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# OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 November 2008

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** I wish to inform Members that the Business Committee has agreed to suspend the sitting for 10 minutes, from 10.55 am to 11.05 am, to accommodate Members who wish to mark Armistice Day.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Contingency Arrangements in the event of Apprenticeship Redundancies

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement regarding contingency arrangements in the event of apprenticeship redundancies.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** We are all well aware of the current economic conditions, which affect each and every one of us in so many different ways. We must all make adjustments to how we lead our lives and manage our financial affairs. It is at times like these that businesses naturally look to reduce their running costs to offset loss in revenue. Usually, the apparently easy options are targeted. Often, however, those options, while perhaps effective in the short term and offering a quick fix, are not beneficial in the longer term.

Training is one of the easy targets, but, although cutting that perceived luxury will save money and release staff time for the production line, it can only end up halting the development and improvement of skills that would otherwise improve performance and competitiveness. At the end of the day, we train staff to create a better business. Cutting training provision may offer a short-term fix for cost-saving purposes, but, in the longer term, it threatens future growth. When the upturn comes — and it will — those who have not kept up their training investment will be stuck at the starting gate, while their competitors who did not take the quick fix will be well ahead, grabbing the opportunities that will be there for the taking. We must ensure that continuous professional and technical training is available, so that employers are in a better position to strike when the iron becomes hot again — as it will.

However, I am not so naive as to think that resisting simple cost-cutting measures will sort out all the problems. I understand employers' hesitancy to commit resources when the future appears so uncertain. Unfortunately, people are losing their jobs as the downturn tightens its grip — a situation that is particularly evident in the construction sector. There have been several company closures and attempts to control costs through staff layoffs. Sadly, apprentices are often the first to go because they are the easy target.

An apprenticeship has long been recognised as a respected pathway to good training, a good career and good prospects. Apprenticeships have ensured the continuity of the skills that industries need in order to compete and grow in a vibrant and dynamic economy. We cannot, and dare not, lose that route to skills development. Therefore, I announce several interventions that my

Department will implement to support the sectors that have been hardest hit, namely the construction, engineering and motor-vehicle sectors, and to protect the ethos and value of apprenticeships and preserve the skills pool. These interventions are a measured response that is tailored to suit the point in the economic cycle that has been reached. They can be reviewed quickly and built upon should the situation change significantly.

Aware of the tightening of the labour-market situation, my Department has been working on its response for some weeks. The first step is the Department's engagement with the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, and other relevant employer bodies, to encourage employers to take on any apprentices who have been made redundant. Employers who have a strong tradition of investing in apprentices will be encouraged to do that, as well as employers who have not yet engaged with the provision. The Department will contribute a modest amount of conditional funding towards the additional wage costs. This is an opportunity for employers to stand up and be counted in this time of need; an opportunity for leading employers to demonstrate why they are leaders; and an opportunity for smaller employers to put their heads above the parapet and to show competitors and customers what sets them apart.

I am delighted to report that several major companies have indicated that they are prepared to foster additional apprentices. I appreciate that a lot is being asked of employers; it is a difficult sell and will demand sacrifices. However, I am already encouraged by the sense of partnership because it demonstrates an acceptance that whatever affects Northern Ireland as a whole affects everyone on an individual level. I am convinced that the co-operation of spirit that has been demonstrated, and the willingness of industry representatives to provide a safety net for apprentices, will go some way to resolving the present difficulties.

The Department is implementing provision to allow apprentices who have been made redundant and cannot find an alternative employer to continue training and to work towards completing their apprenticeship framework. Under the Steps to Work employment initiative, apprentices in the construction, engineering and motor-vehicle sectors, who are aged 18 and over, will be offered level 2 or level 3 placements with employers for up to 52 weeks. That will allow those apprentices to continue their NVQ training and assessment. Separate arrangements will be implemented for further education colleges to offer technical-certificate and essential-skills training free of charge through evening or weekend classes. Apprentices will be entitled to a benefit-based training allowance and may also qualify for other benefits while they are on the Steps to Work programme.

Apprentices aged 16 or 17 who have been made redundant will be eligible for the pre-apprenticeship component of Training for Success, which allows them

to return to training in order to complete the technical training certificate and essential skills elements of an apprenticeship framework. It is anticipated that the skills and knowledge developed during that training period will make the participants much more employable, thereby allowing them to complete the NVQ after they return to employment.

I recognise that the success of these interventions depends on employer placements, which appears to run counter to the cause of problem being addressed. However, I appeal to employers to help with the initiatives and to work collectively for a solution. A basic tenet of apprenticeships is that apprentices must be in employment in order to complete the framework and to demonstrate competence in the workplace. No full-time training option can deliver that.

The options that I propose also cost relatively little extra — in the range of £250,000 for every 100 apprentices, either in the fostered employment or in Steps to Work. The pre-apprenticeship intervention will be cost-neutral as part of the normal Training for Success provision. Therefore, at present, the costs are reasonable and the interventions are appropriately measured. I must say, however, that my Department and I will continue to monitor the economic conditions as they change. Should these interventions seem no longer appropriate, I will ask my officials to explore further measures. I also believe strongly that there is no substitute for real work experience while in training. That must always be a prime consideration when arriving at any solution.

My Department remains committed to the provision of apprenticeship training and to the already substantial financial investment that has been made in it. Furthermore, my Department remains committed to ensuring that, despite the current economic predicament, a resolution will be found that ensures the continuous provision of high-quality skills training. I call upon all Members to work with my Department and me in order to promote these interventions and to ensure that they succeed.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, which my Committee will study carefully when it meets tomorrow. I have no doubt that members will have questions for the departmental officials who will appear before the Committee tomorrow on this very issue.

The Minister is aware that the Committee has long been interested in the issue of apprenticeships. The Committee recently produced a report for the Assembly on Training for Success, which is a Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) programme for apprenticeships. In the past few weeks, the Committee has twice written to the Minister about its concerns

over the loss of apprenticeships during the current economic downturn, to which the Minister referred.

As the Minister said, one of the most worrying aspects of losing an apprenticeship with an employer is losing the associated college place. That is often a devastating blow to someone who has set their sights on a particular goal and an occupation, which they cannot work towards once their apprenticeship is lost. That has been highlighted by the Minister.

The Committee has learned from the Department that between September 2007 and the end of October 2008, the six regional colleges lost 230 apprenticeships because employers cancelled them. Construction industry apprenticeships alone accounted for 164 of those places. On 5 November, the Committee heard from the Construction Industry Group about the poor work prospects in the industry and the knock-on effect of the downturn.

Committee members have also been approached by constituents about the situation in relation to apprenticeships, and the Committee wrote to the Minister in order to highlight those concerns. The Committee believes that the interventions announced today may not be sufficient and it again wrote to the Minister seeking further action, which resulted in his statement.

As the Minister pointed out, the measures that he has announced greatly rely on employers stepping forward to take up redundant apprenticeships. It must be accepted by everyone that that will be difficult and that it requires everybody to work together. I also encourage employers to step up to the mark and to take on apprenticeships. The Committee supports employers who help in such a way. However, as we move towards greater economic difficulties, Committee members remain to be convinced that these measures will be enough. It is likely that more and more employers — who often regard apprenticeships as an unaffordable luxury — will have to tighten their belts.

The Minister and his Department should consider measures that fundamentally address the problems in an apprenticeship system that relies heavily on the goodwill of employers and can unravel in an economic downturn, as we are now witnessing. The Committee is aware of that situation and plans to give the proposals further consideration.

I also welcome the statement personally. Will the Minister outline the cost of his proposal to give money to employers who become foster parents to apprentices? From the outset, it is important to find out the cost of that proposal. The Committee is committed to working with the Minister to tackle the crisis. Go raibh maith agat.

10.45 am

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for her comments.

She said that the measures may not be enough, which may be true. This is a calibrated response — over the past few weeks, we have examined the options open to us, because we could see trends developing. I have made it clear that, rather than being the end of the matter, the measures that I propose are a response to circumstances. Those circumstances may change, and I do not rule out further interventions.

We will pay around £40 a week to an employer who fosters an apprentice. There is no substitute for experience gained in the workplace. A certain amount can be done in a classroom, but work-based experience is essential in order to gain an NVQ. There has been a response from some employers, even in the hard-pressed construction sector, who say that they are prepared to examine the proposal. On a visit to a major factory last week, I received one commitment to consideration of the proposal, and officials will visit that factory in the next couple of weeks. Other significant employers have said that they are prepared to examine my proposals.

Intervention is never easy. The fundamental driving force is that we have encouraged young people to take up apprenticeships, and we have encouraged employers to provide apprenticeships, only for young people to discover that their contracts have been cancelled in the middle of their courses and work placements. There are few more demoralising circumstances that those young people could face. Rather than losing the work that those apprentices have done, we are trying to find a way to continue the apprenticeships so that they can attain the qualifications that they are working for and become more employable. That is the rationale behind the proposals.

The proposals are not perfect. We have concentrated on three sectors, because a critical mass of students is required for technical-certificate classes to be viable, and the students are distributed throughout the countryside. The proposals are by no means perfect and may not be the last word on the issue.

I thank Committee members for their contribution, and officials will explain the detail of the proposals to them tomorrow. We are also thinking about the next stage, in case it comes to that. I hope that the economy does not further deteriorate, but there is little point in having a devolved institution if we are not prepared to respond to local circumstances as they arise. That is one of the main reasons for the Assembly's existence. If necessary, we will make further changes to the proposals.

**Mr Speaker:** I allowed the Chairperson of the Committee some latitude. When there is a ministerial statement, it is only right to afford some latitude to the Chairperson of the appropriate Committee. However, I remind Members that I expect them to ask the Minister questions about his statement.

**Mr Newton:** I welcome the Minister's statement. Like the Chairperson of the Committee, I wish to express my concerns at the increasing number of apprentices who are being made redundant before they have completed their training. All Members will be sympathetic to that situation.

The Department for Employment and Learning has made a great deal of progress on apprenticeship training, but the Chairperson of the Committee made the fundamental point that the current system is subject to economic ill winds. Will the Minister examine policy and operational out-turn in order to ensure that the system is not subject to a downturn in the economy just so swiftly as has happened on this occasion?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I take the Member's point about the economic ill winds, but we are living in the real world and apprenticeships are part of that world. It would be difficult to be completely insulated from the economic tsunami that we have faced in the past few months. I take the Member's point, but the very fact that we become involved in these interventions makes its own point. My Department and the Committee for Employment and Learning need to reflect on the Member's statement rather than give an off-the-cuff reaction to it.

I am very reluctant to go back to classroom-based apprenticeships. Equally, if the employer were removed from the calculation, the quality of the apprenticeship could deteriorate, because the employer will have made an investment in the young person to make the apprenticeship viable. Having said that, we are entering uncharted waters, and it would be unwise for any of us to say definitively what we should or should not do in any circumstance. However, I am prepared to reflect on what the Member has said, and I am sure that the Committee will also reflect on what has been said.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Rev Dr Robert Coulter, I ask Members to keep their questions brief as the sitting will be suspended soon.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I welcome the statement and congratulate the Minister and his Department on the initiative. Will he agree that the problem of apprenticeship redundancies may extend beyond the construction, engineering and motor vehicle sectors?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Sadly, the answer to the Member's question is yes. We identified the sectors that have been most obvious to us in recent weeks, and, indeed, the construction sector's position is well known. However, I will keep the matter under review.

If a critical mass of apprentices in other sectors were in similar circumstances, and provided there were sufficient numbers that classes could be provided in further education colleges, for instance, to help them to obtain their certificates, we would be prepared to revisit

the matter. At the moment, however, the construction, engineering and motor vehicle sectors have the most significant numbers of apprenticeship redundancies, but I will keep the matter under review.

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to suspend the sitting to accommodate Members who wish to mark Armistice Day. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 11.05 am.

*The sitting was suspended at 10.54 am.*



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

11.05 am

**Mr Attwood:** I also welcome the Minister's statement, but I do so with a heavy dose of caution. This matter was raised at a meeting of the Committee for Employment and Learning several months ago. I recall the somewhat passive responses of officials on that occasion, and there is an echo of that in the Minister's statement. Twice during his statement, the Minister told us that officials have been working on the matter for a few weeks, even though the problem has been emerging over many months. Therefore, I view the proposals as a first step only, as does the construction industry, whose representatives referred to them as "broad-brush".

I will ask the Minister a specific question. In Scotland, the contracts that are awarded by public bodies — including Government and public authorities — require a certain percentage of apprentices to be employed in the public works in question. Is the Minister prepared to consider doing the same with regard to the £16 billion of investment that was endorsed in the Assembly — despite some opposition — in the past few months? Is he prepared to consider making the employment of apprentices a condition of contracts for public works for those who have been awarded tenders?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member will have heard me say that I am open to examining how the situation that confronts us will evolve. I also said that I am open to further interventions if they are required. I do not necessarily see this as being the end of the matter, because we cannot anticipate the cycle's development.

Several different types of clauses are now written into public-works contracts, and I am happy to write to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is responsible for such matters, to draw his attention to the Member's comments. The Department of Finance and Personnel has the overarching responsibility for matters that relate to the construction industry, such as procurement.

I say to the Member that it is not a matter of being cautious, or of not responding to events. It is precisely because of my concerns about this matter that my Department is responding. I have made it clear that further responses and interventions will be made if they are deemed appropriate and necessary.

**Dr Farry:** I welcome the Minister's statement: I hope that it will be part of a series of statements from Ministers trying to address problems in the Northern Ireland economy. I am sure that the Minister agrees that the most important intervention that the Executive could make would be to bring forward several major capital projects, particularly to assist the construction industry.

Has the Minister's Department made any assessment of the risks to the economy that may result from intervention? Is there any danger that subsidising certain members of staff and companies may lead employers to release other members of staff, which would have an impact on the unemployment figures? Has he sought assurances from companies that all staff will be retained if extra assistance is given to apprentices?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I agree that the Executive should consider a series of measures that could be taken, but, without trying to politicise my statement, the first priority for the Executive is to meet. Interventions can be made across a number of Departments, including consideration of the profile of the capital programme and planning policy statement (PPS) 14.

Undoubtedly, intervention involves risks, and my Department is aware of those. We are concerned that we do not distort the market and we are conscious of the criticism that payments made to young people and the provision of young people to employers lead to a certain degree of exploitation. I assure the Member that we are conscious of those issues and that any involvement that we have with employers will take those matters into account. We have been considering the issues and we are aware that intervention in the market carries risks.

However, that must be balanced with the demoralising plight of many young people, who, having put their heart and soul into their work, lose their job at a critical stage, perhaps when they have only a short time to go before achieving a qualification, meaning that all of their work is completely lost. I assure the Member that we will engage closely to ensure that such exploitation does not take place.

**Mr Hilditch:** I declare an interest. I have a son who has just finished a second-year apprenticeship in plumbing but is already on his third employer, having been made redundant twice.

We have seen at first hand in our communities the distress and anguish that the current situation is causing to young people at the outset of their working lives. I welcome the Minister's statement: as he said, it is a start. Will he take the opportunity to pay tribute to and acknowledge the efforts of the frustrated but resilient young people who wish to complete their apprenticeships and remain in their chosen industries rather than walking away and taking another job such as stacking shelves in the local supermarket?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I thank the Member for his comments; he is one of several Members who wrote to me about individual cases in which people found themselves in such a plight. My Department is trying to encourage young

people to get involved in apprenticeships, because they provide a route to long-term employment.

As I said in my reply to the Member for North Down Dr Farry, we were concerned that those young people, having taken that first step, may suddenly discover that all their effort has been wasted. They may have spent 18 months working towards a qualification, and, through no fault of their own, that may be taken away from them. In such a situation, it would be difficult to motivate that person again. For that reason, the Department has considered options to try to protect those people and to ensure that the work that they have put into their apprenticeships can be carried forward and is not lost to them.

I can think of little else that would demoralise people more. The Member may recall that, in the past, people circulated on various training schemes, time and again, like a merry-go-round, but achieved few qualifications.

11.15 am

I agree with Mr Hilditch, and I commend young people who decide to undertake an apprenticeship. The number of apprentices aged 24 and over who have come forward to start apprenticeships has been encouraging and interesting, and illustrates that it is not only younger people who want to become apprentices. People are prepared to make career changes, and we encourage them to do so because they may start a course when they are 17 or 18 years of age but, after a while, discover that the path that they have chosen is not for them. The age limit has been removed, and we have improved flexibility and provided people with an opportunity to take a different career path. I strongly support Mr Hilditch's view that those people deserve to be commended.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement.

Recently, I met the director of Belfast Metropolitan College, who said that his biggest concern was the number of apprentices who were unable to complete their courses. Of the 230 apprentices who have been unable to complete their courses, 164 are involved in the construction industry.

The Minister said that, if the measures do not work, colleges would offer full-time training with simulated practical work experience. How long will those measures be given to take effect before that option is implemented? Questions were asked about whether colleges and training organisations could offer those facilities. However, even that would not be an ideal situation, given that the other leg of apprenticeships is work experience. There will be a skills gap, which the Minister mentioned. When the economic climate improves, will colleges be up to speed and ready for

that step change, and will their apprentices be fully skilled and ready to go into the workplace?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** It is for precisely that reason that we are examining those interventions, and possibly others. Those measures will ensure that, when there is an upturn in the economy, the workforce is prepared and fully skilled.

The Member will know that companies that invest in their employees, and in their employees' skills, are two and a half times more likely to succeed in the workplace and in their chosen businesses than those that do not. We are examining those interventions to protect apprentices' skills bases and to ensure that our aims, objectives and targets for improving the skills of the workforce are not deflected. A simulated work environment forms part of those measures. The colleges are fully engaged and working closely with the Department. As I said, we are prepared to examine other interventions. To some extent, the issue of timing will be dictated by events. We will want to work closely with the Committee and with Members who are providing feedback about what is happening on the ground in their constituencies. Collectively, we can make a difference.

The measures will involve using a certain amount of resources, because this cannot be done for nothing. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on the Department to put its money where its mouth is and to encourage employers to continue to invest in their workforce, even during the financial downturn.

We are working closely with the colleges. They will be an integral part of the entire process, because they are developing large elements of the courses and qualifications. We are also working on those interventions with the sector skills councils and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils.

That will, I suspect, be an ongoing process for quite some time — well into next year — and I believe that there will be opportunities to tweak and amend things according to circumstances.

**Mr Cree:** I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a very difficult time for business, and I look forward to other Ministers bringing forward the views of their Departments on how they can help.

Although companies often see training as a cost, does the Minister agree that it is also an investment opportunity that may help to ensure the longer-term viability of companies, even in this time of recession?

**Mr Easton:** I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement. Will the Minister confirm whether his Department will find the foster companies, or will apprentices have to find their own foster companies? Will the Minister's measures cover those apprentices who

have lost their jobs over the past month or two, or will they be covered by the new measures from here on in?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I apologise, Minister. Maybe you would like to answer both questions at the same time.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** With regard to Mr Cree's question, I said in my statement — and in speech after speech — that companies investing in their workforce is good in principle, but it is good for their future bottom line. We are not asking companies to do it for anything other than their own benefit. All of the evidence points to the fact that companies that invest in training survive recessions and emerge from them in a much stronger position. That is a well-established fact.

We must, however, be realistic. If a company has a huge cash-flow problem, and a wages bill to pay on a Friday, it is easy to stand here and pontificate by saying that all the evidence suggests that companies that invest do better. That is fact. However, I understand the difficulties; I have been in that position myself. I know that it is tough to meet a wages bill of whatever size, and training and maintenance and suchlike are easy to cut. I say to companies — and I do not do so lightly — that leading businesspeople, trade unions, and other Ministers with responsibility for skills throughout the United Kingdom have come together in recent weeks to encourage companies nationally not to slash their training budgets. We are doing that for very obvious reasons.

To answer Mr Easton's question: my Department is, so to speak, going round leading suppliers of apprenticeships. We are, basically, knocking on companies' doors, explaining that we have a particular individual in difficulty and asking if they can help by taking that person on and giving him or her an opportunity to complete an apprenticeship. We are telling companies that it is difficult to predict the numbers involved. Mr Butler quoted figures from September, but I suspect that they have been overtaken by events.

The Member also asked what happens to someone who found themselves in that situation on 20 September — has that person missed the boat, or can that person avail of some of these opportunities? The answer is yes — we will do everything we possibly can. We cannot solve every apprenticeship's problem by these measures.

They are confined to three sectors; therefore, individuals in other sectors will not be covered. The Department's objective is to place as many people as possible in order to give them an opportunity. As long as the time gap is not too great, they ought to be able to be accommodated.

From the colleges' point of view, the new academic year has started. However, it is not too far into it and, therefore, I hope that as many people as possible can be placed. The Department will be as flexible as it can.

However, I cannot guarantee that every individual will be sorted out; that would be misleading. We will do our best to accommodate as many people as possible.

**Mr McCallister:** I welcome the Minister's statement. He is aware of the difficulties in my constituency and in other constituencies. Further to Mr Cree's point; it is important that other Ministers are proactive in tackling problems in these difficult times.

The Minister mentioned the possibility of a wage subsidy for fostered apprentices. Has he raised with the Low Pay Commission the more general problem of maintaining a living wage for younger apprentices who do not fall under minimum-wage provisions?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member is aware that the issue has been debated on the Floor of the House on several occasions because it was feared that there could be a degree of exploitation of younger people by employers. One may suggest that the Department, while it has tried to rescue apprentices, has, in the same breath, put an additional burden on employers.

The Member is aware that, some months ago, I made a submission to the Low Pay Commission about how much apprentices are being paid, because, at present, they are not covered by the current national minimum wage arrangements. I do not know the outcome of that submission yet. Therefore, the only arrangements in place are between apprentices and employers. Until a decision is made by the Low Pay Commission, the Department will be unable to enforce any particular rate. The Department has decided on the particular rate at which it will intervene. Thereafter, it will be up to the employer and the apprentice to agree terms.

The situation is not satisfactory, and I hope that it will be corrected. The Department has made a clear submission to that effect because, on several occasions, there has been widespread support for that from around the Chamber. I will inform the House as soon as I am aware of the Low Pay Commission's response.

**Mr Dallat:** Earlier, the Minister said that we have entered uncharted waters: that is absolutely true. Will he assure the House that he has set his compass for the future and that he will take every opportunity to ensure that further education colleges and other education providers offer courses that are appropriate for each area of industry?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member is aware that substantial investment has been made in further education colleges during the past years. Not only has substantial and ongoing investment been made in the estate, investment has been made in the curriculum and in the variety of courses available.

I assure the Member that the Department regards the further education sector as a critical delivery mechanism: it is at the core of the Department's view for further

education. In fact, in the Programme for Government — and, perhaps, people have forgotten that we have a Programme for Government — the Executive made strengthening the economy the first objective.

11.30 am

Each Department with an input into boosting the economy has several sub-targets. My Department is making further education a major element of its mechanism for economic delivery, although it is more than a purely economic issue. I assure the Member that the colleges are highly capable of dealing with our current demands on them.

However, as the Member said, we are in uncharted waters, and I fear that, as time goes on, we may have to knock on their door again soon. The Department funds the colleges from the block grant. The colleges may argue that ever more is being asked of them by the Department. In trying to salvage as much as possible from the apprenticeship programme, resource issues may have to be considered, and, if necessary, I will do that.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Alcohol Misuse

**Mr P Ramsey:** I beg to move

That this Assembly considers that the misuse of alcohol in society causes serious damage to the health and social well-being of individuals and communities; and calls on the Executive to formulate, and implement, policies designed to reduce alcohol misuse.

I wish to place on record that I am a director of Foyle Haven, which is a drop-in centre for street drinkers and alcoholics in Derry. I thank Members and the Minister, who is on his way to the Chamber, for their attendance today.

The abuse of alcohol is the single most challenging social, health and economic problem that faces society. Recently, the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland called on the Dublin Government to take strong action on alcohol abuse, and it proposed several measures. In January 2008, the college detailed the following statistics: 88% of public order offences relate to alcohol; 34% of marital breakdowns —

**Ms S Ramsey:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion, and I am sorry to have interrupted the Member while he was in full flow. However, when a Sinn Féin Minister is due to respond to a debate, but is not present in the Chamber, everyone in the House highlights that fact. Today, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not present, and I would appreciate being given some idea of his whereabouts.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I understand that the Minister is on his way, and it is up to him and the Executive to respond to the debate.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Member for her comments, but the debate began earlier than scheduled, and I assume that the Minister is on his way.

Alcohol is cited as the major cause of 34% of marital breakdowns, and Members will have seen many such breakdowns as a direct result of alcohol. How many families in our communities across Northern Ireland have we watched become estranged because of alcohol? How many families live in poverty and hardship due to alcohol?

One in every eight patients who attends an accident and emergency department in the Republic does so as a direct result of alcohol-related injuries. The recently announced figures for Northern Ireland show that 6,000 people attended accident and emergency departments for the same reason, many of whom were under 18.

I propose the motion because it is difficult to identify another single factor that causes so much damage to people, particularly the young, and to our communities and economy.

I will first consider what signals the Assembly should send to the Executive, drinks companies and the public, after which I will detail the extent of alcohol consumption. Finally, for the record, I will propose several initiatives that I would like to see introduced.

I welcome the Minister to the debate. Members should signal to him and his team that they have the full support of the Assembly for the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs. A signal must also be sent to the Executive that it is essential that the issue of alcohol misuse is not simply left to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), while other Departments consider it a mere add-on. Each of the relevant Departments must treat cross-departmental issues as core responsibilities.

People who are working to reduce alcohol misuse are concerned at the level of buy-in of some of the other Departments. We need to send out a signal to the independent community and voluntary-sector organisations that we endorse strongly their work on alcohol misuse and alcoholism.

It is important to acknowledge the good partnership work that is being done in many areas in Northern Ireland. Derry City Council, the council with which I am most familiar, has a proactive civic-alcohol forum that is working hard to reduce alcohol misuse. The council is working with vintners to design and implement responsible codes of practice, and community organisations — such as the Divert project — are offering alternative activities to young people and educating them on the dangers of alcohol misuse.

The PSNI in Derry have worked hard to reduce on-street drinking, particularly among underage drinkers, and many community and statutory organisations deal with addiction problems. Derry City Council passed a proposal recently to ban on-street drinking in more areas, and many residents in Derry — and in many other communities in Northern Ireland — believe that on-street drinking should be banned in all areas.

It is important that we send a strong signal to the people of Northern Ireland that demonstrates that we recognise the damage that alcohol abuse does to communities, families and individuals. Alcohol abuse also has direct health implications, and most importantly, we must demonstrate that we recognise the associated behavioural, social and economic problems.

The Assembly should also send the signal that it is concerned about, and for, alcoholics, many of whom end up homeless and on the street. I know three alcoholics who, in the past month, have been found dead on Derry's streets, having committed suicide or died because of physical and mental-health problems that were related to their addiction. The Assembly must demonstrate to alcohol companies and retailers that we

are taking the problem seriously and that we intend to deal with it.

In my introduction, I referred to some of the findings of research that was done on the matter in the Republic. Those findings give a stark overview of the scale of the problem and are similar to statistics and trends in Northern Ireland, Ireland, France, Luxembourg and Denmark top the world rankings for alcohol consumption. Those findings correlate with those of the Department of Health and Children in Ireland, which demonstrate a greater increase in alcohol consumption in Ireland than in any other European country. The Irish Government take the problem seriously and are enacting several measures to reduce alcohol misuse. The Strategic Task Force on Alcohol in Ireland aims to reduce alcohol consumption to the European average, and we should try to do the same.

England has similar problems. According to the UK Department of Health's Alcohol Needs Assessment Research Project in 2005, alcohol misuse in England costs £55.1 billion a year, which is an extraordinary amount of money. Moreover, the Scottish Government are consulting on a range of robust and imaginative initiatives that are designed to reduce alcohol misuse. Given that all Administrations experience similar problems, the Assembly should conduct its initiatives in partnership with the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Some jurisdictions are ahead of us in their ideas and in good practice. The Assembly should examine those models.

The Assembly should also examine policy initiatives that are in place — or are being considered — in other regions. The big-ticket issues relate to price consumption, accessibility, regulation and the promotion of a cultural shift away from alcohol abuse towards healthier lifestyles. Some of those measures fall within the remit of the Executive, and some are reserved matters. However, the Assembly should pursue them all.

There is a negative correlation between price and consumption. The higher the price of an alcoholic drink, the lower its consumption rate. Therefore, the Assembly should consider banning price promotions and below-cost alcohol sale. In many supermarkets — which I will not name — a six-pack of beer is much cheaper than milk or water. Furthermore, the Assembly should consider banning alcohol advertising in the same way that cigarette advertising has been banned.

We need to put measures in place to ensure that alcohol can be traced back to the point of sale, and back to the purchaser if that is technically possible. We need to ensure that anyone supplying alcohol to underage drinkers is caught and dealt with effectively.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for taking my intervention. He refers to those who sell alcohol. Yesterday, I met the Quinn family. In south Armagh,

and in other areas across the North, grave concern is caused by the sale of counterfeit alcohol, sold — allegedly — in some pubs and clubs across the North and from the back of ice-cream vans. That particular type of alcohol has devastating consequences; we do not know what all is in it. Some say that after one or two glasses of it, young people are going off their heads. I hope that anyone with information on that will help the PSNI to track down these pedlars of poor health and poor futures for young people.

**Mr P Ramsey:** That is a good point. Alcohol is a poison in itself, but if young people are being poisoned with additional substances, we should hand over any information that we may have on that to the police.

We should raise the age limit for purchasing alcohol from off-licences to 21, in order to prevent alcohol from getting into the hands of children. We should charge a social responsibility tariff on bars and nightclubs so that they contribute to the additional spending on policing and health that is incurred as a result of the sale and consumption of alcohol. We need to ensure that no bar will sell alcohol to a person who is drunk; we have all been in bars where drunk people are standing at, or rather holding up, the counter and yet alcohol is still sold to them. The law on that is only loosely observed, and it needs to be tightened up.

We need a sustained programme of education in the dangers of alcohol to be taught in schools, colleges, universities and workplaces. We need to step up the public-awareness campaign against binge drinking and the antisocial behaviour associated with it. There should be a blanket ban on on-street drinking and drinking in public places, with restricted permission given on a case-by-case basis.

In addition to the legislative —

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

**Mr P Ramsey:** Each of us adults needs to send out a strong signal that drink must be taken responsibly.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thought that I was entitled to an extra minute for taking an intervention from another Member.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** You have had your 10 minutes.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Member for tabling the motion. I have listened to him describe the damage to families and relationships. Later today, I will bring before the House a motion on drink-driving and the difficulties that that creates.

This morning, I wish to talk about issues that relate mainly to younger people. Over the past couple of days, we have heard and seen evidence that more and more people under the age of 30 are showing signs of early-stage liver disease. 'The Irish News' reported

that there has been a 22% rise in referrals for that condition over the past 12 months.

My stance is not anti-drink; it is possible for people to go out and enjoy alcohol responsibly. However, we must examine the damage to health and society that alcohol abuse causes, and see what Government can do about it. Other European countries do not have alcohol-related problems on the same scale that we have in the United Kingdom or the Irish Republic. Here, the culture among many young people is to get as drunk as possible as quickly as possible.

Not so long ago, I was a student in Dundee. I was offered drink promotions of all kinds in virtually every bar and student venue that I visited. It was commonplace for pints of beer to be offered at £1 and vodka at 30p. Those were some of the offers advertised specifically to young people and students. I recall that young people were often carried out of bars and nightclubs or involved in alcohol-fuelled violence at the end of the night. My experience is supported by police evidence, to the effect that much of the violence that occurs on our streets — some 45% — is caused primarily by alcohol.

A culture of excessive drinking is now promoted in universities, and the perception of university students is that they go out and get drunk every night. Unfortunately, that image prevails in the media, and students in Belfast conform to that stereotype. In January, the 'News Letter' reported that, last year, Belfast had the highest percentage of emergency admissions to hospital for alcohol-related conditions.

Universities are focusing on violence and antisocial behaviour, and making efforts to stamp them out. Much of the blame has been levelled at the drinks industry; it has a responsibility to ensure that it does not target its drinks at teenagers. Ultimately, however, the choice to abuse alcohol rests in many cases with the individual. Guidance must be forthcoming from parents.

11.45 am

I am unconvinced that further stigmatising alcohol is the right way forward. When I was a student, I worked in the United States of America for four months. I was struck by the fact that teenagers and other people under the age of 21 did not drink alcohol. Liquor stores did not sell alcohol to people who were under that age, so the age limit of 21 seemed to work very well.

However, I noticed that many of those younger people took recreational drugs as a direct substitute. That led me to believe that the important issue is not so much the price of alcohol or the age at which one can buy it, but the attitude of young people towards alcohol. That is not to say that price is not a contributing factor — because cheap drinks and longer opening hours obviously offer young people more opportunities to abuse alcohol — but there is a bigger issue that must be addressed.

In preparation for the debate, I read a number of articles that argued that we should follow the lead of countries such as Sweden or Iceland and increase the price of alcohol in our bars to somewhere near £6 or £7 for a pint of beer, which is approximately the cost in Iceland. I am not convinced that that is the way to go, because that would penalise people who act responsibly.

However, we must recognise that cheap-alcohol promotions are causing a problem, as Pat Ramsey said. I see merit in ensuring that people are not encouraged to abuse alcohol. In the news yesterday, we heard that the Westminster Home Affairs Committee called for pubs to ban happy hours and for supermarkets to cease their cut-price drinks promotions. Individuals have a responsibility to look after themselves, but it is unfortunately the case that many young people avail themselves of the supermarket drinks promotions and get very drunk before they even go out at night. That is a huge problem.

I support the view that laws on cheap-drinks offers, pub happy hours and advertising campaigns that target young people should be toughened. There is a list of medical conditions — such as heart disease, liver disease, diabetes, strokes and mental-health issues — that young people do not seem to care about at all when they go out and get drunk.

Unfortunately, many parents are also to blame. We have talked about individuals' responsibilities, but parents also have responsibilities. Right across the country — from the most socially deprived areas to the more affluent ones — parents buy alcohol for their children and send them out for the night to drink on the streets. That is a problem that society must tackle.

Some of the statistics that I read yesterday — such as the fact that 648 children under the age of 10 had been hospitalised due to alcohol — are shocking. The Assembly must take the lead in tackling the problem.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I apologise in advance because there is another engagement that I must attend later, so I will miss some of the debate.

The misuse of alcohol can have a devastating effect on the physical, emotional and mental health of individuals, their families and the wider community. We have already heard about the direct and indirect costs of alcohol misuse — those are very well documented. Although there is a clear onus on individuals to ensure that they use alcohol wisely, there is also a very clear responsibility to put controls and adequate preventative measures in place to warn people — particularly the young — about the long-term effects of binge or heavy drinking.

There has been a marked change in patterns of drinking, among young people in particular, over the

past 10 years. Statistics increasingly show that young people are misusing alcohol. Sometimes, children begin drinking alcohol as young as 11. Ireland as a whole has one of the highest levels of binge drinking among 15- and 16-year-olds in Europe, so those people are particularly vulnerable.

Alcohol abuse can lead to a number of problems for individuals. Young people are more likely to suffer physical, emotional and social harm due to alcohol. It can also lead to their experiencing mental-health problems in later life, or becoming involved in antisocial activity. In some cases, it can lead to more serious crime.

The choices that we make when we are young can often have a long-term impact on the course of our lives. Therefore, there is a responsibility on parents, Government, schools, communities, the police and, particularly, the drinks industry to ensure that young people have positive influences when making those choices.

I do not want to concentrate solely on young people, but some are addicted to alcohol. It is very important to highlight that fact, because they need residential services, help and support to overcome that addiction. That goes for all people who are addicted to alcohol, not just young people.

We must be proactive in deciding how to intervene. I have worked on an initiative that was established by the Inter-Church Addiction Project, which is pushing for a dedicated residential facility to help young people with addiction problems. It is clear that people with such problems need more help and that a strategic approach must be adopted to providing that help, which must include the provision of adequate resources at a community level. I am aware that there is an overall strategic direction with respect to dealing with the problem, but there must be more facilities at a local level.

It is not only the individuals directly affected by alcohol who need that support, but their families. People misuse alcohol for a variety of reasons, some of which may relate to traumatic life experiences. Often, alcohol abuse is a symptom of a wider problem. It is essential that people be treated in a holistic manner and with respect and dignity. We need only consider the case of the young man who died on the streets of Derry a few weeks ago to appreciate that.

More must be done to provide shelter for people with addiction problems. It is hard enough for people to cope with an illness such as alcoholism without having to worry about where their next meal is coming from or where they are going to shelter from the cold each night.

The way in which alcohol is marketed also contributes to the problem. For instance, there is evidence of a link between the number of outlets that sell alcohol in an area and the level of alcohol-related problems there.

There is also a link between the price of alcohol and the level of its consumption. Therefore, there is an onus on off-licences and supermarkets that sell alcohol to ensure that it is done in a responsible manner. Drink promotions need to be more controlled, and advertising should be banned on television or other media outlets to which children and young people are particularly vulnerable.

A voluntary code of practice has been agreed by some off-licences, and some community initiatives have strived to stop the sale of alcohol to minors. Those schemes should be welcomed, but there needs to be more of them. We all have a part to play in ensuring that effective preventative strategies are in place to warn people of the dangers of alcohol misuse to their health and their emotional and mental well-being, including the risk to their family relationships. We must also ensure that adequate support services are available to people with an alcohol addiction, and to their families. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McCallister:** I am glad that the House has the opportunity to debate the issue of alcohol misuse. I am pleased to state that the Ulster Unionist Party will be supporting the motion. Alcohol misuse — or, indeed, abuse — is a serious problem in today's society. Not only is it having a devastating effect on the health and well-being of very many people in Northern Ireland, but it is stretching our Health Service to the limit.

It is well known that alcohol has massively damaging effects on the health of those who abuse it. Alcohol can negatively affect almost every part of the human anatomy. It is the second major cause of throat cancer after tobacco, it can lead to high blood pressure and, if consumed regularly, it can lead to an irregular heartbeat. It also has a devastating effect on the lungs and the liver.

Owing to the increase in the overall consumption of alcohol, increased numbers of people are dying as a direct result of alcohol abuse. The figures speak for themselves: in the United Kingdom, the alcohol-related death rate doubled between 1991 and 2006 from 6.9 per 100,000 people, to 13.4. Alcohol has truly become a silent killer in our society.

People can be affected badly in many ways because not only does alcohol have a devastating effect on a person's physical health, but it can lead to emotional problems, placing enormous strains on personal relationships. Unfortunately, alcohol abuse is becoming a key contributor to the break-up of many families here. Alcohol can become an addictive substance and, as such, it commonly contributes to depression and many other mental-health problems. As other Members have indicated, alcohol abuse is also a major factor in instances of suicide and self-harm.

It is well known that young people often abuse alcohol — one only need walk around our town centres on a

Friday or Saturday night to see the evidence of that. I have absolutely no problem with people going out and enjoying themselves at the weekend, but some are abusing that privilege. We need to move away from the mindset that people must get drunk on a night out.

We live in a society in which binge drinking is considered the norm. I wonder whether people would continue to drink such vast quantities of alcohol if they really knew what was going on inside their bodies.

We must adopt a proactive approach to this matter. Therefore, I welcome all public attention that is brought to bear on it. The mindset that has developed over the past decade must not be allowed to continue.

The alcohol industry and the licensed trade have key roles to play in tackling this matter head on. Recently, I have been pleased to see some of the big supermarkets adopting the Challenge 21 initiative, in which people who appear to be younger than 21 are asked for identification. Mr Ross mentioned the time that he spent in the United States — most bars there have agreed to seek identification from anyone who appears to be under 40 years old. On my last visit there, obviously, I was keen to be asked for identification. Hopefully, measures such as Challenge 21 will have the desired effect of limiting alcohol abuse by people under the age of 18.

It is too easy to buy large quantities of alcohol, and Mr Ramsey highlighted the fact that the availability of cheap alcohol is a major contributor to its misuse. I agree with that; however, over-taxing alcohol tends to impact too hard on those who drink and act responsibly.

**Mr Ross:** The Member mentioned the tighter regulations on selling alcohol to young people in America. Does the Member also recognise that there is a massive drug problem among young people in America? In many ways, one form of abuse is being substituted by another, so there is a bigger question about attitudes to alcohol and drugs that must be addressed.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have one extra minute.

**Mr McCallister:** Although I accept that a drug problem exists throughout American society, including that in our discussions raises the problem that the people in the United States who are penalised most for drug abuse are often not the heaviest users. There are differences in drug usage even among people from the same ethnic background. Drug abuse in America raises a complex range of issues. Here, alcohol is the drug of choice, and it has enormously damaging effects.

The availability of cheap alcohol must be addressed, and it is encouraging to see some supermarkets acting responsibly and tackling the problem head on.

In 2005, the Church of Ireland released a report on young people's drinking habits. Worryingly, it concluded



that binge drinking among Northern Ireland's teenagers is the highest in Europe. I am glad to see that the Health Minister recognises that trend and is being proactive, and I look forward to the young people's drinking action plan being published.

As other Members said, this matter affects a broad range of Departments, and, therefore, it is time for it to be brought to the Executive table; the Executive must meet and operate in order to tackle the problem. Departments such as the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), Education and Social Development, which is in charge of licensing, will wish to feed in to any discussions —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member should conclude his remarks.

**Mr McCallister:** The Ulster Unionist Party is more than happy to support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank Pat Ramsey for tabling this important motion, which my party fully supports. However, given that the Executive have been on strike since early summer, the part of the motion calling on them to act on the House's deliberations seems slightly presumptuous. Given the serious legislative shortcomings and worries throughout the community, I say shame on the lot of them; they must get back around the table immediately and show people that they can earn their salaries. The Executive's failure to act tars all Members with the same brush and denies us the means with which to provide everyone in Northern Ireland with a better future.

Alcohol, like everything else, if used in moderation, hurts no one. Indeed, I am reliably informed that, in some instances, it can be good for one's health. When it is abused, horrendous problems can be, and are, created, and every Member is aware of the damage caused by alcohol misuse.

It is not only the unfortunate person who succumbs to the addiction of alcohol who suffers terribly, but their friends, relatives and the public who see the sorry state that such an addiction can inflict on a person.

*12.00 noon*

Only last week, we heard the cries of a mother from Derry who lost her son. He was homeless, because of his addiction to alcohol. I offer the sympathy of the Alliance Party to that mother and her family, and I urge the Assembly to do something that will ensure that such a tragedy does not happen in our society again.

The Alliance Party is thankful for and grateful to the groups that work day and night to help alcoholics, wherever they are. The Link Family and Community Centre in Newtownards does extraordinary work, as do other organisations, which work quietly at all hours of the day and night to help addicts. Statutory groups and

the Health Promotion Agency are also working to overcome the scourge of alcohol.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Does the Member agree that there needs to be cross-departmental action on the proposals that have arisen from the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs? Such an approach would help to ensure that there was an integrated service and a one-stop shop for people with addiction problems.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has one minute extra.

**Mr McCarthy:** That suggestion is included in my speech; help must come from all Departments. Alcohol abuse causes much despair and is the cause of many horrible road accidents — as has been mentioned — as well as accidents at work and in the home. The cost to hospital services is huge. It is estimated that the Health Service spends some £12 million on the provision of services to those affected by overindulgence in alcohol.

Some of our great sportspeople who are seen as role models have been hooked on drink. They earn high wages and are able to purchase alcohol, but they do not see the disaster that is befalling them until it is too late.

Every effort must be made to steer young people away from alcohol. Advertising by the big suppliers must be curtailed. Pat Ramsey mentioned the ban on cigarette advertising; there is no reason why the same ban could not be imposed on the alcohol trade. Unfortunately, alcohol has become inexpensive and too easily accessible for young people. They are hooked on the scourge of alcohol before they know what is happening.

I support and encourage new policies to tackle the scourge of alcohol misuse. As Mr Ramsey said, the Health Department should take the lead in the fight against alcohol misuse, but the Education, Employment and Learning, and Social Development Departments must also play their part.

Parents and guardians have a major role to play. It is disgusting to hear about some parents encouraging their youngsters to drink alcohol and buying it for them; that is scandalous. The parents should have the sense to know where such habits can lead.

Sellers of alcohol must play a bigger part in ensuring that their products do not get into the wrong hands, and they should refuse to sell alcohol to a customer who has had too much already. Unfortunately, the recent trends and habits of continuous heavy consumption that lead to weekend binge drinking — particularly among the younger generation — make a mind-boggling contribution to family breakdown, loss of employment and damage to health.

The Executive must return to the table immediately; they must lead our people out of despair and into a bright new future. I support the motion.

**Mr Poots:** I endorse Mr McCarthy's comments about the need for the Executive to meet again. The DUP Ministers are available to attend an Executive meeting this Thursday, along with the Ministers from two of the other parties that are represented in the Executive. I trust that the other party will make itself available to attend the Executive meeting on Thursday.

I welcome Mr Ramsey's motion. The human cost to society of alcohol misuse is huge. That is often demonstrated to its worst excesses on our streets, where young people are involved in fights, which can lead to serious injuries. Knife culture is often associated with alcohol misuse. As a consequence of excessive drinking, accident and emergency staff in hospitals are abused, while hospital beds are taken up with people whose injuries come from their drinking alcohol, as well as with people whose injuries were caused by someone who had drunk excessively. Alcohol misuse can also lead to people developing seriously damaged livers and forms of cancer. No one can underestimate the damage that excessive alcohol use can cause.

Having said that, drinking to excess is an individual choice, although many people who choose to take alcohol start very young, because of considerable peer pressure, or because they think that it is cool and trendy or good fun to drink. Many of those young people do not realise the risks involved. Consequently, they end up drinking far more than they ever wanted to, or planned to, and end up damaging their health.

Pubs are part of the problem, and happy hours, and so on, are a contributory factor. However, to some extent, we must look beyond pubs and the drinks industry to the unregulated drinks industry. By that, I mean those clubs that sell cheap booze that is made available illegally and illegitimately, as Mrs Kelly pointed out. We must do what we can to eradicate those clubs from the marketplace. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that illegal alcohol is not readily available throughout the country.

I support the view that off-licences should not sell to anyone under 21 years of age. Many 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds are getting drink from older brothers and sisters or from friends who are 18 or 19 years of age. Were the legal age at which people can buy drink to rise to 21 years of age, that would make a considerable difference, and that has been shown to be the case in an area in Scotland, where, for a trial period, off-licences were not allowed to sell alcohol to anyone under that age. As a result, antisocial behaviour, crime and underage drinking dropped significantly during the trial period.

We should also ensure that off-licences put the products that they sell in labelled bags. Why is it that, wherever one goes, every shop has its label on its bags, except for off-licences, which use blue bags? Off-licences

should be made to print their names on their bags. If underage drinkers were spotted walking down the street carrying labelled bags, the offending off-licences could be identified. Moreover, supermarkets should not be allowed to use alcohol as a loss leader.

The use of advertising has been mentioned. I remember, from when I was a young lad, a Guinness advertisement that involved folks waterskiing. It showed the surf on the water and beautiful girls, and so on, while a glass filled up with Guinness, with froth appearing on the top. The advertisement made Guinness look very attractive — something that people would want to drink. However, at the same time, people were living in broken homes, lives were being destroyed and husbands or partners were out every night of the week drinking, with no money left over for their families.

Advertisements portray the good side of alcohol consumption, never its negative side. We must address that. Perhaps as much money should be spent on portraying alcohol's negative side.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle I, too, support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. In common with other Members, I commend Pat Ramsey for bringing this timely motion to the House. I also want to welcome the Minister. I know that some of his party colleagues were annoyed that I mentioned that he was not present earlier, but it is a case of give and take, John McCallister — Sinn Féin Ministers get it in the neck when they are late. — *[Interruption.]*

I did not hear what the Member said, but John will tell me later.

On 1 April this year, my colleague Jennifer McCann and I tabled the following motion:

“That this Assembly expresses concern at the levels of underage drinking and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce effective measures to help combat alcohol misuse, including the clear and identifiable marking of carrier bags provided by off-licences.” — *[Official Report, Volume 29, No 2, p80, col 1].*

That falls in nicely with what Edwin Poots has just said about the marking of carrier bags, which was a key issue during April's debate. Other Members mentioned the problems caused by alcohol misuse, which was useful.

I see that there are many young people in the Public Gallery, and I must point out that a lot of the damage that occurs in our communities as a result of alcohol misuse is not always done by young people. We must be careful to point out that fact, of which I know other Members are conscious. Much of the damage that I see in communities and families as a result of alcohol misuse is caused by adults. We must be careful, therefore, that we do not portray young people as being responsible for all the damage and antisocial behaviour.

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms S Ramsey:** No, Kieran: I listened to you for six minutes, and that was enough.

I want to emphasise a few points. It is critical that the House unites behind social justice motions and establishes a positive way forward. I thank the BMA (British Medical Association) for its briefing note on alcohol misuse, which gives a useful insight into the medical profession's perspective. The BMA says that there has been an increase in binge drinking. It says that that increase has been fuelled by irresponsible activity such as happy hours and sales promotions, and that those activities should be banned.

As far as I am aware, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have much of a remit in that area, so we must turn our attention to the role of other Ministers — for example, those with responsibility for health promotion, education in schools or licensing laws. Before I expand on that point, I want to give a special mention to professionals in the community and voluntary sector who work long and hard to tackle alcohol misuse in communities. They are faced with some of the most horrific cases of alcohol misuse day and daily, and they are all too aware of the knock-on effect of such alcohol misuse.

When my colleague and I tabled the motion on underage drinking in April, we wanted to call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action but were advised that the Minister for Social Development is the relevant Minister. It is crucial that the Minister for Social Development becomes the lead partner in this matter, because she has responsibility for liquor licensing legislation.

During that debate, she informed us that she would consider all the issues that were raised as part of the licensing review, which started in 2004. We were told that the review's recommendations would be implemented in 2007. However, in the debate in April 2008, we were told that the review was being considered again. It is important that the Minister gives the House an idea of where matters stand with the review and that she takes on board the point about exploring the possibility of putting identifiable markings on carrier bags provided by off-licences. The Minister also told us about a good scheme in Dublin and that she would meet her counterpart there, so it would be useful to get an update on that work.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I would appreciate it if a copy of today's debate could be sent to the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Education and the junior Ministers in OFMDFM, because they accepted during April's debate that they would take lead responsibility for underage binge drinking and the development of all the strategies that the Departments are promoting.

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

**Ms S Ramsey:** I support the motion.

12.15 pm

**Mr B McCrea:** I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Other Members have spoken about the impact that alcohol misuse has on the health of young people and the work of accident and emergency staff. However, it also affects policing. I was out with the police force over the weekend, and some 70% of the incidents that it deals with are alcohol related.

Members are often tempted to quote statistics, but some of the figures in respect of alcohol are stark. Mr Ross referred to his experiences in the United States, where the legal age for drinking alcohol is generally 21. However, research carried out by the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism found that 75% of people of sixth-form-equivalent age in the United States drink alcohol; 66% of people of GCSE-equivalent age drink; and 20% of people of third-form-equivalent age drink. When attempts were made to change attitudes to alcohol in the United States, it was discovered that the initial education measures were not very successful.

Some Members have advocated tackling the problem of alcohol misuse by advertising the associated dangers. However, research in the United States indicated that although such advertising scared people, it did not change their activity. It was found that the problem required more advanced treatment such as norm-setting, addressing social pressures, and teaching young people to say no. Family and parental responsibility is also crucial; parents can influence their children's behaviour.

The Home Office figures on alcohol consumption among young people in the United Kingdom are unbelievable. They show that 88% of 16- to 17-year-olds have drunk alcohol. Some 29% of children aged between 10 and 13 have drunk alcohol. Therefore, some primary-school pupils are drinking. In addition to adversely affecting the health of our young folks, alcohol misuse increases instances of crime. Many people who drink are involved in crime. The Home Office statistics indicate that the 14% of people who drink more than once a week committed 37% of crime. Conversely, the 45% of people who do not drink — or who seldom drink — committed 16% of crime.

The findings of research jointly carried out by the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University, Trading Standards North West and the Home Office are incredible. That research found that, on average, 15- to 16-year olds drink 177 pints of beer a year, which is three pints a week. The research also indicated that there are 57,000 people in Liverpool who binge drink at least once a week.

The natural reaction to such figures is that something must be done about alcohol consumption among young people. Who is to blame for the problem? Where, and from whom, do young people get alcohol? Mr Ramsey

referred to the role of supermarkets. However, some Members will be aware that many taxi drivers keep a crate of vodka in the boot of their car and provide a quaint service called “dial-a-vodka”. That vodka is unlikely to be Smirnoff — it is more likely to be cheap and dangerous. Alcohol can also be ordered from reputable retailers online. Who checks that that alcohol is delivered to the intended recipient at a particular house?

The attitude of some parents is the most disturbing aspect of alcohol misuse among young people. A report carried out in Stoke-on-Trent, ‘Underage Drinking, Stopping the Supply’, stated:

“most commonly young people acquire alcohol at their own or their friends’ houses... There is a noticeable reliance on older people and/or relatives to get the alcohol for them” .

The study also stated:

“71 per cent of young people said their parents/carers were aware that their children drink regularly”.

It is not right to point the finger at off-licences in particular.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member’s time is almost up.

**Mr B McCrea:** I beg your pardon; I was just getting going. However, Members get the gist. It is important that something is done about children drinking and that parents are involved.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Excessive alcohol consumption costs the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety an estimated £12 million every year and more than 250 lives. A range of measures can be taken to tackle that problem.

Irresponsible promotional activities such as happy hours should be prohibited. There is strong and consistent evidence that price increases result in reduced consumption. The cheaper and more accessible that alcohol is, the more people drink. It has been estimated that a 10% price rise will cut consumption by 10%. Areas in Europe with the highest alcohol prices tend to have the lowest levels of consumption. Reductions in opening hours and outlets selling alcohol are associated with reductions in alcohol use and related problems. The density of outlets that offer alcohol ought to be more carefully considered by planners. Strong enforcement of licensing laws is essential. School-based alcohol educational programmes are positive and should be encouraged.

Alcohol consumption is associated with a wide range of medical conditions. Medical staff are already seeing young people present for treatment with significant liver damage caused by alcohol abuse. Alcohol misuse is associated with crime, violence and antisocial behaviour, and it can impact significantly on family and community life. Alcohol misuse can cause family breakdowns, is a major factor in domestic violence, and it ruins job prospects. Alcohol misuse has direct costs for hospital

services and the criminal justice system. There are also indirect costs such as loss of productivity and the impact on family and social networks.

Five years ago, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety estimated that every year of excessive alcohol consumption costs 266 lives, £300 million in total lifetime economic worth, 4,037 expected life years, 140,000 sick days, £13.2 million in lost productivity and £12 million to the Health Service.

**Mr McCallister:** Do the figures, background and problems quoted by the Member provide a good reason to have an agency within the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that will address public health and social well-being?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will be allowed an extra minute.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I thank the Member for his question. Public health and social well-being can still be addressed in the same manner and to the same effect within one regional board; therefore, I do not agree that two tiers of bureaucracy are needed.

Addiction problems are an increasing challenge in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the United Kingdom. Treatment for addictions is not regarded as an emergency and does not attract the same resources as other services. Northern Ireland would benefit from many more hospital beds dedicated to addiction services. In 2005, 271 people received help for addiction to alcohol and drugs; today, that figure is closer to 1,000. About 15% of those individuals received help for addictions before they were 18 years of age. The number of people under the age of 18 who are admitted to hospital for alcohol-related conditions has increased significantly in recent years.

Habits learned early in life can persist through to adulthood and prove difficult to change. Addictions can have a knock-on affect on so many areas, such as crime. For example, from 2004 to 2005, 359 young offenders committed to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre and Prison declared a dependency on alcohol. Of the inmates, 460 admitted to a dependency or misuse of drugs; only 58 inmates did not declare a dependency on either alcohol or drugs.

Tighter restrictions are required on how and when the advertising of alcohol is permitted. The labelling of alcoholic-beverage containers would be a useful method of explaining recommended drinking guidelines and supporting other alcohol-control policies. In GB, recent voluntary agreements with the alcohol industry have led to the inclusion of some information about alcohol content on containers.

Individuals at risk of misusing alcohol should be identified early, routinely screened and, if necessary, managed appropriately. A detailed strategy paper, the

'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011' was published two and a half years ago. Will the Minister outline how many of the desired outcomes in that paper have been realised, particularly those that were short-term goals?

There is also a role for television. Scenes in many programmes are set in pubs or focus on a drinking culture. Often, there is a lot of drinking by young people in those programmes.

Dealing with the effects of alcohol eats into the health budget. In response to a parliamentary question at Westminster a couple of years ago, a direct rule Health Minister told me that the cost of tackling alcohol-related illnesses and crime was more than the total spend on all health promotion that year — that is a scary statistic.

We must try to eradicate the culture of binge drinking, which is not as big a problem in other parts of the world.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

**Mrs I Robinson:** In other parts of the world, people seem to be able to drink without doing so to excess. I congratulate the Member for tabling the motion, which I support.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion and commend Pat Ramsey for tabling it. I welcome the continued focus on alcohol-related problems since my colleagues Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann tabled a similar motion in April.

Other Members have mentioned many of the facts and figures around alcohol misuse, which I will not repeat. However, excessive alcohol consumption costs the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety an estimated £12 million and claims 266 lives every year. Those are the most startling of all the statistics, and they must be taken seriously by the Assembly.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm is welcome. However, a more co-ordinated departmental approach to the issue is required, and the motion calls for that. Alcohol misuse is associated with crime, violence, antisocial behaviour and can impact significantly on family and community life. It also causes family breakdown, is known to be a major factor in domestic violence, and can ruin people's job prospects.

Despite the strategy from the Department, and the various targeted media campaigns in recent years, we have witnessed an increase in the levels of alcohol misuse and in the pattern of heavy drinking and binge drinking. There are concerns about alcohol consumption among young people, particularly young girls. In the information that it sent to all Members, the BMA states

that doctors are reporting instances of serious liver disease in young people because of alcohol intake.

There are several initiatives that can be advanced, and there are issues that must be examined to address the problem, which Pat and other Members mentioned in the debate — for example, the controlling of price. There is an argument that an increase in the price of alcohol will result in less consumption. Some countries, such as Finland and Sweden, have seen a decrease in the alcohol consumption of heavy drinkers after a reduction in licensing hours. As other Members mentioned, strict regulations on marketing and advertising are required to govern the activities of licensed premises, particularly price promotions on alcoholic drinks in supermarkets.

More measures to reduce drink-driving are required — hard-hitting media campaigns that were used in the past should continue because they are very effective and hit home to people. Further qualitative research to examine attitudes to alcohol misuse is required. There are different reasons why people decide to drink too much alcohol, and we must get to the bottom of that. There must be targeted public- and school-based alcohol education programmes as part of the wider strategy.

*12.30 pm*

Some Members mentioned drinking guidelines and alcohol labelling. Much of the strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm focuses on guidelines to reduce drinking, but few people can recall those guidelines, let alone understand them, or even appreciate the relationship between units, glass sizes and drink strengths. More effort must be made to address those issues.

Early detection measures must be increased in order to provide early intervention and the treatment of alcohol misuse. We need dedicated front-line support services in order to assist people in need. The BMA's report states that doctors have serious concerns about the lack of facilities available for people to be referred for assistance. That is poor, to say the least, and we must ensure that the necessary front-line services are in place to address the needs of people who have alcohol-related illnesses.

Those are only a few of the issues that need to be addressed, but it is clear that they are cross-departmental matters. On that basis, I fully support the motion, which calls for a cross-departmental strategy to tackle this very serious issue. Go raibh maith agat.

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

*The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

**Mr Simpson:** By the time we reach this stage of the debate, when 11 or 12 Members have made contributions, everything that needs to be said has probably been said. Therefore, I do not wish to be repetitive.

Some people take the view that the real problem begins with the production of alcohol, but I will not dwell on my personal views about that. I will stick to the motion, and congratulate Pat Ramsey for securing the debate on such a worthwhile and serious subject.

There is no doubt that there is a major problem in our community, not only with the abuse of alcohol, but with its misuse. Only last week, one of the local papers in my constituency ran an article about an 11-year-old lad who was taken from his home by the police in connection with alcohol. I understand that the story of that young person was briefly aired on the radio this morning by a member of the YMCA from the Portadown area.

All Members have had experience of similar problems in their constituencies. I have heard of incidents in the Portadown area as well as in Lurgan and Banbridge. It is a major problem in society today. It has already been mentioned that crime rates have increased because of alcohol, which plays a major role in incidents of violence and antisocial behaviour.

The sale of alcohol is an important consideration. There are issues about pricing, and we heard calls last week and this week at Westminster to finally face up to the problem. Alcohol pricing is a problem, as are the opening hours of outlets. As we all know, opening hours for public houses and other outlets were extended, and that has caused a problem. We were sold a pup, because we were told that extending the opening hours would solve many problems in society, but it did not; it made things a lot worse. That is something that we must face up to.

Over-consumption of alcohol and the binge drinking culture is a problem in my constituency of Upper Bann. I have had to deal with several complaints about alcohol abuse and misuse from across the political divide. It does not matter which side of the House we are from; the same social issue affects our respective areas.

The statistics are scary. It was mentioned earlier that on average, there are 266 deaths a year as a result of alcohol abuse and misuse. I am sure that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will refer to the amount of money that is taken from his budget — about £12 million — in order to help prevent those deaths. There are major difficulties that we must deal

with, but we must also keep in mind that this is a cross-cutting issue that will involve several Departments.

In order for the Assembly to do the job that the motion calls for, the Executive must meet so that decisions can be taken. Anyone who speaks in support of the motion, or votes in favour of it — if it goes to that — must keep that in mind. To voice support for the motion, and to vote for it, only to trot off and refuse to attend an Executive meeting, is nothing but rank hypocrisy of the worst kind, and is immoral, when there are social issues that must be dealt with. The public, quite rightly, will condemn those who refuse to attend the Executive. Members must forget about party wish lists and get down to the nitty-gritty of social issues that affect everyone in society.

I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** Alcohol misuse is a major public-health issue in Northern Ireland. Members have estimated the cost to the Health Service in Northern Ireland at £12 million, but I feel that that figure is a gross underestimate: it is at least double that, if not higher. Alcohol misuse leads to considerable costs to society, which are estimated at a further £800 million. The physical and emotional cost to people, to families and to children is enormous.

I can list countless shocking statistics on the serious harm that alcohol causes to society. Each year, 7,000 people are admitted to acute hospitals due to alcohol misuse, about 200 of whom are aged under 18. In 2005, 246 people died as a direct result of alcohol. In 2006-07, there were 387 admissions to hospital for liver sclerosis, which was an increase from 294 in 2002-03. Approximately one in six people who attends hospital accident and emergency departments has alcohol-related injuries or problems. At weekends, which are the peak times, the proportion rises to eight out of ten.

American research suggests that one in three adolescents who attempted suicide was intoxicated at the time. More than 70% of domestic violence offenders had been drinking at the time of the assault. In 2003, almost two thirds of sentenced male prisoners and four fifths of sentenced female prisoners admitted to hazardous drinking prior to imprisonment. I could go on with such statistics.

I recently witnessed at first hand the harmful impact of excessive alcohol consumption when I spent a night with frontline emergency services. It was shocking to see how much time ambulance and accident and emergency staff have to spend dealing with injuries that are the effects of alcohol abuse — time that should be spent dealing with genuine emergencies.

I witnessed what happens on a typical night with young people staggering out of pubs, outside student

unions and at the Odyssey complex. I even saw young people being abusive to ambulance staff who tried to help a man who had been knocked down. I want more parents to see the poor behaviour and lack of respect and control of some of their children after drinking. The Odyssey Trust Company and student bodies must take more responsibility for young people's drinking and for their health and safety.

Alcohol is Northern Ireland's favourite drug, and, worryingly, there seems to be an ongoing process of social collusion. It is difficult to persuade parents to educate their children on the harm that alcohol causes when so many people enjoy a drink. Indeed, the main problem with alcohol in Northern Ireland is our unhealthy attitude towards its use.

Christmas is around the corner, and with it will come the usual excesses. Supermarkets and off licences will start to sell alcohol at ridiculously low prices. We will all stock up and drink and eat too much, and laugh off hangovers and bad behaviour. That attitude is deeply embedded in our culture, and is one that is difficult to change. However, until we adopt a more responsible attitude to alcohol, we can not become more responsible drinkers.

I am determined to tackle the consequences of alcohol misuse. In May 2006, my Department launched a new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, which focuses on reducing excessive or binge drinking and increasing public awareness of the real harm that is associated with alcohol misuse. The strategy is supported by a wide range of Government Departments.

Much progress has been made, including the establishment of treatment and support services across Northern Ireland, and the development of a youth-counselling service. Education and information programmes, which provide information for parents and young people, are being taken forward in schools, clubs and across local communities. I acknowledge, in particular, the work of the community and voluntary sector, which makes a real contribution to preventing and addressing alcohol and drug misuse and the harm that that causes.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Given the contributions from Members from all parties today, does the Minister believe and support the concept of establishing an all-party working group to operate in tandem with the new strategy?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Yes, I am more than happy to support such a proposal. Departments work together, and they can introduce and promulgate policy. However, an all-party working group would make a major contribution to tackling the key issue of society's attitude to alcohol, which is at the root of the problem.

The alcohol culture in society must be changed. More must, and can, be done.

My Department has produced an action plan that focuses on key areas in which I want to see rapid progress, and decisive and clear action taken. Alcohol is far too cheap. Drink is 62% more affordable today than it was in 1980. I want to see the price of alcohol increased so that people pay a similar price for it in supermarkets and off-licences as they do in pubs. Some alcohol is cheaper to buy than bottled water, and that creates too much temptation. I want to explore the possibility of introducing minimum unit pricing, meaning that every unit of alcohol will cost a set price. That would mean, for example, that large bottles of strong cider could no longer be sold so cheaply.

Alcohol advertising on television before 9.00 pm should be banned. Our health messages cannot compete with those from the drinks industry, which spends vast sums on advertising. I will, therefore, work with colleagues across the UK to ensure that existing legislation on alcohol advertising is rigorously enforced. I will also raise the matter of not advertising alcohol before the watershed. There must be a rigorous enforcement of the law, with test purchasing in off-licences, pubs and supermarkets. It is clear that young people are not simply accessing drink from friendly adults who buy it for them. Anyone who is caught selling drink to underage buyers must feel the full force of the law.

I will continue to work with my ministerial colleague Margaret Ritchie to ensure that the review of liquor licensing is used to further reduce young people's access to alcohol. The review must also consider licensing hours, branding of carrier bags, and the number of licences issued, which some Members mentioned during the debate. Every alcoholic drink must be clearly labelled with easy-to-understand information about the number of units that it contains and explanations of the damage caused to health because of binge drinking or excessive consumption.

I will continue to push for action on the work that is being implemented across the UK. Happy hours and drinks promotions only serve to encourage excessive alcohol consumption. There must be a clampdown on the number of drinks promotions in shops and bars. If the drinks industry does not behave in a socially responsible manner, we must introduce further legislation to end such practices. I have met representatives from the alcohol industry, including those from the major supermarkets. To date, I have had positive responses from Sainsbury's and Asda; however, it took Tesco some four months to get around to responding to me. It is disappointing that such a major player in the marketplace took so long to respond. Supermarkets have a role to play in helping to promote sensible

alcohol consumption. They must continue to work proactively with Government on the issue.

I will now pull together all the different strands to which I referred. My Department is in the process of developing an integrated action plan to deal with young people's drinking. The plan is cross-departmental, because a wide range of departmental responsibilities is involved in tackling the issue. Although the action plan's emphasis is on young people, it is important to recognise that adult-drinking patterns significantly influence young people and society. The plan must also contain actions that will impact on the entire population. I am already encouraged by the work that is being implemented from that agenda.

I mentioned the positive discussions that I have had with each of the major supermarkets and with representatives from the alcohol and drinks industry. Furthermore, I have met police to discuss the enforcement of legislation on the availability of alcohol. However, we must go further in some areas. I note Mr Ramsey's call to extend the designated alcohol-free zones in his constituency.

2.15 pm

Two main issues must be considered in the action plan: first, whether the current legislation is being enforced fully and effectively; and secondly, what further legislation is required. I hope that the Department for Social Development's forthcoming review of liquor licensing will address some of those issues. We need to now consider how we can ensure that alcohol is priced and promoted responsibly. However, that should not be about demonising or criminalising our young people; I understand that they want to enjoy themselves. The point is to ensure that all people are supported in making healthy and responsible decisions about their alcohol consumption. The action plan is being finalised and will be issued in early December. I will examine urgently the actions that are being taken.

The drinking culture that exists in Northern Ireland has been around for far too long. I am determined to take positive action now; however, our biggest challenge is our attitude towards alcohol, but that will not necessarily change overnight. Alcohol misuse is one of the biggest public-health issues facing Northern Ireland. However you measure the cost, whether to the individual, the family, the community, the Health Service, or society as a whole, alcohol misuse is one of our biggest public-health issues.

The new public-health agency that I am creating will have a central role in driving forward the public-health agenda and in reinforcing public-health messages about responsible drinking. We all have a responsibility to tackle the issue, and we need to work together across Departments and sectors. Above all, we

must ensure that we are giving a clear and consistent message about alcohol to our entire population.

**Mr O'Loan:** I thank Pat Ramsey for tabling the motion. I also thank those Members who spoke, and I thank the Minister for his response. We do not often see such a high level of consensus on a motion. That is entirely appropriate, as there is no doubt that the misuse of alcohol is causing enormous social damage. It has huge consequences for individuals, families, and society as a whole. Almost every Member has described the nature of those consequences by discussing the damage that is done to health, the effects that it has on crime rates, and the consequences that it has on our accident and emergency departments and the Health Service generally. It is clearly a problem that is of particular significance in contemporary society. It is also a particular problem where young people are concerned. Members agree that the attitudes of many young people to alcohol need to be challenged. When our doctors report cases of serious liver damage in young people, we cannot be complacent.

My views on the issue have changed over the years. At one time, I would have favoured little regulation on the issue, accepting that individuals must exercise their own responsibility and accept the consequences. However, I now recognise that that will not work. The consequences are simply too great for individuals, families, and society as a whole. We need well-considered regulation and enforcement. It is clear, for example, that increased opening hours are associated with increased alcohol consumption, as is the increased number of outlets selling alcohol. We must respond to that.

These are not new problems in society, although their present manifestation may be different to what has happened previously. The Gin Act was passed in 1751 to reduce the consumption of spirits, which was regarded as one of the primary causes of crime in London. At that time, the consumption of gin averaged two pints a week for every Londoner.

Alcohol abuse was a major problem in Irish society in the nineteenth century, and it was considered to be rampant. There was widespread alcoholism. One response to that was the temperance movement that was established by Father Mathew around 1838 with the taking of the pledge. It had a dramatic effect and became an international movement. It did a great deal to alleviate the problems associated with alcohol.

In 1898, the movement culminated in the creation of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, which was set up by Father James Cullen. It did similar excellent work to establish a climate of temperance. Indeed, that organisation continues to do good work to the present day. That movement was founded in the Catholic Church and system: clearly, an equal and strong



temperance movement exists among the Protestant churches and society.

Members will be aware that the Social Development Minister is examining liquor licensing. I have no doubt that she hears clearly the message that comes from the Assembly, the Health Department and many other authorities. The issue of how alcohol is treated in society requires careful consideration and control. In order to make progress, it is necessary for the Executive to meet, as many Members have said, so that the Minister can put her proposals to them.

There are indications that the drinks industry has started to come to terms with the fact that it must demonstrate more responsibility on this matter. The Federation of the Retail Licensed Trade has demonstrated that it is aware of its social responsibilities.

It is important to recognise that there has been a significant shift from drinking in pubs to drinking at home, which means that alcohol is purchased in off-licences and supermarkets. As other Members have mentioned, supermarket drinks promotions are, certainly, cause for alarm. I have seen two litres of cider being sold for £1.18 and a can of beer being sold for 22p. In order to strengthen regulation, the below-cost selling of alcohol must be countered.

I call for much greater responsibility from the industry — both the manufacturers and the retail trade. They must not simply pay lip service to the issue, but accept that their product does immense social damage. They must play a part in the creation of a remedy.

Approaches to the problem will consist of several elements. First, further regulation and enforcement are, undoubtedly, needed. I welcome the Minister's remarks on what is going to happen and what is being considered for future action. Secondly, education and health promotion are needed. I noted the Minister's comments on society's unhealthy attitude towards the use of alcohol. That means, of course, that the answer cannot come simply from the Assembly or the government system: many different sectors of society must take responsibility for a solution to be anywhere near possible. Thirdly, there must be more involvement and responsibility from the drinks industry. I repeat my call for it to be actively engaged in the remedy.

I draw particular attention to the call from the British Medical Association, whose opinion must be taken seriously. It echoes several points that Members have raised in the debate. The BMA calls for:

“prohibiting price promotions on alcohol beverages, and ... establishing minimum price levels ... A statutory code of practice on the marketing of alcohol beverages ... a ban on:

- broadcasting of alcohol advertising at any time that is likely to be viewed by young people
- alcohol industry sponsorship of sporting, music ... events aimed mainly at young people”.

I fully support all of those policies.

In conclusion, I thank all the Members who have contributed to this useful debate. On its own, the debate will not result in action, but it sends out crucial signals from the Assembly to the range of Departments that have a role in generating action. The debate also sends a message to wider society that the misuse of alcohol is a problem that the Assembly wants to be meaningfully addressed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly considers that the misuse of alcohol in society causes serious damage to the health and social well-being of individuals and communities; and calls on the Executive to formulate, and implement, policies designed to reduce alcohol misuse.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Review of Environmental Governance

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

**Mr Ford:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the failure of the previous Minister of the Environment to take forward the recommendations of the 'Review of Environmental Governance'; believes that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is not adequate to deal with the challenges facing Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to re-consider this matter urgently.

I have great pleasure in proposing the motion that stands in my name and the names of my colleagues. The motion is similar to one that Brian Wilson and I brought to the Assembly on 25 September 2007:

"That this Assembly calls on the Executive to establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency for Northern Ireland." — [*Official Report, Vol 24, No 2, p72, col 1*].

Following debate on a couple of amendments, that motion was passed unanimously — or at least without dissension — by the Assembly. Even the Minister, who subsequently took a different decision, did not oppose the principle of an independent environmental protection agency. However, it is well known that on 27 May 2008, the previous Minister of the Environment refused to implement the recommendations of the review of environmental governance. Rather, she put forward a plan that amounted to little more than the rebranding, on 1 July 2008, of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) as the body now known as the NIEA — I am indebted to Friends of the Earth for reminding me that that stands for "Not the Independent Environment Agency". That is not a criticism of the agency's staff, but a simple statement of the fact that, at a time when this region, along with every other region on this island, must be seen to have transparent, open and independent environmental governance, it is the only region not to have made any progress in that respect.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you studied the Hansard report of 25 September 2007 in detail. Indeed, I think that you supported my call for an independent agency on that occasion. The House clearly accepted the substantial piece of work that had been submitted by the review of environmental governance (REGNI)

team of Mr Burke, Professor Turner and Mr Bell. The team submitted detailed arguments for significant changes to environmental governance in general, and they argued in particular for the establishment of an independent agency to meet the needs of our economy, society and environment.

Several major issues that were highlighted during that debate do not need to be reiterated today. However, some key points remain, notably the court ruling that was made a short time before the debate. It dealt with the draft northern area plan and the need for the Planning Service to receive independent advice. Mr Justice Weatherup's decision stated:

"By the terms of the Directive it is apparent, as the Department accepts, that there be separation between the responsible authority and the consultation body."

Members are aware that the decision was subject to an appeal by the Department. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Department accepted the fundamental tenet held by the judge that separation is required. The question is whether the Department can argue that there is adequate separation. Patently, the Environment Agency, as currently established, is an executive agency of the Department of the Environment (DOE) that reports to the Minister. To those of us who understand the dictionary definition of the word, the agency is, in no sense, independent.

The Department ought to accept the strong likelihood that it will lose any appeal that it mounts. It could learn a lesson from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) decision this week and not proceed with meaningless appeals and accept court decisions without wasting more taxpayers' money.

2.30 pm

There is no sign that the Department is preparing for the possibility of change. In May 2008, the then Environment Minister told the House:

"The Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure have all set out practical, and even constitutional, reasons why the transfer of functions is not appropriate at this time." — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 1, p2, col 1*].

She continued:

"the Programme for Government commits us to a review of Departments by 2011." — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 1, p2, col 1*].

Given that the Executive will not engage in their present responsibilities, Members will appreciate why those of us at this end of the House are not holding our breath for a review of Departments by 2011.

I am interested to know the constitutional objections to the transfer of powers among Departments. It seems that empire building by Departments is not, in any sense, a valid constitutional reason for objection. Since the Minister's decision, agencies and bodies that are appointed to advise DOE have outlined their opinions

on environmental matters. The Historic Buildings Council was less than happy with the proposals, and the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) issued a fairly strong criticism in the minutes of its June meeting, in which it noted that the chairman of the CNCC was the only member with an environmental background invited to sit on the Department's better regulation board. The Department seems to have lost sight of its key position.

CNCC reiterated independence issues and noted that an agency staffed by civil servants — regardless of those individuals' skills — will be responsible to a Minister and will not enjoy the necessary degree of independence. As CNCC noted, such an agency will not facilitate the necessary checks and balances. In those minutes — which I presume are not objected to, given that they are published on the Internet — a senior official in EHS explained that the rebranding process is likely to last some years. The fact that that rebranding process, which will merely change the name of a departmental agency, will take some years to complete suggests that taking time to establish an independent agency might have been a better idea.

In recent weeks, an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) at Lisnaragh near Dunnamanagh in Tyrone has had its status rescinded. It has been alleged that there was ministerial interference in that process. I do not make that allegation; I do not know whether there was ministerial interference. However, as long as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) reports to the Minister, a suspicion of ministerial interference in such decisions will remain. The Assembly must avoid that situation in order to secure good environmental governance and meaningful progress. It is not good enough to say that nothing underhand occurred, because the suspicion exists and will remain.

**Mr Weir:** I am shocked at such an allegation. We cannot tolerate the appalling situation of democratically elected politicians taking decisions in this country.

**Mr Ford:** If Mr Weir is incapable of distinguishing political decisions from decisions based on scientific evidence in accordance with European law, he is a worse lawyer than I had thought.

Since that decision in May, flooding has affected people in Northern Ireland during this year's so-called summer. Not only did the REGNI report support the rebranding of EHS but the merging of several agencies.

It was specifically recommended that there should be proper river-basin management, and that the Rivers Agency should be in the same body as EHS and that the whole process of sustainable water management should be dealt with by one agency.

The so-called flood map of Northern Ireland has just been launched. Compared to the flood map maintained by the Environment Agency of England and Wales,

which is on the Internet, it is fairly low-level. However, even that required the co-operation of two Ministers. That is an example of how a single agency, with absolutely clear and unambiguous responsibilities for dealing with river management, would have had a much clearer line of responsibility and accountability for dealing with flood prevention and its associated problems. Such flooding is likely to continue, affecting homes, businesses and agriculture across Northern Ireland. That is a fundamental issue that should be dealt with by a single agency. That is what REGNI reported, and that is what Ministers deny.

Other issues that may not have the same day-to-day resonance — such as establishing a national park or further aspects of planning guidance — are clear cases where much-needed independent advice is not yet present. That is why we need an independent agency.

**Mr Gallagher:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "calls" and insert:

"for the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency which must become fully operational within the lifetime of this Assembly."

As the proposer of the motion said, a similar motion was proposed last year. In that debate, I proposed an amendment similar to that which I propose today.

I agree that we need an independent environment agency, such as many other countries have. However, the amendment that I proposed last year asked specifically for that independent agency to be established during the lifetime of this Assembly. When it came to the vote, Alliance Members voted against the amendment. Since then, they — and the rest of us — have seen what has happened. As described by Mr Ford, we have ended up with an agency still within the Department of the Environment and not properly independent.

I appeal to all Members to support the amendment; on this occasion, the amendment is clear, and I ask Alliance Members in particular to give it their support. If we are successful in persuading the House to adopt the amendment, the leverage of elected representatives in support of a fully independent environmental protection agency will be increased.

For too long, environmental issues have been given a low priority here. We have only to look around the Chamber to see how low that priority is. It is well known that, around the Executive table, the needs of many other Departments take precedence over those of the environment. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is one, and OFMDFM is another.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, countries such as the Republic of Ireland and the other countries of the UK have had independent agencies tackling abuses and properly enforcing environmental legislation. We have fallen behind because we do not have the system and

structures in place with the capacity to produce the outcomes necessary for better protection of the environment. Granted, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is an improvement on what went before. However, although it has tried to address some of the issues, the fact is that the Government cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. In this case, it is an Irish hare, but that approach does not work.

As I have said, DOE is one of 11 Departments, and it is very often overruled. Internal Government bodies pose other barriers to effective environmental regulation. First, the necessary confidentiality of departmental policy-making processes and interdepartmental debate creates a serious lack of transparency with regard to the making of regulatory decisions. Such decisions cannot command the confidence of the public or be regulated without proper transparency.

Secondly, officials who administer the regulations are exposed to the real and perceived risk of conflict of interest. The effectiveness of the regulation of internal Government bodies is inhibited since modern environmental governance requires a strong, focused regulator that is able to adopt modern risk-based regulatory practices without a loss of public confidence. Northern Ireland needs such a strong, independent voice to champion and safeguard the environment.

The 'Foundations for the Future' report was launched in 2007. It made very clear recommendations about environmental regulation. Following wide-ranging consultations, that report was well put together and very detailed. It set out clearly the functions that should have been retained by the Department in relation to planning and environmental policy. It also spelt out the accountability mechanisms that were necessary for a new environmental protection agency. It recommended that the agency's purpose should be to protect and enhance the environment and, in doing so, contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

It is quite clear that a well-resourced, independent environmental protection agency would be crucial to building confidence about environmental governance. There also needs to be a shared vision — one that is developed by the Government and the other stakeholders — on local and agreed standards for the protection of the environment. We must develop effective arrangements for the integrated management of important material assets such as our rivers, uplands and coasts.

We live on a small island, and problems such as air or water pollution can spread very quickly. It is an obvious reality that we cannot partition our environment. Therefore, an all-island strategy is needed to manage the environment.

Last week, the catchment-management programme for Lough Melvin, which straddles the border, was

published. That was undertaken by agencies on both sides of the border. The fact that they did that work meant that they have a two-year head start on developing the directives in relation to catchment-management plans. That is an example of the kind of work that can be done when real co-operation occurs. An independent environmental protection agency, to correspond to the same body in the South, would add greatly to such work.

Co-operation is not limited to river catchment. Organisations such as the RSPB and the corresponding body in the South — BirdWatch Ireland — have been working together for years and have formulated initiatives in the interests of conserving some of the bird populations that were at risk.

The reports from those bodies are examples of how we can highlight water pollution and nature conservation by identifying the risks and responding to them.

2.45 pm

Unfortunately, as I said, environment management systems here are inadequate. We also have a reputation, particularly in Europe, of being behind with much of our work. The threat of fines being imposed by the EU remains a real possibility.

Given the urgency of environmental matters — some of which I have mentioned — and environmentalists' concerns that the time for corrective action is running out, we cannot procrastinate on the issue any longer. The SDLP tabled the amendment because it wants to see action happening during the lifetime of the Assembly.

I welcome that the Minister is present for the debate. When a similar debate was held before, it was clear that one party opposed having an independent environment protection agency — that was the Minister's party. Today, I appeal to him to prioritise the environment rather than his party political interests.

**Mr Ross:** It will come as no surprise that the DUP will be opposing the motion and the amendment. As has been said, many of the arguments have been rehearsed in the Chamber previously, and I doubt whether we will hear much that is new today.

The DUP advocates having a locally elected, devolved institution, so that locally elected people can make decisions. All the parties here adopted a similar view before the Assembly was re-established in May of last year. Yet, all the other major political parties in the Assembly are now supporting an independent environmental protection agency (EPA) and power being handed to an independent body.

We are not a party of big Government; we are a party of good Government. That is why the previous Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, decided on an environment protection agency that is within Government, rather than one that would not be directly

accountable to the Assembly or the Committee for the Environment, and that would result in increased bureaucracy for the people living in the Province. That does not mean that the DUP is not committed to preserving the environment for future generations. However, we would rather do so in a way that keeps the Minister directly accountable.

I listened to Mr Ford's opening comments, in which he mentioned certain things that have happened recently. I agree that we should consider recent events — for example, those involving the energy regulator or Northern Ireland Water. In such instances, Members from all sides of the Chamber are calling for Ministers to take action, or intervene; but, of course, those Ministers cannot do so because power has been devolved to an independent body.

Mr Ford also referred to how, when the Minister of the Environment originally made the decision about the EPA, she noted that many other Ministers had expressed their concerns on the practical difficulties in transferring powers to an unelected, independent body. At that time, various unelected organisations undertook a concerted campaign to establish an independent EPA. However, rather than cave in, as some parties did, we stood firm in our belief that an independent EPA would be expensive, bureaucratic, unaccountable and particularly bad for the farming community in Northern Ireland.

Case studies from around the world have shown that an independent EPA is not a panacea for all our environmental problems — such problems are greater in some regions where independent EPAs operate. We need only look to the Irish Republic or to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for examples of those. Prosecution for offences involving pollution is sixteen times more likely in Northern Ireland than in Scotland. The new Northern Ireland Environment Agency has hardly existed long enough for Members to come to a view on its successes or failings; therefore, today's motion is premature, if even necessary.

The premise of the motion is that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has failed, but that is not the case. As was established in previous debates and in the Minister's statement, the board of the proposed, so-called independent EPA would be appointed by the Minister. Therefore, the same people would end up doing the same jobs that they are doing now; the only difference being that they would not be accountable to the Assembly or the Committee for the Environment.

Our focus should be on ensuring that the efforts already made by the Minister of the Environment and his predecessor are implemented successfully and are producing the desired effect. Several convictions have been secured since the new Northern Ireland Environment Agency was established. Prior to that, the EHS was starting to make some inroads into catching

and prosecuting those responsible for environmental crime, particularly those responsible illegal dumping, which is a serious issue.

An independent EPA would not be as accountable as the current body. It would cost taxpayers an additional £2.5 million to set up, with additional annual running costs of £500,000. It would be no more effective than the body that has been established within Government. For those reasons, I oppose the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion and the amendment, and I reiterate that Sinn Féin has continually called for an independent environmental protection agency.

In May 2008, I stated in the Chamber that the then Minister had missed a good opportunity to establish an independent environmental protection agency. Instead, she chose to rebrand the EHS as the NIEA.

Sinn Féin calls on the current Minister to ensure that environmental matters, such as illegal dumping, waste management, the built and cultural heritage, and river pollution, are addressed properly through an independent environmental protection agency.

Recently, we witnessed NIEA's failure to consult properly about declaring Lisnaragh as an area of special scientific interest. Surely that should have caused alarm bells to ring in the Minister's Department. Although the matter received a great deal of press and media coverage and the Minister spoke about it, opportunities were not afforded for a proper consultation. I place on record the fact that Sinn Féin is not opposed to designating ASSIs, but in this case, the consultation was inadequate.

Anglers throughout the Six Counties are incensed that the pollution of local rivers, leading to numerous fish kills, happens regularly, with NIEA taking little or no action. In addition, illegal dumping, especially in border areas — which I am sure that Mr Ross will be glad that I mentioned — continues unabated, with no co-ordinated response from NIEA.

Mr Ross mentioned expenses. Although I am in danger of becoming parochial, ratepayers in the Armagh City and District Council area have paid to have illegal dumps cleared on numerous occasions, and I want the Minister to take that on board. Armagh people have yet to see results from NIEA —

**Mr I McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** No, I am sorry.

In short, NIEA is perceived as those who are opposed to it said that it would be; that is, as an ineffective, inefficient entity. The dissatisfaction with EHS, which led to a sustained campaign by a coalition of environmental organisations for an independent

body, continues to be felt about the rebranded, but unchanged, NIEA. The opportunity to replace lost confidence by creating a transparent and accountable independent body was missed.

The latest campaign for an independent body is not new. Between 1962 and 1996, several reports called for — and encouraged — the creation of such a body. It has been argued that an independent body, operating outside Government bodies, would have little impact on policy. However, the same might be said about the EHS/NIEA to date, for all the impact that they have had. If an independent body were given a chance, surely it could do better.

It should be noted that the purpose of an independent body would be to deliver results, rather than to formulate policy. However, I do not mean that policies and guidelines are not required. An independent body would hold everyone — members of the public as well as private and statutory bodies — to account, and Sinn Féin believes that an independent environmental protection agency would get the job done and inspire confidence while doing so, much more so than —

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** No, I am sorry; I am in full flow. Members from across the Chamber will have a chance to speak later.

Such a body would do so much more than the NIEA is doing. Sustained criticism highlighting the failure of the EHS — and now the NIEA — to deal with environmental governance must cause the Minister to realise that change is required. The Minister must have witnessed the ridiculous role that NIEA has played in planning — it is the last body that people consult in most planning applications.

The only question that remains to be answered is whether the Minister is prepared to accept responsibility and show leadership, or will he, like Nero, continue to fiddle while Rome burns. Comparing the Minister to Caesar is, perhaps, a bit much; Sid Caesar may be a better comparison — he was a comedian as well.

I hope that the Minister will take the views of the majority of Members — and people beyond — into consideration. He should tell us that he will reconsider the previous Minister's position and revisit the matter of an independent environmental protection agency.

Before finishing, I inform the Minister that I have taken his advice from last week, and I am now drinking from a glass. I tell him that in case he wants to comment on it. *[Laughter.]*

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):** Go raibh maith agat, a

LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy and Mr Lunn for tabling the motion on the review of environmental governance, and my colleague Mr Gallagher for his amendment. Indeed, it was he who previously tabled an amendment to a motion on the subject.

In July 2007, Professor Sharon Turner briefed the Committee for the Environment on 'Foundations for the Future — The Review of Environmental Governance', which had been published the previous May. I compliment her and her colleagues for their detailed and comprehensive work on that topic. She informed the Committee that, during the previous year, the then Minister with responsibility for the environment, Jeff Rooker, had appointed a panel of experts to conduct an independent review of environmental governance in the North. The panel's challenge was to identify how the assets that were available to manage Northern Ireland's environment might be better arranged to deliver higher-quality and more consistent environmental outcomes.

In thinking about those assets, the review addressed the focus, structure, roles and relationships among the elements of the governance regime, but it was notable that the review did not include an evaluation of existing environmental policies.

A few months later, the Committee for the Environment considered Criminal Justice Inspection's report on enforcement in the Department of the Environment. In July 2008, the Committee received a briefing from departmental officials, who set out their goals for the future of environmental governance. Those goals focused on the better-regulation agenda of the previous Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster. In considering her approach to providing effective systems of governance and regulations, Mrs Foster took account of the recommendations contained in the review of environmental governance's final report and Criminal Justice Inspection's report on enforcement in the Department.

The Minister maintained that the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive had changed fundamentally the context of environmental governance, because the initial review had been commissioned under direct rule — we have heard similar comments today from Members on the Benches opposite. She noted that the Department was now being scrutinised by the Committee for the Environment and that accountability arrangements were much improved under devolution. However, that does not mean a great deal at present.

Arlene Foster argued against the review's suggested organisational changes and said that Ministers from other relevant Departments wanted to retain their responsibilities rather than have them transferred to the

Department of the Environment. As a consequence of that, her logic probably leaned towards the establishment of an independent EPA. She also said that the Programme for Government's commitment to a review of the Departments in 2011 meant that then would be a more appropriate time to consider any fundamental restructuring of responsibilities among Departments. Those are the arguments that the then Minister advanced, but we may hear more arguments today.

Minister Foster announced that she would retain the Environment and Heritage Service and reorganise it as a DOE executive agency, but, at the time of the announcement, some compared that to Marathon's transition to Snickers. She acknowledged that some people would be disappointed at that decision but maintained that, as Minister of the Environment, she, along with her Executive colleagues, would make decisions that the Assembly and the Committee for the Environment would scrutinise. She said that such scrutiny would bring some degree of accountability to her Department and allow a close degree of scrutiny that had not been possible under direct rule. She also announced that the new agency's transparency and openness would be increased by the appointment of two new independent members to its board and that board meetings would be held in public.

Committee members asked for details of the new board's position and to see the DOE's finalised action plan in response to Criminal Justice Inspection's report.

Despite the time constraints and priorities placed on the Committee for the Environment, it has kept a close watching brief on environmental governance in the North. However, the Committee is not an agency; it does not have to hand a full-time workforce working to capacity or with the resources that are available to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency — I almost reverted to form and said the EHS in error. I hope that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has not reverted to form.

It takes its responsibilities in scrutinising the work of the Department seriously and carries out those responsibilities conscientiously, thus ensuring that it plays its full part in the accountability of the Department conferred on it by devolution.

3.00 pm

Speaking as a constituency MLA, I have to say that we have a long, long way to go on environmental governance, and with implementation in full of the review of —

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment:** The Committee for the Environment can help and can prepare a watching brief on

environmental governance in the North. However, it will be nothing like a well-resourced, independent environmental protection agency with vision, as referred to by my colleague.

**Mr Beggs:** I welcome the debate as an opportunity to raise this important matter. I support the motion and am content with the amendment.

The Ulster Unionist Party engaged constructively with the review of environmental governance group and supported its subsequent recommendations, chief of which was the setting up of an independent environmental protection agency, and we remain committed to our manifesto.

It is worth pointing out that the two main parties in the current Assembly and Executive — the DUP and Sinn Féin — did little to engage with that review of environmental governance at the time. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a DUP Minister decided to cherry-pick the report and ignore its main findings. That decision, and the entire farce of the DUP stewardship of the environment, mirrors the mismanagement of education by Sinn Féin, and the dysfunctional nature of the current non-working Executive. We have the two extreme ideologues that ignore expert opinion and have no comprehension of the importance of achieving a consensus on issues that are important to the people of Northern Ireland.

The authors of 'Foundations for the Future: The Review of Environmental Governance' were tasked to identify — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please. The Member has the Floor. Any remarks must be addressed through the Chair.

**Mr Beggs:** Mr Deputy Speaker, the clock continued to move. I hope that you will take that into account.

The authors were tasked:

"to identify how the assets available to manage Northern Ireland's environment might be better arranged to deliver higher quality and more consistent environmental outcomes."

That was supported by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), which indicated its importance in giving confidence to those who wished to invest, that decisions would be taken in a consistent manner. In other words, it suggested the best way to organise our existing resources.

Even if one were to look at the area of the co-ordination of river-basin catchment management, the report highlights the fact that the Rivers Agency, the then Fishery Conservancy Board, the Loughs Agency, the Drainage Council, and Waterways Ireland were all involved. If anything can be done to reduce the number of bodies that are involved in discussions in alleviating flooding — which is what we are actually talking about — the bureaucracy would be reduced, leading to

better and faster decisions. To run with the line that an environmental protection agency would mean increased bureaucracy is not true. There are many areas where more efficient and better processes can be put in place.

'Foundations for the Future' was first published in June 2007, and the experts set out in detail the reasons for their recommendations. I encourage all Members who have not yet done so to read the report. The failure to follow what the title of the report suggests, supported by such cogent argument and content, does not bode well for the current rebranding process. The report recommended that:

"Responsibility for environmental regulation in Northern Ireland should be transferred to a new independent Environmental Protection Agency",

so that decisions would be:

"immune from unwarranted interference by Ministers or officials."

The report also stated that the EHS, as an executive agency of the Department of the Environment, would be:

"increasingly out of step with good governance practice elsewhere"

in the United Kingdom or the British Isles. A key recommendation was:

"to separate institutional policy making from regulation",

which means that we are presently out of step. The Minister and the Assembly would have the responsibility of setting the policy in which the EPA would operate.

It was proposed that a whole range of functions would co-ordinate into one body, which would result in significant expertise being amassed in one agency. Those resources would enable better and possibly speedier decision-making and better governance.

One finding of the report was that there is a serious lack of transparency around the making of regulatory decisions. We know that there were significant issues around the designation of Lisnagarh as an ASSI. First, there was a lack of transparency in the process. Next, the Minister's management board recommended approval, but the Minister decided against — a lack of transparency, resulting in a conspiracy theory. Clearly, there are failings in the process. How will the geologically significant features in that general area be protected? The Minister must answer that question.

I am aware that there is concern about the percentage targets for ASSIs. ASSI status must be clearly designated based on the quality of the landscape and not purely by geographical area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Weir:** It will come as no great surprise that I oppose both the motion and the amendment. Mr Boylan made a somewhat inaccurate reference to Nero fiddling while Rome burned. Given the general attitude towards the establishment of an EPA, the historical character with whom I most feel a connection is perhaps Custer.

A range of issues must be tackled. The proposer of the amendment, Mr Gallagher, said that there must be no more procrastination — I certainly agree with that, but I have reached the opposite conclusion to him. We are faced with several choices. Are we prepared to take action on the environment now, or do we simply want to be seen to be doing something about the environment? If it is the former, the House must reject the amendment and support the NIEA, which can be developed now, rather than support the call for an EPA that might take a couple of years to establish. Would we prefer to see money spent on the environment or on administrative structures? We could take advantage of the fact that an agency has already been set up, or spend somewhere between £2.5 million and perhaps £4 million to set up an EPA. Would that money not be better spent on environmental protection rather than administrative structures? Indeed, it might be better spent in a range of other areas where there are pressures on front-line services.

The nub of the matter is accountability. My colleague Mr Ross mentioned places in which environmental bodies have been set up. It was not that long ago that energy prices were raised, and, at that time, there were many calls — particularly on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — to intervene in the work of the energy regulator. However, the regulator was set up in exactly the same way that the independent EPA would be set up. With the best will in the world, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment did not have control over the regulator and was therefore unable to introduce the range of measures that she would have liked to.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** No, the Member will have his chance to speak later.

Likewise, mention has been made of ASSIs. In particular, Mr Boylan mentioned the Lisnagarh ASSI. However, the overturning of that decision — which was done by the Department — would not have been possible if an EPA were in existence. The Member is very much arguing against himself. Having fought long and hard to ensure that there is democratic accountability in Northern Ireland, we should not lightly throw it away.

Similarly, complaints have rightly been made about the level of consultation that EHS has provided for in the past — both about the slowness of the consultation process and the lack of consultation in general. However,



if we establish an independent EPA that is completely outside the Department's and Minister's control, who could apply pressure to ensure that the consultation process is improved? The matter would be completely out of our hands, and a level of accountability would be lost.

When considering the effectiveness of an EPA, we must learn from the mistakes that others have made. Have independent EPAs been successful on other parts of this island? No, they have not. We have only to look down South at the shambles over the development at Tara. The matter is supposedly under the control of a Green Party Minister. However, he is presumably not able to intervene as much as he wants to, because the issue is in the hands of an EPA.

The Scottish Government have had major problems with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Let us consider the statistics: the number of prosecutions for pollution in Northern Ireland is 16 times the number in Scotland — which has an independent EPA — and four times the number in Wales. Therefore, if this is an argument about effectiveness, the statistics are very much in favour of the current structures.

The current structures are also favourable in respect of consistency and bureaucracy. I pay tribute to the consistency of the proposers of the motion and those who tabled the amendment. The Alliance Party and the SDLP have been fairly consistent on the issue. However, two of the other parties that have spoken in favour of the motion have not been so consistent. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) and DARD were two of the obstacles to drawing in powers that could form part of an EPA. I wonder which party controls those Departments.

The party to my right lectures the DUP on its failure to do this, that and the other in respect of an EPA. Curiously enough, there were two Ulster Unionist Environment Ministers during the last Assembly mandate — Minister Sam Foster and Minister Dermott Nesbitt — but an independent EPA was not established under their tenures, despite UUP assertions that the issue has been on the table since 1962. That party has shown no consistency on this matter.

However, all the parties are consistent in the message that they send out to farmers.

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

**Mr Weir:** The Ulster Farmers' Union is strongly opposed to the substance of the motion. Therefore, I hope that parties will not be mealy mouthed when explaining their position to farmers.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, as amended. When the review of environmental governance was launched in Belfast last year, I recall the hope that was felt by

many people who work in environment-related occupations on a daily basis. I recall the hope that was felt by non-governmental organisations — which do not hold a particular political opinion — in respect of the review's recommendations.

The review was broadly welcomed across the political spectrum, but not by the predictable, naysaying Democratic Unionist Party. Given the decision taken by the previous Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, the current Minister's position is not surprising.

The independent experts who undertook the review took account of the importance of a high-quality environment for the population's immediate well-being. They also stated that a high-quality environment was a key attractor for inward investment and tourism, and essential to sustain and develop the sectors of the economy that are dependent on the environment.

Protecting our environment can yield many economic benefits, such as increased tourism. Furthermore, if we do not take action on environmental governance and climate change now, damage to the environment could have a massively negative impact on the economy 20 or 30 years down the line.

**Mr Wells:** I have listened to what the Member has said — after he was quite finished striving to cover north Antrim with bungalows. When the then Environment Minister discussed this matter within the Executive, the Sinn Féin Ministers — the Regional Development Minister and the Agriculture Minister — sat on their hands and did absolutely nothing. They were perfectly content with the decision.

In public, they claimed that they were in opposition, but they sat on their hands again when the matter came before the Executive after Mrs Foster's statement to the Assembly. They did not lift a finger to oppose her decision. It is all very well for the Member to say in the public that he is in favour of an environmental protection agency, but his party is saying something very different in private.

**Mr McKay:** It is important to knock that nonsense on the head. The decision that came before the Executive clearly stated that an NI environmental agency would be set up.

**Mr Weir:** Did you mean Northern Ireland?

**Mr McKay:** It is the North of Ireland. There was no decision on an environmental protection agency that Sinn Féin could have blocked. Sinn Féin wants an independent environmental protection agency to be established. The Rubicon must be crossed in respect of that matter before the Committee can discuss what remit that environmental protection agency will have.

**Dr Farry:** Does the Member agree that the establishment of an independent EPA falls under the definition of a "significant and controversial matter" in

accordance with the ministerial code of conduct, which can force a collective decision to be taken by the Executive?

**Mr McKay:** No proposal on an EPA has come before the Executive. That would be clear to the Member if he had done his homework. He has had about six months to check the facts, and I urge him to do some research on the matter.

3.15 pm

Independence is absolutely necessary. I agree with Members who said that independence is needed because a regulator must command public confidence and act, and be seen to act, in a consistent manner. Nevertheless, Ministers and elected representatives must have a central voice in environmental regulation while retaining the power to direct an independent agency as well as the right to issue guidance on how its powers are exercised. Therefore it is not a question of an independent environmental protection agency being totally beyond the oversight of this political institution. The remit to do that exists and can be put in place by the Assembly.

In May, the ministerial statement was made to the dismay of many environmental non-governmental organisations. The new Environment Agency was nothing more than a repackage; it has been no more effective than its predecessor. It has been rebranded with no extra substance. The DOE has continued to come under fire since the rebranding of the Environment and Heritage Service, particularly in respect of water pollution.

Therefore it is clear that the new Environment Agency, in common with the new Minister of the Environment, is not fit for purpose and delivers little of substance. On reflection, it seems that over the past two or three weeks, hardly a week goes by without the Minister being criticised by all parties bar his own. Every week more and more is heard about how the Minister is falling behind with his work. He has a great deal more to do for the environment; he must take responsibility for it rather than sit on his hands. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr I McCrea:** Members will not be shocked to learn that I will not be supporting the motion or the amendment.

On 1 July 2008, I attended the launch of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Only four months later, the Assembly is debating a motion more or less calling for the abolition of that agency.

It is unbelievable that, after only four months, some Members can be so certain that the agency is doing such a bad job. If an independent environment agency had been established, I doubt that we would be debating whether it should be abolished after four months. Some

Members are so fixated on the idea of an independent environment protection agency that they do not want to see the Northern Ireland Environment Agency succeed. That is why they ask for it to be abolished.

In the debate on 27 May 2008, the then Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, stated her belief that an independent review should be carried out in 2011. That review must consider any problems with the Environment Agency and, as the then Minister said, make changes if necessary.

I accept that there were many problems with the EHS, and other Members have spoken about the problems with planning consultations and other issues. It seemed that the EHS was a law unto itself, and it took ages to respond on planning matters. However, while others shouted from the sidelines it was a DUP Minister who faced the issue head-on and took the right decision to form the Northern Ireland Environment Agency — an agency that is accountable to the Minister and to the Assembly and its Committees. The Committee for the Environment is charged with scrutinising the Minister and the Department; as a member of that Committee, I take that responsibility seriously. Yet the Minister is once again being called upon to hand over his powers to scrutinise the Environment Agency by making it independent.

In my Mid Ulster constituency, there was severe flooding in August this year when the Moyola River burst its banks. Many homes were badly damaged and their contents destroyed, and farmers lost livestock, crops, equipment and other material. Many people believe that the flooding was made worse because environmental constraints meant that badgers, fish and even trees were deemed more important than property. That is because there are only a few weeks in the year in which the Rivers Agency can carry out maintenance work — remove debris, cut back trees or repair river banks. Surely, there must come a time when the lives and property of people are put before fish, birds and badgers.

In January 2007, the Ulster Farmers' Union launched its campaign to cut excessive red tape in agriculture and received unanimous support from the Assembly. If Members truly support a reduction of red tape, it is time for them to support the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and reject the notion of an independent environment protection agency that would, ultimately, increase red tape.

**Mr McClarty:** The Ulster Unionist Party regards Northern Ireland's diverse and beautiful natural environment as one of our greatest assets; it is also a crucial component of our local economy and will be an even greater component in a peaceful future.

However, we are also acutely aware that we have not been good stewards of our natural environment; for decades, we have been one of Europe's sick men and

considered a special case. We have continuously failed to meet European regulations and continued to pollute at unacceptable levels. However, times have changed, and we must change with them.

The review of environmental governance held out some hope for the reform that was required. However, as with so many issues, the Minister has proven that he would rather go it alone, centralise power and remain outside the considered mainstream. As a party of the Union, the Ulster Unionist Party is deeply aware of the grave disparity that exists between the levels and mechanisms of environmental protection in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The review of environmental governance highlighted what has been realised across the rest of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland for more than a decade — to ensure the required environmental protection, legislative responsibilities must be meaningfully separated from the regulatory and enforcement functions of any environment protection agency. The continual failings of the EHS have proven that over past decades. The Minister is not allowing us to implement best practice.

The previous Minister of the Environment paid homage to that fact in her statement on 27 May 2008, when she outlined proposals for the new Environment Agency:

“I want to see clear blue water between the role of the core Department as policy-maker and legislator and the role of the environment agency as protector, regulator and enforcer.” — *[Official Report, Vol 31, No 1, p4, col 1]*.

However, despite the former Environment Minister's sleight of hand, it cannot be denied that the new Environment Agency remains firmly under the control of the Department of the Environment and the Executive. No clear blue water has been established and, like the continued pollution of rivers such as the Six Mile Water, there is nothing but a murky opaqueness between the two.

The former Environment Minister went on to make much of the better regulation board, only to inform us that its members would be leaders in the agriculture, construction, water and business sectors. The Minister made no mention of representation from environmental experts or advocates. The former Minister of the Environment called them critical friends — I am concerned that in order not to offend a friend people sometimes refrain from telling them the whole truth.

Unfortunately, such lazy thinking and language is what we are coming to expect from the Minister of the Environment. However, the Ulster Unionist Party does not support regulation for regulation's sake. That has been proven by the actions and decisions of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, we believe in good and fair regulation, and

the creation of an independent environmental agency would be good regulation. The recent incidences of flooding provided a less than obvious example of the benefits that a functioning Department and an independent environment agency can deliver.

Detailed flood risk assessments are produced by the EPA in England and Wales. That information is then integrated into a climate-change adaptation strategy. However, although we have created preliminary flood maps, our inability to join up the dots will mean that we will probably not utilise them to their optimum. We have an Environment Minister who does not believe in climate change, and we do not have an independent environmental protection agency from which independent advice can be sought. Under the DUP's leadership, we will be unable to join up the dots to ensure that good regulation and reform are put in place.

As Mr McGlone said, changing the name of Marathons to Snickers did little to change their flavour. In the same way, the Environment Agency has made little difference during its short lifetime, and it is time that the Minister recognised that fact. I support the motion.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** I am not sure whether people who have listened to this debate will welcome it, because the Assembly is becoming more like the BBC, with repeats almost every week, especially on issues relating to the environment. Members trotted out the same old arguments, and no new ideas were suggested. There was no recognition of the good, hard work that the Department is doing on the entire area of the environment.

I want to address as many of the Members' points as possible, but I wish to make something very clear from the start — there will be no review of the current governmental arrangements for the Environment Agency during the lifetime of the Assembly. There are three reasons for that. First, a new agency has been set up, and it needs time to be assessed and to prove itself. We have heard Members speaking nonsense and writing the agency off after only three or four months, without one shred of evidence that it is not doing its job, and without one example of where it has failed. They have simply written the agency off, saying that it is not fit for purpose, it is not up to the job, and it cannot perform as well as other agencies. I could repeat statements that other Members have made.

The proposer of the motion, Mr Ford, said that the Environment Agency is not up to the challenge. Mr Ford was a social worker, and I am sure that if anyone had dared suggest to him that a social policy could have been evaluated and a judgement made on it after four months, he would have said that they needed to have their heads felt, because he knows that a policy cannot be evaluated in such a short time. He did not do

himself or his argument any justice when he came off with the nonsense that we heard in his speech today.

Standards in the Assembly have been criticised at times, but if a GCSE student had proposed some of the arguments that Members made today, they would not even get a grade C for them, because no justification was given for any of the sweeping statements that were made.

Secondly, new members of staff have been appointed to the agency, and independent members have been appointed to the board. Those people must be given some sense of security and a long-term objective to work towards. Time and again, Members raised issues for party political reasons, but that creates a degree of uncertainty. Some Members are simply pandering to groups that will applaud them for it, despite the fact that many of them are not even clear about what they mean when they talk about the role of an independent environmental agency — but I will come to that issue in a moment.

I believe that we owe it to the agency's staff, who have been given rigorous targets, to have some kind of stability over the next few years.

3.30 pm

My third reason for opposing the motion is that I have worked with many of those staff members. They have presented me with policy papers, arguments and plans, and I have visited them at their places of work, some of which are not in very pleasant conditions. I have seen their commitment to the agency. Some of them make their telephone numbers available to members of the public so that they can be called out to incidents, 24 hours a day.

I owe it to those totally dedicated staff who, despite the impression given by some Members here, feel aggrieved when the environment is damaged, when some part of the job for which they are responsible has not been adequately done or when someone has escaped prosecution for a pollution incident. I have spoken to some of those staff members, and when a polluter escapes prosecution, they feel as sore about it — sorer, perhaps — than those who, in their mock rage, make statements to the papers that give the impression that the agency's staff are doing nothing and turning a blind eye to some things that are happening.

For all those reasons, the Assembly, rather than continually sniping at the organisation, ought to fall in behind those dedicated staff. I do not always agree with them; sometimes I have rows with them, and we have words. They may have different views and ideas, but at least they are dedicated. They are owed, until they have shown otherwise, the support of the Assembly. They do not deserve the headline-grabbing criticisms that are sometimes made of them.

I will turn to some of the issues that were raised. The agency has been criticised because it is not accountable or independent. I did not have time to find quotes from every Member of the Assembly, although I suspect that I could have found examples had I dug long enough. However, every party in the Assembly that has talked about the importance of having an independent environmental protection agency has, at some time or another, questioned the value of having independent regulatory bodies, whether they are for energy or for water. To use the broad language of the proposer of the motion, there is nothing wrong with the objective of cutting back on unaccountable and over-bureaucratic bodies.

Either we have an independent agency, or there must be some regulation. I note that the Ulster Unionist Party's Minister has said that he has no confidence in regulators. He did not want an independent body. He said that, having seen how the electricity and gas regulator operates, he does not do a particularly brilliant job for the consumer. Independence, therefore, does not guarantee that a good job will be done.

Sinn Féin, of course, demanded in September 2008 that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should interfere with the work of the Utility Regulator. When we talk about independent regulators and independent bodies in the Assembly, some Members do not like to see that independence being exercised too strongly.

I suspect that they would have the same difficulty were an independent environmental protection agency established.

Mr Boylan and other Members let the cat out of the bag when they mentioned Lisnarah. I am not sure whether they welcomed the fact that, given that the agency is not totally independent, the Committee for the Environment was able to consider the issue and bring a recommendation to me. Mr Beggs was not sure what recommendation was made because, according to the minute of that Committee meeting, he said that he was not sure what was proposed. He, therefore, sat on the fence on the issue.

Mr Ford thought that it was so important to scrutinise the work of my Department and that of the regulator that he did not even stay to the end of the Committee meeting, so he did not know what decision was made. Therefore, before Members start to criticise the Department and the agency, they ought to consider their own involvement.

Members mentioned transparency. NIEA has open board meetings, and on its website, it publishes papers that show how it reached decisions, what decisions have been made, and what targets have been set. There is information on team briefs, corporate plans, business plans, performance data, accounts and other matters.

The agency is totally transparent, and anyone can see how it conducts its business and how the Department regulates it.

Mr Gallagher's amendment calls for an independent agency to be fully operational before the end of the current Assembly mandate so that it can protect the environment. He ignored the fact that that will involve a cost, but other Members pointed out that perhaps he would prefer £4 million to be diverted to the setting up of a new agency. I, however, would prefer that money to be spent on better regulation and on ensuring that people are in place to make sure that that regulation occurs. His amendment is an example of the naivety of some Members who think that I am able to wave a magic wand tomorrow that, hey presto, will create a brand new, costless, independent environmental protection agency.

Establishing such a body would not be costless, and it could not be done immediately, anyway. Primary legislation would have to be drafted, and the legal entity would have to be set up to cover its management and financial relationships with the DOE. An independent environmental protection agency would have to seek resources from the DOE — money would not fall from the trees or come from the sea. A chairperson and a board would have to be appointed, and there would have to be a shadowing period to allow the chairperson and the management team to bed in. That would not work, and it would not happen overnight. An agency exists that is working towards achieving its objectives.

Mr Gallagher also said —

**Mr Beggs:** The reason that Ministers have given for not setting up an independent environmental protection agency could equally be given as a reason not to review public administration and local government. The redevelopment of local government is progressing, so why does the Minister use that argument against establishing an independent environmental protection agency?

**The Minister of the Environment:** Every time that the Member opens his mouth on such issues, he shows his ignorance. As I will demonstrate, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency serves its purpose well. Local government, on the other hand, will be reformed in order to give it additional powers and to improve it. That is why the review is progressing and why the Northern Ireland Environment Agency should stay.

Arguments were made about the effectiveness of the agency. I will not repeat all the statistics that other Members gave, but the Northern Ireland Environment Agency prosecutes more people than any independent agency in the United Kingdom, even though Northern Ireland is a smaller area. The agency pursues polluters effectively, and its sentencing is effective. It does not discriminate between semi-governmental bodies and

bodies that are unattached to Government; Northern Ireland Water feels the weight of my Department as much as any private individual. Infraction proceedings against other parts of the United Kingdom, whose agencies are independent, occur more often.

Therefore, there is no guarantee that an independent environment agency would lead to a form of governance in which pollution would not occur and the environment would not be damaged.

Cathal Boylan asked about the border areas. The agency pursues the issue of waste management in border areas to the point where it forces councils in the Republic to pay for the removal of waste that was dumped illegally in Northern Ireland. I have pursued that vigorously to the point where illegal dumpers have had their assets seized and some of the illegal dumpers have been put in jail. Therefore, do not tell me that the Environment Agency is not effective. The agency is effective, and, for that reason, we ought to give it the opportunity to prove that is capable of doing the job. In its short life, it has shown that to be the case, and over time, it will continue to show that. The Assembly should fall in behind the agency's staff and give them the help and encouragement to ensure that the environment is cleaned up.

**The Deputy Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**Mr Gallagher:** Something of Dr Paisley's legacy has clearly rubbed off on the Minister of the Environment, who began his contribution to the debate with a no, no, never approach.

I want, first, to set the record straight and to correct the Minister's implications that I was attacking staff from the Department of the Environment, or any other staff for that matter. I have never verbally attacked staff, and I know that all staff work hard in difficult circumstances.

The motion, however, is not about staff, but the regulation of the environment. We are debating the issue again because the Minister's predecessor, Arlene Foster, with the support of her party, who contributed to the debate on the day that the new agency was introduced, put the staff in a difficult position. The Department of the Environment is the only Department that tries to have it both ways: to be poacher and gamekeeper. Members from the other side of the House attempted to draw other regulators into the issue. The Department of the Environment is unique in having a regulator that tries to be poacher and gamekeeper at the same time. That does not work. It is clear that the public has no confidence in the agency, and that is why so many Members have again provided their views on the issue.

Furthermore, the views of experts were simply sidelined and dropped. The review of environmental governance provided several recommendations after

long, drawn out consultations. Yet what we got from the Minister of the Environment was simply moving furniture around and repackaging the EHS. The Minister can shout for as long as he wishes, but he will not change the fact that the public increasingly care about the environment, and this issue will not go away.

We are criticised on this side for daring to say that we need a better body after only four months. The Minister has tried to tell us that the agency is the most effective regulatory body in the UK. May I remind him of a well-known tyres incident that happened under the new Environment Agency not so long ago when an individual was found disposing of tyres illegally. He was intercepted by the agency, taken to court, and fined £200.

It turned out that the true cost of the tyre disposal was £1,000. What has happened to the polluter-pays principle? That is just one example of why this debate must continue until we have an independent environment agency. *[Interruption.]* I will not give way. The scale of protection — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please. The Member has the Floor.

3.45 pm

**Mr Gallagher:** The issue is the scale of protection for the environment and, as I have said, that is completely inadequate; the public has no confidence in it. The way in which regulation is being taken forward is not independent, and that is not the fault of the staff of the Department of the Environment.

**Dr Farry:** We are pleased that we have the opportunity to discuss this critical issue today. Although it has only been a few months since the decision was taken by the Minister's predecessor, this is a matter of considerable public concern.

Like many other Members, I have received a large postbag full of letters from constituents on the issue. Ninety-nine per cent of them are in favour of having an independent environment protection agency. People recognise that the arrangements for institutional governance of the environment in Northern Ireland are not fit for purpose and need to be modernised. They also recognise that independence and transparency need to be taken into account when decisions about the environment are made.

There has been a significant evolution in thinking during the decade following the last review. The decision that the previous Minister of the Environment took on the matter was not based on any sound rationale in policy-making; the decision was political, and it was taken to reflect the needs of a narrow section of the community in Northern Ireland rather than the wider needs of society. It ran against the recommendations of the review of environmental

governance set up during direct rule by Lord Rooker — hardly an example of a pro-environment Minister. Nevertheless, he went along with it.

Major environmental issues must be considered by an EPA, including the prevention and control of pollution, waste management, biodiversity, inland and coastal waterways and our built heritage, and some Members have stressed that independent EPAs are the norm, not just in these islands but in the world.

A number of different themes have emerged in the debate, one of which is the notion that having an independent environment protection agency runs contrary to the idea of having a devolved Assembly with local, elected MLAs and Ministers taking decisions. Democracy is more sophisticated than simple majority voting in a legislature followed by a Minister doing whatever he or she likes. Democracy is about having a rules-based system; it is about the rule of law and putting in place proper checks and balances to ensure that the law fully takes its course. Such checks and balances need to exist in an independent environment protection agency. Other democratic jurisdictions — Scotland, which has its Parliament, and the Republic of Ireland — are able co-exist satisfactorily with an independent EPA. There is no reason why we cannot do the same while not undermining the quality of democracy in the Chamber.

The DUP is not consistent when making its comments. When it comes to private finance initiatives, the DUP is quite happy for major contracts to be handed over to the private sector to run on behalf of Government — for example, the Workplace 2010 contract. Although that is on hold, temporarily, it will potentially cover two-thirds of the Civil Service estate. Once the contract is signed, Members will have no control over how it will roll out because that will be set out in law. The DUP is happy to do that while arguing against having an independent EPA — it is not being consistent. It shows that the argument is more about political expediency than logic.

A rather demeaning comment was made about unelected NGOs. Let me tell the House something about the RSPB: it is a mass-membership organisation throughout the UK that, I dare say, has more members in Northern Ireland than every political party in the Assembly combined. That puts the matter in context. That organisation's views reflect those of its members.

We have been told that there cannot be an EPA because its set-up costs might range from £2.5 million to £4 million and it would incur running costs of £600,000 each year. We do not hear about the costs of not having a proper system of environmental governance in Northern Ireland, which may include financial costs in the increased likelihood of fines and

infraction proceedings, and the wider impact on the economy.

The DUP seems to operate on the notion that developing the economy and protecting the environment are mutually exclusive. They are not at all. Indeed, they are more than simply consistent; there is a social imperative to grow a green economy. In the United States, where there will be a change of leadership in the next few months, one key aspect of the new Obama Administration will be the development of the “green new deal”. It recognises that development of the economy and protecting the environment go hand in hand. That is significant, given the American legacy on the environment. Northern Ireland should be heading in the same direction. Although change does not happen overnight, as Jeffrey Sachs pointed out in today’s ‘Irish Times’, it is important that we start to head in that direction.

Clearly, much of what the DUP says on the issue has been influenced by one sector of society, namely farmers, through the Ulster Farmers’ Union. Other aspects of the economy must also be borne in mind. That is reflected in the support of the CBI, among other bodies, for an independent environmental protection agency. Members are aware that the CBI tends to be hard-nosed when it comes to economic matters; however, even it recognises the new opportunities to rebalance and transform the Northern Ireland economy. Many aspects of the economy depend on a good, clean environment.

Another notion is that there cannot be a review because the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has been in place for a mere four months. The reason for this debate is that there was no sound, policy-making rationale for the decision that was taken on the agency: it was flawed. A proper review has already been conducted — the review of environmental governance. Its recommendation is quite clear: an independent EPA is needed. There is no point in Northern Ireland hanging around for years and missing out on the opportunities that arise from a different way of doing things and for society to lose out as a consequence. Rapid progress must be made now.

The decision-making process must also be examined. Four out of five parties in the Assembly seem to believe in the importance of an independent environmental protection agency. We are not too sure about Sinn Féin; however, we will take it at face value for the purposes of this debate. The DUP is the one exception.

There is supposed to be power-sharing in this society. To me, that means an Executive that can take collective decisions on “significant or controversial” matters. However, the outcome on this important matter is subject to the lucky dip of d’Hondt — the

fact that the DUP, rather than another party, has taken on the Environment portfolio. My understanding was that the St Andrews Agreement would stop that type of outcome. To use another example, there is a risk of the Education Minister being able to take a polarising decision on education simply because Sinn Féin has the Education portfolio. Collective outcomes are needed from the Executive. Mechanisms for that exist through the ministerial code of conduct.

As far as the Assembly is aware, the former Environment Minister informed her Executive colleagues of the decision that she was going to take. However, her decision had a cross-cutting impact on other Departments such as DCAL, DARD and DRD. However, it was also a “significant or controversial” matter under the definition in the code of conduct. At no time did any party in the Executive challenge the Minister’s decision and seek to force a collective vote in the Executive that could have delivered a different outcome.

**Mr McKay:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** Sorry, I have no time.

After the Minister was challenged on her decision through a petition of concern, the First Minister and deputy First Minister accepted that the issue of environmental governance was a “significant and controversial” matter under the definition in the code of conduct. That means that all future decisions on environmental governance will have to be collective decisions of the Executive.

However, given that all future decisions are supposed to be collective, it begs the question of why the first decision was not. Had it been, the outcome and the nature of today’s debate would have been different. Members must bear in mind that major flaws exist in the Executive. I am glad that the Minister was listening to that part of my speech, and I hope that he will heed the remainder when he reads the Hansard report, because he was rather inattentive during the first half.

The Alliance Party is happy to support the SDLP amendment. However, I must point out that the SDLP’s tabling of a similar amendment last autumn was tactically unsound. At that stage, the priority was to seek the maximum level of consensus in the Chamber on the principle of an independent environmental protection agency.

As it turned out, the motion received the support of all parties in the Chamber, including the DUP, on that important topic. Since then, the DUP has wandered off and, rather than acting for the common good, has given in to special interests in society. However, that is a decision for the DUP to justify in due course. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 29.*

**AYES**

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Burns and Mr A Maginness.*

**NOES**

*Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Bresland and Mr Ross.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 30.*

**AYES**

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.*

**NOES**

*Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, 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 S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Bresland and Mr Ross.*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the failure of the previous Minister of the Environment to take forward the recommendations of the 'Review of Environmental Governance'; believes that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is not adequate to deal with the challenges facing Northern Ireland; and calls for the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency which must become fully operational within the lifetime of this Assembly.



*(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair)*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Drink-Driving Limit

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

**Mr Ross:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to investigate the viability of reducing the current drink-driving limit.

Earlier, in the debate about alcohol misuse, I said that we would debate this motion, so it is good that we are doing so. Drink-driving is widely recognised as a major problem on our roads, and it is no longer culturally acceptable to drink and then drive home. It is not only the person driving who puts his or her life at risk but also the lives of everyone else who uses roads or, indeed, footpaths.

Far fewer people drive after drinking alcohol than even 10 years ago. Nevertheless, worryingly, a recent survey found that 17% of people said that they had driven home in the knowledge that they were probably over the legal limit. Two people might drink the same amount of alcohol but be affected differently — one person might be over the limit and the other not.

When discussing such matters, it is important that we have public backing, and, in recent polls, 75% of people support lowering the legal drink-driving limit. Public support for a law often means that people abide by it.

Although no specific measures are mentioned in the motion, the most likely reduction would be to 50 mg, which would bring us into line with the rest of Europe. Although I do not usually wish to harmonise our laws with Europe, the UK, Malta, Luxemburg and the Irish Republic are the only countries in which the limit is set as high as 80 mg.

Some people have called for a zero limit; however, that is unworkable and unenforceable. The body maintains a natural level of alcohol, even as a result of digestion. In addition, those who use a mouthwash in the morning and people who might have had a couple of pints the previous night would find themselves in difficulty with the law.

Although we have among the highest drink-driving limits in Europe, we have tougher penalties, and that is

important. More than 1,000 people lose their licences every year for drinking and driving. In Northern Ireland last year, more than 600 drivers were caught drink-driving, and, scarily, despite the fact that we have more campaigns against drink-driving than ever before that is a higher figure than for the previous year.

Many people say that they are unsure of the drink-driving limit and how much they can drink before driving, and we must consider that grey area. Reducing the drink-driving limit would send a clear message from the Assembly that it is unacceptable to drink any alcohol before driving a car. People who argue that they are unaware of how much they can drink before driving would support reducing the limit to 50 mg, because that would make the law much clearer. If one intends to drive, one drink is far too much.

On the other side of the debate, few people would argue against the motion. However, some publicans say that lowering the limit might criminalise innocent people. That is nonsense. Lowering the limit is, first and foremost, about saving lives and reducing the risk of accidents.

In 2007-08, Northern Ireland experienced 431 drink-driving road accidents, in which 18 people were killed and 143 people were seriously injured. In October 2008, 'The Irish News' reported that one third of all road deaths are caused by alcohol-related accidents. Moreover, the proposal to reduce the drink-driving limit is supported by the Government's road safety strategy, which points to evidence that reducing the limit to 50 mg can significantly reduce road deaths. The Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, and the BMA in Northern Ireland support that opinion, and the association has actively campaigned for a reduction for many years.

The anti-drink-driving campaign is well established, and it is making a particular push as we approach Christmas and the new year. Often such campaigns are targeted at men coming home from sports events on a Saturday or from a night out with their friends, because, unfortunately, men are more likely to drink-drive, and evidence backs that up. However, it is not a problem for men only. In August 2008, the 'Sunday Sport' reported that the ladette culture was responsible for a rise in the number of drink-driving convictions among women in Northern Ireland. The number has doubled in the past decade, and that has been attributed to the fact that attitudes towards drinking have changed, particularly the attitudes of women who go out with their friends and have a glass of wine. Bars are serving bigger glasses of wine than they used to, and that can often put the customer over the limit.

One often thinks that it is older people who disregard drink-driving laws, but that is not always the case. On 22 April 2008, I proposed a motion on graduated driver

licences (GDL), and, as part of that, I called for a lower limit for novice drivers. That part of the motion was supported by most young people; in fact, it was the only part that was supported by young people. It is the law in New Zealand, Australia and many states in the US where GDL is operated. The rationale is that novice drivers are most at risk from road accidents, because they do not have much experience on the road. To add additional risk by permitting them to drink alcohol is inappropriate. In the areas in which GDL operates, the limit is reduced to 20 mg and increased to 40 mg or 50 mg on completion of the driver's restricted period.

The not-a-drop message is the most effective campaign, and lowering the legal limit will reinforce that view. The message is simple, and there are no grey areas. If someone intends to drive, he or she should not drink any alcohol. One drink can impair one's ability to drive. That is because people are two and a half times more likely to be involved in a road accident if they have been drinking. Alcohol is a sedative, and the effects of alcohol can hit the brain in a matter of minutes. It is not acceptable to gamble with drink-driving.

Over the weekend, I am sure that other Members were as disgusted as I was to see an Ipswich Town football player, David Norris, mock the fact that his friend had been imprisoned for drink-driving. His friend Luke McCormick, who killed two young boys after driving on the motorway while drunk, is, fortunately, serving seven years in prison for that offence. It is hoped that Ipswich Town Football Club will punish its player for making light of such a serious and tragic event.

**Mr Shannon:** Today's newspapers report that the club has reprimanded the player. He has been fined, and he has apologised to the family and stated that he regrets his actions.

**Mr Ross:** I am pleased that Ipswich Town has taken action against the player. I hope that that will send out a message to many people across the country.

From the moment that we take a drink of alcohol, it starts to close down mental activity, and it progressively damages an individual's ability to perform the complex skills that are required to drive safely. Our ability to observe, implement and process information from our eyes and other senses is impaired by even a low level of alcohol in the bloodstream. Taking that first drink can often be a fatal decision.

At under one eighth of the legal limit, basic driving skills and the ability to concentrate are diminished. We begin to relax to the point of sleep at times, and drivers who fall asleep cause some 16% of accidents on major roads in England and 10% in France.

At one third of the legal limit, visual functions and choice reaction time begin to show serious impairment, and at one half the legal limit, vigilance, alertness and

reactions are impaired on half of the scientific tests conducted. At three fifths of the legal limit, perception and visible functions are impaired, and, at four fifths, the driver's ability to have sound judgement is damaged. Therefore, it is easy to say when a driver increases his or her risk of an accident: it happens the moment that they take one alcoholic drink.

I hold no truck with the assertion that those who go out and enjoy a glass of wine with their meal will be targeted unfairly. Why do they feel that they are different from a young man who has a couple of pints after a football match on a Saturday? The same facts apply for everyone: drinking and driving causes accidents and can also cause death. That is why I am calling on the House to back the motion and send out a strong message from the Assembly that drink-driving is unacceptable. I look forward to hearing the views and comments of other Members and the Minister this afternoon.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank Mr Ross and Mr Weir — who are members of the Committee for the Environment — for proposing the motion on the drink-driving limit. The Committee considered the issue earlier this year, following a presentation by the Minister of that time, Mrs Arlene Foster, on her proposals to improve safety on the North's roads. The Committee urged the Minister to ensure that drink-driving limits would be enforced strictly, and it supported the proposal for random breath-testing.

However, in conjunction with that, the Committee noted that it would be essential for enforcement to be consistent on both sides of the border. The Minister advised the Committee that her counterparts down South had announced their intention also to take steps to reduce their current drink-driving limit. The Committee recommended that the Department consider a high-profile media campaign to increase road-safety awareness and that it include the need for compliance with new drink-driving limits.

4.30 pm

Committee members supported the proposal to lower the blood-alcohol limit to 50 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood for most drivers. That would bring the North into step with most other European countries. They also backed the idea of introducing an even lower limit of 20 mg per 100 ml for inexperienced drivers, LGV drivers and motorcyclists. Studies have shown that the accident risk increases substantially for young or inexperienced drivers at blood-alcohol levels of 20 mg per 100 ml. A lower drink-drive limit for novice drivers has been introduced in some countries, with evaluation studies showing that that resulted in fewer alcohol-related fatalities in that age group.

To inform its thinking on the road-safety proposals, the Committee engaged in extensive consultation with many interest groups. It is worth noting that, although all respondents supported the proposals to reduce the drink-driving limit, many stressed the importance of getting across the message of never drinking and driving, rather than focusing on a specified legal limit.

During the consultation, the British Medical Association informed the Committee that, in 2005, Northern Ireland saw 276 road-traffic accidents in which the driver was affected by alcohol. Those accidents resulted in 529 casualties, including 24 people killed and 95 seriously injured. The Minister told the Committee that, in 2006, 18 road deaths were accountable to drink-driving and/or drug-driving. That makes it patently clear that more must be done to address the problems in the North.

However, the Committee did not support in full all the Minister's proposals. The consultation identified inconsistencies in the success rate of alcohol ignition locks in countries that had tested them. In the US, where such locks are fitted in the cars of repeat offenders, either as an alternative to disqualification or as a form of probation after a period of disqualification, they appear to be effective while the order is in force. However, reoffending occurs rapidly once the restriction has been removed. In Canada, where the programme is much more tightly supervised, more long-term improvements have been experienced. Consequently, although Committee members supported the general principle of alcohol ignition locks, they wanted more information on their effectiveness from other parts of Europe before fully endorsing them.

In summary, the Committee for the Environment supports the principle of lowering the drink-driving limit, with an even lower level for inexperienced, motorbike and LGV drivers. The Committee wants to see the drink-driving limit strictly enforced and notes the need for consistent enforcement throughout the island.

I fully support the motion, and I commend Committee members Mr Ross and Mr Weir for tabling it.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will not be quoting from any Sunday newspapers, or from any other newspapers.

As road-safety spokesperson for Sinn Féin, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it for doing so. Members should be aware that Sinn Féin has consistently called for zero tolerance on drink-driving and drug-driving, and, therefore, it welcomes any debate on the issue.

I raised the issue in the Chamber with the Minister's predecessor, who, at that time, stated unequivocally that she was in favour of lowering the existing limit.

As Members are aware, the island of Ireland is out of line with the thinking of the majority of European countries. Here, the limit is 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood, compared with a 50 mg limit in other countries. Indeed, throughout Europe, only Britain, Ireland, Malta and Luxembourg allow such a high blood-alcohol level when driving. Members should show leadership and correct that flawed policy by arguing strongly in support of the motion. If we agree the motion, we should ensure that the Minister acts. He must take responsibility for his Department's actions rather than bemoan the lack of Executive meetings or his reluctance to implement regulations, as he did during last Tuesday's debate on introducing a levy on plastic carrier bags.

As I said, Sinn Féin would welcome a zero-tolerance approach throughout the island, but, beyond that debate, we would certainly welcome a reduction in the current limit, be that down to 50 mg or 20 mg. The previous Minister of the Environment pledged to have a public consultation on the matter, and we still await that. I hope that the current Minister will move the issue on at a pace in keeping with its importance.

I know that the Minister and many of his party colleagues are reluctant to embrace scientific findings. Nevertheless, I hope that they will accept that studies have shown that even one drink can lead to impaired driving. The BMA has stated that a blood-alcohol level of 50 mg doubles a driver's risk of crashing. At present, 80 mg will raise the risk tenfold. Some 56% of motorists who drink believe that it is unacceptable to drive after even one drink, while 61% of drivers and non-drivers surveyed feel that people should not be allowed behind the wheel after one drink. The majority of people have already expressed their support for tougher drink- and drug-driving legislation. We should ensure that their wishes are adhered to.

The 2007-08 statistics for road-traffic collisions and casualties show that drink- and drug-driving was second only to excess speed in being responsible for death and serious injury on our roads. The figures up until September of this year show 14 fatalities involving drink and drugs, accounting for some 18% of road deaths in 2008. It is our duty to ensure that we do all that we can to reduce that figure. Our party would certainly welcome and support any new measure that can be introduced and implemented.

Of course, we can bombard the airwaves with advertisements and try to educate as much as we can. Certainly, we must continue to do everything that we can to make a difference. However, it could be argued that the issue of drug-driving is under-represented in current road-safety advertising, given its increased prevalence. I ask the Minister to take that on board and to address the problem, perhaps through the introduction of new forms of technology.

Reducing the legal limit may put the thought in people's minds that taking that first drink could lead to the loss of their licence, and they would have to consider the effect that that would have on their social and work life. That may lead to drivers making decisions that they do not currently make. In turn, that may lead to someone's life being saved on our roads or the prevention of a serious life-changing injury. For that reason, Sinn Féin is willing to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Beggs:** I, too, welcome this debate about reducing the current drink-driving limit. PSNI road traffic collision statistics show that in 2007-08, some 37 people were killed as a result of excessive speed. The second highest cause of death on our roads was drink-driving; some 18 lives were lost during that year. In addition, a further 143 people were seriously injured as a result of drink and drugs, so it is a major issue — something happens almost every other day.

As others have said, the legal limit for driving in Northern Ireland is 80 mg of alcohol in 100 ml of blood. There is no fail-safe guide to how to stay under the legal limit or about the number of units of alcohol one can consume and still drive safely. Much depends on age, weight, sex, stress levels, when one last ate, and the amount and type of alcohol that was consumed. Research shows that any amount of alcohol affects one's ability to drive safely, as reaction times are impaired and there is a reduction in the ability to judge speed and distances.

Although the UK, Ireland and Malta have prescribed limits set at 80 mg, most European countries, as a result of painful experience, have now set a level of 50 mg. Given the number of fatalities and lives ruined in Northern Ireland, surely it is time that we followed suit? Organisations such as the BMA are not suggesting a zero limit, because there will be cases in which individuals would register slightly above zero even when they have not been drinking — for example, diabetics and people who have used mouthwash may register above zero. The BMA doubts whether an absolute zero limit would be enforceable and acceptable to the public but argues that a 50 mg level, which would bring the UK into line with most other European countries, would be effective and beneficial.

A study by University College London showed that lowering the limit from 80 mg to 50 mg would prevent 63 deaths and 230 injuries a year in the UK. The head of road safety for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Kevin Clinton, makes similar estimates. He says that cutting the drink-driving limit from 80 mg to 50 mg:

“could save 50 lives and prevent 250 serious injuries...each year.”

He went on to state:

“At levels between 50mg and 80mg, drivers are 2 - 4 times more likely to be involved in a fatal accident than drivers with no alcohol.”

The BMA's head of science and ethics, Dr Vivienne Nathanson, commented:

“There is clear evidence of the link between rising blood alcohol concentrations and dangerous driving behaviour.

The introduction of the current limit...led to a dramatic fall in the number of deaths on the road, but the position has been stagnant since 1993.”

She went on to say:

“We need a new impetus to reduce the toll of injury and death.”

In October 2007, the then Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, told the Assembly that her Department was “actively” looking into reducing the legal driving limit. Therefore, the Department has been actively looking into the issue for more than a year. I ask the Minister: what progress has been made?

Regrettably, the UK Government decided last month against reducing the legal limit for alcohol in drivers' blood in GB. Instead, the Department for Transport said that it was considering giving the police new powers to stop and test drivers at random. Cathy Keeler, Brake's deputy chief executive, said:

“Although better enforcement is needed and Brake is pleased the government is consulting on improving police enforcement, cutting the drink-drive limit would save lives.”

A clear direction has to be travelled, and it is time for the Minister to take action. What are the proposals for reducing the alcohol limit to 50 mg? Has the Minister finalised the proposals? If not, why not? If the proposals have been finalised, is the Minister waiting for Executive approval? Is this yet another item that has been prevented from coming before the Assembly and, therefore, prevented from becoming legislation? If that is the case, shame on Sinn Féin for blocking such an issue. This legislation would save lives, so it is too important to be blocked. I support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** This motion could almost be regarded as an extension of the earlier debate on alcohol misuse. It is a very important issue, and we are grateful to the Members who brought it to the Floor of the Assembly.

Drinking and driving is wrong; it is totally unacceptable. It puts a lethal weapon into someone's hands and cannot be tolerated. The result can — and most likely will — be serious injury or death on our roads.

The slogan “don't drink and drive” must be paramount. It is as relevant today as it was on the day that it was introduced. The motion calls for an investigation into the viability of reducing the current drink-driving limit. I have no problem in supporting the motion. Indeed, I support efforts to reduce the maximum alcohol level for drivers from 80 mg to 50 mg.

Drinking and driving invites trouble for drivers and all other road users. We simply cannot take risks on our busy and congested roads. The maximum alcohol level for drivers in most European countries is 50 mg. I see no reason why Northern Ireland should not have the same rules and regulations if they would save lives.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) supports a reduction of the legal limit to 50 mg. Like the Ambulance Service, the Fire Service and other rescue services, the police are first on the scene of some of the most horrific road accidents. The police must be listened to because they are expected to pick up the bodies of the unfortunate victims of drink-driving. As legislators, the least that we can do is work with them to cut down and, we hope, eliminate road accidents.

4.45 pm

The BMA states that in 2007-08 there were 431 road accidents involving alcohol or drugs. On the subject of drugs, I compliment the authorities in south-west Cork for intercepting a vast quantity of drugs —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The subject is drink-driving, Mr McCarthy.

**Mr McCarthy:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The figures are staggering — 661 casualties, including 18 deaths and 143 seriously injured. We cannot allow that carnage to continue. It has been mentioned, and I will do so again, that in February of this year, my colleague Trevor Lunn asked the then Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, whether she had any proposals to change the law on drink-driving. In a response to a question for written answer, she said:

“Departmental officials are liaising with counterparts in Great Britain about a range of measures to deter drink-driving and reduce casualties. One issue under consideration is appropriate blood alcohol limits. I have already announced that I favour a reduction in the current limits, although no decisions have been made yet. At a recent Environment Committee meeting, I discussed lowering the limits from 80mgs of alcohol per 100mls of blood to 50mgs for most drivers. This could be accompanied by a lower limit of 20mgs for inexperienced drivers, LGV drivers and motorcycle riders, in line with European Union recommendations.”

She concluded:

“I intend to consult shortly on these proposals and on a range of other road safety measures.”

The former Minister certainly demonstrated willingness. I hope that we will shortly hear the present Minister reply along the same lines in an effort to reduce the carnage on the roads. I support any moves in that direction, and I support the motion.

**Mr I McCrea:** I also welcome the motion. Sadly, too many people have lost their lives on our roads through drink-driving. I fully support the motion because bringing our limit into line with the majority of European nations could save many lives.

Hundreds of people die every year in Northern Ireland as a result of drink-driving. The Republic of Ireland — where the same drink-driving limit as in the United Kingdom applies — has one of the worst records in Europe for alcohol-related deaths. The record of alcohol-related deaths in Northern Ireland might have matched or been worse than the Republic of Ireland's, if it were not for the fact that the penalties for drink-driving in the UK are among the most severe in Europe.

However, we have not reached the end goal. If anything more can be done to save lives on Ulster's roads and reduce the carnage caused by drink-driving, I will support it. I endorse every effort that has been made by the Department to reduce road deaths; in particular, alcohol-related road deaths. I fully support advertising campaigns by the DOE and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to discourage drink-driving, and I wholeheartedly support the message that they send out to “never, ever drink and drive”.

The reason for not reducing the drink-driving limit to zero has been discussed. I do not believe that a zero limit is the answer. First, as my colleague Alistair Ross said, the use of mouthwash might result in a person's being over the limit; and digestion can produce alcohol in the blood, which can lead to an above-zero result. There is no point in having a limit that will penalise drivers who do not drink and drive and who pose no danger to themselves or to other road users.

Zero tolerance is also not the answer, as it would be difficult to enforce. We must set an alcohol limit that utilises our police resources fully so that those who are guilty of drink-driving are brought to justice. If the current drink-driving limit were reduced to 50 mg in each 100 ml of blood, more drivers would avoid drinking alcohol altogether for fear of being above the legal limit.

Research gives an idea of the difference that reducing the alcohol limit would make to the risk of having a car crash. According to figures that were compiled in 2003, those who drive with 80 mg of alcohol in each 100 ml of blood are 10 times more likely to be involved in a crash than those who have 50 mg of alcohol for each 100 ml of blood. Those figures show clearly that a reduction in the drink-driving limit will make the roads of the Province a safer place.

I support the motion and welcome the fact that all Members who spoke supported it.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and echo what many Members said, so I will try not to repeat any of the statistics that were mentioned.

In the day that is in it, we have heard about other ways in which alcohol is having a detrimental effect on our society. Unfortunately, binge drinking and, indeed,

drink-driving have been tolerated and accepted as a cultural norm for generations. That is the challenge that we face, and there is a great deal of work to be done to address that.

Several Members spoke about cases where people go out to socialise, drink into the wee small hours, wake up four or five hours later and assume that they are fit to drive. Unfortunately, that is commonplace. One statistic that the Research and Library Service found on the issue relates to drivers who endure a heavy drinking session: if they finish drinking by 12.00 midnight, it could take over 13 hours for the alcohol to leave their bodies; that is, until 1.30 pm the following day. Unfortunately, many members of the public are not aware of that, and it should be highlighted. I ask the Minister to examine drink-driving in those instances, as more could be done to highlight the dangers of the practice.

Other Members referred to different forms of technology that can be used to prevent drink-driving. I am interested to know the Minister's opinion on the acceptability of the morning-after breathalyser tests that are on sale and that some people use at home to find out their blood-alcohol level and to ascertain whether they are safe to drive.

I echo the comments of my colleague Cathal Boylan. Ultimately, drivers must be responsible for their own actions. However, that does not mean that we should not consider other preventative measures to save lives on the roads. I know of several pub owners in rural areas, particularly in my constituency, who drive customers home at closing time and discourage them from drink-driving. That is proactive and responsible behaviour that should be encouraged along with other initiatives to discourage drink-driving. That does not take away from the fact that the buck stops with the driver.

I support the motion and urge the Minister to address not only drink-driving, but the culture that permits it. I also urge the Minister to implement preventative measures to ensure that drink-drivers do not get on the road in the first place. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr G Robinson:** I congratulate my colleagues Mr Ross and Mr Weir for tabling the motion on a topic that is of timely importance, given that the Christmas-party season is fast approaching.

Alcohol is a curse on society. The increasing tendency to use alcohol for social and leisure purposes is worrying, and, sadly, it tends to result in some people drinking and driving after a night out.

Anti-drink-driving advertisements will soon be aired on our television screens. I hope that they are graphic and memorable, so that they serve as a warning to people who are tempted to drink and drive.

PSNI figures show that in the past three years, the number of accidents in which alcohol was a contributory factor has risen steadily. As a result of alcohol, there were 72 fatalities, and 395 people were seriously injured. Surely we cannot permit that trail of human tragedy to continue. The Assembly has a moral duty to reduce that physical and emotional carnage. We can make a contribution by reducing the legal blood-alcohol limit for driving. I would prefer the limit to be zero, but, having read information from the BMA, I accept that that would not be an easily enforceable proposal, because some low alcohol readings could be biochemical in nature.

I am not alone in believing that the combination of alcohol and driving is lethal. At times, it is necessary to introduce legislation to protect people from themselves and from others. The reduction in the drink-driving limit would act as a safety measure to protect some people from themselves and, more importantly, to protect other road users.

So far this year, approximately 90 people have died on Ulster's roads. Each one of those people is not a statistic, but a human being. They may be someone's wife, mother, husband, father, son or daughter. If we were to ask the families who have suffered the loss of someone in a drink-driving-related road accident, they would tell us to make the roads safer and to reduce the drink-driving limit. Those people know first hand about the results of such behaviour.

I support the motion, because the merits of reducing the drink-driving limit can be seen in results across Europe. However, I call for no leeway to be given if the reduction is enacted. The tougher the punishment, the tougher the lesson, and, hopefully, the result will be fewer deaths. If someone is caught driving while over the limit, he or she must be prosecuted.

The DOE's summary of scientific evidence behind the "Just one drink impairs driving" campaign of November 2005, states: "Alcohol impairs sensible decision-making."

The first impaired judgement is to drive a vehicle, and the second can cost the driver or someone else their life.

Drink-driving is an offence, it is against the law, and it is unacceptable in our society. I sincerely hope that the motion will receive unanimous support, and I wholeheartedly support it.

**Mr McCallister:** I support the motion and I thank the Members who tabled it. This is today's second motion that relates to alcohol, and that reflects the importance that the Assembly places on safe and responsible consumption.

Unfortunately, there are many accidents and deaths on Northern Ireland's roads. PSNI statistics highlight

that the second-biggest cause of deaths on our roads is due to drink-driving or driving under the influence of drugs. In 2007-08, drink-driving resulted in 431 collisions, 143 serious injuries and 18 deaths in Northern Ireland. When one considers all the knowledge that we have accumulated about how alcohol impairs people's judgement, hand-eye co-ordination and alertness, it is unacceptable that, in the twenty-first century, it continues to be such a prolific killer on our roads.

The United Kingdom drink-driving limit is 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood. The introduction of that limit in 1993 significantly reduced the number of road deaths in the United Kingdom, and the number of alcohol-related road deaths has levelled out. Malta and the Republic of Ireland are the only other European countries that have the same limit as the UK.

The most widely-accepted blood-alcohol limit in Europe is 50 mg, and the Minister should seriously consider reducing the limit here.

5.00 pm

A University College London study showed that lowering the limit from 80 mg to 50 mg would prevent 65 deaths and 230 injuries a year across the United Kingdom. Therefore, a simple change in law and enforcement activities could save a significant number of lives and reduce the number of debilitating injuries and associated grief for families.

However, it should be noted that organisations such as the British Medical Association (BMA) do not suggest a limit of zero because there are cases in which people could register blood-alcohol levels slightly above zero even when they had not been drinking. For instance, people with diabetes and those who have used mouthwashes can register above-zero levels of alcohol in their blood. Therefore, enforcement of such a level would be difficult, and that must be taken into consideration.

As well as the potential for reducing the blood-alcohol limit for drink-driving, other options are available to us. I congratulate the Department of the Environment on its long-standing high-profile advertising campaign on the dangers of drink-driving. Awareness-raising must continue to be a crucial part of any campaign to reduce road deaths and accidents due to drink-driving. The stringency of the law, the related penalties, and the ability of the Police Service to enforce the law must also be taken into consideration.

I do not believe that comparisons can be made with police services on the Continent, where the drink-driving limit is lower. We have more robust policing and penalties in relation to this issue, and we must continue to give the PSNI the resources and the capacity to tackle drink-driving and improve detection rates.

Our cultural rejection of drink-driving has come a long way, and can compare favourably with most countries in Europe. However, I disagree with Mr McKay: we have moved in the opposite direction, in that binge drinking has almost become part of our culture, whereas drink-driving has, at least, become culturally unacceptable. We cannot take that for granted; we must continue to make drink-driving unacceptable. The Assembly and the Executive must send out a clear message that any degree of drink-driving is unacceptable.

Although I do not wish to deny anyone the enjoyment of a civilised drink, there are many who suggest strongly that people have the responsibility to ensure that they have a designated driver in their company or that they have ordered taxis. Mention was made earlier of pub owners leaving customers home. Anything that can help to reduce the number of people who are drinking and driving is to be welcomed. It is especially important that, in the run-up to Christmas, the Department and the Minister get that message out and reinforce it. I support the motion.

**Mr Gallagher:** I commend Alastair Ross and Peter Weir for securing the debate, because it draws attention to an important issue. It is to be hoped that the debate will help to strengthen the message that drinking and driving do not mix, that alcohol impairs judgement and that it is dangerous for anyone with alcohol in their system to get behind the wheel of a car.

The greatest cause of accidents is speed, or a combination of speed and alcohol consumption. The most accident-prone group of people on the roads is, as we all know, young men aged between 17 and 25 years. It was recently estimated that at least 6% of all road casualties occurred when someone was driving while over the legal alcohol limit. In helping to strengthen the message about drink-driving, we must all realise that the road safety campaigns are important, and at this time of the year, it is important that they are presented strongly.

However, despite that and all of the other supporting messages about the dangers, it is still clear that a small number of people are not getting the message about road safety.

Drink-driving is a factor in accidents, and a move to lower the limit would send out a clear message about its dangers. In a recent Automobile Association study, two thirds of those questioned backed a reduction in the current limit from 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood to 50 mg per 100 ml. The vast majority of people do not drink and drive, and, in supporting such a reduction, the SDLP is not seeking to target people who consume a small amount of alcohol and who are responsible for their actions. We support the reduction

in order to make the message on drink-driving clearer and to make the law clearer for all drivers.

John McCallister highlighted some good reasons why a limit of zero would not work. It is often argued that a zero-tolerance approach of not allowing any alcohol is the only way of dealing with the problem of drink-driving. As Mr McCallister said, people on medication would encounter problems if they were breathalysed. Reducing the limit to zero would not be straightforward, and that is backed up by the BMA, which also doubts whether a limit of zero would be acceptable to the public. The BMA argues that a reduction from 80 mg to 50 mg would be helpful and beneficial.

The SDLP supports an all-Ireland approach to a range of road safety issues, including the curbing of drink-driving. We want more work to be done on that and, if possible, we want a decision to be taken together so that both Governments are seen to be working in tandem on the issue. Apart from the Republic of Ireland and the UK, only two or three countries operate the present limit of 80 mg.

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

**Mr Gallagher:** I stress the importance of getting the message out and of an all-Ireland approach to road safety.

**Mr Shannon:** In 2007-08, there were 6,321 road traffic collisions that led to injuries, from which there were 9,748 casualties. Of those, 110 people were killed and over 1,000 people were seriously injured, which was an increase from the previous year. The leading cause of accidents was inattention. Some might ask what that has to do with this debate — I will try to explain.

Scientific study has found that taking a single drink can impair attention levels and reaction times. Therefore, having only one drink of alcohol, which would leave a person well below the legal limit, will lessen attention levels. That is a major factor in road traffic accidents. It is clear that road safety must be improved, and the way to do that is to reduce the level of alcohol with which one is permitted to drive.

A wus scunnered aa the nummer o' fowk at wur tuk ap las' yeir fer drunk-drivin' — 3,546. Thon bes mair waefu when we realise efter yairnin wi' polis representatives at fer ivry driver cleekit they alloo at thair ir a clatter mair oan the road aa the saime tim' at irnae cleekit. A wus gunked forebye tae fin' at mae ain airt bes secon' onie tae D an E polis districts an this tae me isnae acceptable. The fact at in the fatalities oan oor roads hit wus foun' at 34% o' deid drivers hed alcohol in thair systems an at 14 ir allooed tae hae dee'd directly fae bein' unner the influence o' drugs an alcohol bes scairsum.

I was shocked by the number of people who were convicted for drink-driving last year — 3,546. That figure is even more shocking when one considers that for every drink-driver caught, the PSNI believes that there are many more who escape conviction. I was also shocked to discover that the number of drink-drivers caught in my area is second only to the numbers that are caught in policing districts D and E. That is unacceptable. Even scarier is the fact that, of the fatalities on our roads, 34% of dead drivers had alcohol in their system, and 14% had drugs and alcohol in their system.

Research has shown that drivers experience a natural dip in alertness in the afternoon. Therefore, if they were to drink even a small amount of alcohol during that time, their alertness would deteriorate further. That small reduction in alertness, combined with alcohol-impaired drowsiness, can lead to tragic and fatal consequences. In fact, that is a factor in more than 20% of motorway accidents on the mainland. However, I do not want to labour that fact, because the figures are very clear.

Given that my sons have completed the new driving test, I have a better idea of hazard perception. When I taught my sons to drive, I was aware of hazards such as a child playing in the street or a dog barking. Those things are everyday occurrences that can change lives in a matter of seconds. If a driver drinks what equates to half the legal limit, he or she would be less aware of a child stepping out in front of the car. That made me think twice about what the limit should be. I want to focus on that issue today.

In 2007, the Department of the Environment carried out a survey in which respondents were asked whether they thought that it is acceptable to drive after having one drink. A total of 63% said that that was not acceptable. In the same survey, respondents were asked whether they thought it was acceptable to drive after having two drinks. A total of 76% said that that was unacceptable. Clearly, as the figures suggest, it is not acceptable.

Some people believe that it is never right to drink and drive, which Members have reiterated. Tommy Gallagher mentioned that most people never drink and drive. Many Members know people who have been injured or killed on the roads as a result of an accident in which alcohol was a factor. It is a well-known and accepted fact that the two do not mix favourably.

Another reason that we need to reduce the drink-driving limit is because of the morning-after belief that it is safe to drive, about which other Members spoke. Many people do not realise that they might be over the limit after a rough or long night. Many people believe that, because they took a taxi home the previous night, they are fit to drive in the morning. Young drivers who



are under the influence are especially vulnerable to being involved in a crash. The Assembly must send out the right signal about alcohol and drinking any amount.

At present, we have the highest drink-driving limit in Europe. Indeed, no country in the world permits a higher blood:alcohol ratio than here. We must follow the example set by the rest of Europe and reduce the limit: it is that simple, and it will save lives. I know that the Minister will introduce a rigorous campaign coming up to the Christmas season. The Assembly should back that to the hilt by sending out a message to the public today that drink-driving will not, and cannot, be accepted. Never, ever drink and drive.

5.15 pm

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):**

I welcome this very useful debate, and I congratulate Alastair Ross for tabling the motion. However, the research materials that he mentioned during his speech caused a glimmer of worry to cross my mind. 'The Irish News' was bad enough, but when he spoke about the 'Sunday Sport', I began to get very worried. [Laughter.]

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member give way?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I suppose I had better.

**Mr Ross:** For clarification, the research material was actually from the 'Sunday Sun', and I am more than happy to provide that for any Member who doubts my credentials.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It was commendable that Mr Ross picked out an article on drink-driving from the 'Sunday Sport'.

**The Minister of the Environment:** He recovered that very well, before the Whip got to him. [Laughter.]

The other thing that worried me was the level of knowledge that some Members had about the after-effects of drinking and the impact that that might have on their driving the next morning.

The debate is welcome for two reasons. First, we are approaching the season when, maybe after a Christmas party or a drink at work, people are more tempted than at other times to drive. Secondly, it comes at a time when we are focusing on the success that the Assembly has had, across all Departments, in trying to reduce carnage on the roads. The fact that we have achieved, ahead of time, the targets for reducing the number of people killed or seriously injured on the roads in Northern Ireland is a comment on the way in which Departments have worked together in order to improve people's quality of life by making the roads safer, and by ensuring that we do not have the fatalities and associated tragedies visited on homes across Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, there are still too many accidents that could have been prevented had people not been careless or taken alcohol before driving. A number of Members gave statistics: 20% of road deaths caused by drivers having alcohol in their system, and 10 % of serious injuries caused for the same reason. That represents 127 lives lost over the past five years. One thinks of all the human tragedies behind that figure.

The first funeral of a friend that I attended as a teenager was a young man who, when leaving Bangor one night, was driven through the wall of Clandeboye estate by a drunk driver who was not even aware after he had hit him that he had killed anyone. He got out of his car, and was found staggering down the road unaware of what he had done. The tragedy that visited that family has been multiplied time and time again. This is a serious issue that the Assembly needs to address.

Despite what people know, the statistics show that last year 6,619 people were stopped by the police and found to have been driving while under the influence of alcohol. Of those, 3,546 were prosecuted, and more than 3,300 lost their licences as a result. We want to send the message that we take this issue seriously, and if people persist in breaking the law in this way, they will find that all the attendant inconvenience, and worse, will be visited on them.

Alastair Ross was right to raise the issue of public support. The public do support more stringent action being taken. Sixty-five per cent of respondents to the road safety monitor said that people should not drink at all if driving, and 85% supported strict action by the police through random breath-testing. I will talk about penalties and police actions later.

Mr Ross also stated that some people may say that reducing the drink-drive limit will criminalise those who might be innocent. That is a reasonable argument if people do not know what the law requires of them. However, if we decide that the limit should be lowered, and if the law is clear, then someone who gets behind the wheel of a car with alcohol in their system cannot claim to be innocent.

Clarity is the important issue. That is one reason that the Department has rejected the idea of zero tolerance, because people could exceed the limit and break the law innocently by taking medication or simply cleaning their teeth. The Department will not opt for a zero limit because it wants to ensure that the people who are caught and prosecuted have knowingly broken the law. That means that the limit must be set at a level that does not catch people who, inadvertently, have some alcohol in their system.

I want to deal with the question of consultation, and I noted the remarks of the Chairperson of the Environment Committee on that matter. I look forward to the Environment Committee's response to the

Department's consultation paper and on its support on those matters that I want to bring into the public domain.

The Chairman also raised the issue of a separate drink-driving limit for younger people and professional drivers. There should be a 20 mg level for younger people because they are less able to deal with the impairment that alcohol causes to driving. Sometimes, their lack of experience can lead them into trouble. There is, therefore, a rationale for having a lower limit for younger drivers.

Several Members mentioned the promise that had been made by my predecessor to bring the matter forward and questioned why it has taken so long. However, no Member raised the issue of penalties, although the two matters are related. If the limit is lowered, the implications for penalties must be examined. The delay has been caused by the difficulty in getting a clear picture about penalties across Europe and in countries where a lower limit is in place. Northern Ireland has one of the highest limits, but it also has some of the toughest penalties. Consideration must be given to whether those tougher penalties should be maintained if the limit is lowered. The necessary research on penalties has led to the delay.

I hope to introduce a consultation period before the end of 2008. Of course, that will depend partly on how the party opposite behaves. At present, a range of matters is piled up for the Executive's consideration. Although Sinn Féin complains about lack of action, it is responsible for the fact that action cannot be taken on those matters because they cannot be approved by the Executive for public consultation. I hope that Sinn Féin will start to behave and that I will be able to make progress on departmental initiatives on planning reform, the review of public administration, PPS 14, consultation on the drink-driving limit, and a list of other matters.

If consultation is allowed to progress, the Department hopes that it will be finished by April or May 2009. Depending on statutory changes that must be made, decisions on the way forward and subsequent action should be taken within 12 to 18 months. Of course, that will depend on how the Department decides to progress. The simplest way is to reduce the limit to 50 mg and to maintain current penalties.

A decision to opt for two limits and differing penalties would require more legislative change and delay the process of implementation.

During the debate, the question of whether I would support the use of morning-after test kits was raised. Rather than self-testing, I prefer that people who are in any doubt simply heed the message that the Assembly is seeking to get across: if unsure about being above the limit, do not get behind the wheel of a car.

One reason for considering a reduction in the limit is to send out a message that it is simply not acceptable for those who have consumed alcohol to drive — even if the drink was taken a considerable time before driving. Anyone who thinks that they are still feeling the effects of alcohol should not get behind the wheel of a car. As Members stated, alcohol affects reaction times, and any individual who has had a drink is more likely to be involved in a collision or another type of accident.

Mr Boylan talked about education, and I agree with him that that is important. One of the roles of my Department is to try to take the road safety message to a wide range of people. Two of my Department's main objectives have been to raise the awareness of the impact of alcohol and to encourage people not to drink and drive.

A reduction in the limit must be complemented by other measures; not only a reconsideration of whether to introduce graduated penalties. Should lowering the limit be accompanied by graduated penalties? No country in Europe with a 50 mg limit imposes the mandatory 12-month ban that exists in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the issue of graduated penalties must be examined, along with the question of whether police should be given additional powers to carry out random breath tests.

The one message that I hope Members and the public will take away from today's debate is that I as Minister, my Department, and all parties in the Assembly take this issue extremely seriously. One way in which the Assembly can improve the quality of life in Northern Ireland is by increasing road safety, thereby reducing the number of people who are killed or seriously injured.

I intend to act as quickly as I possibly can. Before the end of the year, I hope to publish a paper, and I will take note of the results of the subsequent consultation process. Although I do not wish to prejudge the outcome, I have made it clear that my preference is to reduce the general limit to 50 mg and the limit for novice and professional drivers to 20 mg.

To ensure that the public are clear that the Assembly intends to take this matter extremely seriously, I want the penalties to be revised and police powers increased. I trust that I will have the support of Members and the Committee, and that progress can be made as quickly as the legislative process allows.

**Mr Weir:** I am happy to conclude an appropriately sober debate on this subject. Members from every party were unified in their approach, and speeches were consistent, without being repetitive. I am heartened that the Assembly speaks with one voice on this issue.

Tommy Gallagher and Jim Shannon were two of several Members who said that the examination of the

drink-driving limit is part of a wider process of ensuring road safety.

Alastair Ross and others said that a level of cultural change in the attitude to drink-driving should be acknowledged. However, their reasoned argument is that there is much further to go, and perhaps cultural change has not come quickly enough.

Over the past 20 or 30 years, the social unacceptability of drink-driving has, undoubtedly, become increasingly clear. Education and advertising were mentioned. Statistics indicate a high level of public awareness of the deliberately graphic advertising campaigns that attempt to emphasise the effects of drink-driving. Members can quote a multitude of drink-driving statistics, but there is a human story behind every death and every injury that results from a person's drink-driving. Each story is one too many.

5.30 pm

The proposer of the motion said, as did Mr Beggs, among others, that drink-driving affects people regardless of weight, age or sex. Indeed, binge drinking has increased among women. A small amount of alcohol can have a major impact on the system. I will not reiterate the statistics outlined during the debate. However, if Members wish to investigate the subject further, advertising campaigns, such as the Not a Drop campaign, reveal that low alcohol consumption can have a major impact on people's perception and alertness.

Patsy McGlone highlighted the need for education and emphasised that, even though advertising campaigns have been somewhat effective, we cannot become complacent. All Members support sending out a consistent message that one should never drink and drive. Mr McGlone called for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to reduce the limit on the legal level of alcohol in blood. I strongly support reduced levels in any jurisdiction. Furthermore, he mentioned, and it is an important point, that the Assembly must consider introducing a secondary, much lower blood-alcohol limit for the most vulnerable groups, such as motorcyclists, LGV drivers and inexperienced or novice drivers.

To avoid any criticism, I should point out that Mr Ross indicated that the proposals apply to inexperienced and novice drivers rather than to young drivers. I assume that he does not want to be inundated with emails again. Inexperienced drivers are vulnerable, and, therefore, a lower blood-alcohol level is appropriate. Indeed, I welcome the Minister's remarks that he will seriously consider that possibility.

Cathal Boylan highlighted the fact that, although it lies second behind excess speed in the league table of causes of death and injury, drink-driving is, nevertheless, a vital issue. He outlined the European examples. As the proposer of the motion and others

indicated, there is, probably, a broad consensus that 50 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood is the most appropriate level. Other major European countries, such as Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Holland and Iceland — a country whose inhabitants have more reason to drink of late — have a 50 mg limit. Being out of step with Europe has been detrimental to our citizens.

Roy Beggs, among others, highlighted the BMA's statistics. Although the BMA recognises the need to reduce blood-alcohol limits in drivers, a zero limit — no matter how attractive it appears — is not a practical solution. Everyone has alcohol in their blood — even teetotallers. During the debate, I wondered whether alcoholics would be battering down chemists' doors to obtain mouthwash, because that product's alcoholic effect was advertised during the debate.

We must make proposals that are sensible, and the blood-alcohol levels that have been discussed are sensible.

Kieran McCarthy highlighted the support of ACPO and the BMA for a reduction in the limit, and he emphasised the direct human cost of drink-driving. He also pointed out that this is part of a bigger picture. In tackling the issue, we have also to consider the way in which society views alcohol misuse. In many ways, this debate is an extension of the one that took place earlier today.

Ian McCrea emphasised the severity of the problem and used statistics to show that those at the drink-driving limit are 10 times more likely to have an accident than those with lower blood-alcohol levels. Daithí McKay drew attention to the problem of morning-after blood-alcohol levels. Even responsible people do not always think that through; if one drinks in the evening, the alcohol will still have an effect the following morning. He also stressed the need for a proactive approach to be adopted by various agencies and the private sector. Where there are proactive schemes, we should seek to identify best practice.

George Robinson stressed the timeliness of the debate, as Christmas is approaching, and he stressed that this is about protecting both individual drivers and others. Victims of drink-driving can be either those behind the steering wheel, passengers or — as was illustrated movingly by the Minister — bystanders caught up in an accident.

The need for proactive measures, and for a cultural rejection of drink-driving, was stressed by John McCallister. Tommy Gallagher pointed out that, despite the advertising, a section of the community is not getting the message. We must target those irresponsible elements.

From his perspective as a father, Jim Shannon emphasised the difficulties faced by inexperienced

drivers and the need to keep the roads safe. The link between drink-driving and other issues is alertness.

The Minister demonstrated the need for a joined-up approach. The seriousness of this offence must be reflected in legal penalties.

I welcome the debate. In particular, I welcome the Minister's response and his intention to take action if he can get the support of the Executive and proceed to early consultation. On this issue, the House speaks with a unified voice. If we can help to bring about a lowering of the drink-driving limit, it will be seen as a real, positive benefit for the people of Northern Ireland, brought about by devolution. People will be walking around in five or 10 years' time who would otherwise be statistics on a tombstone. I urge the House to support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to investigate the viability of reducing the current drink-driving limit.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Ambulance Provision in North Antrim

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak; all other Members will have approximately seven minutes.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** I thank the Business Office for scheduling this important matter for my constituency. I appreciate that. I also thank the Health Minister for gracing the Chamber with his presence, and I look forward to his response towards the conclusion of the debate.

I pay tribute to the men and women of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS). Like most people in this country, I believe that they do an absolutely smashing job, by helping people in immediate crisis and danger. It is important that Members put on record their 100% support for the unstinting work of the men and women of the Ambulance Service, and that we condemn people who take it upon themselves to attack ambulance workers. It is important that Members highlight such activities as callous and irresponsible.

This debate, however, is about my genuine concerns regarding the impact of the Minister's efficiency savings on the delivery of front-line services in my North Antrim constituency.

In common with many rural areas, my constituency gets a raw deal. Patients will suffer, and Ballymena, in particular, will take the lion's share of the impact that the efficiency savings will have on accident and emergency ambulance cover. If the Minister's efficiency savings are followed through and delivered in the way in which the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service stated, 75% of the cut will come from rural cover, not from urban cover. That is critical for not only my constituency — which is a large, rural hinterland — but for other constituencies such as East Antrim, East Londonderry and South Antrim. It will have a detrimental impact on people who live in large rural areas.

That occurs at a time when ambulance cover is becoming increasingly strategically significant for the delivery of front-line health services. As hospitals constrict and consolidate, the Ambulance Service is becoming a much more strategically important tool. On that basis, the current Northern Ireland Ambulance

Service plans, as they affect my own constituency in particular, will have an extremely detrimental impact.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust — which covers Ballymena and the glens of Antrim — has the same level of ambulance cover as it did when the Antrim Area Hospital opened almost 20 years ago. I was surprised when I saw those statistics, because most people would have believed that ambulance cover would have increased during that time, but it has not. For almost 20 years, the Ambulance Service in my constituency has, effectively, stood still. There has been no significant increase in ambulance cover, and the trust is now asked to make an efficiency saving that will, in effect, reduce by a third the number of ambulances that operate in the constituency.

There has been no attempt to deny that claim, because it is correct. An article in the 'News Letter' on 30 July 2008 made that claim, and it was discussed on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' shortly thereafter. I wrote to the Minister on 4 August 2008, highlighting my concerns that the daily ambulance cover that operates from Ballymena will be cut by up to one third. The Minister kindly responded on 5 September 2008, but he did not address that point. He said that the significant investment that he announced in early October 2008:

"will enable the service to modernise and to respond more quickly and appropriately to life-threatening calls".

However, the issue that the ambulance workers and I raised was the reduction of the number of ambulances, which is critical to them. There was a debate in the Assembly on 7 October 2008, during which the point was made that reducing by one third the number of accident and emergency ambulances available to a large rural constituency had not been properly addressed. Ballymena ambulance cover will be cut by a third, and the silence from the Department about the impact on patients is deafening.

From where will the efficiency savings come? The answer, starkly for anyone in the Chamber and in the constituency, is from front-line services. I say that with sadness, because we were told that the number of rapid-response vehicles (RRVs) will increase, and the profile of ambulances will, therefore, change. However, that profiling means that, in order to meet the Minister's target, 69.26% of the efficiency savings that must be made will come from the re-profiling of the accident and emergency vehicles.

In other words, ambulance-response hours in the constituency will be reduced by 17,520, but the RRV service will increase to 43,750 hours.

That means that £931,000 — or 75% of the Minister's target — will come entirely from front-line delivery services. I am particularly concerned for

patients because ambulance provision is being targeted for that saving.

5.45 pm

The administration side of the Ambulance Service has offered up only £20,000, or 1.6% of the Minister's target. The training side of the service has offered up £35,000 of savings, or 2.8% of the Minister's target. That means that the lion's share of the efficiency saving — I am not going to call it a cut because I believe that the Minister is right: it is an efficiency saving that he must find — is coming from the front line. What concerns me most is that the public will lose out on the aspect of the service that they see and that they consider to be important.

Those statistics come from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service itself. It wrote to its members and said that those statistics, which briefly summarise the NIAS efficiency saving proposals:

"must be seen for what they really are, a complete sham."

Those are its words; not mine. The letter goes on to say:

"When studying how NIAS are proposing to achieve the Minister's efficiency savings, they have made it glaringly obvious that they had no intention of actually making savings where they would have minimal effect on the emergency/patient care side of the service. Instead, NIAS have actually used the Minister's efficiency savings to force in their own agenda, the phased introduction of single-manned RRVs, under the guise of achieving the efficiency savings."

That gets to the heart of the matter. It must be questioned whether a rapid-response vehicle is an adequate response to an emergency situation, if ultimately an ambulance should arrive at the scene. The public fear that the current policy is not meeting that challenge.

When we consider where the efficiency savings will have the greatest impact, we must remember that the Ambulance Service in Ballymena must cover a large rural area that includes the glens of Antrim. Although the glens of Antrim are very beautiful at most times of the year — during the spring, summer and autumn — they are also very remote.

That area is more remote during the winter and many places become almost inaccessible; therefore, many people living in that area become isolated and are cut off from services. To tell those people — my constituents — that we are going to reduce the number of ambulances and emergency vehicles that are operating in that area by one third is entirely wrong. That decision will have a devastating impact on that rural constituency.

Ambulance Service workers wrote to the Minister, and it is important that I put on record some of the points that they made to him, which they have also raised with me. They indicated:

“The proposal for the Northern Health Board Area is to remove one 999 ambulance from 9-5, Monday to Friday in Ballymena, leaving just 2 vehicles, a one third cut amounting to 40 hours per week. This is the entire saving for that whole area.”

They go on to say:

“NIAS management ‘claim’ this will be offset by a new single manned rapid response vehicle (RRV) which they will provide, however, this vehicle is already in place (callsign Romeo 18) so this is a false claim designed to mislead the public.”

Again, those are their words; not mine.

The letter goes on to claim:

“It is expected that NIAS management will seek to spin the RRV as some sort of improvement, and this needs to be attacked head on by highlighting the shortcomings of this option.”

In their letter, the ambulance staff then set out the actual shortcomings, first explaining:

“The existing ambulance with a 2 crew, a Paramedic and a Technician, can respond to any 999 call, administer various treatments on scene and if necessary immediately transport the patient to hospital.”

Ambulance-treatment options include:

“Full 2 person Advanced Life Support (ALS) to a cardiac arrest, including CPR, Defibrillation and Drug Therapy, with Airway Protection.

Safe 2 person checking of all injected drugs before administration, including pain relief.”

That is a standard that I know that the Health Service wishes to maintain. In addition, there should be:

“Enough oxygen to provide multiple casualties at once.

Immediate transport for head injuries, strokes, internal injuries, etc which can only be treated in hospital.”

The letter goes on to state that a rapid-response vehicle with a lone paramedic can:

“Stop the 8 minute clock to falsely claim to meet government targets.”

We are getting to the real point; instead of recognising constituents’ needs, the Ambulance Service is attempting to stop the clock in order to meet targets.

Furthermore, a rapid-response vehicle with a lone paramedic can:

“Provide one person CPR only in a cardiac arrest.”

Anyone who knows anything about CPR knows that two-person CPR is much more effective and quicker than one-person CPR.

Furthermore, such a vehicle can:

“Provide basic pain relief and a maximum of 1 hours oxygen.

Provide “first aid” treatment of any injury which needs hospital admission.”

However, importantly, an RRV cannot:

“Transport anyone to hospital.

Provide injected drugs safely, no second person to check dosage!

Do CPR, Defibrillation & airway protection safely, as each requires stopping the others by the lone operator, thus providing sub standard care!”

NIAS management will also claim that an ambulance will be dispatched immediately to back up the RRV”.

How can it, given that ambulance provision will have been cut already by one third?

Those points summarise ambulance workers’ concerns.

Although people on the front line will be expected to deliver the service, at the back of their minds, they will know that it will not be as efficient, or as proactive, as it ought to be and as it would be if a full ambulance service were available.

The proposed rapid-response-vehicle scheme was tried and tested in Wales. However, having experienced the downside of delivering the service to remote rural areas in the Welsh valleys, the ambulance service there accepted that that level of provision did not meet the needs of people in those areas. It is therefore now reverting to delivering a full ambulance service.

I appeal to the Minister to consider the policy afresh. I recognise that he must make efficiency savings that will, of course, be painful. Nevertheless, much more could be done by management instead of on the front line. Further efficiencies could be identified in areas that are capable of withstanding cuts.

Although the cuts that I described have been requested for Ballymena and North Antrim, parts of Belfast, for which considerably more ambulances are available, are being asked to make — proportionately — substantially smaller cuts. For example, more ambulances will serve Ardoyne than North Antrim. It is preposterous that a large rural area, which suffers from the problems that I outlined, will have fewer ambulances than an urban area such as Ardoyne. I am not saying that Ardoyne is not entitled to those ambulances — it is, and patients there have every right to expect such provision. However, to say that people who live in rural parts of Ulster are entitled to a lesser service is preposterous, and asking people in my constituency to accept the lion’s share of cuts is wrong.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member on the opposite Benches for raising this matter. He made several good points, and I will attempt not to repeat them.

North Antrim is an extremely rural constituency, and the comparison with Wales, which is also a large rural area, is worthwhile. If the ambulance service in Wales has already undergone such an experience, we should not repeat its mistakes.

Ambulance Service workers in North Antrim and the people there — particularly those who live in the glens of Antrim, which have traditionally suffered

from a lack of, among other things, health provision — have told me of their concerns about Ambulance Service provision. It would be a great shame if that neglect were to continue under this Minister.

North Antrim is served by 10 accident and emergency vehicles: three in Ballycastle; four in Ballymena; and three in Ballymoney. All those vehicles have more than 100,000 miles on the clock, and eight of them have travelled more than 150,000 miles. It is important that we concentrate on those ambulances and ensure that they are replaced and upgraded, where necessary, rather than replaced with rapid-response vehicles.

There are many rumours in the constituency, and I hope that the Minister will provide clarity on his proposals. I hope that he will consider the opinion of all the elected representatives of North Antrim — as well as the public — and, primarily, those who work on the front line in the constituency. Rapid-response vehicles are useful, sometimes, in urban areas, but they will not make a huge impact in rural areas, such as the glens, which are already alienated. Several people have come to my office to complain about the Ambulance Service, particularly about the response times of some ambulances. I know of numerous examples in which it has taken an ambulance up to one hour to arrive at the scene of an incident. It is lucky that none of those cases resulted in a loss of life, but that could happen in the future — in fact, that is more likely if cuts are made.

The usefulness of the rapid-response vehicles must be explored further, especially since they will be restricted in the medicines and medical equipment that they will be allowed to carry. In some instances, as Mr Paisley Jnr said, the rapid-response vehicle will have to wait for the arrival of an emergency ambulance on the scene before drugs can be administered or the patient can be transferred to hospital.

There is a great deal of concern, particularly in the north of the constituency, about the knock-on effects that the restructuring and withdrawal of accident and emergency vehicles will have. There are rumours — and I emphasise “rumours” — in the constituency among people who work on the front line. They believe that the existing resources in the area will be overstretched to other areas, such as Coleraine, when the cuts are made. It is important that the Minister address those concerns and questions, many of which remain outstanding.

Ultimately, one must look at the human effect that the decisions will have on our communities. North Antrim is one of the largest constituencies in the North, and many parts of it are sparsely populated. The concerns of the constituents, and the constituency’s circumstances, must be considered when decisions on

the Ambulance Service are being made. One cannot compare North Antrim with other constituencies; one must consider its situation and its communities that live a considerable distance from the centre of service activity. Those concerns must be taken into account before the Minister makes any final decisions. He has to listen to the representatives from the area, its people, and, above all, those who work on the front line.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for tabling the topic for the Adjournment debate, because there is a great deal of concern in the constituency about what is going on. Gossip has been circulating about the reduction of ambulance cover, particularly in the Ballymena area. It is wise that we take a look at it.

Putting the patient first must be at the heart of everything that is done in the Health Service, and ambulance cover is no exception. The proposals for changes in the pattern of ambulance provision in North Antrim are out for public consultation; perhaps that is why gossip has raised concerns in the minds of so many people. It is vital that proper, well-argued and prompt responses to the consultation are made by everyone.

6.00 pm

I concur with what has been said about the rural area of North Antrim. However, North Antrim cannot be compared with other places because it has wide rural areas and many centres of industry. A major accident would place a heavy demand on the Ambulance Service.

For some time, there has been concern in the constituency that ambulances are sitting in Ballymena in the evenings with no crews to work them. If an accident involving multiple casualties were to happen late in the evening, ambulances would have to be drawn from the surrounding towns, leaving those areas exposed as no ambulance cover would be available. The proposal to put an additional accident and emergency ambulance into Ballymoney, Coleraine and the glens of Antrim would alleviate the problem and concerns in many ways.

The shift rotas are changing from Friday 21 November, and the service for North Antrim will be reduced by one ambulance, which will adversely affect the 9.00 am to 5.00 pm cover. How can one situation be balanced against the other? In a hugely populated area, ambulances are being taken away; in rural areas they are being introduced. How will that sort of system get assistance to patients as quickly and as effectively as possible? I know that the idea is to have three rapid-response vehicles in Ballymena. However, as Mr Paisley has pointed out, patients cannot be brought to hospital in an RRV. Are ambulances being replaced by RRVs as a money-saving exercise? If that is the case, putting patients first has gone out the window. When

considering ambulance cover in Ballymena, patients must come first.

I congratulate Ambulance Service personnel in the North Antrim area for the way in which they have coped with many difficult situations. I congratulate them for their dedication, their expertise, and the way in which they have, on many occasions, saved lives. However, in an area where there have been so many fatal accidents, my real concern is about what will happen when there is an accident in which many people need to be taken to hospital, and when only one patient at a time can be taken in our modern ambulance.

I can also see the dilemma faced by the Minister and the Department. If someone can provide a more convincing answer, he or she should come forward with concrete proposals. Those who criticise the proposed changes must come up with something other than a cheap line that is easy to trot out but, ultimately, means nothing. Debate must be intelligent and informed and, above all, practical and realistic — especially in these financially stringent times. I say: put the patient first; not the need to save money.

**Mr O’Loan:** I congratulate Ian Paisley Jnr for securing the Adjournment debate on what is a very important issue. However, I will not go the whole way, by any means, in supporting the manner in which he presents his concerns.

As has been said, this discussion occurs in the context of efficiency savings. Like all other parties in the Assembly, I support the achievement of greater efficiencies so that areas where improvements can be made can be identified, the existing service can be costed, and better outcomes can be achieved through transferring money within the service.

We all ought to support such efforts. Properly managed, efficiencies are not cuts. That is not to say that, in certain instances, they are not properly managed; in certain situations, across Government as a whole, they are not. Sometimes when efficiency savings are not made properly, they are cuts. However, I see no evidence of that in this case.

I will quote some figures, which might be somewhat different to the ones that Mr Paisley quoted. Mine are from a letter, dated 28 August, from the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, Mr McIvor, to Ballymena Borough Council. It states that in the northern division, it is proposed — and Rev Robert Coulter is quite right that a public consultation on the matter is about to begin — that there will be a reduction of 2,659 hours per year of accident and emergency ambulance cover, which is conventional ambulance cover. However, there is to be an increase of 11,263 hours of paramedic RRV cover. Thus, for every hour reduced of conventional ambulance cover, more than three hours of RRV cover is put in place.

In Ballymena, according to one document, that means that there is a reduction of 40 hours of accident and emergency ambulance cover per week, but considerably more RRV cover in its place. Mr McIvor, the chief executive of the Ambulance Service, does not discuss that matter in terms of hours, but he says that one 12-hour shift of accident and emergency cover is replaced by three longer shifts of RRV cover. We can immediately see where the savings will be made. Operating one-person crews instead of two-person crews will automatically generate a considerable saving. We are told that those are paramedic crews and that not all accident and emergency ambulances are paramedic-covered, although most are. We are also told that RRV vehicles, as their name would suggest, can get to the scene more rapidly than a conventional ambulance.

In my opinion, managers must be given substantial independence of action. It is not wise if they are repeatedly second-guessed by the political system without very good reason. The political system has a role, of course, but it is not to second-guess operational decisions without, as I said, very good reason. I am concerned about a developing political culture in that regard. I worry greatly that if that continues, we will deter good managers from taking up posts and make managers who are in post over-cautious in their decision-making. That should be seriously considered in the political system.

We are talking about professional ambulance staff and managers. If they tell us that an RRV response is appropriate in many cases, then we should listen to them and take them seriously. Again, I refer to Mr McIvor’s letter, the last paragraph of which states that paramedic RRVs are in common use throughout the United Kingdom and provide early patient care, improved clinical effectiveness and, therefore, improved patient outcomes. When considering the issue, I must ask whether those people are competent or not. If I have no reason to suggest that they are not competent, and if competent appointed managers tell me that a proposed change in service will lead to improved clinical effectiveness and patient outcomes, I take them seriously.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** The Member is absolutely right that managers should be given their place, but does he accept that they should also be accountable for their actions? The people have determined that they are accountable to us as Assembly Members. We are entitled to hold managers to account, and they should be rigorously tested on the facts and figures that the Member has produced.

**Mr O’Loan:** I agree with the Member in that regard. Indeed, I was going to say that the outcomes should be monitored. A decision has not yet been made on the best way of providing service delivery.



However, if the new service structure is deemed to be the best method of service delivery, the implications of that decision and the outcomes of the service must be closely scrutinised. If anyone feels that they are receiving an inadequate service, elected representatives will want to hear about it.

Members have rightly raised the important issue of service provision to a large rural area in North Antrim, which includes the glens of Antrim. That area has steep, winding roads and many homes that are at considerable distances from ambulance centres. We need reassurance that the Ambulance Service will be of the required standard in that difficult-to-serve area.

I welcome the new service structure with an element of caution. The new structure is subject to consultation, which may yield further information that I will want to consider. I strongly welcome the capital investment that will provide a large number of new vehicles. I recognise what the Minister has done in that regard, and I thank him for that.

I support the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in what it is doing. I will listen to any new facts that may emerge during the consultation process, and I await detailed monitoring of any new service that is implemented.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** It is good for everyone that decisions have not yet been made on the matter, because it gives the Minister an opportunity to listen to the views of the North Antrim representatives. He will also consult with the people directly involved, and that will grant him a further opportunity to assess the exact lie of the land.

We are approaching the winter. It would have been better if we could have had the discussion before now, because people are very worried about what could happen this winter. North Antrim has a large urban population and a large rural population — both must be considered. We must give the Minister every opportunity to recognise that it is not a one-way street.

I appeal to the Minister to examine immediately the proposed arrangements, especially in relation to rural areas. The rural community needs to be assured that they will have an ambulance service and that they will not be hung out to dry. No one in our country knows what a day may bring forth. It only takes one major calamity for the Minister to be accountable to the people. I ask him to assess those rural areas very carefully and ensure that, in the event of a calamity, the proper equipment and service can be supplied to the people who need it. I am sure that the Minister will take that into consideration when he maps out the way forward.

6.15 pm

To be frank, with any change there will be problems. There is no perfect solution that will close the book and make everything right. Any departure from the status quo requires a correct fit, and that does not happen overnight, particularly where life-or-death calls are involved. Ambulances are the lifeline for people who must get to hospital in order to have their lives saved.

This is a very serious matter, and I trust that the Minister realises that no one in North Antrim is criticising him. They are glad that there is time to consider ambulance provision. They want him to look into the issue and to listen to what they have to say. They hope that, despite financial limitations, a system will be set up by working together.

This is a hard time for everyone, and it will get harder. I do not share the optimism of some people who believe that we are out of the darkness. There is greater darkness to come before it gets light. Therefore, it is a serious time, in which the Minister has his difficulties. If he had the money he could give this to us, but he has not. He must do his best with the money that he has. I am glad that there is a good representation from North Antrim in the Chamber to show the Minister that we are here to help him with the problem of ambulance provision. He will be blamed if he does not get the answer right. We want the Minister to know that North Antrim Members are with him and that we will do our best to encourage him and to get him the information that he needs. There is no use in approaching the Minister in three months' time and saying "I told you so". Now is the time to inform him.

I am sure that all of us in the Chamber are dedicated to doing that. Finally, I trust that he will give urgent consideration to the matter that I have raised — in the event of a local calamity the proposals will leave the rural part of the constituency in great difficulty.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for requesting this Adjournment debate. Although the issue of the comprehensive spending review CSR and its impact on the Ambulance Service was debated in this Chamber a few weeks ago, it is clear that the debate on the issue continues to be a matter of concern for the public and their representatives. People are naturally focused on what effect the proposed changes will have in their local areas.

In relation to Ballymena and North Antrim, Ballymena Borough Council and Moyle District Council have written to me to express their concerns. I, therefore, welcome the opportunity to reassure Members of my total commitment to providing a quality, fit-for-purpose, twenty-first-century Ambulance Service for the people of Northern Ireland, including North

Antrim. I say, once again, that the level of ambulance provision is absolutely not being reduced.

I will start by repeating some of the remarks that I made in a previous debate. The men and women of the Ambulance Service deserve to have modern equipment and vehicles and the technology that enables them to deliver high-quality emergency care to the public. That is why I am investing almost £100 million of capital funding over the next 10 years in the Ambulance Service. That includes £17.4 million over the CSR period.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service intends to use that funding to replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis and modernise its estate. Over the next three years, it will purchase 60 new accident and emergency vehicles, 60 patient-care vehicles and 26 new rapid-response vehicles. In the longer term, that will allow the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to move to a rolling programme of replacement so that no vehicle will be more than five years old.

New vehicles and equipment will be matched by new ways of delivering emergency care to people who require that vital life-saving service. That is where the CSR comes in. The efficiency savings that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust, in common with all other health and social care trusts, must deliver were agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. The CSR is not simply about saving money — it is about the targeted, sensible and effective reinvestment of those savings in front-line services.

In common with many other health and social care organisations, the Ambulance Service is experiencing an ever-increasing demand for its services, which amounts to 10% more emergency calls each year. Therefore, it is crucial that the Ambulance Service, along with other health and social care organisations, should seek to improve the way that it delivers its services. That means developing new ways of working to reflect modern best practice and enhancing the skills of its workforce so that they can provide a greater range of clinical interventions in emergency situations. For example, the introduction of the new rapid-response ambulance vehicles with a single paramedic allows the Ambulance Service to realise an improvement in service delivery, which will benefit patients.

The use of the RRVs sees the introduction of a model of service that has been applied elsewhere in the UK and has been proven to work. They are widely and extensively used in England and Scotland. They were being rolled out in Wales, but union opposition prevented the completion of that — rather than the service, it was union opposition that prevented RRVs from being taken up in Wales.

In no way does use of RRVs compromise patient care; their greater use in no way represents a less effective emergency service. Members may be aware

that the Ambulance Service has a target of responding to 70% of category A — life-threatening — calls within eight minutes. When an emergency call is made, an RRV and an ambulance are dispatched at the same time. Each RRV has a paramedic in it, and each ambulance has a paramedic and an assistant. It is the vital service and support that the paramedic provides that is key. Each RRV is equipped with the same life-saving equipment as an ambulance and — typically — will get to the scene of an injury more quickly. That allows the paramedic to treat and stabilise the patient prior to the arrival of an ambulance to transport the patient to hospital.

An ambulance service is not a snatch-and-grab operation — rushing out, grabbing the patient and putting him or her into the back of the vehicle. It is about getting the appropriate medical care to the patient as quickly as possible. The quickest way to get a paramedic to a patient is to use a rapid-response vehicle, backed up by the ambulance. Recently, I saw that in Belfast when I was in an RRV — I saw how the RRV responds first, followed by an ambulance a few minutes later. I was extremely impressed by the whole system.

RRVs are more efficient, because the paramedic can assess whether an ambulance is required. Around 10% of emergency calls do not require an ambulance. In those cases, the RRV can stand down the ambulance and allow it to be directed to another call. The effectiveness of the provision of ambulance services cannot be measured by the number of ambulances on the road — a more meaningful measure is the number of hours of emergency cover that the service provides.

By the end of the CSR period, paramedic response capacity will have been increased by 61,000 hours to more than 600,000 hours of cover. The other side of the efficiency savings coin is investment in new developments, and I have made available substantial additional funding over the three years of the CSR period. Over that period, I have made available an additional £12 million of revenue funding, which will deliver not only the additional hours of rapid-response cover but which will also support paramedic thrombolysis and the introduction of 28 clinical team leaders who will deliver 24/7 clinical supervision.

In effect, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's operating budget will increase by about 24% from £46.5 million last year to £57 million in 2010-11. That represents a substantial investment in the Ambulance Service's most important asset: the people who work for it. The dedication of the men and women to saving lives is a credit not only to themselves but to the service as a whole.

It is, of course, a regional service. It combines urban areas such as Ballymena and Coleraine with rural areas such as the glens of Antrim, both of which present

challenges to the service in ensuring acceptable response times. The Ambulance Service delivers regionally, according to area. For example, Ballymena and the glens are part of the northern area, which has 36 accident-and-emergency ambulances, and it is proposed that it will have 35 by the end of the CSR period. However, the number of rapid-response vehicles will rise from two to five. Coleraine has five accident and emergency ambulances and one rapid-response vehicle; Ballymena has four accident and emergency ambulances and one rapid-response vehicle.

Bob Coulter said that ambulances are not being manned. We do not man all the ambulances all the time; we man roughly half of them. That reflects shift patterns and the fact that peak times are from 11.00 am to 4.00 pm and from 10.00 pm to 2.00 am. Much of the rest of the day is downtime. A large percentage of an ambulance crew's shift is spent in a station waiting for a call. Therefore we do not man all ambulances all the time. There are about 130 accident and emergency ambulances in the system, about half of which are manned at any given time.

The Ambulance Service prepares for a major event, and I visited a major event preparation a few weeks ago. It included police and fire services, as well as all the accident and emergency units of the hospitals in Belfast and the Ambulance Service.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Minister draw his remarks to a close?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mister O'Loan's figures are right. In the northern area, 2,000 hours of traditional accident and emergency ambulance cover will be replaced with 11,000 hours of paramedic rapid-response vehicle cover, which will give a net gain of 9,000 hours of paramedic cover.

The consultation is important, as it gives everyone an opportunity to make their point. However, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is a net gainer from CSR savings. Other trusts would like to be treated in the same way.

*Adjourned at 6.29 pm.*





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