actually give those issues the same priority that they do in their daily lives.

The other issues that have been raised —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I will give way in a moment.

The other issues that have been raised are important, but they need to be addressed in the context of a functioning Executive, and in a mature way. People need to wean themselves off a diet of crisis and stand-off, and on to the solid food of good governance. If the Executive can not have any impact on those issues through these institutions — as some have been hand-wringing today — then it begs the question: what is the point?

If people are here because they believe that they can make a difference, they owe it to the people whom they represent to meet and find a way through their problems, rather than stamping their feet outside the door and complaining.

Mr Shannon: As a member ó tha OFMDFM committee, aá agre wi tha principal ó tha moatshin.

Tha Executive er vital tae tha strength an stabilness ó tha Proavince an ther er impoarten decisions that must be tuk sooner rather than later – but, bi tha saem

token, aá must sae that thees metters er in progress ó bein maed an simply canny be rushed.

As a member of the OFMDFM Committee, I agree with the principle of the motion. The Executive are vital to the growth and stability of the Province, and there are important decisions that must be taken sooner, rather than later. However, by the same token, those decisions are in the process of being made, and they simply cannot be rushed.

There is no one in the Chamber who does not want to see the issue of post-primary education resolved. I have been inundated with questions from teachers and from concerned parents who simply do not know what their children will be doing in the near future. Of course, that is a decision that must be made, and, indeed, should have been made, and yet it is another example of why things cannot be rushed in the initial stages. The Minister of Education was so concerned with scrapping the 11-plus that she did so without having any replacement in mind. Had she not been so hasty, and allowed the test to stand until she had in place a new transfer system, we would not be in the situation that we are in today.

I agree that the Executive must meet to discuss and resolve the issues, such as water charges, and others. However, by the same token, we must take into account the external factors that are at work before those decisions are made. To take the issue of policing and justice as an example, as a member of Ards district policing partnership, I see the benefits of the devolution of policing and justice, and the impact that it would have in Northern Ireland. However, as an elected representative who is in touch with his local community, I also see that the confidence of the people of Strangford, the area that I represent, is not at the level that is needed in order to proceed with such a large step.

If there were a vote on the devolution of policing and justice powers, I am certain that the result would show that the unionist people are not yet ready. Timing is crucial, and it is clear that now is not the right time. Although the day when we are able to take control of policing and justice powers is coming, we are not yet there.

There must also be correct financial aid to enable the devolution of policing and justice powers. There are many issues; the devolution of those powers is not as simple as setting up a ministry. That financial aid is not in place — no one would sign up for a mortgage over umpteen years without knowing when or how it could be paid.

So that I am not misunderstood, I reiterate my desire for Northern Ireland to have legislative powers for policing and justice as set out in the Committee's report, where certain powers remain with the House of

Commons. However, some in this Chamber are not yet in a position to handle such responsibility.

If we listen to financial commentators, it seems that the UK is heading into a recession. As much as I would prefer that not to be the case, the Executive must — and will — play a major role in ensuring that Northern Ireland does not regress into an economic wasteland or disaster. I have been contacted by concerned constituents who have elderly parents or relatives and are very worried about how the price of coal, oil and electricity will make matters worse for those who already struggle. Those are the issues that the Assembly and Ministers must concentrate on — we must implement measures that offset, to as large a degree as possible, the rising cost of living in the Province.

Last week, I welcomed the Ards arthritic care group to Stormont, all of whom were in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The main question that those ladies and gentlemen asked was how they would get through the coming winter. As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to consider those matters on behalf of our constituents. As I suspect is the case for all Members, people regularly call into my advice centre and say that the Assembly must focus on the bread-and-butter issues and how people live each and every day. Those issues are very important. We are elected to make a difference, and now is the time to show that we are equipped and able to do that by tackling the day-to-day issues in Northern Ireland.

I agree with the part of the motion that encourages the Executive to meet, but we must strive to make the right decision rather than a quick decision. The most important issue is that the Assembly gets things right.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin.

The motion points to various outstanding issues that the Executive must address, including the transfer of policing and justice powers, post-primary education, the development of the Long Kesh site, PPS 14, and the impact of the current financial downturn on the people whom we represent.

Sinn Féin is consistent in its pursuit of a resolution to those issues, and its Ministers are at the heart of the implementation of the necessary changes to education, regional and rural development and the other many important issues that affect the lives and living standards of people in the North and across the island of Ireland. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that those issues are addressed and that the neglect and underdevelopment of the past is confined to the past. That is why Sinn Féin put equality, which was not always present in previous programmes, at the heart of the recent Programme for Government.

Many issues in the motion are ones of equality, which is why they are priorities for Sinn Féin. All the

issues in the motion will be addressed and resolved by the Executive and the Assembly, with equality and partnership as the guiding principles.

It is right and proper to express concern, but we must explain how to move forward. The Assembly, the North/South Ministerial Council and all the other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are underpinned by equality and partnership. Sinn Féin stands by the commitment that it made at St Andrews, and it is time for all parties — including the British and Irish Governments — to not default on their commitments. We have no intention to countenance, never mind allow, a return to any form of majority rule. The DUP may have a desire or notion to return to that policy, which allows people to be excluded or mandates ignored.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Before I do, I have made a note to allow 30 extra seconds for Mark Durkan's intervention. He may go ahead.

Mr Durkan: The Member has just said that Sinn Féin will not allow anyone's mandate to be ignored. However, it is clear that Sinn Féin has agreed with the DUP that a Minister for justice will not — at this or any other time — be appointed through d'Hondt, which is the mandate-based system of inclusion at the heart of the agreement, but by cross-community support. At present, that is a veto on the SDLP; it will be a veto on Sinn Féin in the future.

Mr McCartney: If Mark had read the Good Friday Agreement, I am sure that he would realise that there must be some movement on the issue. D'hondt was deployed for the setting up of 10 Departments.
[*Interruption.*]

I want to discuss why Mark jumped in during my comments. Let us bear in mind what you said last week in Oxford. You are the person —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCartney, all remarks must be referred through the Chair, not to Mr Durkan by his first name. Please refer all your remarks through the Chair, Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: If the haranguing from the margins would stop, perhaps I would not fall into that practice.

Now, I will refer directly —

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No; I will not give way because I have already given way once.

The SDLP and the DUP might have taken succour from the speech of the SDLP leader at Oxford. Of course, he has since tried to distance himself from that speech and claims that he was misinterpreted. Remember that the SDLP once said that we live in a post-nationalist Europe; the party spent the next two years saying that

that is not what it meant, even though it was written in the party's manifesto. This morning, Mark Durkan's analysis of the situation is that the DUP is wrong, but that Sinn Féin is to blame. If that is not muddled thinking, what is?

I reiterate my point: progress cannot be made unless there is equality at the heart of the Executive and the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: The Member speaks about the DUP's desire to return to majoritarianism. I want to point out to him that the DUP has never advocated that. As a matter of fact, he is quite right: it was Mr Durkan who came up with that suggestion last week.
[*Interruption.*]

Well, he was as near to it as made no difference. I understand that he has recoiled from his remarks somewhat.

Do the Member and the House accept that the burning issues for people are the bread-and-butter ones? People are not pulling the coat off my back demanding that policing and justice be devolved to a Northern Ireland Administration; they are concerned about the price of a loaf of bread and their next purchase of heating oil. The Assembly must get on with tackling those matters. Nothing should stand in the way of that.

Mr McCartney: I agree with many of your comments. However, bear in mind that in the past, when there was no equality or partnership, the problems that you mentioned were foisted upon one community by another.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. How short is your memory, Mr McCartney? I asked you to refer all your remarks through the Chair. However, just five or 10 seconds later, you have made your comments directly to Lord Morrow.

Mr McCartney: I believe that it was slightly more than five or 10 seconds ago. Forgive me.

Mr Durkan: It was a healthy exchange.

Mr McCartney: A healthy exchange is right. However, the point that I want to make through the Chair to Maurice Morrow is that although I agree with his points, the problems that he mentioned were foisted upon one community by another because there was no equality or partnership. My party is completely and absolutely committed to equality and partnership.

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

Mr I McCrea: The motion is timely and important, as it goes to the heart of the concerns of many people in their daily conversations. It is not specifically about the fact that the Executive have not met since June, but is more about the economic and financial crisis that Northern Ireland faces.

2.45 pm

The Executive have not met since June, and the sole responsibility for that lies with Sinn Féin Members. They alone have no regard for the everyday financial problems that our constituents face, and they will have to answer to their community for that lack of leadership. The DUP has consistently called for a meeting of the Executive. My party leader, the First Minister, made it abundantly clear that he was prepared to come home from his holiday if an Executive meeting was to be held, but Sinn Féin refused to co-operate.

Sinn Féin uses the impasse over policing and justice as its excuse for not agreeing to a meeting of the Executive. During the summer, however, a joint letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee stated that having considered the devolution of policing and justice matters, they required the Committee to undertake further work. The letter also stated that the Committee's consideration should be based on the model of a single Department with a single Minister at its head. As that way forward is agreed, Sinn Féin has no reasonable excuse for holding back the Executive from meeting on Thursday.

Sinn Féin seems to think that policing and justice is the main topic of discussion in Northern Ireland. However, as has been said previously, the discussions around dinner tables this evening — and for many evenings to come — will centre on more important issues. How will the next meal be put on the table; the next item of clothing put on a child's back; or the next electricity or heating bill or litre of fuel for the car be paid for? Those are the issues that matter to many of my constituents, and I have no doubt that every Member, whatever his or her party, can say the same.

It is important that the Executive meet this Thursday to allow Ministers to bring forward proposals to help people through the financial crisis. My party leader, the First Minister, has taken the lead with his recent suggestion that water charges be deferred, but only an Executive meeting can take such a decision.

I welcome the fact that all parties will support the motion and hope that an Executive meeting will take place. That is the wish of all the people of Northern Ireland whom we are elected to serve.

Mr B McCrea: What I have just heard is a lot of pathetic party-political bickering.

Mr Durkan: There will be none of that from you.
[Laughter.]

Mr B McCrea: There will be none of that from me.

There is so much Pontius Pilate talk. People are always apportioning fault. Two days ago, I spoke to a businessman about this issue, and he said that he

would not put petrol in his car to drive to a polling station to elect any of us. He did mean every political party and Member. I had hoped that he would exempt a few Members who are trying to do a good job, but the shame is on every one of us. People look at the Assembly, and consider us to be a pathetic shower for not getting around a table to tackle issues that affect everyone.

I was in New York last week when they announced the bailing out of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac for \$200,000 million. Lehman Brothers — the biggest and bluest of blue-chip companies — has gone into bankruptcy. Merrill Lynch has had to sell itself to the Bank of America. Will these events affect Northern Ireland? Of course they will.

The businesses struggling to keep people employed, the construction industry leaders who were here yesterday to talk to us, the farmers putting up with floods all ask what our august body is doing about the crisis. Compare how those people must deal with those issues with how Members are apparently unable to do so. I do not point the finger at any particular Member — that will lead only to more ping-pong politics. The Executive must meet soon. I prefer that they meet on Thursday. They must deal with those issues.

We must stop these battles by proxy. We can take any topic that we choose and put a particular angle on it. Members on the Benches opposite talk about equality and partnership, but I do not see any equality and partnership or anyone listening to our reasonable concerns about the education system. It is one way or no way.

I have argued that we should try a different approach. Issues such as water charges and PPS 14 are not easily solved; however, we must start to tackle them. People say that the days of majority rule are over, but that is nonsense. The idea is to build consensus so that we can progress; otherwise, the tail wags the dog and we get Government by minority while vested interests prevent progress. We get stalemate and inaction. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable in society struggle to make ends meet. Those people do not look at their MLA and think that we are doing a good job; they ask how they will be able to pay their electricity and gas bills. People are faced with the decision of whether to eat or heat. We must find a way of tackling those issues.

I want to conclude on a more positive note. I believe in a future for all the people of Northern Ireland. We must be able to work out difficult issues properly and not brush them under the carpet. We must be able to say that Northern Ireland can and will be a good place for everyone. It is time that we showed the collective vision and leadership that people expect.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate.

The summer was one of lost opportunities. We met with one challenge after another, but, by and large, we

did nothing or appeared to do nothing. That is the perception. Like other Members, I, too, have talked to people, and, frankly, the feedback has been a blanket condemnation of all — the good, the bad and the ugly.

We had three months to get ready for the difficult times ahead, but that time was wasted by those who put their selfish needs first. They cannot plead ignorance, because apart from the floods in August, the other problems that befell us were predictable when recess began in early July. Indeed, the problems were obvious when the Executive met in June. However, for three months, the ship of the state has drifted towards the rocks while the bridge was deserted. No one was in charge, and it would appear that on the doors of Stormont castle a sign read “Gone fishing”; some had gone to Donegal, others to Florida. It looks as though those Members have gone fishing once again today, because they have not bothered — or perhaps they do not care — to be here to listen to what we have to say. It is an insult to the Chamber that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister is here — at least one of them should be.

Some told us that there was no need for the Executive to meet at all, because departmental business was being carried out anyway. That is hardly a ringing endorsement of devolution. However, we know that business was not being carried out because some 30 important papers are lying in a drawer. The issues in those papers will not go away, such as the crisis in the construction industry, members of which were here yesterday.

Some 85,000 people are employed in the construction industry, 3,000 of whom have already been made redundant, and it could be that many more are made redundant before another 12 months is out. There are energy, food, housing and financial crises; there are also other issues, including the credit crunch.

We needed the Executive to take corporate responsibility for all those problems, and to lead the community; that was the corporate responsibility that we heard so much about at the time of the St Andrews discussions from the now First Minister.

Other Members said that there was little that the Executive could do about our problems; that there was not much point in holding meetings; and that we could not do anything about the global oil markets, Russian gas prices or the Treasury in London. That makes me wonder why those people bother getting elected at all if they cannot, or do not want to, do anything. We can all make a difference. It is absolute nonsense to say that the Executive could do nothing. The Executive could have done a great deal of work — they must start doing it as quickly as possible — if only Sinn Féin had not closed down the devolved Government.

I appeal to Sinn Féin, even at this late stage, to ensure that Thursday's meeting goes ahead in order to

make things happen. We owe it to the people. We must speak loudly on behalf of the building workers who are being laid off, the pensioners who are afraid to order home-heating oil, the families with children who cannot face an electricity bill, and the parents who do not know where their child will go to school next year.

Over the summer, one sector after another called for the Executive to meet and to face up to the problems. People who were concerned about jobs and about jobs in the construction industry, about poverty, and about children and the elderly were all screaming for the Executive to meet. People who could not sell their homes because there were no buyers, and buyers who could not get mortgages, wanted the Executive to meet. They all wanted a lead from the Executive — it did not happen. The Executive could and should have discussed all those issues. They should have discussed the work of the fuel poverty task force that was set up by Margaret Ritchie and ways in which its recommendations might have been funded.

We will have a crisis next winter about the elderly people who will not be able to eat or to heat their homes. We need the Executive to do something about it now — not in January or February, when the damage will have already been done.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, although, as my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin said, there might be some sentiments in it that I might not fully support.

We have heard many fine words from representatives in the Chamber today and over the past week and fortnight about how deeply concerned they are about those in fuel poverty and in poverty. I am sure that many of those people are genuinely concerned. However, some among them would not know poverty if it jumped up and bit them on the ass. That is the simple fact of the matter. They have never commented on poverty before; they have never introduced any motions in this Assembly about poverty; nor have they dealt with it in any meaningful way. They are using people's difficulties as a political battering ram against my party, which is fair enough, but it is not acceptable to use the deep concerns that are held by the general public.

As for those parties that lecture Sinn Féin that the Executive must meet — no matter what, because that is the only way forward let us look at their most recent history. The SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party voted against the Budget. They voted against the Programme for Government, and, if their mandate had been carried —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not.

If their mandate had been carried, the Executive and Assembly would have collapsed long ago because,

without a Budget or a Programme for Government, it could not have continued. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Durkan: We voted to amend the Budget.

Mr O'Dowd: This time last year, Basil McCrea was openly advocating that the Ulster Unionist Party should withdraw from the Executive, so why does he now show such concern about the future of the Executive? The SDLP —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. The SDLP — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, if I may continue, the SDLP was so determined to destroy the Budget and the Programme for Government that it voted against its own Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. We must examine where those parties are coming from — are they seriously concerned about the future of the Executive and the Assembly? Their past voting record suggests that they are not.

I believe firmly that the Executive should meet on Thursday, but they must meet in a stable partnership and with an equality-proofed agenda.

Those who dismiss that as trivia, as the Alliance Party, the SDLP and others have done, should be ashamed of themselves, because that is what this institution is supposed to be built on.

3.00 pm

Over the last few days I have heard moderate tones from the DUP; and some DUP members have even indicated that they may be in favour of power sharing. However, let us look at what happened in the Chamber yesterday. The Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party had an opportunity to display to the nationalist community their true views, through actions rather than words, but instead they voted against the amendment that stated that this Assembly notes the increasing levels of:

“violent dissident republican and continued loyalist activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; welcomes the increased level of political and community support for the PSNI in the face of this threat; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the PSNI and looks forward to further asserting these principles through the devolution of policing and justice matters.”

Both parties, as a collective, voted against that amendment. That is what their fine words mean to the nationalist and republican community. Sammy Wilson throws people off advisory bodies because their address is in the South. Those things send signals to the nationalist and republican community. That may not matter to the SDLP, who now defend the poor and the downtrodden; however, earlier this year it tried to

bring down the Assembly during the Budget. Those things may not matter to the SDLP, but they matter very strongly to Sinn Féin.

Some Members: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order —

Mr O'Dowd: The St Andrews Agreement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Dowd: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has the floor. If the Member does not wish to take an intervention, it is entirely up to the Member.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Assembly is built on the St Andrews Agreement and the Good Friday Agreement, and none of the issues that Sinn Féin has raised since October 2006 has held any surprises for the DUP, the British Government or the Irish Government. The British Prime Minister will address the Assembly later today, and I wait with interest to hear what he says.

The Prime Minister cannot come in here and lecture Irish republicans or unionists on the way forward. He is a co-signatory of the St Andrews Agreement, and we expect him to ensure that that agreement is implemented in full. He, along with the Taoiseach of the Irish Government, has responsibilities, and should not come here to lecture anyone.

I seek some information from those on the opposite Benches. I am led to understand that the Utility Regulator brought a report on fuel price increases to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and that the Minister signed off on that. Why did the Minister not block those increases? I would like that to be made public —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, time is up.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the last speech, the Member made accusations about the voting record of the Ulster Unionist Party with regard to the Budget. He also made another —

Mr O'Dowd: That is not a point of order.

Mr B McCrea: When the record is checked, what is the appropriate way for the Member who made those accusations to go about correcting his erroneous statements?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no right of reply on any reference to a party and to how a party votes. Thank you, Mr O'Dowd, I will make the decisions here, I do not need your assistance.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Perhaps you can clarify why you referred that comment to me? At no stage during your address did I interrupt you or attempt to suggest what ruling you should give.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Yes you did, Mr O'Dowd. You said:

"That is not a point of order."

I will make the decision on whether it is a point of order.

Mr Ross: We find ourselves today in what the media has deemed a crisis. Whether the current impasse is a crisis, a deadlock, or any other buzzword, the situation is indisputable. I listened to Mr Basil McCrea's comments about how he hoped to rise above it all and not apportion blame. However, there is only one party who refuses to meet at the Executive table, and that party is Sinn Féin.

Many of us will recall playground disputes as children, involving a child who did not get his or her own way and who took the ball home to complain to mummy. What we have seen over the summer from Sinn Féin is little more than playground politics. When Sinn Féin does not get its way, it runs away from the Executive table and tells tales to our national Government in Westminster, or to the Irish Government in Dublin, in the hope that it suddenly will get its own way.

Yesterday, I listened to Martina Anderson saying that the days of single-party rule were over. The days of concessions to republicans every time they run away and throw a temper tantrum are also over. I listened to John O'Dowd on 'Stormont Live', saying that he wanted stable government.

Why, then, does Sinn Féin threaten to pull down the structures if it does not get its own way? Over the summer, leading Sinn Féin figures south of the border threatened to withdraw Ministers from the Executive, and, in recent days, the leader of the Sinn Féin Assembly group said that the party did not think that enough progress had been made to hold an Executive meeting on Thursday.

Republican threats of violence did not work on the unionist community over the past 40 years, so to think that threats to pull down the institutions will work now is just ludicrous. If Sinn Féin wishes to encourage progress on the devolution of policing and justice, as it claims, these latest attempts at bullying will hardly fill the unionist community with the confidence required for those powers to be devolved. All it does is to highlight the fact that the lines and the spin that Sinn Féin fed its electorate after the St Andrews Agreement over the devolution of policing and justice were false, and confirmation that the DUP has secured a triple lock on the transfer of those important powers.

Devolution was heralded as a bright new beginning for Northern Ireland, and all the parties in the Chamber spoke of the importance of locally elected politicians taking decisions that affect local people. The central pillar of that is a locally formed Executive charged with taking and implementing many of the important decisions that impact on our constituents' lives.

It is, therefore, extremely disappointing that the Executive have not met since June; and although the First Minister has indicated that he signed off on some 30 papers, the Executive are being prevented from meeting because of Sinn Féin's refusals.

All the other parties want to meet and get on with the job that they are paid to do, whether it be the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party or the Ministers on our own DUP Benches. The community will not take kindly to the fact that, at a time when we are all faced with rising energy costs, economic downturn and people faced with job losses, Sinn Féin blocks the Executive from meeting and prevents local Ministers from getting together to deal with such issues on a collective basis, as this system of government requires. In fact, it highlights some of the shortcomings of this type of mandatory coalition.

The motion mentions serious issues such as education and rural planning, which are being stalled because of the childish stance taken by the Members opposite. Quite understandably, those people in our community who are concerned about how they will afford to heat their homes this winter are fed up with the latest Sinn Féin-orchestrated deadlock. Is this really the sort of leadership that the community that it claims to represent wants? From conversations and communications that I have had in my own constituency, that is not what people in East Antrim want, nor, from listening to radio and television phone-ins, is it the type of behaviour that people across the country want.

It is time that Sinn Féin Ministers took the responsibility and the obligations of their office seriously and, instead of running away from the tough and important decisions, come to the Executive table on Thursday and take those tough decisions that can assist the most vulnerable people in society as they face harsh economic times.

The motion calls for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on policing and justice, but the proper place for those discussions is in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Nonetheless, the motion accurately sums up the mood of the Assembly and of the community, and I therefore support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: One of the principal reasons that I and, no doubt, the vast majority of Members supported a return of devolution was the ability to influence our own affairs. I strongly supported the restoration of

accountable, democratic structures at Stormont precisely because we could influence our own affairs in a way that we had not been able to do under direct rule.

Principal among that influencing our own affairs is our Executive, and if the Executive cannot meet, there are few ways in which we can influence our own affairs. The Assembly can meet every hour of every day and discuss these matters, but the Executive are central to it all.

That is particularly important as we face the current economic crisis. One hears much talk, here and outside, about how, if the Executive meet, ruminate and take decisions on those issues, things will somehow be better. With some of those issues, there is little that any Executive can do. If national Governments cannot make a difference, it is very difficult for a regional Assembly to do so. When one sees, as in the past 48 hours, the collapse of a bank the size of Lehman Brothers, and the Government of the biggest economy in the world cannot do anything, one knows that one is facing grave difficulties.

We can, however, exact some change, and we have seen — as was mentioned by colleagues — that when we have our hands on the levers of power, we can make a difference. We have already seen a freeze on the regional rate, which will assist people. We have also seen measures such as the lone pensioner allowance, whereby people over the age of 70 receive a 20% discount on their rates, and other measures that will greatly assist some of the most vulnerable individuals.

The Assembly can, and should, act on precisely those sorts of issues, and the Executive should be addressing them. I could, by adding to the reams of comments that have been made in the Assembly and in the press, engage in a blame game, but there is little point given that, as my colleagues have said, three parties in a four-party mandatory coalition Executive want to meet. The single party to refuse is sending out spokespersons daily to say that the Executive will not meet, Members know where the blame lies. It lies not with the DUP, the SDLP or the UUP; it lies full square at the door of Sinn Féin.

The Assembly should be dealing with the issues that affect people in Northern Ireland, such as rising energy costs and how to mitigate their effects on those who are most vulnerable and most adversely affected. The Assembly should be putting in place the fundamental elements of the economy, infrastructure and skills, not only to enable Northern Ireland to ride through the current economic problems as best it can but to ensure that it is well placed in the aftermath — when I hope that the economy will recover — to take advantage of any investment decisions.

Mrs Long: Business is struggling and people are concerned about the uncertain future and the economic

climate. Does the Member agree that to add to the mix political instability, which has held back development for so long, is, therefore, completely irresponsible? Rather than easing the path of people who are trying to make a positive contribution, which is what they expect from the Assembly, such instability places more barriers in front of them.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her intervention. This time last year, Members talked about how political stability is good for economic development. There is, therefore, no doubt that political instability is not helpful in any way, and I lay the blame for that full square at the door of Sinn Féin. That party's responsibility is not to bog down the Assembly, as is happening now, but to move forward to help not only business but the most vulnerable in society.

Yesterday, I was unable to attend the presentation that was given by the construction industry, but I heard reports about the threat of approximately 2,500 job losses by Christmas, and that is the kind of issue that people raise with me. Members have recently returned from recess, during which they spent more time in their constituency advice centres and surgeries than when the Assembly is in session. People are not talking about the devolution of policing and justice, but about issues such as the threat to jobs.

As desirable as the devolution of policing and justice powers is, it requires the confidence of the community, as has been repeated ad infinitum by my colleagues. There is, undoubtedly, huge public expectation about what the Assembly can do. Although there is, at present, no confidence in the community in the devolution of policing and justice, if the Assembly does not begin to tackle the problems, and if parties procrastinate and do not get off their backsides, confidence in the Assembly and its ability to effect change will plummet through the floor.

Mrs D Kelly: For the record, the SDLP, as a party of non-violence and social justice that was born out of the civil rights movement — and whose leaders John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Mark Durkan were the architects of power sharing, inclusivity, partnership and equality and ensured that those principles were enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement — will not take lectures today, or any other day, from Sinn Féin on any of those matters.

The reason for today's political instability is Sinn Féin's poor negotiation at St Andrews, where it gave the triple-lock veto to the DUP, something about which Mark Durkan had warned it. Did Sinn Féin listen? No. Sinn Féin did not listen, and it is not listening to the people about the real problems that they face. Yet Sinn Féin listens to the DUP, and tells members of that party that it will be all right on the day, but it is not.

Over the summer, one sector after another called for the Executive to meet to face up to the problems. The Executive could have re-examined all of the infrastructure investment projects that are planned for the next few years, some of which could have been brought forward to give work to the construction industry this winter. The dualling of the A5 Derry to Aughnacloy route is a massive project that could provide years of employment, and the Assembly should be discussing with the Dublin Government how that could be expedited. Sinn Féin will, potentially, not attend an Executive meeting on Thursday. What about the North/South bodies: will it give up on those too? Some people might say that it already has.

3.15 pm

Indeed, they could have re-examined the Maze/Long Kesh project. I am not talking about another sectarian bun fight over a supposed shrine to terrorism or even a wrangle about support for different football codes. The Maze/Long Kesh development project, as a whole, has the potential to generate considerable permanent employment and several thousand construction jobs lasting for two to three years.

We all need those jobs, and we will need the millions of pounds that the British Treasury has promised for the project. We do not need a party political decision or a sporting decision; we need a development decision, which should be taken by the whole Executive. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure should not be taking that decision. By any standards, it is the largest development project that we are likely to get our hands on. The decision must be, and should be, taken by the whole Executive.

All the signs are that we are heading into a lasting economic slowdown. In the middle of this great crisis, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment took time off to pursue a career in local government for a job from which she resigned only a few months ago, and the Minister for Regional Development will put a tin hat on poverty with a water tax unless the Brits bail him out again for another little while. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has OK'd flood relief —

Lord Morrow: I want to put the record straight about the reference that the Member made to the post that Arlene Foster resigned from. Arlene Foster resigned from Fermanagh District Council because a conflict of interests resulted from her previous job as Minister of the Environment.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sorry that the subtleties of double-jobbing and treble-jobbing were lost on me and on the great unwashed.

The Finance Minister OK'd flood relief grants in a midnight phone call, and the Environment Minister believes that global warming is caused by bovine flatulence. The Executive are not on top of all the

problems that we face. How could they be, when they have not functioned for three months? The First Minister's office does not provide real leadership. There are two Ministers and two junior Ministers, but where are they now? They have treated the House with contempt, and, each week, they treat the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with contempt.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Member saying that the fact that neither the First Minister, the deputy First Minister or either of the junior Ministers are here to tackle this issue shows complete contempt for the House? Will she confirm that she is as outraged about that as I am?

Mrs D Kelly: Lest there be any doubt in the Member's mind; yes that is the case. Not only is the House being treated with contempt but, at last week's meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, four papers were to be presented but were not. We have to change our forward work plan every week because nothing is being done.

Mr B McCrea: Shame.

Mrs D Kelly: Indeed, shame on them.

Yet, in the Chamber, we have listened to crocodile tears about the problems faced by many people on a day-to-day basis, but that is all because of party political interest. Where is the need to make decisions for the common good and give real leadership? It is missing from here, and it has been missing for the past three months. Let us see if they can rise to the challenge on Thursday.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will certainly give way, Mr Durkan.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member recall —

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The origins of the motion go back more than three months, even before the Executive held their last meeting on 18 June. It was perfectly clear then that we were heading for hard times and that our devolved institutions would be put to the test. Before the Assembly went into recess, the SDLP called on the Executive to examine energy policy and to urge the British Government to impose a windfall tax and use the proceeds of that to mitigate fuel poverty. Given the urgency and the fundamental nature of the challenges that we faced, Members had the right to assume that business would be done during the summer and that no petty procedural wrangles should stand in the way.

Sadly, that did not happen. For reasons that were highlighted in the Chamber yesterday, there were no

meetings. When it became clear that the Executive would not meet in July, the SDLP called for the Assembly to reconvene. Although some parties think that it should be the other way round — indeed, some think that it is the other way round — the Executive are answerable to the Assembly. Members should note the absence in the Chamber of Ministers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to the debate.

Sinn Féin's Martina Anderson described the call to reconvene the Assembly as "political posturing", because the Assembly and the Executive do not have the power to rectify the crisis. Speaking about the crisis, Martin McGuinness took the opposite view and said:

"we ... need to exercise what power we have to minimise the impact".

He, belatedly, produced a list of measures for action. However, he seems to be entirely unaware that many of those measures are in the pipeline already.

Alliance Party leader David Ford said that a recall would be too expensive, and he preferred to put his faith in the power of conscience. He said:

"If the Executive is not already ashamed enough at its failure to meet all summer, a recall of the Assembly will have no impact."

However, it will have an impact. In fact, it must.

Numerous people from various parties — the DUP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party — mentioned recurring issues including poverty, vulnerable pensioners' fears for the winter, health and education concerns, worries about lack of breadwinners in households to supply food and fears that those who have been in full-time employment for years will, for the first time this year, be unemployed. Those are the real issues.

The SDLP wrote to all MLAs to request that they support a recall, the terms of which are identical to the wording of today's motion. We understand that Ian Paisley Jnr replied; unfortunately, he got mixed up and sent his response to the Office of the Speaker. Moreover, at that time, he was confused about the number of names required to achieve a petition of concern. Indeed, he was confused again yesterday. Anyway, such things happen.

Mr Moutray and Mr McLaughlin supported our motion, and Mrs Long made valid points about the onus that Members share. At that stage, I scanned the Chamber — there were six DUP and five Sinn Féin Members present, but not one Minister. I compliment those Members who took an interest and who have the concerns of their constituents at heart. Mr Shannon spoke; he is a grass-roots politician who has his finger on the pulse of the community.

During his attack on the SDLP, Mr McCartney said that the Good Friday Agreement was 10 years ago and suggested that the country has moved on. The core

values at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement are pivotal to equality.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin, through its agreement with the DUP during the summer, is attempting to gerrymander the system of appointing Ministers in order to exclude the SDLP from a justice Department?

Mr McGlone: Mr McCartney let the cat out of the DUP bag today. *[Laughter.]* Courtesy of provisional Sinn Féin, no nationalist need apply — nice one.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: No, I have too much to get through. Basil McCrea made a valid point in support of the motion. Dr McDonnell referred to the summer of lost opportunities and mentioned the Executive's corporate responsibility to respond. Mr O'Dowd should, perhaps, arrange a therapy session with the good Baby Doc, because he got things completely wrong.

The UUP did not vote against the Budget. The SDLP voted to amend the Budget while colleagues voted for water charges, to cut childcare and to cut voluntary-sector jobs — and that is a fact.

Mr Hamilton made some valid points about the economy with which I concur, but —

Lord Morrow: The Member should have given way to Mr Poots earlier. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Very good. Members —

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Yes, if the Member makes a very brief point.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin is in a somewhat embarrassing position today, in that it has engaged in a role reversal with David Trimble by trying to pull down institutions that it signed up to a very short time ago?

Mr McGlone: From the Member's point of view, that is definitely a fair point. *[Laughter.]*

Members are genuinely committed to the care, well-being and concern of the people whom they represent. I do not deny that. We must take responsibility for holding the Executive to account — that is our duty and that is what people sent us here to do. When the Executive have not met for three months, we must hold them to account.

If one Minister or one party is responsible for that hold-up, we must lay the blame where it belongs. This is an extremely serious matter — it is nothing short of a political scandal, which threatens our democratic institutions, our society and the well-being of our people. It is incredibly and crassly stupid at this time, when people crying out for leadership and proper governance, that this should happen. It is way beyond a joke.

I cannot think of an example of another Cabinet or executive body in the democratic world that could simply shut up shop for one quarter of a year at the whim of a single party leader. Having said that, perhaps something similar happened this summer in Zimbabwe, where an ageing, autocratic, long-winded guerrilla leader — who has genuine difficulty in making the transition from paramilitary command to democratic politics — prefers to hang out with his war veterans, rather than debate with political opponents.

Some Members: Gerry Adams.

Mr McGlone: Gerry Mugabe — sorry; Robert Mugabe — is a very different case.

Members should not suppose that their duty and responsibility to hold the Executive to account will go unchallenged. Look around — where are the responsible Ministers who are prepared to answer the charge? Where are they today? Perhaps other than through the media, why can we not even find out who blocked the meetings of the Executive? Who, if anyone, made decisions this summer? Who, if anyone, is in charge? Why was the July meeting cancelled at short notice? Why was there no emergency meeting when people were stuck in floods, and when I and many others visited people whose homes were flooded or whose livestock drowned? It is incredible.

No one was here to provide answers at a time when there are major issues in respect of job creation and fuel poverty. Pensioners are afraid and families are left without a breadwinner. The cost of housing is a major issue. The response of the Executive is to do nothing. That is incredible. We must put down a marker today. If we elected representatives do not use the power to hold the Executive to account, we will lose it, one slice at a time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern that the Executive has not met since June and notes the backlog of papers requiring due consideration by the Executive on important issues such as post-primary education, the Maze and PPS14; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meets to address important papers being brought forward by Ministers, to consider the regional impact of the economic downturn and measures which might mitigate its impact on households, businesses, employment and the regional economy including expediting the start dates for major public works agreed in the Investment Strategy, rejecting water charges and prioritising interventions against rising fuel poverty; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive; and reaffirms the recommendations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Report on the Inquiry into the devolution of policing and justice matters which highlighted issues which needed to be considered, examined or discussed by the Assembly and/or discussed by the political parties before the devolution of policing and justice.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; where necessary co-operating with other agencies and Departments; and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. — *[Mr G Robinson.]*

Motion not moved.

3.30 pm

Integrated Schools

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools. — *[Dr Farry.]*

Motion not moved.

Adjourned at 3.30 pm.