

---

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 9 February 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to raise a point of order with regard to the debate on the Consultative Group on the Past on Monday 2 February, primarily in relation to the remarks that Nelson McCausland made about my party colleague Gerry Adams, which I believe were wrong, inflammatory and, certainly, unparliamentary. Did the Ceann Comhairle have an opportunity to review the Hansard report?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That issue has already been raised with me, and I will deal with it this morning. First, I say to the whole House that that is an issue to which I did not expect to return so soon. However, these matters must be faced up to, and dealt with.

I have warned all Members, on many occasions, to take care about what they say about other Members in the Chamber. Although they may be covered legally in some circumstances against action, they are not covered by parliamentary procedure. If Members make direct allegations of criminal behaviour against other Members, when there have been no convictions, I will rule such allegations as unparliamentary. I say to the whole House that Members who sit in another House will know that. Erskine May, on page 440, is absolutely clear on the subject of direct allegations against other Members.

That being so, I reflected on what was said by Mr McCausland during the debate on the Consultative Group on the Past on 2 February 2009, and I took counsel on the matter. I believe that direct and unsubstantiated allegations of criminal behaviour were made about another Member. I am afraid that that was not the first time that the Member made such an allegation. I regard the remarks as unparliamentary and, therefore, ask and call on Mr McCausland to withdraw them.

**Mr McCausland:** Mr Speaker, I do not intend to withdraw the comments, because they were true.

**Some Members:** Hear. Hear.

**Mr McCausland:** I was quoting from a book that was published by the IRA, and which I now intend to place in the Assembly Library so that everyone can — *[Interruption.]*

**Some Members:** Hear. Hear.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would ask the Member to take his seat. I advise the Member that, as he has not withdrawn the remarks, I now order him, under Standing Order 65, to withdraw immediately from the Chamber and its precincts during the remainder of today's sitting.

*The Member withdrew from the Chamber.*

**Mr P Maskey:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask Members to take their seats. Does the point of order relate to that particular ruling?

**Mr P Maskey:** It certainly does.

**Mr Speaker:** I will certainly not take points of order on that issue. If Members want to discuss it with me, I am happy to do so after the debate. However, I will not take any points of order on the ruling that I have made today.

**Mr P Maskey:** Can I raise a point of order on a separate issue?

**Mr Speaker:** First, let me finish. I want to say to the whole House — and I have said it over and over again — that it gives me no pleasure whatsoever to do what I have done today. Once again, I refer Members to parliamentary procedures elsewhere, whether they are in Westminster, Scotland or Wales. Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Once again, I say to Members who are also Members of another House that they would know that.

**Mr P Maskey:** On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I must draw to your attention to the unparliamentary characteristics of certain Members' reactions when their colleague was put out of the Chamber —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already ruled that I will take no further points of order on that issue from any side of the House this morning. I have made that absolutely clear.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Is your point of order about the same issue?

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** No, Mr Speaker. It relates to a general ruling. Can you provide the House with serious and considered guidance about the use of sources and how Members should quote from such sources? If, for example, a Member is referred to in a published work that is accepted and is not challenged in the courts, are Members at liberty to quote from that manuscript? Can

you take advice and guidance — perhaps from another place — about how sources are used and quoted from in this House? Many Members would find it helpful to know the limitations within which they are entitled to operate and, indeed, how they should use those sources?

**Mr Speaker:** I am extremely happy to come back to the Member directly, or to the whole House on the issues that he has raised. However, I say to all sides of the House, we all get information from various books and papers; the main issue for the House is how we use that information. It is not a matter of going to the Library and reading certain material, but of how one uses that material. I am certainly happy to speak to the whole House or to the Member directly in order to explain the procedure on the use of such material in the House.

**Mr S Wilson:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have noted what you have said about Members obtaining information and the question of how it might be used. Does your ruling not gag Members and prevent them from using certain information or quoting from particular sources? Can you clarify that it is permissible for Members to use such information and that your ruling is simply about to how they use it?

**Mr Speaker:** I am extremely happy to examine guidance on behalf of all Members on how they might use material in the House.

**Mr Storey:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr S Wilson:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Members to take their seats. I have already ruled. We have almost ventured into the subject on which I have already made a ruling. If Members can demonstrate that their points of order relate to totally separate issues, I am happy to take them. Sometimes, points of order grow legs in the House. We end up discussing matters on which I have already made rulings.

**Mr S Wilson:** Mr Speaker, if you are saying that you are going to look at guidance, are you saying that there is no guidance at present? If there is no guidance, how could you make the ruling that you have?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let me make it absolutely clear that there is clear guidance. Listening to the Member, one would almost believe that we make it up as we go along. We certainly do not. The Member is also a Member of another House and knows exactly what the parliamentary guidance is there. It is absolutely clear.

**Mr Storey:** On a different point of order, Mr Speaker. In the House last Monday, the leader of Sinn Féin, in his comment to you, made reference to remarks that I made in the House. He said that, in my remarks — and

I quote from the Hansard report — I made reference to ‘Mein Kampf’.

That is absolutely untrue, and I ask you, Mr Speaker, to tell the House what action you have taken on the matter. On the basis of the action that you have already taken in the House today, I ask that the Member is asked to withdraw his remarks.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member came to see me, and we spoke about the matter. I have also spoken to Mr Adams on the matter. Neither I, my Clerks nor the Hansard report recorded any remark of that nature having been made, and I wrote to Mr Adams this morning to indicate that absolutely clearly. We have looked at the Hansard report, examined the issues and taken counsel. As far as I am concerned, as the Speaker, no such remarks were made by Mr Storey.

**Mr Storey:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, the Member also made reference to my absence on the occasion of his remarks. When the opportunity arises, and when the Member is present in the House today, will you, as the Speaker, ask the Member to withdraw the statement that was not accurate?

**Mr Speaker:** Let us move on. I have already —  
[*Interruption.*]

Order. I have already written to the Member this morning. Let us see how the Member reacts to these issues. [*Interruption.*]

Order. Mr Storey also knows that he came into my office to see me. We spoke privately on the issue, and I told him exactly what I was going to do. Let us be absolutely clear.

**Mr Poots:** On a different point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised a matter with you in relation to a statement made by Ms Ruane, the Minister of Education, last week; I also followed that up in writing, and I asked what action has been taken on that issue? It would be grossly unfortunate for democracy and the House if a Member is thrown out for telling the truth, yet a Minister can get away with telling blatant untruths.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member is referring to the accuracy of a ministerial statement. As the Speaker, I have no intention of getting involved in whether a ministerial statement is accurate or not; that is not my job. I am very happy to talk to the Member about this issue outside the Chamber. Indeed, I am extremely happy to talk to any Member from any side of the House about an issue that he or she feels strongly about. I operate an open-door policy at my office — come in and talk to me.

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It may be useful for the House, and its Members, if some directive were to be provided. I listened carefully to

you saying that you have written to Mr Adams. Did Mr McCausland receive the same facility? Was a letter sent to him?

**Mr Speaker:** Let me make it clear, there was nothing unparliamentary in what Mr Adams said. There are two totally separate issues here. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I repeat that I am happy to talk to any Member — about any of the issues that have been raised this morning — outside the Chamber. Now, I am going to move on.

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Is it a separate point of order, Lord Morrow?

**Lord Morrow:** It is a separate point of order.

**Mr Speaker:** OK; let us hear it.

**Lord Morrow:** As Chief Whip of the DUP, I want to state that we do feel that we are being victimised.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** On a separate point of order, go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I asked for a ruling on remarks that Basil McCrea made about Cairtriona Ruane during a debate last week. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr Speaker:** I have written to Basil McCrea about that; we have been busy writing this week. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I have spoken to Mr McCrea about that matter. Nothing that Mr McCrea said was unparliamentary; it is simply the cut and thrust of debate. I will call Mr Attwood, and then I am going to move on.

**Mr Attwood:** On a separate point of order, Mr Speaker. You have just said that you are not going to get involved in matters concerning the accuracy, or otherwise, of a ministerial statement made to the House. You are not going to get involved.

I ask you to review Erskine May, which makes it clear that if any Member — not least a Minister — deliberately misrepresents in the Chamber, the Speaker is obliged to bring that matter to the Minister's attention. Indeed, the precedent in another place is that a Minister who deliberately misleads should resign. I ask you to review your ruling that you will not get involved in issues that relate to the accuracy of a ministerial statement. That is not sustainable.

12.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** As the Member knows, there are a number of avenues that Members can take if they feel that a ministerial statement is, for whatever reason, inaccurate. If the Speaker gets involved in deciding the accuracy of ministerial statements, it could become a minefield. The Member can talk to me privately if he wants.

**Mr Weir:** Further to that point of order —

**Mr Speaker:** Is it on the same subject?

**Mr Weir:** It is on the same subject. In light of your ruling, will you clarify whether a Minister can say absolutely anything and not be held to account, whereas a Member who tells the truth risks being thrown out of the Chamber?

**Mr Speaker:** That point almost borders on the first subject. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I want to make it absolutely clear that the Speaker is not responsible for how ministerial statements arrive in the House or their authenticity. I am willing to accommodate ministerial statements because I recognise that they allow Back-Benchers to hold Ministers and the Executive to account. As I keep repeating, there are a number of avenues that Members can go down if they feel that a ministerial statement is, in whatever way, inaccurate. I am happy to talk to any Member about the roads down which they can go.

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order —

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** On a point of order —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask both Members to take their seats. I have opened the House up this morning to points of order. The only reason I have done so is because Members have said that their points of order are different, and nothing to do with the subject on which I have ruled. However, when I allow points of order, they almost border on the ruling that I have made. I am happy to take Members' genuine points of order on separate subjects.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** On a point of order —

**Mr Speaker:** I will take John O'Dowd first, then Ian Paisley Jnr.

**Mr O'Dowd:** My point of order relates to the broad thrust of the debate. Are Members crossing into questioning the rulings of the Speaker? The Speaker's role is difficult enough, and there is a mechanism to correct situations where Members feel victimised. We have spent the past 15 minutes questioning the ruling of the Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** As I have said in the past — and I will repeat it again — I make rulings, and Members make points of order to challenge that ruling. I want to make it absolutely clear that I will not allow that. Members are indicating that they want to make points of order on separate issues, but it ends up being almost the same point of order.

Mr Paisley Jnr, I take it that this is a separate point of order.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** You are in the Chair to protect Members' rights, which are absolutely crucial to the good running of this place and to its support in the

community. I want clarification on your ruling. You said that it is not unparliamentary to refer to someone as a Nazi or as a supporter of 'Mein Kampf'. Is it the case that Members can use that term and describe each other as Nazis, but, ludicrously, cannot refer to situations in our own country? I want clarification about the use of the term "Nazi" in the House.

**Mr Speaker:** Members must be careful with the language that they use in the House. How they use that language is the issue for all sides of the House. I will take no further points of order on any issue.

If any Member wants to speak to me about these issues outside the Chamber, I am very happy to do so.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Financial Assistance Bill

#### Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** I inform Members that the Financial Assistance Bill has received Royal Assent. The Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 4 February 2009.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### North/South Ministerial Council

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

I must inform Members that a valid petition of concern was presented on Wednesday 4 February in relation to the motion. The valid petition of concern relates only to the motion and not to the amendment.

I inform Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

**Mr Simpson:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the impact of global economic conditions; notes the benefit of the border to the Northern Ireland economy at this difficult time; notes the relatively positive relationship with the Republic of Ireland; and calls on the Executive to consider whether the North/South Ministerial Council is of any value to the people of Northern Ireland.

Before speaking on the subject, having read the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party, the DUP will support that amendment.

The Democratic Unionist Party believes in sensible North/South co-operation between this part of the United Kingdom and our nearest neighbour in the Irish Republic. There are times when working together can be of mutual benefit to the people of both countries. For the DUP, North/South co-operation has to be based on recognition by the Irish Republic of the sovereignty and independence of Northern Ireland as a region of the United Kingdom.

The Belfast Agreement-style North/South co-operation that was delivered was never acceptable to the DUP, because it was characterised by free-standing institutions that were not accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. That is why the DUP worked tirelessly through political negotiations to bring all North/South co-operation under the control of the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That process culminated at St Andrews, where we ensured that accountability was introduced in respect of decisions made by North/South bodies. By that, the DUP prevented a repetition of the situation that prevailed in the past, whereby North/South bodies could act in defiance of the wishes of the Assembly. That represented a major step forward.

In tabling the motion for consideration, we are motivated through a desire to save the taxpayers of Northern Ireland expenditure, which could be redirected

into front line services such as schools, hospitals, roads, and much-needed economic infrastructure. People are looking to us in these difficult times to provide value for money and efficient government. My party believes in streamlined, cost-effective government. Although others might still wish to defend expensive, useless talking shops, such as the Civic Forum, through tabling petitions of concern, we are trying to cut back on red tape and the waste of taxpayers' money.

I welcome the support given by the UUP recently in the Chamber to our cause for reducing the number of Departments, and for the scrapping of the Civic Forum. The DUP has a radical reforming agenda. We want to reduce the number of Government Departments from the present figure of 11 to a more practical six. We want to erase the Belfast Agreement's legacy of expensive and cumbersome Government. We support reducing the number of MLAs. It is our desire to save money and to ensure that people get the best possible service for the lowest possible cost. The North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, which comes under the control of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), had an overall budget of over £130 million, of which almost £40 million is from the Northern Ireland Executive.

The purpose of the motion is to ask whether that expenditure represents good value for money. That is a serious and genuine question, which is not motivated by any party political consideration.

I am disappointed by the knee-jerk reaction of the nationalist parties in submitting a petition of concern. I will refer to that in a moment. That being the case, people, particularly nationalist politicians, should question whether the formalised structures devised in 1998 by the UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin are an appropriate mechanism for achieving their objectives.

Businesslike co-operation between Ministers on both sides of the border is a far better approach than having occasional meetings, in which agendas have to be padded out simply to spare blushes and enable Ministers to say that a meeting has taken place. The motion seeks to address that situation. It is aimed at achieving greater efficiency, greater cost-effectiveness and greater benefit for Northern Ireland in these straitened economic times.

The motion need not have spooked the nationalist/republican Benches in the way that it so evidently did. We are entitled to ask why those Members have been so spooked by the motion. After all, all sides of the House should be able to support the motion.

The motion considers four aspects. It notes the impact of global economic conditions — what do the SDLP and Sinn Féin find so intimidating and terrifying about that? Have they not noticed what is happening? Have they not been watching the events of recent months?

The motion also notes the economic benefits of the border during these difficult times. Why should that spook Sinn Féin and the SDLP? It does not seem to have spooked traders in Newry and Londonderry in the same way that it has spooked their political representatives.

The motion notes the relatively positive relationship with the Irish Republic. Where is the problem with that? Why should Sinn Féin and the SDLP be so alarmed by a unionist saying such things? Have they forgotten — or do they want the rest of us to forget — that according to the Southern Government, the constitutional issue is settled? Even Gerry Adams has given up all talk of Irish unity occurring any time soon.

The motion also calls on the Executive to consider whether the North/South Ministerial Council is of any value to the people of Northern Ireland. Why would that cause such panic in the SDLP and Sinn Féin ranks? Why would they be so spooked at that suggestion? Have they no confidence that the North/South arrangements and structures can sell themselves? Are the benefits not so obvious that they can speak for themselves?

John Hume, the former leader of the SDLP, used to lecture us on how one cannot eat a flag. It is sad to see that under his successor, and in defence of his “Durkanomics”, the SDLP is trying to convince us that we can eat structures, bureaucracy and quangos. There are some Members who appear to be opposed to change, who are stuck in the past, and who want to impose second best on our community. That is not the way of the DUP.

**Mr Neeson:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after ‘Executive’ and insert

“to institute a review of the North/South Ministerial Council aimed at ensuring it provides better value for the people of Northern Ireland.”

The Alliance Party supports fully the review of the number of Departments and the number of MLAs. The Alliance Party wants to see an efficient, effective and accountable Government in Northern Ireland and an efficient, effective and accountable North/South Ministerial Council.

12.30 pm

In its response to the Programme for Government, the Alliance Party noted three core themes on which the Executive should focus. The first theme was segregation and exclusion in Northern Ireland; the second was rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy; and the third was delivering public services in Northern Ireland in a more sustainable way.

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

Certainly, in respect of the first and second themes, and possibly the third, Northern Ireland is distinct from the rest of the UK and Ireland. It is fair to point out

that segregation along sectarian lines typifies Northern Ireland in way that is not true elsewhere, even if there are parallels in other parts of the UK and Ireland.

It is also fair to point out that Northern Ireland's economy is public-sector dependent in a way that goes far beyond that which exists in any other UK region, even in the north-east of England and Wales, which have lower GDP per capita. In fact, there are as many people employed in the public service in Northern Ireland as there are in the Republic of Ireland, despite the latter having well over double the population.

Even in the area of sustainable public services, which includes housing, pollution, and transport, Northern Ireland has a legacy of poor performance that must be overcome. In all those areas, therefore, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have genuinely different fundamental problems that will require different solutions. Why, then, does the Alliance Party not simply support the motion as it stands? I suggest three main reasons for our proposing the amendment.

First, through positive engagement, Northern Ireland can learn much and, indeed, teach a lot to the Republic of Ireland. That engagement should largely be private- and voluntary-sector-led, but it is important that it proceeds at Government level, too. In many areas — such as segregation and its links to racism, social exclusion during economic growth and decline, and a new immigrant workforce — we have similar issues.

Secondly, our economies are intertwined in a way that unionist politicians choose to underestimate, but which business leaders appreciate fully. I recognise and acknowledge, therefore, the points that Mr Simpson made in his statement about co-operation. Our economies are not intertwined simply because we share a land border, but because we share common banks, common key industries in many sectors, and many other common interests.

Thirdly, more often than not, sustainability requires a cross-border approach — to agriculture, to tourism, to the environment, and on many other issues, such as the recent development of the single electricity market. None of those is restricted to the island of Ireland, but they illustrate how the North/South Ministerial Council can play a part in developing linkages that are in all our interests.

Therefore, we reject the underlying point of the motion, that the North/South Ministerial Council's very existence should be questioned. We reject that not because the NSMC is part of the Agreement — like anything our institutions must evolve and develop — rather, we reject it because the North/South Ministerial Council has the potential to improve relations further, not simply to the level that is outlined in the motion.

During the recent banking crisis, a major cross-border element was involved.

Implicitly, we accept that the North/South Ministerial Council has not reached its full potential. I wonder whether a person on the street could point to any concrete achievements of the Council. Our reaction to that is not to question its existence; rather, it is to ask what can be done to make it function more effectively and demonstrate its value.

In recent times, we have seen changes in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and that has brought about the membership of unionist parties. Change can be brought about, and it is important that a review is carried out.

Improving cross-border linkages is in all our political, economic and environmental interests. There is no evidence that abolishing the North/South Ministerial Council will achieve anything. However, there is plenty of evidence that the value of its work can be greatly enhanced, and we should consider how that could be done.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In immediate follow-up to Sean's point, he need have no fear whatsoever: the North/South Ministerial Council is not going away.

I begin by congratulating — Comhgháirdeas — the excellent North/South co-operation that we witnessed on Saturday at Croke Park, when Ireland came together to beat France in an international rugby match, which was an important sporting occasion. If we had two separate teams, we would not have packed a punch that would have beaten les Français. Brian O'Driscoll needed Paddy Wallace on Saturday.

Last week, it was the Civic Forum. This week, it is North/South co-operation. The DUP is guilty of picking sham fights that have more to do with the electoral battle ahead with Jim Allister. This is all about Jim Allister and the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). The North/South Ministerial Council is not up for grabs — it is not contestable.

Any attack on — or undermining of — North/South co-operation or the North/South Ministerial Council is a complete waste of time in relation to this Assembly's business. The North/South Ministerial Council is legislatively based; it is in the Good Friday Agreement, and it is in the St Andrews Agreement, of which the DUP is very fond. A bit of political honesty is called for — this has more to do with electoral competition in the forthcoming European elections in June 2009 than it has with anything else. I presume that we can expect plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. We can expect far more behaviour of a similar character in the months ahead. That is why we submitted a petition of concern.

Members must remember that the Assembly is not a free-standing political institution; it is interdependent with the North/South Ministerial Council. My message to the DUP is that it should never forget that fact.

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Member establish whether it was Sinn Féin or the SDLP that submitted the petition of concern?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member can check that for himself; copies are available to Members in the Business Office.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To save the Member time; the SDLP submitted the petition of concern. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McElduff:** It takes two parties to sign a petition of concern. The SDLP does not have sufficient political strength to submit a petition of concern on its own.

The review for which the Alliance Party amendment calls is already in place, and the results will be published before the end of this year. It is not about benefiting the Six Counties; it is about benefiting the whole island of Ireland.

Earlier this morning, I had occasion to meet primary school children, teachers, staff and parents from Strabane. One lady, who lives in Lifford, said that if she fell sick at a weekend or during an evening, she would like to be able to access the GP out-of-hours arrangement one mile away in the town of Strabane, rather than having to go to Letterkenny, which is approximately 15 miles away. At the moment, there is a lady with a lot of schoolchildren in Room 342 who wants that point to be heard today in the Chamber.

Everybody knows that the border impacts negatively on social and economic life. At a recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, progress on the A5 was, thankfully, reported.

**Mr Poots:** In the interests of North/South co-operation, does the Member support the painting red of postboxes in Donegal?

**Mr McElduff:** I believe, Mr Deputy Speaker, that due to the fact that I gave way, I will be given additional time in which to speak.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have one extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McElduff:** I will deal with Mr Poots's intervention issue in due course. Who painted the postboxes red in the first place?

The North/South Ministerial Council reflected on the progress being made on the A5 north-west gateway to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast-to-Larne road projects. In addition, it reflected on the intensified co-operation on child protection, including the cross-border awareness campaign; the official opening of the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen;

further progress on the developing situation at the all-Ireland Middletown Centre for Autism; and work on removing financial obstacles to cross-border mobility.

Therefore, good work is taking place within the North/South Ministerial Council, and I can assure Mr Simpson that it would pass with flying colours any test based on value for money or the effective and efficient use of public resources. What we really need is more extensive and more expansive North/South co-operation and integration. It is ridiculous for a small island, with fewer than six million people, to have plans to locate several acute hospitals back to back, without reference to each other. That is my speech — onwards with North/South co-operation.

**Mr McFarland:** In 1994, I was involved in a study that highlighted approximately 80 entities, such as councils, that were involved in cross-border activities. In 1996, in the Forum for Political Dialogue, we discovered that that figure had nearly doubled to 150 entities, which was clear evidence that the number of bodies involved in cross-border activities was rapidly multiplying under direct rule. However, the Belfast Agreement stopped all that, and brought cross-border co-operation under control by creating six bodies, covering six areas of co-operation.

I do not think that anyone has a problem with closer co-operation with neighbouring states — that makes lots of sense. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that that matter was sorted out in 1998, and each NSMC meeting since then has required agreement between a unionist Minister and a nationalist Minister. Since 1998, those Ministers have reported back to the Assembly, and I am not aware of a single instance in which there was a problem or a default in respect of those meetings.

Therefore, this debate is another DUP stunt. However, that party must be careful not to re-open negotiations, because given its history at St Andrews, that is a highly dangerous approach to take.

**Mr Molloy:** The Member said that there have been no problems with North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Will he explain why Ulster Unionist Party Ministers failed to turn up during the previous mandate?

**Mr McFarland:** I shall move on to my second point. Let us examine the DUP's negotiating skills at St Andrews. It managed to remove the unionist veto, which would have prevented Martin McGuinness from becoming the deputy First Minister; it agreed to the setting up of an all-Ireland civic forum; and it agreed to examine further areas of co-operation.

Furthermore, under the ministerial code amendments that the DUP managed to negotiate at St Andrews, Ministers have since been forced to go to North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Until then, unionists were able to interfere with wayward nationalist Ministers.

Members will know that during the first Assembly mandate, David Trimble called a halt to all North/South activity because people were messing around here.

I am afraid that all that was lost at St Andrews, so why has the DUP tabled the motion? Is it an attempt to claw back the mistakes that it made at St Andrews?

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member cited the supposedly robust and macho stance taken by his former — or, perhaps, it is his current — leader, Lord Trimble. Will he remind Members about how the court case went concerning that robust and macho attempt at stopping North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

12.45 pm

**Mr McFarland:** I think that it is fair to say that we managed to halt wayward nationalist activity and North/South Ministerial Council meetings for some time.

Given the negotiating skills that the DUP displayed at St Andrews, it would be dangerous for them to start to renegotiate the value of the North/South Ministerial Council now. The Alliance Party's amendment calls for a review of the Council, but that is already being carried out by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with a DUP staff member and a Sinn Féin staff member. I wonder how independent that will be. Although the Ulster Unionist Party supports the Alliance Party's idea that there is a need for a review, which is ongoing, we believe that it should be independent and carried out by people from outside the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports efficiencies. It is quite in order to review institutions, but there is little point in having a stunt debate today, particularly since the motion is subject to a petition of concern.

**Mr Attwood:** Mr Simpson asserted that nationalism need not have been spooked by the motion. I assure Mr Simpson that the SDLP is not spooked. We have looked at the hard evidence that has been gathered over not only the past number of days and weeks, but stretching back over months and years. We have concluded that elements in the DUP want to take the new order of politics on this island and recreate it in the image of the old politics that they knew and loved.

I say to Mr Simpson, through the Deputy Speaker: the North/South Ministerial Council and the architecture that is part of the Good Friday Agreement on a North/South basis are not negotiable. I note that Barry McElduff, on behalf of Sinn Féin, has adopted the SDLP analysis of the evidence. The evidence is clear in not only today's motion, it was clear in the recent debates on the Civic Forum and the number of Departments. The motive behind those debates was to take bites out of the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement for political reasons. Sinn Féin is wrong to say that the

DUP's moving of the motion is purely tactical in advance of its battle with the TUV. There are elements of that, but this runs deeper. This is a strategic move, because it declares the intentions and ambitions of elements in the DUP to take the new order — for which some struggled and negotiated painfully, and which has been advantageous for the people of this island — and return to the past.

I know that the DUP was not present at the negotiations surrounding the Good Friday Agreement, but it must understand that the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement arose from an analysis that if political and sustainable stability was to be achieved on this island and between these islands, one needed to deal with three sets of relationships: the relationship within the North; between the North and the South; and between the islands of Britain and Ireland. That is the core concept and value of the Good Friday Agreement. Out of that comes the political balance and arrangements that were in the Good Friday Agreement and which continued in the St Andrews Agreement.

If one begins to unpick that balance of relationships and institutions, and that architecture, one begins to unpick the buy-in that so many people on this island committed to with regard to the Good Friday Agreement and the referenda that were held in the North and South.

Therefore, the DUP must understand that if those balances were the essence of political agreement in 1998, and that that architecture gave expression to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, all-Ireland arrangements are essential for nationalists who want to share the life of the rest of the island. Those balances are essential for unionism, too, in order that unionism has an agreed relationship with the rest of the people of this island. However, if one begins to pick and choose, and have an à la carte approach, one must understand that that is beginning to unpick requirements that are essential for longer-term stability and prosperity on this island.

This morning, and on other occasions prior to the debate, the DUP created a smokescreen as to the motivation behind the debate. As one of its Members said, they do not want to have structures in place for the sake of having structures in place, and that the DUP wanted to do away with unnecessary bureaucracy.

Why is the North/South Ministerial Council being picked on? On 21 October, the DUP leader, as First Minister, came to the Chamber and said the following about the bureaucracy of the British-Irish Council:

“The Council considered progress on the strategic review of the British-Irish Council. It noted the proposal for the remit of the standing secretariat to be expanded to provide for an enhanced role in managing the work of the British-Irish Council and supporting the agreed work programmes”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p160, col 1*].

We agree with Peter Robinson; in order to maximise the benefits of the British-Irish Council, there is a need



for bureaucracy. Why, then, does the DUP not agree with its own leader? There is also a need for bureaucracy when it comes to the North/South Ministerial Council, in order to maximise the benefits for all the people on this island.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and the amendment. As a constituency worker, I know that there are few things worse than living with bad neighbours, and I know the strain that that can put on families in both homes. I urge Members to read the motion and the amendment because they state quite clearly, in economic terms, why things must change. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are similar in many ways. We have gone through years of hostility and horrific atrocities, although Northern Ireland has borne the brunt of that. However, we have moved on to a new stage and have become a new kind of neighbour, as it were.

It makes sense to have a good relationship with your neighbours, rather than a bad one, if that is at all possible. The past few years have shown that it is possible for the people of the Province to have a working relationship with the people of the Republic. I do not wish to trivialise the problems of the Province and the Republic in any sense but, if I may, I will use the illustration of a neighbourhood dispute.

Where there is a neighbourhood dispute, community police will often intercede, arrange meetings between the two parties and come to arrangements that are beneficial to all. Once community relations are better and the community is running smoothly, the police no longer need to facilitate the meetings and can use their time more effectively in other areas. The parallels, as I hope that I have illustrated, are obvious.

In my reasoned opinion, we have a good neighbourly relationship at present. Structures have been set up that allow us to make the best of the border and benefit each independent nation, and those structures are carrying on without the plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. That calls into question the need for those meetings and the money that is spent facilitating those meetings, during which things are discussed that are already in motion and are working for the benefit of all involved. The costs are far too much.

The people of the Province — as well as the people of the Republic — would, if consulted, prefer that the moneys spent on running sessions on things that are now running naturally and effectively should be spent on things that are needed now, during the credit crunch. Things that will make a practical difference to the lives of the people — for example, more social housing, heating for the elderly, more free dinners for children at schools, better health services and better roads.

It must be remembered that the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, which

comes under the control of the North/South Ministerial Council, had an overall budget of £130.67 million last year, of which just short of £40 million came from the Northern Ireland Executive. To me, that does not seem to be good value for money. That £40 million could make a vast difference in improving such things as social housing, which every Member in the Chamber would like to see happening, and dealing with issues that are much more important than supporting another talking shop.

In this difficult economic time, the people of the Republic believe that that money should be spent in a more practical fashion. The North/South Ministerial Council is not accountable to the people of the Province. That, in itself, is a landmine, when it is added to the fact that structures are in place already that make it easy to co-operate on mutually beneficial matters. The Council's remit has been met, its work has been completed and it is now redundant.

I was disappointed to learn that a petition of concern had been presented in reference to the motion. That has been mentioned in the Chamber already this morning. It must be due to the fact that some Assembly Members in the Chamber have misread or misunderstood the motion. We are not saying that there should be no co-operation with the Republic — we need co-operation for business matters. We are saying that that co-operation must be considered and should not come in the form, and with the expense, of the Council, as it does at present.

My fellow Assembly Members all want more money for front line services in their constituencies. Matters such as the Council have outlived their practical usefulness and can make room for other things that are necessary.

Therefore, I ask every Member in the Chamber to understand that the DUP is saying that as long as everyone benefits from good neighbourly relations, they should continue. However, we need not continue to pay out unnecessary money in a way that is neither cost-effective nor time-effective.

**Mr P Maskey:** The Member made some great points during his contribution, and he made the case for all of us that a united Ireland is the best option. Will he join the rest of us and call for that as soon as possible?

**Mr Shannon:** A united Ireland would never be beneficial to citizens of the United Kingdom or to the future well-being of the majority of people in the Province. I cannot, therefore, agree with the Member, but he knew that before asking the question.

I would be surprised if any Member votes against the motion based on a belief that the money could not be better spent. The reason for the motion is the desire to reduce the amount of red tape and the costs, but not

the practical benefits, of neighbourly co-operation. More money should be invested in front-line services; that is what everyone who voted for us wants in the current hard times. I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am concerned that the motion serves no other purpose than to divide the House. The proposers may not be comfortable with North/South partnership, which is fair enough, but the DUP signed up to it. As a republican, I was not happy about taking my seat in the House, but I did so in the context of the Good Friday Agreement. The motion reflects that the DUP, as Barry McElduff said, is moving into election mode. The party has become obsessed with Jim Allister and is positioning itself for the European elections; nothing more.

The people in the street whom we represent are concerned about paying bills and mortgages, and with feeding and clothing their children, and so forth. They do not want resources to be wasted by bringing a motion to the Floor of the House where it has no likelihood of success, as its proposers knew from the outset.

I echo the sentiments of Martin Luther King whose view of the world in 1967 applies equally to Ireland and the world in a new century:

“We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu — a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

The Good Friday Agreement is internationally recognised and presents the potential architecture for the development of all-Ireland governance. Its premise is the need for the formal promotion of North/South relations, thereby creating the dynamic for building an inclusive Ireland. The creation of the North/South Ministerial Council and implementation bodies was an important aspect of the Good Friday Agreement for nationalists and republicans. People in the North and South endorsed the agreement. The logic is underpinned by strand two of the agreement, and it can be undone only by the people. If unionists want to sabre-rattle, so be it, and if they want to beat their chests and attack anything Irish, that is their prerogative. However, they do not reflect the view of their community, which has moved on without them.

Strand two of the agreement also makes an integral provision for the development of an all-Ireland inter-parliamentary forum. It is widely recognised by policymakers, businesses, local authorities and NGOs that the creation of a balanced development of policy on an all-Ireland basis is the way forward. The development of the all-Ireland economy, spatial integration, social networking and human rights

harmonisation is already under way, but it must be built upon.

Sinn Féin wants the number of North/South implementation bodies to increase with, for example, the creation of an all-Ireland energy body to work on how the island can address climate change — indeed, such direction is needed because the Minister of the Environment continues to bury his head in the sand as far as climate change is concerned. The energy body’s remit would include the determination of an all-Ireland energy strategy and the overseeing of its development. As such, it must be given powers to compel the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and its equivalent in the South to adopt policies that are grounded in all-island thinking.

The need to move away from dependence on external oil supplies and embrace domestic and alternative energy forms is needed.

*1.00 pm*

There is also a need to promote the development of alternative energy sources such as biomass, wind, wave and solar power. It is said that our unique coastline and weather conditions have the potential to meet the needs of the entire EU energy demand over the next generation through the utilisation of wind power and the electricity interconnector to Europe.

We need an all-Ireland implementation body for rural development: disparities between regions across Ireland are severe, and they are likely to intensify in the absence of an all-Ireland policy that seeks to protect the Irish agriculture and fishing industries. Sinn Féin proposes a new implementation body that will address the core area of developing rural and social infrastructure. The body would provide resources for aquaculture; fishing and fish processing; marine-based facilities, inshore fishing and sea angling. It would progress greater equality —

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

**Mr W Clarke:** — between the regions of Ireland. It would co-ordinate resources and build a social infrastructure, which is necessary for the development of agriculture in Ireland. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr Hamilton:** I will begin by noting that in 2009 there is a much more positive relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That, in my view, is as much to do with personal relationships, the passage of time and the acceptance of realities on the part of many, than it is to do with fabricated structures and institutions.

My party accepts that cross-border co-operation is not only a good thing on certain occasions but is absolutely necessary in certain areas, particularly

where there is mutual benefit. Sometimes co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is as essential as co-operation across borders and across the world. I can think of several recent examples where cross-border co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has had a positive impact: for example, in some of the animal health issues; the dioxin scare; the agreements between the police and the guards and the financial services sector agreement that was reached back in June 2008 between the then Finance Ministers, and now the First Minister of Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister of the South. Those are all good areas of co-operation.

However, the common characteristic of those three areas is that none of them lies within the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council, proving the point that positive — even essential — co-operation can take place between our two states on an ad hoc basis where necessary and without the need for artificial institutions to be created.

Given some of the previous comments, there is an opportunity to review some of the more recent North/South Ministerial Council behaviour and some of the activities that went on in the North/South axis as opposed to the east-west axis.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** Hold on a second. We all remember the hideous imbalance there was between activities on the North/South axis compared to the east-west basis. There were all sorts of disparities: there were 65 meetings of the NSMC during the period of devolution compared to around 10 meetings of the British-Irish Council. Given that the DUP is now in the lead position, I am glad to see that there is more activity on the British-Irish Council: it meets more often — in fact, it has met when the North/South Ministerial Council has not met; there are more work streams going on, and there is more positive work happening on the east-west axis in comparison with what happened in the past, when Mr Basil McCrea's party was in charge.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Member for giving way — as he always very kindly does. Is he advocating a deregulated system for cross-border co-operation, and does he welcome the idea that Caitríona Ruane can somehow saunter across the border unescorted?

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member knows that she does saunter across the border every day to take her kids to the local grammar school in Newry. The point that my party makes — and I presume that it is one that the Member's party agrees with — is that there is no need for artificial institutions or structures to advance cross-border co-operation where it is of mutual benefit and is of particular benefit to Northern Ireland,

especially when there are savings to be made to the public purse in these difficult times.

The difficult times that we have experienced highlight not only why we do not need a North/South Ministerial Council, but the economic benefit to Northern Ireland of the border. It was not so long ago that Members on the opposite Benches, and their colleagues outside, were fawning over the Celtic tiger. Unionists' worry would not have been the North/South Ministerial Council — that would have been the least of our worries — rather, it would have been an all-Ireland economy and total economic integration with the South.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** Bear with me for a second. In recent months, not only have we witnessed a retail phenomenon, whereby people from the South are coming across the border to shop — and being chastised by their Finance Minister for being unpatriotic for doing so — but, in the last month alone, unemployment figures there have risen by some 36,000. That is close to the total unemployment figure for Northern Ireland. Moreover, economic growth in the South is to fall by 4% over the next year, leading to an unemployment total of 400,000. We can see the economic benefit for Northern Ireland of having the border and of being part of the fifth-largest economy in the world, while enjoying the safety net of the welfare state.

**Mr McElduff:** Will the Member join me in calling for a single-issue meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to examine current economic challenges, including the downturn in the construction industry? The Council would be a useful vehicle through which to address those issues, for the benefit of everyone on the island.

**Mr Hamilton:** Neither I nor my colleagues would have any objection to holding meetings with Ministers in the South to talk about economic issues. Of course, Ministers from the South will now be travelling to Northern Ireland to try to shelter under our umbrella.

In conclusion, accusations have been made that the DUP is pushing an agenda, but let us consider the points raised by the Members opposite. They are absolute zealots when it comes to the North/South Ministerial Council. Even if there is a better, more cost-effective and adult way of securing cross-border co-operation — similar to the way in which states across the world co-operate across borders — those Members will not blink or move away from that structure at all.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** We want to have a mature, normal relationship with our neighbours in the South; not the sort of artificial one that we have had in the past.

**Mr Elliott:** It was interesting to listen to Mr McElduff — he always provides thought-provoking comments. He mentioned the Ireland rugby team's win at the weekend, and the great success of that sporting organisation. It is just a pity that some other sporting organisations in our society are not so inclusive. I am thinking, in particular, of the Member's beloved GAA.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. That is not the subject under debate. Mr Elliott, please address the motion.

**Mr Elliott:** I was about to mention the North/South element of the GAA, which is clearly focused on the nationalist/republican community.

It is interesting to note that North/South co-operation and agreements are nothing new in this society. Before I was born, there was the Erne Drainage and Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1950. As I understand it, that was the first piece of legislation that went through the Northern Ireland Parliament and the Irish Parliament under exactly the same terms. That provided not only for the hydroelectric power scheme in Ballyshannon in the Republic, but also for much better land management in respect of the Upper Lough Erne system in Northern Ireland.

Thus, North/South co-operation is nothing new. However, we must ensure that that is what it is — co-operation, which brings mutual benefit to both areas. I do not want to return to the bad old days of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In those days, people in the Republic of Ireland establishment had arranged themselves in such a way that they were almost running sections of the Northern Ireland Government through Westminster procedures, simply because they had a foothold in Northern Ireland. Thankfully, the Ulster Unionist Party was at the forefront of cutting that practice out and we at least ensured that established organisations were in place that are subject to a control mechanism and are responsible to the Assembly.

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member mentioned some of the creations that came out of the Belfast Agreement. Although his party supported the agreement, I recall that he did not support it at the time. Does he agree that Tourism Ireland, for example, has been an unqualified success in better promoting Northern Ireland's tourist attractions?

**Mr Elliott:** I would not say that Tourism Ireland has been an unqualified success in promoting the benefits of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination, but it is doing just as well as the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Therefore, we do not have any flagship to hold up there, particularly in Fermanagh.

While Mr Hamilton was speaking, I was thinking about his remarks about the good co-operation on the dioxins issue. I notice that the motion refers to a:

“positive relationship with the Republic of Ireland”.

The dioxins problem was a disaster for Northern Ireland and a disaster for co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Someone can contradict me if I am wrong, but I am led to believe that the Republic of Ireland Government and officials knew of the dioxins problem down there for almost a week before they thought it feasible to tell any of our officials or Ministers up here in Northern Ireland Assembly. I do not hold that up as an example of good co-operation; I hold that up as an example of a selfish outlook, and what they could do for themselves and themselves alone. When it then came to us seeking compensation, because the problem originated in the Republic of Ireland, they turned their noses up and told us to look after ourselves. Therefore, the dioxins scare is not a great example of co-operation.

I return to the 1970s and 1980s. Let us be blunt: murders were carried out in this Province, and there was not much co-operation from the Republic of Ireland Government and security services at that time when members of those terrorist organisations were allowed to roam free and roam over the border without any chance of getting caught. Therefore, any co-operation that now exists is welcome, but it must be set in the context of what we had, and to which we do not want to return.

I support efficiency savings provided that they deliver — we do not want talk about efficiency savings that does not deliver anything. I am thoroughly disappointed that the party that tabled the motion has not been able to do what it planned to do, or hoped to do, when its representatives signed the St Andrews Agreement. All that we heard at that time were proposals for possibly more North/South co-operation.

With regard to a North/South parliamentary forum, the Agreement states:

“The Northern Ireland Executive would encourage the parties in the Assembly to establish a North/South parliamentary forum bringing together equal numbers from the Oireachtas and the Assembly, and operating on an inclusive basis.”

It is just a pity that they did not do that at the time of the St Andrews Agreement when they had the opportunity.

**Mrs D Kelly:** It would seem that many in the Chamber need a history lesson. Members opposite referred to artificial institutions and structures — are they not aware that the border itself is an artificial structure in that it is some 80 years old, whereas the island of Ireland is centuries old. The division of Ireland was caused by the threat of violence from unionism at that time. Do Members not realise that? Do they not realise also that the Good Friday Agreement was an historic compromise whereby the nationalist people of Ireland — all those who aspire to the re-unification of Ireland, its people and its territory — agreed to the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the

Irish constitution? That was the price that nationalists paid, and the compromise that they made, for peace.

**Mr K Robinson:** Will the Member accept that, prior to the removal of articles 2 and 3 from its constitution, the Republic of Ireland was the only country in the European Union that laid claim to the territory of a neighbouring country, which was an international disgrace that needed to be rectified?

**Mrs D Kelly:** The circumstances in which Ireland was divided were an absolute disgrace. Nonetheless, we are where we are. Some Members opposite have gone some way to point out some of the positive improvements in North/South relationships, because they realise that we operate in a European context and, as the credit crunch has taught us, are part of a global village. Those Members are now noting the positive relationships and the benefits to people, North and South, from the promotion of opportunities through the North/South bodies.

1.15 pm

It was entirely disingenuous of some Members to say that the motivation for the motion was to save taxpayers' expenditure. If the DUP is so concerned about that, it should look at the expenditure on the Ulster-Scots Agency. That would save the taxpayer millions of pounds — *[Interruption.]*

I can talk all day if Members want me to.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member may talk for a maximum of five minutes.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I understood that it was six minutes. I could talk for Ireland, never mind for five minutes.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Mr Hamilton accused some Members who wish to protect North/South bodies as being absolute zealots. I am afraid that the SDLP is guilty of that charge. We are absolute zealots in relation to North/South bodies because we cannot rely on Sinn Féin Ministers to protect them, and we have one Minister in the Executive.

Mr Simpson said that the agenda had to be padded out to save Members' blushes, but that is not the case. In fact, the DUP and other parties have placed restrictions on it.

**Mr McElduff:** Can I ask for a progress report? How are you getting on with establishing an all-Ireland party with Fianna Fáil?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Mr McElduff, please refer all your remarks through the Chair and not directly to the Member.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The SDLP has so much for sale that a number of parties are interested in looking at what we have to offer. In fact, Mr McElduff borrowed some of

the language that I used last week for his contribution. However, imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, so I will take it as a compliment.

The DUP says that it is interested in efficient and small structures in government. One would have to ask then why the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was expanded to include special advisers to the junior Ministers. It is so interested in efficiency in government, yet there is no Executive business today or tomorrow, there is no Assembly business today, and there is no legislation this week. Another week has passed by, and the DUP still has no business before us, even though Ministers were to meet —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. That is not the subject matter of this debate, Mrs Kelly. Please return to the debate in question.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I was merely pointing out and rebutting some of the remarks made by Members opposite who said that the DUP was interested in efficiency in government and in good government. However, it is very clear that it is not up to the job. If one wants to look at examples of good practice, one only has to look at the Peace programme and the cross-border agencies and how they are delivering on a cross-border basis —

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** — for the people of all of Ireland.

The SDLP opposes the motion and the amendment. The petition of concern relates to both.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How does one follow Dolores Kelly?

My party is concerned about a number of issues relating to the motion, and, therefore, we will be voting against it. That is also why the petition of concern has been submitted.

It is clear that the DUP is in election mode, and I do not hold that against it. They feel the need to embolden themselves.

The SDLP feels that it must attack Sinn Féin in every speech. Alec Attwood pointed out that the DUP is unionist. We know that: it is in the name of the party. What does the DUP want to achieve as the leading unionist party? That must be measured, examined and debated. On some occasions, Sinn Féin will agree with the DUP: on others, it will differ. However, Sinn Féin will strongly differ with any party that tries to dilute the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. The North/South Ministerial Council is a main pillar of that agreement. None of us would be here today to debate the subject if the North/South Ministerial Council were not there. It is integral to the progress of the agreement,

and despite claims by the DUP that it has somehow drawn in North/South co-operation, the opposite is the case.

Whether North/South co-operation be formal or informal, it will continue — for a number of reasons, including common sense. The motion refers to the benefits which the border has brought to the North's economy. The existence of the border has caused greater detriment to the North's economy than any other factor. Partition has caused greater detriment to the economy of Ireland than any other factor. Whereas we, in the North, can shield ourselves from recession to a certain extent with public-sector jobs, that cannot continue for ever. The harsh winds blowing through the world's economy have reached here, and the situation will get worse. The economy of the Twenty-six Counties is in dire straits, but my party still firmly believes that the direction of travel for the people of Ireland should be towards operating as a single economic unit. We must participate in the global economy as such a unit.

In current circumstances, we have North/South co-operation through the North/South Ministerial Council —

**Mr McElduff:** Does the Member welcome the fact that the DUP Chief Whip is familiarising himself with the contents of the Good Friday Agreement? He has the document in front of him.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome that fact.

Areas of co-operation are wide, and there is a need to improve on them. We are operating two economies and services back-to-back, and that is detrimental. Mr McElduff has already referred to primary care in the Health Service; however, all strands of the health services are operated on a back to back basis, which is both detrimental to efficient delivery of services and costly.

Education is another area where we must look across the border for co-operation. Particularly in Mr Elliott's constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, small, rural primary and secondary schools are under severe pressure. We must not say to children that they cannot cross the imaginary line to attend the school of their choice, or that school transport should not serve children on either side of that line. It makes sense in neither education nor economics.

Mr Simpson referred to the economic savings that would be made. He said that the North/South Ministerial Council costs £140 million each year, and that £40 million of that came from the Executive. The mathematics suggest that someone else is investing £100 million in the Council, to the benefit of all the people of Ireland, and especially those of the border regions.

I am concerned at the amendment sponsored by the Alliance Party. I know that it is a unionist party, but, even as Europeans, Alliance Party members should

want to ensure that the North/South Ministerial Council is good value for the people of Ireland — not just for those of the North. That is why Sinn Féin opposes the Alliance Party's amendment: it is narrowly focused.

Sinn Féin opposes the DUP's motion. To debate it is a waste of time, but this is not the first debate to have wasted the time of Members, and I doubt that it will be the last. Regardless of how many motions of this nature the DUP tables, petitions of concern will be brought against them and they will fall automatically.

Let us work on, using the structures that we have, to deal with issues that we can address and improve the lives of people across the island of Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** A point of clarification: Mrs Kelly said that the petition of concern applied to the amendment as well as to the substantive motion.

The petition of concern applies only to the motion, not to the amendment.

**Lord Browne:** I support the motion and the amendment. How many of us here could have predicted, when this Assembly first met two years ago, that we would now be in the midst of the worst economic meltdown since the great depression of the 1930s? Two years ago, money seemed to be growing on trees on both sides of the border. The air was thick with grandiose plans for spending on infrastructure, and schemes for all manner of extravagant cross-border projects. I think that everyone would agree that in today's radically changed economic circumstances, our first spending priorities must be the preservation of the jobs of our workers, and the provision of a safety net for the weakest members of society.

We have all seen stories in the media in recent days about the bonuses being paid to top executives of failed banks. I am sure that most of us would wholeheartedly agree that such payments are outrageous. How can we, as Members of this Assembly, justify to our constituents the expenditure of almost £5 million to date on the North/South Ministerial Council, and the proposed expenditure of over £3.5 million over the next four financial years? I am not arguing that it does not make sense for Ministers and civil servants in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to hold bilateral meetings to exchange views on matters of mutual interest — in particular, the possibilities for minimising the effects of the economic downturn on both sides of the border. However, I am sure that this could be achieved at much less cost to the taxpayer, and I think it would be useful for the Executive to investigate whether current spending on the North/South Ministerial Council can be fully justified. I support the Alliance amendment; a review of the costs of the Council should be carried out.

I am somewhat sceptical of the advantages of membership of the European Union, and I remain

unconvinced of the merits of the case for further moves towards European Union integration. However, I recognise that membership has brought considerable benefits for some in our community: the common agricultural policy has provided a secure income for farmers, and access to the wider European market has been beneficial for the development of export businesses. However, we cannot just cherry-pick the policies we like and reject those we do not. The recent outburst by both private- and public-sector representatives in the Republic, condemning Irish citizens who cross the border to shop in Northern Ireland, is an unfortunate example of that self-interested attitude.

There have been calls in recent years for Northern Ireland to abandon the pound sterling and adopt the euro alongside the Republic of Ireland. Leaving aside the obvious anomaly which this would produce, of one country in the United Kingdom with two currencies, the present crisis has revealed the economic costs of a loss of control over interest rates and the value of currency. Spain, for example, which is a member of the euro zone, has surrendered control over these vital policy tools. The number of people out of work there has now reached over 3.3 million, and many companies are struggling with declining sales and liquidity problems.

In the Republic, the official estimates for 2009 suggest that the Minister of Finance will face an opening deficit of €13.3 billion, which is 7% of GDP. I am not suggesting that we in the United Kingdom are not facing very serious problems ourselves, but the fact that the UK can set its own interest rates — unlike the Republic, which is part of the euro zone — and manage its own exchange rates. That may allow us to avoid sky-high unemployment, and the possible consequence of social unrest, and in these circumstances, I believe that the border represents a real economic benefit. I support the motion and the amendment.

1.30 pm

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to Mrs Kelly's remark, you were good enough to clarify that the petition of concern does not cover the proposed amendment. Does it cover the motion as amended?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am happy to clarify that the petition of concern covers the motion as amended, because at that point, it will become the substantive motion.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** It has been a good-hearted debate, and like Members on this side of the House, I support the motion and the proposed amendment from the Alliance Party. The previous Member who spoke, my noble friend from East Belfast, spelled out, loud and clear, some of the current economic issues that perplex not only our country, but most other countries. He debunked the theory, which came from the party

opposite, that if there was a single unitary economic entity, everything would be alright. To date, there are 27 nations in the European Union, in which different economies are openly trading back to back; some countries have shared monetary systems, others have different monetary systems — unity is not a recipe for success. We must spell that out loud and clear.

Mrs Kelly the Member for Upper Bann put forward the theory that one of the failures of the Assembly is that no legislation is going through today, and that there must be more legislation. A marker must be laid down clearly stating that more government does not necessarily mean good government and that more legislation does not necessarily mean good government. Less government, and the rollback of governmental interference, is usually a good thing for people, the economy and the country.

I want to get to the kernel of some of the arguments that have been put forward, particularly by the SDLP and Sinn Féin, who are beating their chests about the importance of the North/South Ministerial Council. The motion does not debunk that; indeed it indicates that the DUP is all for practical co-operation and relationships, good sense, good neighbourliness, and for using the opportunities that exist. However, we have heard the almost irrational response — a petition of concern no less — that the motion has to be stopped as it is the DUP trying to stop the unity Ireland state express. We should recognise that that express was stopped a long time ago. Do not take my word for it; take the words of the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern.

When interviewed by the London editor of 'The Irish Times', Frank Millar, for a recent book, 'Northern Ireland: A Triumph of Politics', he said:

“You know what folks, forget about the unity issue, this arrangement, this sharing of the island, this is the way that it's going to be.” When asked would 50% plus 1 be the basis on which to achieve it, ie a unitary Irish state, ‘No, no.’ he replies, clearly dismissive of the idea that unity could be accomplished on a simple sectarian headcount. ‘50% plus 1 is not the way to do it; the only way it can be done is if a sizeable amount of people on the island of Ireland, North and South, believe that this is the way forward. 50% plus 1 is not the way to do, that would be a divisive thing to do and there is no point in having votes that find out whether you have got 1% over or 1% under.’”

I think that that should put a nail in the coffin of those who constantly say that we are trundling toward a united Ireland, and, indeed, that the motion by the DUP is an attempt to stop that. A united Ireland has been stopped, and no less authority than the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland admitted as much in that interview.

**Mr Hamilton:** Further to the point made by the former Taoiseach, does the Member concur that as shown by recent polling and in studies by Queen's University, a substantial number of people in Northern

Ireland who would vote for nationalist and republican parties, support the maintenance of the Union?

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I think that that is obvious; there are traders in Newry — Catholic and Protestant, working together — who recognise that the border is the best single impetus that they have had recently to overcome some of the economic woes that the country is facing.

**Mr McElduff:** Will the Member support my call to his colleague Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to include a question in the 2011 census asking people to state their constitutional preferences? Let the people decide and do not be afraid of accurate and truthful information.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I am not afraid of it. Do not stand up to get a slap in the face. Bertie Ahern has told you loudly and clearly that you are not getting a united Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member must refer all his remarks through the Chair.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I will refer all slappings to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Many calls have been made for all of Ireland to work together. I would have loved to have seen one practical example of that. The Member from Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott referred to the recent scare over pig meat. As a Member from a largely rural constituency, I was concerned that dioxins were affecting our economy when it was clear that the source of the problem was the Republic of Ireland. When we asked the Republic of Ireland to act as good neighbours and stand up and share the burden, give compensation to our farmers on an equal basis and admit that some role and responsibility lay with that jurisdiction, there was utter silence.

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

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** When I was a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I noticed the time that was wasted on those meetings, which could have been done by videoconference, instead of the panoply of conferencing.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member's time is up. I have to slap you down. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lunn:** I support the amendment as proposed by my party colleague Mr Neeson, and, if the amendment is accepted, I will support the motion as amended. I draw the attention of the House to the nonsense of a situation in which the Alliance Party can propose a sensible amendment and our votes will count on that amendment, but our votes will not count on the substantive motion.

The debate has had a political aspect and an economic aspect. The motion emphasises the economic benefits or otherwise of the North/South Ministerial Council and the other areas of co-operation between the two areas of the island. Various Members, including Dolores Kelly, Lord Browne, Ken Robinson and Tom Elliott have given history lessons. Apart from that, the theme of the debate has been that all Members, to some degree, have recognised the benefits of North/South co-operation and, indirectly, therefore, the benefits of the North/South Ministerial Council.

The motion indicates that the DUP wants to do away with that body, so I am glad that Mr Simpson has agreed to accept the Alliance Party amendment, which makes it clear that the North/South Ministerial Council must stay, but that it could be subject to a review. Mr McElduff said that a review is imminent; I was not aware of that, but that is OK. The Alliance Party calls for a review by the Executive; I imagine that the same review is already in place, so that is fine.

Everyone has been supportive of co-operation, apart from one or two comments. Jim Shannon mentioned "bad neighbours", but he also said that we need to co-operate economically with those "bad neighbours". I see that as support for the North/South Ministerial Council.

Willie Clarke gave a litany of the achievements of the North/South Ministerial Council and the bodies that are indirectly related to it. Simon Hamilton did likewise, but he spoiled it by pointing out that all the achievements that he had listed were outside the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council. Barry McElduff mentioned the A5, the A8, Waterways Ireland and the Middletown Centre for Autism. The proposer of the motion, Mr Simpson, was also constructive in his support for the North/South Ministerial Council.

**Mr S Wilson:** Is the Member trying to destroy my colleague Mr Simpson's reputation by saying something positive about him?

**Mr Lunn:** I do not wish to destroy anybody's reputation, but Mr Simpson's contribution was constructive in respect of the long-term future of the North/South Ministerial Council. That was in some contrast to the party that sits to my left, which appeared to want to outdo the DUP.

**Mr O'Loan:** I wish to refer, in particular, to what the Alliance Party's amendment fails to do. The amendment leaves intact, in the motion, the reference:

"notes the benefit of the border to the Northern Ireland economy at this difficult time",

which echoes the exact language of Peter Robinson's New Year statement.



Considering the complexity of the issue and the significance of the border for our politics, our economy and our social relations, does Mr Lunn accept that reducing any discussion of the border to merely the number of people who come up to shop at Sainsbury's in Newry and its equivalents does not do justice to the necessary politics of our time?

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for that. Mr Speaker, if the intervention lasts more than a minute, do I get more than an extra minute?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** No. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lunn:** Thank you.

I take the Member's point. At present, the benefit of the border is entirely directed towards the North. Of course, times will change, and that benefit will swing the other way. However, the implication of the motion is that there is, at present, a benefit to Northern Ireland.

In fact, the Member talked about the wording of the motion, and I do not like the phrase "relatively positive relationship", but I will let it pass. I take it that that means relative to the way it was 25 years ago, so that is OK.

As I said, there has been a theme in the debate of general support for the Council, and I am glad of that. I understand nationalist Members being — I think that the words used were — "spooked" or "suspicious". Mr Attwood accused people of taking bites out of the agreement, because there is a developing pattern of sniping at various aspects of the cross-border bodies. However, those bodies are here to stay. I am not sure why some Members are so worried about the motion that they are relying on a petition of concern.

We hope that our amendment is accepted. I believe that John O'Dowd called the Alliance Party a unionist party. We can rest easy, because next week somebody on the unionist Benches will call it a nationalist party. That is fine with us, for as long as it continues.

**Lord Morrow:** I support the motion and the amendment. Much has been said in the debate, but little of it was relevant.

I take issue with John O'Dowd, who said that the debate was a waste of time. I regard it as anything but that; it has been a good and a useful debate that has put down markers for the future.

Alex Attwood, to his credit, has caught on to the fact that there will be changes in the future. He may have been the only Member who acknowledged that, and he did so for different reasons than he might have liked. However, I believe that he acknowledged that things cannot continue as they are, and that the DUP is planning changes. Mr Attwood is absolutely right, and time will reveal those plans. There will be more about that at another time and on another stage.

I want to comment on some Members' remarks. First, we brought the motion to the House with sincerity, because we believe that given the present economic climate, this is the ideal time to cut out a lot of the bureaucracy and red tape that is involved in the running of government. I believe that it was Alan McFarland — he will forgive me if it was not — who said that more people are employed in Northern Ireland's public sector than in the whole of the Republic of Ireland's public sector. Perhaps it was not Mr McFarland, but someone made that remark.

That may be a good enough reason to cut back on bureaucracy and red tape, because dramatic changes have followed the demise of the Celtic tiger economy, and things will never be the same again.

*1.45 pm*

We now hear a lot of bleating from across the border because people there find it difficult to live and to pay the unaffordable expenses and prices that are asked of them in a state that is virtually bankrupt. I do not say that with any malice: I say that simply because that is what economists tell us. It is highly unlikely that the Southern economy will survive. It is heading into very deep water. That poses the question of why anyone would want to add more bureaucracy to an economy that is already in virtual free fall.

Mr Neeson stated that he wants the number of Departments and MLAs to be reviewed. My party is at one with him on that matter. Perhaps that is why the Member has earned the tag of unionist, because he simply agrees with some of what my party has been saying. My party wants bureaucracy reduced and there to be fewer MLAs and government Ministers. We do not believe that there is any good reason why the current situation should continue. My party will, of course, be working overtime in order to ensure that that change happens.

Mr McElduff had much to say. In one of his comments, he used the phrase — and I am unsure as to whether he realised that he was using it, but he used it nevertheless — political honesty, which is a wonderful commodity but one that is in very short supply. I am sure that he would agree that if that were applied in every circumstance, we would see things differently, because, as another Member pointed out, there is little doubt that the North/South Ministerial Council has brought about nothing of any significance whatsoever: nothing for the nationalist community; nothing for the unionist community; nothing towards the well-being of the Irish Republic; and nothing towards the well-being of Northern Ireland. One must ask why, under the living sun, it should survive, particularly in the current economic climate.

Now that Sinn Féin and the SDLP are coming closer together on various issues, and there seems to be a

conduit opened between them where there seemed to be a cold war, which they have now overcome, and if they can agree on who actually put down the petition of concern — Mrs Kelly assures the House that it was the SDLP, while Mr McElduff is not sure — perhaps those parties could sit down and discuss whether there are good economic reasons for continuing with the North/South Ministerial Council. At least suspend it for a while until the country is up and going again economically and demonstrate to the people at large that that waste will not continue.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for giving way and, in particular, for nailing Sinn Féin's view of the motion, which is that it is a sham, because the Member indicated that the DUP had ambitions for the future of the North/South Ministerial Council. Can the Member confirm whether it is now DUP policy that the North/South Ministerial Council should, in the Member's words, be suspended? Is that the DUP view, and is that what it is telling the Irish Government?

**Lord Morrow:** Yes; and I would say to Mr Attwood: just watch this space. I know that you have told Sinn Féin that it must get up very early in the morning to be ahead of the DUP. Therefore, rise early in the morning and you will see what will happen in the not-too-distant future. As a matter of fact —

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Lord Morrow:** I shall in a minute.

As a matter of fact, during a previous debate, I said that Sinn Féin should sleep with one eye open because the DUP will be bringing forward proposals.

**Mr O'Dowd:** As regards to sleeping with one eye open, I have a young son who did not let me sleep all night, so I was up very early this morning. Can the Member explain to the House how the DUP will suspend, stop or cancel meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council? He is reading the Good Friday Agreement, and he will realise that his party cannot do that under its terms.

**Lord Morrow:** Yes, I have the Good Friday Agreement, which was well spotted by Barry McElduff. He noticed someone bringing it into the Chamber, which was extraordinary work by him. Despite its name being printed all over it, he deducted that I had the Belfast Agreement in my hand. So, well done.

The DUP's hand is not in the Belfast Agreement; that is not our work. Therefore, we have a responsibility to bring about its demise, and we will.

Tom Elliott was quick to make some useful comments, and rightly so, about the lack of co-operation during the war of genocide when terrorists skulked across the border and there was no co-operation on extradition. Those were good and valid points.

However, he went on to lay the blame for all the current misdemeanours at the door of the DUP — it is surprising that Tom Elliott would do that — and said that we have ambitions for an all-Ireland Civic Forum. We do not; the St Andrews Agreement was between two Governments, and everyone should know that.

I have the Belfast Agreement in front of me. It was signed off by Mr Elliott's party, and I am certain that the SDLP was also involved. I do not know whether Sinn Féin was huffing at that time, but I think that it was doing other things.

Paragraph 18 of strand two of the Belfast Agreement states:

"The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas to consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, bringing together equal numbers from both institutions for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern."

The DUP was not there, and I notice that Tom is not here now either.

Paragraph 19 states:

"Consideration to be given to the establishment of an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues."

Despite that, Mr Elliott says that we are setting up an all-Ireland Civic Forum. The Civic Forum is in the Belfast Agreement, but has anyone seen it meeting anywhere?

**Mr McFarland:** The Member's party assured us that the document from which he is quoting is dead, and that unionists will never have a problem again. However, at St Andrews, the DUP not only made provision for the Civic Forum and cross-border bodies, it agreed that Ministers would be obliged to go to North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Ministers are forced to do that by the ministerial code and cannot opt out. There is no longer any way of stopping the North/South Ministerial Council but there was under the Belfast Agreement.

**Lord Morrow:** Mr McFarland misses the point. The point is that Mr Elliott said that we were setting up a Civic Forum, but the Ulster Unionist Party had already made that provision in its Belfast Agreement. The authors of that great piece of work — *[Interruption.]*

Mr McFarland is now trying to mix it a bit. The provision was made in his party's Belfast Agreement and had nothing to do with the DUP. He should not try to palm off onto us something that his party created.

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

**Lord Morrow:** Dolores Kelly said that it was unfortunate that Ireland was ever divided.

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

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 39.*

**AYES**

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

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

**NOES**

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr W Clarke and Mr O'Loan.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 39.*

**AYES**

**UNIONIST:**

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

**OTHER:**

*Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCarthy and Mr Shannon.*

**NOES**

**NATIONALIST:**

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr W Clarke and Mr A Maginness.*

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>[54.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Supported Housing

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

2.15 pm

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability.

I commend my colleagues in the Business Committee for securing today's debate. I note the fact that the Minister for Social Development has come along to listen to this debate. It is a pity that the Health Minister is not also here, because this is a cross-cutting motion.

We tabled this motion because we feel strongly that more needs to be done to provide adequate supported housing. That must be done in a cross-departmental manner because there is a collective responsibility on all of the Departments — particularly on the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) — to support people, and supported housing provides a lifeline for vulnerable people in our communities. It enables them to live independently, and it promotes their inclusion in wider society. We must do all within our power to ensure that that becomes a reality for those people.

Like me, I am sure that many other Members have met people in their constituency offices who have raised concerns about elderly relatives who stay in hospital for longer than necessary due to the fact that no supported accommodation is available. That must change, and we have tabled today's motion to call for action to ensure that such things do not happen.

The Bamford Review encouraged more co-operation among Departments. We await the Executive's response to the consultation that took place recently. The Executive's response to the Bamford Review contained many ambitious targets, many of which I believe, with the best will in the world, will not be realised unless there is a clear, definitive and concrete work plan among DHSSPS, DSD and other Departments. Such a work plan must come to the fore in the period ahead.

The Health Committee visited Muckamore Abbey Hospital and met many people who are detained there.

At first hand, we were able to see the situation for those who have experienced serious delays in being discharged due to the fact that there is a lack of supported housing in the community. I met two very young men, Sammy and Richard, who have been waiting three years and seven years respectively for discharge. However, they cannot be discharged into the community because there is no supported accommodation available. We cannot allow that to continue. Those two young men are in the prime of their lives, yet they are being detained in Muckamore Abbey Hospital because there is nothing in the community to support them.

The patients such as those who are in Muckamore are not the only section of society that requires supported housing. The needs of other groups in society must be met — for example, those who need to be housed due to domestic violence, homelessness or other numerous and varying reasons. Currently, those needs are not being met.

Today's motion calls for a review of the waiting lists for supported housing because the most vulnerable people in our society should be supported by a clear strategy so that they can live their lives as fully and as independently as possible. I urge all Members to support the motion.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I thank the Member for giving way — I caught her just at the end of her speech. This is an important debate, and I know that the Minister for Social Development will respond to the debate on behalf of the Executive. However, many of the issues that will be raised in the House today will probably relate to health.

A cross-departmental strategy is needed to deal with these issues — whether they are issues of health or social development. Rather than assuming that the debate will automatically be read by the Health Minister, perhaps the Speaker's Office could provide the Health Minister with a copy of the Hansard report, because we are well aware that this is not just a social development issue or a health issue. This is a community issue, and it is about cross-departmental work — from the Executive right down to Committee level. Perhaps the Social Development Minister will tell us whether she will formally give a copy of the Hansard report to the Health Department.

**A Member:** Was that a speech?

**Ms S Ramsey:** Of course that was a speech.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind the Member that the normal convention is that interventions are shorter than speeches.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** As part of the Committee for Social Development's review of the

budget for the Supporting People programme, it heard evidence from several organisations that are involved in the provision of supported housing. Sometimes, it is all too easy to accept an argument made by a voluntary or community organisation, and to then make bland statements in the House in praise of that organisation's work. However, in this instance, the Committee has been genuinely impressed by the professionalism, commitment and dedication of the voluntary and community organisations that provide supported-housing services.

The Committee for Social Development closely questioned those organisations, and it was impressed by their commitment not just to their vulnerable clients but to providing quality and value for money. The organisations were keen to demonstrate the range and excellence of the services that they offer to vulnerable groups and the relatively low cost of delivering those services.

The absence of joined-up government is the major complaint from those organisations. Rather than a single system that focuses on vulnerable individuals and their needs, there are several separate systems, focusing on benefits, health or housing matters. The absence of joined-up thinking means that those organisations spend a great deal of time aligning the benefits to which individuals might be entitled with their housing needs, and then matching those with health-treatment needs. Each system has its own application process, budget limitations and varying eligibility criteria — a source of exceptional amounts of frustration among the voluntary and community organisations to which the Committee spoke.

Undoubtedly, the Minister will say that the provision of supported-housing services for Muckamore Abbey residents carries a significant price tag, and I do not dispute that the provision of such services will require time. However, while I accept that there are difficulties, it is essential that the Departments of Health and Social Development work more closely together to deliver the best-value outcome for Muckamore Abbey residents.

The Committee for Social Development supports the spirit of the motion, in so far as it refers to the need for joined-up working between the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health.

**Mr Armstrong:** I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I am happy to support the motion. I have always thought that a society can be measured by the way in which it treats its most vulnerable citizens, and supported housing is one of the few matters that command the support of all parties in the House.

It is the nature of the Social Development portfolio that the Department and the Minister are tasked with improving the lot of many of the most vulnerable in

our society, including tackling fuel poverty, dispensing social security benefits and dispensing state pensions. Supported housing affects vulnerable people who cannot fend for themselves and who require support and assistance in order to lead a normal life in the community. Obviously, some people cannot be released from care facilities and abandoned in a flat or a house.

The recommendations of the Bamford Review form part of the background to this debate. However, although we support the goals of the Bamford Report, we must accept that public policy operates in the real world, not in a vacuum. Unfortunately, the present economic situation means that budgets — whether they are the Executive's, departmental or household — are being cut.

With that in mind, one must have a realistic expectation of what the Minister and her Department can do. However, it is imperative that the Minister redoubles her efforts to ensure that every penny that her Department spends is spent in the most effective and efficient way.

There are real problems with the issue of supported housing. Those who require such assistance tend to be extremely vulnerable and, often, suffer from the most severe learning difficulties. Supported housing tends to be quite expensive, and, as the DSD budget has come under pressure, it is no surprise that the supported-housing scheme is feeling some pain.

Even when funds are available for supported-housing projects, it has often proved difficult to receive planning permission from councils, because, often, local communities assume, wrongly, that supported housing means bail hostels or accommodation for undesirables. Those are misconceptions, and much more needs to be done to educate the public as to who is being helped by supported housing.

Supported housing helps some of the most vulnerable people in society and, with improved information and education developments on supported-housing provision in DSD, progress can be achieved in local communities, with the help of leadership from local representatives.

As I said, societies are often judged by how they treat their most vulnerable and what priorities those groups are given. Our society should be judged in that way. Although the Minister's intent and support for supported housing is clear, it is regrettable that she is hamstrung by a much reduced capital budget.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mrs Carmel Hanna.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

#### Partitionism

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) if the statement made by the deputy First Minister at the North/South Ministerial Council on 23 January 2009 that partitionism is evil breaches the Pledge of Office's requirement to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future.

(AQO 1986/09)

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** The Member appears not to be aware that questions about breaches of the Pledge of Office by Ministers rightly fall to be considered by the Assembly or, ultimately, as a matter of law, to the courts; they do not fall to Ministers themselves. Therefore, OFMDFM has no role in determining whether the deputy First Minister's comments constitute such a breach. If the requisite number of Members table an appropriate motion and if the Assembly concludes that a Minister has failed to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office, it may pass a resolution censuring him or her, or pass a resolution of no confidence, following which the Minister can be excluded from office for a specified period.

**Mr McCallister:** The Business Office accepted the question as a proper one to put to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Will the First Minister state whether the deputy First Minister was attending the North/South Ministerial Council in his official capacity and, if so, when did the First Minister officially sanction the deputy First Minister's comment that partition was evil? If the First Minister did not sanction that comment, what action is he going to take to deal with it?

**The First Minister:** First of all, I do not think that the Member should attempt to implicate the Business Office in relation to the substance of his question; it was the substance of his question, not the eligibility of it, that I drew attention to. The deputy First Minister did not make the remarks at the North/South Ministerial Council. As was the case for Mr McCallister, I became aware of the comments through

the press. However, the deputy First Minister did not make the comment that Mr McCallister has ascribed to him. The deputy First Minister did not say that partition was evil; he said that partitionism is evil.

Therefore, one must look at the definition of partitionism, and we find that, not for the first time, republicans have a different definition than that provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. For republicans, partitionism is defined as the practice of advocating the removal of the border, but behaving in a manner that reinforces it. Incidentally, it is usually used as a term of abuse to other nationalists. However, in my view, partition is good, not evil — Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from it. It could also be suggested, however, that partition is something that the Republic of Ireland engaged in when it annexed the Republic from the United Kingdom.

**Mr Ford:** I suspect that, had the deputy First Minister responded to the question that was just answered by the First Minister, there might have been a different answer. However, in order to bring about some collectivity, will the First Minister give an assessment of the progress that has been achieved in recent months toward the goal of a shared future?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have warned Members that the supplementary question must lead from the original question. The Member has gone outside that; therefore, I will move on.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the First Minister for detailing the sanctions that can be imposed and how that can be done. Given that his office has responsibility for equality, are any sanctions to be imposed by his office in relation to the recent comments of Minister Wilson?

**The First Minister:** I think that the question asked by the leader of the Alliance Party was more germane than the question that has just been asked. The Member knows that if a Member believes that a Minister has acted contrary to the Pledge of Office, there are steps that the Assembly can take. There is no step that can be taken by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to such an issue.

As far as Minister Wilson's statement is concerned, I would have thought that we would wish to have a robust debate on all of the issues. I am not sure which of the Minister's statements the Member is referring to; however, if it is the most recent one on climate change, the Minister has provoked a debate in Northern Ireland that I suspect would not have taken place had he not made those comments.

Every individual must be entitled to have a view on the issue. However, the view of the Democratic Unionist Party is on record and in its manifesto; it is that view that the DUP will uphold in the Executive.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, let us have supplementary questions that relate to the original question. Mrs Kelly caught me out on that occasion. *[Laughter.]*

She knew what she was doing. Members, be extremely careful when asking supplementary questions.

### Ministerial Code

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what changes have been made to the ministerial code since 20th March 2007.  
(AQO 1987/09)

**The First Minister:** During that period, no changes have been made to the ministerial code. However, Members will be aware that, during the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill, the deputy First Minister and I gave a commitment to bring forward a draft amendment to the code for the approval of the Assembly. We secured the Executive's agreement to that on 15 January, and today we tabled a motion to request the Assembly's approval for a draft amendment to paragraph 2.4 of the ministerial code. That paragraph sets out those matters that a Minister would bring to the attention of the Executive for consideration and agreement.

The purpose of the amendment is to require the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring to the Executive for agreement a proposal to make a determination on designation under the legislation. It similarly requires the Minister to designate the Department to seek Executive agreement on the scheme for financial assistance. Our existing obligations under paragraph 2.4 of the code would, in any case, have required us to bring those matters to the Executive. We have already circulated a draft Executive paper to Ministers to seek their agreement to a draft determination on designation, and, shortly, we will provide Ministers with the text of that determination.

We hope, however, that our draft amendment to the code will demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that the Financial Assistance Act is not, as some Members claimed, an instrument to facilitate intervention by OFMDFM, but a means by which the Executive — collectively — can effect essential change.

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the First Minister for his reply. Does he agree that his answer puts an end to the suggestions by some Members about the Executive's role as set out in the Financial Assistance Act? Will he tell the House whether he has received any apologies from those who suggested otherwise during debates? Does he agree that the new ministerial code has transformed decision-making in Northern Ireland to the extent that, for example, it prevented the Minister of Education from proceeding with her plan to abolish academic selection?

**The First Minister:** Sadly, I suspect that my response will not put an end to the allegation, because Members continued to make that allegation despite receiving assurances during the debates on the various Stages of the Bill. The deputy First Minister and I approached the issue on the basis of securing a collective decision from the Executive, and we had a private meeting with the Minister for Social Development to discuss how to take it forward. However, I suspect that, although the proof of the pudding was in the eating, some people will not partake of that dish.

The only issue that I have with Member's final question is his positioning of the word "new" before ministerial code, because that is now as it always was. The main distinction, which came from St Andrews, is that the ministerial code became statutory. Therefore, it requires every Minister — not only the Minister of Education — to ensure that they bring any controversial, significant or cross-cutting matter to the Executive for their decision. That requirement benefits the collectivity of the Executive. There can never be the fully collective Government to which a voluntary coalition lends itself, but the ministerial code brings the Assembly as close to that as the existing system permits.

**Mr Brady:** A Cheann Comhairle, will the Minister tell the Assembly whether amendments to the ministerial code will delay the provision of financial assistance to those living in fuel poverty?

**The First Minister:** The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will not delay that provision. We took the legislation forward in a manner that brought it before the House and ensured that it passed faster than anybody else had indicated was possible.

Royal Assent was announced from the Chair this morning, and we are moving on to the stage of changing the ministerial code. We will move immediately on the issue of designation — it is no secret that that will be to the Department for Social Development, so that it can bring forward a scheme to allow payments at the earliest possible moment.

### Civic Forum

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many individuals have written to the Department or responded to the consultation process, about the reinstatement of the Civic Forum.  
(AQO 1988/09)

8. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it will give to an online interactive alternative to a formal Civic Forum.  
(AQO 1993/09)

**The First Minister:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 8 together.

The review of the Civic Forum has sought to canvas as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the structure, operation, composition and membership of that body. The review aims to determine the most appropriate mechanisms and arrangements for engaging with, and obtaining, the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

The consultation phase of the review ran from 29 May 2008 until the end of August 2008, attracting 60 written submissions. An analysis of responses indicated that a majority — 44 respondents — favoured some mechanism of engagement with civic society, of whom only 19 respondents explicitly made reference to the need for a civic forum. There was very little demand for a return to the same structure of forum that operated between 2000 and 2002.

I can confirm that none of the written submissions suggested an online interactive relationship between Government and civic society. However, during the series of meetings that the review team held with former members of the Civic Forum, nominated bodies and academics, which ran parallel to the consultation exercise, one academic described innovative approaches to citizenship participation and referred the team to an article on online citizenship that he had jointly authored. The review team was also approached by a local businessman, who advocated consideration of a web-based process similar to that used for gathering the views of citizens on legislation in the American state of Idaho.

Those proposals will be considered, along with the other representations made during the consultation phase, in the review team's initial analysis. It is expected that that report will come to us in the near future.

**Mr Easton:** Will the Minister give an undertaking that he will not establish, or re-establish, a body that has no real purpose and is a complete waste of taxpayers' money?

**The First Minister:** Every Member — especially those with ministerial responsibility — will recognise the real value of having an interaction with civic society. However, the nature of that interaction is the issue that the deputy First Minister and I are looking at in the first instance, and which the Executive will also want to examine. I am sure that neither he nor I will want to have an interaction that could be described as a waste of money and time. We will want to have the best possible interaction, and, given the tight financial situation we face, we will want to ensure real value for money.

**Miss McIlveen:** Will the First Minister list a single achievement of the Civic Forum?

**The First Minister:** The questions get harder and harder. The Civic Forum met on a number of occasions, it provided papers to the previous First Minister and deputy First Minister, and its role was to be a body that would provide advice. However, everybody recognises that the reason for the review of the Civic Forum is to ascertain whether it is possible to get better advice and a better system that will advantage all our Ministers.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister confirm that there is a legislative imperative in the Northern Ireland Act to bring forward legislation to bring into effect that section of the Good Friday Agreement?

**The First Minister:** That same agreement required a review of the value of the Civic Forum to be carried out, which is now happening. It will be carried out on the basis of ensuring that we do not simply dogmatically have something because it is in the Belfast Agreement. We shall determine its value and see how best it can be improved.

After all, if democracy is important to everyone here, we want it to be a journey that will ensure that we get better and better interaction through better and better structures. There is no question that the Executive will want to have good interaction with civic society: the issue is whether the Civic Forum that was set up in 2000 and ran to 2002 can provide that kind of interaction or whether there is a better way to achieve our goal.

2.45 pm

**Mr K Robinson:** I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive report. Will he tell the House how many public servants are currently working on matters relating to the Civic Forum? Perhaps he will also tell us how long they have been doing that work, as no decisions appear to have been taken.

**The First Minister:** The review has been under way for a considerable period. We have received 60 responses to it, and the team will, therefore, proceed to make recommendations based on that advice. They will talk to stakeholders in addition to considering the responses that were received from the 60 groups and individuals. Thus, work is ongoing. However, the one certainty is that much less money has been spent over this most recent period than was spent over the Civic Forum's lifetime.

**Mr Attwood:** The First Minister will be glad to hear that my question will be easy to answer. Last Tuesday in the Chamber, the First Minister's DUP colleagues referred to the Civic Forum as being:

"stacked with pro-agreement nodding dogs." [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p214, col 1*].



They said that:

“its make-up was anti-unionist, anti-orange and anti-evangelical.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p218, col 1*].

They also hoped that:

“it should never see the light of day again.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p214, col 2*].

Does the First Minister agree that to characterise so many so wrongly is unfortunate and an unnecessary slight on the many in this community who have made the journey to which he has just referred.

**The First Minister:** The composition of the Civic Forum was tainted by the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were able to make nominations directly, without any application of the principle of merit. It says something that the present incumbents are prepared to consider mechanisms that do not amount simply to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister having patronage, but rather that ensure that we encourage the kind of engagement that allows the best people to come forward — they are the people who can provide the most accurate account of civic society’s viewpoint and needs.

### Anti-Poverty Strategy

4. **Mrs McGill** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the anti-poverty strategy will be published; and if this strategy will go to full formal consultation or consultation through the anti-poverty forum. (AQO 1989/09)

### Child Poverty

7. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it supports the plans to extend the proposed UK legislation on child poverty to Northern Ireland; and, if so, when public consultation on this legislation will take place. (AQO 1992/09)

**The First Minister:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 7 together.

The Northern Ireland anti-poverty strategy, ‘Lifetime Opportunities’, was published in November 2006. After devolution, we examined the strategy to ensure that it was fit for purpose for the new Administration. After consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive agreed in November 2008 to adopt formally the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities, along with the key aims and priorities outlined in the Programme for Government, as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social inclusion in Northern Ireland.

Two extensive periods of consultation took place during the development of the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, and there are no plans, therefore, to carry out further formal consultation. We are in the process of re-establishing the ministerial-led poverty and social inclusion forum, which will enable key sectoral interests to feed into the process. We are also finalising the terms of reference for the new anti-poverty ministerial subcommittee. We aim to convene the first meeting as soon as is practicable. Our hope is that that subcommittee will ensure that there is effective cross-departmental working on key actions that will result in tangible progress against poverty.

I now turn to the proposed UK legislation on child poverty. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Treasury have sought comments from Ministers in each of the devolved Administrations on a consultation document that outlines the UK Government’s intention to place on a legislative basis its target to eliminate child poverty in the UK by 2020.

The consultation document was published on Wednesday 29 January, and the consultation will run until 11 March. It is expected that the child poverty Bill will be introduced on a UK-wide basis after Easter. We are considering the proposals and have written to our Executive colleagues seeking their views and comments. We will also seek the views of the OFMDFM Committee, and we anticipate that our Executive colleagues will consult their respective Committees as appropriate.

The UK Government have no plans for a Northern Ireland-specific consultation on the proposals. However, members of the public and organisations here can respond directly to the United Kingdom Government consultation. We intend to respond formally to the consultation through an agreed Executive response.

**Mrs McGill:** I thank the First Minister for that comprehensive answer. Who will participate in the new anti-poverty forum?

**The First Minister:** It is vital that the Executive makes a determination on all such matters. As I said, the broad architecture of the overall strategy has been accepted, and it is now for the ministerial subgroup to present proposals on the outstanding issues. When that is done, the Executive will take a decision, and the Assembly and its Committees will be informed.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive response to my colleague Claire McGill and me. However, I am disappointed. How do the First Minister’s Executive colleagues feel about the absence of a formal consultation on the child poverty Bill? Does he agree that the provisions in the Financial

Assistance Bill can be used to address child poverty issues?

**The First Minister:** My heart is warmed by the Member's desire to be deeply involved in the UK consultation on this issue. If the Bill were a piece of Northern Ireland legislation, there would have been direct consultation with the Northern Ireland community. However, as Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, its people are fully entitled to make submissions as part of the consultation process.

The Member is correct that OFMDFM has had to tackle poverty with its hands tied behind its back. The new legislation provides us with a mechanism that enables us to proactively address those issues and meet the targets that were set in our Programme for Government.

**Mr Moutray:** What was the Executive's response to the OFMDFM Committee's report on child poverty?

**The First Minister:** We appreciate the considerable work that Committee members put into the report — they probably spent between 12 and 18 months working on it. The report contained 47 key recommendations, which apply to almost all Government Departments. Consequently, OFMDFM attempted to separate the issues and send them to their relevant Departments. The Departments sent back their responses, which we compiled. I hope that the Committee has been made aware of the Executive response before it is finalised. The Executive response is with the Committee, although it has not been published yet — it would be wrong for me to indicate my view until the response is published.

The bottom line is that getting people a good job is the best step towards removing them from all issues relating to poverty. In many ways, therefore, it is a cross-departmental issue, and, unfortunately, the current economic climate makes our task more difficult.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the strategy's actions and targets be measurable objectively, and how well funded will they be?

**The First Minister:** The targets will be the same targets that were set in the Programme for Government, and, given our present circumstances, they will be challenging. The Programme for Government targets were set, but we always recognised that, from time to time, they would need to be revised if more energy or funding was needed in a certain area of activity in order to reach those targets.

There is a strong view on the parts of the Executive and OFMDFM that every possible step must be taken to reach those targets, even though they have been

made more difficult. That is an area of activity to which the deputy First Minister and I are committed.

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn; questions 7 and 8 have been answered; and questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

### Sterling/Euro Exchange Rate

11. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the impact the exchange rate between sterling and the euro will have on the delivery of the Programme for Government. (AQO 1996/09)

**The First Minister:** This might have been a good time for us to have a discussion on the value of having so many questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that six questions have been withdrawn and Members are, obviously, duplicating the rest, but that does not relate to Mr Shannon's question.

We recognise that short-term fluctuations in exchange rates can have a positive and negative effect on our economy. Such fluctuations are occurring against a background of continuing uncertainty in the global economy. Current economic conditions and developments in the financial markets present us with significant challenges. That makes it more important than ever that the Executive and individual Departments collectively remain focused on delivering on the commitments in the Programme for Government. Therefore, although we will review our priorities and targets regularly to ensure that they remain relevant and focused on addressing the key challenges that we face in the medium to longer term, changes in the exchange rate must not make us lose focus.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the First Minister for that reply. I am sure that the global economic slowdown is on everyone's minds, including that of the First Minister. What impact will that have on Northern Ireland's economy?

**The First Minister:** I could take half an hour to answer that question alone. One area of activity relates to jobs, which is critical to so many people in Northern Ireland. Although our unemployment rate has been increasing substantially, it is not increasing at the exponential rates of the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. I believe that the latest figures for Northern Ireland showed an unemployment rate of 4.2%. The Republic recently announced an unemployment rate of 9.1%. The UK average is 6.1% or 6.2%. However, Northern Ireland has the lowest level of unemployment of any region in the United Kingdom. Given the Republic of Ireland's figures, it has the lowest level of unemployment in the whole of the British Isles. No one should take any credit for

that. It simply means that the way in which the Executive have approached the issue, along with the fact that there is a very high level of public-sector activity in Northern Ireland, have assisted in ensuring that we have a slower rise in unemployment.

There are a series of other matters relating to the construction industry. The Member will be well aware of the real difficulties that the construction industry faces in spite of the fact that the Executive have a much larger capital programme than has ever been the case. However, the increase in our capital construction programme has not been able to fill the void that has been caused by the lack of activity on the housing front.

3.00 pm

The construction industry faces serious difficulties. I could describe the state of each industrial sector, but at some stage the Speaker might become impatient.

## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations contained in the Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses.

(AQO 2006/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** I am conscious of problems in process and procedure in respect of this issue, but they are not all the fault of my Department. Renewable energy projects contribute to the economy and should be supported.

The review concluded that evidence existed to merit and warrant the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) funding of the project and that it was in line with the wider aims of Government policy. The project aims to protect and enhance the environment and encourage use of renewable technologies to assist with meeting the energy costs of rural businesses across the North. The industry has told me that that is greatly needed, especially in the current economic climate. It was recognised that, with an emerging technology and a lack of local experience, the project entailed risks. The Department took steps to manage those, and it will assess the lessons it has learnt and those learnt by the industry. Together, we will be able to manage those risks better in the future.

The Department has accepted the report of the Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses

Project. The recommendations contained in it, and the implications for this and other projects, are being considered by the Department. It will consider the lessons learnt, and how they can be incorporated into procedures as we move towards closure of the current rural development programme and the implementation of the rural development programme for 2007–2013.

One of the recommendations is that, subject to approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department should consider making an offer of an ex gratia payment to each of the applicants who purchased the Powerbreeze turbines. A business case requesting approval to offer ex gratia payments was forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel in December and, while it awaited a response, my Department facilitated a meeting with the Powerbreeze applicants to advise them of the current situation.

On 29 January, DFP conveyed written approval for DARD to make an offer of ex gratia payments and, in the near future, the Department will enter into negotiations with the 11 Powerbreeze applicants to offer payment.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Wind generation is not rocket science — it has been around for a long time. Does the Minister accept that DARD showed serious failings in respect of wind energy for rural businesses? She mentioned an ex gratia payment; should she not consider 100% compensation to those farmers who have been adversely affected?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The Department cannot take full responsibility for everything that went wrong with the project. The review identified that actions of the various stakeholders contributed to the problems that arose. However, the Department commissioned the independent report and accepts that it has partial responsibility for what went wrong. It would not be appropriate for the Department to offer 100% compensation when it is not 100% to blame.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us whether each applicant will be offered the same amount?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The short answer is no. Capital and installation costs varied from applicant to applicant. The average cost of each turbine was £51,000 and the average contribution to that from applicants was approximately £31,000. The Department will base its offer of an ex gratia payment on a uniform percentage of each applicant's eligible costs.

**Mr Gallagher:** Individual farmers and landowners have opportunities to provide energy from wind on their holdings. However, they face difficulties raised by the Planning Service under the new supplementary

planning guidance. Has the Minister discussed those problems with the Department of the Environment?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I have had many discussions with the Department of the Environment on planning, particularly in relation to the policy planning statement (PPS) 21 working group. However, I have not discussed specific cases of wind energy projects on farms. It will probably emerge in future discussions.

### Milk Auction Prices

2. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the recent auction prices for milk. (AQO 2007/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am aware of the significant reductions in milk prices at recent United Dairy Farmers' milk auctions; I understand that they resulted primarily from a weakening of international markets. That is a very worrying development, which, if sustained, could have undermined the profitability of the dairy industry, which makes an important contribution to the North's agrifood industry.

I was teleconferencing with Hilary Benn in October when the significant seven-pence drop occurred, and I was able to use that price drop in my discussion with him to raise the issue of export refunds. Following that, Executive colleagues and I worked hard to secure the reintroduction of export refunds for dairy products, which were agreed at last month's EU management committee meeting. Our continuing lobbying resulted in a major shift from the usual position of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on export refunds when its officials abstained in the vote held in Brussels.

The introduction of export refunds for dairy products is an important step in the right direction, and our efforts to secure a successful outcome have been welcomed by the Ulster Farmers' Union and Dairy UKNI. I was encouraged to note that, following the reintroduction of export refunds, there was a better price for milk at the January auction. I hope that this will be the dawn of brighter days ahead for the dairy industry.

**Mr P J Bradley:** Month after month at the milk auctions when we learn the new prices and compare them with cross-channel prices we discover that there is a differential of 10 pence per litre, which means £500 per cow per lactation. Adding to that the extra cost for feed, fertiliser and fuel, does the Minister agree that if that downward trend continues it will lead to a continued exodus from our farms? Does she have any intention of doing anything to support the industry in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Perhaps the Member is asking about direct support to dairy farmers. However, the operation of the dairy sector falls under the common agricultural policy; therefore any support in addition to the price-support measure such as intervention and export refunds and the single-farm payment would have to be agreed at EU level.

However, although I cannot provide further direct financial support, we should seek to benefit fully from measures already in place; that is why we pressed for the reintroduction of export refunds. I also welcome the recent EU Commission announcement that it will continue with intervention purchases beyond the fixed ceiling, if necessary, until 31 August. There are measures in the rural development programme to help the dairy sector and to help all farmers. The farm modernisation scheme, which opened last week, provides measures by which farmers can apply for financial assistance.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I draw Members' attention to the list of Members' interests. What discussions has the Minister had or does she plan to have with the industry to assist with milk products exports; and what other measures will the Minister pursue to return the dairy sector to profitability?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** We had discussions with processors in the lead-up to the reintroduction of export refunds. The role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is to help the dairy sector as opposed to processors. Help is available under the rural development programme. Axis 1 of the programme covers support available for focus farms and benchmarking, both of which have dairy sector representation. Support is also available under the farm modernisation scheme.

Axis 1 of the rural development programme also includes agriculture and forestry processing and marketing grants schemes, supply-chain development, and farm family options. There is also significant grant aid available under the farm nutrient management scheme, which closed on 31 December 2008. In addition, under the regional food programme, the Dairy Council was awarded £162,500 for generic research and promotional activities.

The Department carries out a wide range of activities aimed at supporting the dairy sector, including the provision of technical support to producers and processors, the provision of knowledge and technology transfer programmes, and benchmarking and services that enable farmers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their farm businesses. The industry also receives significant support from Government through the Agri-Food and

Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), including dedicated dairy technologists. My aim is to have a sustainable and vibrant dairy industry that continues to make a significant contribution to the local economy and to rural areas.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she accept that following the reintroduction of export refunds only a very minimal increase in price was received by the United Dairy Farmers at a recent auction? Dairy farmers are still losing money on every litre of milk that they produce. Does the Minister accept that there needs to be an increase in export refunds in order for the industry to return to some sort of viability?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I fully support farmers in their quest for a fair and sustainable price. Although I do not have any direct influence over retail prices, I believe that I have a role to encourage and facilitate discussion in order to increase the understanding of issues. When export refunds were introduced we were slightly disappointed with the levels set. In order to strengthen the dairy sector we have to get away from our dependence on milk powders.

### Fishing Quotas

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she would change her Department's policy to enable boats under 10 metres long to carry their fishing quota over from month to month. (AQO 2008/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Traditionally, under-10-metre vessels are small inshore vessels fishing for small amounts of fish. All under-10-metre vessels here, and in England, Scotland and Wales, are allocated equal monthly quotas from a central quota pool. In the South, there is no under-10-metre sector, and all vessels fishing for white fish and prawns, regardless of size, are allocated a quota from a central pool. Monthly allocations are agreed with the industry in advance, depending on fishing plans and quota availability.

Our under-10-metre quota pool has been adequate, and the system has been adequate for most vessels. In recent years, more specialised small vessels capable of fishing for large amounts of quota species have entered the under-10-metre fleet. Although I appreciate that those vessels struggle with the monthly allocations, the under-10-metre quota pool system was never designed to be used by such vessels. However, in acknowledgment of the difficulties experienced by some small vessels fishing mainly for prawns, flexibility already exists to spread prawn allocations

over a three-month rather than a one-month period. Vessels that need a larger quota are free to leave the under-10-metre quota pool and to lease the quota that they need.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. However, owners of under-10-metre boats have told me that they are unable to transfer the quota from month to month; they may be able to do that for prawns, but they cannot do it for the other species of fish that they catch. There are approximately 80 boats under 10 metres long in the three ports, of which 30 are in Portavogie, the area that I represent. Would the Minister be prepared to initiate a consultation document or be prepared to meet the owners of those boats to discuss the matter further so that we can get a solution to their problem?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I recognise that, technically, the under-10-metre sector does not come under any producer organisation. However, my officials or I would be happy to meet that sector to consider a way forward to see if we can better organise a system that suits the sector.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us when the Department will be making the recently announced hardship payments to fishermen?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** First, the Department has to make a scheme, in the form of a piece of subordinate legislation, and invite fishing businesses to make claims for the harbour, landing and light dues paid by them. I expect that it will be possible to make those payments before the end of the current financial year.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Minister acknowledge that the inability to transfer the monthly quota is wasteful of the fishing quota that is given to Northern Ireland? Furthermore, does she accept that she needs to have a better working relationship with DEFRA, the lead agency in EU negotiations, in order to improve the outcomes of the EU fisheries assessments?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The Member will be very disappointed to hear that I have a good working relationship with all the Administrations that were involved in the December Fisheries Council. We work very well — and very hard — together; we were very pleased with the outcome of last year's Fisheries Council. However, we accept that there will be challenges in future. We work for all sectors, and the under-10-metre sector is no exception. As I said in answer to the previous question, I am happy to meet that sector to see what we can do to make life easier for it.

3.15 pm

### North/South Meetings

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the next meeting of the North South Inter Departmental Meeting between her Department and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will take place; and to detail the planned schedule of future meetings. (AQO 2009/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Formal meetings between the permanent secretary of my Department and the secretary general of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) are held regularly, and I expect the next meeting to be arranged in the next few weeks. Thereafter, I expect meetings to take place on a three-monthly basis at least.

In addition to those formal meetings, senior officials in both Departments have regular discussions on a range of subjects of mutual interest on a day-to-day basis. In order to improve and increase the level of North/South contact and work between our Departments, I have established a North/South unit in my Department to help co-ordinate the extensive North/South work that is already ongoing and to scope areas of future work and co-operation.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for that response. Does the Minister agree that such meetings are an important part of the economic well-being of the agricultural community on the island of Ireland, particularly during the economic downturn? Can she enlighten the House on why there seems to have been some slippage at Executive level in the efforts at North/South co-operation? I am heartened to hear that some level of injection of enthusiasm has been made into that, and can she provide further details on that?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I can speak only for myself, but there has been no injection of enthusiasm; I have always been very enthusiastic. Since I became Minister, I have attended two formal North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meetings and three aquaculture and marine sectoral meetings. I was due to attend a further agricultural sectoral meeting on Thursday 5 February in Dublin, but it was postponed because severe weather conditions prevented many attendees, including the accompanying Minister and some officials from my Department, from going. I hope to rearrange that meeting for a date in the near future.

In addition to the rearranged meeting, I hope to attend a further three agriculture meetings and three aquaculture meetings this year. The next aquaculture meeting is planned for March. I have also held several bilateral meetings with my DAFF counterparts, Mary

Coughlan TD and Brendan Smith TD, to discuss topics such as the electronic identification of sheep, bluetongue vaccination, the all-island animal health and welfare strategy and the CAP health check.

I have also had bilateral and trilateral meeting with my DAFF and Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs counterparts, Brendan Smith and Éamon Ó Cuív. Those meetings included discussions on animal disease, the farm nutrient management scheme, the December Fisheries Council, rural development issues and, more recently, discussions on the contaminated feed issue. Quite a bit of business has gone on.

**Mr Poots:** What discussions has the Minister had with her counterpart on the dioxins issue? Has she raised the fact that information that would have been vital to Northern Ireland in fighting that issue was withheld by the Republic of Ireland Government for at least three weeks? Does she realise that, as a consequence of that, her fortress-Ireland policy on animal health is in tatters? When does she expect to receive compensation from the Republic of Ireland Government, which was the body for licensing the operation that allowed the contaminated material to enter the food chain?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Two or three questions were asked, and I hope that I can deal with them all. I advise the Member to read the papers, because he should know by now that compensation will not be forthcoming from the South because of financial and legal problems. However, they are assisting us in putting together a co-financing package, and I am meeting Mariann Fischer Boel about that tomorrow.

The Member said that information was withheld. The information was not communicated to us, as opposed to its being withheld, which makes it sound as though it was done deliberately. There has been considerable contact between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and DAFF at official level in dealing with the dioxin-contaminated feed incident. Officials in my Department have had regular communication by telephone and email with counterparts in the South to exchange information and update on developments, and that is ongoing. Between 8 December 2008 and 26 January 2009, meetings and teleconferences were held on 26 days.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for being frank in her answers. Will the Minister advise on the specific aspects of the engagements that officials in her Department have had with the counterparts in the South? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** In addition to the list that I gave in a previous answer, officials are dealing with Southern

counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on a daily basis. Numerous further topics are discussed that impinge on our respective Departments throughout the island, including animal and plant health, disease control, flood risk, food issues, forestry and rural issues.

### Rural Development Programme

5. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the New Challenges under the Rural Development Programme as announced in Brussels on 19 January 2009.

(AQO 2010/09)

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** The President of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, announced on 19 January that the Commission proposed to launch a €5 billion EU economic recovery plan funded by the reallocation of unspent CAP funds from the EU Budget. That was also referred to by the Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, at the EU Agriculture Council meeting held on the same day.

The Commission published the actual proposals on 20 January. The package proposes a total of €3.5 billion for energy projects, €1 billion for the extension and upgrading of high-speed internet access in rural communities, and €0.5 billion in additional aid to tackle the so-called new challenges that were agreed in the health check. Those new challenges are climate change, renewable energy, water management, biodiversity and dairy restructuring.

It is important to remember that the proposals have yet to be agreed by member states and MEPs. I welcome proposals to use unspent EU money in support of our farming and rural communities. However, I would like to see the scope of spending opportunities associated with the proposals widened to allow all sectors of agriculture to benefit. I will raise that issue with the EU Commissioner when I meet her tomorrow.

**Mr Burns:** Will the Minister tell Members how soon our farmers will receive the benefits of the €3 billion from the CAP health check?

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** Unfortunately, the current plan is to distribute the money on the basis of historical rural-development allocations, which means that we would receive a total share of around €2 million to fund both rural broadband and the new challenges.

The proposals have not yet been agreed. If they are, there will be conditions attached on how the money can be spent. I will consult with stakeholders before

any decisions are taken; therefore, at present, I have no definitive answer to the Member's question.

**Mr Craig:** Will the Minister support any application, or potential application — under the rural development programme — from the Orange Order for Orange Halls, which are an integral part of the rural community?

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** I said in my earlier answer that the allocation of funding must go out to consultation, during which I will seek the views of stakeholders. However, money is allocated on the basis of objective need. The Department will want to consider how the money will be spent. As I have said, it is €2 million, which is not a lot of money in the present climate, but we will consider how to best spend it.

**Mr Elliott:** Will the Minister clarify how much of the current rural development programme funding — in percentage terms — will be spent on outside bodies administering some of those funds? I am thinking, in particular, of the farm modernisation scheme. On a side issue, has the Minister discussed anything with the Minister of the Environment on the issue of climate-change finance?

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** It is very early days, but I am happy to see Members taking such a keen interest in a programme that is not even on paper yet. I look forward to hearing the views of Members and stakeholders on how the money should be spent, but it is too early to provide definitive answers on the detail of the proposals.

### Rural Transport

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how she intends to work with the Department for Regional Development in developing a joined up approach to improving rural transport.

(AQO 2011/09)

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** Improving transport provision is crucial for many people who live in rural areas; in particular, for the most vulnerable in society. That is why I have identified rural transport as one of five priorities in my Department's draft rural anti-poverty and social-inclusion framework, which is currently out to public consultation.

My Department has been working with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) on the development of that framework by seeking to identify gaps and barriers to the provision of, and access to, rural transport. I also recently established a new interdepartmental committee on rural policy, which includes a senior policy official from the Department

for Regional Development. The committee will work with me on various rural policy initiatives that I am developing in order to help ensure a joined-up approach to rural issues across all Departments.

I will continue to work with the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken to improving rural transport. I will also explore opportunities for improving rural transport as part of the development of the rural White Paper.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she explain what type of support, and how much funding, will be available from DARD for rural transport? Go raibh maith agat.

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** My Department is currently developing a number of proposals. The overall framework is worth £10 million until 2011. Economic appraisals are being carried out in order to determine the funding allocations for each priority area. We are considering the ability to use SmartPasses on rural transport partnership buses; introducing a management-information system to collect data on use of rural transport partnership buses; developing a social-auditing programme to ascertain the social impact of rural transport; and supporting the development of a social-care scheme to be run by the rural transport partnerships.

**Mr McCarthy:** I welcome the Minister's reply. In particular, I am interested in the use of SmartPass for rural transport. *[Interruption.]* That is good news for those of us who have reached that stage. The door-to-door facility that is run by DRD at present has the ability to provide better rural transport. However, questions remain about when it can cover most of the rural outlying districts. Will DARD take any measure to hurry the day when the door-to-door scheme will extend beyond towns?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I would never be as cheeky as to make comments such as those that were made by Members across the Chamber: it will be a long time before Mr McCarthy gets his bus pass. As I have said, my officials have been in discussion with DRD about a range of potential actions that can be developed to deal with rural transport and access issues. Door-to-door schemes have proved popular in west Fermanagh where, clearly, they address a social need. My officials and their counterparts in DRD are examining ways to further extend the scheme throughout rural areas — for example, through development of social-care schemes.

**Mr Dallat:** I am sure that the Minister will agree that a bus pass is as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike if there is no transport system. Will the Minister tell the House what are the absolute minimum standards with regard to the availability of rural

transport that she will accept from her colleague the Minister for Regional Development?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** It is not up to me to put conditions on another Minister. The Minister for Regional Development and I have a good working relationship, as one would imagine. I want to maximise the work that we can do to improve services in rural areas. However, I do not put conditions on the Minister because I find that that is not a great way to do business.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 7 has been withdrawn.

### **Axis 1 Focus Farm Measure**

8. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in the delivery of Axis 1 Focus Farm Measure of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

(AQO 2013/09)

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The measure opened for applications in mid-August 2008. Prior to the closing date on 12 September 2008, 169 applications were received. Since then, applications have been assessed against the essential criteria, and 101 farms and diversified businesses have been visited. To date, 98 applicants have been interviewed. The environmental-sector interviews are due to begin by 9 February 2009. The selection process to recruit and appoint up to 60 focus farmers across the 10 sectors will then be complete. The measure will then be given over to the newly appointed managing agent for augmentation of farms in readiness for visitors.

**Mr Bresland:** What roles will farms that were previously funded under the Peace II programme have under the rural development programme?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Focus farms is a sub-measure of axis 1 of the rural development programme. The main object of axis 1 is to create a more competitive agriculture industry. Focus farms will contribute to that objective through farmer-led training of farmers. We have found that because it is delivered by peers, it is useful. We have had positive feedback from the previous programme.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 9 has been withdrawn.

### **Ear Tags**

10. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department will take in relation to the practice of having to replace missing ear tags at meat plants given they are almost



immediately disposed of once they are replaced.  
(AQO 2015/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I have always been aware that if an animal loses its tag on the way to a slaughterhouse, its keeper must purchase a new replacement tag; only then can the animal be accepted for slaughter. Quite understandably, that requirement has long been a source of frustration for many keepers. I presume that I am not the only MLA who has received phone calls from irate farmers who give out about the cost and inconvenience of sourcing a new tag and because it adds little to the traceability of their animals.

Recently, therefore, I announced that the requirement to replace cattle's ear tags that are lost on the way to a slaughterhouse no longer applies. If an animal arrives at a slaughterhouse with only one ear tag, provided that it is accompanied by the correct documentation and — importantly — that there is evidence that the second tag had been applied, it can now be accepted for slaughter without the need to apply a new tag.

The change has been broadly welcomed by the industry. I must re-emphasise that a calf will still need to have two tags: only when a tag is lost on the way to a slaughterhouse will the second tag not be necessary. I do not want anyone to think that we are down to a single-tagging system — we are not. Under EU requirements, we still have to double tag.

3.30 pm

## **ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT**

### **Broadband Speeds**

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of Ofcom's Consumer Research recent findings in relation to broadband speeds. (AQO 2026/09)

12. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to assist broadband connections in West Tyrone. (AQO 2037/09)

### **The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

**Investment (Mrs Foster):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 1 and 12 together.

The initial Ofcom report 'UK Broadband Speeds 2008 — Consumer Experience of Broadband Performance' was produced on 8 January 2009. It reports an average UK broadband speed of 3.6 megabits per second. The Northern Ireland average of 3.6 megabits per second is, therefore, fully consistent.

However, the report should be treated with caution due to the relatively low sample sizes upon which its findings are based. I await with interest the findings of the full report, which Ofcom intends to publish in the spring of this year.

As with every other UK region, we have areas where access speeds will be lower than the reported average. My Department is committed to the ongoing development of Northern Ireland's telecommunications infrastructure to deliver high-quality broadband services where there is empirical evidence of demand. I am particularly keen to ensure that the needs of our rural areas are addressed. My Department has gone to great lengths to deliver access to broadband services at affordable prices. Our local Access Broadband contract has ensured 100% broadband availability across all of Northern Ireland, including West Tyrone, since December 2005.

Just recently, we have put in place a further three-year contract to deliver ongoing access to a first-generation broadband service for those remote, rural users who are currently dependent on a satellite connection. Added to that, I have announced a strategic and significant investment in the west, which is funded under the broadband fund that I launched in August 2008. My officials and the supplier contracted to deliver this investment have met representatives of Cookstown District Council on a number of occasions. The council's telecommunications adviser described the investment as:

“an exceptional fit for the needs of the area”.

Finally, under a Programme for Government commitment, we are actively developing our specification for the delivery of access to next-generation, higher-speed broadband services to at least 85% of businesses by 2011. In addition, all the international connectivity services delivered through Project Kelvin will be available in Omagh and Strabane.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. I have sought reassurance in the past that she is doing everything in her power to connect rural customers on an equal basis of cost and speed, and I thank the Minister for her interest in the matter.

On a second but related point, I ask the Minister to give her assessment of the decision to locate the tele-house in Coleraine rather than Derry, which is a bit like the late-1960s decision in respect of the university. Derry was identified in the application —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already said — during questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. I am going to move on to Mr

Thomas Buchanan, who asked question 12, which was answered with question 1.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for her response. Last month, the Minister announced Project Kelvin, which is a significant investment in our telecoms infrastructure. Omagh is one of the places where that is to be located. However, over the past week or so, I have heard some negativity, and there are concerns that the project will be delayed and not delivered on time. I am a little worried that some of the companies that we hope to attract will look elsewhere. Will the Minister give us some reassurance in regard to the delivery of that project?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I was somewhat surprised by the comments of Mr Buchanan's West Tyrone colleague. Project Kelvin is going to Omagh, and the people of Omagh and West Tyrone should celebrate that, rather than questioning it.

I assure the Member that Project Kelvin will be delivered and that it will be delivered on time. The fuss over the siting of an unmanned tele-house is frustrating; it is sited for purely technical reasons. The benefits and prestige, to which many have referred, will come from what can be done with the products and services that Project Kelvin will provide for the whole of Northern Ireland and for its eight sites. There will be the same level and speed of service throughout Northern Ireland.

The Hibernia Atlantic solution will give us direct access to a multimillion-pound, worldwide telecommunications network, and those who react positively to it will forge ahead. I strongly urge all companies to take advantage of this significant investment. All political representatives and business bodies need to look at what Project Kelvin will bring to Northern Ireland and to think strategically about what can be done with it.

The NI Executive and the Republic of Ireland's Government have had to take tough decisions on finances. However, given that the project is important to our respective economic futures, we decided to fund it.

However, the actions of complainers continue to harm the project. Word has filtered through to me that the company executives who are involved have noticed what is going on and are not impressed with Northern Ireland or its political representatives. That frustrates and disappoints me. Those executives have dealt with Governments across the world and have not experienced such an outcry. I want to emphasise the importance of Project Kelvin, which represents a great chance to move ahead. The Republic of Ireland Government and I are delighted that it will be operational by the end of 2009.

**Mr Durkan:** I agree with the Minister about the significance of Project Kelvin for the region's

connectivity. Will the Minister confirm that all documentation on the proposals for Project Kelvin — up to and including the invitation-to-tender document — specified Derry as the location for the tele-house? Was she consulted when her Department informed companies that that specification could mean County Derry? When was that decision taken, and why were officials who are involved in the Northwest Gateway initiative and the North/South Ministerial Council not notified? Why was the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment not notified or consulted?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I can confirm that I was not consulted about that issue, because the decision was taken solely on a technical basis. When that discussion took place, the relevant details were posted on the Central procurement directorate's website for all to see. If the Chairperson did not see that posting, that is a matter for him. I am singularly disappointed that the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who acts on behalf of all of Northern Ireland, seeks to put Londonderry ahead of the rest of Northern Ireland. The tele-house is good news for the whole of Northern Ireland and — as my friend Mr Simpson rightly says — the Republic of Ireland. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland and I are content with what has happened, and Mr Durkan should be, too.

**Mr Elliott:** I understand that new-generation broadband, including Project Kelvin, is not, at this stage, planned to extend to Fermanagh. What action is the Minister taking to redress that imbalance?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Member is right; there is, at present, no direct connectivity in Fermanagh, per se. However, Fermanagh is linked to the entire telecommunications network, and will, therefore, indirectly receive the benefits of Project Kelvin. The Department is working with its colleagues in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland, which has recently carried out a study on the possibility of providing a link-up from Monaghan, through County Cavan and into County Fermanagh. That would benefit businesses in Fermanagh greatly. We are proactively considering that proposal at the minute.

## Economic Downturn

2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the current economic downturn and rise in job losses, what action she is taking to assist companies that are not classified as a client of Invest NI. (AQO 2027/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest Northern Ireland has brought

together economic development partners comprising Enterprise Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and local councils to hold 10 seminars for businesses that are not classified as Invest Northern Ireland clients.

To date, five of those events have been held, and the remainder will take place before the end of this month. The sessions offer businesses the opportunity to receive information on the range of support that is available to help cope with the impact of the current economic conditions. Moreover, one-to-one practical advice from business experts on a variety of issues — including cash-flow management and optimising export potential — is available.

Several other initiatives have been established to assist all businesses in Northern Ireland. For example, the Carbon Trust interest-free loan scheme can help businesses to maximise energy efficiency and thereby make considerable operating-cost savings. The scheme has, to date, offered £3.4 million to businesses in Northern Ireland, and 167 energy-efficiency and technical surveys have been completed. Furthermore, an export mentoring programme has been developed.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for the breadth of her answer and I welcome the initiatives that have been taken. As her Department carries out the review of Invest Northern Ireland, consideration might be given to including small and medium-sized enterprises that do not meet the criteria for inclusion in Invest NI's client list. In the present difficult economic circumstances, they should have the opportunity to be included, not on the basis that the Minister has outlined — welcome as her initiatives are — but on the basis of being permanently able to access support from Invest Northern Ireland.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Member is aware that the review is not just of Invest Northern Ireland, but of the policies and programmes of the Department. It is probably within that remit that we will take on board what he is saying, because Invest Northern Ireland has a very specific, defined role in relation to the potential for export or actual export. Therefore companies that are not engaged in such practices probably fall under DETI policies and practices. I imagine that there is no bar to the team that is carrying out the review of Invest NI and DETI taking consideration of the points the Member has raised.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank the Minister for her answers. Given that small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland account for about 65% of employment here, will the Minister say what action her Department is taking to adjust the focus and resources of Invest NI to allow for direct investment in small and medium-sized enterprises and sole traders to make up

for the lack of available credit and to ensure that those businesses survive the recession?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** As I said to my friend the other Member for East Belfast Mr Newton, there is a difficulty with Invest NI insofar as it has a specific remit and is dealing with companies that are exporting or have the potential to export. I think that the issues raised by the Member are in relation to working capital, and she is probably aware that the Business Secretary, who was here on Friday, has established a fund in relation to working capital, and we in Northern Ireland will want to avail ourselves of that through the banking system.

There is a problem with state aid in relation to working capital, and I understand that the national Government are seeking state-aid approval from Europe in relation to those measures. I hope that it will be forthcoming because, as the Member rightly said, the main issues for the companies that we speak to seem to be cash flow and the availability of credit. Those issues are the most difficult to deal with under the state-aid rules that we have.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Would the Minister ever consider recommending that Invest NI widen its remit to cover not only those companies that export goods but those companies whose business is not solely export-based? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The bar for exports is quite low; companies do not have to export very much. Many businesses that come under the criteria of Invest NI in Fermanagh, for example, just export to Cavan or Monaghan; it is not a huge difficulty for them to overcome. I am not going to pre-empt the review of Invest NI and DETI. The chair of the review team has called for evidence, and I am sure that if any evidence in relation to the remit of Invest NI is produced, it will be reflected in the team's report.

### Productivity Goal Target

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the productivity goal target set out in the Programme for Government, which seeks to close the gap with the rest of the United Kingdom by 2015, can be achieved given the current widening of this gap. (AQO 2028/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** An ambitious target has been set to halve the private-sector productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, including the greater south-east of England, by 2015. The private-sector productivity gap had been widening; however, recent forecasts suggest that that is no longer the case and

that the gap is beginning to narrow. In addition, recent output data for the UK regions from 12 December 2008 will have further implications for the gap, and my officials are analysing the latest and forecasted position.

I can confirm, however, that the Programme for Government's productivity goal remains an important target for the Executive. My Department is committed to targeting investment in innovation and exports and to improving energy and telecoms infrastructure. Those measures, alongside actions from the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Regional Development, are aimed at producing a high-productivity, high-wage economy in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

**Mr Cree:** Is the Minister satisfied that the targets in the Programme for Government can be met?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** One of the reasons why I extended the review team's remit to cover Invest Northern Ireland and my Department was to take the Programme for Government's targets into account. Given the current situation, that is an important thing to reflect on. The review team will examine those targets as well as all the other issues that must be addressed.

**Dr Farry:** Does the Minister accept that there is a danger that the Programme for Government targets will produce a false positive? The productivity gap may narrow, relatively speaking, if there is a deeper recession in the rest of the UK than in Northern Ireland, without there being an absolute improvement in Northern Ireland's position.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have often stood here and said that all economies are relative; the Member has hit the nail on the head. Although we are going through a recession, it is deeper in other parts of the UK, and, therefore, the productivity gap will close — but not for the reasons that we would have liked it to close. I accept that point completely; that is why it is important that the review team examines that particular Programme for Government target.

**Mr Dallat:** Bearing in mind the recent publication of the Varney Review II and the absolute need to match the skills that industry demands with those that are provided by our universities and colleges, will the Minister outline the mechanisms that she intends to put in place in order to ensure that that happens in future and that we emulate some of the good points in the Republic's economy?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** As the Member knows, my Department works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning in order to match skills to the jobs that

are available. The Economic Development Forum will meet this Thursday, and will discuss that issue, among others. I know that my colleague Reg Empey has done a lot of work on the issue of apprentices — in the construction industry, in particular — who, unfortunately, are out of work because of the downturn. It is important to keep an eye on the skills sets that we have so that they are not lost when the upturn comes. The Member is absolutely right; those are the issues that the Economic Development Forum will discuss this Thursday.

### Presbyterian Mutual Society

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to meet with the Prime Minister and/or the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a solution to the crisis facing the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQO 2029/09)

15. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made to the UK Government in relation to safeguarding the investments made by individuals to the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQO 2040/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 15 together.

At our meeting of 15 January 2009, the Executive considered the issue of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS). It was agreed that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would raise the issue of help for the members of the society with the Prime Minister, and impress upon him the need for the UK Government to provide support in the form of depositor protection.

On 26 January 2009, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister, stressing that global uncertainties in the financial markets that were outside the control of the PMS were the main causes of its problems. The society's difficulties were compounded by the fact that bank and other deposits, on both sides of the border, were guaranteed, whereas the society's deposits were not. That contributed directly to the withdrawal of significant funds from the society in a very short period, causing it serious liquidity problems.

I am keen that an early date for a meeting can be agreed so that we can impress on the Prime Minister the seriousness of the situation for thousands of blameless ordinary savers, and persuade him of the moral obligation on the UK Government to treat Northern Ireland depositors with the PMS in the same way as those UK savers whose deposits in the Icelandic banks have been protected. However, I can only say that that will be a very difficult task.

**Mr B McCrea:** I appreciate the Minister's difficulty; a lot of people wish to speak to the Prime Minister. However, is she aware of the details of the guarantees that the Prime Minister has given to those people who deposited their money in the Icelandic banks? If so, will she be able to press the Prime Minister for equality of treatment for investors from Northern Ireland, enabling them to obtain similar guarantees?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

**Investment:** We have been working through the details of the Prime Minister's decisions as regards the Icelandic banks. However, we are also examining other ways in which he can help savers with the PMS. We do not want to put all our eggs in one basket, because we may be disappointed. That is all that I can say about that matter.

I note, however, that the Chancellor is now speaking about helping pensioners who have savings in banks, and I believe that he should also help those elderly savers who put their money into the Presbyterian Mutual Society believing, rightly or wrongly, that it was as safe as houses there, and who are now in great distress.

I am sure that many Members have been contacted by members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society and, indeed, by their children acting on their parents' behalf because the elderly members are not always able to communicate. It is distressing reading through those letters. We will do our utmost to help in any way that we can.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the Minister, and the First Minister and others, for the work that they have done on this matter so far. Will the Minister outline the role of DETI with regard to the whole Presbyterian Mutual Society issue?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

**Investment:** It is important to know what my Department's role is. The directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society came to see me in, I believe, late October or the start of November, and said that they had dire liquidity difficulties. They came because they needed my Department to enact legislation that would allow them to appoint an administrator so that the creditors would not force a fire-sale of property. That happened very quickly, and I thank my Executive colleagues for agreeing to my paper going through so swiftly.

All that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does is to regulate the registration of industrial and provident societies. It does not have any other regulatory functions beyond that, and it certainly does not have any prudential supervisory role for industrial and provident societies. The Presbyterian Mutual Society is, in many ways, unique, in that of the many other industrial and provident societies in Northern Ireland, none took money and invested it in the way in which the PMS did.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. As the Minister said, many of us are concerned about the many people who had their life savings tied up in the Presbyterian Mutual Society and who cannot benefit from the savings protection scheme. Does the Minister share the concern that some of the activities of the Presbyterian Mutual Society went far beyond the remit of its founding principles, which are based on helping each other, particularly in regard to some of the investments made and some of the concerns, for example, in the administrator's report about, possibly, mortgage provision, which went way beyond that remit.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

**Investment:** In Great Britain, the industrial and provident societies, although registered with the Financial Services Authority (FSA), are not automatically within the scope of the financial services compensation scheme. Northern Ireland societies are exempt from FSA regulation provided that they do not engage in FSA-regulated activities. The administrator has reported that the FSA is in contact with him to seek some clarification on the nature of the business that the society undertook. I understand that the administrator is continuing to assist the FSA with those inquiries. I hope that helps the Member to understand where we are at with that particular issue.

### Trade Mission to the Netherlands

5. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what investment opportunities were identified in the trade mission to the Netherlands. (AQO 2030/09)

11. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the recent trade mission to the Netherlands. (AQO 2036/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

**Investment:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 11 together. Last week, I led to the Netherlands a delegation of 36 companies that represented a cross-section of Northern Ireland industry. I saw at first hand the determination of local companies to maximise their trading links with Dutch companies. During my visit, Northern Ireland companies undertook more than 100 appointments with customers and potential customers.

I also witnessed the signing of a significant agreement between the Wright Group, Ballymena, and the Dutch company VDL to supply buses to Arriva London in an £11 million contract. I also attended the launch of a new product range by C & J Meats of County Armagh. In addition, I attended a briefing with leading trade journalists representing the Dutch

tourism industry and was able to reinforce Northern Ireland's position as a tourist destination.

In the past, the Netherlands presented limited foreign direct investment opportunities. When I was in the Hague, however, I was pleased to be introduced to a number of potential investors that are considering Northern Ireland as a possible investment location. Although it is too early to assess the full potential benefits of the trade mission, my officials in Invest NI will be following it up with the participants over the coming months.

**Mr Simpson:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I understand that the trip was a good success. The Minister mentioned some companies that could consider Northern Ireland as a potential investment destination. One such company that did that is Vion. The Minister will be aware that its pork factory in Cookstown is experiencing difficulties because of the dioxin contamination. Will the Minister outline whether she has had any talks with that company, and whether she believes that some assistance can be given to it?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Member is correct — Vion bought over the Grampian Country Foods plant in August 2008. The company regarded that as a substantial investment in Northern Ireland. The Vion plant at Cookstown is one of its best processing plants in the United Kingdom.

However, Vion has expressed considerable dismay at the fact that the Republic of Ireland scheme has not been opened to it in relation to the losses that it suffered as a result of the dioxin scare that emanated from the Republic of Ireland. Each week, Vion process 20,000 pigs — 8,500 of which come from the Republic of Ireland, probably from Counties Cavan and Monaghan. The company is greatly disturbed by the fact that it has not been allowed to avail itself of the Republic of Ireland's scheme.

I hope to speak to the chief executive of Vion within the next 24 hours to try to secure the 600 jobs in the Cookstown plant. I will do all that I possibly can to ensure that those jobs remain in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she see any potential for partnership between Northern Irish companies and Dutch companies in relation to renewable energy? What are the prospects for new contracts for online tour operators to boost our tourism industry? The Strangford constituency has lots to offer — in particular, the Exploris aquarium in Portaferry — and we would love to see more visitors coming. Can the Minister provide any encouragement that may have resulted from her trip to the Netherlands?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In respect of the Member's last point, there certainly was renewed interest in Northern

Ireland. I made reference to the first tourist of whom I am aware — King William of Orange, who visited us in 1688. They were more than happy to remind me that the House of Orange is still very much in existence.

The Member is correct: Northern Ireland has a lot to offer the Dutch market. Many fishermen make the trip from the Netherlands to Northern Ireland and travel to County Fermanagh and to Portrush on the north coast. I took time out of the trade schedule to have lunch with Tourism Ireland, and I briefed journalists about the benefits of coming to Northern Ireland. The strapline that we used was that there has never been a better time to come to Northern Ireland, because of the differential between the euro and sterling. We certainly wanted to drive that message home.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the report about her and Invest NI's trip to the Netherlands. Does the Minister agree that, at these times, it is also important to support local industry? I am aware of one small manufacturing plant in my constituency that has recently doubled its workforce to 70. It has outgrown its current plant, so it cannot take on any more workers. That company is having extreme difficulty in liaising with Invest NI. I hope that the trips abroad are successful, but does the Minister agree that Invest NI also has a strategic role in supporting local industry?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I absolutely agree with the Member, which is why over half of the budget of Invest NI is spent in relation to indigenous firms. The whole idea of having devolution is that we work closer together. Members should bring difficulties that they experience to the attention of the appropriate Minister. If the Member has a specific instance of a company that is having difficulties, and he brings that to me, I will speak to Invest Northern Ireland.

Before the Member came into the House, I made reference to the fact that Invest Northern Ireland has a very specific remit in relation to exports or helping companies to export. Perhaps we could try and work something out with the firm in the Member's constituency in relation to that latter remit.

4.00 pm

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

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Supported Housing

*Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability. — *[Mrs O'Neill.]*

**Mrs Hanna:** There is overwhelming evidence that well-supported care in the community allows people to live better lives than they otherwise could in a hospital, and if an alternative is available, few people would chose to live in a hospital ward. Nevertheless, the Society of Parents and Friends of Muckamore Abbey informs us that a few individuals who have lived in Muckamore for up to 50 years would rather remain there — it is their home. Some patients, and their families, do not wish to be pressurised into community care; they feel better cared for in their present setting. However, although most people in Muckamore Abbey Hospital wish to be resettled, they have been restricted by a lack of funding and suitable care models, and that is particularly the case for younger patients. In recent years, several wards have been closed, and there have been successful moves into community living, such as Springfield Court in west Belfast, which is a model of independent living in the community that Minister Ritchie opened in June 2007.

Unfortunately, according to ARC, the Association for Real Change, and the patients' group in Muckamore called "Tell it like it is", approximately 200 people are still waiting to be housed. Moreover, the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) noted that after 10 years, hospitals are still listed as addresses for hundreds of people. In addition, the Bamford Review's 'Equal Lives Report' states that all such people must be discharged by 2011. In the absence of new money and additional resources, community-based accommodation and support services have not been able to develop to the required level, and people with learning disabilities continue to wait.

Some of the people whom I am speaking about have complex needs and require considerable support for the whole of their lifetime, primarily in the area of health and social care. Therefore, individual needs assessments are required to dictate more specifically the most appropriate accommodation for them.

Consequently, it would have been more appropriate if the motion had been addressed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that the Saint John of God Association provides an excellent facility — which I visited — on the Glen Road in Belfast? Unfortunately, there is not enough capacity on the site to expand on the excellent work being done.

**Mrs Hanna:** Indeed, I do agree. However, although excellent models exist, they are insufficient, and there is a lack of consistency throughout the trusts. Furthermore, one in six carers is in poor health, and although the Minister of Health, Social Care and Public Safety is hoping to address the matter, there is a lack of respite care. That is part of the package that must be considered.

Families and carers who look after physically disabled people experience problems with house adaptations, equipment, and support from the health and social services. Although many adaptations, such as having an intercom system on the front door, making doors wider, and installing ramps, stairlifts and downstairs bathrooms can make a huge difference, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must first carry out specific needs assessments before people are ready to move into supported housing. That is an important point.

As well as a commitment to resettling people from hospitals and to investment in a range of domestic, local community-based housing, there must be a partnership with people with a learning disability, their families and carers in the planning and implementation of the resettlement programme. Specialist support must be provided for families and paid carers of individuals who have been resettled from hospital, and who, without such supported care, might have to be readmitted to hospital.

Too often, there is an over-reliance on the willingness of carers to provide support and independence, help with learning disabilities, personal social services, and supported daytime activities for those at home. Consequently, if the patient does not get out and about, there can be a lack of stimulation.

Resettlement requires a cross-departmental approach. Health and social services must first carry out assessments of people with disabilities; it must then work with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and interface with various Departments, agencies and services, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Housing, employment, leisure and transport are critical, and the absence of effective links between the providers of such services can deny, or impair, the usage and uptake of services and opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

**Ms Lo:** I support the motion. I pay tribute to Professor Bamford, who taught me at university, for producing such a comprehensive review.

Bamford advocated that all those who live in a hospital for people with learning disabilities should be relocated to the community by June 2011. Furthermore, he proposed that all future newbuild accommodation for people with learning disabilities should be small, supported housing for five individuals or fewer.

Last August, I visited one such project in Grays Park Court in the Belvoir Estate — in my constituency — that is run by the Triangle Housing Association. It has five two-bedroom bungalows, which accommodate nine people with learning disabilities, some of whom came from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. One of the bedrooms is occupied by a staff member who provides support and care 24/7. It is a homely setting with group living, and it is nothing like an institution. Residents have their own bedroom, kitchen and living area, and they live independent lives.

The Executive's response to the Bamford Review was limited, but their consultation document promised that there would be a 25% reduction in the number of those in hospitals for people with learning disabilities by 2011. The health and social services trusts received £17 million to implement the recommendations relating to learning disabilities, but DSD did not receive any allocation for its social housing programme or the Supporting People programme, which aimed to build additional supported housing with supported services, as suggested by Bamford.

In reviewing the published five-year social housing development programme, the housing sector is concerned not only at the decline in the number of supported-housing schemes but at the fact that they have been pushed back to years 4 and 5 of the programme to facilitate a resolution of the revenue-funding programme.

In April, the Minister for Social Development said that DSD planned to start 61 units of supported housing for people with learning disabilities in 2008. In September 2008, she said that DSD would develop 38 new units for settlement of Muckamore Abbey Hospital patients during the next three years. At that time, there were 270 patients in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The Minister's announcements fell far short of what is needed for the resettlement of people with learning disabilities from hospitals.

Bamford recommended that funds should be provided to ensure that an average of 80 people per year are resettled over the five years from 2006 to 2011.

The Executive must allocate the necessary funding for supported housing if they are to recognise that people with learning disabilities have the right to be treated as equal citizens with access to mainstream

services. Furthermore, the Executive must recognise that many of those people have aspirations to live independently and to integrate into their communities as a means of achieving their full potential. Unless we have adequate money to build new supported housing, we will not see a reduction in the waiting lists to resolve the unnecessary delay in discharging patients from Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

**Mr Craig:** I congratulate the Members who proposed the motion; it is good that the issue is being debated today. Figures that I looked at indicate that approximately 270 people remain in Muckamore Abbey Hospital; that number must be reduced. I, along with other Members, acknowledge that some people do not wish to leave the facility, which is totally understandable, given the length of time that they have been there.

However, the needs of some of the patients at Muckamore Abbey Hospital could be met through supported-housing programmes. I witnessed such a programme in my own constituency, where Triangle Housing Association has put forward a development in the Ballymacash area. I, as a local representative, worked on that development and helped to bring it to fruition. We dealt with community representatives, dispelled a lot of the misunderstanding around such developments, and worked with the Planning Service, which seemed to have huge difficulties with the new, fold-type developments.

Only a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting that development to meet some of the first people to be relocated from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Those people recounted how they had been in that facility for almost 40 years, and told me that, for the first time, they have their own freedom to do simple things that we take for granted, such as getting on a bus, going to the local shops and doing some shopping for themselves. They had not been able to carry out such tasks for over 40 years, but they now have the freedom to do them. It was an absolute delight to see the joy on their faces.

I met one individual who was delighted with the new facility. Unfortunately, he was there for only four weeks before he passed away; he had four weeks of freedom on this earth, freedom and delight in that new facility. It is a crying shame that we cannot deliver more facilities like the one in Ballymacash for the people who must leave Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

I acknowledge that the Minister and her Department have received £4.6 million for the resettlement scheme. That may go some way towards relieving a lot of the pressures. However, having seen the complexity of the operation in Ballymacash, I have no doubt that that amount will not meet those needs fully. As a society, we need to redress that issue. It is something that all Ministers in the Executive must tackle now,



because Muckamore Abbey Hospital is supposed to be empty by 2011. Given the present rate at which people are coming out of that facility, I find it difficult to see how that target can be met. All Ministers must address that issue; it is not something that one Minister can do alone.

I am fully aware that this may simply not be an option for some people who suffer severe disability. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work in this environment; the needs of each patient must be assessed. Professor Bamford got it absolutely right in his review, in which he said that shelter and care are basic human rights. Where and with whom we live helps to define us as individuals and give us status. I witnessed that on the faces of those who moved into that new facility, and I saw how their lives were enhanced because of their new surroundings. It was a delight to see the change in those individuals.

The individualised options have much merit, as they offer a degree of independence as well as the support of 24-hour care. I realise that they are not a cheap option for society. That one development, which has approximately 20 people from Muckamore Abbey Hospital, has a staff of between six and eight people permanently looking after them; therefore, it is not a cheap option for society. However, I believe that society will be measured on how it treats those who are least well off. This is an option that we must follow. I commend those who proposed the motion.

4.15 pm

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tuarascáil seo.

I commend my colleagues for bringing the motion to the Chamber, and every Member will endorse the sentiments that it contains. I join my colleague in thanking the Minister for Social Development for being present to reply to the debate. As has been said, housing is only one element of what is required. Without a proper package of care and attention, any efforts will come to nothing.

There are some brilliant housing developments, but when talking about the provision of social housing, we often forget that certain people require specialised housing to allow them to live independently. Only by dealing with such people can many of the difficulties that they face be understood. That is particularly true of those living in residential care, and people who cannot be released from hospital because of the lack of suitable supported accommodation or because the home to which they would be released lacks certain facilities.

There are many good examples of good supported homes. Over the years, many housing associations have built up an expertise in the provision and running of accommodation for people with mental or physical disabilities, people with drug or alcohol problems, the

older population and many other sections of the community that require additional support. I know of many examples of supported accommodation that offer high-level care and high-quality accommodation. The Supporting People programme provided a major morale boost to those who delivered supported housing, and the Assembly must ensure its continued support.

I also commend those who provide the care and demonstrate dedication and determination in providing for those in society who require specialised accommodation. One facility in my constituency that provides for older people is under threat of closure. Grovetree House, near the Grosvenor Road, caters for older people, and is a community in its own right, providing excellent care in a warm, friendly atmosphere. The Assembly must ensure that it receives investment, rather than being faced with closure.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Does the Member agree that keeping people institutionalised who need such help prevents them from developing their own personalities and little bit of independence? Government should ensure that the motion marks the end of institutionalisation and leads to a positive outcome.

**Mr F McCann:** That is why my colleagues tabled today's motion. Anyone who is familiar with Grovetree House knows that it is a home to the people for whom it caters. Most of the residents are very old, and their families are able to visit and mix with them there.

At the weekend, I received an email from a guy who works near Muckamore Abbey Hospital. He stated that proposals are being developed to provide a new concept of supported living called a "mini-campus". That would provide proper care packages and be sufficiently resourced to ensure independent living of a quality not previously experienced, particularly by people who have been in hospitals such as Muckamore Abbey for 20 years or more.

The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI) was hailed as the way forward in dealing with those suffering from mental-health and learning disabilities. Professor Bamford constantly referred to the need to get away from the dangers of the past. He highlighted the dangers of the long-stay hospitals that existed in previous generations, as borne out by Mary Bradley's comment on institutionalisation. Supporting individuals in suitable housing in ordinary settings will help them to access a wide range of mainstream services and resources. As Professor Bamford stated:

"People with challenging behaviour require specialist facilities with high staffing levels. It is important that the layout of the accommodation provides adequate personal space and there is access to daytime occupations and intensive staff support."

The crucial building block in any plan is the development of a strategy. The two Ministers named in

the motion must present a strategy to the Assembly on how to move forward. The Assembly has an obligation to ensure that those who are most in need in society are afforded the protection that they need, as well as the opportunities that others take for granted.

Many specialised housing associations have shown that with investment and good planning, buildings can be transformed into high-quality homes, making them an attractive choice for many older people. The concept of lifetime homes advanced the debate on the provision of homes designed for people with various disabilities. The same level of thought must be given to accommodation for people with mental-health problems and those with learning and physical disabilities. The accommodation can be provided in group or individual elements, but the crucial element is putting together a proper care package to ensure that people are safe, secure and properly cared for.

In conclusion, we must ensure that those in our society who require specialist accommodation can avail themselves of it. I support the motion. Furthermore, I ask both Ministers to bring a strategy to the House that can make a difference. Housing is only one element; what is needed is a specialist care package that will make life easier for the people who come out of institutionalised care.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Members opposite for tabling this important motion on what is a complex debate. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made a commitment to provide care in the community for individuals where possible. That commitment is based on the desire to give people as much freedom and independence as possible, and the greatest quality and normality of life that is achievable. The debate illustrates correctly that the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must work together closely in order for that to happen.

The co-ordination of budgets and procedural arrangements between Departments during times of relative affluence is difficult, but at times of extreme constraint, it can be more complicated. Therefore, although we want to see the best possible outcome for people with complex needs, that fact must be recognised.

It should be remembered that the vast majority of people who are in need of sheltered accommodation are effectively and efficiently relocated into social housing in local communities. Housing associations should be commended for their tireless work, and the benefits that they bring, without fanfare, to individuals and society throughout Northern Ireland.

It has been assumed that the motion refers to people who are waiting to be housed and who have complex needs. Although recognising the difficulties there are at Muckamore Abbey Hospital — as others have

mentioned — it must be remembered that those difficulties are faced across Northern Ireland. People with complex needs require specific accommodation as well as care packages, and that involves the provision of both capital and revenue funding streams.

Historically, we have had a buoyant housing budget and have been constrained by a care budget. However, in light of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's commitment to care in the community and delivering for people with special needs, revenue streams are generally now available to provide care for people leaving hospital with complex care needs. Nevertheless, the Minister for Social Development is in a constrained budgetary position. Capital receipts are grossly inadequate in the current market, and the outcome of the last monitoring round was understandably disappointing for the Minister and her Department.

It is unfortunate that that reality is having a detrimental impact on the supported-housing units that are required in order that people with the most complex needs can be housed in the community. It is not surprising that such units cost more to develop and build. There is genuine concern that such specialised units are being squeezed to the margins in the current fiscal crisis. Today, the Minister needs to provide an update on her plans and the resources she has available to address the situation.

I do not doubt for a moment that the Minister is fully informed and is committed to her entire social housing portfolio. However, it has become obvious that her housing budget is inadequate. This requires Executive decision-making as well as decisions by the Minister for Social Development. Mr Craig referred to a cross-Government decision — I hope that by that he means that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be involved in this process.

I note that the Minister kept the Supporting People fund at £61 million, but did not apply the 3% efficiency savings to it. It must be remembered that the vast majority of provision under the fund is being delivered, and that the target set in 2003 of assisting 12,000 people to live independently has been achieved already.

The Government here have been heading in the right direction. However, that does not make it any easier for those people who are unnecessarily housed in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The Minister must assure the House that the programmes are being run as efficiently as possible and that funding is being invested in the areas of greatest need.

We all know that the Budget is under significant pressure. The Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are acutely aware of that, and it is up to us to help them by providing constructive ideas about how best to proceed, rather than taking cheap and easy political shots.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I resent the Member's remark that cheap political shots are being taken. I proposed the motion to highlight the issue — based on a meeting with a group that John also met. We have talked about how health inequalities are the product of social, economic and health issues, and that is why the motion calls on both the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action. The motion was not tabled to take a cheap political shot at either Minister; the Member knows me well enough to know that.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful for the intervention. My remark was about the need for everyone in the Chamber to take a collective approach — and that issue will probably arise in tomorrow's debate. It was not particularly aimed at Ms Ramsey and her colleagues. My point was that we must all participate constructively in the debate instead of listening to some —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

**Mr McCallister:** Every week in the Health Committee, we hear people blaming the Health Minister for the current situation, yet Committee members voted for and supported the draft Budget at the time. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

**Mr Burns:** I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this topic, about which I care greatly. Muckamore Abbey Hospital is in my constituency, as are several supported-housing programmes. I will talk about one in particular today — a housing shelter in Crumlin, which is a supported living scheme for adults. It is a partnership between the charity Praxis Care, BIH Housing Association and the local health and social care trust. Praxis Care rents the houses from the BIH Housing Association. The scheme blends well into the community and is not really noticed. It is a perfect example of how people can be taken out of Muckamore Abbey Hospital and start living independently.

Those people have had difficulties in the past, but, nevertheless, they must be rehoused in our community. The SDLP very much supports the motion. Those people are well looked after by a good team of social workers, nurses and wardens. They try to lead independent lives. They go out to work every day; for example, they tend the Walled Garden in Hillsborough. As my colleague Jonathan Craig said, they also have the opportunity to go shopping. They have the freedom to go out to get their hair cut and to take the bus to visit their families. Indeed, they do the things that they were never able to do while living in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. They do not really cause any bother.

The secret to independent living is location. If housing units can be built in the right location within a community, residents can enjoy a great sense of belonging.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I hope that the Member agrees that the majority of people whom we have talked about today are patients in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. I want to put on record the fact that people are in Muckamore Abbey Hospital not because they have committed any crime, but because they have mental-health issues. When those people are brought into supported living, it is because they are upstanding members of the community and not for any other reason.

**Mr Burns:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree with her — no one is saying that those people have been convicted of crimes or that they are criminals. However, they do have learning difficulties and they require support in our community.

There are already plans to help such people in the community: the Health Minister has plans to create about 38 new supported-housing units over the next three years for adults who are currently awaiting discharge from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Although those plans will cost about £5 million, I commend the Health Minister for them, because it is not acceptable that patients are being held in Muckamore Abbey Hospital 10 years after their treatment has ended. They are ready to leave, but there is nowhere for them to go. I want more money to be spent on such schemes, but that is, perhaps, wishful thinking. I know that the Health Minister is under pressure to make a lot of savings and that every penny must be accounted for. However, if he could afford to spend more money, he should do so on such schemes.

The Minister for Social Development has an important role to play in the delivery of supported-housing units, and she will offer the Health Minister the support that he requires. The Social Development Minister plans to build many new supported-housing units over the next few years, and when she responds to the motion later, she will talk about her work on the Supporting People programme.

I strongly back the call for more supported-housing units. Much work has been done to deliver them and neither the Health Minister nor the Social Development Minister requires any reminding about the need for such housing. However, I remind Members that the Social Development Minister cannot build such houses if certain parties block her at every step of the way and raid her budget at every opportunity.

I have great sympathy for the people in Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their families. The Social Development Minister and the Health Minister will work together to do what is required. I urge other members of the Executive to get behind both Ministers and help them to deliver on their plans.

**Mr Poots:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. It is regrettable that the last Member who

spoke played politics with what is such an important matter.

As public representatives, we have the opportunity to help many people in the community, and there is nothing as rewarding as helping those who are least able to help themselves. When we talk about people with learning disabilities, we refer to a wide range of people — those with minor learning disabilities, who can easily live in supported homes as the motion highlights, and others who need specialised care.

I am very familiar with Muckamore Abbey Hospital: my family and I visited my brother there virtually every week from the time that I was a child. He was transferred to the Beeches Nursing Home in Aghalee 16 years ago, and although the difficulties and upheaval that that move caused to both him and my family were not insignificant, the reward was great.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital is a good facility — the people who work there are second to none; they are very caring, and they do their job well. However, Muckamore provides a hospital environment — it looks like a hospital, and hospital food is served there. If we can do anything to help more people with learning difficulties move into a more homely environment then that is what we should be doing.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital is a 1950s concept. We have moved on. We do not want people with learning disabilities to live in a hospital if they do not need to; therefore I encourage the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development to make every effort to assist people with learning disabilities. People with more severe learning disabilities could be moved into residential homes where they would get the additional support that is required; others could be moved into supported homes where they could have a degree of independence and could build friendships. Homes could be built in a certain area for people with learning disabilities, and they could go to their vocational classes and have additional work provided to them. Everything that can be done should be done.

We all know that Ministers have a difficult job to do in prioritising budgets, but I assure both Ministers that they will benefit richly from any priority that they give to people with learning disabilities. When they are no longer Ministers, they will be able to look back and say that they did some good for a section of the community that may not have been able to do it for itself.

**Mr A Maginness:** Much has been said, so I will try to restrict my remarks.

I recently visited the Roe Valley Hospital, which is the last extant remains of a workhouse in Ireland; indeed, it is the best preserved remains of a workhouse. Poor people and those who needed relief were brought into the workhouse, where children were separated from their mothers and fathers, and wives and

husbands were separated from one another. They were all put into different parts of the workhouse to live — or exist. People were punished for communicating with one another; children were punished for trying to communicate with their parents and parents with their children. They were put into a hole, and they were not allowed to communicate with anyone. However, we have moved on from those horrific days when people were treated in such an inhumane fashion.

As Mr Poots said, in the 1950s and 1960s Muckamore Abbey Hospital was regarded as a modern way of dealing with people with learning difficulties. However, now we know that, rather than improving their sense of independence and their way of living, in fact, people became institutionalised and retarded, and the growth of their independence was restricted. However, now we have an opportunity under Supporting People and supported housing to allow people to develop and to exercise as much independence as they can.

I congratulate the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health for their work in that field, but we need more money to assist in the process. I am sure that everyone in the House believes that it is well deserved and should be supported, but there will be problems with regard to budgeting. Therefore, I hope that everyone who supports the motion will put legitimate pressure on the Department of Finance to provide the additional funding that is necessary.

The target for 2008-2011 is to resettle 80 people from learning-disability hospitals, such as Muckamore Abbey. The target for 2007-08 was to resettle 40 learning-disability patients into the community, and the target for 2008-09 is to resettle 20 people.

At the end of March 2008, that target was exceeded slightly when the figure of 41 was reached. That is good progress; one hopes that it will be maintained and that the very reasonable targets to resettle people will be achieved.

I hope that, by 31 March 2009, no child will be resident in a learning-disability hospital. The trusts indicate that the ministerial target will be met and that, by 2014, no learning-disability patient will have a hospital as his or her permanent address. I hope that both Ministers will be supported by Members in achieving those targets.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank Ms Ramsey and her colleagues for tabling the motion.

Important values and standards have been established by Professor Bamford's 'Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland)' and by the Executive's response to it. Those values include ensuring that people with a learning disability are treated as equal citizens, are included in mainstream services and in the life of the community, and are

empowered to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives.

Accordingly, the Executive set the targets that have already been outlined by Mr Maginness. They are meaningful goals which, if implemented in full, will make a great difference in quality of life for hundreds of people. It is my understanding that those targets are progressing as planned.

However, as policy is turned to reality, the complexity of the issue must be fully considered. Individuals with learning disabilities do not fall neatly into one category. They are individuals: their needs, likes, wants and abilities are richly varied — as many Members have pointed out.

My concern is that, as the focus shifts to meeting dates and targets, a key principle will be lost, namely: that all services and living arrangements should be tailored to the specific needs of each individual, rather than determined by blanket policies that are applied to all. That is particularly true when addressing the requirements of the current residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The most recent figures suggest that more than 180 individuals are still resident, and that population is large enough to create a broad diversity of need.

The policy assumption made is that all residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital will do better if they are rehoused and resettled in the community. Those individuals who are considered to be in need of resettlement have stated a desire and readiness to leave the hospital and find a home in the community. The immediate focus, as suggested in the motion, should therefore be on those residents finding accommodation and support that meets their needs as quickly as possible.

However, it should also be noted that a sizeable number of long-stay residents, their families and carers have expressed to the Assembly a concern about the community-centred resettlement policy for Muckamore Abbey residents. It is their view that, for some long-term residents, a community situation would involve a major and difficult adjustment. They propose a different arrangement: perimeter accommodation for some residents who have lived at the Abbey for many years and who are comfortable in that environment, where services, support and highly-skilled staff are close to hand. That shows the complexity of needs of adults with learning disabilities, and it cautions us against using a one-size-fits-all approach to providing services — as Mr Craig outlined earlier.

Additionally, the Bamford Review highlighted that the strong focus on resettling hospital residents into a community situation was shifting attention and resources away from supporting the current and future needs of learning-disabled adults and children who live at home with their families or with carers. The vast

majority — approximately 70% in Northern Ireland — of individuals with learning disabilities live at home with their families. Those families need funding to allow them to adapt their homes to the physical needs of their children, for additional care and support in the home and for respite care.

For those reasons, we must consider the whole picture when we provide services to learning-disabled adults and children, and we must be sure that services are centred on the needs of the individual, rather than on the need to send out a press release, declaring that targets have been met.

I support the motion, and I call on both Ministers to quickly facilitate the resettlement into the community of those residents who are ready to leave learning disability hospitals; to make all decisions on resettlement in full consultation with residents, their families and carers; and to keep policy implementation focused on the specific needs of the individual.

4.45 pm

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):**

I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate today. I welcome the opportunity to take part in and respond to the debate, not least because it gives me the opportunity to clarify and correct some of the issues raised and to politely suggest that the motion would have been better directed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, I will leave that matter with the Business Committee, which is the best judge on that issue.

The debate contained several contributions from people who have direct personal experience of the matters under consideration. I appreciate the great sensitivity in these discussions because, after all, we are dealing with people who have distinct special needs that require special care. I would hope that we would be able to accommodate that in our society, notwithstanding the natural financial difficulties.

I will try to address all the questions or points that Members have raised. I assure the House that I will study the Hansard report of the debate very carefully, and if I have left any issues unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

The Supporting People programme has been a major vehicle for the delivery of supported housing since its introduction in 2003. One key to that success has been the alignment of the social housing development programme to the priorities of the health and social care sector. That strategic approach, across all of the partner agencies, has benefited some of the most vulnerable people in our society by providing independent-living support in the community, alongside the resettlement of long-stay patients from hospitals such as that named in the motion — Muckamore Abbey. Elderly people, those with a

learning disability, children and young people leaving care, and those suffering from a mental-health problem have been the main beneficiaries of that new, joined-up and more strategic approach.

The motion asks me to work with my ministerial colleague, Michael McGimpsey, to tackle delays in the discharge of long-term patients from learning disability hospitals, such as Muckamore Abbey. It is a pity that those who tabled the motion did not fully appreciate the significant strategic and co-ordinated work that is already under way to do just that. I will briefly spell out some of the work that is being undertaken jointly between our respective Departments to deliver health and housing solutions.

A regional resettlement team was established in September 2007 to oversee the discharge and resettlement of patients across all learning disability hospitals in the North. Chaired by a senior official from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the group takes its membership from trusts, boards, the voluntary sector, health and social services councils, and active discharge teams from each of the respective hospitals. My Department is also represented on that team, as is the Housing Executive, which is a key contributor to that work. That is proof, were it needed, that we are all working together on this issue.

I take on board the point made by Dawn Purvis —

**Ms S Ramsey:** Will the Member give way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have little time, so I will continue if I may. Dawn Purvis referred to some issues within the regional resettlement team and to some of the issues that have been raised by families about the need for perimeter care.

I will refer that matter to the Minister of Health in order to see if those particular issues can be addressed. If the Member has particular instances that she wishes to raise, perhaps she could refer them to the Minister of Health and to me in order that there can be a full investigation in a sensitive way.

The deputy chief executive of the Housing Executive chairs a joint commissioning partnership between the four health and social services boards, the Probation Board, the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). Together, they are responsible for the regional commissioning of services and the endorsement of local needs and priorities as identified by four Supporting People area partnerships, which meet on a more local level to identify needs and issues in their respective areas.

Working together to tackle those issues is, therefore, not something that I need to be reminded to do by the motion; I am already doing that, as are my officials, and Minister McGimpsey and his officials. However,

we must not underestimate the scale of the challenge that we all face in delivering the supported-housing schemes that are required if we are to realise some of the wider objectives identified in earlier reports such as the Bamford Review or 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society'.

Over the next six years, we plan to deliver 82 new supported-housing schemes, which will deliver 994 supported units for those in greatest housing need. That will cost almost £125 million in revenue and capital funding. Members should not underestimate the scale of those plans or, after the next comprehensive spending review, the need to find the resources to deliver them. By 2014, 31 of those schemes will deliver 270 additional units specifically for people with a learning disability. Once again, that underlines just how much importance I attach to helping the people referred to in the motion. The total cost of that provision will be more than £38 million.

My colleague Carmel Hanna referred to the fact that I have visited some of those supported-housing units throughout Northern Ireland since May 2007, which is something that I was very happy to do. I was able to have direct conversations with some residents and to see how happy they were in their new homes and new environment. It is important that funding continues so that we can create more such facilities.

In order to demonstrate that I have taken account of the need to find long-term solutions for people in Muckamore in particular, and in other similar hospitals, I have, over the past two years, ensured that learning disability schemes received an increased share of Supporting People funding. I expect almost 20% of my budget for Supporting People this year alone to be allocated across 128 schemes in support of that vulnerable client group. Therefore, I can assure Members that I am all too aware of the need to provide more supported-housing schemes to assist the vulnerable, particularly those who remain in hospital and who need our help to make the transition into a supported-housing scheme — many of whom have been living in a hospital setting for almost all their lives.

Members should be encouraged by the success of our combined efforts to date. Trusts were asked to resettle 60 patients from hospital to community care by March 2009. That was achieved, indeed exceeded, before the end of November last year. Similarly, trusts were asked to ensure that all children were resettled away from hospitals by March 2009, and that, too, will be achieved. Targets have, therefore, been met, a point already made by my colleague Mr Maginness.

With regard to delayed discharges, challenging targets set for 2008 and 2009 will be exceeded through the work of the regional resettlement team.

Undoubtedly, progress is being made; the figures speak for themselves. However, none of us can be complacent. I remain all too aware of the challenge that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I face in delivering supported housing for those who need it most. We need resources and the commitment of everyone in the Chamber — not empty rhetoric. I ask Members who have direct influence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that we obtain the resources to do that. That is very important.

I wish to touch briefly on some of the other issues that were raised. Jonathan Craig referred to the targets. One hundred and eighty-three people remain in hospital awaiting resettlement; they are on the primary-target list, and it is estimated that 163 of them require supported-living arrangements.

Mr McCann and Ms Ramsey said that housing is only one component. That is correct; there are many complex issues to do with care arrangements and there are complex care packages. Everyone is different, and they require individual attention. Many of those people need intensive staff support to meet a variety of needs within the model of supported living. When I visited supported housing, I was touched when I saw what many people and their families have to endure and the care that is required. I found that touching, and it has remained with me ever since. We will have to tackle that as a community.

DHSSPS set a target for Muckamore Hospital for 2007-08 to resettle 40 people. That was achieved, and the eventual figure was 41 people.

John McCallister referred to the reduction in the DSD budget as a result of the December monitoring round. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and DSD submitted a joint bid to implement the Bamford Review in the overall three-year Budget, and it remains a mystery why the DHSSPS bid was met and the DSD bid was not. It was a joint bid, and a joint approach is required if we are to tackle all the issues and help and assist the most vulnerable. I hope that the budgets can be reviewed in the context of the current economic downturn and in the context that everything is fluid and changes.

I trust that Members and people in the Gallery with an interest in the motion will be reassured that we are taking a strategic approach to deliver supported housing for all, particularly long-stay hospital patients. As I come from Downpatrick, I am well acquainted with many long-stay hospital patients who were born in Downshire Hospital and have lived there practically all their life, only to be discharged into the community in the past few years. I have personal family connections in that both my parents were trained and worked in that environment.

My personal commitment is underlined by the increased resources that I have already made available to addressing the needs of those in long-term care who need support to resettle in the community. My ministerial colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has that same commitment, and, through our combined efforts, we can make and are making a difference.

Once again, I thank the Members who contributed positively to the debate. I thank Members for the opportunity to speak on an issue that remains of particular interest to me, the work of my Department and each of our partners, who, as I have made clear, work closely with us at all levels in meeting the challenge before us.

5.00 pm

Finally, I yet again ask anybody in the House who has personal and direct influence with the Minister of Finance to do what they can to ensure that my Department receives the dedicated budget that it requires to deliver on the Bamford recommendations for all the people. There cannot be a one-sided approach; there must be a totally joint approach in order to provide the best delivery of care to the most vulnerable in our society.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank my colleagues for proposing it.

The strategic framework for mental-health services is detailed in the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI), which supports the fundamental principle that mental health and social care should be provided in the community, unless there is good reason for not doing so. Bamford supports a process of reform and modernisation of services that will result in the delivery of high-quality and integrated services and well-designed facilities.

The subject of the motion is Muckamore Abbey Hospital, but, as John McCallister said, this is something that impacts right across the board. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust, for instance, is currently in a public consultation process on its 'Changing for the Better' plan, which relates to service development and efficiency proposals. We can only hope that service development will take precedence over efficiency proposals.

There is a proposal to have continual resettlement of people with mental illness from long-stay hospital-based care. The Southern Trust proposes to continue to reduce the number of people with mental illness who are in long-stay hospital care. Those people must have a supported environment in the community. DSD must provide suitable housing for them, because, regardless of the aspirations voiced today and the targets that have been mentioned, a support infrastructure for

people moving out of long-stay hospital care must be accompanied by housing provision; otherwise, those people have nowhere else to go. Therefore, housing must be put in place before the support infrastructure. DSD must provide housing that is suitable for patients' needs and that will help integrate them into the community in which they live. As has been said, it is not simply a matter of putting people back into the community without that support infrastructure and expecting them to manage.

Jonathan Craig mentioned how other people in the community — the Planning Service, and community groups — had been very much involved in the initial discussions and planning of supported housing in his area. That seems to me to be a good model to follow. He certainly provided a detailed insight into how that approach impacts on, and improves the quality of, people's lives by giving them more independence. They are able to travel on buses, go shopping and so on. I believe that that is the way forward.

DSD, through the Social Security Agency, also has a vital part to play in respect of benefits and the provision of grants for community care through the social fund. Many people who move out of long-stay hospital care have not had to deal with the very complex benefits system. They need help in order to maximise their benefit entitlement. Unfortunately, the employment support allowance tends to target people with mental-health problems and those with disabilities. That must be borne in mind when those people are moving back into the community. They should be treated sensitively and properly, and given all the advice and help that is available to maximise their benefit entitlements.

It is incumbent on DSD to provide the housing that is needed in order to move such people back into the community. As I said earlier, there is not much point in trying to tackle delayed discharges of people if they have no homes to go to.

Among the Members who spoke in the debate, Michelle O'Neill said that adequate supported housing is necessary, and provides a lifeline for vulnerable people, but she said that there was a lack of supported housing. A clear, concrete work plan must be established, involving DSD and the Department of Health.

David Hilditch, as Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, said that the Committee was currently reviewing the Supporting People budget. He talked about submissions to the Committee by voluntary groups, in particular, and how the Committee was genuinely impressed by those organisations.

Those organisations offer quality and value for money. Their main complaint is the absence of joined-up government. Obviously, the need for joined-up government between DSD, DHSSPS and, indeed, the

Department of Finance and Personnel has been brought up time and again in the debate.

Billy Armstrong also pointed out that the measure of a community is how it treats its vulnerable people, and that is an issue that must be examined closely.

Carmel Hanna mentioned evidence that suggests that people have better lives in supported housing than they do in hospital stays. Obviously, certain people on long-term hospital stay can become institutionalised and want to stay in the confines of the hospital because they have been there for so long. No one would dispute that those people's health and social care requirements are more relevant to the Minister of Health than to the Minister for Social Development. There are insufficient models and lack of respite for carers. The Department of Health must carry out clear assessments of carers' needs. There should not be over-reliance on carers. Mrs Hanna suggested that a cross-departmental approach to the matter is needed.

Anna Lo talked about the Bamford Review and about small supported houses for five or fewer people, where, in some cases, staff members are in situ.

Jonathan Craig referred to supported housing in his constituency, which appears to be successful, and he gave evidence to that effect.

My colleague Fra McCann endorsed the motion's sentiments and thanked the Minister for her attendance at the debate. He rightly pointed out that housing is only one element of social housing provision. Specialist housing and residential care are required to allow people to leave hospital. He mentioned examples of supported housing in his constituency that have been very successful.

John McCallister mentioned that the issue is not only about Muckamore Abbey Hospital; it is one that impacts throughout the community and must be addressed urgently.

Thomas Burns supported the motion. He mentioned that Muckamore Abbey is in his constituency. He also discussed supported-housing programmes. He talked about people who move out of hospital and back into the community and said that they do not cause any bother. In her intervention, my colleague Sue Ramsey pointed out that those people are not in hospital for things that they have done; they are there, through no fault of their own, because of circumstances.

Mr Poots talked about his experience of Muckamore Abbey. I agree very much with his point that, irrespective of how good it is, it is still a hospital. He mentioned the impact that moving out of the hospital environment and into supported housing can have on someone. Certainly, I have my own experience of visiting Muckamore Abbey. In the 1960s my sister trained there as what was then called a "special-care



teacher". I visited Muckamore Abbey on many occasions. It was a good hospital; however, it is now redundant as regards what it was originally intended to be.

Alban Maginness gave Members a potted history of the workhouse. His point was that progress has been made and that many hospitals like Muckamore, in particular, were products of the 1950s and 1960s. They have served their purpose.

Dawn Purvis mentioned the importance of values and standards and that Bamford's policy must become reality. She discussed the complexity of all of the issues that are involved and added that the principle must not be lost. She said that the specific need of each individual must be addressed and that there is a diversity of need.

The Minister talked about action that has been taken and that which is ongoing, I got the impression that she was saying that the motion did not involve her much. The Minister talked about empty rhetoric, but she is becoming something of an expert in that herself.

The Minister also talked about targets being met, but it is a pity that that information is not more widely disseminated. That would be a good start in making people aware of what is happening. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability.

*Adjourned at 5.10 pm.*

